

Title: Harry Potter – Slytherin: The Deathly Hallows

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Summary: Harry Potter, sorted into Slytherin House, fulfills his destiny in an unexpected way. Horcruxes or Hallows or...?

Audience: PG

Category: Alternate Universe

Warnings: Cruelty and violence

Length: 191 pages

## **Harry Potter – Slytherin: The Deathly Hallows**

### **Chapter 1 – At Number Twelve**

Harry Potter felt bewildered.

He knew that Hermione and Ginny were watching him, but he kept his eyes on the kitchen table. They were looking to him for leadership, but he had no idea what to say or do. They had only arrived minutes before at number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, having just escaped the Death Eaters takeover of Hogwarts.

The Ministry too had fallen -- Kingsley Shacklebolt's Patronus had told them -- and Scrimgeour was dead.

Kreacher was bustling about the kitchen, humming merrily, as he prepared them an after-midnight snack, unaware that their world had just been shattered by the Dark Lord.

What could Harry do about it? Nothing.

They had lost. Professor Dumbledore, the Order of the Phoenix, and the Ministry of Magic had all failed to prevent Voldemort from coming to power.

Only a year ago, they had seemed to have the upper hand, but that was then -- everything had changed. How could they possibly hope to defeat Voldemort now? Yes, of course, they would resist -- continue to fight -- but it seemed hopeless.

Moments before, Harry had proposed sending a *letter* to Professor Dumbledore to find out where he was.

Ginny had called him on it... not directly. Even being distraught, not knowing what had happened to Draco, she was too nice to say it was a *stupid* idea. No, she had just asked in a worried but angry tone if Harry would send Draco a *letter* too.

Then she had shouted, finally releasing her frustration, “HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE WITH US!”

Yes, Draco was supposed to be with them. Professor Snape had told Harry to get his friends and leave Hogwarts immediately or they would “*all be dead by morning.*” But Draco had not been with them, and there had been no time to find him.

Suggesting sending a letter *had* been stupid! Owl Post could no longer be trusted -- the Ministry was now controlled by Voldemort. Owls would be routinely intercepted and tracked. Harry realized he had to think differently now -- about *everything*. As Mad-Eye Moody would have said, “CONSTANT VIGILANCE!”

“Treacle tart, Master Harry, your favorite,” said Kreacher, as he served Harry, Hermione, and Ginny. “Kreacher will now go turn down your beds and then come back to clean up... if Master Harry needs nothing else...” said Kreacher bowing.

“Fine. Thank you, Kreacher,” said Harry automatically.

Kreacher hurried out.

It sounded so normal, but things were no longer going to be normal. What kind of life would there be with Voldemort in charge? No one would be safe. No one would be free -- not even Muggles. The rage built inside him...

“*NO!*” Harry shouted while slamming his fists on the table. It made the girls jump.

Harry looked at them and declared, “We’re going to *fight!*”

“Of course, we are,” said Hermione matter-of-factly. Then she added, “But *first...*” and leaned toward Harry, before saying very seriously, “we are going to *find* and *destroy* the rest of the Horcruxes. Otherwise, we’ll *never* be able to destroy Voldemort.”

Hermione's words hit Harry like a punch in the face. He had forgotten all about the Horcruxes, including the one he carried in his pocket even now. He immediately began to fish for it when Ginny said, "But, only *after* we find Draco... Right?" It was clearly a plea, not a question.

The Horcruxes... Draco... 'I've got to get a grip,' thought Harry.

"You're both right," he said, nodding.

He felt better, back on course. His fingers had found the locket and he withdrew it from his pocket holding it by the chain, so it swung like a pendulum.

He offered it to Hermione. She did not reach out to take it. She looked apprehensive.

Ginny, on the other hand, looked *very* frightened. Five years before, in her first year at Hogwarts, she had been possessed by the piece of Voldemort's soul in Tom Riddle's diary. She knew first-hand what a Horcrux could do.

"Master Regulus' *locket!*" croaked Kreacher, sounding plainly in distress.

Kreacher must have just returned to the kitchen.

"What?" asked Harry. He turned to look at Kreacher who was trembling and wringing his hands.

"It is Master Regulus' locket... He switched it with the locket in the basin and, and..." Kreacher fell to his knees and began to wail.

Harry looked closely at the locket for the first time. He now saw it did not look like the locket he had seen around Merope's neck in Bob Ogden's memory.

Harry left his seat and knelt in front of the sobbing house-elf holding out the locket in his palm for Kreacher to see. Very gently he asked, "Kreacher, please tell me everything you know about this locket."

Over the next half-hour, in non-stop tears and sobbing, Kreacher told the nightmarish story of Regulus Black.

How Regulus eagerly joined the Dark Lord when he first sought power. How Regulus ordered Kreacher to perform a service for the Dark Lord and became disillusioned

when he learned what had happened to Kreacher -- taken by the Dark Lord to a forbidding cave with a barren rock island in a lake filled with Inferi... Made to drink a harmful potion... and dragged into the water to his presumed death by the Inferi. How Kreacher had Disapparated for home from under the water because Regulus had told him to return. How Regulus made Kreacher take him there and helped him switch the locket. How Regulus sacrificed himself to the Inferi to strike a blow at the Dark Lord. And how Kreacher returned with the cursed locket but was unable to destroy it as Master Regulus had ordered.

By the end, Kreacher was weeping uncontrollably. Hermione and Ginny were down by his side and weeping with him. Kreacher gratefully accepted their comforting.

Harry again looked down at the locket in his hand. So, this was *not* a Horcrux. It had *all* been for *nothing*. He was in shock. Without thinking, he opened the locket and saw a folded paper inside. He took it out and unfolded it. It was a note. He read it and then handed it to Hermione who read it aloud.

*“To the Dark Lord,*

*I know I will be dead long before you read this, but I want you to know that it was I who discovered your secret. I have stolen the real Horcrux and intend to destroy it as soon as I can.*

*I face death in the hope that when you meet your match, you will be mortal once more.*

*R.A.B.”*

“Kreacher, where is the locket Regulus gave you to destroy?” asked Hermione anxiously, beating Harry to the obvious question.

Kreacher, now largely recovered, answered proudly, “Hidden in the attic with all the Black family treasures that Master Sirius threw away. Kreacher recovered them and hid them for safekeeping -- as his poor Mistress wanted.”

“It’s *here*? It’s been *here* all this time!” exclaimed Harry in amazement. Then calmly, he said, “Kreacher, we mean to *destroy* it. We know *how*.”

Kreacher’s enormous eyes widened, and he said, “Kreacher will get it at once,” and instead of walking out of the kitchen, he Disapparated with a loud pop and Apparated

only a few seconds later with the Locket dangling by its chain, his hand already extended to give to Harry.

Harry recognized it at once as the one he had seen in Bob Ogden's memory. He took the deadly Locket from Kreacher and, in a sudden inspiration, handed Regulus's locket to Kreacher, saying. "I know Regulus would have wanted you to have this for all you did to help him."

Kreacher looked at Regulus's locket in his hand, then at Harry, and broke down into tears again while trying to say thank you over and over between great heaving sobs. It took almost thirty minutes for Kreacher to finally compose himself. Halfway, when he had almost recovered, Hermione suggested he wear it, which he did and then broke down all over again. Finally, fully recovered and proudly wearing the Black family heirloom around his neck, Kreacher bid them goodnight and crept off to the cabinet with the water heater where he slept, cradling the locket against his chest with both hands.

The three adjourned to the drawing room on the first floor to discuss how to destroy the Locket. First, they tried to open it, but nothing they tried worked. Finally, Hermione said, "Maybe it's a good thing we *can't* get it open..."

Harry was just about to disagree when another Patronus appeared from nowhere facing Harry. It was a large shaggy dog and spoke in Sirius' voice. "McGonagall told me where you were going. Do *not* leave. Do *not* use magic. You can be *traced*. Don't contact me using your mirror unless it's life and death. Wait until I return." Then it faded away.

What did he mean we can be *traced*?" asked Harry sounding surprised.

"Harry, ..." as Hermione seemed to be puffing up for a long-winded explanation, Ginny cut in, "All underage wizards are covered by a Ministry spell that enables them to be located when performing magic. Remember?"

"Damn!" said Harry. "*The Trace*. I *forgot* about the that. We're *both* underage, Ginny. If we use magic, the Ministry can locate us. Luckily, we haven't used magic since we arrived."

He looked at Hermione, "You're already seventeen. We're really going to need your help, Hermione."

“Wait,” said Ginny nervously, “Harry, you used magic when you Apparated us here.”

Hermione must have been thinking the same thing because she quickly said, “That was outside in the green, but even then, I don’t think so. I think the magic happens when you Disapparate. Apparating at the destination is sort of *built-in*, so to speak, to the initial magic. But if not, we’re in a *safe house*. It’s unplotable... and a lot of other things. The Ministry would only be able to determine the general area and could not find the house even if they were standing right in front of it. I think Sirius was more concerned about you two *leaving* the house and using magic *outside*.”

Hermione was smiling. It was the first smile Harry had seen in a long time. He smiled too. Then Ginny did.

Then Harry said, “Well, anyway, Ginny, let’s neither of us use magic for the time being, OK... except, of course, in self-defense.”

Hermione shook her head and said, “No. That won’t be necessary. *I’m* of-age. The Ministry won’t be able to tell if underage magic is being performed if an of-age wizard is present.”

“You’re right again, as usual, Hermione,” said Harry appreciatively. “That’s settled. Now, I think we should get some sleep. I’ll keep the Locket for now.” He put it around his neck. It felt surprisingly warm against his chest. “We’ll talk in the morning about how to destroy it.”

It was hours after midnight. It had been an incredible day. Harry could not believe there was still a week left in May and wondered what would come next.

They went to their usual rooms. Kreacher had already seen to making their rooms ready.

They all fell asleep immediately, including Harry -- which meant he did not perform his Animagus incantations or Occlumency exercises.

## Chapter 2 – Off Occlumency

He seethed with anger.

Two men were before him. One man was on the ground writhing in agony, screaming. The second man stood trembling, looking terrified.

He lifted the Cruciatus Curse so they could hear him speak.

“You let Albus Dumbledore *and* Harry Potter get away, Yaxley! *You* had complete surprise on your side. *Crouch* did not fail Lord Voldemort at the *Ministry*...”

The man on the ground struggled to his knees and pleaded, “My Lord, neither Dumbledore nor Potter were present. We searched. Snape told us they both fled immediately after we arrived...”

“And you did not think to have any Death Eaters stationed *outside* the school gate in case that happened?” he said with malice.

He did not wait for an answer, he raised his wand. “*AVADA KEDAVRA!*”

The kneeling man fell on his face with a crunching thud as the flash of green light faded.

He turned to the other man, who tried to look calm.

“Use every available Death Eater, Barty. I want Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter found *now*, before they go to ground.”

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Harry awoke abruptly.

He looked at the bedside clock. He had not been asleep long. This was his first connection to Voldemort’s mind in a long time. His Occlumency had apparently gotten so good, the vision had come as a shock. But the connection did not cause his scar to hurt or his head to throb nearly as much as it had done so many times before.

It made Harry feel confident -- in control.

But then suddenly he realized, if he had stopped practicing Occlumency after Professor Snape’s last lesson, he might have seen the preparation for Voldemort’s attack on the Ministry and Hogwarts. He might have been able to prevent it.

Professor Dumbledore had made a mistake making him learn it -- a costly mistake.

Harry vowed to himself he would never use Occlumency again, even if the pain returned.

He clutched the locket in his hand without thinking and went back to sleep.

### Chapter 3 – Bad News

At breakfast, Harry arrived in a bad mood.

“Look who’s here,” said Ginny, pointing to the top of the tall China cabinet.

Hedwig and Aristotle were perched on top. Hedwig fluttered her wings and hooted when she saw Harry.

Harry did not seem pleased, saying, “Oh, no... They’re going to be a problem.” And then, quickly deciding, added, “We need to send them off. The Ministry will be intercepting owls now and then tracing them to their destinations.”

Hermione agreed and suggested they send them to France to stay at Beauxbaton Academy until they could safely return.

Harry said dismissively, “Can you take care of it, Ginny? I’m hungry.”

“Uh, sure, Harry,” said Ginny, sounding surprised, “right after breakfast.”

“Great,” Harry said dully.

Changing the subject, Hermione said, “There are three Death Eaters out in the green across the street.”

Harry said curtly, “So what; they can’t get in.”

Hermione looked at him askance, and then picked up the Daily Prophet, which, as usual, Kreacher had laid out waiting on the table. Hermione wondered aloud if it might be too dangerous for Kreacher to leave the house from now on to get the daily paper, reasoning the Death Eaters might be looking for him too. But if he did need to go out, he should take Harry’s invisibility cloak.



Hearing this, Kreacher laughed and shook his head, muttering, “Miss Hermione does not know the ways of house-elves.” But he would not elaborate when Hermione asked him to explain.

Harry did not say anything but began eating his toast.

So, Hermione started to read the newspaper articles aloud as she usually did. The headlines and stories were shocking.

*SCRIMGEOUR RESIGNS*

*DOLORES UMBRIDGE NAMED MINISTER FOR MAGIC*

*PIUS THICKNESS TO HEAD DEPT OF MAGICAL LAW ENFORCEMENT*

*NEW WIZARDING ERA DECLARED*

*WIZENGAMOT DISBANDED*

*SEVERUS SNAPE APPOINTED HOGWARTS HEADMASTER*

The previous one they had been expecting. But they were quite surprised by the next.

*NEXT SCHOOL YEAR TO BEGIN ONE MONTH EARLY*

The story read:

*Due to the changes planned for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, students will be reporting to school on the first day of August rather than September, which has traditionally been the start of the new school year. Students will have only a month-long holiday this summer. The additional month of school will be used to orient students on the changes that are being instituted in the curriculum, rules, staffing, standards, and traditions of Hogwarts to bring it into the New Wizarding Era,’ said Dolores Umbridge, new Minister for Magic, in an exclusive interview with the Daily Prophet.*

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Over the next few days, they would learn more.

Hogwarts would be closed for the summer when the term ended at the end of June. No students would be allowed to remain under school protection, as had been implemented the previous two years. All vestiges of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw houses would be removed. The Slytherin house crest had become the new school crest by replacing the name Slytherin in its banner with Hogwarts. The hour glasses recording house points were already replaced with a large display board that recorded the top three and bottom three performing students in each year.

Defense Against the Dark Arts became simply, The Dark Arts, while Muggle Studies was replaced with Management of Muggles and Lesser Beings. These new classes were taught respectively by Amicus and Alecko Carrow, brother, and sister Death Eaters. They were also placed in charge of student discipline.

Professor Burbage, former Muggle Studies teacher, was sacked. Professor Bins was also sacked and replaced with someone from the Ministry to teach a History of Magic curriculum approved by Dolores Umbridge. It focused on the right of wizards to rule over Muggles and the importance of pure blood.

Professor Trelawney was sacked as well, and Divination was eliminated entirely from the curriculum. The Department for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures from the Ministry was tasked to prepare a syllabus for the renamed Control of Magical Creatures and to provide an instructor until a qualified teacher could be hired. Hagrid was not mentioned.

In Diagon Alley, Ollivander's Wand Shop, Florian Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour, and Weasley's Wizard Wheezes were declared abandoned by the Ministry and auctioned off. Several shops from Knockturn Alley, most notably Borgin and Burkes, relocated to Diagon Alley.

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When Hermione finished reading aloud the article about the earlier start of school, Ginny asked, "Who do you think came up with the phrase, *New Wizarding Era*?"

"It had to be Umbrage," concluded Hermione.

"Bloody right," said Harry sarcastically, "If it had been Voldemort, he would have called it *The Dark Lord's Delightful Dynasty*." He laughed at his own joke.

“Are you alright, Harry?” asked Hermione, looking at him closely.

“Fine,” declared Harry, rather too loudly. “Let’s talk about destroying the Locket and finding the other Horcruxes.”

“OK. Good,” said Hermione. “I’m afraid we won’t be able to destroy the Locket until we can get some Basilisk venom or the Sword of Gryffindor. There’s nothing we can do while we remain here.”

“Well, that’s just *great*, Hermione,” said Harry angrily. “I had expected *you*, with all your *brains*, to come up with *something*.”

Ginny looked shocked and exclaimed, “Harry, that’s NOT FAIR!”

“Now don’t *you* go and start...” Harry snarled.

Then Hermione yelled, “Take it off, Harry! The LOCKET... take it OFF!”

Harry appeared taken aback, having the two girls yell at him. He was about to fire back, when he suddenly stopped as if he had just realized something. He reached beneath his shirt under his robes, pulled the locket out and took it off. He threw it down hard onto the table in disgust.

“Damn! It was that *thing*, Hermione,” said Harry angrily. “It was making me *angry* at everything and everybody.”

Near the fireplace, Kreacher croaked, “The Locket is *evil*...”

“Kreacher knows. You *can’t* wear it. None of us should wear it,” said Hermione conclusively. “We just need to keep it safe.”

“But we need to keep it *with* us... and I have an idea,” said Harry.

He reached beneath his robes again and this time pulled out the moleskin pouch Hagrid had given him. He opened it and stuffed the locket inside and closed it again. Then he stuffed the pouch back down his collar.

“Harry, I don’t think...” started Hermione, but Harry interrupted, “I think it’s OK, Hermione. I feel... normal.” He had his hand on his chest where the pouch would be. “I

tried it because you can't feel things inside the pouch -- like Sirius' mirror. It's like they aren't there. If I start acting strange again, we'll try something else."

Hermione and Ginny both agreed.

After breakfast they adjourned to the drawing room to discuss finding the remaining Horcruxes -- Hufflepuff's Cup; something of Ravenclaw's, almost certainly her lost Diadem; and Voldemort's pet Snake, Nagini.

They agreed discussing the snake was a waste of time. It was sure be close to Voldemort and would be the last one they would go after, for obvious reasons. They also agreed with Professor Dumbledore that one of the other two was likely hidden at Hogwarts because, based on the ring and the locket, Voldemort chose places meaningful to him to hide them. There was no more meaningful place to Voldemort -- and Harry -- than Hogwarts.

But Hogwarts would be a very difficult place for them to search, especially now that it was under Voldemort's control and school was still in session for another month. They would need to wait until the summer holiday. So, they agreed to check the "easy" places before they tackled Hogwarts -- when, of course, they were finally able to leave number Twelve. For that, they agreed to wait until Sirius arrived, which they expected soon.

Then they discussed the other possible, and likely, hiding places outside Hogwarts -- the Orphanage where Voldemort grew up; Borgin and Burkes, where Voldemort worked after leaving school; and ...Albania.

Albania!

How do you search an entire country, which also happens to be a thousand miles away? They had nothing more specific other than Voldemort was reported to have traveled there after leaving school and later hidden in a forest there after his body had been destroyed. Albania worried them the most because it made Hogwarts seem easy by comparison. They hoped that Voldemort had not considered Albania a 'meaningful' place. It certainly was not one of the 'easy' places.

They developed reasonable plans for checking the Orphanage and Borgin and Burkes. Then they returned to discussing Hogwarts. It was huge and contained an untold number of places where something could easily be hidden, but at least it was not

thousands of square miles of mountainous forest. And again, Hogwarts was the place that Voldemort had considered his true home.

They planned through lunch and dinner and well into the night.

Hermione kept focusing on the Chamber of Secrets. “It just seems so logical, and, more importantly, we need to get Basilisk venom,” she kept saying. They all agreed they had to go there. But there were more arguments than agreements, not only about where, but about how.

Harry insisted, “We can’t go traipsing about the castle or grounds for days at a time. It’s got to be fast -- *in and out* -- focused on our best guesses. We’ll have to use the secret tunnels because I’m sure they’ve removed Professor Dumbledore’s password to the front gate. I think we’re talking about less than a thirty minutes each time. And we’re probably only going to get two or three shots at it before we’re detected -- if we’re lucky. Remember, he said they could detect comings and goings if they needed to.”

Ginny insisted, “And it’s going to have to be done in the dead of night. Any other time, there are just too many people around.”

“Not during the summer, not now,” reminded Harry. “The Prophet said students won’t be allowed to stay anymore. So, the teachers and staff will again be mostly gone on holiday too.”

Hermione insisted, “We shouldn’t try to look in more than one place at a time. We should stay together for mutual protection. And we should start planning now to go to the Chamber of Secrets, since it’s the most logical place to start.”

“But, if we split up, we can search more places faster,” Harry argued.

After another hour in which they ticked off every place they could think of to hide something in Hogwarts, arguing for and against, they were finally back to the Chamber of Secrets.

“OK, OK, Hermione,” Harry finally said, “It’s the Chamber of Secrets first... It’s really late; let’s call it a day and start planning in the morning right after breakfast.”

As they got up to go, Ginny asked, “What do you suppose is happening at Hogwarts?”

Harry looked at her, wondering what she meant by the question. But he answered simply, “I suppose they’re doing revision for end of term, OWL and NEWT exams starting in two weeks.”

Ginny looked like she was going to say something, but just nodded.

Hermione, on the other hand, looked quite sad.

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Before he went to sleep. Harry got out the Marauders’ Map for the first time since they had arrived at number Twelve. He should have thought of it sooner.

Draco was not on it anywhere.

He checked for his other friends first in their dormitories and common rooms. He noticed that several were missing: Adrian, Tracey, Neville, Luna. Where were they? But soon, he spotted Neville and Luna moving in the corridors where they should not be after hours. Then they disappeared.

Harry smiled. He knew one of the only two ways to disappear off the map at Hogwarts was to be in the Room of Requirement, but strangely, they were not in the seventh-floor corridor when they disappeared. Over the next few days, he watched his friends at night and noticed the location where they disappeared changed every day.

The Room of Requirement appeared to be changing locations, but his friends seemed to know where to find it. How? But more importantly, how were he, Hermione and Ginny going to find it, if *they* needed it? Or, if it were already occupied, how would they get in not knowing what it was being used for... without *asking* someone?

And could that be where Draco was -- hiding out in Room of Requirement?

It was definitely possible. It gave him hope, but he did not want to say anything to Hermione, and especially Ginny, unless he were sure.

## Chapter 4 – Waiting for Sirius

The next day’s headlines were worse.

### *MINISTRY ALLEGIANCE OATH MANDATORY*

*All school age and older English witches and wizards in country are now required to swear to and sign an oath of allegiance to the Ministry of Magic. Everyone must appear in person at the Ministry and has thirty days to comply. The only exceptions are students attending Hogwarts School. Their oaths will be processed by the Headmaster. The penalty for non-compliance is arrest and trial for sedition.*

Hermione pointed out there no longer seemed to be a requirement to pledge allegiance to the Minister for Magic, but now, even school-age children were included, and non-compliance meant arrest.

### *ALBUS DUMBLEDORE MISSING*

*HARRY POTTER WANTED FOR QUESTIONING  
IN CONNECTION WITH  
THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ALBUS DUMBLEDORE*

Both articles described suspected foul play by Harry Potter against the missing Hogwarts Headmaster and the reason for him leaving school before the end of term.

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Over the next month, the headlines, stories, and Ministry decrees continued to get worse.

*SENIOR POSITIONS IN THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC LIMITED TO  
PURE-BLOOD WITCHES AND WIZARDS*

*MUGGLE-BORNS FAILING TO REGISTER  
UNDER THE MUGGLE-BORN PROTECTION ACT  
ARE SUBJECT TO ARREST*

*MUGGLE-BORNS BANNED  
FROM MINISTRY AND TEACHING POSITIONS*

The paper began to publish a list of ‘Undesirables’ -- those witches and wizards who had not complied with either the Oath of Allegiance or Muggle-born Registration. Several members of the Order of the Phoenix were included -- Sirius, Remus,

Mundungus, Arthur, Molly, and Kingsley. But Harry Potter was named '*UNDESIRABLE NUMBER ONE*' for his suspected involvement in Dumbledore's disappearance.

*MUGGLE-BORNS BANNED  
FROM HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY*

*MUGGLE-BORNS REQUIRED TO SURRENDER WANDS  
TO MINISTRY OF MAGIC*

*MUGGLE-BORNS REQUIRED TO WEAR  
MINISTRY ISSUED IDENTITY BADGES*

*WITCHES AND WIZARDS  
FORBIDDEN TO MARRY MUGGLES OR MUGGLE-BORNS  
-- EXISTING MARRIAGES NO LONGER VALID --*

*WITCHES AND WIZARDS FORBIDDEN TO ASSOCIATE  
WITH MUGGLES OR MUGGLE-BORNS*

*SQUIBS BANISHED TO LIVE WITH MUGGLES*

Hermione could no longer bear to read aloud such articles in the newspaper as she had always done.

The dismal news and waiting for Sirius made each day seem longer than the last. May had passed without a word from Harry's godfather. And he did not respond when Harry finally tried to contact him using their magically paired pocket mirrors.

Harry was now making life miserable at number Twelve.

After the first three days at number Twelve, he had been worried. But after a week, he became angry because he refused to believe that something had happened to Sirius, as Hermione suggested. After another two weeks, Harry was furious and could not keep his mind on anything else. At one point, Ginny asked jokingly if Harry had started wearing the locket again. Harry would have hexed her if Hermione had not intervened.

For the next two weeks, Harry mainly kept to his room, only coming down for meals. Further planning by the three was non-existent.



At breakfast of the last day of June, there was a loud crack and Sirius was standing in the kitchen.

“Sirius!” Harry shouted excitedly.

Hermione shouted too, but she sounded alarmed, “Are the protections *broken*? Do we need to *leave*?”

“Don’t worry, Hermione,” said Sirius calmly. “I’m a Black. We’ve always been able to Apparate through the protections.”

“But your cousins... Bellatrix and Nar...” Hermione responded.

Sirius cut in, “Only Blacks in my father’s branch of the family... Fidelius would take care of any bastard Blacks I don’t know about. Plus, you have to know where you’re going. Fidelius blocks that, even if you used to know,” Sirius explained.

“*Why haven’t you contacted us?*” demanded Harry impatiently. “It’s going on *six weeks*! Did you lose your mirror? You haven’t answered me? We thought you were *dead*.”

“Harry, I said it’s only for life and death...” admonished Sirius.

“But *six weeks*, Sirius, ...*Six Weeks!*” Harry complained, nearly shouting. “Do you know what it’s like being cooped up, not knowing...”

The look on Sirius’ face made Harry stop talking.

Harry suddenly felt like an idiot. Then he said, “Sorry...”

Sirius did not have to say, *‘I do know what it’s like -- having spent twelve YEARS in Azkaban.’* Instead, he said, “I’ve come to bring you news, but first, Harry, let me explain why I’m so late... I’m on a mission. I can’t tell you what it is, but it was planned a long time ago. The fall of the Ministry set it in motion. All I can tell you is that this may be the last time I see you or contact you until we defeat... *You-Know-Who*.”

“Since when did you stop saying V...” asked Harry in surprise, before Sirius cut him off, shouting...

“DON’T SAY HIS NAME!”

The three of them jumped.

Sirius held up his hands in apology. “Sorry... His name is now *taboo*, or cursed, or... whatever. This is *item-number-one* of the things I’ve come to tell you. It happened recently; not sure exactly when. It’s the Ministry’s doing. It’s almost like *The Trace*, but it covers *everyone* and has the full magical power of the Ministry and You-Know-Who behind it. If you say his name, simple protective charms are broken, and you can be located. I assume that’s why there are Death Eaters on the green across the street.”

Sirius finally sat down at the kitchen table. Kreacher immediately came over and served him breakfast.

Sirius continued, “As you know, this house has very old and powerful protective charms, plus the Fidelius Charm and every other protection the Order could throw at it. You-Know-Who’s followers must only know that someone nearby has broken the taboo but can’t pin it down. Once you stop saying his name, they’ll probably go away.”

Harry, Hermione, and Ginny looked at each other.

Sirius saw this and added. “Look, I know it’s going to be *hard*. You can call him anything you want, except his name... You-Know-Who, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, the Dark Lord ...snake-face ...dog breath...”

This drew a laugh from them which somewhat broke the tension.

“We think we might have lost one or two Order members because of it. We only learned about it out because Kingsley was briefly cornered but escaped. One of the Death Eaters made the mistake of telling him they found him because he used You-Know-Who’s name. We’re getting the word out to all Order members and our supporters. Soon, *everyone* will know... if they don’t already.”

Sirius took a big bite of sausage. The look on his face indicated he had not been eating well for a while. He turned to Kreacher and said, “Excellent! Could you make me something to takeaway, Kreacher?” The old house-elf bowed and set about it.

Sirius took another bite and talked as he ate. “Now, the rest of the news... and I’m afraid to say, *none* of it is good... When the attack came, we were taken by surprise. Snape claims he had no warning of it -- so much for his *‘deep investment’* with You-Know-Who. It’s more one sided, at best, if you ask me...” his words trailed off bitterly.

But then he resumed, “We were scattered. Some remain unaccounted for -- Remus and Hagrid included.”

“Oh, no!” gasped Hermione. Harry and Ginny both shook their heads in distress.

Sirius plowed on, “Dumbledore remains unaccounted for too. Of course, we *know* he isn’t dead.”

“How do you *know* that?” asked Harry. “He was *very* ill when I saw him right before the Death Eaters invaded the school. I’ve really been worried.”

Sirius smiled, “What’s the address of this house?” Harry thought of it but could not say it.

“Of course!” exclaimed Hermione. “The Fidelius Charm. Only the Secret Keeper can say, write, or communicate the location in any way. As long as we *can’t* do that, it means we haven’t become secret keepers ourselves -- meaning Professor Dumbledore is *still* alive.”

Sirius nodded and then continued, “Remember my Patronus message... have you been using magic?”

“Not much... And we haven’t gone out at all,” said Harry, not appreciating the cross examination.

After checking Hermione and Ginny’s nodding agreements, Sirius said, “Good. The magic injunction was more precautionary. *Not going out* was the critical one. Using magic inside here was safe for the same reason using You-Know-Who’s name inside here was safe. But if you had gone *outside*, the two of you still under-age would have been at tremendous risk. They know you are on the run and The Trace would have enabled them to easily find you anywhere outside and away from of-age wizards. But using his name would have gotten *you too*, Hermione.”

“So,” said Harry sounding satisfied, “when I’m seventeen at the end of next month, I can go out with Hermione.”

Sirius puffed out his cheeks in exasperation, “To do *what?*”

Sirius’ question made Harry angry. “To *fight*, damn it! I... *we*... want to fight, Sirius, not sit around here doing nothing.”

“That’s my *godson!* And I’m *proud* to say it, Harry. But if I sound more like Remus right now, it’s because we’re hanging by a thread. We need to keep you *safe* for now. Please trust me. Please trust Dumbledore. That’s all I’m going to say,” declared Sirius.

Harry slumped back in his chair and folded his arms.

Ginny broke the awkward silence that followed, asking hopefully, “Sirius, do you know anything about *Draco?*” She had obviously been anxious to ask since he arrived.

“I’m sorry, no. He’s *not* in school. McGonagall sent word that that only he and the three of you are absent -- not counting *all* the Muggle-borns that were kicked out. Longbottom and Lovegood tried to leave too but were caught and punished.”

Ginny said excitedly, “Draco must have got away and be on the run too...” Suddenly she sounded worried again, “...though it has been a *very* long time... He should have been able to get here *long* before now...” Her words trailed off when she realized their implications. Then she asked, “You don’t think they *got* him, do you?”

Hermione moved over and put her arm around Ginny, who now looked distraught.

“I’m sorry, Ginny,” said Sirius sympathetically, “we *don’t know* what’s happened to Draco.”

Ginny hung her head.

Harry was glad he had not mentioned the possibility of Draco hiding out in the Room of Requirement. Professor McGonagall would have known.

Sirius paused for a moment and then continued, “McGonagall also said Death Eaters have been assigned to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts and Muggle Studies -- or whatever they’ve become. Oh, and I forgot... Filch was sent packing -- all Squibs have been banished to the Muggle world... There have been many other changes at the school, but I can see you have been keeping up as best you can via the Daily Prophet.”

There was a large teetering stack of newspapers in the corner of the kitchen.

“But if you didn’t know, the Prophet is now under complete Ministry control too, with everything that means. Don’t trust it,” he added.

“Right,” Harry spoke up again, quite tersely, his arms still folded. “And on the subjects of keeping up and trust... How are you contacting Order members? If it’s using Patronus messages, Hermione knows how. She can be our communications link.”

Sirius ignored Harry’s petulant attitude and said evenly, “We normally only use Patronus messages in emergencies because it’s fast and we don’t care if others are present. For other communications, we use a *secret* method.”

“Well, *I’m* an Order member, Sirius, if you *remember*,” said Harry defiantly, giving Hermione and Ginny an I’ll-tell-you-later look, “so, why haven’t *I* been told about it?”

Sirius stared at Harry for a moment, then said, “Kreacher, bring me a ring from your *secret* cache of the Black family heirlooms -- for Harry.”

Kreacher bowed, croaking, “Yes, Master.” The elf popped out of and back into the kitchen even faster than he had fetching the locket. He handed an old looking silver ring to Sirius.

Sirius put the ring on his right ring finger and pushed it up next to the plain gold ring he wore. Next, he took out his wand and with his left hand pointed it at both rings. A spark jumped from the tip of the wand to the rings, making him wince. The spell was nonverbal.

You could see the disappointment on Hermione’s face. She had been watching intently.

Sirius then took off the ring and handed it to Harry who immediately put it on. It had been too big to start but immediately shrunk to fit perfectly. It momentarily felt hot.

Then Sirius said, “Write a note, a letter, whatever. Then roll it up and pass it through the ring. It will cause the ring of the addressee -- individual, group or all Order members -- to tingle. You can’t mistake it and it will continue every minute until you take it off and pass a piece of paper or parchment through it. Even a small piece will expand to the size needed to copy the whole message, which will look as if the words had been burned onto it.”

Harry had a very satisfied look on his face, which caused Sirius to say, “Now, don’t go using this expecting everyone to start telling you everything that’s going on, because they won’t.”

“Why not,” demanded Harry.

“Because as soon as we learned that Dumbledore was missing, we implemented a prearranged cell structure that Dumbledore established long ago. We are only allowed to contact members of our own cell. We are under orders to ignore any message or instructions from anyone not in our cell, except the leadership. You are not in my cell, Harry. If you don’t know what cell you’re in, then I’m sorry.”

“*Damn it*, Sirius. Then *why* did you just give me this ring?” complained Harry, frustration clearly bubbling out.

“Because I said you should have been given one when Dumbledore agreed to make you a member. He thought it better not to. I’m sure he had his reasons,” said Sirius sympathetically.

“I *bet* he did,” said Harry under his breath.

“And I *also* gave it to you,” continued Sirius, “because if there *is* a true life-and-death emergency, and you can’t use your Patronus because you don’t have a wand, and you can’t get to your mirror, I want you to use the ring. The Order members who receive your message will just have to decide whether or not to act on it. I will get the word out that you now have a ring, but it could take some time.”

Harry softened completely and said, “Thank you, Sirius.”

Sirius nodded and said, “I hope you never have to use it, Harry.”

Hermione coughed softly and asked, “I don’t suppose you could tell me the spell...?”

“Sorry, no, as I’m sure you expected,” chuckled Sirius.

“No, but I had to ask,” said Hermione smiling, adding, “No tattoos then, like the Dark Mark? But a Protean Charm of some kind, I’m sure.”

Sirius gaped at Hermione for a moment, and then laughed, “Is there *any* type of magic you don’t know about? Anyway... Tonks thought a tattoo would be great, but the original Order members, from the first war, preferred the rings. Dumbledore joked that another tattoo might confuse him... because he was so used to the one on his left knee that’s a perfect map of the London underground.”

Everyone laughed this time, including Kreacher.

Unexpectedly, Ginny said, “So Professor McGonagall is in your cell...”

“Clever girl,” said Sirius. “But not quite correct. When Dumbledore disappeared, she took over his place in the leadership structure.”

“So, you *have* tried sending messages to Professor Dumbledore and received no answers, right?” asked Ginny.

“Right. And to Hagrid, Remus, and any of the others who’re missing,” replied Sirius.

Hermine asked, “What happens if someone else is wearing a member’s ring because it was lost or... whatever?”

“Nothing. It only works for whom it was made,” answered Sirius, adding, “Good question, Hermione. I should have mentioned that... Harry, the ring will also store any messages that have been sent while you’re not wearing it. The ring will tingle as soon as you put it back on.”

“Do you know when someone had *read* your message?” Hermione asked again.

“Unfortunately, not. All you know is that the message will be received if the ring has not been destroyed and the owner has not lost it or... died.”

Hermione’s next question went in a completely different direction and caught Sirius off guard. “Is Fleur alright? You’re supposed to get married next month.”

Sirius balked. He seemed not to know what to say. After several awkward seconds, he finally said, “She’s in the Order doing her job. That’s all I can say.” And it was clear he did not want to talk about it anymore. He paused again; then he said, “I can’t stay much longer... There are a couple more things...”

“So, you’re leaving, and I’m just supposed to sit tight until I’m needed,” said Harry, clearly wanting to revisit what Sirius had already told him.

Sirius sighed, “Harry, I can’t *make* you. The Order isn’t going to *Imperius* you. All I ask is that you stay out of sight until you turn seventeen -- it’s just *too risky* until then. Please at least do this.”

Harry did not answer. He was again leaning back with his arms folded, this time also scowling. But then he thought of something, and asked, “So, then I *don't* need to go back to Privet Drive this year?”

“There’s no point. The blood protection was broken when You-Know-Who used your blood to return. There’s only another month until you turn seventeen. It’s safer staying here than trying to get you there and back for whatever other protection you might obtain for that short a time before the protection expires. Anyway, that’s what we’ve concluded in Dumbledore’s absence,” explained Sirius.

Harry shrugged. It made sense.

Ginny looked anxiously at Harry, then Sirius and, sounding desperate, asked, “Am I going to have stay here until *I'm* seventeen? That’s *fourteen months*, Sirius!”

“No, Ginny, you’re coming with *me*,” said Sirius. “I’m taking you to your parents. That is *another* reason for my visit. The Burrow was no longer safe after the Ministry fell -- the Ministry protections on the house were removed. Your family is now in a safe house. I’m not going to say where it is for obvious reasons. Kreacher will take us and return. My Black family house protections won’t let me side-along a non-Black. But you should know one thing before we go... Ron has parted company with your family, much like Percy. He appealed his expulsion from Hogwarts to the Ministry through Percy and *disavowed* your family -- just so he could get a wand and return to school next term. He’s currently living with Percy in London.”

Harry and Hermione were shocked, but Ginny wasn’t.

She said bitterly, “I think I saw this coming. Ron has *changed*. His fall from popularity -- his public humiliation -- *warped* him, made him angry and resentful, instead of shameful. I’ll do my best to help my parents deal with it.”

The others nodded in agreement but did not say anything.

Then Sirius said, “Hermione, please use your Patronus to message us in an emergency. Please teach Harry how to do it. Send it to ‘The Order of the Phoenix’. We’ll be here as soon as possible. Harry, Hermione, use the Invisibility Cloak; use Kreacher to get you to safety; do *whatever* it takes to survive, understand?”

Harry and Hermione both said yes.



After warm goodbyes and hugs, Sirius, Ginny and Kreacher were gone. Kreacher returned a minute later.

“Where did you take them, Kreacher?” demanded Harry.

“Kreacher cannot say, Master Harry. Kreacher must obey Master Sirius’ orders first,” croaked the wizened old elf while bowing.

“Good,” said Harry as he eyed Hermione. “Just checking... But could you take us there if I asked?” asked Harry hopefully, still eying Hermione, who started to look suspicious.

“Kreacher cannot. Master Sirius knows how to give Kreacher orders when he wants them obeyed. That is why Kreacher’s return was delayed,” said Kreacher somewhat sadly.

Hermione gave Harry a satisfied look and turned to look at the Daily Prophet. But she suddenly put it down and without looking at Harry said, “And *why* didn’t you *tell me* you were made a member of the Order? I thought Professor Dumbledore told you to share *everything* with me. First, it was not saying the Prophecy had been destroyed -- even Dumbledore forgot about that one. What *other* secrets are you keeping?” She then looked at Harry and cocked her head waiting for Harry’s explanation.

Harry knew this was not going to be fun.

## Chapter 5 – More Endless Waiting

July was better than June, but not much.

Now Harry just moped. He knew that Sirius’ advise was right and Hermione was not about to let him forget it. At least Harry could see his birthday as the starting date for action. So, he resumed discussing Horcruxes and Draco’s whereabouts with Hermione. But after only two days they had exhausted the subjects once again.

Hermione taught Harry how to send a Patronus message, but that only took one day. They also resumed Animagus training now that Ginny was gone, but Harry made no further progress. It just contributed to his moping, so Hermione stopped insisting he practice after one week of it.

Hermione no longer wanted to read the Prophet aloud, though she would point out things she thought were important. Now they split the paper and read it at the same time, swapping halves when they were done. The news kept getting worse -- more decrees, more restrictions, less freedom. Now there were rewards for information concerning the whereabouts of Albus Dumbledore, Harry Potter and his allies. The rewards increased every week.

Perhaps as a result, stories about sightings of Harry Potter, Sirius Black and sometimes either one accompanied by a girl, soon began appearing in the newspaper. These sightings came from all over the country. Soon, Hermione Granger was named as the accompanying Muggle-born girl and added to the list of 'most wanted' Undesirables. Sometimes all three would be sighted, but usually just one or two.

Harry was amused that the Ministry -- meaning the Death Eaters -- had to spend so much time checking out so many bogus sightings.

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Harry started to get anxious about destroying the locket. He knew Basilisk venom was preferred, but the only source was in the Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts. They could also use the Sword of Gryffindor, which Dumbledore had impregnated with the venom and had Harry use to destroy the Horcrux ring. But the sword was also at Hogwarts, and in the Headmaster's office, which would be even harder to access.

"Maybe, *somehow*, we could get word to Neville or Adrian to steal it for us..." suggested Harry, "...hypothetically."

"And get them *killed*... hypothetically," responded Hermione curtly. "But school is out, so it's not an option now."

"Right, I forgot," said Harry, ignoring Hermione's acid retort.

After hearing Harry vent his locket-destroying frustration for what seemed like the millionth time, Hermione finally told Harry there was *another* way to destroy a Horcrux.

"I read in *Secrets of the Darkest Art* that we can use *Fiendfyre* to destroy Horcruxes... but it would have to be a real emergency because it's so *extremely dangerous*."

All he could say was, "Why have you *waited* so long to tell me?"

“Because I *know* you, Harry,” she said softly.

She then explained how incredibly dangerous Fiendfyre was -- among the most insidious and darkest magic -- and that she was afraid of it. She said they absolutely dared not use it inside the house or anywhere in a populated area. It was almost impossible to control. It was as if the fire had a mind of its own and its goal was to burn the entire world. And worse -- water would not put it out -- only the counter curse or the complete absence of oxygen and combustible material. They would have to wait for the right opportunity and conditions.

After she described the extreme dangers of Fiendfyre, Harry reluctantly agreed. And though he could not explain why, learning about Fiendfyre had improved his mood.

They continued discussing where the two-remaining known inanimate Horcruxes could be, though they had not come up with anything new. Hermione was still focused on the Chamber of Secrets as the logical place to hide one -- as well as the source of needed Basilisk venom.

Harry always disagreed in part. He said again, “Hermione, the Chamber is associated with the *diary*. Vol...”

“Don’t say his *name*, Harry!” Hermione chided.

“Sorry... *He* wouldn’t have hidden *two* Horcruxes in the same place,” Harry finished.

Hermione responded, “But you know he didn’t *hide* the diary there. He left it in Lucius Malfoy’s care.”

Harry answered back, “...with instructions to plant it so it would cause the Chamber to be opened -- where it *ended up*.”

“No, Harry, Mr Malfoy acted on his own...” corrected Hermione.

Most discussions ended once they got into this argument, so they always left the Chamber of Secrets until last. They did agree that only one object was probably hidden at Hogwarts, but where the other one was hidden stumped them. The Orphanage, Borgin’s, and Albania were all they could think of that seemed a possibility.

They also resumed killing a lot of time practicing to become Animagi. Of course, it was not really *practice* for Hermione -- she had been one since sixth year. She was

effortlessly transforming back and forth between witch and eagle. She was there to encourage Harry not to give up, because he continued to be so close. He experienced the heightened senses and the second heartbeat, but the image of the creature he would become never appeared in his mind. He always felt “resistance” and then the headache. He wanted to quit, but Hermione would not let him.

“What are you feeling?” she would ask him each time he stopped to rest.

“I don’t know... It feels powerful... I mean, *really* powerful... but there is something holding me back... Like something doesn’t *want* me to transform. It doesn’t make sense, Hermione.”

“No... it doesn’t...” said Hermione, but she did not sound convinced.

Harry just assumed she thought he was not trying hard enough.

That night as soon as he got into bed, he had a vision. It was the first one since he had sworn off Occlumency. His scar did not hurt at all this time. He wondered if his “adequacy” at Occlumency, as Professor Snape had assessed, had caused that.

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He was angry.

“Why do you let him live, Lucius? Your plan to use Draco to deliver Harry Potter to Lord Voldemort from school last year did not work. Why do you think this time will be different?”

“My Lord,” said Lucius Malfoy in a quavering voice, “it appears the Memory Charm combined with the Imperius Curse created an unforeseen conflict within my s... the boy. Draco did not act *normally*. Snape informed us of that much. When Draco was cursed by the Weasley boy, it broke the Imperius Curse. Fortunately, the memory charm continued to work. He had no memory of entering the vanishing cabinet, or being captured when he emerged, or even having left school.”

“Yes, fortunate for *you*, Lucius,” he said maliciously. “The Weasley boy showed true pure-blood courage... or have you forgotten already? *He* was attacking *Harry Potter* and your *pathetic son* just got in the way. The Weasley boy has been rewarded and will be returning to school... with a new wand courtesy of... the *Minister for Magic* herself.”

He laughed at the irony of it.

“Yes, My Lord,” said Lucius, gulping nervously. “*This time*, My Lord, with Draco under our control again, and the school in our hands, we will rely *only* on the Imperius Curse. Draco will return to school when it resumes and will wait for Harry Potter to make contact, as we expect him to, once he learns Draco has gone back to school. Potter will want to see his best friend. We will expect Potter to try and meet Draco in Hogsmeade. Draco will deliver Potter to us, My Lord. I am sure of it.”

He beckoned Lucius closer to him.

Lucius edged nearer.

Then he leaned in very close to Lucius’ face and said very slowly, “This is your *last* chance, Lucius. If Draco *fails*, he will *die*. And we will make *Narcissa* kill him in front of you and all our Death Eaters as an example of what happens when you *fail* Lord Voldemort.”

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Harry could not wait until morning. He got up and went across the hall to Hermione’s room and knocked.

She had been reading in bed, of course, not sleeping.

Harry told her what he had seen.

Hermione listened intently and when Harry finished, said, “That confirms *almost* everything that happened last year, including Draco’s odd behavior. But now they’ve got him again. At least we know their plan and that he’ll be safe for now.”

“Be *safe!*” exclaimed Harry. “Hermione, *You-Know-Who*’s got Draco. He could change his mind in an instant and Draco will be *dead*. We’ve got to *save* him... *now*.”

“Harry, it’s too *risky*. Wait; no, that’s an *understatement*,” said Hermione sounding incredulous. “*It’s impossible*, Harry. We’ve got to stay *here*. Remember what Sirius said. Please... at *least* until you’re seventeen.” Hermione was pleading because she could tell that Harry was already determined to act.

Harry did not say anything for several seconds. He seemed to be thinking. Then he asked, “Do you remember how to *break* the Imperius Curse?”

As if it were a quiz, Hermione immediately answered, “There are several ways... personal resistance -- fighting the curse -- which is *very* difficult, depending on the strength of the wizard performing it and the wizard resisting it. The curse can be lifted by the cursing wizard... or by his death; and also by a very great shock of some kind, apparently like Ron using that deadly slashing curse, *Sectumsempra*, on Draco.” But then she pleaded again, “But, Harry... *no*.”

Harry ignored her plea. “But I broke Professor Moody’s and Vo... *his* ...Imperius Curse,” said Harry. “It can’t be *that* difficult,” argued Harry.

Hermione exhaled forcefully, sounding exasperated. “Harry, you are not called the *Chosen One* because it’s a clever title. It *means* something. You have extraordinary abilities you are only beginning to learn about, especially when it comes to *him*. *This* is one of them.”

“But I *still* can’t transform into... whatever,” complained Harry. Then he returned to the first subject, asking, “Then why isn’t The Order using the Imperius Curse *twice* as much as they are to *beat* them?”

Hermione could not fathom Harry’s thought processes.

“Harry, you just can’t go around using that curse willy-nilly. First you must have close access to the target. It’s not easy getting close to Death Eaters; it’s *dangerous*. It’s also *illegal*; it’s a *slavery* curse. You know the old Muggle saying, ‘The road to hell is paved...’”

“Yes, I *know*, Hermione,” said Harry dismissively.

“Fine,” said Hermione. “If we *are* using it -- and I have no reason to believe that we aren’t, because this is war -- it should be used *sparingly* and *strategically*. That’s what Professor Dumbledore would do, I’m sure.”

“OK. OK, Hermione... for now,” said Harry sounding frustrated. “I’m going back to bed. We’ll talk about this more tomorrow.”

Neither Harry nor Hermione got much sleep.

Harry was planning Draco's rescue.

Hermione was planning how to talk Harry out of it.

## Chapter 6 – Elf Logic

Hermione did not wait for Harry to take his first bite of breakfast toast before she started in with her arguments. She had not even bothered to start reading the Daily Prophet yet; it was still folded neatly where Kreacher always placed it on the table.

She began with a repeat of Sirius' request to stay safe and not to go anywhere, at least not before Harry turned seventeen.

Harry took comfort in the fact that it was only two days hence.

Then Hermione said they would be vastly outnumbered and, furthermore, it would be crazy to go charging into the enemy's very headquarters, where You-Know-Who himself would be. She also said it could possibly be a ruse to lure Harry in -- just like they had tried two years before in the Hall of Prophecies. Harry would be delivering himself to You-Know-Who -- the one thing Professor Dumbledore had worked so hard to prevent all these years. And finally, she said, "And you really don't know *exactly* where Draco is. They could be holding him anywhere."

Uncharacteristically, Harry had sat patiently and listened to Hermione's arguments. He was still holding the piece of toast he had picked up when Hermione had begun. When Hermione finished, Harry grinned and put the toast down.

"Why are you *smiling*, Harry?" asked Hermione, sounding a little perturbed.

"Because I *do* know where Draco is," said Harry smartly. "In my vision, I saw the Malfoy family crest on the wall behind Lucius Malfoy. Draco showed it to me in our first year. He said there's a big carving of it hanging on the wall in their drawing room at home... He's at *Malfoy Manor*."

"They *could* be keeping him somewhere else," argued Hermione weakly.

"Very unlikely," said Harry dismissively.

“He could be anywhere in the house. How are we possibly going to find him without running into someone?” asked Hermione, not giving up. But she quickly realized she was falling into a trap by arguing the details. “Wait,” she said before Harry could answer, “Harry, what about everything else I said? Please.”

“Hermione, you haven’t even heard my plan,” said Harry patiently. “But I’ll answer you first. I understand all your arguments and agree with every one of them.”

Hermione had not expected this. She looked surprised.

But then Harry said, “Hermione, if *you* were held prisoner, I would do *everything* in my power to rescue you. If I didn’t, I’d *never* forgive myself. I’m sure you’d do the same for me. Draco is my best friend and I’ll do it for him too.”

Tears welled up in Hermione’s eyes and she rushed around the table to hug Harry, weeping on his shoulder. “I love you, Harry. Tell me your plan. I’ll help you.”

Harry patted her on the back and said, “Dobby’s going to snatch him for us.”

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“A house-elf cannot be snatching its Master without his permission, sir and miss,” explained Dobby.

The tiny house-elf had just thrown cold water on Harry’s plan.

Hermione had been delighted and impressed with the simplicity of Harry’s plan, saying, “I should have thought of that.”

They had lost all interest in breakfast, despite Kreacher’s fussing. Eventually he gave up and stood by the fireplace waiting for them to leave the kitchen.

Harry had called Dobby and the tiny elf popped into the kitchen almost immediately. “Harry Potter is calling Dobby, sir?”

“Yes, Dobby. Thank you for coming,” Harry had said politely. “Draco is under the Imperius Curse at Malfoy Manor. We need you to rescue him and bring him here.”

When Dobby gave Harry and Hermione the bad news, Hermione, said, “But Draco isn’t himself under the Curse. I’m sure he’d *want* you to rescue him.”



Dobby shook his head, “Dobby is sorry, miss. It is not mattering.”

“But, Dobby,” said Harry, “you are a *free* elf; you *have* no master.”

“But it is Master Draco who is freeing Dobby, sir. Dobby is deciding Master Draco is being his Master and can still be calling Dobby,” said the now smiling elf as if his twisted logic made perfect sense.

“But *I* can call you *too*, Dobby, and *I’m* not your master,” argued Harry.

“Harry Potter is being a *special* case,” said Dobby proudly. “Dobby cannot be taking Harry Potter without his permission either.”

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Hermione nodded her head toward Kreacher who was standing patiently by the fireplace.

Harry understood. He turned toward Kreacher and asked, “Have you been listening, Kreacher?”

“Kreacher has, Master Harry,” croaked the old house-elf.

“Draco is not *your* master. Can you rescue Draco if I asked you to?” asked Harry.

“Kreacher could if Master Draco were not in his *home*, Master Harry. He is protected there. It is elf law.”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” said Harry dismally. “I figured there would be a problem of some kind, Hermione. That’s why I didn’t ask Kreacher in the first place...” Harry suddenly inhaled, turned back to Dobby and asked, “Dobby, if you took *me* to Malfoy Manor and *I* grabbed Draco, could you bring us both back?”

“Yes, of course, Master Harry,” said Dobby as if the answer were obvious.

Harry looked at Hermione nervously, expecting the worst. But instead, she said, “I knew you were going to ask him that... I know I can’t *stop* you, so, *I’m* going with you. You need someone to cover your back.”

Harry reluctantly agreed. He knew he could not talk her out of it. But he still felt guilty about endangering her too.

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They sent Dobby to recon Malfoy Manor and locate Draco. They were very specific in instructing Dobby not to be seen.

This made Dobby laugh. “A house-elf is only being seen when he is wanting being seen.”

Kreacher snorted.

Dobby was gone for over three-quarters of an hour. Harry and Hermione were well past worried by that point. But then Dobby Apparated into the kitchen accompanied by his usual small popping sound.

“What took so *long*, Dobby? We were worried something had happened to you,” said Harry with genuine concern.

Dobby did not answer the question. Instead, he announced, “Dobby is seeing Master Draco sitting in the drawing room by himself in the large green leather wing chair near the window.”

To Harry it seemed *way* too easy, too lucky, and too... specific.

“Could it be a *trap*, Dobby?” asked Harry, and he began ticking off possible traps -- “Any invisibility cloaks or disillusionment charms... someone hiding behind the curtains or the furniture... or outside the door... or window or... a secret panel or doorway... any evidence that anyone is nearby or on guard?”

Harry tried to think of everything.

“Sir, Dobby is only seeing Master Draco sitting in the drawing room by himself in the large green leather wing chair near the window,” said Dobby sounding confident.

Kreacher snorted again.

Harry was sure he heard Kreacher say, “Rubbish” under his breath.

“So, you said, Dobby” replied Harry. He was thinking.

Harry then closed his eyes and tried seeing into Voldemort's mind, but he saw nothing. Harry knew Voldemort used Occlumency, though it clearly did not work when he was angry or experiencing unusually strong emotions.

Harry opened his eyes and shook his head.

Hermione had her lips pressed together in thought. Finally, she said, "Harry, I think you need to trust your instincts."

"You're right, Hermione," responded Harry.

He took out his wand and pointed it at Dobby.

## Chapter 7 – Reckless Rescue

Dobby and Harry Apparated into the drawing room of Malfoy Manor with a loud pop.

Lord Voldemort was standing in front of the empty chair where Draco was supposed to be seated. He was holding a wand Harry did not recognize. Nagini was coiled at his feet hissing.

Harry could see he was surrounded by Death Eaters, who lined the walls of the large room.

Dobby squeaked loudly and Disapparated, leaving Harry behind.

"So much for a *free* elf's loyalty..." said Voldemort mockingly. "Harry Potter, we meet again. You were expecting Draco Malfoy, of course... So easily manipulated when it comes to your friends..."

Harry could not help but think, '*Why does Voldemort always make speeches?*' But the delay caused by Voldemort's verbosity was a good thing this time.

"I didn't come for Draco... I CAME FOR YOU!" shouted Harry.

This completely surprised Voldemort; he was speechless.

Harry had arrived with his wand out. It was already pointed at Voldemort.

'*Expelliarmus!*' commanded Harry, nonverbally, hoping to catch his surprised enemy off guard. But it was no good.

The Dark Lord must have sensed Harry's spell through body language or some other means and flicked his own wand with lightning speed to parry.

Then Voldemort jabbed his wand at Harry.

But before Harry could say or even think, '*Protego*', his wand emitted a bolt of golden light directly at Voldemort's wand, which exploded in his hand.

Voldemort shrieked in pain and the Death Eaters gasped in shock.

And before either Voldemort or his Death Eaters could react, Dobby reappeared at Harry's side with Hermione and Draco in tow.

Harry yelled, "THE SNAKE..."

But Hermione had already seen it.

She pointed her wand at Nagini, who was rearing to strike, and shouted...

*"INCENDIUM PER FENDE!"*

The snake was instantly enveloped by intensely hot writhing flames which seemed to be alive. They consumed the huge snake in a heartbeat, reducing it to ash.

Voldemort was blasted backwards into the large wingchair, and both tumbled over.

The deadly flames then exploded upwards and outwards across the ceiling to the surrounding walls and then down. The Death Eaters were all desperately trying to get out of the burning room, fighting each other at the doorways and windows to escape.

Draco only managed to get off one stunning spell before Dobby grabbed Harry's hand and Disapparated with his three charges -- just barely escaping the murderous Fiendfyre, which Hermione had unleashed.

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“I think I got Crabbe’s dad right in the face!” exclaimed Draco as soon as they Apparated into the Kitchen at number Twelve.

Harry had never seen Draco look so happy in his life.

Draco leaned over and picked up Dobby like a small child and hugged him, exclaiming, “Thank you, Dobby. *I owe you my life!*”

Then still holding Dobby he embraced Harry and Hermione in a group hug and broke down into tears, barely managing to say, “Thanks for coming for me.”

## Chapter 8 – Draco’s Story

Draco told his story.

First, he explained what happened at school.

“I thought I could somehow get behind them in the dungeons by going down to the basement. I had Dobby Apparate me, Cho, Daphne, and Tracy to the kitchens. I’d never explored the far end of the basement, but it’s a dead end. There is no connection between the basement and the dungeons. I should have had Dobby take us directly to the dungeons, but at the time I thought it was too risky. *Big mistake; my mistake.*”

“By the time we came back near the kitchens, there were already Death Eaters down the basement stairs. We were trapped near the Hufflepuff common room, and they saw us. But before we started to duel, we heard Professor Snape announcing the school surrender in the Entry Hall. I expected them to let me go with Tracy and the rest, but they recognized me. Montague laughed in my face -- said I was ‘on the list’, which I now know includes you, Harry... and Hermione and Ginny.”

“They Imperiused me and I was taken to Malfoy Manor, which is... *his* ...headquarters. Yes, I know about the taboo, which is driving me crazy, by the way. I can’t seem to revert to saying, ‘the Dark Lord’. Anyway... they restored my memory; and I think I know why... but that comes later...”

“Anyway... Harry, it was the *VANISHING CABINET!* ...That’s how they got into the school. There was another one -- of a matching pair -- in Borgin and Burkes. I remembered I saw it there with my father years ago. It looked very similar to the one in Professor Snape’s office. I hadn’t seen it until then. The two are *connected.*”

“Montague got chased into the one in the empty classroom at school by Fred and George when we fought the DLA in fifth year. Montague obviously learned the two were connected because he came out of the one in Borgin’s right away. It’s also why he was reported being seen in the castle last year. He’s none too bright, Montague -- it took him long enough to figure it out. But he needed to test whether or not it worked *both* ways. He also needed to confirm its location. I don’t think he remembered exactly where it was, being chased by Fred and George. And then, remember, it was moved *twice*, first to Filch’s office and then to Professor Snape’s.”

“Montague used the information to ingratiate himself with... *him*. Montague’s a full-fledged Death Eater now with the Dark Mark, one of the youngest, and was the first one initiated from the DLA.”

“Here’s the bad part. I guessed about the paired vanishing cabinets months ago, but I wanted to test my theory before telling you... Maybe I’m not so much brighter than Montague after all... Anyway, I went through after it was moved to Professor Snape’s office. It was late at night, so I figured there was no risk coming out in Borgin’s well after closing time and then nipping right back to school. *Another* big mistake.”

“After Montague had confirmed his theory by coming out in Filch’s office, he told the Death Eaters, and they moved the one from Borgin’s to Malfoy Manor and placed it under guard in the cellar... I was caught immediately.”

“They put a memory charm on me to forget anything about the *two* vanishing cabinets, what I had figured out, or that I had gone through them... or anything. They did it because Professor Snape told them Harry was teaching everyone how to break the Imperius Curse. They were afraid that if I broke it, they’d lose their secret way into the school via the twin cabinets. They even made me forget that I was Imperiused. Then they sent me back to school via the cabinets. My Imperiused instructions were to try to get Harry to go into the vanishing cabinet -- and it totally screwed me up -- ordering me to *do something* they told me to *forget about*.”

Hermione said, “Incredible. What could they have been thinking? The Imperius Curse makes you feel wonderful and willing to do things you don’t want to do. Telling you to do something that you couldn’t understand because it conflicted with the memory charm... *and* telling you to forget that you’d been Imperiused just killed your normal motivations and made you act *strangely*.”

“I’ll say,” said Harry.

“I bet it also interfered with your ability to *fight* the Imperius Curse because you didn’t know what to fight against,” Hermione concluded.

“Hermione, you *nailed it!*” exclaimed Draco. “When Ron hit me with Snape’s slashing curse, it broke the Imperius Curse. That was pure luck. But unfortunately, it did not break the memory charm. I still didn’t remember anything about the vanishing cabinets or being Imperiused. All I knew was that I had memory gaps, which I told you about.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Hermione, “I’m going to have to write a report about this for Defense Against the Dark Arts...” Her words trailed off and she turned red with embarrassment.

“I’m glad someone is still able to imagine what it’s like to be normal,” said Harry sympathetically.

Draco continued, “There’s more... Um... *he* ...wanted to have me *killed* because my father’s plan failed -- yes, my *father’s* plan -- to have me turn you over to... *him* ...from school, and because everyone knows we’re best friends... you know. The same for Ginny and Hermione too, being on the list -- anybody that’s a best friend of Harry Potter gets killed, so be warned. Anyway... what really made... *him* ...angry was thinking they had lost their secret way into the school.”

Harry interrupted, “I probably didn’t sense his anger because I was still using Occlumency then. If I had only stopped sooner,” said Harry painfully, “we might have *prevented* all this.”

“Harry, you can’t blame yourself,” said Hermione. “Professor Dumbledore thought it was the right thing to do. You had no reason to think otherwise at the time.”

“She’s right, Harry,” said Draco, “it’s *not* your fault... Now let me finish... They had planned to use the vanishing cabinets to get *into* the school, kill Professor Dumbledore, and take over the school. But they couldn’t do that until the Ministry had fallen. Curiosity got the better of them. They sent Montague through again soon after I was cursed by Ron. They were amazed when they realized their secret was still safe. But it made them accelerate their plans to take out the Ministry and they ended up deciding to take out the Ministry *and* Hogwarts at the same time, because they would need only a small force to take the school by surprise. Well, you know what happened. I was caught again when they attacked the school -- no big deal. But... *he* ...was enraged that neither you nor Professor Dumbledore were caught.”

“*That* I saw in a vision,” said Harry.

Draco nodded and continued. “That’s when my father begged... *him* ...to use me as bait *again*. At first, I thought it was because my parents *really did care* about me -- regretted disowning me and all -- but then I heard my father talking to my mother... You know, when you’re Imperiused, the people in control treat you like you’re not there -- like a servant or house-elf... Anyway, it was clear I was nothing more than a way for them to get back in favor with... *him*. Once they had achieved that, I would be *disposable*. It only confirmed what I learned about my parents five years ago,” Draco said bitterly.

Then he finished, “You know the rest. Dobby and Hermione appeared. Dobby lifted the Imperius Curse on me -- who knew house-elves could do that? -- and we came to get *you*... I have got to admit it, Harry, you have nerves of steel to face... *him* ...like that again. I couldn’t have done it. Thanks again for coming for me, mate... You too, Hermione.”

Draco leaned over and gave Hermione a peck on the cheek. She blushed; Harry blushed too at Draco’s praise.

Hermione put her hand on Harry’s back and rubbed it.

“It was *Hermione’s* plan that worked; my plan failed,” said Harry. “We sent Dobby to Malfoy Manor to find out where you were located and scout out their security. It took him so long we were suspicious, especially when he behaved strangely when he returned. We figured he had been caught and Imperiused. I tried and failed to lift the Imperious Curse on Dobby, but Kreacher intervened. He did it with a snap of his fingers. So, we accidentally learned two things critical to our success -- how to lift the Imperius Curse on you without injuring you... and that the Death Eaters were setting a trap we could exploit. Dobby was able to tell us everything about their plan. Poor Dobby wept like a baby; said he’d been overconfident in his ability to enter and search Malfoy Manor undetected and could have gotten us all killed.”

“Dobby said he was caught almost immediately. In hindsight, that was *my* mistake, though as I said, a lucky one. We used Dobby like this before and your father knew it. They must have come up with a way to detect a house-elf Apparating. So, your father recognized an opportunity to capture me right away by Imperiusing Dobby and making him lead us into a trap. He quickly and easily convinced *You-Know-Who* -- and why not? It was a golden opportunity to turn our plan against us. And their counterplan was good. Dobby was Imperiused to return only to the drawing room. If he arrived anywhere



else and tripped their alarm, it would have told them their counterplan had failed. We only had one shot. And Hermione came up with her *new* plan in about a minute,” said Harry proudly.

Hermione blushed again.

Harry smiled at her and continued, “Dobby took me to the drawing room, letting them believe their counterplan had worked. Then he abandoned me and located you. Just about everyone else at Malfoy Manor was ‘preoccupied.’ Dobby came back here and then took Hermione to you. She stunned the guards, Dobby released you from the Imperius Curse, and then you three rescued me.”

“I was only waiting for Dobby for maybe five seconds,” said Hermione breathlessly, “but it seemed like forever. My heart was beating so fast, I could feel it in my chest.”

“But that’s not *all*, Hermione!” exclaimed Draco. “The *Snake*, Hermione! You got *Nagini!* It was *brilliant*. I’ve never seen anything like that curse. It turned that huge snake to ash almost instantly. What was it? If that snake was a Horcrux, you destroyed it for sure. I think the blast we felt was from the bit of Vol... Damn it! ...*his*... soul *dying*. I even though I heard it *scream*... or maybe just imagined it.”

Harry laughed, “How could you hear it with all those Death Eaters screaming. I wish I could have taken a shot at *You-Know-Who* after he went over with the chair. What do you think happened after we left?”

Hermione gave a little cough and looked embarrassed. “I don’t think many of the people in that room made it out unless they acted together and used the counter curse in time. You asked what my curse was, Draco... It was *Fiendfyre* -- one of the very few things that will destroy a Horcrux. I had *not* planned it; I simply reacted instinctively when I saw the snake. We’ll destroy the Locket the same way -- but only when we can find a *safe* place.”

“Wow! You got the *locket* on the Horcrux hunt that night? Brilliant!” exclaimed Draco looking at Harry in amazement.

Harry and Hermione looked at each other. Harry coughed in embarrassment, and said, “Not exactly... we’ll tell you the story later. Go on...”

“So, why haven’t you destroyed it already?” asked Draco. “We could use the fireplace right here. I’m sure we can handle the counter curse -- being at the ready to put it out right away.”

“Absolutely *not*,” said Hermione sternly. “Fiendfyre has a mind of its own. It acts almost consciously. It would be up and out the chimney in an instant. It would destroy this house and probably all of London. It seeks and consumes anything combustible. To stop it you must completely surround it with a magical barrier. The counter curse is very basic -- just *Finite Incantatem* -- but, again, you must *surround* the Fiendfyre with the spell, which isn’t easy to do. Professor Binns said the Great London Fire of 1666 was actually caused by an unknown wizard experimenting with Fiendfyre. That’s why it was banned by the International Warlocks Convention of 1709. I just have to hope enough of the Death Eaters responded quickly enough to use the counter curse -- or I’m afraid to think what may have happened.”

“Well, Malfoy Manor is way out in the countryside; there’s nothing near it for miles” said Draco thoughtfully. “Still, I hope it *destroyed* the whole house and everyone in it... Good riddance,” said Draco angrily, “especially my... *him*. But from what you just said, I agree we shouldn’t try it here.”

Harry knew Draco had almost said, “my parents,” but evidently had second thoughts. Perhaps Draco still had some hope of eventual reconciliation. Harry was not sure, but he was *not* going to discuss the possible fate of Draco’s parents now or probably ever. He needed to say something else.

“If something *did* happen to *You-Know-Who*, we should know soon enough. You can’t keep something like that a secret. And remember, as long as *one* of his Horcruxes remains, he won’t really be dead. He’ll be able to return just like the last time. We still need to find and destroy the rest of them *before* we can kill him.”

“Right,” said Draco. “Hermione, was Fiendfyre in that book Professor Dumbledore gave you? You never mentioned it.”

“Yes. But I didn’t think it was a good idea to tell you, or even Harry,” said Hermione. “I’m still shocked I used it. The book is *Secrets of the Darkest Art*. It explains in detail how to create and destroy a Horcrux. But it never envisions someone making more than one. Basilisk Venom, Fiendfyre, and Dragon Fire are the only verified methods for magically destroying one. But immersion in active molten lava -- the fire of mother earth -- is theorized. However, if it didn’t work, that bit of soul could survive for the lifetime of the earth... or perhaps longer. The same might be true if you were able to vanish one.

The book doesn't mention Vanishing, but Professor McGonagall says vanished objects go into 'nothingness' and if that isn't magical destruction, what is? But nothingness is not provable; we only know you can't bring vanished objects back. So, you couldn't take that chance. Of course, some wizards joke that everything that is conjured is really just something that has been vanished by someone in another universe."

Hermione laughed at this, but Harry and Draco just looked at her strangely. So, she continued, "Anyway... in my opinion, it would be too risky to try molten lava or vanishing. If any wizard thinking about creating a Horcrux really thought about the implications of true physical immortality, I think they'd be afraid of it," concluded Hermione as if she had just summed up the whole discussion perfectly.

Then Draco said with a straight face, "Say Harry, you don't happen to know where there are any nearby rivers of molten lava do you?"

Hermione threw a napkin at Draco's face. Then they all laughed.

"Seriously, Hermione," said Draco, "this *name taboo* thing is a *big* problem. Like I said, I tried switching back to using *'the Dark Lord'*, but it doesn't come naturally anymore. Is there anything we can do about it?"

"I'll think about it," was all she said.

"Say," said Harry, "there's one other thing I need to tell you two about... It happened a split second before you Apparated next to me in the drawing room... I was dueling *You-Know-Who*. He blocked my nonverbal disarming charm and immediately attacked me with his own nonverbal spell. I wasn't ready for it, but my wand -- *completely on its own* -- fired a streak of golden light that hit *Vo...* Damn it! ...hit *You-Know-Who's* wand and shattered it. It practically blew up in his hand. And here's the *odd* bit... he wasn't using his *regular* wand. It was a wand I didn't recognize."

Harry finished and raised his eyebrows indicating he wanted their reaction.

As usual, Hermione was the first to comment. "Harry, wands don't act on their *own*. It must have been a spell you cast subconsciously," she said matter-of-factly.

"But I don't *know* any spells that send out jets of golden light to shatter things. Do you?" responded Harry.

“Well... no. But that doesn't mean you couldn't have read about it somewhere or heard about it from someone -- like Remus, or Sirius, or more likely, Professor Dumbledore -- and simply forgotten it. But in a life-or-death situation, you were able to recall it subconsciously. I bet it will come to you, unexpectedly, when you're not trying so hard to remember it,” said Hermione, sounding very confident in her answer -- because it was, of course, completely logical.

Draco weighed in too. “Sounds reasonable...” he began, which generated a smiling nod from Hermione. Then he said, “I hope you remember it soon. That spell's better than *Expelliarmus*. As for... *him* ...having a different wand... it was *my father's* wand.”

“What? Why?” asked Harry, amazed.

“It's another story,” said Draco, “and I don't understand much of it.” He paused for a moment deciding where to begin. Finally, he said, “It has something to do with Ollivander. He's being held prisoner in the cellar of Malfoy Manor... Still there if he wasn't killed in the fire... Been there over a year. Death Eaters must have kidnapped him. No surprise... Anyway, I heard my parents talking about it. There is some kind of connection between... *You-Know-Who's* wand and yours -- something about the cores being the same and they won't work right against each other. Remember what you said happened dueling... *him* ...in the graveyard?”

“You mean when my wand and his were connected by that golden beam,” asked Harry incredulously.

“Right. *Another* golden beam... Coincidence? Well, apparently that connection in the graveyard was caused by the *wands*. Ollivander told... *him*, but he didn't believe it. But then when you dueled *him* in the Ministry, *you* were using a *different* wand... which you never told us by the way... and you beat *him* again *without* that weird connection happening. So, after that... *he* ...believed Ollivander and made my father give him his wand. So... *You-Know-Who* has had *two* wands for a while, until you destroyed my father's.”

Hermione said, “This is *very* strange. I wish I could talk to Ollivander about it. Did Professor Dumbledore talk to *you* about this, Harry?”

“No,” said Harry. He hoped Hermione would not ask about the Ministry, but she did -- penetrating questions all.

“Then why *weren't* you using your own wand at the Ministry? Whose wand *were* you using? And *why* was it so effective against You-Know-Who's wand?”

Harry sighed. “I've told you, I promised Professor Dumbledore I would never discuss what happened at the Ministry until he told me I could. Sorry. That's all I'm going to say about it.”

Hermione blinked several times but did not say anything. Her lips were pursed. She looked like she wanted to say something. But then she looked at Draco and asked, “Anything else?”

Draco shook his head.

Hermione turned her attention to Dobby who had all this time been looking down and sitting quietly on a small stool by the fireplace -- under the watchful eye of Kreacher, who did not look happy.

She said, “Please don't look sad, Dobby. You bear absolutely no blame for what happened. In fact, if it *hadn't* happened, we wouldn't have succeeded. *You alone* enabled our success.”

Kreacher scowled and shook his head when she said this.

Then Harry chimed in, “It was *my* fault for not realizing I had already used this type of escape before from the Death Eaters. I put *you* in danger, not the other way around. It is important you understand this because we may have to ask you to help us in the same way again. Would you be willing to help us *again*?”

It was like a spark had ignited Dobby's mood. His face lit up in a huge smile and his eyes nearly popped out of his head as he exclaimed, “Oh, yes, Harry Potter! Dobby is *always* wanting to be helping his friends!” He jumped off the stool and said, “Dobby is worrying that you would never be wanting his help again... That sirs and miss would stop being Dobby's friends.”

“Dobby, friends don't abandon each other,” said Harry, genuinely concerned by what the little elf had been feeling.

“That's right,” echoed Draco, “We *know* we can count on you, and *you* can be sure to count on *us*.”

Hermione nodded, blinking back a tear.

Enormous tears appeared in Dobby huge eyes and rolled down his cheeks, exclaiming, “Dobby is lucky to be having the best friends in the world!” He bowed deeply and then said simply, “Dobby must be getting back to work. He is having a lot of time to be making up tonight.”

With that he Disapparated, but not without first grinning at Kreacher.

The old house-elf just shook his head and went to work preparing dinner for three, and then Draco’s room.

They celebrated all evening, and updated Draco on other things – the Locket story, Sirius’ visit, and, of course, Ginny being safe -- but finally the effects of anxiety, stress and even joyful relief had taken their toll. They went to bed exhausted. Draco and Hermione fell asleep immediately. Harry, on the other hand, was disturbed by flashes of visions throughout the night.

Voldemort had clearly survived. But he was hurt, badly hurt.

Oddly, Voldemort did not seem to be using Occlumency. Still, it was like he was there for brief periods and then he wasn’t. Harry would experience the ‘there’ periods as jolts of intense pain and anger, sometimes mixed with feelings of panic and despair.

However, Harry did not mind; they made him feel good.

## **Chapter 9 – Birthdays and Reckoning**

Harry overslept and knew exactly why. His repeated visions of Voldemort’s suffering had cost him a lot of sleep. But now he was awake. He sluggishly performed his normal wakeup routine and then headed down to breakfast.

“SURPRISE! Happy Birthday, Harry!” came a chorus of shouts from Draco, Hermione and even Kreacher, who cheered, “Master Harry!” instead.

Harry was stunned. He had completely forgotten about his birthday.

Hermione rushed up and gave him a hug and kiss.

Draco slapped him on the back, saying, “Welcome to the world of grown-up responsibility, Harry. Yes, I must say, it has been quite a challenge for me, being of-age, for these past, oh... eight weeks. While our dear Hermione here has been coping admirably for close on a year. I hope you’re up to it, mate.”

Harry laughed, but Hermione looked shocked, saying, “I *forgot*, Draco. I’m sorry we weren’t able to celebrate *your* birthday. We’ll ask Kreacher to cook you up something special tonight, but I didn’t think to get you any presents.”

Draco laughed, “Saving my *life* was the *best* present you could have possibly given me, Hermione. Today is Harry’s day, and it can’t have come too soon. Now we can get going on finding those Horcruxes.”

“I feel the same way, Draco,” said Harry.

Harry really did not want a celebration. Today was the beginning of their final effort to destroy Voldemort -- an effort that could not only cost him his own life, but also the lives of his dearest friends.

“This way, Master Harry,” said Kreacher as he led Harry to his place at the table. His favorite foods were already set out, ready to be served. There was one small colorfully wrapped present on the table in front of him. Hermione reached over and handed it to him, saying, “Kreacher was kind enough to get it for me.” Harry opened it. It was a wristwatch.

Hermione smiled and said, “Ginny told me that it’s common for wizards to get a watch when they come of-age.”

“Well, that makes it official,” proclaimed Draco.

“Thanks, Hermione,” said Harry.

After they finished and as Kreacher cleared the table, Harry said, “I was late this morning because I was seeing into You-Know-Who’s mind on and off all night long. He’s *hurt*... very badly, I think. It must have been the Fiendfyre, Hermione. It *nearly* got him, but he somehow survived.”

“Damn!” exclaimed Draco, slapping his hand on the table.

Hermione did not react. Instead, she said almost clinically, “Burns from Fiendfyre are *cursed*. They are *very* difficult to heal -- they remain raw and excruciating for a *very* long time. You can only stop the pain using very powerful pain potions, which, Draco, are called ‘narcotics’ in the Muggle world. His injuries are probably just going to make him more dangerous.”

“On that happy assessment...” said Harry, “and because it’s my birthday, I say we take a break from anymore dark discussions and take the rest of the day off.”

Hermione and Draco readily agreed.

As they left the kitchen, Kreacher said, “Kreacher will have birthday cakes at dinner for both Master Harry and Master Draco.”

Harry and Draco both thanked him.

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The rest of the morning was uneventful. They went to the drawing room, played exploding snap, and reminisced about the good times at school. They especially enjoyed talking about Luna and Neville.

Suddenly, a loud *CRACK* was heard from below in the Kitchen. They all sat bolt upright.

“HARRY POTTER!!!” The name reverberated throughout the house.

“Sirius!” Harry exclaimed and he bolted for the door, followed by Draco and Hermione. They rushed downstairs into the Kitchen and then came to an abrupt halt. Sirius was standing with his hands on his hips, looking angrier than Harry had ever seen him.

“WHAT IN MERLIN’S NAME DID YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING?” shouted Sirius.

He ranted for at least a minute without stopping, “...foolish ...reckless ...acting on your own ...not following orders ...jeopardizing everything we’ve fought for ...ignoring everything we’ve done to protect you ...everyone making sacrifices ...need to work together ...etc. ...etc. ...etc.!”



All the while, Harry, Hermione, and Draco remained remarkably calm and passive. But Harry noticed Hermione's jaw tightening. That was a good sign. Being rebuked by an authority figure would normally have had her feeling guilty and promising to be better.

Sirius was winding down. "...and every available Death Eater is out scouring the country looking for you three. The reward for your capture is now *fifty-thousand* galleons." With this last bit of news, Sirius stopped. He stared at Harry and said, "Well?"

"May I speak freely?" asked Harry.

"Yes..." said Sirius, looking warily.

Harry began, "I am *now* of-age. In fact, we all are. Professor Dumbledore gave me a secret mission and allowed me to include Hermione and Draco. We *intend* to carry it out."

He glanced at Hermione and Draco who nodded in affirmation.

Then he continued. "I am supposed to be a member of the Order of the Phoenix. But it keeps way too many secrets from me, and does not include me in its basic organizational structure or methods -- I'm not assigned to a cell; I wasn't initially given a ring to communicate... I have to wonder *what else* I'm missing."

Harry crossed his arms. "Therefore, I will keep *our* secrets from the Order. You're my godfather, but now that I'm of-age, I will follow my *own* council. If you want us to leave here, we will. If you want to kick me out of the Order, I'm fine with it -- and you can have your ring back. But if you want our *cooperation*, you need to be more forthcoming about what's going on. For starters... What is the status of the Order? Where is Professor Dumbledore? What is the plan to defeat... *You-Know-Who*?"

Sirius looked at Draco and Hermione.

Hermione said sternly, "We're with Harry one hundred percent."

Draco said, "Damn right we are."

Sirius did not try the "that's my godson" approach this time. Instead, he said, "OK. I'll tell you what I know. But you have to promise me to remain in hiding and *not* take any more risks. *Forget* your secret mission..."

Harry cut him off, “*Not happening!* We’re not promising *anything*,” said Harry adamantly.

“Damn it, Harry... OK. OK.” Sirius walked over and took a seat at the kitchen table and waved his arm for them to join him.

All three hurried over and took their usual seats.

Sirius launched into a briefing that lasted several minutes.

“The Order is in bad shape. We don’t know where Dumbledore and Hagrid are, but we know they are alive and together. Podmore, Vance, and Figg are dead. Remus and Mundungus are missing. Remus had been back and forth trying to convince the werewolves not to join You-Know-Who, but he is very late returning from his last attempt. I’m *not* hopeful.”

Sirius looked quite distressed when he mentioned Remus, but he continued.

“Mundungus has probably just gone to ground. Kingsley and Arthur both fled the Ministry. Tonks is our only remaining inside contact. She is in incredible danger every minute. Having a Muggle-born father and blood-traitor mother makes her suspect. I think she’ll have to go on the run soon. Many of our allies in the Ministry, like Amelia Bones, are dead.”

“Kingsley is in charge of field operations, but McGonagall has taken over Order leadership in Dumbledore’s absence. Only she can officially assign you to a cell, Harry, and I’m sure she won’t until we learn what’s happened to Dumbledore. But as far as I’m concerned, you’re *all* in the Order now, since you’re of-age, and you are your own cell. For now, I’m your link to my cell and McGonagall.”

This made the three malcontents smile for the first time since Sirius arrived.

“For the last two months we’ve been mostly working on surviving. We all have missions, but there is no major operation or coordinated effort to roll back what happened. We’re fighting on the margins. We aren’t getting much outside support. The Death Eaters are ruthlessly killing anyone suspected of fomenting opposition. Known Order members, especially from the old days, have kill-on-sight warrants. I tried to send Fleur home to her parents, but she refused to leave. She’s in the same danger.”

“Fred, George, and Bill are protecting their parents and Ginny. You know about Percy and Ron. Fred’s and George’s shop in Diagon Alley was confiscated, along with Ollivander’s and Fortescue’s. Florian is missing and Ollivander was taken a long time ago. We don’t know if either are alive or dead.”

Harry decided to not tell Sirius about Ollivander being held prisoner. It would lead to too many questions. He gave Hermione and Draco a quick glance and a small shake of his head to warn them.

“As far as *Hogwarts* is concerned...”

This caused the three to sit up straighter and lean forward to listen more closely.

“...Snape let us know he would only be able to communicate verbally with McGonagall from now on. He will not communicate with the Order by any other means. He will do his best to control the Carrows -- Amicus and Alecto, brother and sister Death Eaters assigned as teachers. They are in charge of student discipline now by order of You-Know-Who. Apparently, he thinks Snape is *too soft* on his students.”

This made Sirius emit his bark-like laugh.

“They have already introduced *brutal* punishments. Some of the students who were in the so-called Dark Lord’s Army have returned to school. They work for the Carrows and inform on ‘*disloyal*’ students. I’m sure you’ve seen the other changes to the school described in the Daily Prophet. Oh, and Ron Weasley has been reinstated...”

“You told us last time,” said Hermione.

“Well, it’s worse,” said Sirius, “he’s now a member of the DLA.”

Draco muttered, “Bloody bastard...”

Hermione could only shake her head.

Sirius covered quite a lot of additional information. Much of it had been in the Daily Prophet. Harry was disappointed that most of it was also boring.

Finally, Sirius said, “I’ve told you what I know. Now, will you *please* tell me what happened at Malfoy Manor?”

Sirius had asked nicely. It was not a demand; it was a request.

Harry gave a distorted summary of their rescue of Draco. He told Sirius the fire was a diversion that had been part of the plan -- that Hermione and Draco had set the house on fire before returning to get Harry. He did not mention Horcruxes or Fiendfyre. Hermione and Draco clearly got the message.

Sirius just shook his head.

Harry could tell Sirius wanted to chide him again for the incredible risks he had taken to save Draco. So, he said, "You'd have done the same for *me*."

Again, Sirius said nothing, but he nodded.

"There are two other things you need to know," said Harry. "First, the Death Eaters got into the school using twin vanishing cabinets. One was in the school, and one was in Borgin and Burkes, and later moved to Malfoy Manor. It was a chance discovery by the DLA member who escaped last year."

"Yes, we know. Snape told us. It happened *right* under his nose," said Sirius bitterly.

"Under Professor Dumbledore's and *our* noses too," said Draco fairly.

Harry continued, "The second thing, and more important, is that Vol... Damn it! ... *You-Know-Who*... is *hurt*. I keep getting flash visions of him in pain. We think he got badly burned in the fire."

This news made Sirius sit up straight and say, "OK. This is *top secret* and a lot of it is based on rumors flying around. The Death Eaters rounded up all the top Healers from St Mungo's and took them to Malfoy Manor. They also later cleared an entire floor of St Mungo's hospital. It also seems the entire hospital staff has been Imperiused to keep quiet. The top two floors and part of the ground floor of Malfoy Manor were destroyed by the fires you set. We estimate at least thirty Death Eaters were killed, maybe more -- including a good portion of the leadership..." Sirius stopped and looked at Draco before continuing, "I'm sorry, Draco ...we don't know if your parents are..."

"Doesn't matter either way," said Draco looking away.

Sirius continued, “What you told me, Harry, confirms the rumor that You-Know-Who was seriously injured. What doesn’t make sense to me is why he just didn’t Disapparate to get away from the fire.”

“Perhaps their dark protective charms on the house prevented it, like here,” suggested Hermione.

“Prevented *You-Know-Who*?” scoffed Sirius. “Regardless, we’re trying to get more information.”

“Harry, this information is so important; I want you to use your ring if you find out anything. OK? Send it to me... Oh, and there’s one more thing... This *isn’t* a rumor, but I can’t name the source. The Death Eaters got the Goblins at Gringotts up in the middle of last night so they could get something out of the Lestrangle’s vault. Bellatrix Lestrangle retrieved whatever-it-was herself and it was something she could conceal under her robes. Do you have any idea if there is a connection with what happened at Malfoy Manor?”

Harry answered. He could tell Hermione and Draco had guessed the same possible connection that he had, but he had no intention of revealing anything. “Not really... She’s your aunt, Draco. Any ideas?”

Draco shook his head. Hermione did as well.

“Well then,” said Sirius, “anything else before I go?”

Hermione said, “I have two questions. If thirty or more Death Eaters were killed, including some of the leadership, and You-Know-Who is injured, isn’t this a major blow to their side. Shouldn’t we go on the *offensive*?”

Sirius shook his head. “When the Ministry and Hogwarts fell in a single day and Dumbledore disappeared, anyone sitting on the fence went over to You-Know-Who’s side. He has twenty times the followers and supporters he had before he took over. It has to be sixty to one against the Order now. All this about You-Know-Who being injured, and a Death Eater catastrophe are just rumors. There has been nothing about it in the Daily Prophet, of course. People are terrified. No one wants to be tainted by having anything to do with Muggle-borns. Anyone in opposition is either on the run or keeping completely quiet -- they’re afraid to say anything, for fear of being reported. Also, there are opportunists and a lot of score-settling going on too. Many of those suspected of being against You-Know-Who are being extorted by Death Eaters. And if

You-Know-Who is injured, things are probably going to get worse. He's going to want *retribution*."

This last statement seemed to frighten Hermione. She almost looked stricken.

But then Sirius asked, "What's your other question, Hermione?"

This made Hermione shake her head a bit and then ask, "Is Dolores Umbridge under the Imperius Curse?"

"That's a good one," quipped Sirius. "The Order assumes so, just as a matter of good security and to keep up the appearance of an established Ministry official still in charge. Personally, I don't believe it. She has always been a pure-blood fanatic who lusted for power. Just look at the insane laws she's proposed over the years. Many of them are now *in place*. She is the perfect puppet."

Hermione nodded.

"Before I go, do you two want Order rings?" asked Sirius, looking at Draco and Hermione.

Harry was surprised when Draco said, "We're not splitting up, so I don't," and Hermione echoed his response, saying, "Harry's will do for us."

"OK. If that's it then, I'm leaving... and I don't know when or if I'll be back," said Sirius getting up from the table. Then he paused and said, "One last bit of advice... Even if you are on a secret mission, please don't take the kind of extreme risks you took yesterday -- for your *own* sake."

Sirius shook each of their hands and even nodded to Kreacher, who was clearly startled by his master's gesture, and then Disapparated.

"Are *you* thinking what *I'm* thinking?" asked Draco, looking at both Harry and Hermione.

"About what Bellatrix Lestrange got out of her vault at Gringotts right after her beloved master was so seriously injured," said Harry.

Draco nodded.

“Yes,” said Hermione, “I admit; it would be the *perfect* hiding place for a Horcrux. We should have thought of it. Of course, we could *never* have stolen it from there, even if we *had* learned about it. But what connection did You-Know-Who have with Gringotts?”

“Not sure,” said Harry. “All I can think is it represents wealth and power in the wizarding world -- something he never had growing up in that orphanage.”

“That sounds plausible, but if he did use the Lestranges to hide it there, would he have been able to go get it on his own, if he had to?” asked Hermione.

“I think the head of Gringotts bank would give... *You-Know-Who* ...*anything* he demanded,” said Harry.

“But Hermione’s right about breaking in,” said Draco. “The Lestrangle’s vault is one of the best protected. It’s even older and deeper in the caverns than my family’s. And... it’s guarded by a *dragon*.”

“Clearly, we’re all thinking *Horcrux*,” said Harry. “But is it justified? Does it make sense? Could it be something else? Why would Vol...” Harry then swore loudly using a Muggle profanity that made Hermione look askance. But without apologizing, he resumed, “Why would... *You-Know-Who* ...need one of his Horcruxes?”

Harry and Draco both looked at Hermione, expecting her usual logical answer.

“I’m not sure,” admitted Hermione. “*Secrets of the Darkest Art* doesn’t explain how to *use* a Horcrux -- just how to make them and destroy them. However, based on what happened with the Diary, I’m guessing the Horcrux *itself* knows what to do. It’s part of the incantation. There’s one other thing... the book also says there’s a way to put your soul *back together*...”

“What?” said Harry and Draco together.

“Yes,” said Hermione, going once again into academic-question-and-answer mode. “There is a spell, but the key to succeeding is for the wizard to feel genuine *remorse* for the murder he has committed and for the violation of his soul. The process is said to be extremely painful; it may result in *death* -- which is ironic for someone who had sought immortality. In You-Know-Who’s case, having split his soul into more than just two pieces, I’d have to believe the process *would* be fatal -- especially because *three* pieces of his soul have already been destroyed. Personally, I don’t believe You-Know-

Who would ever try to put his soul back together.” She paused and then said, “The real problem is...”

Harry cut in, “...finding out for sure if what Bellatrix got *is* one of his Horcruxes, and if so, where it is now, and figuring out how to get it.”

“And how in Merlin’s name are we going to be able to do *that?*” asked Draco.

“Well, for now,” said Harry, “I’ll keep trying to see into... *You-Know-Who’s* ...mind ...until we can think of something better.”

## Chapter 10 – *Obliviate* Voldemort

The next morning, Hermione was already at the breakfast table when Harry and Draco arrived together. She had fished reading the Daily Prophet and put it by Harry’s place setting.

As soon as Harry and Draco were seated, Hermione looked expectantly at Harry; but he shook his head, saying, “I already told Draco... I didn’t have any *visions* of... *his* ...mind last night. But it was different than being completely closed off -- like when you sense *nothing*. This time I could *sense* him, but it was like his mind was in a complete fog. I think he was in a potion-induced sleep.”

“Well, that’s interesting,” said Hermione. “There’s still nothing in the Daily Prophet about what happened, except for a substantial increase in the rewards for us. But it did say the Ministry would be making a *big* announcement soon...”

“Well, that’s interesting too,” said Draco. “Maybe they’re preparing to say what happened.”

“Could be,” said Harry, “but *if... he* ...dies -- meaning just his body dies like the first time -- I’m guessing the bit of disembodied soul will probably possess one of his Death Eaters, like it did with Quirrell. But it will have to be obvious and *not* kept a secret. Otherwise, there’d be a battle for succession among the Death Eaters.”

Draco and Hermione nodded in agreement. Then Draco quipped, “There’ll be a run on unicorn blood again.”



Hermione groaned, but a moment later she said, “Incidentally, I think I have a *solution* to the taboo. We can try it out after breakfast.”

Kreacher was already serving the boys.

Harry said, “Great. I hope it works. Professor Dumbledore encouraged me to use... *You-Know-Who*'s ...name from the very beginning -- it's really ingrained. It's like I have to carefully think about everything I'm going to say before I say it, just so I can edit the name.”

“And carefully thinking about what you're going to say before you say it is a *bad* thing?” asked Hermione innocently.

“Hermione, you *know* what I mean,” complained Harry.

“Yes, I know,” said Hermione cheerfully. She did not often get in a good tease on Harry.

“*Tell* me about it,” said Draco, “I've already had to bite my tongue twice to stop myself from saying it. If we have to leave here, we'll have to split up... or one slip up and we'd *all* get caught... Hey, maybe we should have asked for those rings after all.”

Hermione shook her head, but was smiling.

Harry pushed back his chair and said, “Hermione, you've got us both worked up. Let's try it *now* and then finish breakfast.”

“Right,” agreed Draco, also pushing back his chair.

Hermione nodded, now looking serious. She got out her wand and pointed it at Draco, who suddenly looked alarmed.

“I've got to test it on *you*, Draco,” chided Hermione, “I don't want to get it wrong on *Harry*... I'm sure you agree.”

“OK. Right... but why didn't you test it on *yourself* first?” he asked.

“Because if I get it wrong, I *might* not be able to fix *myself*... and *you* certainly wouldn't,” she argued logically.

“But you'll be able to *fix* me, right?” asked Draco, seeking reassurance.

“Of course,” said Hermione confidently. And without waiting for Draco to say anything else, she pointed her wand straight at Draco’s head, and said, “*Obliviate*.” She finished with a tiny wand flick.

Draco did a little head shake and then blinked his eyes three times.

“Now,” said Hermione very clearly and deliberately, “when I *tell* you... say *You-Know-Who*’s name... *very... slowly*. So, if my memory charm didn’t work, I can stop you before you finish. Understand?”

Draco nodded.

“OK...” Hermione said, “*Slowly... say... his... name.*”

Draco took a deep breath and said, “Tooommm Riiiddiillle.”

Hermione clapped her hands.

“Brilliant, Hermione!” exclaimed Harry.

Draco looked ecstatic and said rapidly, “Hey! I was thinking ‘Tom Riddle’. But when I said it, it came out Tom Riddle. Why can’t I say, T - o - m - R - i - d ...? Hey, I can’t even *spell* it! This is great, Hermione! Tom Riddle, Tom Riddle, TOM RIDDLE!” he finished with a shout.

But then Draco looked puzzled and asked, “So, Hermione... why can’t I say, ‘Tom Riddle’ when I *want* to say it?”

“Because that would defeat the whole purpose. You can *think* it, but your mind won’t let your mouth say it anymore,” said Hermione evenly, “But if you need to, you can write it down or ‘air write’ it with your finger,” which she demonstrated. “You just can’t speak his self-proclaimed name in any form. You can still say ‘*the Dark Lord*’ if you want.”

“You really are a genius, Hermione,” said Draco.

Hermione beamed.

“Now do me,” said Harry.

She did Harry and then herself.

Each of them then said, “Tom Riddle” several times.

Satisfied, Hermione said, “That should keep us safe from the taboo.”

But then Draco asked, “Hey... What do we say when we want to say Tom Riddle? You know... when Tom Riddle was young -- before he became Tom Riddle?”

“Are you trying to be funny?” asked Hermione, sounding a little annoyed. Draco seemed to be making fun of something that was very serious.

“No, really,” said Draco seriously.

Hermione sighed and said, “Just say ‘*young*’ Tom Riddle.”

“But what if I want to talk about Tom Riddle when he had become Tom Riddle but was still young?” asked Draco, still sounding quite serious.

Hermione stared at him, and then said, “I’m done.” She got up from the table and walked out of the kitchen.

Harry and Draco both howled with laughter.

“You’ve got to work on Hermione’s sense of humor, Harry,” guffawed Draco, “Ginny and I would have gone back and forth at least another minute before we cracked up.”

Harry shook his head. “I like Hermione just the way she is. She probably just saved our lives -- *again*.”

## Chapter 11 – Destroying the Locket

They found Hermione in the drawing room, as usual. She was reading *Secrets of the Darkest Art*. She did not look up, but said while still reading, “I’m trying to see if I missed anything about *using* a Horcrux...”

“Well, I doubt you missed anything the first time,” said Harry.

“I bet it’s the *cup*... Hufflepuff’s Cup ...that Bellatrix got,” said Draco. “We destroy it, and then there’s only *one* left -- something of Ravenclaw’s.”

“There’s no sure way of knowing if it *is* the cup... or even a Horcrux,” said Hermione. “We may have just jumped to conclusions. Bellatrix may have gotten something else entirely; it could have been *anything*. *And*, there are *three* Horcruxes still left to destroy, not two. You’re forgetting the locket.”

“But we *have* the locket,” said Harry.

“Yes, but it is *not* destroyed,” and after snapping the book shut, she said, “And I think we should be about doing that right away. I just wish we didn’t have to use Fiendfyre.”

The mention of the locket made Harry realize he had completely forgotten about it for the last three days. It was still in the moleskin pouch around his neck.

What had he been *thinking*??!

It had been *foolish*... *stupid*... *insane*... to have carried it with him when he went to Malfoy Manor. If the rescue had failed; if he had been killed or captured and Voldemort had learned of it, which was almost certain, he would have taken steps to ensure that his remaining Horcruxes were never found. Worse still, what if, somehow, he *had* already learned of it? Could Voldemort sense when he was *near* his Horcruxes? Maybe *that’s* why he had Bellatrix go retrieve the cup -- if it were the cup. He might have already sent her to throw it into the deepest ocean.

Harry began to panic.

One thing for certain, he was not going to share his wild concerns with Draco or Hermione. He consoled himself with the thought that Hermione had probably already considered all this and dismissed it. Or maybe she did not want to worry them or...

Hermione noticed the look on Harry’s face. “Are you all right, Harry? You look flushed.”

“No. I mean, fine. Yes,” Harry answered awkwardly, then paused and continued, “...I agree; we need to destroy the locket now.”

Hermione reminded them, “It *must* be done somewhere safe... nowhere near a populated area... or anywhere near woodlands or grasslands... An utterly barren desert, like the middle of the Sahara, should be safe enough. But getting there...”

“Or even better, a barren desert *island* in the middle of the ocean...” suggested Draco.

Feeling better now, Harry considered what Draco had just said. Then he snapped his fingers. “I know the *perfect* place.”

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Kreacher Apparated them to a rocky island in the middle of a motionless dark lake in a vast underground cavern.

Kreacher had not wanted to return to the place where he had been forced to watch brave Regulus perish. But Harry convinced him he would fulfill his beloved master’s orders by doing so.

The only illumination was their wand light.

“*This* is the place?” asked Draco, sounding fascinated.

“Yes,” said Harry. A shiver ran up his spine from the memory of it. “It was incredibly difficult for Professor Dumbledore to find it and then get us in and out of here alive. He had to poison himself in the process -- just one of Tom Riddle’s little tricks. Dumbledore once told me that Tom Riddle overestimates his own magic, while ignoring that of other magical creatures. Kreacher’s ability to Apparate us here proves it -- a gaping hole in the protections Tom Riddle put in place.”

Hermione hugged her shoulders, shuddering, “This is a *terrible* place. Let’s do it and get out of here.”

Harry took the Locket out of his moleskin purse and placed it on the rocky ground in the center of the small island. They stepped back as far as they could, to the water’s edge, and took hold of Kreacher’s arms.

Harry said, “Kreacher, as we planned, the instant Hermione casts the spell, get us back immediately to the kitchen at Sirius’ house. Understand?”

Kreacher croaked, “Yes, Master Harry, Kreacher understands.”

Hermione pointed her wand at the locket and said, “On the count of three... one... two... three... *INCENDIUM PER FENDE!*”

There was a blinding flash that lit up the entire cavern and an instant later they were all standing safely in the kitchen, the dazzle in their eyes from the brilliant light already fading.

“Do you still think we need to wait a *full* twenty-four hours before I go back and check?” asked Draco later, for probably the tenth time. He had argued checking after an hour based on seeing the cavern. There was nothing there to burn.

He and Hermione had forbidden Harry to be the one to check, threatening to Imperius him otherwise. Draco and Hermione drew straws. Draco won.

“Please *wait*, for my sake,” said Harry, adding. “And If I come down for a midnight snack and find a singed Kreacher, I won’t be too happy,” said Harry, wagging his finger and feigning a parental-like warning.

Draco and Hermione laughed.

“We could wait *longer*...” said Hermione. She had argued for waiting *three* days. “Because we can be very confident, if it wasn’t destroyed, it will *still* be lying there.”

Harry experienced another wild thought, ‘...*unless Voldemort comes and gets it first!*’ He immediately chided himself, ‘*Get a grip!*’ He took a deep breath to clear his mind.

Then he suddenly felt a jolt of intense pain and, just as suddenly, it was gone. It was his first connection to Voldemort in three days. He craved more.

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Draco and Kreacher Disapparated back to the cave the next day. Harry and Hermione waited tensely for their return. They had agreed on being gone for no more than a minute, but instead, they returned in less than five seconds. They were both gasping and coughing, covered in sweat and fine ash, their clothing steaming.

“Oh my *God!*” cried Hermione, “What *happened?* Is it still *burning?*”

Still coughing and wheezing, and leaning over with his hands on his knees, Draco shook his head. Harry was busy slapping Kreacher on the back, trying to help him clear his lungs.

Finally, Draco stood back up. He leaned way back and forced a huge cough followed by several deep breaths. It seemed to help him recover. Then, in-between gasping breaths, he said, “Fire’s out... intensely hot... cavern glowing red... no oxygen... ash everywhere... locket’s obliterated... just metal slag... lake’s gone too... boiled away.” Then he sat heavily into a chair at the kitchen table and continued to take slow deep breaths.

Hermione did her best to use charms to ease Draco’s and Kreacher’s breathing, but they seemed to be recovering just as well naturally. After about fifteen minutes of breathing through cool wet towels, conjured by Kreacher, both elf and wizard seemed fine. Even if not, Kreacher shook himself away from Hermione’s fussing and began preparing dinner.

Draco finally waved her off too. Sounding quite normal, he retold what they had seen. He summed it up by saying, “If there had been Inferi in that lake, they were totally consumed. After what I saw, I’m surprised *anyone* survived at Malfoy Manor. Survivors must have managed to stop it with the counter curse. Hermione, I swear I’ll *never* argue with you again about using Fiendfyre.”

## Chapter 12 – Regeneration

He was lying in bed under damp covers.

He had just awoken but felt very groggy. All he could see were his completely bandaged hands and arms folded across his chest. His vision was blurred -- like looking through thick fog. He was lying in bed. The room was small, plain, unadorned, and very dimly lit. He faced a closed door.

He tried to move and moaned in agony.

The skin over his entire body felt raw and inflamed. It also hurt to breathe. He coughed violently. It made every inch of his body feel on fire. He used every bit of his will power to suppress it.

Then he remembered...

The boy daring to mock him... *he will die!*

The borrowed wand shattering... Ollivander would pay.

The blood-traitor Malfoy boy rescued... Lucius’ would pay too.

The fiery blast from the accursed Mudblood girl... *she will burn!!!*  
Beloved Nagini... *gone!*  
And he, Lord Voldemort, thrown backwards, stunned, and pinned under that wretched heavy chair -- struggling to regain his senses and retrieve his own wand from his robes as the fire closed in...

He groaned, remembering the agony of it.

His last memory was finally freeing his wand and blasting everything away through the large window and then falling...

And it *enraged* him! Lord Voldemort defeated again by a rogue elf, a retched Mudblood, a blood-traitor, and... *Harry Potter!*

The pain caused by his anger was agonizing. He had to force himself to calm down...

"My Lord?" quietly asked a familiar voice.

He realized he was not alone.

"Bellatrix?" His voice was raspy, strained and very weak. Speaking hurt too.

"Yes, My Lord."

"What is this place? What has happened?" he asked quickly. Now fully awake. He could barely suppress his pain to think.

"My Lord, you are in St Mungo's under the best of care. You were severely injured in the fire. You also fell twenty feet out of the window. The Healers were able to quickly mend your broken bones but say they cannot do anything for the burns... It was Cursed Fire, My Lord. They must heal on their own. All they can do is treat your pain and try to prevent infection."

She hesitated a moment and then said, "The Healers insisted it was necessary to keep you... asleep... temporarily... to prevent shock. They now feel you are well enough to help them assess what will be required for your continued treatment to... control the pain, My Lord."

Voldemort could tell that Bellatrix had prepared her statement.



“Do not patronize Lord Voldemort,” he said angrily.

His anger again made him tense his muscles and his skin again felt on fire. It took an enormous effort to suppress crying out. After several seconds he was able to say, “Tell the *truth*.”

“You are *dying*, My Lord,” said Bellatrix, sounding genuinely grieved.

This did not shock him. He had prepared.

“Lord Voldemort cannot see you. Stand before your Master and brighten the lights,” he commanded.

What seemed to be a shadow moved into his line of sight and said, “My Lord, the lights are fully bright. You are nearly blind.”

This did not shock him either. “Are we alone?”

“No, My Lord. The lead Healer and your guards are here,” she answered.

“Have everyone else leave, Bellatrix,” he commanded.

He heard hurried footsteps and saw blurred shadows moving in front of him and quickly out the door. He knew they were glad to be gone.

“We are alone, My Lord,” she said after he heard the door shut.

“Make sure we are not overheard,” he further commanded. He *needed* Bellatrix. He trusted no one else for this.

Bellatrix performed *Muffliato* to his satisfaction.

“My wand?” he asked.

“On your bedside table, My Lord,” answered Bellatrix.

“How is it that *you* escaped the fire?” he asked.

“I was late returning, My Lord,” said Bellatrix nervously. “I was checking on a verified sighting of the Potter boy and the Mudblood girl near Newcastle and...”

“*Verified sighting?*” he interrupted mockingly. “How *disappointing* it must be for you to have missed *our* ‘verified sighting.’”

“My... My Lord... I... I am sorry...” stammered Bellatrix.

“Never mind,” he said trying to sound pleasant. “Lord Voldemort does not fault you for doing what he has instructed you to do. You have been a most faithful servant, Bellatrix. Lord Voldemort *accepts* that he is dying. He wishes to pass his legacy onto you. Lord...”

Bellatrix knew well not to interrupt the Dark Lord, but for this she could not help herself. “My LORD! You honor me above all *others!*” she cried. Her voice quavered, “I cannot express...”

“*Enough...!*” he commanded, annoyed by the interruption. “Do you remember what Lord Voldemort told you years ago to do if he were ever near death?”

Sounding like an eager schoolgirl who knew the answer to a prize-winning question, Bellatrix said, “Oh yes, My Lord! I retrieved the cup from my vault. I have the cup even now! Here, My Lord.”

He could barely make out the glint of something in the shadow that was Bellatrix standing at the foot of his bed.

For the first time since he had awoken, he felt good.

“Excellent. Most excellent. You truly deserve the honor of succeeding Lord Voldemort. You must drink from the cup in my name.”

“Yes, My Lord... Uh, *Now?*” asked Bellatrix, sounding a little confused.

“Yes, while Lord Voldemort still lives,” he said evenly. “You must drink his blood...”

“Your... *blood*, My Lord,” said Bellatrix uncertainly.

“Yes. Take it now,” he said as he painfully moved one of his bandaged arms, so his hand fell open over the side of the bed, presenting his wrist.

“Yes, My Lord,” said Bellatrix obediently.

He saw her blurred shape move to his side, felt her next to him. He knew she had a knife. Soon he felt her pulling at the bandage around his wrist. He ignored the pain of it. He knew what was coming...

“Aaaah,” he cried softly as he felt the knife cutting his flesh. She had cut deeply. He heard the sound of liquid. He knew his blood was filling the cup.

It sounded like... *salvation*.

“Make a toast to Lord Voldemort and then... drink,” he said pleasantly.

He could see her raise a shadowy arm high into the air with the cup in her hand.

Her voice was like music to him. “To the Dark Lord, *Lord Voldemort*, the greatest wizard of all time -- in whose memory I shall *rule!*”

*‘What presumption!’* he thought, but it merely amused him.

He heard her drinking. He sighed -- waiting.

The effect was not quite instantaneous. He thought he heard her smack her lips with relish... before... she gasped.

Then he heard the golden cup clang several times as it hit and bounced on the floor.

He saw her stagger and felt her clutch at the metal frame at the foot of the bed. He heard her wand hit the floor too.

Then she became rigid as if petrified.

A dark blue mist emanated from her mouth and curled around her body enveloping it. The mist swirled and roiled. Tiny flashes of light flickered within the mist, like the embers of a dying fire.

It continued for several minutes and then the mist began to disappear -- not by dissipating, but by being absorbed by what remained -- a younger, whole, and uninjured version of himself.

“Before you do what you must, *hear me*,” he said, using all his remaining energy to sound like Lord Voldemort should sound.

“To survive. This is why I created you, but remember, we are one and the same. Take the wand and my memories.”

He could see the shadowy form of his younger self move to the side of the bed. Then he felt the tip of his wand pressed against his temple. He thought he could feel the memories leaving his mind. The process repeated many times. Near the end, he even felt the pain fade away.

But at the same time, he felt the rage within him building to a crescendo as his memories were restored. And as they were, he also felt his younger visage changing, becoming... snakelike.

Finally, he knew he was done. He looked down on the dying older version of himself -- another bit of soul soon lost.

He bent down and whispered into the bandaged ear, “Revenge!”

A moment later, there was a flash of green light.

### Chapter 13 – One Step Forward

“Harry... are you alright?” asked Hermione. She sounded very concerned.

Harry was still in the drawing room at number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. He was semi-reclined on the sofa, still between Draco and Hermione.

“That’s the *longest* you’ve ever been out, Harry,” said Draco, also concerned.

“You had us worried,” added Hermione.

“Right,” agreed Draco. “We started talking about doing something... bringing you out of it.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” said Harry. “The vision started as soon as Tom Riddle came out of the Healer-induced sleep. He was still in intense pain and was not using Occlumency -- I don’t think he was able to use it in his condition. He was severely injured and taken to

St Mungo's. That's what I've had flashes of since Malfoy Manor -- him going in and out of consciousness and then the drugged sleep... But that's *nothing*."

Harry sat up straight and took a deep breath before saying, "Get ready. You are *not* going to believe what happened." Harry proceeded to describe, in as much detail as he could remember, the regeneration of Voldemort using the Horcrux of Hufflepuff's Cup to utterly consume and transform Bellatrix Lestrange's body.

Hermione and Draco both looked like they were going to be sick.

When he finished, Hermione exclaimed, "He *consumed* Bellatrix! How *horrible*! She was his most *devoted* follower. It just proves how *monstrous* he is. And now we know the full effects of Horcrux regeneration. *Secrets of the Darkest Art* doesn't mention anything like that."

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer witch," sneered Draco about his former aunt.

"But think about it, Hermione," said Harry. "You said the Horcruxes must have the magic within them to restore themselves. Young Tom Riddle came out of the diary and was using Ginny's life energy to regenerate. We don't know what would have happened to Ginny if the process had completed. She may have vanished too. In this case, Bellatrix drank his blood from the cursed cup in his name, triggering what happened. And the blood was important -- it transferred the protection from the graveyard regeneration to his new body. Drinking *any* liquid from the cup probably would have worked too, but not to the same degree. Remember, Tom Riddle had given Bellatrix instructions long before to retrieve the cup if he were near death. With the ring and the locket, we don't know what would have happened. The ring may have consumed Professor Dumbledore if he had put it on."

"But you *wore* the locket, Harry," said Hermione, "and nothing happened to you except you felt bad."

"Yea, but remember," interjected Draco, "you told me you were never able to *open* it. I bet if you had been able to, something *really bad* would have happened."

"That's what I thought," said Hermione, "But maybe just wearing it long enough would have allowed it to take control of you and enable you to open it. But with the ring and the locket, the new body would not have had the blood protection... unless, of course, you were the one wearing it, Harry."

“That doesn’t matter now,” said Harry, “but what does, is that we need to be more *careful* when we find the last one.” On that they all agreed.

Hermione was insistent on continuing to analyze what happened. Draco wanted to go have dinner, but Harry indulged Hermione.

“Are we sure there isn’t still a bit of his soul in the cup?” asked Hermione.

“I’m sure,” said Harry. For a short while, I sensed two Tom Riddle’s in my vision.”

“What about Bellatrix’s soul?” asked Hermione.

“My Aunt Bella had a soul?” quipped Draco.

Hermione would normally have ignored a remark like that from Draco, but this time she said, “Please, this isn’t something to *joke* about.”

Harry gave Draco a look that said, ‘Please, not now,’ and Draco grudgingly said, “OK.”

Harry said, “I *know* she’s dead. I sensed nothing of her in the new Tom Riddle. I’m sure her soul left her body when she died. The bit of soul in the cup made everything happen and is now in the body of the new Tom Riddle. The old Horcrux is now *just* a cup.”

“Bellatrix and Tom Riddle joined forever in the same body... Now that would have made a spicy story... Sorry, sorry,” said Draco holding up his hands. “I couldn’t resist.”

But Hermione actually laughed at his joke and so did Harry.

But then Hermione got serious again, “But did you consider the *other* possibility?”

“What *other* possibility,” asked Harry.

“That the new Tom Riddle used the cup to make a *new* Horcrux with the bit of soul from the dying Tom Riddle. He murdered Bellatrix, so it would have been possible. Your vision ended when the new Tom Riddle used the killing curse,” said Hermione nervously.

Harry slapped his forehead. “Oh my *God!* I didn’t think of that.”

He stood up and paced around the drawing room for a few moments muttering to himself. Then he stopped and said, “Though I can’t be sure he didn’t change his mind after I lost the vision, he was definitely thinking the bit of soul in the old Tom Riddle should be... *sacrificed*. He wasn’t thinking new Horcrux. He believed his memories made him who he was. And they were transferred into the new body. So, he didn’t see his original bit of soul as special. The body holding it was just a vessel that was too injured to carry on -- a living Horcrux now slowly being *destroyed* by Fiendfyre. And I think that’s the key. And he also remembered the suffering of the decade-long period as a disembodied-soul. When he killed his older self, he knew he was destroying that bit of soul to prevent a part of him suffering and dying in a horribly burned body and then possibly carrying on in the disembodied state again -- something he dreaded.”

Harry paused for a moment tying it all up in his mind. Then he continued. “It makes even more sense when you realize that the older Tom Riddle was *not* the original. That original bit of soul had entered a regenerated body in the graveyard that had none of the *original* body bits. In essence, it was just another Horcrux too. For as long as we have known Tom Riddle, he’s been nothing but a living Horcrux. And he still is. But I do think the *human* Horcrux that embodies him as Tom Riddle is always the one that has to be destroyed last -- it’s what makes that bit of soul special. The other Horcruxes keep that piece of his soul, the one that is embodied as Tom Riddle, alive even if that body is destroyed -- unless it is destroyed by something that *destroys* Horcruxes. That piece can exist without an object or a body and can come back as long as other Horcruxes exist. That’s why Professor Dumbledore says, Tom Riddle must be destroyed last.”

Draco’s head was swimming, but Hermione was ecstatic, saying, “That was the most *amazing* analysis I’ve ever heard from you, Harry. I think it’s spot on. I can help you write it up for publication. But there’s one other *very* important thing we learned -- Tom Riddle can destroy bits of his *own* soul using the Killing Curse.”

Harry did not know what to say. But publication was the farthest thing from his mind. So, he said, “Thanks, Hermione. Sure,” to make her happy.

Draco said, “I need to recap this to make sure I understand... The *old* Tom Riddle wanted to stay alive long enough to pass along all his memories to his new self to avoid what happened to him sixteen years ago. And he was willing to sacrifice that bit of soul to accomplish it?”

“Spot on again,” chirped Hermione. “You see, I don’t think he realized the Fiendfyre -- the cursed fire -- was going to destroy that bit of soul anyway when the body died. It

would be like being poisoned with Basilisk venom, just slower and more agonizingly painful.”

“Got it. OK then,” said Draco, now primed for more, “how is he going to explain the body in the bed and Bellatrix being missing?”

“Does Tom Riddle need to explain *anything* to his follower’s?” asked Harry rhetorically. “I bet when he walked out of that hospital room completely healed, his Death Eaters fell to their knees -- maybe even the Healers too. They must then have truly believed he had conquered death and was immortal -- surviving his own killing curse when you were a baby and now, fatal Fiendfyre burns. With so many witnesses to this resurrection, his followers will be even more fanatical. Who wouldn’t follow him, hoping to learn the secrets of immortality themselves?”

“As to your questions...” finished Harry, “He could have easily vanished his old body; ditto Bellatrix’s wand and the cup. Then he just conjured new robes and told everyone he sent Bellatrix on a secret mission. Who is going to quibble about anti-Apparation spells on St Mungo’s over the word of *Lord Tom Riddle*?”

“I bet he kept the cup,” said Hermione. “Remember, Professor Dumbledore told you he liked trophies of the Hogwarts founders.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Harry.

“Have you had any more visions of the new Tom Riddle’s mind?” asked Draco.

Harry shook his head. “He used Occlumency right after Killing Curse.”

“So, are we agreed then, there is only *one* Horcrux left?” asked Draco again.

Harry and Hermione both said, “Yes.”

“And that he still doesn’t realize it?” asked Draco a third time.

Nods from both.

“OK. He’s back to full strength but thinks he’s only three soul-bits down instead of five. Overall, we’re ahead,” said Draco, sounding bolstered. “I find it ironic that he eliminated the Horcrux that would have been the hardest of all to get -- the Cup. I mean...”



*Gringotts*... I almost want to give him *three cheers*... uh... no, not really,” said Draco jokingly.

“Just think...” said Hermione. “Three Horcruxes destroyed or used up in three days. That has to be some kind of *record*.”

Draco’s eyes went wide, exclaiming, “Hermione, you just told a *joke!* Now that *is* a record.”

They all laughed. Then Draco’s stomach gave a loud rumble. They took that as the signal that it was time to go down to dinner.

On the way out the door, Hermione said, “Ginny told me that growing up with Fred and George taught her that you can do just about anything -- if you’ve got the nerve. Now I know what she means.”

## Chapter 14 – Two Steps Back

Kreacher had prepared an especially delicious dinner for them.

As Kreacher was serving, Harry said, on the spur of the moment, “Kreacher, would you like to sit down with us for dinner?”

Hermione looked surprised. Draco coughed and shook his head vigorously at Harry.

But it was too late.

Kreacher almost dropped the soup ladle into Harry’s lap. The grizzled old elf looked as if Harry had just slapped him. He stepped back in shock, staring at Harry.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Kreacher,” stammered Harry. “I didn’t mean to *offend* you.”

Draco jumped in to explain. “Kreacher, you must remember that Harry grew up with Muggles and still does know everything about our world. And also remember, most of his experience with house-elves has been with... *Dobby*.”

“Ahhh, yes,” croaked Kreacher knowingly. “Yes, Kreacher understands. There is nothing for Master Harry to be apologizing to Kreacher about... as long as it is never

happening again.” The wizened elf then resumed ladling Harry’s soup as if nothing had happened.

Harry mouthed, ‘Thank you,’ to Draco and Hermione suppressed a giggle. Later when Kreacher briefly left the kitchen, Harry asked Draco, “What happened? Kreacher joined in my birthday celebration.”

“Yes, but you didn’t ask him to *sit* at the table,” said Draco, as if this explained everything.

“What difference does that make?” asked Harry.

“All the difference in the world,” explained Draco. “Servants don’t *ever* sit with their Masters. That would put them on an equal level. It just isn’t done.”

Hermione looked as if she did not like Draco’s answer.

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When they had finished desert, Harry said, “I’m still excited by what we learned today. Can we talk about next steps?”

Draco and Hermione were both for it.

Harry started off, “So we’re down to *one* Horcrux -- something of Ravenclaw’s.”

“Well, I’m not sure we can absolutely rule out an *unknown* artifact of Gryffindor’s,” said Hermione, “but for the sake of argument, let’s assume it *is* something of Ravenclaw’s and see where the discussion goes.”

Draco eyed Harry.

“It would save a lot of time if Tom Riddle would just tell us what and where it is,” said Draco flippantly.

“*Exactly* what I had in mind!” exclaimed Hermione.

“*What?*” said Harry and Draco together.

“Now listen;” said Hermione, “we could spend *ages* trying to figure this out. Instead, I have a plan to leverage Harry’s ability to see into Tom Riddle’s thoughts and get him to tell us both the what and the where. In fact, it’s something Harry told us two years ago that Professor Dumbledore planned to do.”

“I don’t remem...” Harry started to say when Draco erupted.

“How in *Merlin’s name* are you going to *do* that? Harry can only see Tom Riddle’s thoughts when he’s excited and lets his guard down, but even then, Harry can only see what’s got him wound up. Harry can’t say, ‘Please sir, I want you to think about your Horcruxes while I’m in your head’.”

“Well, I thank we *can* do that!” responded Hermione just as strongly.

“OK,” interrupted Harry. “Challenging each other’s ideas is good, but we need to hear the *idea* first. Draco, let Hermione tell us her idea.”

“Sorry, Hermione,” said a mollified Draco, “I was out of line... I apologize.”

Hermione nodded appreciatively. Then she said, “I propose we send him a *personal* message. One that will make him very angry and enable Harry to see into his mind. The message will be cryptic, so only *he* will understand it, and it will make him think of all his Horcruxes and where they’re located.”

“Like... Dear Dark Lord,” quipped Draco, “We know about all of your Horcruxes and intend to destroy them. Love... Harry, Hermione, and Draco.”

Hermione could not help but laugh. She knew Draco meant no harm.

“Pretty close to right,” said Hermione approvingly. “But it needs to be *cryptic*, so anyone else hearing the message won’t understand it, except Tom Riddle, Professor Dumbledore and us.”

“Hearing it?” questioned Harry.

“Yes. We send Tom Riddle the message via *Patronus*,” explained Hermione.

“Brilliant!” said Draco. “That way, we know the message will go directly *to him*. It will only mean something *to him*. So, it doesn’t matter if he’s in a meeting with his Death Eaters. And best of all... the delivery method alone will set him off. I mean, who would

dare have the impertinence to send a *Patronus message* to Lord Tom Riddle himself? His Death Eaters can only use their Dark Marks.”

Harry understood completely. He could imagine Voldemort’s reaction. But more importantly... “Hermione, what’s the message?”

“Just these six words...” said Hermione smiling. She ticked them off, “Chamber... Shack... Cave... Vault... Manor... Hogwarts... Of course, the last one is a guess, but we all agree it’s a very good guess and worth the risk. Even if it’s wrong, he’s bound to think of the *correct* location.”

“Again, it’s *brilliant*, Hermione,” said Harry. “I have to ask, though, why didn’t you propose Diary, Ring, Locket, Cup, Snake, and Diadem? Those words are more to the point and go to the heart of what we’re seeking.”

“I thought of doing that,” answered Hermione, “but a couple of those words have clear meanings that can be linked to Tom Riddle by many of those around him. It’s *not* cryptic enough. It might raise questions that could make him think and react differently. We don’t want that. We’ll only get *one* shot at this.”

“OK, I get it,” said Harry. And then he proceeded to review Hermione’s message. “The *locations* best associated with the Horcruxes...”

“*Chamber...* The Chamber of Secrets, which the *Diary* documented its opening...”

“And was where it was destroyed,” interjected Draco.

“Right. Next, *Shack...* Marvolo Gaunt’s shack where he thinks the *Ring* is still hidden.”

Draco again, “What if he thinks of it as a cottage or hovel, or something else?”

“I think shack is better -- the place was a wreck -- but we can discuss cottage or hovel after,” said Harry.

“No. Shack’s fine. Go on,” said Draco.

“OK. Next... *Cave...* The cave by the sea where he thinks the *Locket* is still hidden.”

“*Vault...* The Lestranger family vault at Gringotts where the *Cup* had been stored for him by Bellatrix and is now who-knows-where -- but spent.”

“*Manor*... Malfoy Manor where his pet *Snake* was destroyed.”

“*Hogwarts*... where we believe the last Horcrux, probably something of Ravenclaw’s, is hidden. And the only thing of Ravenclaw’s we’ve heard of is the *Diadem*.”

Draco asked, “Is *Hogwarts* too specific? Maybe... *school*, instead? ...Sorry to nitpick.”

“I think Draco’s right about using ‘school’ instead,” responded Hermione. “All the others are more general.”

“I agree too. And they *are* cryptic enough,” said Harry finishing the list. “I can’t think of better words for the locations. Do you think the order makes a difference?”

“I thought about that,” said Hermione. “We only have a rough idea about the order they were created. Professor Dumbledore thinks the ring was created first and the snake last. The diary was probably second. The locket and cup, or vice versa, were probably done in sequence -- perhaps third and fourth -- after he quit Borgin and Burkes. We just have no idea about the Ravenclaw object. He could have found it at school or through Borgin’s or in Albania.”

Harry chided himself. It had never even occurred to him Voldemort’s Borgin job had been a possible source of the Diadem, like it had been for the Cup and the Locket.

Hermione continued, “What I’m trying to say is that the order they were created isn’t really important. I put ‘Chamber’ first because he knows many people know about the Diary and that it was destroyed. I put Hogwarts, now ‘School,’ last because it will be the last word he hears, and it may trigger his first memory -- having had time to think about what all the preceding words mean together. And I put ‘Manor’ next to last because I think it will make him *especially* angry -- the painful memory of what happened to him there -- and will help ensure the mental connection with Harry stays open.”

“Opened by getting the impertinent Patronus...” interjected Draco.

“Right,” said Hermione. “The other locations just provide the information necessary to get our message across... as Draco correctly stated, ‘Dear Dark Lord, we know about all your Horcruxes and intend to destroy them. Love, from us.’”

Harry was more than impressed, “Hermione, you are *truly* amazing. Your ability to thoroughly analyze alternatives, and do it so quickly, astonishes me. I’m glad you’re on *our* side. If you were a dark witch, you’d *rule the world*.”

Hermione blushed deeply and then grimaced at the last comment. It was not a good look.

Draco laughed.

“When do we send the message?” asked Harry.

“*Never*, I hope,” said Hermione scowling at Draco.

“What!” exclaimed Harry.

“I get it,” said Draco. “This is something we only do as a *last* resort... because it’s *extremely* risky.”

Hermione nodded and Draco continued, “Once we send the message and find out what the last Horcrux is and where it’s hidden, we need to: One -- get it and destroy it before he can save it. Two -- kill him before he can make another Horcrux and hide it where it can never be found, which he would certainly do. Two is much more difficult, and assumes we accomplished number one.”

“Correct,” said Hermione. “We need to do our best to accomplish both one and two *without* ever having to send that message. Sending it means we’re *desperate*. It’s a *last* resort.”

“Then why did we just go through this discussion, Hermione?” asked Harry sounding exasperated.

“Because...” Hermione said very calmly, “you need to know we have a *Plan ‘B’* that will work. We can still succeed without risking everything in one attempt. Think how much easier it would be if we found and destroyed the last Horcrux without him knowing what we’re doing.”

Draco jumped in, “Right. Then an ambush or even suicide attack could take Tom Riddle out. It could save many lives.”

“Correct,” said Hermione, though she did not like the idea of a suicide attack.

She continued, “Because I think our Plan ‘B’ could cost many lives, assuming the last Horcrux is at Hogwarts... We need to be patient. Look how much we’ve already accomplished.”

These were sobering words for Harry. He had still been heady over their success at Malfoy Manor. He had been very ready to take on another risky plan. Hermione had seemed to be leading him down that path during the last hour and had then hit him over the head with a hammer. He realized if she had resisted or tried to slow down his obvious press for aggressive action, he would have probably been even more insistent on jumping back into the fire and risking everything -- like he had done to save Draco.

Hermione had used his own penchant for recklessness against him, but at the same time given him something he wanted and needed -- a good *Plan ‘B’* as Hermione had called it -- something ready to fall back on if their smarter and less risky strategy failed.

As Harry was saying goodnight to Hermione, he said, “I completely forgot that Dumbledore told me we could use my connection to Tom Riddle’s mind for this. How do you remember these things, Hermione?”

Hermione shrugged, “It’s me, Harry. It’s what I do.

“It’s what I need,” he replied, and he kissed her.

## Chapter 15 – Children’s Stories

The next morning Hermione was crying when Harry and Draco entered the kitchen. She had her head down on her arms and was trembling.

“What is it, Hermione? What’s happened,” asked Harry as he rushed to her side.

She lifted her head. Her face was red, and her cheeks were soaked with tears. She hiccupped and said, “Look,” pointing to the Daily Prophet which was lying in front of her.

The headline said it all.

*MUGGLE-BORNS ORDERED TO RESETTLEMENT CAMP*

Harry picked up the paper. He knew Hermione would not read it aloud, so he did.

*“The Ministry of Magic has ordered all Muggle-borns to report for transportation to a resettlement camp located in the countryside. This is being done for the protection of legitimate witches and wizards. Muggle-Borns who fail to comply or anyone who aids in their non-compliance will be arrested and charged with sedition. Muggle-borns have twenty-four hours to report to the Ministry for relocation with nothing but the clothes they are wearing. All necessities will be provided in the camp by the Ministry. As a consequence of this order, all Muggle-born property and possessions shall immediately become the property of the Ministry of Magic.”*

Harry had difficulty reading the decree. His voice finally broke at the end, and he let the paper drop back onto the kitchen table.

Hermione sobbed openly. Draco looked stricken. Harry was shocked but not surprised.

“It’s *my* fault,” Hermione sobbed, “It’s his *revenge*.”

“It’s *not* your fault, Hermione,” said Harry emphatically. “Just look at all the *horrible* decrees over the last two months. This was just the *obvious* next step. We all knew this was coming -- we were just afraid to talk about it. Remember, the Daily Prophet said a big announcement was coming three days ago. This has to be it. Something like this takes a *long* time to plan and prepare. It had nothing to do with what we did. And I say we... because *we* acted together.”

“Harry’s right, Hermione,” said Draco sympathetically. “This would have happened even if you hadn’t come to rescue me. You’ve got to believe that. And besides, we *need* you at your best... not all eyes-wet and nose-drippy.”

Hermione snorted in surprise at Draco’s mock admonition while attempting to suppress a laugh. She immediately reached into her robes for a handkerchief. But Kreacher was faster and standing ready with a disposable tissue he had conjured in the blink of an eye. Hermione accepted Kreacher’s offering. She dabbed at her eyes and then blew her nose. An instant later, Kreacher vanished it.

“Thank you, Kreacher,” said Hermione.

The grizzled elf bowed and returned to finish preparing the boys’ breakfast.



“I suppose you’re right,” said Hermione, now seemingly recovered. But then she snarled, “I wish we could *get* that horrible Umbridge woman *too*.”

“Tom Riddle made this happen, not Umbridge,” said Draco. “She’d rather have the Muggle-borns around to torment them, not lock them away out of sight. She’s a real piece of work; I know. She’s been to dinner at my house a *lot*. My parents think she’s great.”

“So, the sooner we get rid of Tom Riddle, the sooner we get rid of Umbridge,” said Harry.

Harry did not get through his breakfast.

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The old man was writhing on the floor in agony, screaming, “Pleeeassssee... I *beg* you...”

“Ollivander, you said using another’s wand would avoid the problem of the twin cores, as it had for Harry Potter at the Ministry. Lucius Malfoy’s wand shattered against Harry Potter’s wand.”

Ollivander screamed again.

He lifted his wand, saying, “Enough,” and commanded, “Speak.”

Ollivander remained on the floor and sobbed, “My... My Lord, I *can’t* explain it. It *should* have worked... just as Dumbledore’s wand worked against yours. Dumbledore knew of the twin cores. I told him right after Potter’s wand picked him in my shop all those years ago.”

“Then why did Albus Dumbledore’s wand succeed in Harry Potter’s hand while Lucius Malfoy’s wand failed in Lord Voldemort’s?”

If the old wandmaker’s answer did not satisfy, then he would die... *painfully*.

Ollivander shook with fear. He spoke tremulously and hesitantly. “My Lord... it can only be that Potter’s wand was... *much* more powerful than Malfoy’s... and Dumbledore’s wand was... *somewhat* more powerful than yours... As you know, My Lord... Dumbledore is... *also*... a very powerful wizard... and My Lord... he is very *old*... His

wand has acquired *much*... experience *and* power... over those many years.... My Lord... you need a wand *more* powerful than Dumbledore's... to be *sure* of success.”

He was quite surprised by what Ollivander had *dared* to say -- suggesting that the *power and experience of a wand* could mean more than the *skill of the wizard* wielding it. But yet, what else could explain what had happened?

He did not want to believe it. It even made him angry to think it might be true. But for the first time, he experienced real doubt... and did not like it. Yet, he must be *sure*...

But before he could ask, Ollivander spoke again, answering his question. The old wandmaker spoke more assuredly now.

“There *is* such a wand, My Lord... the *Elder Wand*... the wand of *legend*... the death stick... the wand of destiny... *the* most powerful wand in the world! ...Gregorovich, the wand maker, claims to have obtained it many years ago. He said, after studying it, he has been able to incorporate its qualities into the wands he made.”

“Where is this wandmaker?” he demanded.

“I do not know for certain, My Lord,” said Ollivander, quavering once again. “He has reportedly retired. I believe he is living somewhere in Ukraine, My Lord.”

He pondered this.

*No one* must know. He could kill Ollivander now to protect the secret, but he might be needed later to confirm that the wand he obtained was truly the wand of legend. This Slavic wandmaker, Gregorovich, might be a fraud.

Yes, better to keep Ollivander alive... for now.

He raised his wand and the old wandmaker whimpered, “No more, please, My Lord.”

The plea for relief amused him. He held his wand on Ollivander longer just to extend his misery and then said, “*Obliviate*.”

He must act alone. He could trust no one. It was a long way to travel and would take valuable time...

But he *must* find Gregorovich and obtain the Elder Wand...

...before he faced Albus Dumbledore... or Harry Potter... again.

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Harry had not expected another vision so soon. It had only been two days. So, Ollivander was still alive and being held prisoner somewhere.

Harry told Draco and Hermione what he had seen.

“Gregorovich is a goner,” said Draco matter-of-factly. “Do you really think he has the Elder Wand or was Ollivander just trying to... you know... delay the inevitable?”

“Ollivander *wasn't* lying. Tom Riddle can almost always tell when a person is lying,” said Harry. “Only a master Occlumens could possibly fool him.” As Harry said it, he thought of Professor Snape, and what it must be like for him, playing his role as spy for the Order. “Incredible,” he said aloud.

“What’s incredible, Harry?” asked Hermione.

“I was just thinking about Professor Snape and the effort it must take him, when he’s with Tom Riddle, to conceal his role,” said Harry. “I never thought about it before -- the risk he’s taking.”

Draco chuckled, “Well that’s just about the nicest thing you’ve ever said about old Severus.”

“Well, I think it’s very brave too,” said Hermione.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t,” replied Draco, “but I’m trying to decide if Ollivander was talking about the Elder Wand from the *Tale of the Three Brothers*.”

“What’s that?” asked Harry and Hermione together.

“What!” exclaimed Draco. “It’s one of the most *famous* children’s stories of all time!”

“Draco,” said Hermione, incredulously, “Harry and I grew up in the *Muggle* world. We learned Muggle children’s stories. And I bet Tom Riddle did too, growing up in that Muggle orphanage.”

“Oh... Right,” said Draco with a chuckle. “It’s my favorite,” and he proceeded to tell Harry and Hermione the story.

When Draco finished, Hermione said, “It can’t possibly be true. It’s just a morality lesson -- like all children’s stories are.”

“I thought so too,” said Draco. “So, why would Ollivander tell Tom Riddle to go looking for the wand from a *children’s* story?”

“Because, for some reason, Ollivander *believes* the wand exists,” said Harry.

Draco suddenly sat up and exclaimed, “What a minute! ...Harry, your *Cloak*... Get out your Invisibility Cloak!”

Harry had been carrying his invisibility cloak in his large robe pocket ever since Professor Dumbledore had told him to keep it with him at all times. He got it out. They all looked at it closely, more closely than they ever had before.

Draco said, “Professor Dumbledore *gave* you this, right?”

“Yes, first year. He borrowed it from my father before...” said Harry.

“*Woh...*” breathed Draco interrupting. “Harry, could this be *the* Invisibility Cloak in the Tale? I mean, it’s *perfect!* ...Yes ... *Yes!*”

Harry could tell that Draco’s mind was racing.

Then Draco exclaimed, “Harry, we’ve *got* to find the Elder Wand *before* Tom Riddle does! ...With the Wand and the Cloak... Harry, you’d be *invincible!*”

Harry was caught between Draco’s sudden declaration and still trying to remember if Professor Dumbledore had ever hinted that the cloak was special, when Hermione jumped in.

“No. No. No. You’re jumping to conclusions, Draco,” said Hermione, clearly trying to inject some reason into the discussion. “This is *silly*. You’re talking about a *children’s* story. There is no ‘*most powerful wand*’ or ‘*perfect invisibility cloak*’ and certainly no ‘*resurrection stone*’ that will bring people back from the dead. What would you do with the *stone* anyway?”

“I could bring back my parents,” said Harry quietly.

Hermione gave a little gasp, “Oh, Harry, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

But Harry cut in, “But the Cloak *is* perfect, Hermione. The two that Professor Moody had were junk compared to this. Professor Dumbledore must have borrowed it from my father because he thought it *was* extraordinary and wanted to examine it. And now Tom Riddle is going after the most powerful wand in the world because Ollivander told him it *exists*. How do you *explain* that? There’s *truth* behind every legend. It *can’t* just be a coincidence.”

“Yes, it *can* be a coincidence, Harry,” said Hermione doing her best to be persuasive. “Harry, *think*. A *stone* that brings people back from the dead -- there’s no such *thing*.”

Harry had to admit, “Yea... You’re probably right about the stone, Hermione. The Philosopher’s Stone could be used to *extend* life, but Professor Dumbledore told me there is no magic that can bring back the dead. *But...* that doesn’t mean Tom Riddle won’t find a *wand* more powerful than Dumbledore’s. What are we going to do about *that*?”

Hermione answered immediately, “We can find and destroy the last Horcrux and worry about the wand *later*. That’s what Professor Dumbledore would *want* us to do.”

Harry and Draco both had to admit Hermione was right.

She breathed a very great sigh of relief.

## Chapter 16 – Plans Upon Plans

They went to the drawing room and immediately began planning to find and destroy the last Horcrux.

They knew they could easily get into Hogwarts using Dobby or Kreacher. But being able to search the school without being seen was another matter. Obviously, it would be safer to search after hours, but they still had only one invisibility cloak. And there was Peeves who could tell that someone was using an invisibility cloak. And he always seemed to turn up at the most inopportune time. The same seemed to be true of Filch’s cat. The Marauder’s Map would help, but not if they ended up being cornered.

But then Hermione reminded them that the Daily Prophet reported that Squibs had been banished from the wizarding world to live with Muggles, so Filch and his cat should no longer be at Hogwarts. And Sirius had said so.

Hermione spent the next several days teaching Draco and Harry how to perform a Disillusionment charm, even though they were not sure it would work against Peeves. Still, the key factor in their favor was that school had not yet started. It would be largely deserted until the teachers and staff arrived a week or so early to prepare for the new school year. That still gave them nearly three weeks virtually alone in the castle.

They were in the middle of making a list of the places to search and arranging them by priority. The Chamber of Secrets remained first on the list -- to Hermione's great satisfaction -- and she had Harry teach them how to say 'open' in Parseltongue.

Suddenly, Harry froze. He looked to be in a state of total shock.

Draco looked at Hermione and said, "Another vision. This one must be *really* bad..."

"NO!" Harry yelled and they both jumped. "Not a vision... I just *remembered*... in the Daily Prophet, over two months ago... it said, school started... the first of *AUGUST* this year!"

Hermione looked horrified.

Draco said, "What?"

"Oh Harry, I completely forgot too," moaned Hermione.

"What are you talking about?" asked Draco.

Harry was sick to his stomach. He let Hermione explain. "There was an article in the Prophet near the end of May, right after Hogwarts and the Ministry fell. The Ministry announced that Hogwarts would start on the first of *August* this year to indoctrinate the students on all the changes that were being put in place."

"How are we possibly going to search the school now, while it's in *session*? It would be easier to get into the Lestrangle's vault at Gringotts," said Draco in complete frustration.

"Alright, I *screwed* up," said Harry standing up. He started pacing the room speaking at the same time. "It's *still* possible... just a lot more difficult. Searching after hours is even

more important now and probably limited to an hour or two at most. The longer were active, the more likely we'll be detected. We'll also definitely have to search together now for mutual security, because there are bound to be patrols."

As he talked, he seemed to gain more confidence.

They would need a good hiding place if Dobby could not respond to get them out when they wanted. They could not just operate out of an empty classroom now. Maybe they could get the support of some students and teachers. But how could they bring them into their confidence without telling them too much?

Harry wanted to contact Professor McGonagall, but Hermione and Draco both thought she would not want them anywhere near the school -- for a *lot* of reasons, including their own safety, the safety of the students, and her instructions to the Order. Draco was concerned about so many of the expelled DLA students being back. If the three brought their friends into their plans, it was more likely DLA students would get wind of them.

The discussion and planning went on until two in the morning, when finally exhausted, they went to bed.

But they all felt much better than they had just a few hours before.

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The next day, they resumed planning right after breakfast.

None of them wanted to talk about the Daily Prophet that morning, whose headline blared:

### *MUGGLE-BORNS REPORTING FOR RELOCATION*

It was too painful.

They focused on where to search.

"Where would you search for something hidden at Hogwarts?" repeated Harry for what seemed the millionth time.

"It could be hidden in plain sight," said Draco, "...like the Sword of Gryffindor."

“But teachers like Professors McGonagall, Snape and especially Dumbledore would certainly recognize a powerfully cursed object. And even the best magical concealment can be detected by the best wizards -- Tom Riddle found the Chamber of Secrets after it went undetected for a thousand years. But have any of us ever seen anything at school that looks like a diadem... other than on the statue of Rowena Ravenclaw in the Ravenclaw common room?” asked Hermione.

Harry and Draco looked at each other questioningly, then Draco said, “We’ve never been there. Could it be the real thing enchanted to look like part of the statue?”

“No, I checked it out last year,” responded Hermione.

“Then we haven’t seen anything,” said Harry.

“So, it must be completely hidden,” concluded Hermione.

And she continued to push for the Chamber of Secrets. Harry now favored Ravenclaw tower. “After all, it was *her* house. And there’s the statue; maybe it’s inside or underneath it.” Draco favored places that students never wanted to go, particularly the Forbidden Forest. But he also suggested the attics -- none of them could remember anyone ever mentioning them, but there definitely were attics in Hogwarts. Harry had checked them out once as a possible place for a student hangout. Draco joked about checking Filch’s office, which Hermione thought was actually a very good idea.

She said, “He’s a squib. He’d never recognize a Horcrux. And Fred and George said he’s got filing cabinets full of confiscated things. Tom Riddle could easily have stashed it among them.”

“See!” exclaimed Draco. “It *could* be in plain sight -- for the right audience.”

“So, would that apply to the kitchens?” asked Harry.

“I don’t know,” said Hermine, jotting down a note on her expansive array of planning parchments. “I’ll ask Kreacher if elves can detect dark objects. He should know since he had the locket until he gave up trying to destroy it. If house-elves can detect dark objects, then that rules out the dormitories, classrooms, bathrooms, and everywhere else they clean up.”



“Which is probably ninety nine percent of the castle,” said Harry, adding, “Professor Snape is the only teacher I know who bans them from going into his office... Look, we need to find out *now*... *Kreacher!*”

Kreacher popped into the drawing room immediately. Harry questioned him. Kreacher said house-elves and goblins *could* detect dark objects, but possibly not if they were inside a container protected by powerful concealment charms. Detecting was *iffy* in a place like number Twelve, Borgin’s or Malfoy Manor -- which were saturated with old dark magic concealment charms. But at Hogwarts, chances were better, even though it was very magical. So, the places where the Hogwarts house-elves went were unlikely to be hiding a Horcrux, but it wasn’t impossible.

“So, would that also be true of the Merpeople in the black lake?” asked Draco. “If the Horcrux is at the bottom of the lake, would the Merpeople be likely to find it?”

Hermione shook her head, and said, “Probably not, but at least we know the charms needed to explore it from the Tri-Wizard Tournament.”

They ticked off other places where house-elves might not go *or* which offered special opportunities for concealment -- Quidditch Pitch, Green Houses, Owlery, Trophy Room, the suits of armor in the corridors, Hagrid’s Hut, the Whomping Willow, the rooms under the forbidden corridor where the Philosopher’s Stone had been hidden -- if they were still there and they could find a way in now that the trap door was gone -- and the hidden passages out of the school, both working and caved in... etc.

They ruled each of them out from the priority search list for one or more reasons.

They also talked about more ‘impossibly difficult’ locations, like under or behind any of the millions of stones in the floors, walls, and ceilings anywhere in the castle. This possibility and others like it only depressed them, so they stopped discussing locations that would be very good ‘random’ places that someone-who-really-wanted-to-hide-something-where-no-one-would-ever-find-it would choose, but Voldemort wouldn’t.

Unfortunately, the Forbidden Forest was one of those places and it was Draco’s favorite.

They finally settled on their top three, one for each of them, to target first. They agreed to spend one more hour discussing them before going to bed.

Hermione -- the Chamber of Secrets.

They all agreed it had to be searched for obvious reasons, but Harry just had a gut feeling Voldemort had not opened the Chamber again to hide a Horcrux.

Harry -- Ravenclaw Tower.

Harry thought it was the best place to start looking for *any* object belonging to Rowena Ravenclaw, and it might give them ideas on *where else* it could be -- if it was not there - - or *what* it could be if it was not her diadem. Hermione had come to believe it could *only* be the Diadem. So, searching in Ravenclaw Tower did not make any sense to her for all the reasons they had ruled out the other houses -- the house-elves.

Draco -- the Forbidden Forest.

Draco had almost picked Filch's office, but he knew it would be a quick and easy search they could fit in anytime. Draco said the Forest made the most sense because it was easy to get to and both students and teachers did not like to go in there. It was also where Tom Riddle feasted on Unicorn blood while he was possessing Professor Quirrell.

But Harry argued that Hagrid was in the forest all the time. Draco countered that Hagrid could not check every tree and bush and, besides, he was not a very good wizard. Harry responded by saying they could not check every tree or bush either.

Hermione said there were a lot of magical and non-magical creatures in the Forest that could have easily stumbled across it and moved it -- even if they did not know what it was. And, furthermore, forests change. You would have to be able to recognize the hiding place years, maybe centuries later.

"Not if it was well hidden and measured from a boundary stone or other relatively permanent marker," insisted Draco.

Hermione conceded that all the Horcruxes, except the diary for obvious reasons, had been placed in magically protected locations. She explained to Draco and Harry that such protections would be easier to detect in the Forbidden Forest than they would be in a magical place like Hogwarts castle or Gringotts.

Draco challenged her on the snake's magical protections, given that it was not hidden, but Hermione asked him if there were any better magical protection than Tom Riddle himself.

Harry said critically, “Professor Dumbledore is better. He was able to detect the Ring in Marvolo Gaunt’s shack.”

“But, unfortunately, none of us have his skills,” said Hermione.

They were all clearly starting to get annoyed with each other.

Harry was wondering if there could be magical protections that even Dumbledore could not detect without being lucky when the answer hit him like a thunderbolt. He was *certain* he knew *exactly* where young Tom Riddle would hide something at Hogwarts so that no one would ever find it.

Just as Harry was about to reveal the answer, Dobby popped into the drawing room.

“Harry Potter!” the tiny elf squeaked, “Professor Dumbledore is needing to be seeing you immediately!”

## Chapter 17 – Dumbledore’s Bequests

“Dobby is to be taking all of you,” said the house-elf. He gestured quickly for them to come to him.

The three jumped to his side and took hold of his tiny arms. In an instant they were standing in a small, well illuminated cave. Hagrid towered above them, waiting.

“Hagrid! You *are* alive!” shouted Harry.

The three rushed forward to embrace him.

“Take more ’an a couple o’ Death Eaters ta do me in,” growled the huge gamekeeper.

“No one knew what happened to you until Sirius told us you were with Professor Dumbledore,” said Hermione. “Before that, we imagined the worst... What *did* happen to you?”

“Later,” he said. “Perfessor Dumbledore needs ta see ya now.”

He led them through a narrow passage, saying, “We’re in the mountains ’bove Hogsmeade. Sirius stayed here when he were on the run. I blocked up the entrance tight. Dobby gets us everythin’ we need.”

They came to a crude grey curtain across the passage.

Hagrid stopped and called out softly, “Perfessor Dumbledore, sir. They’re here.”

They heard Dumbledore’s voice, “Ah, good. Please send them in, Hagrid.”

Send them in consisted of Hagrid drawing back the curtain while the three filed past him.

The area behind the curtain was a small alcove at the end of the passage and only just big enough to fit a narrow bed, wardrobe, very small writing desk and chair, plus a comfy chair, in which the old headmaster was sitting. Fawkes, the Phoenix, sat on a perch on top of the wardrobe. He eyed them and seemed to give an approving nod. They barely had room to stand together inside the alcove. It was dark. The only illumination was what reflected in from the front of the cave where Hagrid met them.

Despite the lack of light, it was clear Professor Dumbledore was not well. He looked quite ill and weak. There was a stoop in his shoulders and his chin nearly rested on his chest. The light appeared to bother him. He held up one hand to shield his eyes. He was extremely thin, appearing to be nothing more than skin and bones beneath his robes. The overstuffed chair seemed to swallow him.

“Thank you for coming,” said Dumbledore cheerfully, despite sounding tired. “I am sorry the invitation to visit is so late. But you have done so very well on your own, I hardly think you need my counsel at this point...”

“No!” all three of them said together. Harry continued, “We are *desperate* for your counsel. Not knowing what happened to you has been our greatest worry.”

Dumbledore chuckled, “You embarrass me, Harry... I have made so many mistakes I wish I could repair. It is the arrogance of old age. We assume age brings wisdom, and it often does, but only to those who do not mix it with overconfidence... My plans... *my plans... all* for naught. I will not waste your time explaining what I had planned. As they say, *‘the best laid plans of wisps and wizards...’* But enough of my regrets...”

Dumbledore paused, then said, “Ah... I am sorry; I seem to have forgotten my manors. I would offer you to sit, but there does not seem to be room for any more chairs.”

“Don’t worry, sir,” said Hermione. “We’re fine. Please continue.”

“Very well...” said Dumbledore, sounding contrite. “When you left me ailing, Harry, as I was outside the Entry Hall, I was becoming delirious from the effects of Lord Voldemort’s potion...”

The three all exclaimed at once and drew out their wands.

“Sir! No!” “The taboo!” “His name is *cursed!*”

They looked like they were expecting Death Eaters to begin Apparating at any moment.

“I hope you think me not so feeble now, that Lord Voldemort’s *taboo* would present a challenge *to me*. I assure you; it is quite safe to say his name here,” said Dumbledore sounding bemused.

“Yes, sir. Of course ...forgive us,” said Harry for all of them. They felt embarrassed.

“This cave is also protected by the Fidelius Charm, most competently performed by Professor Snape, who is also the Secret Keeper. Again, you may use Lord Voldemort’s name freely here, but I would advise against it, lest you forget when you leave. I am afraid I am too old to adapt. Neither Hagrid nor I are able tell you the cave’s exact location. When Dobby returns you to number Twelve, Grimmauld Place, you will not know how to find it... and he has promised me *never* to bring you back.”

Professor Dumbledore resumed his story without another word about the interruption. “Lord Voldemort’s potion was slowly killing me. I desperately needed Professor Snape. No discredit intended, but Madam Pomfrey’s excellent skills in this case were not up to the challenge. I needed Professor Snape to provide a powerful *antidote*.”

“I was only barely aware that the battle going on inside the school meant my plans were crumbling around me. I must have lost consciousness. Hagrid found me. He had seen the Dark Mark from his cabin and found me when he came to investigate -- dispatching two Death Eaters out in the grounds while on the way. Fortunately for me, he chose to take me to the safety of the Forbidden Forest rather than join the battle.”

“When we received news from the Order of the Phoenix that the Ministry had fallen, he brought me here and has cared for me since. He was able to contact Professor Snape soon enough to save my life. Since Professor Snape did not have a sample of the potion, the only thing he could do was give me *Draught of the Living Death*.”

“What!” exclaimed Harry, “But that’s *poison!*”

Draco looked at the ceiling. Hermione coughed.

Dumbledore chuckled. “Harry, I know your academic strength is *not* in Potions, even though you earned an Outstanding in your O.W.L. Remember, as I am sure Miss Granger and Mr Malfoy can attest, it is actually a *sleeping* potion so powerful, it can make a person be *mistaken* for dead. It greatly slows down the metabolism. But if left in such a state for too long unattended, a person will die of dehydration or hunger. Over time, Professor Snape was able to extract enough of my blood to distill out Lord Voldemort’s potion, create a temporary antidote, and restore me to consciousness. It took him almost until now to succeed.”

They all noticed the word “*temporary*” and looked at each other.

“Yes, I will very soon die... but I have my faculties for now -- though my vision is quite poor and sensitive to bright light, as you may have well surmised. I believe I have sufficient time to help put things to right. Now tell me *everything* that you have done.”

Harry, Draco, but mostly Hermione recounted everything that had happened since Professor Dumbledore went missing. She also included what had happened to Draco well before, when he investigated the vanishing cabinet at school. Hermione, as always, was especially good at providing precise details.

When they had finished, Dumbledore exclaimed, “Incredible! Bravo! Extremely well done, all of you! ...Of course, Fiendfyre is *quite* dangerous -- not something to be used around Hogwarts... Nonetheless, only *one* Horcrux remains. And as you know, I also have long suspected one was hidden in the school. Lord Voldemort boasted that he had learned more of the secrets of Hogwarts than anyone, which, of course, included the location of the Chamber of Secrets, which would seem to be a perfect hiding place.”

Hermione beamed and nodded her head.

But then Dumbledore said, “Of course, after the Chamber was opened by you at the end of your second year, I searched it quite thoroughly and found... nothing.”

Hermione looked crestfallen. Draco and Harry remained silent and did not even eye each other.

Dumbledore continued, “Regardless, let us hope Lord Voldemort found *another* place at Hogwarts he thought would be safe. I am certain the school holds *more* secrets... Now Miss Granger, you are nearest... If you would be so kind as to retrieve the wooden box in the bottom of my wardrobe...”

As Hermione opened the wardrobe, Dumbledore continued speaking, “We are quite fortunate that Professor Snape was made Headmaster. He is the only one of the original teachers who would possibly have been allowed to fill the position under the new regime. *The Carrows indeed! It disgusts me to think of those two in my school... having charge of my students!*”

This was the first time Dumbledore had shown anger. Then he noticed that Hermione had retrieved the box. “Ah, please open it, Miss Granger,” he said cheerfully. “I have something to give each of you.”

Hermione opened the hinged lid of the box. The box contained a Golden Snitch which feebly fluttered its wings, a small silver knife, and a small book.

Dumbledore continued, “The Golden Snitch is for you, Harry. The knife is for you, Mr Malfoy. And the book, *Tales of Beedle the Bard*, is for you, Miss Granger. Please take them.”

They each took their item.

“You may put the box on the writing table, Miss Granger,” which she did. “These objects were bequeathed to you in my will, but, as I have said, my plans have been overcome by events. So, I give them to you now.” Dumbledore paused and took a deep breath before continuing.

“Mr Malfoy, I thought you would like the knife. It was given to me, now many years ago, by the President of Gringotts Bank in honor of having been a loyal customer for seventy-five years -- and also for helping him with one or two things over that time. I think it will come in *very* useful. It has for me.”

“Harry, this Golden Snitch you won in your first Quidditch match. It contains the *Resurrection Stone*, which was mounted on Marvolo Gaunt’s ring.”

Hermione gasped and Harry and Draco both looked at each other and then Dumbledore again in eager anticipation.

“Yes, *The Tale of the Tree Brothers* is true -- at least as far as the objects described in the tale existing,” said Dumbledore emphatically. He ticked them off, “The Elder Wand, the Resurrection Stone, and the Cloak of Invisibility. The Cloak has been passed down in Harry’s family for unknown generations, descended from Ignotus Peverell, one of the three brothers who inspired the legend. Together the three objects are known as the *Deathly Hallows* by those who have studied and sought them. The possessor of these Hallows is said to become the ‘*Master of Death*’. I have drawn the symbol for the Hallows above the title of the Three Brothers’ tale in the book, Miss Granger. Please observe the super-imposed three basic geometric forms which comprise the symbol.”

Hermione quickly opened the old children’s book and found it. She showed it to Harry and Draco.

“Harry, you now have *two* of the Hallows. But listen to me -- I *beg* you -- do not seek the third. It would be your *undoing*, as it has been for so many others. Only the Cloak is safe to use. The Snitch I gave you will only open when the time is right, and you will know when that time is. When you, and you only, touch the Snitch, it reveals a hidden message.”

Harry looked closely at the Snitch. It was difficult to read in the dim light, but he saw an inscription. He read it aloud, “*I open at the close.*” He had no idea what it could mean.

Dumbledore continued to speak, “As I expected, and you have confirmed, Lord Voldemort is seeking the Elder Wand.”

“Do you think he’ll find it, sir,” asked Harry.

“I am *counting* on it,” answered Dumbledore unexpectedly.

They were all completely taken aback.

But Dumbledore explained, “Trusting in legends will be his *downfall*... as it was *mine*.” But he did not explain further. Instead, he said, “Before you go, I must speak to Harry alone... Miss Granger, Mr Malfoy, I bid you farewell.”



The two said goodbye to their old headmaster. Hermione's eyes were wet with tears. They returned to the front of the cave to wait with Dobby and Hagrid.

When Dumbledore heard voices at the front of the cave, he resumed, "I repeat, you are *not* to seek the Elder Wand, Harry. You do *not* need it to defeat Lord Voldemort."

"But sir, the *unbeatable* wand..."

Dumbledore shook his head and held up his hand. Harry stopped speaking.

Dumbledore then reached into his robes and drew out his wand.

No... It was *not* his wand, not the one Harry had always seen Professor Dumbledore use from his first day at Hogwarts.

"Harry, this is my *first* wand -- the wand I used at Hogwarts as a student over a hundred years ago -- '*ebony and dragon heart string, fifteen and a half inches, inflexible*' as Ollivander would say."

Professor Dumbledore held it out, handle first, to Harry. "Take it."

"Sir?" said Harry questioningly.

"Here, I give it to you *freely*. It is *yours*. I pass it to you as someone old passes a wand down to the next generation. Take it, please, Harry," said Dumbledore holding it out farther.

Harry did not understand, but he took the wand. He was quite touched by Dumbledore's gift. It felt good in his hand.

"Now, place it in your robe pocket and do not tell *anyone*, not even your friends. Keep it with you at *all* times. You will *know* when to use it," said Dumbledore urgently.

"Sir, I don't understand. Why do you always have to talk to me in riddles? The Snitch and now this..." complained Harry, now completely frustrated.

"Harry, I cannot tell you -- not *now*. I am *truly* sorry... When you come to know everything -- and you shall -- you will understand," said Dumbledore, pausing.

To Harry, it sounded like Dumbledore *was* truly sorry.

Dumbledore then resumed, speaking intensely, “But listen now. This is *vital*ly important. After my death, you must go to Professor Snape as soon as possible. He will tell you what you need to know. All will be clear. You will know what to do. And, Harry, please *do* tell your friends this. You will *need* their help.”

Dumbledore’s tone softened. “When you took my wand, I saw that Sirius has made you an Order ring... I should have made one for you myself -- another one of my mistakes. After you leave, tell your friends we talked about your Order ring and seeing Professor after I am gone... And after I *am* gone, you may tell them all the things I have asked you to keep secret,” said Dumbledore with a wink.

“Now it is time for you to go, Harry,” said Dumbledore. He sounded sad.

Harry knew there was no point in arguing. He approached Dumbledore and took his hand in his own. “Goodbye, sir.”

“Thank you, Harry. Until we meet again...” said Dumbledore sincerely.

Harry thought it odd for Dumbledore to say that, given what he had said earlier. He bowed his head and turned away, drawing the curtain across the passageway on his way out. He joined the others and said goodbye to Hagrid, who seemed the same as always.

“Don’t ya be worryin’ ’bout anythin’, Harry,” said Hagrid cheerfully. “Like I been tellin’ Hermione an Draco here, I’ll take good care o’ Perfessor Dumbledore.”

As they took hold of Dobby, Hagrid said, “Be careful now, you three,” and waved goodbye.

In an instant, they were back in the drawing room of number Twelve.

Harry said, “Thank you, Dobby. We’ll be needing you again very soon.”

“Dobby is knowing, sir. Professor Dumbledore is telling Dobby.” The little elf bowed and disappeared with a small pop.

They were excited after seeing Professor Dumbledore and Hagrid. They stayed up well past midnight discussing what had happened before finally going to bed.

Harry had completely forgotten what he was going to tell them before Dobby arrived.

## Chapter 18 – On the Run

The next morning, Harry, Hermione, and Draco had just finished breakfast, delicious as always. Kreacher was cleaning up.

They had only read the headlines of the Daily Prophet and nothing more.

### *MUGGLE-BORN RESETTLEMENT RESOUNDING SUCCESS*

With a sub-headline:

#### *NONCOMPLIANT MUGGLE-BORNS HUNTED*

They were about to resume planning how to search Hogwarts, when there was a burst of white light at the far end of the table. It was a message Patronus, which since last year, had always meant bad news. This one was a small female deer. It trotted toward them on the top of the table and stopped.

Professor Snape's voice said, "*The Secret Keeper is dead. You are at risk. Leave now and find a safe place.*" It repeated once and then faded away.

They all reacted to the message the same way, "Dumbledore's dead!"

It shocked them because it had happened so very soon, even though he had warned them it was coming.

Hermione said, "Harry, Professor Dumbledore told you to go to Professor Snape right after he died."

"First things first, Hermione," said Draco quickly, "We need to leave *right now*. Everyone in the Order besides us is a Secret Keeper now. And we know two Order members are missing; there may be others by now. We need to leave in *minutes*, not hours."

Hermione fired back, "I didn't say anything about taking *hours*, just where I thought where we should go *first*."

“Please, not now,” said Harry before Draco could respond. “We need to find someplace safe and then go see Professor Snape as soon as we can.”

Then he turned to Kreacher and asked, “Where can we go that’s safe, Kreacher?”

Kreacher looked strained and said, “Kreacher does not know, Master Harry.”

Harry and Draco looked at each other in surprise -- they both seemed to expect the house-elf to have a secret hiding place at the ready.

Then Hermione said calmly, “I’ve been planning for this a *long* time -- having to go on the run.”

“You have?” said Draco.

“Of course, she has,” said Harry, “Hermione has a plan for *everything*... fortunately for us.”

Hermione smiled. She said, “Go pack your things in your backpacks -- only things you *really* need -- and meet me at the front door in five minutes.”

When they regathered, Hermione was carrying a small, beaded bag -- like girls carry to balls. It had a wrist strap. It may have been the one she had at the Yule ball, but Harry could not remember.

“Where’s your school bag, Hermione?” asked Harry.

“In here,” replied Hermione, holding up the little bag. “...Undetectable Extension Charm. I’ve got everything we need to camp out.”

“Camp out!” exclaimed Draco.

“Well, can you think of a better idea? The farther we are from people, the better,” said Hermione.

Kreacher trotted into the hall from the stairs to the kitchen carrying a large picnic basket, which was almost as large as he was. “A few things until you make arrangements, Master Harry,” croaked Kreacher.

“We can’t take *that*,” said Draco incredulously.

“Maybe a few sandwiches...” Harry started to say.

When Hermione said, “Thank you, Kreacher,” taking the basket from him.

To their amazement, she began stuffing it into the small, beaded bag. In moments, the basket was gone. She said, “I put it next to the tent,” as if it made perfect sense.

“The tent!” Draco and Harry said together.

“Yes, the tent,” said Hermione sounding amused. “I said we were going to *camp out*. Where did you think we were going to sleep? I asked Ginny to borrow it the last time she went home. It’s the one of the two they used at the Quidditch World Cup.”

“Good thinking, as always,” said Draco, adding, “When we need more food, we can call Kreacher.”

“No!” exclaimed Harry. “We can’t tell anyone where we are or where we’re going; it’s too risky.”

Harry turned to the old elf and said, “Kreacher, if the Death Eaters are able to enter the house, leave and go into hiding until I call you. Be safe... please.”

“Yes, Master Harry,” replied Kreacher. The old house-elf bowed deeply.

“OK, let’s go,” said Harry. “You guide us, Hermione.”

Harry covered the three of them with his invisibility cloak. They opened the front door, crouched down to hide their feet, and stepped carefully out onto the top step. There was only one Death Eater on duty across the street on the green. He looked completely bored. They all held hands and Hermione Disapparated. Moments later they appeared among tall trees widely spaced. Early morning daylight was casting long shadows across the leaf covered forest floor.

“It’s the Forest of Dean near Gloucester,” announced Hermione. “My parents used to bring me here in the summer when I was a child. It’s still summer camping season, so I brought us deep into the forest. I’ll do the protective spells and enchantments; you two set up the tent.”

She pulled off the cloak and threw the beaded bag to Draco while she began walking in a wide circle around them waving her wand.

Harry was suddenly overwhelmed with a vision.

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He was jubilant!

Snape was standing before him.

“Albus Dumbledore... *dead* ...at last. How did it happen, Severus?”

“My Lord, he entered the school at breakfast -- walked brazenly into the Great Hall. I admit I was taken aback by the audacity of it. I presume he aimed to rally the teachers and students to his side, since we know the Order of the Phoenix is almost finished.”

He nodded. Yes, Dumbledore was always so presumptuous.

Snape continued, “The Carrows were intent on capturing him, but I thought it best to make an example of him in front of the students and staff... As I told you, My Lord... *I killed him* -- the one he thought was *his* spy.”

He was pleased that Snape took pleasure in repeating his achievement.

“Strangely, he did not even put up a fight. When I called him out to duel, all he said was, ‘*Severus, please*’ ...the Carrows will tell you. I cannot imagine what he was thinking,” said Snape looking puzzled.

“Well done, Severus.”

Snape acknowledged the compliment with a deep bow.

“And what did you do with the body, Severus?”

Snape appeared embarrassed, like a small child caught stealing a treat. “I thought it best to give it over to his former staff -- an act of weakness on my part, I admit, but a gesture I thought would tamp down the possibility of open revolt. Had I not shown, what they would consider ‘*proper respect*’ for the body, the situation might have...”

deteriorated. He was, after all, a *great* wizard... *in his time*. They buried him on the school grounds next to the Black Lake. Of course, I did not let the students attend.”

He sighed in mild disappointment. “Severus, there has always been a streak of sentimentality in you. It is your greatest weakness.”

“I beg your forgiveness, My Lord,” said Snape, again bowing, this time even more deeply.

He waved his hand dismissively. “You handled it well enough. Now go to the Daily Prophet and give a full accounting so everyone will know that Albus Dumbledore is *finally* dead.”

Now, only Harry Potter remained.

## Chapter 19 – Triple Agent

Harry told Draco and Hermione immediately. Both were as shocked as he was.

But Draco was also outraged. “I can’t *believe* Snape killed Dumbledore! He was a *traitor* after all!”

“Professor Dumbledore wanted me to go see Snape as soon as possible after his death!” cried Harry. “He said Snape would have something important to tell me. How can I go *now*? He was working for Tom Riddle all along.”

However, Hermione asked Harry to describe again what Professor Snape said happened after Dumbledore entered the Great Hall.

When Harry repeated it, she said, “Harry, it doesn’t make *any* sense. Why would Professor Snape send his Patronus to *warn* us? If he had truly been working for Tom Riddle, he could have killed Professor Dumbledore *anytime*... or *you*, for that matter. I think it was *planned* between them,” she concluded matter-of-factly.

“*Planned!*” exclaimed Harry.

“Yes, *planned*,” said Hermione emphatically. “Professor Dumbledore knew he was dying. He wanted it to have some benefit. It firmly cemented Professor Snape’s position as a true Death Eater in everyone’s mind -- including Tom Riddle’s.” She folded her

arms and said, “You *still* need to go see Professor Snape, Harry. It’s what Professor Dumbledore told you to do.”

Draco was shaking his head again. “Too risky, Harry.”

Harry seemed uncertain. “I’m not sure now. I’ll have to think about it.”

“Harry! You’re ignoring Professor Dumbledore again... At least send Professor Snape a message; use your ring,” said Hermione, sounding frustrated.

“Maybe Snape’s really been a perfect double agent for Tom Riddle all along. I don’t *know*, Hermione.” argued Harry. He was full of doubt.

“Well, please make up your mind quickly. Seeing Professor Snape ‘*as soon as possible*’ doesn’t mean next week,” chided Hermione.

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They changed locations every day.

The borrowed tent was like a small apartment. They were actually living quite comfortably. Hermione made sure they always saved some of each food from every meal, so she could make more using magic. They did not want to have to go anywhere to find it. Hermione used a freezing charm to keep things fresh. But it did get tiring, eating the same things every meal, so they also foraged and fished, when possible, to supplement what Kreacher had prepared for them.

Their biggest frustration was not knowing what was going on. Kreacher had been able to get the Daily Prophet for them. Now they did not even have that.

They spent the first two days on edge, seeming to expect an attack by Death Eaters at any moment. They jumped at every sound which meant they did not get much sleep. And someone always had to be on watch when the others tried to sleep. They were too anxious for their safety to talk about the hunt for Horcruxes.

While trying to sleep on the night of the third day, Harry had his first vision of Voldemort traveling on the continent in search of Gregorovich. He witnessed the senseless murder of an entire family. It appalled him. It also reminded him they were in a *race* to find the last Horcrux before Voldemort obtained the Elder Wand.



The next morning, he told Draco and Hermione what happened and that they needed to start *doing*, instead of just *planning*. But if they were not ready to go to Hogwarts, which they agreed they were not, they would check the other likely locations outside Hogwarts -- except for Albania.

They used every method possible to disguise themselves. They always worked as a team and carefully scouted before moving in on their targeted search site.

They found the Orphanage was gone. It had been torn down and converted into a block of flats. There was nothing they could do except hope the last Horcrux had not been hidden there. If so, it was now probably buried in a construction landfill somewhere.

Draco went into Borgin and Burkes under the invisibility cloak. Harry and Hermione used Disillusionment charms and waited outside to provide backup and security. Draco was inside Borgin's so long, Harry and Hermione almost left their hiding place across the street to rescue him. Later, Draco told them he had to be very careful. He found nothing resembling a tiara or diadem, nor anything labeled as an artifact of Ravenclaw's -- or, just in case, Gryffindor's.

But there had been a very old and beautiful opal necklace labeled as cursed and deadly. That made Draco realize Borgin would have recognized a Horcrux and would never have put it on display in the front of the shop. Then while making his way slowly to the back room, he had wondered, would Borgin even risk having one hidden there, knowing what a Horcrux could do? It was not likely, so he left.

Draco concluded, "That was a waste of time. I'm sorry we ever considered it."

Hermione nodded but did not say anything.

That marked their seventh day on the run.

Hermione, who had been very patient, said, "Harry, maybe you should talk to *Sirius* about seeing Professor Snape. Use your ring, not the mirror, to contact him. Set up a meeting. He'll know somewhere safe."

Harry was conflicted. He was concerned that Sirius had not contacted him, especially now. He desperately wanted to talk to Sirius about going to see Professor Snape and Hermione's theory about Dumbledore's death. He assumed Sirius must have gotten the news about Professor Dumbledore by now. Professor Snape must have let the other Order members know he sent his Patronus to warn the three of them, or someone else

would have. But then, maybe Sirius had been on the run so long himself, he did not consider being on the run a matter of life-and-death. Whatever Sirius' reason, Harry decided *not* to contact him yet, since they had been fine -- so far.

Harry had two more visions in quick succession the next day. Voldemort was still on the continent searching for Gregorovich, tracking down and questioning people. Voldemort obtained information from each person using Legilimency. He killed everyone he questioned when he could have, just as easily, used a memory charm to make them forget.

It was hard for Harry to watch Voldemort killing *innocent* people -- much harder than watching him kill Death Eaters who failed him. Voldemort always *enjoyed* killing his followers who failed him, but surprisingly, when he killed innocent people, it was without malice -- he hardly felt anything. It was simply... necessary.

"He's getting closer. I'm worried," said Harry after he related Voldemort's progress to Draco and Hermione.

"You've *got* to see Professor Snape, Harry," Hermione pleaded again.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, I can't take that chance now. I need to talk to *Sirius*," said Harry.

"Well then, do it, *damn it! Quit dithering!*" exclaimed Hermione, who almost never swore.

"But it's not life-and-death," said Harry.

"At this point, how do you *know*, Harry?" reasoned Hermione. "You've ignored Professor Dumbledore's instructions for over a week now. He said the information from Professor Snape was *important*. It's supposed to get you *to do* something."

Harry looked at Draco, who just shrugged.

"OK," Hermione. I'll make a decision in the morning.

That night he had a vision while he was sleeping. It woke him up, but the vision did not end when he awoke. That had never happened before.

Voldemort had found Gregorovich. His initial elation quickly turned to rage when he saw in Gregorovich's mind that the Elder Wand, which the wand maker had indeed

acquired, had been stolen almost a hundred years before by a golden-haired young man. But Gregorovich had no idea who the young man had been. It was a *dead end*. In his rage, Voldemort slaughtered Gregorovich in the most cruel and violent way he could imagine. That was what woke Harry up. But he experienced one more thought from Voldemort before the vision ended.

To quench his rage, Lord Voldemort would, at last, take his... *revenge*.

Harry struggled to keep the connection, but it was broken. Harry swore.

Voldemort had *not* thought about what his revenge would be.

## Chapter 20 – The Room of Requirement

In the morning, Harry told them what he had seen.

Hermione seemed especially disturbed by it.

He concluded by saying, “We’re off the hook -- at least for now. We have time to be methodical. And I’ve *made* my decision, Hermione... I’m *not* going to see Professor Snape. I think it’s too risky.”

“Oh, Harry!” Hermione exclaimed in exasperation.

Draco gave him a thumbs up behind her back.

“Sorry, Hermione,” said Harry.

Hermione just stared at Harry for several seconds. Then she stood up and walked out of the tent. After ten minutes, Harry followed her out. She was sitting against a tree a few yards away. Harry tried to talk to her, but she said she wanted to be left alone, so Harry went back inside. She did not come back inside for lunch, and it was not until very late afternoon that she returned to the tent. Even then she would not talk to Harry or Draco.

Finally, Harry said, “This isn’t like you, Hermione. You know the silent treatment won’t get me to change my mind.”

“I know, but I was so angry and disappointed, I had to be alone,” said Hermione, “I guess we’ll just have to hope it was the right decision. So, what now?”

Draco said, “Why don’t we come up with a final plan for searching Hogwarts and then have dinner. You must be very hungry, Hermione.”

Hermione said with a sigh, “Fine. Yes.”

For some reason Harry had a big grin on his face and said, “Searching Hogwarts is going to take a *lot* less time than we thought...”

Hermione said, sounding irritated, “If you mean because Professor Dumbledore told us he already searched the Chamber of Secrets, we still need Basilisk...”

Draco jumped in, “...We can substitute Filch’s office. It’ll be quick and easy.”

“No. That’s not it,” said Harry still smiling. “We *still* need to go to the Chamber of Secrets to get Basilisk venom...” he nodded to Hermione, then added, “But... I’m *certain* I know where Tom Riddle hid the Horcrux at Hogwarts. In fact, I thought of it right before Dobby arrived to take us to see Professor Dumbledore.”

“*What!*” exclaimed Draco. “Why haven’t you said so before *now*?”

“We were wrapped up in too many other things -- seeing Professor Dumbledore, going on the run, the latest visions, talking about seeing Professor Snape, contacting Sirius... all of that. I even *forgot* about it for a couple of days. And I wanted to eliminate the Orphanage and Borgin’s just to be sure... and because they were easy.”

“*Easy!*” exclaimed Draco. “You weren’t in Borgin’s...”

“*Enough!*” shouted Hermione. “I can’t *believe* you two. Harry, *where... is... it!*”

But Harry was not immediately forthcoming. He said, “It came to me after Hermione was talking about even the best magical concealments being detectable by the best wizards. I was wondering if it was possible to have magical protections that even the best wizards required luck to find -- and it came to me...” He held them in suspense for a few more seconds and then said, “The Room of...”

“**REQUIREMENT!**” Draco and Hermione both shrieked.

“It makes *perfect* sense,” said Hermione. “I *should* have thought of it. And I was just thinking about it as a place to operate our search from... I was so certain about the Chamber of Secrets; I couldn’t think past it. The Room of Requirement is the *perfect* place to hide something. Tom Riddle must have found it while he was searching for the Chamber of Secrets as a student.”

“This is *not* going to be easy,” said Draco shaking his head. “We have to figure out the type of room Tom Riddle decided to hide it in. It could be *anything* -- he might have decided to hide it in a *tearoom*.”

“No,” said Hermione, shaking her head. “It’s going to be *much* easier than that.”

“It is?” said Draco and Harry together.

“Think,” said Hermione. “The Room is very *elemental*. It primarily responds to basic needs and then adjusts once you’re inside. *Hiding something* is a basic need, not wanting a tearoom. I think anyone who needs to hide something is going to get the same room. Imagine you’re anyone standing there and thinking ‘I need to *hide* this whatever.’ The Room is going to become a place to *hide* whatever.”

Draco’s eyes widened in understanding. “That makes *perfect* sense, Hermione. I never thought of the Room that way... But I bet the Room would become a tearoom if you really wanted it to be -- minus the tea, of course.”

“Yes, Draco, we know the Room can become a specific type of place and is also subject to Gamp’s Laws. So, it wouldn’t be much of a *tearoom* without the tea or the sweet and savory nibbles,” said Hermione testily.

Harry cut off the start of an argument by saying, “Good discussion... I was hoping it would be something like that. Do you think we can make our first attempt tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Wow,” said Draco, “Do you think we’re *ready*?”

Hermione looked alarmed by the prospect of actually executing their plan.

Harry said, “I think we are, but I need to confirm something with Dobby first.”

“I still think we should let Professor McGonagall know we’re coming,” said Hermione.

Harry shook his head. “I’d rather not involve her if we can avoid it. She’s not a big risk taker...” Harry saw the surprised looks on Hermione and Draco’s faces and quickly added, “What I mean to say is, she wouldn’t want *us* to be taking the risk and might not agree to help us. She considers student safety above everything and still sees us as her students. And once we contacted her, a master Legilimens like Professor Snape, might find out and we’d have put *her* in danger.”

“Right. So, let’s talk to Dobby,” said Draco, and commanded, “DOBBY!”

The tiny elf popped right into the middle of the tent.

“Master Draco is needing Dobby, sir?” asked Dobby, adding, “Dobby is also pleased to be seeing Harry Potter and Miss Hermione again.”

“Yes, Dobby,” said Draco, “we’re pleased to see you again too. We need your help...”

“Dobby is always wanting to be helping his friends,” said Dobby eagerly.

“Yes, we know. Thank you, Dobby,” said Hermione sweetly.

Dobby beamed.

“Can you find out for us if the Room of Requirement is currently in use, Dobby?” asked Harry.

“Dobby is already knowing this, sir. It is being the hideout for Dumbledore’s Army,” said Dobby proudly.

“Dumbledore’s Army!” exclaimed Harry, Hermione, and Draco together.

“Yes. They is the Hogwarts students being in rebellion, sirs and miss. They is calling it the ‘D’ ‘A’ in secret,” said Dobby again proudly.

“Who’s in the DA, Dobby?” asked Harry excitedly. Draco and Hermione, like Harry, were all ears.

“Mr Longbottom and Miss Lovegood and many others,” said Dobby, adding, “...*all* the friends of Harry Potter.”

“They’re actually fighting?” asked Draco.

Dobby hesitated, then said, “Not open fighting, sir. Not dueling... But *resisting* the Carrows and their supporters in other ways.”

“Like what?” asked Harry.

“Posting signs, hexing and jinxing students who is supporting He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and... breaking very many school *rules!*” Dobby said triumphantly.

Draco and Harry laughed. But Hermione said, “But why haven’t they been caught, Dobby? Everyone knows where the Room of Requirement is.”

“Ah, miss, Mr Longbottom is needing the Room to be changing the door’s location,” said Dobby as if the answer were obvious.

“Right,” said Harry. “That’s what it looked like on the Marauders Map.”

Draco and Hermione looked questioningly at Harry, but Dobby continued...

“And you cannot be getting into the Room without knowing it is a hideout for Dumbledore’s Army. And someone is always staying in the room, usually Mr Longbottom, because he is being expelled,” said Dobby knowingly.

“Expelled!” exclaimed the three together.

“Yes, sirs and miss. Mr Longbottom is cursing Professor Carrow in class and then he is going into hiding in the Room of Requirement.”

“But the Carrows could put a guard on the door,” said Hermione.

Dobby nodded and smiled. “They is doing this, miss, but it is no longer being the *real* door. It is being a *false* door now on the seventh floor. The Room is making a new opening door somewhere different every day and Mr Longbottom has a way of telling his friends.”

“But what about *food*...” continued Hermione, glancing briefly at Draco, who just smiled.

“Dobby is taking food from the Kitchens at first, but then Mr Longbottom later is telling Dobby he can be getting it for himself, but Dobby is not knowing how,” explained Dobby.

“Maybe he found a way around Gamp’s Laws,” mused Draco, giving Hermione a glance this time. She did not rise to the bait.

“Dobby, the reason we called you here is to find out if you can take us directly into the Room of Requirement?” asked Harry.

“Dobby is a Hogwarts house-elf. Dobby is being able if the Room is being *used*, even if not knowing what for,” said Dobby. “This is how Dobby is taking food to Mr Longbottom. But Dobby is *not* knowing where the real door is changing every day.”

“Great, Dobby!” said Harry. He turned to Draco and Hermione. “We need to talk to Neville now.”

“Wait!” said Hermione. “We need to talk about this. You said we shouldn’t get our friends involved.”

“Yes, but the situation’s changed, Hermione,” said Harry. “Neville, or someone from Dumbledore’s Army, is now *always* in the Room. They will have to vacated it so it can become what *we* need to search. We have to coordinate this with him. Remember, he’s been expelled. The Carrows are after him. We just can’t say, ‘Neville, you need to get out because we have something more important to do’.”

“Harry, you’re right. I wasn’t thinking,” said Hermione. “It would be safest for Neville if Dobby brought him here when he has to leave the Room for us.”

“Good idea,” said Draco.

Harry agreed but said, “He won’t need to this time. This will just be a coordination visit. He’ll need to warn the rest of Dumbledore’s Army about what’s going to happen.”

“Another good idea,” said Draco. This made Hermione happy because it gave them more time to plan.

“Ready?” asked Harry.

Draco and Hermione nodded.



“Right...” said Harry, turning to his tiny friend, “Dobby, please take us to the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts. If you detect the slightest thing to be amiss, bring us back here immediately.”

“Dobby is understanding Harry Potter,” he replied and held out his arms.

The three took hold of Dobby’s tiny, outstretched arms and an instant later they were standing in the middle of a brightly lit room. There was a brief moment of quiet and disorientation as their eyes adjusted to the light. Then they were met with a loud chorus of cheers and shouting and immediately surrounded by a host of their school friends. They had obviously arrived in the middle of a meeting of Dumbledore’s Army.

Harry wondered, ‘A meeting before dinner? It had to be the weekend. He had lost track of the days... Yes, it was Sunday.’

Finally, above the din they heard Neville shouting, “Give them some *air*, or I’ll *hex* the lot of you!”

This made everyone laugh and the noise died down.

“Let Harry speak,” said Luna from the somewhere in the crowd.

Harry held up his hands and the room became silent. “We came to find out what’s going on at Hogwarts and to figure out how we can search the school for something that will help us fight... uh... *You-Know-Who*... Yes, we know about the taboo... Anyway... we’re sorry we interrupted your meeting. We need to speak to Neville now.”

The members of the DA were clearly disappointed and voicing it.

“What are you looking for?” “We can help you find it.” “Aren’t you going to help us fight the Carrows and the DLA?”

Neville shouted again, “Alright, everyone back to training while I talk to this lot. I’ll fill you all in before we break up.”

Though there was still grumbling, the DA members obeyed. Neville was clearly in charge. He led them to a corner of the room.

“Don’t worry about them,” said Neville, “They know it will be a long and dangerous war. We’re the DA, Harry, Dumbledore’s Army. We make the DLA’s life miserable. Them not being able to get into the Room is driving them absolutely crazy. But I just didn’t want the DA getting too excited about you showing up. I know it’s got to be critical, or you wouldn’t be here to look for -- whatever it is you’re looking for... It must some *magical weapon*, right?”

“You’re *exactly* right, Neville,” lied Harry, “but it would be dangerous if we told you about it.”

Neville looked disappointed, but said, “OK. What do you want me to do?”

Harry said, “We believe what we’re looking for is in another version of the Room of Requirement...”

Neville cut in, “...So, I’m going to have to *leave* the Room? You know they’re after me, right? Let me...”

But Harry cut in, “We know. Don’t worry; you’ll be safe. Dobby will temporarily take you to our camp in the countryside and then bring you back when we’re finished. Then Dobby will take us back.”

“So, you *aren’t* staying,” said Neville confirming his suspicion.

“No. We can’t. We’re carrying out Professor Dumbledore’s orders and we have to do it alone. Sorry, Neville,” said Harry sincerely.

“That’s, OK,” said Neville, “I understand. Let me run this lot off then, so...”

“No, No,” said Hermione, speaking for the first time. “This visit is just to assess the situation. Tell us when to come back tomorrow. We don’t want to disrupt your activities. And you need to let all the DA members know what’s happening.” Though she was talking to Neville, Hermione kept one eye on Harry to remind him it wasn’t okay to change his mind about what they had agreed to. She could tell that Draco was making faces at Harry behind her back and she intended to speak to him later.

“OK,” said Neville, “As early as you like. I’ll be here. This lot will be in class all day. We do almost all our activities at night and on weekends. The DLA is supposed to keep an eye on us. They’re spread across all the dormitories -- but they’re lazy... Like to get their beauty sleep.”

Harry was about to speak when he was suddenly in another room...

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He was holding a pair of Chocolate Frog cards in his long white finders and *laughing* -- the irony of it!

He had not laughed in a very long time.

From out of his eyesight a voice said, "My Lord, when you described the young man from so long ago, I thought I knew who it must be. Of course, he's *much* older now, but I guessed it might be him. My Lord, my youngest son collects the cards and is forever showing them to me. My Lord, the first card you hold is quite old. It's a *collector's* item. It shows him when he was first gaining power during the 1920's. My Lord, the other card beneath it is a recent reissue. It shows him as an old man -- a photograph from prison, Nurmengard."

Both cards read *Gellert Grindelwald*.

Yes, he mused, who but Gellert Grindelwald would *also* have sought the unbeatable wand and secured it?

Grindelwald, who like himself, sought power and dominion over both the magical and non-magical worlds, but who, unlike himself, was, as the recent card so simply stated, *Defeated by Albus Dumbledore in 1945*.

He would go to Nurmengard and find out from the old, shamefully *defeated* Dark Wizard what had happened to the Elder Wand. Then he would resume the hunt for...

His mind suddenly reeled... '*Defeated*'... by... *Albus Dumbledore*...

THE WAND! The Elder Wand! *Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald!*

Yes! Yes! It had to be!

He must go immediately to Hogwarts... but... it must remain a *secret*.

The voice continued, "...he loves them, My Lord. His oldest brother gave him his own collection to start him off and he's been..."

*“AVADA KEDAVRA!”*

The look of surprise had barely formed on the man’s face when he crumpled at his feet.

It would now remain a secret.

Regrettable, but necessary.

He pulled up the left sleeve of his robe and carefully touched the tongue of the snake on the Dark Mark on his forearm and said, “Severus Snape, meet Lord Voldemort alone at the front gate of Hogwarts in one quarter of an hour.”

He vanished the Chocolate Frog cards, stepped over the body, and strode from the room.

He was elated, whispering to himself, “Harry Potter, you are now *mine*.”

Then thinking... ‘And I *know* where you are. We are coming.’

## **Chapter 21 – Change in Plans**

“Harry, Harry. What happened? What did you see?” Harry heard Hermione speaking as he found himself back in the Room of Requirement.

He was surrounded by Hermione, Draco, Neville, and Dobby, who were holding him up. They must have thought he would fall when he became unresponsive while connected to the Dark Lord’s mind.

Harry could not answer. He was still stunned by what he had just learned.

Professor Dumbledore had possessed the Elder Wand all along!

And now, Voldemort was coming to get it and... Harry.

*Voldemort knew he was at Hogwarts!*

Harry quickly regained his composure and shook off the helping hands, exclaiming, “Neville, I need to speak with Hermione and Draco *immediately!* There’s been a change

in plans. We're *staying!* Keep everyone here for now. I'll brief you in a couple of minutes."

Neville nodded. He looked excited and went off to tell the rest of the DA.

Harry anxiously huddled with Hermione and Draco. Forcing himself to remain calm, he said, "Professor Dumbledore's wand *is* the Elder Wand. He won it from Grindelwald in 1945. Tom Riddle is coming to get it *now.*"

Hermione gasped, "Oh, my *God!*"

"*Incredible!*" exclaimed Draco. "Harry, we've got to beat him to it!" He had already grabbed Harry's arm and started to pull him toward the door.

"STOP!" Harry yelled and shook off Draco's hand.

Draco looked exasperated. "Harry, you'll have *all* the Hallows... the *Master of Death*... What are you *waiting* for?" cried Draco as he stared, dumbfounded at Harry.

Harry seemed to be frozen -- conflicted.

Hermione looked at Harry and then said to Draco, "Harry remembers what Professor Dumbledore told him, 'The Elder Wand would be Tom Riddle's downfall.' Professor Dumbledore was *counting* on Tom Riddle finding it. He told Harry not to seek it. Right, Harry?"

Harry nodded, still thinking.

Hermione continued, "So we *don't* need to change our plan. Tom Riddle getting the Elder Wand doesn't change the situation. We can still hunt for the Horcrux as planned..."

"Tom Riddle *knows we're here* and is sending all his Death Eaters to get us," said Harry as calmly as he could.

"WHAT? HOW?" exclaimed Hermione and Draco together.

"My last vision was apparently a two-way connection. He taunted me at the end. I don't know how long it's been happening, but it has to be recent..." Harry explained bitterly.

“Then we’ve got to leave *immediately!*” exclaimed Hermione. Draco nodded.

“NO! We *can’t!*” exclaimed Harry. “Think what he’ll do the students and teachers if we get away... No, this is it; there’s no turning back.”

Harry grabbed Draco and Hermione each by the shoulder and declared, “We need to find the last Horcrux *right now...* but... *we need more time.*”

There was only one way and no time to discuss it. He looked at Hermione and commanded, “Send the Patronus message *now*, Hermione -- it’s our *only* chance!”

Hermione immediately stepped back and pulled out her wand.

A brilliant white eagle burst from the tip and hovered in the air before her.

She recited, “To the Dark Lord...” and then spoke the six words clearly and distinctly, pausing briefly between each: “Chamber... Shack... Cave... Vault... Manor... School.” She repeated the list a second time. Then she flicked her wand and the Patronus vanished.

Hermione’s Patronus got everyone’s attention.

Draco said, “Hermione... I thought your Patronus was an *otter...*”

Harry cut him off, saying quickly, “Draco, tell them... *You-Know-Who* ...is on his way to the school with all his Death Eaters, and they all need to go back to their dormitories and wait for further instructions. Most importantly, they must *NOT* tell anyone who isn’t a member of Dumbledore’s Army. Take Luna aside and tell her to inform Professor McGonagall what’s happened. McGonagall will know what to do.”

Draco dashed off to tell Neville.

Harry had barely gotten out his instructions when he was back in Voldemort’s mind.

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No! *Impossible!*

The Patronus eagle was just fading away, having delivered its message.

The shock of it had already overcome his initial outrage over the temerity of anyone sending a mere Patronus to inform Lord Voldemort of anything.

The message!

Yes, it *should* be impossible. No one could know, yet...

His mind raced.

It had to be a trick, a clever guess. But there was doubt, concern.

Then he thought... *Albus Dumbledore*.

Yes, Dumbledore was always questioning, never trusting... And the Diary... Yes, Dumbledore knew about it... had seen it. He may have guessed its true nature.

And ridiculous Horace Slughorn... Dumbledore had brought him back to Hogwarts... certainly not to teach. No... to get what he *knows*... I should have *killed* him.

But the cave...

Even if Dumbledore had learned there were more than one Horcrux, and had even somehow learned of the cave, he could never have overcome the protective enchantments Lord Voldemort had set in place.

No! Impossible!

But still, he had to be *sure*. Too much depended on it.

First the Horcruxes... *then* the Wand. Severus would wait at the gate until he arrived. His Death Eaters would assemble as ordered.

He ticked them off in his mind...

The Diary -- destroyed in the *Chamber of Secrets*.

The Ring -- hidden in Marvolo's *Shack* -- really more like a *hovel*...

The Cup -- retrieved from the Lestrangle's *Vault* and... expended.

The Locket -- hidden in the deadly *Cave*.

The Snake, beloved Nagini -- murdered at Malfoy *Manor* by the wretched Mudblood girl... She too will *burn*.

The Diadem -- concealed in the hidden room at Hogwarts *School*.

He would check on the Ring first, the most likely to have been discovered. If safe, then he would know the message was a trick.

Then the Locket...

And finally, at Hogwarts, he would check on the Diadem, take the Elder Wand for his own, and kill Harry Potter and the Mudblood girlfriend.

He had already begun to discredit the message delivered by the Patronus. The task required was necessary but a damnable annoyance.

Yes. Impossible!

No one was the equal of *Lord Voldemort!*

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Harry's mind snapped back into the Room of Requirement once again.

He could see the few remaining DA members leaving by four other doors that had appeared next to the entry door. Neville and Draco were back standing with Hermione and Dobby, once again holding onto him.

"It *worked*, Hermione. It worked!" said Harry excitedly.

"He's going to check on the remaining objects, the Ring first, then the Locket, and then he's coming here. It *is* the Diadem -- and it *is* in the hidden Room. It should give us the time we need. But just in case, Neville, get word to the DA to start creating mayhem right away. It should create a diversion that will delay him from getting to the Room. Any questions?"

Only Neville spoke, "I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm *not* going with Dobby. I need to stay here. I think there's going to be a battle, and this is where I belong. We already have a plan to drive out the Carrows and the DLA and defend the school."

"*Brilliant!*" exclaimed Harry. "Do it, Neville. You're in charge, but I need you to tell us where the door to the Room of Requirement will be when we want to get back in?"



Neville answered confidently, “The changing entry door rule only applies to the DA’s hideout. When the Room’s vacated, it will reappear in the regular place in the seventh-floor corridor, which, I warn you, is *always* guarded. That’s why we have someone remain inside -- mostly me -- so they can’t take it over.”

“Thanks, Neville. You need to update Professor McGonagall on what’s happening,” said Harry. “Dobby, take Neville to Professor McGonagall, but only if she’s alone or with Luna or anyone else we trust.”

Neville smiled appreciatively.

Dobby was gone and back in a flash and then he was off again with Neville.

Harry pulled out his invisibility cloak and threw it over them as they huddled together. It did not cover much below their knees.

“Hermione, can you Disillusion what’s showing?” asked Harry.

She did it in seconds.

“Great. Let’s go,” said Harry. The three turned to go, and then stopped as they faced the five doors. They all looked the same.

“Which one?” asked Draco.

“Damn, I should have asked Neville where they come out,” said Harry.

“Four must be come out near each of the common rooms and the other one is the current entrance,” said Hermione. “I wonder why they’re not labeled.”

“We need the doors labeled,” said Harry to the Room and suddenly they were. The Room had used the names of the founders. It clearly did not abide by the changes to Hogwarts imposed under the *New Wizarding Era*.

“Brilliant!” said Draco. “It would have been a disaster coming out near the Slytherin common room.”

“And the one in the middle labeled “Entry, Charms Corridor” is too far,” said Hermione. “We need the one for Gryffindor.”

They moved quickly to the nearest of the five doors, wands at the ready. They came out in the seventh-floor corridor not far from the portrait of the Fat Lady.

“Wow, I bet the Room even makes sure the coast is clear when it makes these exits,” Hermione whispered, noting the corridor was deserted.

“Right, let’s go,” whispered Harry and they moved off together as quickly as possible.

In less than a minute, they soon stood before the section of wall across from the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. The false door that Dobby told them about was gone, but that made sense because the Room that was the DA’s hideout had been emptied and was now gone. Harry looked around; the corridor was empty. Didn’t Neville say it was always guarded? But he was ready to call for the Room for hiding things because they had already agreed on the request.

Before they started their first of three passes in front of the wall where the door would appear, Harry said distinctly, “We need a place to hide a Horcrux.”

“What’s a horcrux?” said a very familiar voice behind them.

The invisibility cloak flapped wildly and partially slid off as they whipped around as fast as they could. But they were stunned before they could defend themselves.

In their haste to find the last Horcrux, they did not try to verify what both Dobby and Neville had told them -- the place where the door to the Room of Requirement normally appears was now *always* guarded. Before Harry fell unconscious, he saw Crabbe, Goyle and Ron coming out of their Disillusionment charms, wands pointed at them.

It had been Ron’s voice they heard.

## Chapter 22 – Fatal Destiny

Harry shook his head. He was dazed but coming around.

Professor Snape was standing over him. “Potter! Mr Potter, wake up!”

Harry was lying on the floor of the headmaster's office. He raised himself up on his elbows and looked around. Draco and Hermione were lying next to him on the floor, still unconscious. Snape must have done something to awaken him.

Professor Snape spoke again. He was angry. "Potter, what were you *doing*? Why did you not *come to see me* as Professor Dumbledore *instructed* you? ...*Bah!* No matter now..."

Then, sounding anxious, Snape said, "The Dark Lord is on his way; he called me to meet him at the school gate. He knows you are here. He has already ordered his Death Eaters to assemble. I did not get to those three zealous Dark Lord's Army fanatics that caught you before they had already called him to say they had you, otherwise I would have modified their memories. At least I kept them from delivering you to the *Carrows...*" For a moment Snape seemed distracted, but then he said, "Perhaps it is for the *best*. Perhaps even Professor Dumbledore planned it to happen this way... *Damn him!*"

Harry's head was finally clear enough to speak. He got to his knees. "No, he already knew we were here because he read my mind. You weren't too late," said Harry weakly.

"Occlumency would have..." Snape began, shaking his head in disappointment.

But Harry interrupted, "Hermione was *right*. Professor Dumbledore *wanted* you to kill him. He told you about the Wand of El..."

Snape cut in, "Wand? What wand? *No*, he was near death, and he wanted to cement my position with the Dark Lord. He was afraid I would become disposable after he was gone. He wanted someone as headmaster who would protect the school as much as possible... But we are *wasting time*. I have..."

Now Harry interrupted again, "Why haven't you woken Hermione and Draco?"

"*Because...*" snarled Snape, "as I was *about* to say, I have something to tell *you alone*. This is straight from Professor Dumbledore. I think you will come to *hate* him as much as I have when you hear it..."

Harry listened.

Snape recited, “On the night the Dark Lord was destroyed trying to kill you when you were a baby, a piece of his soul latched itself onto you. It is the reason you can speak Parseltongue, why your scar hurts, and why you can read the Dark Lord’s thoughts. While it lives in you, the Dark Lord cannot truly die. You must *surrender* to the Dark Lord and *allow him to do what must be done*.”

Harry was stunned, but immediately asked, “I have to *die*?”

For the first time Harry had ever seen him, Professor Snape looked sad. He nodded and added, “And most *importantly*, Harry, it must be done by the Dark Lord *himself*. This is vital.”

Professor Snape had never called him Harry before. This, more than anything else, convinced Harry that Professor Snape was still on their side. But then his mind suddenly comprehended the underlying reality of what Professor Dumbledore had told Snape to tell him.

*He was a Horcrux too!* ...And he, like the other Horcruxes, had to be destroyed so Voldemort could be killed.

But why did *Voldemort* have to be the one to kill him?

“Why can’t *you* kill me, Professor? I’d rather it be anyone than *him*,” pleaded Harry.

Snape shook his head and said very softly, “I don’t know, son.”

He had to die and make sure Voldemort did it. It was clear to him now; every moment of his life had been leading up to this. His life began to flash before his eyes. It ended seeing Hermione’s smiling face when she kissed him for the first time.

“Oh, Harry...” It was Hermione’s voice. She was crying.

But it was real, here, and now.

It brought him back.

She must have awakened and heard. She crawled to his side, got to her knees, and embraced him burying her head in his shoulder, moaning, “No. No. We have to go *away... right now!*”

Harry turned to Professor Snape. “What should I do?” he asked uncertainly. He struggled to his feet, Hermione with him, not letting go.

Snape responded urgently, “Go into *hiding* -- *far away*. No one has the right to ask anything more of you. Go now. Take your Invisibility Cloak.” He pointed; it was hanging over a chair near the door. “I will awaken Mr Malfoy and tell him you have gone. I will tell him to have Dobby take him where the Weasley’s are hiding and...”

Harry shook his head. His mouth was dry, and he choked out the words, “No. No. This is our *only* chance. We are *so* close.”

He forced Hermione from him and held her away by the shoulders and said pleadingly, “Hermione, you and Draco have to get the last one and destroy it. I’ll give myself up.”

But before Hermione or Professor Snape could respond, Professor McGonagall burst through the door and into the office. Harry and Hermione jumped back behind Snape.

“Severus, you must *leave* at once. The school is in open rebellion. They say that Harry Potter is here to make a stand against... OH, MY WORD!” she exclaimed as she realized Harry and Hermione were in the room. “Mr Potter, Miss Granger, it’s true then; you *are* here; it *is* revolution!”

“No, it isn’t, professor. We’re here to find something and... leave,” protested Harry.

“Well, I’m afraid it’s *too* late for that,” said McGonagall shaking her head. “The Carrows and the Dark Lord’s Army have been driven off. And I am not sorry to say some of them have been killed. They said that You-Know-Who is on his way with all his Death Eaters. So, it’s *either* surrender or fight.”

“We’re *fighting!*” exclaimed Draco from the floor behind Harry. He was struggling to stand up.

Hermione pleaded again, “We can call Dobby and leave.”

“What!” exclaimed Draco, “We can’t leave *now*, Hermione.” Draco had not heard what Hermione had heard.

Harry looked at Hermione and said, “Draco’s right. We can’t leave our friends and teachers to fight alone.”

Professor McGonagall squared her shoulders and declared, “Well, then I had better call in the Order of the Phoenix and start organizing our defenses. We’ll need all the help we can get. I’ve already wasted too much time. Oh dear, I should have listened to Miss Lovegood and Mr Longbottom. Thankfully, they took action on their own. I need to find them.”

She turned to Professor Snape and said softly, “Severus, you should *go*. You need to protect your position... Who *knows* how this will turn out?” Without waiting for a reply, she turned and left.

Draco said, “Let me help Professor McGonagall, Harry. I’ll be more useful buying you time. You and Hermione can manage without me.”

Harry nodded and Draco was out the door before Harry could wish him luck. Things were happening so fast, Harry hardly had time to think. But he saw something on the wall and suddenly remembered... “Professor Snape, may I please borrow Godric Gryffindor’s sword?”

“Yes,” said Snape, sounding surprised, “but how did you know...”

Harry had started to walk over to get the sword, when Professor Snape stopped what he had started to say and instead said, “No. *Not* that one. It’s a *fake*.”

Harry stopped and turned to look at Professor Snape. “A fake?”

Without explaining, Professor Snape went directly behind his desk to a painting on the wall which consisted of an empty gold painted wooden chair with red velvet cushions. He pulled the corner of the painting and it swung out on hidden hinges. Behind it was a cavity in the wall. Snape reached in and withdrew a sword that was the twin of the one hanging in the glass case.

“Professor Dumbledore said you were to have it,” said Snape, handing it to Harry, adding as he did, “These are certainly conditions of *‘need and valor’*...”

Harry did not understand what Professor Snape meant, but said, “Thank you, sir.”

Hermione had already retrieved the invisibility cloak. Harry took her hand and they dashed from the office.

They did not hear Snape say, “I must do what I can to placate the Dark Lord...”

## Chapter 23 – Where Everything Is Hidden

“We need a place to hide something...” Harry whispered again on his third pass in front of the blank stretch of wall on the seventh floor. He and Hermione were under the invisibility cloak again.

It did not work. This was their second failure. They had already tried the request they used before being stunned earlier, but it did not work either.

Harry looked questioningly at Hermione. She looked down, biting her lip, then after a moment she looked up and said, “I know what’s wrong. You need to have the image of something you want to hide in your mind. It has to be *real*.”

Harry felt his pockets and then thought about the contents of the moleskin purse. But it did not hold anything he did not need. Suddenly, he thought of the Order ring Sirius had given him.

He took it off and held it in his fist.

He concentrated on the ring and then repeated, “We need to hide this ring,” as they passed three times in front of the wall. Harry had no idea what they would try next if this didn’t work. Perhaps the onset of panic amplified his request... In any case, he heard the familiar soft rumbling sound of a large wooden door appearing in the formerly blank stone wall.

Hermione whooped softly, “You *did* it, Harry.”

“Thanks, to *you*, Hermione, *as always*,” Harry said with relief.

They were both grinning as Harry pushed open the door and they both stepped inside.

Their smiles vanished instantly.

The room was colossal -- like a vast cathedral. Hundreds of torches provided illumination, but it still looked quite dim in the far reaches of the enormous room. It was filled with mountains of objects -- everything imaginable. There was virtually no place where two people could stand side by side. Narrow trails led off in various directions from the small, cleared space near the door -- like narrow canyons amid towering piles

containing a thousand years of discarded things you would expect to find in a school of magic. Everything, from the mundane to the bizarre, was here.

Harry's heart sank. He pulled off the cloak and threw it around his neck.

He groaned, sounding defeated. "How are we *ever* going to find it, Hermione? It would take a *lifetime*, no... *several* lifetimes to find it."

"All right, all right, let me think a minute," said Hermione, not sounding defeated at all -- more like she was back in class -- working on a particularly difficult assignment. She started thinking out loud, "...Yes. Yes. The Room *wants* to help its users. We need to think what we need right now..."

"Hermione, we need the *Horcrux*," said Harry, sounding exasperated.

"Of course," said Hermione, sounding not the least bit perturbed, "but we know Tom Riddle's Horcruxes can't be summoned..."

"That's the prob..." Harry began to say.

When Hermione exclaimed, "...but I *have* an idea!"

"What?" said Harry.

"Let's stand back; there isn't much room," she said as she stretched out her arm across Harry's chest and guided him backwards, so their backs were pressed against the door. She then explained, "I already asked the Room to bring me any Horcruxes, but I have to assume it either doesn't know what one is or, if it does, can't identify an object that has been turned into one."

"I didn't hear anything," said Harry.

"Harry, you don't need to ask the Room out loud -- just *think* what you need," Hermione reminded him.

"Right," said Harry, "Well, I've been *thinking* the same thing since we walked in and nothing's happened."



Hermione continued, “I also asked for Rowena Ravenclaw’s diadem, but that didn’t work either. I don’t think the room knows or cares who the objects belong to, which, if you think about it, makes sense.”

“OK,” said Harry, suggesting, “Let’s ask it to bring us *any* diadems.”

“I already tried that too,” said Hermione.

“So then, what’s your idea?” asked Harry, starting to sound frustrated.

“I think I need to sort things out,” said Hermione.

“Fine. So, *what’s* your idea?” Harry asked again.

“That’s it -- *sorting*,” said Hermione.

“What?” said Harry. “Why?”

“I don’t think the Room knows a diadem from a crown, tiara, headpiece, coronet or whatever. I think it has its *own* definitions for things,” said Hermione matter-of-factly.

“Seriously?” asked Harry skeptically.

But Hermione did not answer. Instead, she said, “Let me do the asking out loud so we’re in sync.”

“Do it,” said Harry, “we’re wasting time.”

Speaking clearly, Hermione said, “I need everything sorted so I can hide something among other things like it...”

There was an ominous rumbling and then suddenly everything in the Room except themselves was levitated and in rapid motion. They expected to have to duck and dodge as things whizzed about, but soon realized they were in no danger. It happened faster and faster until everything was a blur. The movement generated a brisk wind and strange whistling and whooshing sounds.

Harry felt a tug in his fist. He opened it and the Order ring whizzed off into the maelstrom before he could close it.

“Damn,” he said, but Hermione appeared not to hear him. She seemed enthralled by it all.

Incredibly, there were no sounds of banging or crashing -- no collisions of any kind. It went on and on for a very long time -- almost mesmerizing. Harry lost track of time, it had to be at least an hour. He finally shouted to Hermione over the wind, “Is this ever going to stop?”

But then suddenly it did stop.

The only sound was a low ominous groaning as the now floating objects slowly settled into their new mountainous piles -- furniture, by type; suits of armor, by size; books, by author, alphabetized, etc. -- everything sorted and organized.

Harry could hardly believe it. “You’re a *genius*, Hermione!” exclaimed Harry.

Hermione whooped and clapped her hands.

But then Harry groaned, saying, “Hermione, it will still take us hours...”

When Hermione interjected, “Wait, Harry. I’m not done...” She took a deep breath and said to the Room, “I need all the sorted jewelry placed here, near the door.”

In an instant, a small pile of Gobstones nearby rose and whizzed off. Soon the space was occupied by a very, very small pile of twinkling and glittering objects that had jetted in and then settled quietly onto the floor. Most of it looked to be costume, though there were some obvious precious objects. Clearly, jewelry was not something that got hidden very often.

“Harry, look!” exclaimed Hermione pointing.

But she did not have to. Harry saw it too.

On the pile, next to a rather garish costume tiara, was a simple diadem -- unmistakable. It appeared to be bright silver, completely untarnished, and had a large blue stone set in the center. They both rushed forward.

“The inscription... We must be sure,” said Hermione.

“*Don’t touch it, Hermione; it’s cursed!*” exclaimed Harry, adding, “And whatever you do, *don’t* put it on. Remember what happened to Bellatrix with the Cup.”

“Why would you think I would *ever* put it on,” said Hermione incredulously as she turned and looked at Harry wide-eyed.

Harry looked embarrassed but did not say anything.

“I’ll just check the inscription,” said Hermione turning back to bend down closely and read the inscription, while muttering, “Just because I’m a girl...”

“Didn’t catch that,” said Harry.

“I said, ‘*Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure*’. It is Ravenclaw’s diadem, Harry,” Hermione said breathlessly, standing straight up and turning toward him.

Harry felt his stomach clench. “It’s way too dangerous to use Fiendfyre in here, Hermione.” He opened his robes and pulled the sword of Gryffindor from his belt, reminding Hermione, “It’s what Professor Dumbledore had me use to destroy the Ring in his office... Stand back against the door again. We don’t know what’s going to happen.”

He used the tip of the sword to hook the Diadem through the latticework around the stone and lifted it from the pile of other jewelry. As soon as he had hooked it, the Diadem began emitting a piercing sound which got louder and louder by the second. It was vibrating like a tuning fork. The Diadem gyrated on the tip of the sword and sent incredibly strong vibrations down the blade making it difficult for Harry to hold on to the hilt.

He desperately wanted to cover both his ears but could only cover one. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hermione had her wand out and could see her mouth *Silencio*, but nothing happened. Then she dropped her wand, fell to her knees, and covered both her ears with her hands.

Harry could barely hear her as she screamed, “*HURRY! PLEASE, HURRY!*”

Harry’s head felt like it was going to explode.

He quickly dropped the ringing Diadem onto the stone floor away from the pile of other jewelry. Then he raised the sword and, with all his might brought down the blade onto the headpiece.

The Diadem split in two and the blue stone shattered into a thousand pieces.

In the instant before the sword cleaved into the stone, Harry was sure he saw the giant blue sapphire turn blood red.

The piercing ringing sound stopped immediately. The only sounds were the tinkling of the shattered jewel, as it pieces scattered across the stone floor... and the painful residual ringing in Harry's and Hermione's ears. The remaining pieces of the diadem suddenly zoomed off -- apparently to be sorted onto another more suitable pile.

"We don't need things sorted anymore," announced Hermione, with a laugh.

Harry laughed too. But then he turned serious, "We *did* it, Hermione. No... *you* did it. I couldn't have done it without you" He embraced and kissed her. "No more Horcru..." The word trailed off.

He could not believe it. For a few minutes he had actually forgotten.

But Hermione hadn't. She started to weep.

Harry let go of her.

"We can *still* go away..." she said softly. She had to say it. But she did not sound the least bit hopeful.

"You know I can't," said Harry tenderly. "He might make another one, but even if he doesn't, he'll continue to live as long as I do."

In his mind, he understood more clearly than ever, '*Neither can live, while the other survives.*'

"And think of what he could do in that time. It would be the end of the world as we know it. Look at what's happened in only three months. Think what things will be like in three years... or thirty, with him in power -- immortal," said Harry gravely, but then more gently, "You know I have to help end it now. Let me go. You go find Draco and Professor McGonagall. Fight by their side... Kill him... *for me.*"

Hermione nodded. She had stopped crying.

Harry was glad.

They kissed again, but only briefly.

Hermione whispered, “I love you, Harry,” and touched his face.

“I love you too, Hermione,” said Harry, stroking her hair.

Hermione nodded. She stepped back. Harry turned and pulled open the door. They were suddenly overwhelmed by the noise, smoke, and dust of battle. The castle was under siege.

Harry yelled, “GO!”

Hermione took off toward the nearest staircase with her wand out.

## Chapter 24 – Despair

Harry watched her go. Then he commanded, “Dobby!”

But the little house-elf did not appear.

He tried again, “DOBBY, I need you!”

Nothing.

Then, “KREACHER!” But he did not appear either.

Frustrated, he yelled, “ANY HOUSE-ELF!” but that did not work any better.

“Damn!” He needed to be taken to Voldemort.

He took the invisibility cloak and threw it back over himself. With his wand in hand and the Sword of Gryffindor back in his belt, he set out for the Entry Hall and front door. He passed holes in the exterior castle wall. Debris was everywhere. Almost every window he saw was broken. And there were... *bodies* -- both attackers and defenders. He

could not look at their faces lest he lose his resolve. The fighting seemed to have moved to lower floors. It was getting louder as he descended to the sixth floor. There he encountered heavy fighting which halted his progress. Death Eaters seemed to be everywhere but were meeting strong resistance.

Harry used his advantage under the invisibility cloak to help his fellow students, but they were still being forced back. Harry now wanted desperately to get out, to find Voldemort. Too many of his school friends were being injured. He was forced to try different passages and ways to get below but was being blocked at every turn. He took every shortcut he knew. He had spent at least thirty minutes and had only managed to descend four floors.

He was near the library when a voice rang out, seemingly from every direction, in Voldemort's high-pitched voice.

"We have breached your defenses and taken the grounds. We also control the upper floors and the ground floor, including the Great Hall. We have captured many of your students and teachers. You are *surrounded*. The battle is *over*, and we have *won*. Surrender now and you shall be *spared*. Continue fighting and you will be *slaughtered*. I order my Death Eaters to withdraw. Brave defenders of Hogwarts, gather your dead and injured, come to the Great Hall and give yourselves up. You have one hour."

There was a brief pause, then Voldemort resumed.

"I speak now to *Harry Potter*... Many of your friends have died needlessly for you. Their blood is on *your* hands. Give yourself up to me in the Great Hall and no one else need be harmed; Lord Voldemort is merciful. Try to escape... and your closest friends will be executed. If you are late, I shall begin killing them randomly one by one."

Harry understood what it really meant -- *anyone* who continued to support him would be killed. But his closest friends would not be spared under any circumstances.

Harry realized he had stopped walking to listen.

Suddenly he was in Voldemort's mind...

\*\*\*\*\*

Everything is falling into place.

The pathetic rebellion by Hogwarts students and teachers is over. They are surrendering.

Harry Potter will be among them because he is weak and will not let his friends be killed for him.

But if Harry Potter resists and challenges Lord Voldemort to a duel... oh, how he relished the thought... he would *still* meet his fate. For Lord Voldemort now possesses the most powerful wand in the world. What an example it would set in front of his followers.

It had been so easy. Severus had led him directly to Dumbledore's tomb. It must have unhinged his faithful spy to watch Lord Voldemort violate the tomb -- Severus had dared to protest. Perhaps that is why he did not look surprised when Lord Voldemort had taken and pointed Dumbledore's wand at him.

He *regretted* killing Severus, but the sacrifice was necessary to become *Master* of the Elder Wand. Ollivander had explained it all. Severus had killed Dumbledore and won the Elder Wand. So, Severus had to die.

He could hardly wait until Harry Potter surrendered, as he knew he would. He could taste the anguish that Harry Potter would feel when he saw his *godfather* lying dead in the middle of the Great Hall. The fool had tried to win the battle single handed. He had not made it past more than six Death Eaters before he was brought down.

And he must not forget his hostages -- the rebellious student leaders and their treacherous teacher. He wondered how many would die if Harry Potter were late. Lord Voldemort would announce each death and leave Harry Potter to wonder who would be next. It would be very interesting. Of course, Lord Voldemort would announce that his dear Mudblood girlfriend was among the hostages and set to be *randomly* selected when the killing commenced.

For her, Lord Voldemort had reserved a special death, for she *would* die, regardless. He would kill her himself -- *incinerate* her in front of all -- as she had incinerated beloved Nagini. But for her it would be agonizingly slow. And before she died, he would let her know what his *revenge* had been for her crime.

He saw it in his mind's eye -- the raging inferno that had been the so-called Muggle-born Resettlement Camp. He laughed at the name. It had become the Muggle-born *Extermination* Camp because of *her*. He had seen to it personally only yesterday.

And with *her* death, he would make a *new* Horcrux. And *another* with Harry Potter's death. And *these* Horcruxes would *never* be found. Even Lord Voldemort would not be able to find them once they were hidden.

Albus Dumbledore had been *very* clever. He and his little student triumvirate had found and destroyed his remaining Horcruxes -- the Mudblood girl had revealed all.

Lord Voldemort had looked into her mind.

All was known. All was ready.

Lord Voldemort could not have created a better setting for the end of Harry Potter.

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Harry staggered as he returned to his own mind. He reeled through the nearest doorway and collapsed onto the floor behind the door. The invisibility cloak fell half off him, but he did not care.

He could not take it all in...

The Elder Wand...  
Snape...  
*Sirius*...  
All the Muggle-borns...  
Their secret mission shattered...  
The hostages...  
**HERMIONE!**

Harry wept. He could not stop. The images from Voldemort's mind were devouring him. It was worse than the Cruciante Curse Voldemort had used on him in the Graveyard -- only it would not stop. He was near despair...

"Harry?"

It was Luna.

Instinctively, Harry tried to cover himself again with the invisibility cloak. But she was already kneeling beside him.



“What’s wrong, Harry. Are you injured?” asked Luna.

Harry tried to get control of himself, but his voice came out strangled, “We’ve *lost*, Luna. We’ve *lost*.”

“Just for *today*, Harry. There’s always *tomorrow*,” she said, as only Luna could. Then she said, “Let me help you get away.”

Before Harry could say anything, she hooked her arms under his shoulder and heaved him to his feet. She then got under the invisibility cloak with him and guided him around the door. Harry found it difficult to move. His feet felt anchored to the floor.

“Come on, Harry. There isn’t much time,” urged Luna. “I’ll get you out the front door and then I’ll go to the Great Hall.”

The *insanity* of Luna’s statement brought Harry back to where he was.

“Luna, you *can’t* turn yourself in,” said Harry as he regained control of his emotions.

“But all my *friends* are there. I need show my solidarity,” said Luna as if it explained everything.

It *did* explain everything.

Harry was ashamed of himself. He *had* despaired. He had given up.

Luna had just *saved* him.

Had it just been luck? He would never know.

“Luna, escaping is *not* part of the plan,” said Harry, feeling relieved. “Trust me. You go ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”

“OK, Harry,” she said sweetly, “I’ll see you later,” as if the world really had not ended. She got out from under the cloak and ran ahead.

But Harry did not move. Harry’s mouth was so dry he could not swallow. He knew he was going to *die*. The full realization of it hit him like it had not before. He trembled. He was more afraid than he had ever been in his life. What time did he have now?

Certainly, no more a few minutes more of life. Every fiber of his body said *run... escape...* as Luna had suggested. But his *mind* held fast.

Then it struck him, '*I open at the close.*'

This must be 'the close' -- the end -- the end of *life*.

He was suddenly aware of the mokeskin pouch hanging around his neck. It contained the Snitch, which held the Resurrection Stone.

It would open for him now. Who would he bring back?

There was no doubt in his mind -- his parents.

But he did *not* reach for the pouch. Instead, he questioned why he would bring them back now as he faced his own death. He would see them soon anyway. However, now he understood why Professor Dumbledore had given him the Resurrection Stone. He knew Harry would need help facing what he must.

But *Luna* had just done that.

If she hadn't, would he have thought of using the stone?

He knew he would. He just had.

He did not *need* the stone now. He just wondered again why Professor Dumbledore had always played it so close.

Harry took a step.

And with that step, he realized he would *never* open the Golden Snitch to use the Stone. He whispered, "I won't do that to you."

Each succeeding step took less effort. It was easier to keep moving.

Being overwhelmed by his vision had been torture.

On his way down to the Great Hall, Harry passed a few still huddled defenders tending to the wounded and the dead. But it seemed most had already descended to the Great Hall.

Harry could not bear to look at the faces of the dead. He saw Death Eaters, students, and a teacher. He did not see *any* Order members. Where *were* they?

At last, he came to the balcony on the first floor overlooking the marble staircase in the Entry Hall. Several dozen bodies were visible. There must have been a major battle here. The Death Eaters had taken the staircase and the balcony. Two masked Death Eaters stood guard at the top of the stairs. They looked on as several pairs of students carried bodies down the first-floor corridor toward the stairs.

Harry saw that one of the fallen Death Eaters was Fenrir Greyback, the werewolf from the old Ministry wanted posters. His mouth was at the throat of a fallen student, a young girl, whose face was hidden from view. Harry was glad that Greyback was dead, but it angered him that any students had been among his victims.

As Harry carefully made his way down the staircase, he saw teams of Death Eaters clearing their fallen from the Entry Hall.

Harry was very careful to avoid contact with anyone.

He finally approached the Great Hall and stopped just outside the doorway looking in.

## Chapter 25 – Sacrifice

Voldemort was sitting in the headmaster's chair now positioned in front of the High Table, like a throne, holding court to his inner circle, who were huddled before him. Harry knew Voldemort, like Dumbledore, could see through invisibility cloaks, but he was distracted.

All the student tables and benches were gone. Bodies had been lined up on each side inside the door.

Although Harry tried not to look at their faces, one body had been laid out by itself in the middle of the floor ahead.

Harry could not help but recognize his godfather as Voldemort had planned.

His grief was instantly overwhelmed by anger.

He looked away. And in doing so, he saw a small group of bound and gagged people in the far-left corner near the High Table being guarded by several Death Eaters. In the front, where they could not be missed, were McGonagall, Neville, Luna and... Hermione.

From his vision he had expected this. Still, Harry felt his heart in his throat.

His mind raced, desperately trying to think of any way to save her, save them all. But *nothing* would work.

Harry walked forward silently until he had just passed by the body of Sirius.

Then he stopped.

He carefully pulled the sword of Gryffindor out of his belt and held it in his left hand. In his right hand he held his wand. He held them out to either side and let them drop; then immediately whipped off the invisibility cloak. The cloak fell, covering his discarded wand.

The reverberating clang of the sword on the stone floor caused everyone's head to snap around and stare at him.

The room suddenly became deathly silent.

But then slowly, jeers, whistles and catcalls from the victors began and continued until they filled the air.

Word of Harry's appearance spread like Fiendfyre. Everyone -- attackers and defeated defenders alike -- began rushing into the Great Hall and spreading out against the side walls, their eyes fixed on Harry. Those who could not get in crowded around the door in the Entry Hall.

Among the jeering could also be heard occasional calls of support and encouragement for Harry.

Harry stood motionless in the center of the room with his arms down at his sides holding his palms forward to show he was unarmed.

Voldemort had remained seated and motionless with his eyes frozen on Harry for what seemed a very long time.

Then he very slowly rose to his feet and his inner circle retreated to the sides.

The Great Hall became silent again.

Voldemort slowly walked forward to the edge of the raised platform and stopped.

He was holding his wand in both hands in front of him, with his fingers at each end slowly twirling it.

It was Professor Dumbledore's wand -- the Elder Wand -- which he had taken from Dumbledore's tomb and already used to kill Professor Snape, and who knows how many others.

Harry remained motionless. He was surprised to sense that Voldemort still felt some uncertainty -- he did not want to get any closer to Harry.

Voldemort stopped twirling his wand and shifted it to his wand hand.

He spoke softly, but every word could be heard in the deathly silence. "The boy who lived... come to die..."

"*AVADA KEDAVRA!*"

Harry saw the flash of green light and knew no more.

## Chapter 26 – The Room of Requirement

Harry regained consciousness.

He felt disembodied, but soon felt a stone floor beneath him and realized he could see. A bright white mist filled a place which seemed to have no defined boundaries. He found himself naked, but robes appeared as soon as he felt the need to be clothed. He put them on. Then the mist abated as he felt the need to understand where he was. It looked like a huge empty cathedral. The stone was clean and sparkling white.

He felt well and whole. And, for the first time in his life, he felt *different*. He realized he could see perfectly without glasses because he had none. He also realized the scars on his forehead and cheek were gone along with any aches and pains.

It finally occurred to him he was probably dreaming... or dead. But at the same time, he realized he was not alone.

He heard a disturbing thumping noise coming from under a nearby bench he had not noticed before. It was the kind of bench you would see in any public place. It was white like everything else.

Harry approached slowly as the thumping noise, like a fish out of water, continued.

Then Harry saw it -- the *thing* under the bench.

It was much like the creature Barty Crouch Jr had delivered to the graveyard -- a flayed mutated infant with outsized limbs drawn up in a fetal position. The face was grotesque and snakelike. It thrashed and thumped. He knew he should do something to help it, but he could not. The thing repulsed him. He could not bring himself to get any nearer or touch it.

"You cannot help it," said a voice behind him.

Harry whirled around. "Professor Dumbledore!"

"Hello, Harry. Thank you for asking me to come," said the old headmaster. He appeared as Harry remembered on his first day at Hogwarts except dressed in white robes.

Harry realized one of his desires was to find out what was happening, and, like the other desires, it had been granted.

Dumbledore walked Harry away from the pathetic creature.

They sat down on another white bench that had appeared some distance away.

"So, I'm dead," said Harry.

Professor Dumbledore shook his head.

"I'm *not!*" exclaimed Harry, quite surprised. "So, then *you're* not dead either?"

"Oh, I am *quite* dead," said Dumbledore.

“I don’t understand,” said Harry. “Where are we then?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” said Dumbledore.

“So far, it acts like the Room of Requirement,” said Harry.

“Ah!” Dumbledore laughed, “I think I remember telling you about the time... no... on reflection, this is not the right time...”

Dumbledore continued, now sounding serious, “Harry, you are somewhere between life and death. Lord Voldemort has once again hit you with the Killing Curse, and here you are. You survived it the *first* time because of your mother’s sacrifice. And earlier this evening, Professor Snape told you what also happened to you that night.”

Harry nodded. Voldemort had unintentionally and unknowingly made Harry his *seventh* Horcrux.

“I knew it meant I had to *die* so Voldemort could be killed,” said Harry. “And it meant I *couldn’t* try to kill him... like I thought you were preparing me to do.”

“And by *not* defending yourself -- an act of pure self-sacrifice just like your mother’s -- it made all the difference. You survived the *second* time,” said Dumbledore proudly. “With his Killing Curse, Lord Voldemort himself destroyed the piece of his soul that has *infested* you since that night in Godric’s Hollow.” Dumbledore gestured back toward the bench where the disturbing creature remained.

“But I *failed*, sir,” said Harry miserably.

“Failed?” responded Dumbledore sounding surprised.

“Sir!” exclaimed Harry, sounding incredulous, “Voldemort *knows* what we did, and he plans to make *more* Horcruxes before he can be killed. And now he has the *Elder Wand*. He’s *defeated* the school rebellion. He’s *killed* Professor Snape and...” Harry suddenly choked up, “...and *Sirius*... and *all* the Muggle-borns... and... and... *HERMIONE!*”

Tears were streaming down his Harry’s face. He put his face in his hands and once again felt near despair.

Dumbledore placed his hand on Harry's back.

"You did *not* fail, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly. "You accomplished your mission against all odds. At this moment, Lord Voldemort has no more Horcruxes. He was *always* going to find out. You delayed the inevitable as long as possible. He was *always* going to get the Elder Wand as well. He believed it *essential*. You, unlike he, would have *never* violated my tomb to get it. And I am sure the battle for Hogwarts is *not* quite over yet. And most importantly, our dear Miss Granger is *not* dead."

Dumbledore paused for a moment, then continued, "As for *Sirius*... Harry, your godfather was incredibly *brave*, but also *headstrong* -- even more so than you. He volunteered for a secret mission even more dangerous than yours. He used Polyjuice Potion to become you and repeatedly exposed himself at tremendous risk all over the country to draw resources away from the intensive search for you. When he heard of the attack on the school and that you were there, he did not wait to assemble with the rest of the Order. He charged in on his own..."

Harry had stopped crying and was listening intently.

"War is a *terrible* thing, Harry, this one especially. It was instigated wholly by Lord Voldemort, an amoral psychotic megalomaniac -- totally evil -- aided and abetted by his fanatical pure-blood followers. I believe Miss Granger understands the dangerous nature of what she is fighting against even more than you, Harry," said Dumbledore quietly.

They sat for some time without speaking.

Harry discovered he felt calm again.

Then Harry asked, "So, if I'm *not* dead, I can *return*?"

Dumbledore nodded, "It is *your* choice."

"If I don't return, would I go with you?" asked Harry sounding hopeful.

Dumbledore shrugged, "I do not know, Harry. I do not know *where* I have been. I am here as part of your experience, not my own."

"But where would I go," asked Harry.



“Wherever and whatever you want this Room to become,” answered Dumbledore.

They sat again without speaking for some time, though it was hard to gauge the passage of time in this place.

Finally, Harry spoke again. “Why didn’t you tell me about the Deathly Hallows,” asked Harry.

Dumbledore hung his head, “Because I feared that you would succumb to their lure as I had. But I have long since understood you are stronger than I. You kept to your mission of finding and destroying the Horcruxes. I am not saying you were not tempted, but when offered good advice by myself and, I must add, your wonderful Miss Granger, you chose *wisdom* over folly. If anyone is worthy to unite the Hallows, it is you, Harry.”

Harry was embarrassed. He changed the subject. “I thought Professor Snape had betrayed us. I didn’t go to see him as you told me to,” said Harry apologetically.

“Professor Snape’s Patronus is a doe,” said Dumbledore meaningfully.

“I know...” said Harry questioningly.

“Did you know it was also your mother’s?” asked Dumbledore.

“What are you saying?” responded Harry, not understanding.

“Severus *loved* your mother from the time they were children,” Dumbledore started to explain, but Harry interrupted.

“I knew that from seeing his memories of my mother, but I thought he *hated* me because he hated my father,” said Harry sadly.

“Did he ever say that?” asked Dumbledore.

“No. But he did tell me he hated my *father*. And you told me that too,” said Harry.

Dumbledore nodded and said, “Harry, it was hard for Professor Snape to look at you and *not* see your father, but I *do not* think he hated you. He *resented* that you were not *his* son. The reason he agreed to spy for me and look out for you was because he *hated* Lord Voldemort for killing Lily. It was his way of making up for his mistake of revealing to Lord Voldemort what he knew of the Prophecy. Yes, it was Severus who

eavesdropped in the Hogs Head Inn when he was a Death Eater. I think if you had not looked so very much like your father, his feelings toward you might have been different. *Luckily*, you were sorted into in Slytherin. I think it made just enough of a difference -- not being in Gryffindor like your father -- that when he saw you, he still felt the anger and regret... but he did not *hate* you.”

“I think you’re right, sir,” said Harry. “Even after he told me what you made him tell me, he *still* tried to save me. He told me to run away. He even called me by my given name and... s...” Harry choked up and could not finish, so Dumbledore said, “...son.”

Harry nodded, then hung his head.

They sat quietly again for a while. Finally, Harry asked, “Why didn’t you tell Professor Snape about the Elder Wand?”

Dumbledore looked away and said, “It would have required revealing too much information that, with Severus being in frequent contact with Lord Voldemort, created too great a risk... And it might have tempted him too, as it had tempted me... and so many others. My plan cost him his life -- as I suspected it would.”

Harry asked, “And why didn’t you keep using your *own* wand, which had *defeated* the Elder Wand?”

“Ah...” sighed Dumbledore, “I thought it was the best way to keep the Elder Wand safe... *No, no*, even now it is my *excuse*... No. It was nothing more than *vanity*, Harry. It was ‘*The Elder Wand*’ after all -- having it *meant* something. That is why I did not destroy it, as I *should* have. I believed I could use it without abusing it or calling attention to it. At least in that I succeeded. I also thought if I died without it ever having been won, its power would be broken. I *planned* my death with Severus. It was *not* a duel.”

“Hermione was right again,” said Harry.

Dumbledore nodded and smiled.

“So, you think its power is now *gone*,” asked Harry hopefully.

“I am sorry to say that I am not sure,” said Dumbledore shaking his head. “Lord Voldemort has it now. He is a *powerful* dark wizard, regardless. He killed poor Severus because he believed Severus had won the wand from me. Brave Severus, he died

trying to protect his students -- whom, on the whole, he thought were insufferable. I never understood why he chose to become a teacher.”

Dumbledore then again looked away from Harry and said, “I assigned him the unenviable task of telling you that you had to *die*, Harry, because I knew I could not do it. I wonder how he could still consider me a friend for asking so much of him.”

Then he looked back at Harry. “But of wands... I do not think the wandmakers, including Ollivander, know as much as they would have us believe. If it is true *‘the wand chooses the wizard’*, does anything *else* really matter? It would now seem to me to be entirely up to the *Elder Wand* to decide if it wants to change its loyalty -- not some other set of ridiculous rules the wandmakers imagine.”

Harry did not like the implications of Dumbledore’s current thinking, but he was ready with his next question. “You had your wand -- the Elder Wand -- at the Ministry when you used Polyjuice Potion to pretend to be me. Why didn’t you capture or *kill* Voldemort?”

“Ah, a very good question, Harry, and rather complicated, I am afraid,” Dumbledore said apologetically. “I *knew* Lord Voldemort had made at least one Horcrux -- his school diary -- which we destroyed. I was quite sure there were more, though at the time, not how many more. If I had killed or destroyed him at the Ministry, he would not have been truly dead and would return yet again, but without any possibly of knowing *when*. It might have been sooner than the last time or *longer* -- perhaps not for decades, or even centuries. And, Harry, I also *believed* the Prophecy -- that only you had been given the means to destroy him -- ironically, by Lord Voldemort himself... But as for *capturing* Lord Voldemort... possibly, but the Ministry would never have been able to *keep* him captive.”

“Why did my wand destroy his wand at Malfoy Manor?” asked Harry.

“It was a *borrowed* wand,” said Dumbledore.

“Draco’s father’s wand -- Draco told me,” said Harry.

“Yes,” confirmed Dumbledore, “and it was the *third* of three events which drove Lord Voldemort to seek the Elder Wand.”

“He had learned about the twin cores from Ollivander after you defeated him in the graveyard. That was the first event. The second was when he thought that *you* were

using *my* wand at the Ministry of Magic that night. Ollivander also told him I knew about the twin cores, and he concluded I had loaned you my wand to overcome the problem. He believed the only reason you again defeated him at the Ministry was that you had a more powerful wand than his own. Had Lord Voldemort anticipated needing to go to the Ministry himself that night due to the failure of his Death Eaters, he probably would have used a borrowed wand then, as Ollivander had suggested.”

“So, when he thought he had laid a trap for you at Malfoy Manor, he equipped himself with a borrowed wand to overcome the problem of the twin cores. This time he knew you would *not* have my wand, so he believed his skill with a borrowed wand would easily overcome yours... How wrong he was,” mused Dumbledore. “Your wand *destroyed* the borrowed wand -- the third event -- but, more importantly, it did so *of its own accord*.”

“No one *believed* me,” said Harry.

“Quite understandable,” said Dumbledore. “What happened is unprecedented. I believe your wand absorbed some of the power of Lord Voldemort’s wand when they connected in the graveyard the night he returned. Any ordinary wand wielded by Lord Voldemort would have met its master.”

“But only an *ordinary* wand, sir?” asked Harry carefully.

“Harry, this is *speculation*,” said Dumbledore advisedly. “I do not know if *your* wand would match up to the Elder Wand wielded by Lord Voldemort. For this is the very reason he sought the most powerful wand in the world -- to overcome *yours*.”

This answer made Harry’s stomach tighten up.

Dumbledore must have sensed Harry’s concern because he said, “But remember, Harry, I gave you my *first* wand.”

“But what good would your school wand do against the Elder Wand?” asked Harry, not yet understanding.

“Harry, I used my *first* wand, my ‘*school wand*’ as you call it, until I defeated Grindelwald with it and *won* the Elder Wand,” explained Dumbledore.

“You gave me the wand that *defeated* the Elder Wand!” exclaimed Harry, finally understanding. “I just assumed you’d gotten another wand after you left Hogwarts. I couldn’t imagine you giving me *that* wand.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Well, Harry, like many other bits of information I have given you, I did not make it clear -- for a *reason*. I wanted you to have it when the time came, but I did not want you charging off trying to use it *too soon*.”

“Like the Resurrection Stone,” said Harry.

“Harry, you again have proven to be *far* stronger than I. Had you not been with me in Marvolo Gaunt’s shack when we found the Ring, I *would have* put it on. I had completely forgotten it was a Horcrux. All I could envision was seeing my departed family members once more. The Ring would certainly have *killed* me -- probably not immediately -- much like the potion in the cave.”

Dumbledore then told Harry his story -- about his family, about Grindelwald, about his misguided political thinking and arrogance, about the quest for the Deathly Hallows and... power -- including the deluded excuse that it had all been “for the greater good.” He was in tears when he finished.

It was almost too much for Harry to take in. It had not sounded like the kind and wise Headmaster of Hogwarts he had come to love. But he could see that Dumbledore was racked by guilt and remorse. Dumbledore had *truly* changed his ways -- something that few people ever did.

Harry did his best to comfort his mentor.

Dumbledore managed to pull himself together and thanked Harry for his kind words.

Then he became serious once more. “Harry, you have the wand that *defeated* the Elder Wand. Also, remember the things I have taught you. But *most importantly*, above all, remember the things you have taught *yourself*.”

They sat in silence for some time again.

Finally, Harry had decided; he was once again determined.

He said with deep conviction, “I *must* go back, if only to try and save Hermione. Voldemort intends to kill her.”

“I would have expected nothing less of you,” said Dumbledore. He then stood up and began to slowly walk away. But after a few paces he turned and said, “Remember, the future is *not* set, Harry.”

Harry stood and asked, once again frustrated by Dumbledore’s obtuseness, “What do you *mean*, sir? You’re holding back -- *again*. Why do you *always* do that?”

“Because the best laid plans... as you know, my own being excellent examples... All I ask of you is to *trust in yourself*. Your instincts are good.” With that, Dumbledore faded away as the thick white mist enveloped Harry once again.

## Chapter 27 – The Elder’s Master

Harry awoke. He was lying on the stone floor of the Great Hall in a very awkward and painful position. He did not move a muscle.

He had been knocked backward by Voldemort’s curse and had apparently fallen over the body of his courageous godfather. He must have landed like a sack of potatoes.

He could hear quiet murmurs all around the Hall, but he was focused on the hushed whispers to his front, along with sobbing a bit to the left. He could tell it was Hermione crying.

This was not what he expected.

He had expected the Death Eaters to be filling the Great Hall with the sounds of tumultuous celebration.

Harry carefully opened one eye by the smallest sliver to assess the situation. There were several Death Eaters huddled around Voldemort attempting to help him to his feet.

Something had happened to Voldemort as well. He had clearly fallen off the dais. Harry wondered if he had been knocked out too. He also wondered how long it had been.

Suddenly Harry understood.

It had been nearly an hour with Dumbledore, but here it had only been seconds.

He assumed all eyes were on Voldemort, who was now on his feet and pushing away his assisting Death Eaters.

As carefully and slowly as he could, Harry moved the hand underneath him -- his right hand -- into his robes and found the handle of his wand. It was not the wand Ollivander had sold him on his eleventh birthday -- which was lying somewhere nearby on the stone floor along with the Sword of Gryffindor. It was the wand Dumbledore had given to him. It was the wand that had *defeated* Grindelwald -- the only wand in the world that was the *master* of the Elder Wand.

Harry suddenly rolled over, sprang to his feet, and drew the wand.

It was as if the Great Hall itself had gasped. All eyes were now on Harry, including Voldemort's.

Harry felt a thrill of confidence as he stared Voldemort in the face.

He was about to issue his challenge to Voldemort when he unexpectedly heard a mixture of groans and laughter.

Harry's eyes shifted focus and he looked at his wand...

It was *broken* -- bent at an odd angle about four inches from the tip.

Before Harry could react, Voldemort screamed, "*Expelliarmus!*" and the broken wand soared out of Harry's hand.

Then Voldemort laughed and said, "Your trademark spell, is it not, Harry Potter? How *ironic*."

Then another spell hit Harry, a silent one, and Harry was forced to his knees with both arms pinned behind his back, unable to move or speak.

"So, you survived the Killing Curse *yet again*," said Voldemort loudly, actually sounding impressed. "Quite *remarkable*..." But then his tone hardened, "But *unlike* the last time, Lord Voldemort has *not* been destroyed. So, *this* time, Lord Voldemort will *finish* the job."

Voldemort had been slowly walking toward Harry as he spoke. Now he was only a few feet away.

“*This* time, Lord Voldemort shall try something... *different*.”

Voldemort circled a little to Harry’s left and picked up something, which made a scaping sound like steel on stone. It was the Sword of Gryffindor.

Harry was in a panic. He struggled to move and suddenly felt his back loosen up. He needed to get his own wand back, but he could not see where it was.

It seemed hopeless.

Voldemort had moved slowly to stand right in front of him. Harry continued to will himself to move and was able to bend his neck to look up at Voldemort and croak, “All the Horcruxes are *destroyed*.” Only Voldemort could hear him.

Voldemort in turn whispered, “Yes... *impressive*. All that *effort*... and yet, here at the end, you understand that Lord Voldemort shall triumph as you knew he must. He will use your death, Harry Potter, to make *another* Horcrux and hide it where it shall *never* be found for all eternity... and then a second one using your *dear Mudblood girlfriend*.”

Then in a loud voice that carried the Great Hall, Voldemort shrieked, “Through the *heart*, then. It shall be *quick*. Lord Voldemort is *merciful*...” Voldemort added a laugh only Harry could hear.

Harry lowered his head and moved his shoulders. Voldemort’s body bind curse did not seem to be holding.

“No, No! You shall *look* Lord Voldemort *in the eyes* when he kills you, HARRY POTTER!” yelled Voldemort.

Harry felt Voldemort roughly grab his hair and force Harry’s head up and back. Harry saw Voldemort’s eyes widen in anticipation as he felt the point of the sword delicately touch his chest. It penetrated his clothing and skin, but was stopped by his breastbone -- awaiting the fatal thrust.

The sword tip stung. Harry could feel blood trickle down his chest.

Voldemort was relishing the moment. He held the sword with increasing anticipation.



The Great Hall was deathly silent.

With one more effort, Harry swiveled his eyes for a final glimpse of Hermione.

At the moment their eyes met, Hermione transformed into an Eagle and shed her bonds.

Harry's consciousness expanded with more determination and focus than he had ever experienced. Nothing was blocking him now. The incantation flashed in his memory, and he felt the fiery double heartbeat as the creature he would become instantly appeared in his mind...

He exploded upward. His enormous and expanding jaws engulfed and crushed the head of his now mortal enemy. The taste of blood, bone, brain, and muscle sent a thrill through his massive body. He shook his powerful neck and shoulders, and the Dark Lord's headless body was flung aside like a rag doll.

He roared in triumph and, before his shocked enemies could react, he was upon them, slashing half a dozen of them to ribbons with his powerful claws.

The enormous lion that was Harry Potter roared again. But this roar was almost drowned out by the roar for Harry by his supporters, who had once again begun to fight.

The Death Eaters were in shock. Now leaderless and in disarray, they fought to regain control of the situation. The outcome was still not certain -- there were still more Death Eaters than students and teachers.

But then another roar followed, and a vast hoard of new fighters rushed into the Great Hall -- led by the house-elves of Hogwarts, including Kreacher, whom Dobby had called. The elves had gone to fetch the parents of the embattled students at the behest of Harry's loyal friends -- Draco and Ginny.

With them were the townsfolk of Hogsmeade who had been rallied by original Order member, Aberforth Dumbledore, and all the remaining Order members -- who had gone for reinforcements and were now shouting out commands to their avenging forces.

It was like a tidal wave -- unstoppable and all-consuming. Death Eaters fell one after another, completely overwhelmed. Some tried to surrender but were cut down like the

rest. Others ran out of Great Hall but were pursued by twice their number. They were shown no mercy, as they had shown none to the Muggle-borns.

The eagle alighted onto the enormous lion's back as the last Death Eater went down under its deadly jaws. The eagle transformed back into Hermione, sitting astride the lion. She gripped its thick shaggy mane and leaned forward to speak into its ear.

“Enough, Harry.”

Harry reeled. He had almost forgotten what he was. He had never experienced such power, and it was intoxicating.

With an accepting growl, Harry was suddenly hands and knees down on the stone floor with Hermione standing astride him. She stepped off and helped him up.

She wanted to kiss him, but his face was covered in blood and... bits. She began to use the sleeves of her robes to wipe his face, but Luna rushed over and magicked it away with her wand.

Then Hermione kissed him.

## Chapter 28 – The Chosen One

Another roar went up, but this one was for Harry *and* Hermione.

The victorious crowd surged to surround them. They were both hoisted off their feet and carried to the High Table and set upon it. The cheering continued. Hermione spoke into Harry's ear, “They're expecting you to say something, Harry.”

Harry was not ready for this. He hesitated. Someone in the crowd finally yelled, “SPEECH!” and the rest cheered in agreement, along with more yells of “Speech, Speech.” In a momentary lull, someone called out, “Say something *nice*, Harry.” It was Luna.

Everyone laughed including Harry and Hermione.

Harry held up his hands and the crowd quieted, but you could feel the excited anticipation in the air.

“Thank you. Thank you *all*... for fighting against *evil*... for believing that we have the right to *live free*. I honor you and those who have died fighting for freedom. Many of us have lost friends and loved ones... We must *never* forget their sacrifice.” He bowed his head for several seconds. Then he said, “We have *won* this battle... but I don’t know what we still have to do... I’ve been underground too long; I don’t know the state of things...”

He searched the crowd and his eyes fell on Kingsley Shacklebolt. “Kingsley, can you take charge...?” It was plea more than a question.

“Harry, we’ve *won!*” bellowed Shacklebolt’s in his booming baritone. “As soon as I saw *Voldemort*’s body, I dispatched fighters to the Ministry and other key sites. They have all reported that surviving Death Eaters and known collaborators are on the run all over the country. We have issued orders to hunt them all down and bring them to justice.”

Another huge cheer went up.

Harry saw this as an opportunity to end his speech making. He took Hermione’s hand and moved to the edge of the table. Many hands reached out to help them down. As they moved through the crowd, people continued to reach out to touch Harry and Hermione and say thank you.

On his way through the grateful throng, someone grabbed Harry’s arm and forced a bundle of objects into his hand. It was Luna. He raised his hand and saw they were three wands -- his own, Dumbledore’s broken wand, and the Elder Wand. Then she handed him the sword, his invisibility cloak, and his mokeskin pouch. She smiled and leaned in close to speak into his ear over the continued tumult, “A lion, Harry, a *lion!*”

As they left the Great Hall, Kingsley could be heard shouting instructions. They could also hear Professor McGonagall organizing the victors into task groups. Bodies of the dead had to be taken care of and the castle had to be searched for other dead or injured. Madam Pomfrey was already tending to the wounded with the help of many students and parents.

Celebrating would come, but later.

The house-elves were already hard at work assisting wherever they could, including providing food and drink from the kitchens.

It was clear that no one expected Harry or Hermione to do anything. Draco and Ginny were waiting for them just outside the doors to the Great Hall. They hugged each other but did not speak. It was too overwhelming.

As he stood there, Harry began to see things he did not want to see. He saw Sirius being carried off. Fleur Delacour walked beside the stretcher in tears. He now saw the faces on the bodies of his fellow students. He saw the face of Tracy Davis. She looked to be asleep. Even as he did, a team on recovery duty swept past them and collected her body. He felt sick. A moment later, Hermione said softly, “We can go somewhere else, Harry.”

Harry shook his head. “It’s *my* fault they died, Hermione. I took *too* long.”

Hermione started to reply, but Draco cut in, “It’s *not* your fault, Harry. Saying so implies they died needlessly. This was war. They fought for the same reasons *you* did, Harry. They deserve our honor and respect. Remember your speech -- that’s all I’m saying.”

Hermione nodded and said, “Tom Riddle is the only one to blame. This all happened because of him -- no one else.”

Harry did not feel the weight of guilt on his shoulders diminish in the slightest. But it felt good to hear his friends. He sighed and said, “You’re *both* right. What should I do?”

Ginny said, “Just be here for them. Walk around. Let them see you. Let them talk to you. You don’t have to do anything. Just listen.”

Harry nodded. He led them on a walk through the Great Hall and then other parts of the castle and grounds.

People would stop what they were doing and briefly talk with them. Mostly it was to thank Harry for destroying Voldemort, but also sometimes to talk about someone who had died. Most students were teamed with parents. It seemed that every magical parent or guardian had come to defend their children. Harry was surprised to see Urquhart, who was on crutches. He had made the Healers from St Mungo’s bring him along because he was afraid for his friends. He cried on Harry’s shoulder when he heard about Tracy.

Visiting the hospital wing was the hardest. The parents who had lost children were receiving counseling from the dozens of Healers from St Mungo’s who had been

immediately summoned by Madam Pomfrey. The absence of any Muggle-born students at Hogwarts made Harry realize even more what had been at stake.

They were shocked to find the rest of the Weasley family there. Ginny rushed over to join them.

Ron had been killed. He had died in the hospital wing of his injuries. It had been shock and loss of blood from the same kind of slashing wound he had inflicted on Draco the previous school year. His bed was surrounded by his parents and all his brothers, even Charlie, but more surprising, Percy. Percy had changed sides and reconciled with his parents in Hogsmeade right before they had assaulted the school. Charlie had returned from Romania when the family had gone into hiding. Fred, George, Charlie, and Bill had all become Order members.

Lavender Brown said she had stunned Ron during the initial fighting against the Dark Lord's Army and the Carrows. But he was found badly injured after the battle. What happened was never determined, but people speculated he was mistakenly attacked by Death Eaters when they stormed the castle. Ron did not have a Dark Mark on his left arm, but there was no doubt he had made the decision to support Voldemort.

Finally, they made their way back to the Great Hall and talked with those who remained -- mostly teachers and staff. Kingsley and most of the Order members had departed for the Ministry to restore a functioning government. Students and parents had found places to sleep -- dormitories, common rooms, classrooms... wherever.

It had been a very long day and night. Everyone was exhausted, but in an incredible showing of normalcy, able-bodied students and parents soon showed up in the Great Hall for breakfast. And the house-elves did not disappoint. They had restored the house tables and benches and served up a meal as good as Harry had ever remembered. Nobody minded the crowding.

In addition, at Harry's request, Professor McGonagall ordered the Hogwarts house-elves to come to breakfast and sit with everyone at the tables. They did not react as Kreacher had at number Twelve. Harry assumed it was because they had all fought together as equals. It turned into an incredible celebration of the house-elves bravery which brought Hermione to tears. It was standing room only. The masters gave up their seats and proudly served their servants and toasted their courage and bravery, because until the house-elves had brought in the overwhelming reinforcements, the outcome of the final battle had remained uncertain.

Later, Hermione went to the kitchens and talked to all the house-elves. This time they did not ignore her. She only asked that they allow themselves to be seen and known to the students so they could be appreciated and remembered for what they had done. They agreed. She thought of it as a first step -- she had never changed her mind about PEE. When she left, they insisted she take a large picnic basket of food for her, Harry, and his friends.

Dobby and Kreacher sat with Harry and the others at breakfast. Kreacher explained that Dobby had called him to help. Dobby explained that he and Kreacher had not answered Harry's calls because they were busy fetching parents, who were being assembled and briefed in Hogsmeade by Kingsley for the counterattack.

Dobby added, "Dobby was knowing that Harry Potter would be fine."

"How did you *know* that?" asked Harry.

"Because Professor Dumbledore is always telling Dobby not to be worrying about Harry Potter," he explained.

"But what if Professor Dumbledore had been wrong?" asked Harry.

"Ah, sir, but you is *being* here," which to Dobby was proof positive that Dumbledore had been right.

Harry told Dobby and Kreacher they made the right decision and ordered them not to punish themselves for not answering his call.

Professor McGonagall finally had to declare an end to breakfast just before ten. She obligingly ordered school suspended until the first of October and announced a memorial service for the first Sunday back. She sent able-bodied students home with their parents. The few students without anyone were taken under wing by other families. Parents with children in the hospital wing were given accommodations. The more seriously injured were transported to St Mungo's.

Finally, only Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny remained in the Great Hall with Professor McGonagall. She told them, "You're on your own. I know you can manage it. Let me know when... or *if*... you are returning to school."

Hermione and Ginny both said enthusiastically, "We are!"

Harry and Draco both remained silent.

“As I suspected...” said McGonagall, straight-faced. “Please come see me this evening after you have rested. I have scheduled a late dinner for nine o’clock for those still here.” Then she walked away.

Hermione and Ginny both turned on the boys, looking annoyed.

Harry said, “Please, let’s not discuss it *now*. OK?”

Ginny and Hermione looked at each other and shrugged.

Draco declared they had done their duty, so they could all finally get some sleep.

“Where should we go?” asked Ginny. The options discussed included the dormitories and number Twelve, Grimmauld Place -- they discovered they could say ‘*number Twelve*’ because they were now all Secret Keepers.

Harry did not want to go to number Twelve yet because it would remind him of Sirius. Draco suggested they could use their old beds in Slytherin and Gryffindor dormitories. But Ginny stuck her tongue out and Hermione said, “Yuck. I don’t think so.” Harry and Draco did not quite get it but chalked it up to girls being girls.

Then Ginny said, “How about the Room of Requirement?”

“Brilliant!” said Harry and Draco together.

When they were standing in front of the blank wall in the seventh-floor corridor, Draco said, “It was your idea, Ginny. You make the request.”

Ginny thought a moment, then walked in front of the wall once. She stopped, turned around, and waited. The door appeared as usual after a few seconds. Apparently, you did not have to make three passes in front of the wall after all.

“Well, that makes sense if you think about,” said Hermione. “Who would have ever discovered it otherwise?”

Ginny said, “I’ve always thought so... Anyway, I said I needed a really nice inn to spend the night with my friends.”

What the Room provided could only be described as five-star resort hotel accommodations. It had an expansive luxury lobby area with marble floors and expensive looking oriental carpets leading to corridors identified with signs reading -- Spa and Pool, Fitness Room, Game Room, Library, Bar Room, Dining Room, and finally, Guest Rooms. Each of the four guest rooms had a card to write your name in a gold frame on the door.

As Harry opened the door to the first room and turned to say something, Hermione scooted past him into the room. Harry's eyes followed Hermione and then turned back to look at Draco and Ginny. Harry's face was somewhere between surprise and shock.

Draco raised his eyebrows.

Ginny elbowed Draco softly in the ribs, saying, "Their both of-age."

Draco smiled and looked at her, questioningly, but before he could say anything, she added, "But, unfortunately for you, I'm not."

She turned and flounced off to the next room, gave a quick smiling glance back and went in. They both heard the lock click.

Harry grinned and Draco slapped his back.

But Harry said, "I just wish I had some of Madam Pomfrey's Pepperup Potion... I can hardly keep my eyes open."

Sounding quite serious, Draco said, "Right. Both of you need to get some sleep... *first.*" Then as Draco turned to go to his own room, he added in a sing-song tone without looking back, "*Then... af-ter-noon de-light!*"

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As Harry undressed for a badly needed bath before going to bed, he took off the mokeskin pouch from his neck and opened it. He took out the Golden Snitch. He held it in his palm and stared at it for some time... thinking. Nothing happened. He assumed the time had passed when it would open. It did not matter. He knew would never try to open it.

He put the Snitch in the bathroom cabinet and left it.



## Chapter 29 – Harry and Hermione

They sat on the bed, cross legged, facing each other with knees touching. They held hands.

“You *knew*, Hermione, didn’t you?” It was not a question.

Hermione nodded.

“When?” asked Harry.

“I knew for certain when you told me that Professor Dumbledore was sure Nagini was a living Horcrux because Voldemort could connect to its mind from a great distance. All the pieces fell into place -- Parseltongue, not dying when your spinal cord was severed, the mental link, learning that Tom Riddle had made Horcruxes, and the Prophecy. But I had *suspected* for a long time.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” asked Harry softly.

“Harry... how could I possibly...?” Her answer trailed away.

“But you knew for so long that I had to *die*,” said Harry.

“I tried to keep it out of my mind... and I kept trying to think of a way around it, but never could... When I heard Professor Snape say that Tom Riddle himself had to be the one to kill you... it was *too* terrible. I wanted us to go *away*... And when you destroyed the Diadem, I had to ask you again, but...”

“...But you knew I wouldn’t,” Harry finished.

Hermione nodded again.

“You *saved* my life, you know... in the Great Hall,” said Harry. Then he added, “...and so many times before that -- *every year*. I wouldn’t be here without *you*, Hermione.”

Harry leaned forward and kissed her.

Then Hermione said, “When I saw you hit with the Killing Curse, I wanted to die too. But then I saw that Tom Riddle was down and it was clear that something strange had

happened. You could feel it. Then when you suddenly got up -- it couldn't have been more than thirty seconds later -- I *knew* exactly what happened... what Professor Dumbledore *must* have believed would happen. But then I saw your broken wand... I almost fainted from despair. And then watching Tom Riddle pick up the sword... it was *too much*... But then I remembered what I had suspected -- it was the piece of Tom Riddle's soul in you that prevented you from becoming an Animagus. I desperately needed to get your attention, but I couldn't speak with the gag -- and then... you *looked* at me."

"I wanted to see you... *one last time*," said Harry, tears in his eyes.

"Harry, you saved us all. You are *so brave*..." she whispered. Then she kissed him.

This time they did not stop.

## Chapter 30 – Accounting

Harry, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny met Professor McGonagall at dinner in the Great Hall.

Hagrid was there, looking miserable. He walked over to them and started to weep. He managed to say that he missed the entire battle because he had been in the Forbidden Forest looking after "his big friend" and had been knocked out. They tried to console him, but he shook his head and left. Professor McGonagall said he had been like that all day. But she was sure he would get over it soon enough when school resumed.

The Great Hall was nearly empty. Harry assumed most everyone was still sleeping or had gone home until school resumed. It was only mid-August, so there would still be a full school year ahead.

Professor McGonagall sat with them at the old Gryffindor table. She had already restored the house banners. But there was still evidence of the battle everywhere. She thanked Harry again for his bravery and saving the school. Harry tried to apologize for the loss of life; she would not hear of it. She then returned Hermione's wand to her. It had been found on the body of a Death Eater in the Great Hall.

During dinner, McGonagall told Harry, "Your aunt and cousin are safe. Daedalus got them away as soon as he heard from the Order that the Ministry had fallen. He was not sure how vulnerable their house would be after the Ministry protections were broken,

but he need not have worried. The protections Professor Dumbledore invoked using the old magic of your mother's sacrifice were more than enough to protect them until you came of age, before which the Order had planned to move them anyway. Daedalus has grown very fond of your cousin, and he of Daedalus, I am told. I believe your cousin sees him as a father figure."

It surprised Harry that he felt glad that Dudley would be OK. He even thought he might like to see his cousin again.

Harry also learned from Professor McGonagall that the Order, except for Sirius, had delayed entering the battle -- leaving the early battle to the students and staff. This was because she had warned Kingsley that she and the staff had not had time to put in place the necessary defenses. Voldemort was already on the grounds and his forces were arriving in force.

Kingsley correctly determined they lacked sufficient strength and was trying to come up with a plan, when Draco, who was assisting Professor McGonagall, suggested using the Hogwarts house-elves to fetch all the parents because the elves could use Apparation to and from the school, saving valuable time. In the meantime, Aberforth Dumbledore was working to rally the townsfolk of Hogsmeade with the help of Madam Rosmerta. When everyone was in place and organized in Hogsmeade, the house-elves Apparated the lot directly onto the school grounds in force.

"That was *your* idea, Draco, to rally the house-elves?" exclaimed Harry. "Why haven't you said so?"

Draco just blushed, while Ginny was clearly dazzled.

Hermione exclaimed, "Brilliant, Draco!" and speaking for them all added, "*You* secured the victory."

"Absolutely," said Harry. "If we hadn't had those reinforcements when we did, we probably wouldn't have won."

"Maybe," said Draco, "But if *you* hadn't been in the Great Hall facing Tom Riddle, it still might not have been enough. Our lookouts reported all the Death Eaters on the grounds and battlements were leaving their posts and running into the castle. Now we know why; they left to watch you and Tom Riddle. We met zero resistance until we entered the castle."

“Mr Malfoy, why do you keep saying Tom Riddle?” asked Professor McGonagall.

Harry, Draco and Ginny laughed and looked at Hermione, who smiled and explained, “Professor, it’s a Memory Charm I used so we couldn’t say *his* name accidentally and trigger the taboo.”

“A *Memory Charm!*” exclaimed McGonagall. “How extraordinarily brilliant! One million points to Gryffindor!”

Everyone laughed.

After they had eaten, Harry presented Professor McGonagall with the Sword of Gryffindor. McGonagall looked confused, “But Mr Potter, the sword is hanging in the Headmas... I mean, my office. I saw it before coming to dinner.”

“I can assure you, Headmistress,” said Harry. “This is the *real* sword. The sword hanging in the case is a fake. Professor Snape loaned this to me right before the battle. I can’t explain *why* there are two, but it had something to do with a plan of Professor Dumbledore’s.”

Professor McGonagall shook her head and accepted the sword from Harry. Then she said, “Professor Dumbledore often said he thought we sorted too early. I would have been *proud* to have you in my house. In my mind you *are* a true Gryffindor -- your Animagus and, now this, leaves no doubt.”

When she said this, Harry remembered that Professor Dumbledore had hoped Harry would build a bridge between Slytherin and Gryffindor and create, after nearly a thousand years, a permanent bond. He now believed it had happened -- almost all of the Slytherin students and their parents had fought to defend the school. Only the DLA members and their Death Eater parents had sided with Voldemort.

After dinner, McGonagall said, “There is someone in my office who is waiting to see you,” but she would not say who.

As she led the way, they all looked at each other, but none of them seemed to have a clue as to whom it might be.

When they entered the Headmistress’s office, they were met with a tumult of applause and cheers. The portraits of all the previous Headmasters and Headmistresses were giving them a hero’s welcome. On the wall behind the familiar desk, hung the portrait of

Albus Dumbledore and next to it, in the place of honor, the portrait of Severus Snape, which still looked wet. They too were applauding.

The four of them turned red with embarrassment, but they also felt proper pride.

Harry looked at Professor Snape and bowed. Snape looked a little surprised and then did what Harry had never seen him do -- he smiled. Draco nudged Harry when he saw it.

Professor McGonagall held up her hands and the room quieted.

Dumbledore spoke. “*Well done. Well done indeed.* I am more proud of you than you can imagine. You have helped liberate the wizarding world from a terrible scourge, which had threatened to destroy everyone and everything we hold dear. The sacrifices that have been made by so many are almost too much to bear, but we must, if only to remind ourselves of their true worth.”

Dumbledore saw that Ginny looked a little uncomfortable, perhaps feeling out of place.

“You, Miss Weasley, aptly represent those under-age students who fought so bravely. Only because your friends made you, did you go into hiding with your excellent family -- because The Trace put you at risk. But when the time came, when you could have stayed behind, you chose to *fight*. And you fought *bravely* with your friends. They know this well and you should not feel in any way diminished. I *honor* you.”

Ginny turned very red.

Then Dumbledore turned to Draco. “Mister Malfoy, your burdens have been *great*. You turned away from the Dark Arts and were rejected by your family for being *good* and *honorable*. They even tried to exploit you in their hope of capturing Harry Potter. You showed the kind of loyalty and true friendship which only those who have risked their lives for their friends understand. I *honor* you.”

Harry placed his hand on Draco’s shoulder. Draco had a tear run down his cheek.

Hermione was next. “Miss Granger, your friends have often said they would not have succeeded, or even survived, without you. And *it is true*. Your intelligence, logic and good judgement are exceeded only by your bravery, perseverance, and absolute loyalty to your friends. I cannot imagine a more well-rounded Hogwarts student -- one that could have been sorted into any house -- yes, even Slytherin. You will go *far*. I am

sorry I never had a second opportunity to have a private conversation with you.” He winked and then said, “I *honor* you.”

Hermione blushed and whispered to Harry, “I’ll tell you later.”

Finally, Dumbledore turned to Harry. “Mr Harry Potter, no one in this room truly understands the *burden* you have born, what you have *been through* -- what *I* have put you through -- while always withholding what you so desperately wanted to know until I thought you were ready. I planned and schemed. What a *fool* I was! You did not succumb to the temptations that in my youth *I* succumbed to. You were more than up to every task. You showed bravery *beyond* my imagination. Oh, that does not mean you were not afraid. Those who face danger without fear are either fools or liars. My feeble plans *failed*. You succeeded, not because of any *Prophecy*, but because of your *own* determination, strength, and abilities. Lord Voldemort sought to divide and conquer the wizarding world, imposing his will on all. You built a *bridge* between Slytherin and Gryffindor and the other houses which has never existed. It *united* the school and made it *stronger* than it has ever been -- Lord Voldemort’s own house fought *against* him. It was not possible for Lord Voldemort to withstand its power. Someday, I hope you will tell your story so that everyone besides your friends will know it. Harry Potter, I *honor* you above *all* others.”

All the portraits applauded again recognizing that Dumbledore had completed his speech.

Harry was embarrassed. Professor Dumbledore had already said some of this in the Room of Requirement, but not in front of his friends. Harry was glad Dumbledore had finished, because he was anxious to ask him a very important question.

Harry cleared his throat and, after the applause died down, asked, “Sir, is there *any* possibility... *he* ...can return *again*?”

The question drew breath from his friends, and even Professor McGonagall.

Dumbledore stared at Harry for a moment and then, looking a little embarrassed, said, “I am sorry, Harry. I cannot answer that. ...Oh, not simply because I do not know. It is because I cannot ponder the *future*. As a magical impression of my former living self, I can only discuss the past. I can only say that I do not *believe* he can return *at this moment* -- given what I knew when I died and what Professors Snape and McGonagall have told me has happened since. Of course, you may ask me again as time passes.”

Professor Dumbledore had a funny look on his face, as if he suddenly recognized his limitations as a portrait.

And for the first time, Harry realized that having a magical portrait made was not a way for witches and wizards to obtain immortality -- in a safe and inoffensive way. As time went by, your portrait would become less interesting, perhaps just a curiosity. Eventually it would be moved to some forgotten storeroom to slowly decay. Time would ultimately make you totally irrelevant.

After they said goodbye, the four of them walked the grounds before the mid-summer sunset. Harry told them his story, as much as he could remember, including all -- well almost all -- the secrets. There was so much; he knew he must have forgotten some things, probably even important things. He knew Dumbledore's and Snape's portraits would tell Professor McGonagall everything. The Headmasters and Headmistresses of Hogwarts were privy to all the knowledge of the previous occupants of the office.

Hermione already knew almost everything; she had a look that told him she had suspected much of the rest. Draco had known or suspected a lot of it too -- but Ginny had not and was truly shocked. Ginny had tears in her eyes and hugged Harry. Hermione and Draco joined in, and they did not let go for a long time.

They visited Professor Dumbledore's tomb by the Black Lake, which McGonagall had personally restored.

Harry took out the Elder Wand.

The others seemed to look at it differently now, even though they had seen it for years in Professor Dumbledore's hand.

"What are you going to do with the Elder Wand, Harry?" asked Hermione.

"He's going to *keep* it, of course," Draco said sharply.

Hermione ignored Draco and stared at Harry waiting for an answer.

Finally, Harry said, "I've have been thinking about it... Professor Dumbledore initially believed that if he died without it having been won, its power would be lost. So, he planned his death with Professor Snape. It wasn't a duel. But Dumbledore had *doubts*. He wasn't sure the Elder Wand would *want* to become *ordinary*. Remember, *'the wand*

*chooses the wizard.*’ He thought the wand might instead choose a new master, especially one like Voldemort, so...”

“Wait, wait, *wait!*” exclaimed Draco. “You said *Tom Riddle*, not Tom Riddle... I mean *You-Know-Who*’s name.”

“What?” said Harry.

“You said the Dark Lord’s name, Harry,” said Ginny, “not Tom Riddle.”

“I did?” said Harry.

“Yes. Say the Dark Lord’s name,” said Hermione.

“Uh... Voldemort?” said Harry tentatively.

“There!” said Draco.

Hermione continued, “When Tom Riddle used the killing curse on you, it must have broken my memory charm.”

“I bet you’re right,” said Draco, adding, “Hermione, don’t let me forget to ask you to remove the charm from us later. Sorry to interrupt. Go on, Harry.”

“Right... um... Professor Dumbledore’s carried out his plan. When he died, the Elder Wand technically had no master. However, Voldemort killed Professor Snape because he believed Snape had become master of the wand. And he *seemed* to wield it effectively. I’m only alive because his Killing Curse was absorbed by the bit of his soul inside me. But then... after I woke up, his Body Bind Curse on me wasn’t holding very well; I was beginning to be able to move. It was as if he *wasn’t* the wand’s master after all... And the spell broke completely when I transformed. Maybe the Elder Wand did not choose *him* as its new master. Still, I think the *wizard* has a lot more to do with a wand’s powers than the legend implies. Professor Dumbledore proved that when he won it from Grindelwald.”

Harry had reached his conclusion. “I think the Elder Wand was always, or almost always, won by the more powerful *wizard*. But because of its ever-increasing legend, ever more powerful wizards sought it out. It just earned the reputation of being the *unbeatable* wand when it really wasn’t.”



Hermione nodded approvingly.

Harry continued, “Professor Dumbledore ultimately believed *‘the wand chooses the wizard’* is the most fundamental wand law. It casts doubt on all the other *rules* the wandmakers talk about in their wand lore. So, if the wand does choose, that means it *could* well have chosen Voldemort when he took possession of it, despite Dumbledore breaking the chain of victors. After all, this was a wand that apparently liked, or was at least accustomed to, being possessed by *very* powerful wizards. But it no longer matters...”

Harry had decided. Without warning, he snapped the Elder Wand in two.

The other three all gasped. They stared at the two separate pieces in his hands and then at Harry. Draco and Ginny had looks of disbelief on their faces, while Hermione’s face glowed with admiration.

Harry said with clear conviction, “I think there’s been *more* than enough killing over this wand. I’ll ask Professor McGonagall to put both of Professor Dumbledore’s broken wands back into his tomb.”

This drew a puzzled look from his friends, but Harry’s mind was elsewhere.

He wondered if his own wand still contained the bit of power Professor Dumbledore said it had *‘absorbed’* from Voldemort’s wand in the graveyard -- now that Voldemort was dead. He also wondered what would have happened if he had used his *own* wand against Voldemort in the Great Hall instead of trying to use Professor Dumbledore’s original wand. Would his own wand have shattered the Elder Wand as it had Lucius Malfoy’s? Or might his own wand have also been broken if he had left *both* wands in his pocket when he collapsed? His head spun... too many what-ifs.

Hermione asked a question, but Harry’s had missed it.

“Harry?” she asked again.

“Sorry. What?” said Harry returning to the conversation.

Hermione repeated, “I said, what do you mean by *‘both’* of Professor Dumbledore’s broken wands? You broke *your* wand when you fell.”

“What? Break *my* wand?” Harry pulled his wand out of his robe pocket and held it out.

“But when you got up after the killing curse, we all saw your wand was broken,” said Hermione sounding confused.

Harry understood. “Ah... You didn’t see me drop my wand on the floor when I dropped the sword at the same time. The sword must have gotten all the attention.” He then reached into his robes and pulled out Professor Dumbledore’s broken wand. He still considered it to be Dumbledore’s wand because he had never used it to cast a single spell.

He told them the story of the wand that had beaten the Elder Wand and everything Professor Dumbledore had told him, concluding, “I’m sure this was Professor Dumbledore’s back-up plan in case the Elder Wand had *not* become *ordinary*. His *original* wand was the master of the Elder Wand. Again, this assumes wands know who their masters are, *and* his wand had given its allegiance to *me*... See what I mean about the uncertainties? I think that’s why the last thing Professor Dumbledore told me was, ‘*most importantly, remember what you have taught yourself.*’ I’m sure he was talking about my Animagus. I think, somehow, he knew about it and that it could be important.”

“Wow,” was all Draco could say.

But Hermione asked, “Harry, when did Professor Dumbledore tell you all this? You were only alone in the cave with him for a minute. He couldn’t have told you all this then. Are these more of your *secrets*?”

Ginny huffed, “Talk about keeping *secrets*, Hermione... *Animagi!*”

Hermione blushed, “Sorry, Ginny; sorry, Draco. We had our reasons. Can we talk about that later? ...Harry?”

Harry was not sure he wanted to tell them about being in the Room of Requirement -- or wherever it was -- with Professor Dumbledore. It was utterly fantastic, and it could have all been his imagination. But it had seemed so real, even tactile. Maybe Professor Dumbledore had used a memory charm on him in the cave and planted answers to any questions he might ask. But was that even possible? He doubted he would ever be sure, but he decided to tell his friends.

Again, they were astonished and did not interrupt once while he told them what he had experienced.

This time, “Amazing!” was all Draco could say.

Ginny’s eyes were as wide as he had ever seen them.

And Hermione was staring into his eyes so deeply she seemed to be looking for... something. He did not know what.

“Well?” Harry asked.

Draco lamented, “The two most powerful wands in the world and they *both* end up being destroyed.”

Ginny said, “I’d *love* to have an experience like that, Harry,” adding with a grimace “except for the *being killed* part, of course.”

Hermione summed it up best, “Whatever happened, Harry, it helped you destroy Tom Riddle and that’s all that matters.”

Harry deeply appreciated Hermione’s comment and told her so later.

But it was Draco’s comment that made Harry ask, ‘Where is *Voldemort’s* original wand?’

“Probably still on his corpse,” speculated Draco.

Harry said he would ask Professor McGonagall to find it and have it snapped in two so there would not be *another* legendary wand lying around.

They returned to the Room of Requirement -- luxury resort version. The two girls decided to enjoy the spa before going to bed. Harry and Draco sat in the bar. Dobby obligingly brought them a few Butterbeers, and they ate some snacks from the picnic basket the house-elves had given Hermione that morning.

Draco said, “I want to show you something, Harry.” He reached into his robes and pulled out something silver and laid it on the bar. It was a clutching silver hand.

Harry knew what it was immediately. “It’s the hand Voldemort made for Barty Crouch, Jr.”

“I knew you’d recognize it,” said Draco. “You can have it if you want -- as a trophy.”

“No thanks,” said Harry.

“Fine,” said Draco. “I’ll put it next to my Hand of Glory.”

“What’s that?” asked Harry.

“Nothing. Something I nicked when I was in Borgin’s. Wanted it for years... Long story. Anyway... I was dueling him, Crouch. He was barmy. Screaming about his Master being dead. Tears running down his cheeks. Then he cried out, ‘The Dark Lord has failed us.’ Suddenly, he grabs his own throat with the silver hand and crushes it -- broke his own neck. He went down and the hand popped off when he hit the floor -- as you see it. It’s light as a feather but solid and stronger than steel. I think I’ll set it up to hold Professor’s Dumbledore’s knife.”

“Gruesome!” It was Ginny.

Ginny and Hermione had just come from the Spa. They wore only scantily wrapped towels.

Draco raised his eyebrows.

Hermione asked, “Draco, if you have Professor Dumbledore’s knife with you, may I see it, please?”

“Yea. Sure,” said Draco. He got it out and handed it to Hermione.

“I’d like to try something...” She took the knife, reached between Draco and Harry, and placed the tip lightly on the silver hand lying on the bar. Then she applied pressure and the knife went through the hand like butter. “I knew it!” she exclaimed. “It’s Goblin made. Professor Dumbledore said it was given to him by the President of Gringotts Bank -- a Goblin. Something else... I bet Professor Dumbledore coated it with Basilisk venom too. He wanted us to have a safe way to destroy the last Horcrux if we couldn’t get the Sword or get to the Chamber of Secrets for a Basilisk’s fang.”

“But why didn’t he say so?” said Draco.

“That’s the way Professor Dumbledore operated,” said Harry sagely. “He wanted to help you along but not tell you how to do it. If he was too specific, you wouldn’t come

up with alternatives. He knew one of us would figure out what the knife was for -- but only if we *needed* it.”

“Well, it would have been you, Hermione,” said Ginny.

“Right,” said Harry and Draco together.

The girls left to go change.

Draco asked Harry a question. It sounded like he had been wanting to ask it but had been waiting for the right time. “Harry, what was it like... *biting* Tom Riddle’s head off? I really wish I’d seen it.”

Harry was completely caught off guard by the question. But as he thought about it, an overwhelming feeling rose up in him that he could not contain. He almost growled his answer. “It was *ecstasy* -- the gush of hot blood, the crunch of bone, the taste of flesh, and the delectably sweet favor of... *brains*. I was an apex predator taking down my prey. I’ve never felt anything like it in my *life*.”

Draco turned a bit green.

Harry shook his head to clear it, then asked, “Are you alright, Draco?”

“Fine. Fine,” said Draco gulping, trying to keep his dinner from coming up. “It was that ‘sweet flavor of brains’ bit that did me in. Sorry I asked.”

Harry, having completely lost his feline primal impulse, began to laugh at the look on Draco’s face.

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Later, alone together in their room, Harry asked Hermione, “Can I ask you about the private conversation you had with Professor Dumbledore?” They were holding hands facing each other again.

“It wasn’t anything about this, Harry. It was at the end of third year -- just academic,” said Hermione, hoping Harry would not pursue it.

Harry, however, said, “Professor Dumbledore wouldn’t have mentioned it, I think, if there weren’t something *more* to it than that. So...?”

Hermione sighed. “It was about changing *time*. He believed you *died* when you tried saving Sirius at the Quidditch match.”

“What!” exclaimed Harry. He pulled his hands away from Hermione’s.

“I’ll *try* to explain it,” said Hermione calmly, “but you’ll have to listen and *not* interrupt. It’s *very* confusing.”

Harry nodded. Hermione took hold of his hands again.

“I believe Professor Dumbledore was *right*. Remember, Dementors eat souls. So, they can destroy a living Horcrux. Who knows; they might be able to suck the soul out of an inanimate Horcrux too. They consumed your soul and the bit of Tom Riddle’s soul. I used the Time-Turner to save you but couldn’t save Sirius. Then I used the Time-Turner again and, with your help, saved Sirius too. *But...* I only remember the last cycle because the memories of an earlier cycle of the same events are lost. Regardless, whenever you use a Time-Turner, you create paradoxes, but Time itself magically cleans up to make the best sense of what happened.”

Harry’s mind was trying to absorb it. “*Why* do you believe Professor Dumbledore?”

“Because I *wouldn’t* have gone back with you to save Sirius if Professor Dumbledore hadn’t told me to -- because he saw us doing it. Months before that, I had used the Time-Turner to prevent Peter Pettigrew from escaping, but I don’t remember his escaping. My future-self told me to do it. I *would* have used the Time-Turner to save *you*, even without a future-self telling me to. Does this make sense?” asked Hermione.

“I’ll have to take your word for it, Hermione,” Harry said distractedly. He was thinking about the possibilities. Suddenly he said very seriously, “If we could get a Time-Turner, we could *prevent* all this.”

This time, Hermione pulled *her* hands away.

“No, Harry. *No!*” she exclaimed. “It’s *too dangerous*. I could waste time giving you reason after reason not to, like I usually do. But for this, I’m *not* having it. I *won’t* help you. In fact, I’ll do everything in my power to *stop* you, if you try.”

Harry had never seen Hermione so adamant, so opposed. It shocked him.

“Hermione... our friends... all the people... the Muggle-borns...” Harry pleaded.

Hermione winced when Harry said ‘the Muggle-borns’ but said, “I’ll have to live with that... The answer is *no*, Harry.”

Harry hung his head and said, “I’ll never mention it again, Hermione. I’m sorry.”

But he could not get it out of his mind. Professor Dumbledore had *wanted* him to know.

### Chapter 31 – Aftermath and Memorial

The next morning, Ginny and Draco knocked on Harry’s and Hermione’s door in the Room of Requirement.

Harry and Hermione both answered the door, appearing to be just on their way to breakfast.

Draco, sounding anxious, said, “Hermione! Good. It’s *you* we need. Please change my memory back. We went to breakfast early and everyone keeps asking me why I keep saying Tom Riddle. When I try to explain, I sound like a jabbering idiot.”

“So, Draco,” said Hermione smugly, “it’s not so *funny* now, I take it?”

Then she grinned and started laughing; Harry and Ginny joined in. Then Draco, admitting that Hermione had gotten the last laugh, laughed too. Hermione then obliged him and reversed the memory charm. She had already performed it on herself.

Draco chanted, “Tom Riddle, Tom Riddle, T...” but the look on Hermione’s face told him the game was over. “Sorry,” he said, finishing quietly, “...Voldemort, Voldemort, Voldemort. And I hope that’s the last time we ever have to mention his name again.”

But they all knew it would not be.

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Harry saw Professor McGonagall at breakfast and told her of the need to destroy Voldemort’s wand.

She shook her head sadly and said his body and the Great Hall had been thoroughly searched by her and Kingsley and his wand had not been found. She also took him into her confidence and revealed something quite interesting. It turned out Voldemort's body was female, though vestigial. She said everyone involved had decided to keep it a secret, but she felt he should know. Harry did not offer to inform her what he, Hermione and Draco knew would explain it.

The time was not right. It required the whole story, and Harry was not yet ready to share it with anyone but his three closest friends.

Harry rejoined Hermione at the Slytherin table to finish breakfast. As he sat down, Hedwig and Aristotle swooped into the Great Hall to deliver mail. They had sent for their owls to return from Beauxbaton Academy the day after the battle. Draco's eagle-owl, Orion, never returned and was considered a casualty of the dark times.

Hermione laughed as they arrived delivering mail as if nothing had happened.

Aristotle dropped a letter from Madam Maxime in front of Hermione and gave an appreciative hoot as she thanked him and rubbed his cheek. Hedwig dropped the Daily Prophet in front of Harry and then soared off with Aristotle, presumably to the owlery, to get reacquainted with the school owls.

Hermione, as usual, picked up the Daily Prophet. She was smiling in anticipation of reading celebratory articles aloud to Harry.

This was the first printing of the Daily Prophet since the Battle. The paper was now truly back under its old manager – Barnabas Cuffe, who had been under the Imperius Curse after the Ministry had fallen.

She unfolded the paper and glanced at the headline. She froze.

Harry saw her eyes scan briefly down the page and then she seemed to choke. She looked like she was having a fit. Harry reached for her, but before he could take hold, she screamed and then collapsed onto the table. She began to shake uncontrollably. Her eyes were open and staring without focusing.

Harry was trying to steady Hermione by the shoulders as Professor McGonagall rushed up. She took one look at Hermione and yelled, "GET MADAM POMFREY," pointing at some students who had just entered the Hall. They turned and ran quickly back out the door.



“She’s having a *seizure*,” said McGonagall, taking charge from Harry. She performed a spell and Hermione relaxed. “I’ve put her to sleep.” She then conjured a blanket and put it around Hermione. “What happened, Mr Potter?”

“I don’t know,” answered Harry, who was deeply concerned and completely bewildered. “She just started reading the Prophet and collapsed.”

“Let me see that,” said McGonagall. She took up the paper that had fallen face down onto the table. She held it out at arm’s length to examine.

The huge headline practically screamed at Harry.

*MUGGLE-BORN RESETTLEMENT CAMP INCINERATED*  
-- NO SURVIVORS --

Professor McGonagall gasped and dropped the paper.

Harry thought he would be sick. In his euphoria after their victory, he had forgotten what he had seen in Voldemort’s mind. When seen through Voldemort’s perspective, it had not had the same impact as this headline. Harry realized now that when he had tried to persuade Hermione about using the Time-Turner by mentioning the Muggle-borns, she did not know they had been *exterminated*. She must have thought he was just talking about everything before that, when Hermione had thought *establishment* of the camps had been Voldemort’s revenge. Harry blamed himself for forgetting to tell Hermione -- to somehow break the news to her in a much less shocking way. But even now, he was not sure how he would have done it.

Hermione began to moan, “It’s... *my*... fault... *my*... fault... I... used... Dark... Magic.” She said it over and over. She would not respond to Harry’s entreaties.

Madam Pomfrey arrived and put Hermione into a deeper sleep. She finally stopped moaning. They took her to St Mungo’s a few hours later.

The Healers helped Hermione understand that Voldemort had always intended to exterminate the Muggle-borns -- whether it would have been by starvation, the Killing Curse... or Fiendfyre -- it was *not* her fault. Harry visited her every day and tried to keep Hermione from talking about it, but she would not stop saying that Voldemort had used Fiendfyre because she had used it to kill Nagini. In the end, the Healers had to

use Memory Charms to ease her guilt and suffering enough so she could recover sufficiently to resume her life.

Hermione was able to return to Hogwarts the day school resumed. Harry accompanied her from St Mungo's. He also joined her the next Sunday to attend the memorial service.

After the service, Harry and Draco returned to number Twelve with Kreacher.

Hermione and Ginny remained in school.

### Chapter 32 – Epilogue

In the week following the Battle, many students returned to school to help with the cleanup and the accounting. Ministry Aurors and Historians interviewed everyone. The wands of all the Death Eaters were subjected to examination using *Priori Incantatem* to record the crimes they had committed.

While Hermione was in St Mungo's with Harry at her side, Draco and Ginny went to the Burrow to see if anything of Ginny's could be salvaged. But there was nothing -- the Death Eaters had totally destroyed the Weasley's home. Mrs Weasley cried more over the loss of their chickens and pigs than anything else. However, she never mentioned the loss of the garden gnomes. Amazingly, the Ghoul in the Attic had escaped and was living in the orchard.

Refusing to accept no for an answer, Draco used his inherited wealth to help rebuild the Burrow -- on the condition of Mr and Mrs Weasley allowing Ginny to become engaged to him before she turned seventeen. She had just turned sixteen the week before but refused to have her birthday celebrated under the circumstances. Draco had made his 'condition' in jest, but instead, Draco was welcomed with open arms as a future member of the family. He was the very first Slytherin in their family line.

Ginny went back to school engaged to Draco. He visited her every weekend. She was the envy of every girl in school.

Ron was buried in the field where he had played Quidditch with his brothers and sister growing up. He was not invited to be buried at Hogwarts with the students who had fought to defend the school. The Wesley's did not object. Ron's name was rarely

mentioned, but Mrs Weasley wanted to believe that he had realized his mistake in the end and had died fighting a Death Eater. It was a mother's love.

Ginny did not believe it, but never said so, except to Draco. He was the only non-family member to attend Ron's funeral. Mr Weasley had asked, but the Ministry would not allow Percy to be temporarily released from Azkaban to attend the funeral.

Harry learned that number Four, Privet Drive; Hermione's parent's house; the Tonks' house; and any place remotely connected with him and his close friends, had also been destroyed by the Death Eaters. Apparently, this had happened soon after the Ministry had fallen, though number Four, Privet Drive had survived until the day Harry turned seventeen. Somehow, number Twelve, Grimmauld Place remained intact. Hermione speculated that the very old protective charms on the house, many involving Dark Magic, when combined with the Fidelius Charm and Order protections were so powerful they had either prevented or deflected a Death Eater attack.

Draco said, "Maybe there is something to be said for *some* Dark Magic. Is it really Dark if it is used defensively and saves your life?"

Hermione asked Draco to change the subject.

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The memorial service on the Sunday after school reopened was standing room only in the Great Hall.

Professor Dumbledore was formally memorialized as were those students who had given their lives. For the first time, students were allowed to be interned on the grounds. Many parents opted for this honor.

A memorial wall was constructed outside the front door to the castle with the names engraved of all those who had died defending the school, both when Voldemort had come to power and later during the battle that saw him finally defeated.

Hogwarts had lost thirty-four students, not counting the members of the Dark Lord's Army who were all either killed during the Battle of Hogwarts, as it came to be called, or later executed. The surviving students all said that without their training in the Dueling Club, many more of them would have fallen.

Seven teachers and staff had died or been murdered -- Madam Pince and Professors Dumbledore, Burbage, Trelawney, Vector, Sprout, and Snape. To the very end, Voldemort, the wizarding world's greatest Legilimens, never realized that Professor Snape had been working against him.

Harry forever blamed himself for not telling Professor Snape about the Elder Wand and the danger it put him in. He had assumed Professor Dumbledore had told Snape, but when Snape had asked, "What wand?" in his last meeting with Harry, Harry realized Dumbledore had not. But then other things had happened very quickly, and Harry had forgotten to warn him.

Harry believed Professor Snape still would have gone to meet Voldemort for the sake of the students and staff. But he would have been *prepared* for Voldemort's attack. Harry was glad he had not had a vision of what happened. He assumed he had been so focused on destroying the Horcrux it had somehow blocked the connection. It was also possible that Voldemort had been completely dispassionate when he took the wand from Dumbledore's tomb and killed Snape. Harry doubted it.

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Professor McGonagall did not sort the first-years when they returned to school to resume the school year that had started early on the first of August. She let them remain in the same dormitories they had been assigned to by Professor Snape. She felt they had already formed bonds with their roommates, so they became part of the Founder's house there were in. And she randomly sorted the handful of Muggle-born first-years that arrived on the first of October. All these first-years were the only class never formally sorted by the Sorting Hat.

The centaurs finally complained to Professor McGonagall that Grawp was destroying the Forbidden Forest. When she found out who Grawp was, she made Hagrid return him to the mountains in Eastern Europe where he came from. On the way back, Hagrid stopped at Beauxbaton Academy to visit Madam Maxime and decided to stay.

Hermione completed both the end of her sixth year and her full seventh year at Hogwarts. Naturally, she earned Outstanding on all hew N.E.W.T. examinations. Harry visited her on weekends.

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The aftermath of the war was brutal. Surviving Death Eaters and those deemed fellow travelers of the Dark Lord were hunted down -- not just in England, but world-wide. Having the Dark Mark on your forearm was a death sentence. The Ministry, under the leadership of new Minister for Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and the reconstituted Wizengamot, restored the death penalty for crimes against humanity and wizard-kind. The Death Chamber in the Department of Mysteries was used again for the first time in centuries.

No one objected because of what had happened at the Muggle-born Resettlement Camp. Only a few dozen Muggle-born witches and wizards in England had survived. They were the ones who had gone underground or left the country in time. Dean Thomas, the Creevey brothers, and Ted Tonks were among those whom Harry knew personally and had survived.

Azkaban prison was deserted for a time. There was no one to send there. When it was reopened, Aurors were again used as guards. Dementors were banished from England. It was said they went East.

The fire at Malfoy Manor had been devastating but also a closely guarded secret by the Death Eaters. More than half of those in the building had perished, including Draco's parents. The survivors had barely managed to use the counter-curse to extinguish the Fiendfyre. The building was eventually abandoned by the Death Eaters. Ollivander had survived locked in the cellar -- it and most of the ground floor had escaped damage. But he was moved when the Death Eaters relocated their headquarters to Lestrange Manor.

To replace the Death Eaters that had died at Malfoy Manor, Voldemort ordered all of-age sons and daughters of every pure-blood family to "volunteer" to become Death Eaters. By the end of the war and the retribution that followed, as many pure-blood witches and wizards had perished as Muggle-Borns. Many believed the fanatical pure-blood families had gotten what they had long deserved.

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Kingsley Shacklebolt held a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix at number Twelve. The primary reason was to suspend operations, which everyone expected. The secondary reason, which everyone was anxious for, was a final accounting and debriefing of activities from the day the Ministry had fallen.

The first order of business was to honor fallen Order members -- Dumbledore, Severus, Sirius, Sturgis, Emmeline -- and presumed dead -- Remus and Mundungus. They also honored other fallen who had helped the Order -- Arabella Figg, and from the Ministry, Broderick Bode and Amelia Bones. Nymphadora Tonks was also honored, having been seriously injured in the Battle of Hogwarts and still in St Mungo's. She was expected to make a full recovery.

The second order of business was to induct Draco, Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna into the Order and issue them rings. Harry had already recovered his ring from the Room of Requirement. He found that needing to recover something you had hidden worked just as well to get in. All he had to do was pick through the jewelry still piled near the door.

The third order of business was to also make Dobby and Kreacher members of the Order of the Phoenix. The two elves, who could not have been more unlike, were dumbfounded. They both wept and insisted on thanking and shaking the hand of every Order member.

Then everyone gave their account, starting with Kingsley. He said that Professor Dumbledore's order to implement the cell structure had probably saved the lives of many Order members, and perhaps even prevented the Order's annihilation. However, it had made communications and operations much more difficult. Snape and Hagrid had not been assigned to a cell and only took orders directly from Dumbledore.

When Snape had reported that Professor Dumbledore was incapacitated and likely to die, it had been a huge blow to morale. Their hopes had then turned to Harry, but Sirius insisted he be left alone, as Dumbledore had instructed.

Harry reported on his meeting with Professor Dumbledore, how Snape had kept Dumbledore alive, and how Dumbledore had arranged his death with Snape. This erased any doubt that some Order members still harbored about Snape's true loyalty. Harry also told them about the Horcruxes -- including himself, their secret mission, and the Elder Wand -- though he did not mention knowledge of the other Deathly Hallows.

Everyone was utterly astonished by what they heard, except of course Hermione, Draco, and Ginny. Neville's jaw hung open the entire time and his eyes looked like they would pop out of his head. Luna's just smiled and kept nodding as if it confirmed everything she had ever suspected about Harry.

Arthur Weasley reported that surprisingly few Muggle-Borns had refused to go to the Relocation Camp. Of those that refused and went into hiding, most survived, despite the efforts of the so-called *Snatchers* -- Ministry-paid bounty hunters. Sadly, Justin Finch-Fletchley was one of the few that were caught and was assumed to have died in the camp with the others.

Molly Weasley told them Ted Tonks had survived. His pure-blood wife, Andromeda, accompanied him when he went on the run when the Muggle-Borns were ordered to report for resettlement. They escaped to France and found a safe house in Paris.

Fleur's story was heartrending for Harry. She had been assigned to the cell with Lupin and Sirius. She was devastated by Sirius' death and had difficulty giving her account. Professor Dumbledore had given them the dangerous mission of being decoys for Harry and Hermione. Lupin and Fleur used Polyjuice potion to become Harry and Hermione and to be seen around the country with Sirius, all appearing to be on the run together -- diverting attention and wasting Death Eater resources.

Lupin had also been tasked with trying to persuade the werewolves against supporting Voldemort. When Lupin did not return from one of his forays, Sirius and Fleur carried on without him. When they received the call from the Order about Voldemort attacking Hogwarts, they rushed back.

Sirius wanted to use Fleur as bait, having her pose as a Polyjuice Harry, to lure Voldemort into an ambush, but she refused. Sirius then offered to take the role of Harry himself, but she still refused, saying it was too dangerous and would not work. She said they needed to link up with the rest of the Order and fight cohesively. Sirius became angry and did not wait. He rushed into the grounds, where he was killed trying to get to Voldemort in the Great Hall, but not before dispatching half a dozen Death Eaters.

Hagrid took every opportunity to repeatedly apologize for missing the final battle, but no one would hear of it. He reinforced what Harry said about Professor Snape -- that he had used every bit of his skill as a potions master to keep Professor Dumbledore alive as long as he did.

The other members told their stories as well, often harrowing, and sometimes tearful as the bravery and valor of those lost were recounted. Before they broke up, Kingsley offered a toast to the Order, the fallen, and to Harry Potter. Then they lifted the Fidelius Charm on the house.

After the meeting, Bill Weasley consoled Fleur and begged her not to return to France.



By this time, the Floo Network had been reopened. Professor McGonagall took her students with her back to Hogwarts using the kitchen fireplace. Before departing, she made one last attempt to get Harry and Draco to reconsider completing their magical education, but they both respectfully declined.

Harry said a special goodbye to Neville and Luna. He thanked them for rallying the students and leading the fight against the Carrows and the DLA. He also gave Luna a kiss on the cheek and whispered in her ear, “You *saved* me, Luna. I’ll never forget it.”

She replied sweetly, “That’s nice.”

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As Minister for Magic, Kingsley retroactively approved Harry’s and Hermione’s registration to become Animagi, arguing that if they had followed the law, they would have put themselves in jeopardy under the previous regime. No one objected.

The Ministry of Magic helped pay for the reconstruction of property destroyed under Voldemort’s reign of terror, including Muggle property. The latter was done anonymously through Gringotts bank’s connections with the Muggle financial industry.

When the Ministry of Magic -- and everyone else -- learned that house-elves could use Apparation through the protective spells and enchantments that prevented witches and wizards from doing so, it initiated a secret project in the Department of Mysteries to develop spells that would work on house-elves and other magical beings. After several months they were finally able to develop a spell that would work. It was first put in place at Azkaban and then at the Ministry.

The Ministry secretly offered to provide the spell to Gringotts Bank. But the Goblins only laughed because their protective spells had never had any such loopholes.

Professor McGonagall was given the spell by the Ministry but elected not to implement it at Hogwarts unless she saw behavior that made it necessary. In the first place, she did not like change and the house-elves needed Apparation to do their jobs efficiently. In the second place, she believed that it would not be Hogwarts if there were not some opportunities for rule-breaking to be going on with.

As expected, Professor McGonagall was formally named Hogwarts Headmistress. She reinstated all the rules and traditions, both old and new, that had been in place at



Hogwarts before Voldemort had come to power. The Ministry provided McGonagall the team of wizards who constructed the stadium for the Four-Hundred Thirty-Seventh Quidditch World Cup. They helped her fully restore the school. Under her guidance and with additional help from the staff and a host of volunteer witches and wizards from all over the country, the school once again looked as it always had -- though the school ghosts complained that the school's ancient "ambiance" had changed, whatever that meant.

Professor McGonagall invited Mr Filch to return as caretaker, but he had become enamored with the theater and decided to remain in the Muggle world. He eventually became a well-known character playing cantankerous old men, accompanied by an amazingly intelligent cat.

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Hermione's parents returned to England from their safe house in France. Where previously they had been completely enamored with the wizarding world, they were now understandably quite disillusioned. They begged Hermione to return to the Muggle world, but Hermione told them she intended to devote her life to making the wizarding world a better place. They accepted her decision, but no longer wanted to be invited to events with her wizarding friends. Explaining to the police, other authorities and their dental patients, where they had been and what happened to their house, was the least of their problems. They not only had to rebuild the house, but their dental practice as well. Hermione did all she could to help them.

The Weasley family was no longer whole. Percy, obsessed with climbing the Ministry power structure, had been written off for two years, but his redemption before the final battle was a welcome surprise. It did not, however, preclude a sentence of one year in Azkaban for collaboration. Ron, on the other hand, had totally shocked his family.

The Weasleys had gone into hiding when the Ministry fell. Their safe house was Shell Cottage, the seaside vacation home of Mrs Weasley's aunt Muriel. Ginny spent the whole time worrying about Draco. When they received the Order rallying call from Professor McGonagall, Mr and Mrs Weasley, Bill, Charlie, Fred, and George answered the call, leaving Ginny behind.

She was furious. Before she could think of how to get to Hogwarts faster than flying by broomstick, which would have taken at least a day, Draco suddenly Apparated directly into the cottage with Dobby. "Fred told me... I knew you'd never forgive me if I didn't

come for you...” he managed to say right before she rushed into his arms and kissed him. Then just as quickly, she broke away and exclaimed, “Let’s go!”

When they and all the others rushed into the castle, Draco attempted to keep Ginny protected, but she fought like a daemon, and they were separated.

Bill kept close to his mother to protect her, but Mrs Weasley was more than a match for all the Death Eaters she faced. Later, when Draco heard Bill’s account of his mother, Draco said that Ginny clearly took after her.

Tonks fully recovered and eventually became the permanent Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts, and the favorite of every student -- especially the boys.

Dolores Umbridge was found guilty of treason and executed. She claimed to have been under the Imperius Curse. But her long-held views on purity of blood, prejudice against Muggle-borns and intelligent magical creatures, and the laws she had proposed during her career, all did her in. She had also made too many enemies in the Ministry over the years who wanted her gone. Anyone connected with her was tainted. Percy was among them but got off very lightly for having changes sides at the end.

When he finished his time in Azkaban, Percy foreswore politics and partnered with Fred and George in the joke shop business -- finally learning to tell a joke himself. He helped them open a second Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes in Hogsmeade.

Bill resumed work at Gringotts along with Fleur and they began dating a few months later.

Draco, as sole surviving heir, inherited the Malfoy family fortune, which was considerable, despite the fact his parents had written him out of their will. The Ministry voided the will in recognition of his role in the war. He added marble facing stones for his mother and father in the family crypt out of family duty, rather than respect. He declined financial assistance from the Ministry and rebuilt Malfoy Manor. Then he turned it into an orphanage for wizard children and funded a sizeable endowment.

For himself, he bought one of the townhouses in Grimmauld Place. He donated money to have the green properly landscaped and made beautiful for all the residents of the square. And while he waited for Ginny to finish school, he helped his future in-laws in every way they would permit.

Harry was allowed to begin Auror training without having taken or passed the N.E.W.T. examinations, which were waived by the Ministry. Absolutely no one objected. Harry inherited number Twelve and what little remained of the Black family fortune from Sirius, who had named him sole beneficiary in his will. Harry's inheritance from his parents turned out to be substantial -- much more than had been in the vault at Gringotts. That was only the petty case account. The inheritance, held in Trust until he turned seventeen, made him very rich.

Despite being extremely busy with Auror training, Harry renovated number Twelve from top to bottom to make it into a fitting modern home. Harry made sure that Kreacher had his own room with an ensuite bath off the kitchen. It brought the wizened old house-elf to tears for only the third time that Harry had known him. When Harry brought Hermione back to London after her final day at Hogwarts, she reacted like Kreacher when she saw what had been had done.

Harry's aunt Petunia and cousin Dudley decided not to return to number Four, Privet Drive, after it was rebuilt. They moved on. Dudley left home after school and started a bicycle repair business -- to the great dismay of his mother. He met a nice girl in a weight loss center, and they married soon after.

Ollivander spent several weeks in St Mungo's recovering from his torturous ordeal. After regaining his health, he reopened his wand shop in Diagon Alley -- supplying the next generation of witches and wizards with their first wands. A few years later, it was rumored that he had acquired a particularly powerful wand and was studying its unique qualities.

When Hermione completed her seventh year at Hogwarts, Harry still had two more years of Auror training remaining. Though Hermione had moved into number Twelve, they did not have much time together because Harry was either studying, in class, or on assignment accompanying a qualified Auror -- which might be any time of the day or night.

Harry encouraged Hermione to go on a worldwide tour to further her studies. Though at one time she had professed against ever studying wizarding law, her intention to fight injustice and prejudice toward both Muggle-borns and intelligent Magical beings drove her toward that topic of study. She excluded Dementors from the list, because she knew they were incapable of peacefully co-existing with humans.

As she had promised years before, Hermione did something nice for the house-elves of Hogwarts. She worked with Professor McGonagall and had individual gold badges

made for each one, including Kreacher, to commemorate their heroism. Each badge had their name and the words, 'The Hogwarts Brave 100' engraved on it. She also had a matching memorial plaque made which listed all their names. It was mounted in the Great Hall. There was an unveiling ceremony at a special feast for all the house-elves where they received their badges, which they wore with pride. Everyone cheered and cried.

Draco could not decide what he wanted to do. Going back generations, the masters of Malfoy Manor had never worked. He was not up to running a wizarding orphanage and turned it over to Ted and Andromeda Tonks. He built them a new house on the estate. They gave their old house the Ministry had helped rebuild to Nymphadora. Draco had no interest in joining Harry to become an Auror, though he had also been offered the opportunity by Kingsley. He wanted to be with Ginny, but she was still in school. Even though he saw her every weekend, on holidays, and during summer break, by the time she started her seventh year, Draco had changed his mind -- but not about becoming an Auror.

Draco returned to complete his seventh year at Hogwarts alongside Ginny.

They were married in the Great Hall on the last day of school. All students and staff attended, along with all their friends and family. Harry was Groomsman; Luna was Maid of Honor; and Hermione and Tonks were bridesmaids. Harry told Hermione that if he had not known the Weasleys, he would have thought every gingered hair person in the country had been invited.

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The wedding reception for family and friends was at the rebuilt Borrow. Before Draco left with Ginny for their honeymoon in Egypt, he asked to talk to Harry privately. They went outside into the garden. Draco performed *Muffliato* to make sure they were not overheard.

Draco said something had been weighing on him and he had to talk about it. It was about the Battle of Hogwarts and... Ron.

It was shocking and very hard to listen to. Harry did not say anything.

Draco was near tears. "...He just *wouldn't* surrender. I *begged* him. And then he said he'd *kill* her, so I couldn't have her. And that's when I did it..." Draco stopped and

gathered himself. He took a deep breath and asked, “Should I tell Ginny?” He looked very worried.

Harry looked sorrowfully at his best friend and shook his head. “No, Draco. There are some things that can *never* be told, no matter how much you love someone. You’ll have to live with it.”

“I understand,” said Draco, adding, “Harry, I’m sorry to burden you with this; you’re the only person I felt I could ask.”

Harry nodded, but he wished Draco had not told him. He could *never* unhear it, never tell *anyone*, not even Hermione.

Then Draco said, “I’ll meet you back inside... I want to... think for a while.”

Harry put his hand briefly on Draco’s shoulder and then turned to walk back to the house. After a few steps he paused and suddenly wondered why Draco had wanted to talk to him privately about his honeymoon. Draco had always been far more knowledgeable than Harry when it came to romance. He shrugged and then resumed walking.

Draco lowered his wand and returned it to his robes. He was not about to let his best friend share his burden.

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After Hogwarts, Ginny tried out for and became a member of the Holyhead Harpies professional Quidditch team as a Chaser. Later she became a sports reporter for the Daily Prophet. Draco supported her in every way. Her reporting job got him interested in writing. He started writing stories about Hogwarts that soon became very popular.

Harry liked them so much, he asked Draco to ghost write his autobiography. They worked on it together with Hermione and Ginny over the next three years. It became an instant best seller.

Harry included Dobby’s story and the little elf became a hero -- even among his fellow house-elves. However, his fellows never mentioned the freedom or paying parts, which they continued to consider quite mad.

Dobby received dozens of paying job offers, including increased pay from Professor McGonagall to remain at Hogwarts. But Dobby accepted an offer from Draco to take care of the orphanage in the rebuilt Malfoy Manor. He also grudgingly accepted a second day off per month -- but only because it would allow him to visit his wizard friends more often.

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A few months after the war ended, the first biography of Albus Dumbledore appeared, written by Herbert Waffling. It was twaddle -- no more than a recounting of information in the public record and newspaper articles.

Another book appeared soon after written by Elphias Doge, one of the members of the Order of the Phoenix that Harry had rarely seen. It was a personal account by an old school friend who had clearly idolized Albus. Still, Harry liked it and sent Doge a letter of appreciation. Doge had given Professor Dumbledore's eulogy at the memorial service at Hogwarts.

The third book caused a sensation. It was a posthumously published account by the estate of Bathilda Bagshot -- the noted historian and author of a *History of Magic* -- assembled from her personal papers. It only covered the period from the Dumbledore family's move to Godric's Hollow to Dumbledore's defeat of Grindelwald in 1945.

The book exposed Dumbledore's troubling early political thought and friendship with Gellert Grindelwald. It was a dispassionate and factual day-by-day record of events and did not offer any analysis. However, 'analysis' was quickly provided by a number of unscrupulous journalists and freelance writers who sought to capitalize on the new information by sensationalizing and wildly speculating about Dumbledore's formerly hidden past.

Harry knew about all of it. Professor Dumbledore had told him everything in the Room of Requirement. But it still did not make pleasant reading. Hermione reminded him that Professor Dumbledore had more than proven himself. Still, Harry went to see Dumbledore's younger brother, Aberforth, the one living member of the Order of the Phoenix that Harry had never personally met. Dumbledore had never mentioned his brother to Harry before the Room of Requirement, though he had learned of him from Sirius.

Aberforth had never once come to Order headquarters at number Twelve or been active. Yet he had helped rally the citizens of Hogsmeade to the Battle of Hogwarts and

Harry had seen him there. Harry recognized him from the photograph Sirius had shown him. But Harry still had never spoken to him.

Neville told Harry that the Room of Requirement for Dumbledore's Army had made a tunnel into the Hogg's Head Inn and that Aberforth had provided food and drink for him so Dobby would not have to continue risking being discovered.

Harry wanted Aberforth's view of his older brother.

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Aberforth was reluctant to speak. That he and Dumbledore were nothing alike was obvious to Harry. Without giving details, Aberforth finally said that in his youth his brother had wanted to change the world -- to conquer it -- regardless of how it affected people, including the ones he loved. He also said his brother *used* people.

His tone was bitter, but then it softened as he said, "When he finally came to his senses... after he had lost the ones he loved... he devoted his life, and ultimately gave his life, to save it. ...Unfortunately, he still *used* people to do it. That never changed. I think you, Harry Potter, know what I mean."

Harry did understand.

Had Dumbledore used Harry? Yes, without a doubt.

Did Harry care? Perhaps briefly, but now he understood it had all been, ironically...

...for the greater good.

## 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 Deathly Hallows* by J.K. Rowling.