

Chattel The Duel

Head Girl Hermione Granger was heading back to Gryffindor Tower from the library late one December morning when someone pulled her into a dark and empty classroom. Strong hands clamped on her mouth and wrist, preventing her from saying more than "Wha-" and drawing the wand she had already gripped.

"We're not going to harm you," a female voice whispered in a pacifying tone. "We just want to talk."

Hermione heard the door close.

"Ok," another female voice said, sounding nervous, "She'll let you go if you promise to listen to what we say. Deal?"

"Mumph." Hermione nodded, mind moving quickly.

"I'll take that as a yes," the first voice said.

Hermione felt the hands loosen. "It was," she confirmed. She stepped away from her attacker and turned, not releasing her wand. Her eyes had yet to adjust to the low light in the room, so she could not identify the two forms standing near the door. "Now who are you and what do you want?"

"It's Daphne and Tracey," Tracey Davis answered, waving her wand and bringing the torches to life.

Hermione nodded, recognizing the two Slytherin girls. "And may I ask why you drug me in here?"

They looked at each other. "Please have a seat, Granger," Daphne said with a sigh.

Hermione studied the two girls, noting the signs of tension in both of them. The fact that they had neither tried to hex her nor grudgingly asked for help with homework - the only two interactions she had ever gotten from Slytherins in her year - piqued her curiosity. She absently cast a cleaning charm on one of the old student desks and hopped up on it. "Well?" she asked neutrally.

Tracey let out a breath. "You're muggle-born. What do you know of pureblood customs?"

"Why?" Hermione asked with an edge in her voice.

"That's not a slight on you," Tracey hastened to answer. "I'm only a full-blood myself. I just need to know how much you already understand of the betrothal customs of the pure-bloods."

"Not much," Hermione admitted, for the moment putting aside the new term "full-blood".

"Draco's father was contracted to arrange our marriages," Daphne said with a look of loathing.

"With the caveat that Draco would not be either of our husbands," Tracy added firmly.

"He still found a way to make this situation awful for you, I take it?"

"What makes you say that?"

Hermione smiled slightly. "You are both clearly unhappy and are coming to me, a high profile muggle-born which must grate, for some reason. Is it because I'm the best friend of the Boy-Who-Lived?"

Tracey and Daphne glanced at each other. "Told you she'd figure that out," Daphne mumbled. She turned to Hermione. "You're right about that.

"I'm told that the muggle world is more progressive in their treatment of wives, but in the magical world it all depends on the betrothal contract. Ours state that we would become our husband's chattel."

"I thought slavery was outlawed in Britain in 1807," Hermione said cautiously.

Tracey smiled wryly. "Not everything written in books is accurate, Granger. Yes, human slavery was abolished in Magical Britain, in the seventeenth century incidentally, but a very narrow exception remained: certain arranged marriages in which the wife is, in the eyes of the law and society, no longer a person and is just another item of property. This category is called 'chattel wives'. I call it slavery under another name."

"What?" Hermione gasped, a look of shocked horror etched upon her face. "You're kidding?"

"It happens in the pure-blood families," Tracey said with a shrug. "Even without being our husband, Draco has made it clear that he intends to use

us for his own entertainment and to make us a common property of his friends. We would rather this not happen," she finished dryly.

"I'll die before I allow that," Daphne said with a fierce scowl.

"I don't blame you. Wait, Tracey, you said you're not a pure-blood, but that this only happens in pure-blood families?" Hermione asked.

"I'm the third generation of full-blood." She raised a hand at Hermione's impending question. "Full-blood just means both parents are magical. Potter, for instance, is a first generation full-blood. Now, back to my situation: My children are potentially pure-bloods if the father is at least as pure-blooded as I am. Not being pure-blood lowers my family's social position, but the fact that we've run several successful businesses for generations makes me *acceptable* enough to the pure-bloods looking for a wife."

Hermione nodded at Tracey's explanation. "Okay, so Lucius Malfoy somehow gained the right to arrange your marriages, and he's used it to turn you into slaves for someone."

"Goyle and Crabbe," Daphne supplied.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Figures. Not to put too fine a point on it, but why'd your families allow Malfoy to do this?"

"To arrange a pure-blood marriage is something of an honor with certain unwritten rules as to how everyone should behave, what the terms are, and all that," Daphne said.

Tracey took over. "Which is why Malfoy got to do the job in the first place."

"You expected his honor to keep him in check?" Hermione asked, trying not to let her disbelief color her voice.

"Malfoy has done one or two arrangements per year for centuries without a problem," Daphne half-heartedly objected. "I tried to tell my father about Draco, but well . . ."

Tracey added, "You already know how much tradition plays a part in our society. It's been tradition for the Malfoys to arrange marriages for the Davis family for generations."

"Until now," Hermione pointed out. "When your parents saw the final terms, why'd they go along with it?"

"Simply put, he'd destroy our families if we didn't sign."

The Gryffindor nodded. "Okay, that explains how you got into the situation. What do you want from me? Or more to the point, from Harry?"

Tracey took a deep breath before resuming. "Being potential property does help us in this instance. We can be transferred to another . . . owner without too much fuss. Draco intends to use that status to his advantage; we intend to use it to ours."

"How?"

"To put it bluntly, we were hoping that you would help us convince Potter to challenge the goons to a duel."

"Why Harry?" Hermione asked. "Why not someone else? It couldn't be hard to defeat those two."

"I could defeat those two," Daphne stated with a derisive snort. "I'm not sure I could defeat their champion."

"Which would almost certainly be Draco," Hermione concluded in immediate understanding. "Still, why Harry?"

"Because Potter is probably the most powerful wizard attending classes right now," Daphne said simply, "and the most skilled duelist. Neither of us is willing to take a chance here."

"Potter is . . ." Tracey trailed off, clearly trying to find the right words. "From what we know he's not a berk - he'd treat us well. Someone we don't know might not, and it's not like we could ask one of the professors to interfere."

"Why not?"

"Everything happening to us is perfectly legal," Daphne replied with a disgusted frown. "The professors couldn't even challenge the goons to a duel of their own without resigning first; old Hogwarts rule prevents it."

"I've read it," Hermione agreed. "Without it I'm sure Snape would have challenged Harry in first year."

"What makes you think they will accept Harry's terms?" Hermione asked next.

"Draco would never pass up the chance to try to hurt Potter," Tracy sniffed. "After that, we're relying on your influence to keep Potter from selling us off or offering us up in a duel of his own."

Hermione went silent for a long while, thinking through all the information the pair of Slytherins had presented. "I'll talk to Harry," Hermione finally promised, "but I can't promise you what his reaction will be. He might not do anything, after all."

"Have him come down and talk to us," Daphne requested. "We'll be here for the next few hours. If needs be . . . well, I suppose we could give him a sample."

A . . . sample?" Hermione squeaked.

"Think of it as an advance," Tracy agreed. "We're willing to do anything - and I do mean anything - within the bounds of our betrothal contracts."

"But -" Hermione started to object, eyes wide.

Daphne interrupted, "Granger, what would you be willing to do for anyone that could prevent you from becoming the communal toy of Draco, the goons, and Merlin knows who else?"

"Point taken," Hermione admitted with a scowl.

"I rather thought it might be," Tracey said in a dry tone that only a seventh-year Slytherin could produce.

"One last question. Why now?"

"Pardon?"

"Why approach him now? Why not wait until after the hols?"

"We're time critical now. The *wedding* is Christmas Eve."

"Okay, then why wait until this late?"

"Honestly? We'd hoped to figure a way out of it without becoming anyone's property."

Hermione nodded, satisfied with the answers. "I'll be right back with Harry. Just wait here, please."

"Thank you, Granger."

They silently watched the door close. "You think he'll go for it?" Daphne asked several seconds later.

"I think so," Tracy said. "If all else fails we can always kill ourselves."

"Too bad we can't do things the old fashioned way," Daphne said as she took Hermione's former seat.

"True, just killing the two idiots would solve so many problems. A shame it would get us killed. It really would be much simpler."

"Yeah." After that, they waited in silence for their savior to arrive.

Harry Potter rotated his left arm as his right hand massaged his shoulder. Hermione found him just before the young man entered Gryffindor Tower.

"Hey, Harry. You okay?"

"Hmm? Oh, hi, Hermione. I'm fine. Professor Flitwick just got me with a Bludgeoning Hex."

"Oh, you just had a lesson? How are those going?"

"I think they're going okay. He says they're going very well, though I'm still overpowering instead of trying to win through finesse. Anyway, what did you need?"

She paused, unsure how to answer.

"Uh, oh," he said with a chuckle.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"You. Or whatever you're about to say, anyway."

"What? I didn't say anything!"

He smiled at her. "Hermione, we've been best friends for over six years. When you frown just enough for the line to appear between your eyes and then chew the right lower corner of your mouth, that means that there is something you want to talk with me about, I'm not going to like it, but you're going to try to convince me anyway."

She blinked.

He laughed, fist raised in triumph. "Yes! I surprised her! My day is complete."

She laughed. "Okay, Mister Seer, you're right so far. But you'll never guess what I need to tell you."

Harry put on an exaggerated pondering expression, tapping his lips with a finger. "I won't like it, but you're going to try to convince me anyway," he audibly considered the situation. He snapped his fingers. "Oh, I know! Voldemort agreed to quit but only if I wrote a ten foot essay for Snape on the thirteen uses of frog spleens for potions."

She gave him a strange look. "Uh, no."

"Then you were right: I'll never guess it."

She rolled her eyes. "Daphne Greengrass and Tracey Davis want to talk with you."

"Why wouldn't I want to do that? What, they want me to marry them or something?"

She paused. "Not . . . precisely."

His eyes narrowed at her. "Then what *do* they want?"

"I think you need to talk with them yourself."

He studied her face for a few more moments before giving a sharp nod. "Lead on, then."

Harry walked into the room a few minutes later. Both Slytherin girls immediately stood and clasped their hands loosely in front of themselves, looking somewhere between soldiers at attention and servants standing before their master. Harry regarded the two girls with an unreadable look for several long moments. "Hermione says that the two of you have something you want to talk to me about?"

"Just listen to them, Harry," Hermione pleaded, standing near the door.

He nodded. "So, what's going on?"

"What do you know about pure-blood marriage laws?" Tracey asked.

"Not a thing," Harry replied with a shrug.

Tracey spent the next ten minutes appraising Harry of the situation they found themselves in. "So, if you win, we become yours," she finished the explanation.

"You can do anything with us," Daphne added. "If you want to pass us around to all your Gryff buddies, then you can. I'd prefer not to be treated that way, of course, but legally there would be nothing that Tracey, I, or anyone else could do about it."

"I wouldn't do that!" Harry objected with a frown.

"Which was one of the reasons we chose you," Daphne said with a gentle smile. "We figured that you'd treat us decently. You won't turn us into prostitutes or party favors like Draco intends."

"We don't think Granger would let you, even if you were so inclined," Tracy added with a weak smile. "Or at the least that she'd raise enough hell to give you pause."

"So that's the situation," Daphne said. "You've got the power, you've got the ability, and we hope that you'll treat us well when this is all over."

Harry was quiet for some time, looking back and forth between the two girls. For their part, they stood, nervously gazing back.

"What do you think, Hermione?" he asked.

She paused for several seconds, frowning. She finally looked up at him. "You're living the dream a lot of boys have," Hermione said with a shrug. "The fact that you're uncertain about it does you credit, but . . . but if I were in their situation I'd be asking you - no begging you - for the same thing. On top of that, it's time limited. You don't have a lot of time to decide." She herself had a lot more questions to ask of the girls but wanted some privacy once they were safe.

Harry nodded slowly. "Only one question. No, two. First, is this really what you two want?"

Both girls grimaced.

"*Want*?" Tracey stressed. "No, I don't *want* to do this; I *want* to spit on Draco's lifeless body, but that's not an option. On the other hand, it's better than any of the alternatives." Daphne nodded her agreement.

"Fine. Last question: Will this hurt me in any way?" He stared into Tracey's eyes, pouring as much power into a silent Legilimency Spell as he could. He disliked the necessity of what he was doing, but they were desperate Slytherins.

Tracey recognized at least some of what he was doing. She faced him fully and spoke plainly, "To the best of my knowledge, what we have proposed will not harm you, directly or indirectly, in any way."

Harry exhaled and brought his hand up to rub at the stress headache he suddenly realized he felt. "How do I do this?" he asked in defeat.

"Just challenge Goyle and Crabbe in a duel with us as the stakes," Daphne replied, breathing a quiet sigh of relief. "They have no reason to accept, but if you mention that they're allowed to name a champion, Draco will stumble all over himself to agree."

"Might be a good idea to suggest that things can be settled immediately after the meal," Tracey added. "Don't give them any time to think about it."

"Traditionally the time and place is named by the challenger. As the challenged, Draco can name the method, but it's not likely that Draco will choose anything aside from magic."

"Sneer and imply that he's unsure of his magical powers if he does," Daphne suggested. "Unless you're confident you could beat him with a blade or something."

Harry had a brief fantasy involving the Sword of Gryffindor and copious amounts of Malfoy blood spilling onto the floor. He shook his head. Entertaining as that idea was, he admitted to himself that he knew nothing of sword fighting. "Thanks. I didn't know anything about how to initiate a magical duel," he said.

"You've been training with Flitwick, haven't you?" Tracey asked in confusion.

"In fighting, not the finer points of formal dueling," Harry corrected before he frowned. "What makes you say that?"

Daphne shook her head. "It's an open secret for anyone paying attention. Which excludes the ferret."

Harry and Hermione glanced at each other and burst out laughing. Harry's was slightly hysterical, but nobody commented on that fact. "I didn't know anyone else called him that besides us," Harry said, wiping a tear from his eye.

The girls grinned. "After what Moody did to him in fourth year? It's become a popular phrase for those of us who're not part of the Death Eater Idolization Club.

"Back to the duel, though, we'll be behind you," Daphne assured him. "I'll tell you anything you need to know."

"Should we do this now?"

"The sooner the better," Tracy agreed. "The Yule Ball is tomorrow, so we can't do this then."

She took a deep breath. "Thank you, Harry," she said quietly.

"Yes, thank you," Daphne added. "I know I was willing to do a lot more to convince you to accept this proposal; for what it's worth, thank you for not demanding that of me."

"I wouldn't do that," Harry objected, his blush returning.

Daphne and Tracey both looked at him with small, sad smiles but did not verbally respond.

The four silently walked to the Great Hall, each lost in their own thoughts. Upon entering, the three girls stopped between the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables and watched Harry walk up to the Slytherin table.

"Crabbe; Goyle. I challenge you two idiots to a duel with your betrothed as the spoils." A sudden hush fell over the Great Hall as the students and staff stopped to watch the developing situation.

"Can they appoint a champion?" Draco asked hopefully from his place between them.

"They can," Harry agreed, utterly ignoring the two thugs he had originally challenged. "Are you volunteering?"

"It'll be a pleasure to wipe that smirk off your face, scarhead," Draco said happily. "Come to the third floor at -"

"It's traditional for the challenger to name the time and place," Harry interrupted. "Or did your parents neglect to instruct you in that bit of etiquette on top of all the rest of your appalling manners?"

"I knew, Potter," Draco said quickly, convincing nobody.

"Then you were trying to take advantage of my background, assuming I'm ignorant?" Harry continued before Draco had a chance to reply. "Have you no honor?"

"Where and when, Potter?" Draco hissed.

"Here, after the meal."

"I'll be here, Potty," Draco agreed in a growl. "Be ready to be humiliated." He stood and left the room.

Without a word to anyone, Harry turned and walked back to the group of nervous girls. "What now?" he asked them.

"Now Dumbledore comes over and tries to talk you out of it," Hermione said.

"What makes you say that?"

"May I have a moment of your time, Harry?" a familiar voice asked.

With a grin to the bushy-haired girl, Harry said, "Never mind." He turned to find Dumbledore standing behind him with a grave expression on his face. "What did you need, Professor?"

"Might we speak privately?"

"I'm busy at the moment," Harry said dryly. "Perhaps later."

"I apologize, but the conversation I wish to have is quite urgent."

"Then I am afraid that you'll have to talk here," Harry replied. "I have an appointment coming up that I can't miss."

"Yes, that appointment is the topic I wish to speak with you about."

"Harry, I fear that you may not know what you have gotten yourself into. You have chosen to challenge Mr. Malfoy in public before witnesses, and he has chosen to accept. The only way we can resolve this is for you to offer up an apology, Severus assures me that -"

"No," Harry flatly refused.

"But people could be injured," Dumbledore said in a grandfatherly tone. "Surely you don't want that?"

"But people *will* get injured if I don't do this, Headmaster. Namely these two lovely ladies."

"If your only wish truly is to prevent anyone getting hurt, then have Draco forfeit," Harry continued calmly. "Now if you will excuse me, I'd like to relax before we begin."

Dumbledore knew there was no point in continuing, at least in front of the other students. "Very well, Harry," Dumbledore said with a disappointed look on his face.

"I can't say that was unexpected," Harry muttered, turning back to the girls. "Now what?" he asked yet again.

"Now we rub your muscles for a few minutes to get you limber," Tracey said firmly. She imperiously waved a gaggle of fourth year Gryffindors out of their space at the end of the long Gryffindor table. "Move aside. We need some room." The Gryffindors, after a look at Hermione and Harry, moved down the table.

Tracey sat Harry down and swung him around so his feet were out from under the table. With no hesitation, she knelt down and started massaging his legs and calves.

Daphne, meanwhile, sat down behind Harry and started running her hands across his neck and shoulders. "Hermione, could you get his wand hand and wrist?"

"I . . . alright," she agreed. "You owe me for this, Harry."

"We're keeping score then?" Harry asked with a crooked grin as he relaxed into the ministrations of the three girls.

"Never mind," she laughed. "Or rather, if we are, then we can start by counting all the essays that I helped you research or that I edited for you."

"Touché." He groaned as the three girls continued working. "If you keep giving me massages like this, then the duel will most definitely be worth it."

Tracey laughed without slowing her hands. "Glad you're enjoying it, Potter." All four of them ignored the Great Hall full of watching, whispering students.

Harry gave a sudden yelp. The three girls stopped, startled. "What's wrong?"

Harry's hand moved, and he rubbed the sore spot on his left shoulder.

Daphne pulled the collar of his shirt back and peeked down his shirt. "You're developing a bruise here. What happened?"

"Bludgeoning Hex; I didn't dodge fast enough," he grumbled.

"Did Professor Flitwick at least teach you how to block it next time?" Daphne asked with humor. She waved her wand over the area.

Harry relaxed. "Oh, that's better. Thanks."

"That's only temporary. If you win, I'll finish the job tonight." Her voice dropped to a purr that sent shivers up Harry's spine, "And if you humiliate Malfoy, I'll see what *e/se* I can do to make you feel better."

He gave a quiet laugh. "You *do* know how to motivate a guy, don't you?"

"Here comes Draco," Tracey nervously said after a few silent minutes. "Once you're both in the dueling circle, the first thing you need to do is open your shirt to show you're not wearing any armor. After that, bow and begin. Good luck, Harry."

"Remember," Daphne whispered, "you can legally kill him in this duel so long as you avoid the Killing Curse, and Draco will most certainly try to kill you. Don't show any mercy, and don't let up until the judge declares the duel completed. Remember, if you lose you're effectively killing both Tracy and me. Please, *please* don't lose."

"I won't," Harry assured the two frightened girls.

With a deep breath, Harry smoothly stood and stepped toward the open space in front of the Head Table that Professor Flitwick had prepared without being asked. Harry opened his shirt to show a bare chest. "How about you, Malfoy? You wearing any armor?"

"How dare you imply I'd do something like that?" Draco asked haughtily.

"Wearing armor would violate the Code," Flitwick said sternly.

"I'm not wearing any armor," Draco growled.

"Prove it," Harry challenged.

"I refuse to debase myself with such a vulgar act," Draco protested. "I am greatly offended by the fact that you're challenging a Malfoy's honor."

"The challenge would be to find *any* honor in the Malfoy family," Harry retorted. "After all, you didn't even show up to the duel we arranged back in first year." He grinned as a wave of murmuring swept through the hall, bringing a flush to Malfoy's face.

"We're all waiting," Harry called, when Malfoy still refused to open his shirt.

"Is this all really necessary?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes it is," Harry said firmly. "Unless . . ."

"Unless?" Dumbledore grasped at the straw.

"Unless we change the terms so that armor doesn't matter," Harry mused. "In that case, I suppose I'd have to use spells that couldn't be blocked," he finished with a shrug.

"You would really . . ." Dumbledore gasped.

"Your choice, Malfoy," Harry stated calmly, completely ignoring the sputtering Headmaster.

"No . . . no I refuse to allow those spells to be cast in these halls," Dumbledore interrupted. "Open your shirt, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco's hands shook in his rage, but he unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a black, dragon hide vest.

"Looks like I win then," Harry said with a satisfied smile. "As I understand it, Malfoy violated the Code; he loses."

"We still have one more duel, Potter," Draco sneered. "For the other who- I mean *prize* ."

"Why don't we have it now then?" Harry suggested, ignoring the verbal slip. "Providing of course you remove your vest."

"Damn you, Potter," Draco hissed.

"Was that a yes?" Harry asked. "Be back in ten minutes or forfeit, you bloody coward."

Harry returned to his seat and the girls immediately sat him down to massage the returned tension out of his muscles. "You have to relax," Daphne advised. "Please, you're better than him. It's not worth getting worked up about."

"His grades prove he's rubbish at anything but potions," Tracey agreed. "And he only does well there because Snape cooks his grades. You've got nothing to worry about, just close your eyes and relax."

"Giving me orders, Tracey?" Harry asked with audible amusement. He did not, however, bother to open his eyes.

"Call it a strong suggestion. Besides, I'm now your betrothed."

Daphne asked, "How do you figure?"

"He challenged Crabbe first," Tracey answered with just a trace of smugness.

"Damn, you're right," Daphne answered. She leaned over and whispered into his ear, "And remember: though you've humiliated Draco already, you haven't rescued *me* yet. Therefore I still have no incentive to make you feel better."

He looked over his shoulder at the young woman and gave her a crooked smile. "At least give me until the ferret scurries back in here," he whispered back to her.

"Want something to drink, mate?" Ron interrupted, handing a glass forward.

Harry focused on his friend. "Thanks, Ron."

"No problem, mate. Shame Malfoy is such a coward." His eyes shifted from each of the girls to another.

"I still have one more duel to fight," Harry assured him. "I'll bust him up real good for you then."

Ron laughed. "I'll hold you to that."

"Something's happening," Hermione whispered, having kept her head up as she rubbed Harry's wrist and hand. "Snape is talking to Dumbledore."

"You are sure you can finish this without harming him?" Dumbledore repeated.

"I believe so," Snape assured the man. While he had no intention of leaving Potter able to walk away under his own power, it was important to tell the old fool otherwise.

"We were lucky on the first duel," Dumbledore muttered with a sigh. "We may not be so lucky on the second. Remember, Severus, as educators it is our duty to insure that none of the students are harmed."

"Of course, Headmaster," Snape agreed smoothly.

Snape turned and said loudly, "Change of plans, Potter. I'll be facing you in the next duel."

"According to Hogwarts: a History , it is strictly forbidden for students to duel Professors," Hermione replied before Harry had a chance to respond.

"Unless the Headmaster gives his permission," Dumbledore said. "This really is for the best."

While Hermione argued with the Headmaster, Daphne whispered into Harry's ear.

"To the death then," Harry loudly interrupted the two.

"What?" Dumbledore asked, paling rapidly. "Surely you can not mean that, Harry."

"I couldn't set that term on my duel with Draco due to his still being a student," Harry corrected. "As a fully accredited wizard, I can make that term to Snape." He smirked at the Potions Master. "One of us won't be leaving this duel outside of a box, Snape."

"I've been waiting . . ."

"I forbid it," Dumbledore shouted, nearly in a panic. He knew just how valuable Harry was to the Light.

"Then Draco has . . . one minute to get here," Harry said with Daphne's prompting.

Harry sighed and turned to Dumbledore. "As to the duel you tried to contrive with your pet Potions Master, it's rather disconcerting to see you flip-flopping on the permissions and rules with so little forethought. I believe such interference post-Challenge against me bends the Code Duello rather badly, too."

"He's right," Professor Flitwick spoke up. "Perhaps it would be best if you were to stay out of this, Albus."

"I -"

"I'm here, Potter," Draco shouted as he came into the Great Hall.

"With ten seconds to spare," Harry said with a glance at Daphne's watch. "Are you ready, Malfoy?"

"Ready, Pothead," he growled back, taking his place on the dueling stage.

"Then let's see you open your shirt," Harry demanded without moving from his very comfortable location.

"You can't really think . . ."

"You've shown today that you are a liar, a coward, and bereft of even a shred of honor," Harry repeated what Tracy was whispering into his ear. "I repeat my demand to see if you are wearing any armor."

"Damn you, Potter." Draco's hands were again trembling as he exposed his pale, sweating chest.

"Let's get started then," Harry said as he stood and moved across from Malfoy.

"You're supposed to return my bow, Potter," Draco sneered.

"I don't respect you," Harry replied. "Why should I even pretend?"

"Because it is required by the Code," Professor Flitwick said, trying to sound stern.

"Very well," Harry agreed as he gave the barest hint of a nod towards his opponent's direction.

Without waiting for Flitwick's signal to begin, Draco shouted, "*Flamere* !" A jet of flame shot out of Draco's wand towards Harry. While it was not a Dark spell, it was a good dueling spell as it was quick to cast and difficult to dodge.

"*Contego Gelu* ." A large shield of ice appeared before Harry, completely blocking Malfoy's flame spell.

Clearly annoyed at the ease of Harry's counter, Draco sent a spread of stunners around the shield and dark purple spears into and through the

physical barrier.

He was counting on Harry's lack of visibility to keep him behind the shield to avoid the stunners, letting the spears break through and impale him.

What he failed to remember was that the blocked visibility worked both ways.

When the first stunner came flying past his shield, Harry tapped his shoe, casting, "*Subsulto* ." Jumping up and forward, Harry easily cleared the ice shield thanks to the Jumping Charm. He was already above the action just as the first spear was connecting to the shield. Coming down toward the visibly startled Draco, Harry pointed his wand. "*Contrecto Poena* ."

A vivid blue light caused Draco to drop his wand and scream in pain.

"*Concussus*," Harry cast as he landed.

Draco's eyes rolled into the back of the head, and he collapsed to the floor.

From beginning to end, the duel took less than fifteen seconds. Despite the speed of his spells, Harry never once seemed to be excited or hurried.

"Potter wins," Flitwick announced to the shocked Hall.

"I suggest you get him to the hospital wing," Harry said nonchalantly as he slid his wand back into its holder.

"Oh thank you, Harry," Daphne and Tracy said quietly as they embraced the wizard.

"No problem," Harry whispered to them. "Now that we have more time to talk, what do I have to do to set you two free?"

"Die," Daphne said bluntly, "or kill us."

That answer rocked Harry back onto his heels. "What?"

"The contract is unbreakable," Tracy explained in a low tone. "You're stuck with us."

Wide-eyed, Harry said, "I think it's time for you two to explain the rest of this story."

Tracey led Harry and Daphne to another unused classroom near the Great Hall. As the three were seating themselves, Hermione and Ron entered and sat together a short distance away. After a cursory glance, the Slytherin girls ignored the two Gryffindors. Tracey opened her mouth to speak, but the door opened yet again to admit Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Flitwick, and Snape.

"Yes?" Tracey asked the professors in a cool tone.

"I don't now how you got into this situation, Potter, but you should release them," McGonagall said without preamble.

"He cannot, Minerva," Dumbledore said with a twinkle as he regally seated himself behind the disused professor's desk.

"What do you mean, he can't?" she asked in shock.

Snape answered, "It is an unbreakable betrothal contract between Miss Davis to Mr. Crabbe and Miss Greengrass to Mr. Goyle. *Potter* here can't release them except through death. Preferably his."

"Now, Severus," Flitwick chided the man.

Snape continued, undaunted, "Your Golden Boy has won them as chattel. What do you think of him now, Minerva? One of your precious lions is now a *slave owner*."

"Is taunting Minerva really necessary, Severus?" Dumbledore asked reprovingly.

Instead of answering, he turned to the Headmaster. "Once they become property, they cannot remain Slytherins. They will have to be moved out of the dorms as well."

Dumbledore nodded. "I am aware of that. Arrangements have already been made."

Snape gave a sharp nod. Turning to Harry, he sneered, "For the good of wizard-kind, I beseech you to use Contraceptive Potions before you . . . *enjoy* the fruits of your conquest. I would prefer to avoid the next round of Potter spawn as long as possible." Without another word, he swept out of the room.

"The git was probably jealous," Ron said to Harry with a grin.

Harry, the girls, and Flitwick grinned. McGonagall's lip twitched.

"Mr. Weasley, that was uncalled for," Dumbledore admonished him.

Tracey gave a disgusted snort. "Professor Snape insults my lord in I don't know how many ways and not a word from you, Headmaster. Then

Weasley here says one moderately amusing thing, and you're on his case about it? What a double standard you have."

The words hung in the air for several long moments.

Harry looked at Tracey in admiration. "Well said," he congratulated her. "However, no matter our status, please never call me 'my lord'."

Flitwick spoke up, "Technically, she is correct, though."

Harry groaned. "Don't tell me that I have *another* title from the whole Boy Who Lived business!"

"No, this is a much more recent title. Anyone who owns human chattel has the title of lord."

Harry sighed. "It's not like I had a lot of choice."

"I'm aware of that, dear boy," Flitwick commiserated. "I am simply stating the facts."

"As to that," McGonagall spoke up, lips pursed in disapproval, "you and your . . . brides will have to move out of the regular dorms."

"There are married student suites available in the castle," Dumbledore spoke up. "I had already informed the house-elves to have two of them prepared by the time the students returned from Yule break. I will let you know where your new room is at that time, Harry."

"Don't you mean you'll inform all three of them?" Hermione asked.

Dumbledore gave a slight shrug. "He will be the Master. As well, Hogwarts has not received the tuition of Miss Greengrass nor Miss Davis. Considering their status . . ."

Harry glared. "You *knew* what they were destined for, didn't you? And you did nothing about it?"

McGonagall transferred her disapproving look from Harry to Dumbledore. "Is that true, Albus?"

"I knew of the betrothal contracts, yes."

"And you were going to let them become little better than the toys of the upper class Slytherins?" Harry asked incredulously.

"It was for the greater good," Dumbledore said, looking just a bit uneasy.

Everyone in the room stared at him. "How is it *ever* for the 'greater good' for two innocent students to be sold into being sex slaves?" Harry demanded.

Dumbledore winced at the term. "I had hoped to keep the upper class Slytherins from turning to the Dark."

"By *sacrificing* two girls to Malfoy and his clique?" Hermione fairly shouted at him.

"Severus assured me that is not how it would -"

"Yes it was, and you know it if you would be honest with yourself," Tracey countered flatly.

"Albus," McGonagall accused him, "you have not denied that you knew precisely what was going to happen to these two young ladies."

"Minerva, I do not *know* how -"

"Stop!" McGonagall barked. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths before continuing in a brittle voice, "I think you should leave, Albus, while Filius and I help these young people try to reassemble their seriously disrupted lives."

"You'll notice that Snape has already abandoned these two lovely ladies," Harry observed to nobody in particular. He turned to McGonagall and Flitwick. "It'll be nice to have some adult help for a change, Professors. Thank you."

Dumbledore looked from one face to another. Hurt confusion in Ron and Hermione's faces, cool anger on the professors', and blazing anger from Harry, Tracey, and Daphne shone back to him.

Bowing his head, Dumbledore stood and left quietly. The tension visibly abated when the door closed.

"Albus and Severus may have known the particulars, but I do not. Could one of you please inform me?" McGonagall asked curtly.

Tracey pulled the Deputy Headmistress aside and launched into the tale again.

"What are the details of the betrothal contract?" Flitwick asked, pulling on his bottom lip as he thought.

Daphne pulled a scroll from her bag and handed it to the Charms Professor. "Here you go, Professor. Also, if we're still students, may Tracey and I join Harry for the dueling lessons next term?"

Flitwick glanced at Harry. "Been sharing information already, Harry?"

Potter shook his head. "They knew before we talked. It's apparently an open secret around school."

Flitwick nodded. "Yes, Miss Greengrass, you two may join us, though it is not for formalized dueling, rather for true magical fights." He unrolled the scroll and started reading it.

McGonagall sighed sadly when she and Tracey rejoined the others. "Albus, what were you thinking?" she asked, looking toward the door.

"It sounds like he believed Snape's *assurances* far more than reasonable."

McGonagall nodded with a frown.

"Why does he believe Snape so much, Professor?" Hermione asked.

The Deputy Headmistress sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose under her spectacles. "I wish I knew, Hermione; I wish I knew."

Shaking off her mood and ignoring the students' expressions, she took one more breath and then straightened. "Mr. Potter, now that I have all the facts, I must commend you for what you are doing."

Harry released a breath. "Thank you, Professor. I'm glad *someone* in authority is actually on my side."

"I have been on your side the whole time, Harry," Flitwick said without looking up from the scroll.

"Sorry, Fil, but you know what I meant."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other, startled. "Fil?" they silently mouthed.

Flitwick looked up and grinned. "I'm teasing you, Harry.

"Now, on to this contract. It is not common for the brides to become chattel, but it's still legal."

"I'd wondered how I never heard about the possibility," Hermione said.

Flitwick winced. "Such things don't reflect well upon the wizarding world and are . . . rarely spoken about. It is not all that surprising that you would not have found references to it.

"This is much more restrictive than most I've studied in the past. The terms for the wives are as they have stated: They will become chattel at the conclusion of the ceremony, are not permitted to harm their Lord, must be obedient to him, have limits placed on what they can say and do, even limits on how they can dress. As I said, such things are uncommon, yet legal. The wedding ceremony itself is clearly defined and is to be paid for by the groom's family, though the brides' families have the right to invite a total of twenty people. The ceremony will take place on Christmas Eve of this year."

"Does it go into detail on what the Greengrasses and Davises get?" Hermione asked.

Flitwick shook his head. "It does not, if anything."

"So I'm now under a legally binding contract to marry them and they immediately become my slaves?" Harry asked.

Flitwick grimaced at the blunt summation but nodded.

"You could have warned me," Harry said to Tracey and Daphne.

Daphne looked down and bit her lip, but neither girl said anything.

"Harry," Hermione said softly, drawing his attention, "remember what they said. They willingly chose this option. Besides, even if you knew, would you have done anything differently?"

Harry fought his anger down and thought about it for a few seconds. He deflated slightly before speaking. "I suppose not, but I'd have preferred to have known ahead of time. I had more than enough of being entered into contracts without my knowledge or consent back in fourth year."

This time, McGonagall winced.

"I am truly sorry, Harry," Daphne said softly. "If we had more time, we would have informed you. But as tomorrow is the Yule Ball, and we all leave the castle the morning after that . . ."

Harry gave a short snort of laughter. "I was planning on going to the ball stag. Looks like you two simplified at least one thing in my life."

All the girls gave him reserved smiles, but Ron laughed aloud.

"Happy to be of service, my lord," Tracey quipped.

Harry gave her a dirty look but softened it with a smile a moment later.

"He is not your lord yet," Flitwick pointed out.

Tracey and Daphne shrugged. "Technically true, but he will be soon enough."

"Which brings up another issue," McGonagall said thoughtfully. "Do you two think you are safe for the next two nights in your dorms?"

Harry's eyes widened, but he remained silent.

"Good point, Min," Flitwick said.

Ron gave both professors an incredulous look.

Flitwick smiled at him. "We are well aware of how things really are and how they may become, Mr. Weasley, even if we are not generally permitted to do anything about it."

"More of Dumbledore's interference, no doubt," Harry observed neutrally.

McGonagall frowned heavily. "Before these latest revelations, I would have phrased it differently, Mr. Potter, but essentially correct."

Tracey and Daphne had been looking at each other as the others talked. "You have a good point, Professor," Tracey said reluctantly. "Slytherin may not be safe for us."

McGonagall nodded regretfully. "I was afraid of that. Well, the married student quarters won't be available until January, Albus said. Perhaps we could put the two of you up in one of the Head Girl quarters?"

"They can stay in the Ravenclaw Head Girl rooms," Flitwick offered.

"Thank you," McGonagall said. With Hermione being Head Girl, the Gryffindor rooms were occupied. "We can get one of the house-elves -"

"Professor," Tracey interrupted, "could we use the Gryffindor Head Boy quarters instead?"

McGonagall looked at her in confusion. "Why would you rather do that, Miss Davis?"

"So Harry can visit us more easily."

After a moment, Flitwick said, "It makes sense. He *is* betrothed to them. It'd probably be a good idea to get to know them," he added dryly.

Harry gave a nervous laugh and blushed.

"True," McGonagall said, ignoring Harry's reaction. "Miss Granger, could you please show Miss Davis and Miss Greengrass the quarters?" She turned toward the back of the room and sharply clapped her hands. "Tilly!"

A house-elf popped in. "Mistress calls?"

"Move Miss Tracey Davis and Miss Daphne Greengrass's belongings from the Slytherin dorms to the Gryffindor Head Boy room."

The elf bowed and disappeared with another pop.

McGonagall turned. "I shall let you know where your new quarters are after the break, Mr. Potter.

"Do any of you have any further issues you wish to bring up with us now?"

The three teens in question shook their heads.

She nodded. "Very well. Then may I speak with Mr. Potter for a few moments?"

Taking the cue, the other four teens followed Flitwick out into the hallway.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry asked.

"Though he phrased it crudely, Severus did have a point. It would be far preferable for all concerned if you and your two brides took precautions such that they don't become pregnant." She became agitated, or at least as agitated as she ever got without a full scale brawl happening before her. "I don't know how much was covered in your muggle education, Mr. Potter, but if you need to be informed -"

Harry hastened to interrupt, "The basics were covered in my health class in muggle school, Professor. This last summer, Remus took me aside and gave me the . . . What'd he call it? Ah, yes, the 'Little Wizard's Talk'." Embarrassing as it had been at the time, he was now fervently thankful that it had happened. The concept of receiving 'The Talk' from his Head of House was more than little frightening. She probably even had moving diagrams. Harry shuddered internally.

McGonagall relaxed. "Very good.

"You are excused from curfew for tonight. I highly recommend you get to know your new ladies. Though the situation has been thrust upon you, you'd be doing them as well as yourself a grave injustice if you did not at least attempt to make the best of the situation."

Harry inclined his head in acknowledgement, surprised that, after the previous topic, McGonagall had essentially told him to spend the night with them.

"One last item. Are you still intending to spending the break here in the castle?" she asked.

Harry nodded firmly. "Definitely. I moved out of the Dursleys' house. I don't intend on ever going back."

McGonagall looked momentarily sad. "Yes, well, there are many other things to discuss: arrangements for transportation to and from the ceremony, where to live after graduation, and so on, but they will keep for a few days. Get to know the girls, Harry. Not all Slytherins are evil."

Harry blew out a breath and headed toward the door. "I know. I just saved them from one who is, though."

Harry found the four teens standing in the hall in an uncomfortable silence.

McGonagall followed Harry out and evaluated the scene in one glance. "Miss Granger, please show these three the Gryffindor Head Boy suite."

"Yes, Professor."

"Oh, and just so you're aware, I've excused Mr. Potter from curfew. Please do not give him a hard time if he chooses to stay with the ladies for some time tonight."

Hermione nodded her understanding. Ron's mouth dropped open.

McGonagall turned to Harry and the girls. "You three, please feel free to contact me with any questions or problems with which I may help you. This situation is not of your making, and you shouldn't be required to deal with it on your own."

Tracey gave her a tentative smile. "Thank you for understanding, Deputy Headmistress."

McGonagall gave a curt nod. "For your safety, I'd recommend having your dinner in your new rooms. Have a good afternoon." She turned and strode off.

Ron stared after her. "Did she just give you permission to spend the night with these two, Harry?"

The two Slytherin girls gave him a narrow-eyed look. Harry scowled.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Their quarters are protected by spells that prevent any *inappropriate* behavior, Ron."

Ron's face took on a look of comprehension. "Oh, that's why you stopped me from -"

"Yes," Hermione hurriedly answered, blushing.

Harry managed to keep a grin from forming.

Daphne rolled her eyes. "Could you show us the rooms?" she asked politely.

Hermione turned and silently led the other four to a portrait near the Gryffindor dorms. Harry and Ron recognized her as Violet, the friend of the Fat Lady. "Fidelis," Hermione said clearly.

Violet nodded, looking at the two Slytherin girls in clear curiosity.

As the portrait swung open, Hermione continued, "Tracey and Daphne will be staying in the Head Boy rooms for a few nights. Harry is permitted unlimited and unsupervised visitation with them. They'll move out before next term begins."

"My pardon, Miss Granger, but I cannot accept orders like that from a student, even the Head Girl," Violet said in a mixture of apology and clear confusion.

"Professor McGonagall will confirm the orders," Hermione said as she waved the others through.

"*This* story I have to hear," the portrait muttered as she moved off the side of the frame.

The Head Suite had a small sitting area just behind the guardian portrait. It was a great deal smaller than the house common rooms but was decorated similarly and served the same purpose.

Hermione walked through the door on the right, the others in tow. The room beyond was laid out almost identically to Harry and Ron's dorm room, though it contained only one bed. The girls' trunks were already present.

Tracey frowned. "Nit!"

A small house-elf appeared. "Young mistress calls?"

"Please change the colors of this room to something else. Brown, perhaps. And we'll need a second bed. At six, bring dinner for three to these rooms."

Nit bowed and began moving about the room in a frenzy, changing colors and cleaning.

Ron frowned at Tracey.

She shrugged. "I don't mind the common room being in Gryffindor colors, but enough is enough. Brown is neutral. Not Slytherin and not

Gryffindor."

Ron waved that off. "No, I wasn't worried about that."

"Then what?" Tracey asked in confusion.

"Two beds?" Ron asked.

Daphne glared at Ron. "I don't know what you are thinking, and I probably don't *want* to know. Just because we're both in the same situation and are willing to marry Potter, that doesn't mean I have any intention of sleeping in the same bed as Tracey!"

Ron shrugged easily. "Whatever. You're both going to become Harry's concubines in a couple days, anyway."

Now Harry glared at his friend. "I'm not going to make them sleep together if they don't want to, Ron! How could you think that?"

"They're both going to be yours, Harry. If you want both of them to sleep with you -"

"Stop right there, Ronald," Hermione said coldly, "and get your mind out of the gutter. Harry wouldn't force these two into anything like that, and you know it!"

Ron shrugged again, unconcerned. "If you say so; I'll just leave the three of you to get acquainted, shall I?" He gave a wink to Harry and left, whistling cheerfully.

The long silence was broken by Tracey. "I think I'm going to like you after all, Granger."

Not giving the Head Girl time to respond, Tracey turned. "My lord, I know he is a friend of yours, but I beg of you not to force me to -"

Harry held up a hand, stilling the girl instantly. "Don't worry about it. Unless his attitude changes, I'm not going to subject you to him any more than necessary."

"Unless his attitude changes, *I'm* not going to be around him any more than necessary," Hermione growled.

Harry looked at her in concern. "Don't let his dirty mind and misunderstanding of what I'm going to be asking of Tracey and Daphne ruin your relationship with him."

"Actually," Daphne said with obvious reluctance and a frown, "it's not really his fault. From a pure-blood point of view, it's fully expected that you'll be bedding both of us as often as you like." She gave a wry grin. "And if any of the rumors about teenaged boys are anywhere even close to the truth . . ." She let the sentence trail off.

Harry flushed crimson. "What I may want and what I'm going to force you into are totally separate things."

Tracey shrugged. "For our sake, I hope you're right."

"But that's a conversation for another day. For now, I think we need to talk."

Hermione took her obvious cue. "The loo is through that door. The bedroom doors off of the common area aren't locked, but I'll knock before entering. I ask the same in return. I guess I'll see you three at the Ball if not before. Bye."

At the smile and wave from Harry and the twin nods from the girls, Hermione left the three alone.

Nit the house-elf finished changing the room to Tracey's specifications and popped out after a quick bow.

Daphne walked over to one of the beds and seated herself. She patted the space next to her. When Harry hesitated, she smiled. "I don't bite, Harry." She tilted her head, and her eyes started to sparkle. "Unless you like that kind of thing."

Harry blushed magnificently again. Tracey let out a snort of amusement as she seated herself on the other bed.

"Girls, please stop teasing me; it's hard enough the way it is."

Tracey and Daphne glanced at each other before breaking into laughter.

Harry buried his face into his hands as he realized what he had just said. "I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

"Yep," Daphne cheerfully replied. She patted the bed beside her again. "I still need to look at that shoulder, Harry."

Finally understanding, he took a seat and turned his back to her, facing the grinning Tracey.

"Lose the robes and shirt, Harry," Daphne ordered with an audible grin. "Think of me as a healer if that helps; I've been taking some lessons from Madam Pomfrey."

After a moment of pause, Harry removed his robe and then his shirt.

Daphne quietly sent a Hogwarts house-elf to the infirmary for a bruise cream as Tracey openly appraised the young man sitting bare-chested in front of her. Quidditch and long hours in the dueling circle had left him toned and wiry. He certainly had nothing to be ashamed of.

"You want to become a healer, then?" Harry asked to distract himself from the grinning Slytherin facing him.

"That was my original plan, yes," Daphne said. She took the pot of salve from the elf. With a minimum of fuss, she spread a bit over Harry's shoulder, rubbing it in with smooth strokes.

"Original? You mean it's changed?" Harry tried to hide the hitch in his throat at her actions.

Tracey answered softly, "We're going to become your chattel, remember? She has to have your permission to get a job at all, and her income would go to you. If you say so, she will do whatever you order as a profession."

Harry's expression darkened. "Let's get something cleared up. If you have things you want to do, you do them. You don't need my permission for something like that." He quietly thanked Daphne and moved further along the bed, putting his shirt back on.

Tracey shook her head slowly in answer to his comment. "Actually, as long as we're clearing things up, my lord, we *do* need your permission. It's a legal requirement as your chattel. Any job she or I would have would affect you as well. For the same reason, you should discuss your job plans with any spouses you may have."

Harry tilted his head. "You phrased that kinda strangely. *You're* going to be my spouses, aren't you?"

"We will be concubines, not real wives; any children we give you would be legitimate but not primary heirs. We would be inferior in all ways that matter to a real wife. You can get married again later if you wanted to."

Harry shook his head. "This is all just too weird."

"Look at it from our point of view," Tracey said with a grimace.

"True," Harry agreed. "Speaking of that, how are you handling it all?"

"As well as expected; we've had a couple weeks to get used to the idea."

"You had a couple weeks and you're only telling me about it today?"

Tracey sat up straighter at Harry's flat tone and narrowed eyes. "Yes, but it isn't as bad as it sounds. It took a couple days to get used to it, more time to realize how bad the situation really is, then we tried to figure out a way to get out of it, then this plan, then we had to decide who to approach and how to do it."

"Actually," Daphne cut in, "choosing the right student didn't take much time. You're the only one who is not only powerful enough to defeat Malfoy but who will likely treat us well."

"It took longer to figure out how to get you to listen," Tracey agreed.

"And you went through Hermione?"

"Would you have listened to us without her?" Tracey asked with a shrug.

Harry frowned for a moment in thought. "I'd like to think so, but I can see how you had to play it safe."

"So, everyone suggests that we get to know each other," Tracey observed.

Harry shrugged. "My life is an open book. Literally, if you read Great Wizarding Events of the 20th Century or any of the others where I'm listed."

Daphne made a rude noise. "At best, that tells your life up to your defeat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. No, that doesn't tell us anything about *you*."

"Call him Voldemort or Riddle."

Both girls stared at him.

"What?" he asked.

"You mean the article in that tabloid was the *truth*?"

His eyes narrowed.

Tracey winced. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked that. I was just surprised."

Harry made a rude noise. "You and everyone else."

"If you don't mind my asking, what was the reason you did that interview?"

"I was hoping that if he were proven to be a half-blood, he'd lose a lot of support. Psychopaths like the Malfoys wouldn't change, but he'd lose at least popular support and financial help from the more moderate families."

Very few of them believed the article. Even if it were *proven*, it still wouldn't stop families like Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and Black."

Harry's eyes clouded over. "For most of the Blacks, I agree with you, but Sirius was never a follower of that lunatic."

"Sirius Black was his chief lieutenant," Tracey said carefully.

Harry made another disgusted noise. "The Daily Prophet wouldn't know the truth unless Fudge or Malfoy misspoke." Harry went on to explain the real story behind Sirius Black and his connection to the Potters.

The two girls shared a long look, surprised by the information. Giving a short nod, they silently agreed to keep Harry talking.

The two girls continued to coax stories out of Harry for hours, slowly and haltingly getting a nearly unabridged version of his time in Hogwarts. When their dinner arrived, all three ate in silence. Harry was exhausted after his emotional unburdening, and the girls were absorbing all the information.

"Not even Ron or Hermione know *all* of that," Harry said at length. "How did you manage to get me to talk about it?"

Tracey suggested, "Maybe you don't consider us any kind of danger to you? After all, if we're going to become your property, there's nothing we can do to hurt you."

Harry mustered up the energy to frown. "I'll never treat you two as property."

Tracey smiled at him sadly. "Thank you for that, but the fact remains that we *will* be your property."

Harry grumbled but nodded his understanding. "So what about you two? Tell me about Tracey Davis and Daphne Greengrass."

Tracey started. "I've been brought up to be a proper wife for a pure-blood. That's part of why my parents went to Malfoy in the first place. The only problem they saw going in was that most of the pure-bloods are into the whole bigotry thing, which is total tripe if you critically examine it. You, a first generation full-blood, are the most powerful wizard in our year, possibly of the generation. Granger, a muggle-born, is the smartest. Simply put, blood has nothing to do with how good a wizard is. However, it *does* matter on the financial and political side. My parents wanted me to have a more comfortable life than they do. Though owning some successful businesses, they work fifteen hours a day. They want me to have an easier life."

"Sounds lonely," Harry observed, well accustomed to that emotion.

Tracey shrugged. "Nit, our elf, was around to keep me out of trouble. We also live close to the Bones family, so I've know Susan since we were kids. I know my parents love me, even if I didn't see them a whole lot."

"Thank you for telling me."

"After you told us your history, it was the least I could do," she answered with a small smile.

"My turn, I guess," Daphne said after a short silence. "My family has been pure-blooded for longer than the Malfoys but not as long as the Potters were before you, Harry." She raised a hand at his look. "I'm not saying that to be disparaging, just a statement of fact. Historically, we've been neutral in all the fights against Dark Lords. We recognize that there is a time and a place for Dark Arts as well as uses for purely Light Magic. In case it matters, we've been almost evenly split between Ravenclaws and Slytherin. Originally, the family was deeply involved in farming." She gave a wry grin. "With a name like 'Greengrass' what else could we be? Anyway, we were farmers and raised livestock. We recognized generations ago that the purebloods are inbreeding themselves into extinction."

"But if you've been pure-blooded for so long -" Harry objected with a frown.

"Doesn't make a lot of sense, does it? Simply put, we've been lucky so far. Inbreeding will produce imbeciles like Greg and Vin or psychopaths like Pansy and Draco. Not to mention the Lestranges, but fortunately they haven't managed to produce another generation."

Harry grimaced. "Have you actually *seen* Bellatrix?"

Both girls laughed. "In her student days, Bellatrix Black was quite a looker according to Mum and Dad," Tracey said.

"We haven't been farmers for quite some time, though," Daphne took up the tale again. "Solicitors, accountants, some aurors. Whole variety of stuff, plus being shrewd with the family finances means we've been comfortable without being truly affluent for generations."

"So what do you want to do after graduation?"

"Healer," she answered promptly. "I've been taking lessons from Madam Pomfrey after hours."

"Well, I'm glad you two are well-versed in pure-blood traditions. With my upbringing, I don't have much of a clue on the muggle world let alone the wizarding one."

"With your friendship with the Weasleys, I'd though they would have taught you some of it," Tracey observed, not quite asking the obvious question.

Harry shrugged. "Not really. Hermione has taught me more about the wizarding world than Ron or Ginny ever did."

"Well, we'll just have to educate you, then," Tracey stated. "As heir of a prestigious name like yours, you should know at least some of the basics."

"Makes sense." Harry glanced at the clock. "It's getting late. I'd better turn in. See you tomorrow?"

"You don't have to go," Daphne observed.

"Thank you for the offer, but I know I need some time to think about everything. Besides, I'll sleep better in my own bed."

Tracey looked bemused. "Every bed is identical, Harry."

"Maybe, but I bet - well, hope, I guess - neither of you snore like Ron."

The girls laughed.

Harry stood with a grin. "Good night, ladies."

"Pleasant dreams, my lord."

"Have fun?" Ron asked with a grin.

Harry removed his shirt. "Yeah, I did, they're nice girls, both of them."

Neville looked at him, wide-eyed. "They're your chattel?"

Harry shook his head. "Not yet. The wedding will be Christmas Eve." He paused. "Merlin! I'm really going to get married in a few days?"

"Saved time by skipping the whole ask-the-girl-out, dating, and engagement thing," Seamus observed with a wide grin.

"Git!" Harry answered with a laugh and a chucked pillow. "Hey, all you guys are invited to the ceremony, I guess. No idea who else to invite."

"Mum will be heartbroken," Ron said.

"Inviting your whole family was already the plan," Harry assured him.

"Not that," Ron said, waving his hand. "I mean you getting married to someone other than Ginny."

Harry exchanged a glance with Dean. "Uh, news flash, Ron: Ginny's been dating Dean for a couple years, and I never dated her."

Ron shrugged. "You know Mum. She expected you two to end up marrying. She has some vision of one big happy Weasley family and scads of grandbabies for her to spoil."

Harry rolled his eyes. "What, we should suddenly realize our burning desire for each other after a quidditch match or something? I was always under the impression that dating someone first was a good idea."

"Like all the time you dated Daphne, and Tracey," Seamus reminded him.

"Shut it, you. You know what I mean."

"I never said Mum made sense," Ron pointed out. "After all, she still owns a bunch of Lockhart's books."

All the boys shuddered.

"Harry?" Neville asked hesitantly. At Harry's raised eyebrow, he continued, "Are you aware of how bad this looks? I mean, owning chattel? When it's done, it's by the darkest of families. The idea of a Light family owning human chattel . . . Well, you're going to get roasted for this."

"Malfoy's dad set it up that way. I just rescued them from that."

"Maybe," Neville admitted, "but that doesn't change the fact that you will own human slaves."

Harry winced. "I know, I know. But under the circumstances, it wasn't like I had many choices."

"I'm not trying to attack you," Neville reassured him hurriedly. "Just saying that it'll look bad."

"Yeah, I know." Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes. "G'Night."

Chattel The Yule Ball

Harry, Ron at his side, left Gryffindor Tower the next morning on the way to the Great Hall for breakfast.

Ron's eyes bugged out just after the pair stepped through the portrait. Harry looked over to find his two fiancées standing in the hallway, clearly waiting for him. Tracey was wearing her Hogwarts robes, but Daphne was wearing a jean and sweater outfit that hugged her figure.

"Good morning, my lord."

"Good morning," Harry said back, subtly elbowing Ron. "Did you two sleep well?"

"As well as can be expected," Tracey said. "Yourself?"

"Very well, actually. Our discussion last night wore me out."

Ron snickered.

Harry glanced at him in confusion. The girls gave Ron cool looks before they fell into step with Harry, one on each side and a step behind. Harry tried to slow to allow them to come alongside, but both girls immediately slowed as well. This cycle repeated and then Harry finally stopped.

Ron, now several strides ahead, stopped and turned. "What's up?"

"I'm trying to let these two walk with us, but they keep trying to stay behind me," Harry said in aggravation.

"Our position dictates that we walk behind you, my lord," Daphne said quietly.

Harry made a rude noise. "To hell with that tradition. I will not force you two to act subservient to me. Come on, walk beside me." He held out his arms, elbows away from his body in clear invitation.

Tracey and Daphne looked at each other for a brief moment before smiling. Each clasping an arm, they again started moving forward.

Upon entering the Great Hall, a sudden hush fell. Trying desperately to keep his composure, Harry moved woodenly toward his regular seat. When he reached it, he found Hermione already sitting across from him, Ron's regular spot open beside her.

"This is the Gryffindor table. What are those two tramps doing here?" Lavender asked acidly.

"Yeah, send the snakes back to their pit," Parvati said, backing up her friend.

Harry fixed both girls with a glare that rocked them back in their seats. "If you must know, Snape has already disowned them. At the moment, they have no house. Now if you two are *quite* through insulting my fiancées . . ."

Both Gryffindor girls audibly gulped and fixed their attention on the plates before them.

Seamus looked an apology to Harry from his place beside Lavender.

Ginny, having watched the entire scene, turned to the third year beside her. "Budge over. We've got guests."

Soon, there was enough room at Harry's usual spot for all three of them, which they immediately took advantage of.

Both girls ate sparingly, their stomachs tied up in knots over the whole situation. Finally giving up the task of eating more, each took out parchment and quill.

Hermione, sitting across from them, noticed that they both shielded their work from everyone around them but made no attempt to keep the contents from Harry. Harry, for his part, paid them no mind aside from an initial look of curiosity he gave each girl.

"Oh, look! It's Potty and his two slaves!" Malfoy's voice called loudly.

Everyone in the Hall hushed, awaiting Harry's reaction.

When he did not respond, Tracey answered without looking up, "It's thanks to *your* father that we'll be slaves in the first place."

"And it's thanks to Harry that we aren't *your* slaves," Daphne added, finishing her note with a final flourish.

Harry, keeping his head up from the moment he heard Malfoy's voice, saw more than one smirk among the watching students.

Malfoy flushed but kept his attention on Harry. "Hiding behind your *women* , Scarhead?"

Harry shrugged. "They're more than capable of dealing with you. Why should I spend more effort dealing with a little *ferret* like you than I have to?"

A few people around the room laughed aloud at this.

Malfoy flushed even darker. "You'll get yours, Potter!"

Harry opened his mouth before visibly catching himself. With a grin, he said, "Originally, I was going to suggest you get someone to write you new lines, but I realized that for once you're actually right. Thanks to the duels against you yesterday, I am indeed getting what's coming to me."

Laughter from all around the Great Hall drove a fuming Malfoy to his seat. Once the situation calmed down, Harry leaned over to each girl in turn. "My apologies for speaking of you like property, but that line was too perfect to pass up."

Daphne shrugged and gave him a small, sad smile. Tracey simply said, "It's the truth."

When Harry stood up from the table, both girls immediately stood with him and flanked him on the way out of the Great Hall.

"My lord," Daphne started, once they were in the Entrance Hall, "may we stop by the owlery?"

Harry gave her a strange look. "You don't have to ask my permission."

"Actually, we do," Tracey corrected him in a matter-of-fact tone, "though we are still technically free until the twenty-fourth. Under normal circumstances, we wouldn't go out in public unless you're with us."

"So in order for you to get to the owlery, / have to go to the owlery?" Harry asked.

They nodded.

Harry sighed and changed directions. "May I know what you're sending, or is it none of my business?"

"Harry," a voice behind them interrupted.

All three of them spun and pointed their wands immediately. Distantly, Harry was impressed that the reaction times of the two girls were nearly as good as his own.

Neville Longbottom, well aware of Harry's reflexes, had his hands empty and away from his body in a non-threatening gesture. When the wands came down, he climbed the last flight of stairs, huffing a little at the fast pace. "I heard the last question," he stated. "Harry, you still aren't thinking like a master. By definition, anything they do is your business."

"I will *not* treat them as property," Harry said forcefully.

"I understand that," Neville said patiently. "And I apologize to the ladies for how this will sound, but you *must* start thinking that way. If you don't, then everyone around you will think they're fair game, much like a discarded toy. They have no right to defend themselves. If you aren't seen as taking interest in controlling them, and therefore showing concern for their actions, they will be abused by anyone who wants to do so." He smiled apologetically to Tracey.

"What?" Harry asked in shocked confusion.

"As we've been trying to teach you," Tracey said calmly, "if you don't start treating us as *your* chattel, some of the people around here will start treating us as community property."

"That doesn't make sense!"

"Yes it does," Neville returned. "If you don't pay attention to their actions, people will start thinking you don't care about them. If you don't care about them, they can be treated poorly by anyone else, and you wouldn't defend them. Or so the logic goes, anyway."

"That's ridiculous!"

Neville shrugged. "To you, maybe, but most of the pure-blood families have elves. In public, how are elves treated?"

Harry blanched as he thought about it. Between Malfoy's blatant mistreatment and utterly controlling attitude toward Dobby, that one was clear enough. From the few times he had seen elves in Diagon Alley, that attitude was not uncommon, though Malfoy took it to extremes.

Neville nodded, seeing from Harry's expression that his point had been made. He went on, "And for your sake, you shouldn't start treating them as friends, girlfriends, or wives, either. If you're seen treating chattel as equals, then everyone will conclude that they're actually dominating *you* . Socially and politically, that will hurt you."

Harry gaped for several seconds before he turned to them. "That's why you walked behind me and try to defer to me in everything." The girls nodded. "Why didn't you warn me?"

In public?" Tracey asked pointedly.

Harry winced. "Good point." He sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. "I refuse to treat you like property. I don't care what the social conventions are. You two are fully expected to protect yourselves from unwanted advances." He gave a wry grin. "If you *want* the advances, let me know, and we'll see what we can do."

Neville's eyes were wide. "You'd let them *date*?"

"Why not?" Harry answered with a shrug. "I took them in to protect them from Malfoy's goons and to try to let them live as normal a life as possible. Keeping them from dating would defeat the purpose."

Neville scowled. "Harry, you have to understand: from every pure-blood's point of view, they're not much different in status than a couple of house-elves. You don't let house-elves date. If you want more elves, you *tell* them to breed."

"That's inhumane!"

Neville shrugged. "Elves aren't human. And as of the twenty-fourth, Tracey and Daphne won't be considered human, either. They'll be chattel, Harry; their parents bargained away their status as persons."

"But -"

Neville raised a hand, cutting his friend off. "Look, I understand that you weren't brought up in this culture. That's why I'm telling you all this. The fact is that you're a *Potter*. You're expected to live according to our traditions and customs."

"That's crazy!"

All three shrugged. "That's the way it is," Daphne quietly pointed out.

"Argh!" Harry paced back and forth for several seconds.

"If you're going to pace, at least head somewhere more private than this," Neville said reasonably. "Anyone who knows you would understand what you're saying. A pure-blood who doesn't know you would lose all respect for you if they overheard any of this conversation."

Harry made an irritated noise as his only response but did start moving toward the owlery again. The other three rushed to catch up with him.

"As a matter of etiquette, nobody is supposed to address them directly, either," Neville said conversationally as they walked. "They should direct all comments to you."

Harry simply growled in response, not breaking his angry, jarring stride.

Once in the owlery, each girl tied their letters to school owls and sent them on their way.

"As you asked, and certainly have the right to know, my letter was to my family, explaining my change in circumstance," Tracey answered an earlier question.

"Mine as well," Daphne said. "I suspect they will want to meet you soon."

Harry paled.

Neville just laughed.

Hours later, Hermione found Harry was working on an essay for Professor Flitwick in the Gryffindor Common Room. "Hey, Harry."

He looked up. "Hey, Hermione."

She looked at him carefully.

"What?"

"You okay? The girls told me about how you were acting after breakfast."

He grimaced but nodded. "Yeah, I'm alright. Just trying to adjust to everything, still."

"Hey, I thought all you girls are off doing that mysterious 'girl thing' you always do before the balls."

"Mysterious girl thing?" she asked with a grin.

Harry nodded solemnly. "I started to ask Ginny about it once. She stopped me before I finished asking the question. Something about having to kill me if I learned too much."

Hermione laughed. "I'll have to thank her for that. No, I'm here on behalf of some of the girls who are indeed doing the 'girl thing'. Grab your dress robes and come along."

Harry looked at her in confusion for a moment but then shrugged and obediently collected his school materials. Hurrying to his room to trade the books for his robes, he came back down to the Common Room.

She led him straight to the Head rooms. Ignoring the disapproving look on Violet's face, Hermione led Harry into the small common room. "Harry's here," she announced. She turned to him, ignoring the sounds coming through the open door to Daphne and Tracey's room. "I'm going to go get ready now. Good luck, Harry." Patting him on the cheek, she went through the door to her suite.

Harry contemplated just how dire that sounded.

Tracey came through the open door, levitating a tray full of nail polish, creams, combs, and assorted tools and jars whose purpose utterly baffled the lone male. "Harry! I'm glad you're here."

Harry took half a step back, eyes riveted on the tray that the former Slytherin levitated to one of the study tables. "Uh, Tracey? I sure hope you aren't planning on doing anything to me."

She blinked once before she looked back and forth from the tray to his scared expression. A small snicker escaped. "No, this is for us girls. I'm not going to beautify you, my lord."

"Unless you want us to, I suppose," Daphne said as she entered.

Harry vaguely noticed Susan Bones, hair encased in some contraption that undulated slowly, had entered at the same time, but his attention was firmly captured by Miss Greengrass. She was clearly just out of a shower, hair still glistening with water. Wearing only a towel that stretched from just above her breasts to mid-thigh, Harry had a view of a great deal of toned, flawless skin. Slender yet muscular legs moved her soundlessly across the room as bare arms worked a comb through her long hair. Her face, scrubbed clean, had that perfect complexion that Harry had only seen in magazine advertisements and on the BBC.

"Uh . . ." Harry intelligently said.

Smiling at the reaction she had produced in Harry, Daphne casually settled into the full-sized reclining chair that Tracey conjured.

High amusement clear in her voice, Susan said, "Unless you want to watch, Harry, the shower's free."

Tracey called after his retreating back, "Leave your robes on the bed, please!"

After wasting as much time as he could - perhaps an hour, all told - Harry cautiously exited the Head Boy suite to find all four girls fully clothed. They had moved on to working on each others' hair.

Hermione spotted him first. "Ah, Harry. Did you have a nice shower?"

"Very . . . stress relieving?" Susan asked with a wicked grin.

Harry tried to muster a glare through his brilliant blush.

"Be nice to the poor boy," Tracey admonished them with a grin. "He is, after all, only a boy."

"Perhaps, but for how much longer?" Susan asked, trying to smile innocently.

Harry groaned and buried his face in his hand as all four girls broke into a fresh round of giggles. "Did you all ask me to come here for a reason, or just to tease me?"

"But teasing you is so much fun!" Susan objected.

Harry gave her a dark look.

"Enough," Tracey said to Susan. She turned to Harry. "We asked Hermione to bring you here for a couple reasons. I wanted to change the colors of my robes to match yours."

"Me, too," Daphne said without looking up from her hands working something or other into Hermione's hair.

"Next, and I don't mean to offend you with this, but there has to be *something* we can do with your hair. We may not use as many cosmetic charms on a daily basis as those two Gryffindor tarts Hermione used to have as roommates, but that doesn't mean we don't know any."

Harry hesitantly said, "So long as it doesn't end up smelling all flowery, you can try, I suppose."

"I've thought about this," Hermione said, surprising them all. "The most obvious one is a non-shiny version of Sleekeazy's." She carefully turned so as not to disturb Daphne's continuing work. "That's what I used in fourth year to tame this mop." She gestured irritably at her hair. "If it can work on me, it can work on you. The other thing I thought about is letting it grow out and gathering it in a ponytail in the back."

Daphne and Tracey brightened at this. "Oh, yeah; try that. Long hair is very fashionable. Makes you look mature."

Harry thought about that for a moment. The only two people he had ever seen with hair like that were Lucius Malfoy and Bill Weasley. Despite his violent differences of opinion with Malfoy, even Harry had to admit that he presented himself well. And Bill was . . . well, Bill.

"Is there an easy way to grow my hair out?"

Hermione and Daphne let loose quiet noises of glee. Susan and Tracey simply smiled. "I know a charm to lengthen your hair, but it's only temporary," Susan said.

Harry shrugged. "Let's give it a shot."

Harry, with each of his ladies a step behind and flanking him, walked into the Great Hall. As in previous years, the hall itself was decorated beautifully. Huge evergreens stood along the walls, and an enchanted snowfall fell from the ceiling before it stopped above his head. Instead of four House tables and the Head Table, smaller, round tables for eight were scattered about the room.

After spending a moment gazing around, Harry moved toward the table containing only Luna Lovegood. "May we sit?" Harry asked her politely.

"If you wish," Luna replied. "You look quite handsome tonight, Harry," she observed in her usual dreamy way.

Harry smiled over at her as he seated Daphne and Tracey. "Thank you. These two, Hermione, and Susan deserve the credit, however."

Luna smiled abstractly. "Actually, I would think your mother and father had more to do with it. The hair and the robes aren't important, Harry. I would have thought you knew that by now."

He nodded. "My apologies; I thought you were referring to my superficial appearance. As you apparently were not, I am even happier that you consider me handsome. In the same vein, I must say that you are as lovely as ever, Luna."

She smiled again, and it finally reached her eyes. "You *must* not do so, but I thank you for doing so."

Tracey blinked rapidly. "Did any of that make sense to you?" she asked Daphne.

Harry grinned as he sat down. "Luna, though she may sound confusing, is actually the most direct person you'll probably ever meet. It's truly a shame that most students in the school don't make any effort to understand her. She is quite intelligent and as loyal a friend as you could ask for."

Luna blushed slightly and looked down, clearly embarrassed by Harry's staunch defense.

"Good evening, Luna," Hermione said as she approached on Ron's arm.

"It has been acceptable thus far," Luna agreed, looking up again.

Ron and Hermione, well familiar with the slightly odd Ravenclaw, simply took seats.

"Where were you all afternoon, mate?" Ron asked.

"Learning more about hair charms than I ever wanted to know," Harry answered sardonically.

"Huh?"

Harry turned his head slightly to let Ron have a look at his much longer hair. It had been lengthened in the back until it now reached his shoulder blades. Hermione had gathered it into a pony tail with a conjured band.

Ron muffled a snicker. "Your hair looks almost long enough for you to be a *girl* !"

Hermione gave him a frosty look. "I think it's very becoming. Besides, that's a lot like how Bill's hair looked at his wedding."

"Yeah, but that's *Bill* ," Ron said with clear confusion.

Hermione let out an explosive breath in exasperation. Daphne and Tracey gave the oblivious Ron narrow-eyed looks.

"His hair is becoming what?" Luna asked Hermione.

Everyone turned from Ron to stare at Luna.

Harry snickered. "Good one, Luna."

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Harry." She looked over his shoulder at the approaching couple. "You did an excellent job, Susan. Harry's hair makes him look very distinguished."

"Thank you," she said, clearly disconcerted by the younger girl.

"It does look good for you, Harry," Stephen Cornfoot opined, arm intertwined with Susan's. "Are you going to keep it that way?"

Harry shrugged. "I dunno, yet. Maybe."

"You should," Susan said as her date seated her. She tilted her head to indicate the rest of the seated students. "I think the other women in the room agree with me."

Harry glanced around and saw that Susan was correct. He was getting far more than his fair share - and even more than his usual level - of attention from the females of Hogwarts. He groaned and slouched down in his seat a little more.

Susan and Hermione laughed.

"Admit it, Harry, you're just a smoldering, sexy hunk of wizard," Daphne whispered to him.

Harry's head shot up, looking at Daphne in surprise.

She smiled enigmatically back at him. Luna, after looking back and forth between them once, also smiled, but not in quite the same way.

Stephen broke the uncomfortable moment by complimenting Hermione and Luna on their dress robes. When he started to compliment Tracey and Daphne, carefully directing his comments toward Harry, the Gryffindor laughed. "I'm not so overbearingly controlling that you can't talk to them."

Stephen smiled at Tracey and then lingered on Daphne for slightly longer, complimenting both girls on how they looked.

"Careful, Harry," Ron teased, eyes on Cornfoot. "He'll be after your fiancées in a minute."

Harry grinned at the stammering Ravenclaw. "Don't worry about it, Stephen. I understand that it's tough to keep your eyes away from them. They have much the same effect on me."

Both girls fought smug smiles at his words.

Tiring of the talk, Ron ordered his meal, causing the others to look over their menus and do the same. Throughout dinner, the topics of conversation were kept light, mostly complaints about the stress of the approaching N.E.W.T. exams.

After pudding was finished, Headmaster Dumbledore waved his wand and created a dance floor and a stage. As several people climbed up onto the stage with musical instruments in hand, he said, "After that delicious feast, I would ask that you help me welcome the entertainment for the rest of this evening, The Sirens." Everyone applauded politely, and the band started playing.

Draco Malfoy, with Pansy Parkinson on his arm and Crabbe and Goyle following, walked up to their table. Crabbe and Goyle glowered at Daphne and Tracey. Malfoy kept his eyes on Harry. "So, Potter, enjoying your new toys?"

Not bothering to answer, Harry kept his attention on Draco and his wand hand free.

Failing to get a rise out of his nemesis, Malfoy turned. "I'm surprised at you, Greengrass. Voluntarily whoring yourself out to Potter like some common half-blood?"

"Leaving aside your pitiful attempt at an insult, you're proving once again that your parents failed to teach you etiquette," Harry said calmly. "As their master, anything someone wishes to say to them should be directed to me."

"What would you know of the noble, pure-blood customs?" Malfoy spat.

"I'm not the one who got caught trying to break the Code Duello," Harry returned, unruffled.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed in a vain bid to look angry and intimidating. Abruptly, he turned. "Come, Pansy. Let's find a table that isn't so *muddy*."

"Oh, very clever. Took you all year to think of that one, did it?" Ron asked with an eye roll.

Malfoy's cheeks flushed and his shoulders tightened, but he did not turn back to the table, instead striding away with Pansy scrambling to keep up with his pace. Crabbe and Goyle glowered for a few more moments before wandering off in Malfoy's wake.

"I must admit that sitting near you provides a great deal of entertainment, Potter," Cornfoot said into the resulting silence.

Luna suddenly laughed loudly for several seconds before stopping just as abruptly. The students at the nearby tables blinked owlishly at them in surprise before turning back to their own tables.

Chuckling at the varied expressions on his tablemates' faces, Harry stood. "Luna, would you care to join me for a dance?"

Luna smiled brilliantly at him. "Thank you, Harry, I believe I would." She stood and took his hand, letting him lead her to the dance floor.

Harry danced with Luna, Hermione, Susan, and Ginny (with permission from their respective dates first) as the evening wore on, interspersed with dances with his fiancées.

It surprised none of them that nobody asked to dance with either Daphne or Tracey.

With everything running through his mind, Harry Potter found himself incapable of finding sleep that night. Finally giving up at two, he climbed out of bed. Feeling restless, he grabbed his Map and stuffed his Invisibility Cloak into a pocket. The Fat Lady continued to snore as he exited Gryffindor Tower.

Harry wandered, his mind running just as aimlessly as his feet. Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle would have turned those two girls into slaves and toys of the upper class Slytherins. Both girls looked absolutely gorgeous in their dress robes. Though he was going to be vilified by everyone who did not

know the whole story, he had saved Daphne and Tracey from a horrible fate. Unfortunately, to save them, he had to take them as slaves after marrying them within the week. Despite their soon-to-be status, the two of them seemed genuinely grateful to him. It was fully expected by everyone, even the two of them, that he would be bedding them frequently.

Why did these things always happen to him?

Surprising himself, he found himself standing in front of the portrait guarding the Head suites. Violet stared down her nose at him, her expression vacillating between disapproving and amused. "Well, are you going to just stand there, young man, or are you going to give me the password?"

Harry was of half a mind to simply leave, but then he heard feminine giggles come from the room beyond. "Fidelis."

Harry stepped into the room and found Daphne, Tracey, and Hermione sprawled on the couches. Empty bottles of butterbeer littered the floor near each of them.

All three girls froze at Harry's entrance, Tracey with a bottle to her lips.

Harry stared. All three girls' faces bore traces of makeup from earlier in the evening. Their hair was still up, though a fair amount of Hermione's had escaped its confines and was spilling about haphazardly. All three were wearing bathrobes, giving Harry an eyeful of six bare, shapely, feminine legs.

After a long, silent moment, Tracey gave a slight shrug and continued drinking her butterbeer. Daphne flushed and looked down to pick at the label on the bottle in her hands with one painted thumbnail. Hermione squeaked and dove behind a couch, out of Harry's line of sight. In the process of moving, she accidentally kicked her pile of empties, sending them sliding in all directions.

Harry tore his eyes away from Daphne's sculpted legs and looked up.

Only Tracey seemed capable of meeting his gaze, eyes sparkling in mirth. "Good morning, my lord," she said evenly. "What may I do for you?"

"Uh . . ."

Hermione stood up from behind the couch. Smoothing her dressing gown down, she held her head high. The only sign of her nervousness was the color in her cheeks. "Good evening, Harry."

Concentrating on the face of his best friend, Harry found his mental equilibrium. Fighting to keep his expression neutral, he nodded politely to her. "Hermione. Sorry for barging in, but I couldn't sleep. I was wandering around and heard noises in here."

She smiled, relaxing minutely when Harry did not start teasing her. "Sorry, but I think I'm about to leave this party myself. Morning is going to come too early the way it is, and I need to get *some* sleep tonight. Good night, Harry." She turned and nodded her good-night wishes to the two girls as well before turning on her heel and entering her quarters.

"She's a lot more fun than I first thought," Tracey observed.

One side of Harry's mouth curved upwards. "She can be," he agreed. He smiled at both Tracey and Daphne. "I don't think I said it earlier, but you were both lovely tonight. I was quite honored to be your escort for the evening."

Daphne looked up and gave a small smile. "Thank you for the compliment, my lord."

He frowned. "I really don't like to be called that."

Her eyes fell. "I know, but it *is* correct and proper."

He sighed. "I know. Much as I dislike it, I know. Oh, I know it isn't your fault," he assured Tracey, who had looked up in sudden concern. "Well, okay, maybe it *is* your fault," he said with a wry grin. "Under the circumstances, though, you didn't have much of a choice."

"Of course we had choices," Daphne said quietly.

"We could have killed ourselves or accepted the situation as it was and married those two idiots," Tracey pointed out.

"Those aren't acceptable options."

Daphne shook her head. "Which is why we chose you instead."

"I still think you could have found a better way out."

The two glanced at each other. "Believe us; we tried finding another way out. No offense to you, but being slaves for the rest of our lives wasn't exactly what we wanted to do."

"Don't blame you," Harry muttered.

Daphne closed her mouth on the rest of what she was about to say. His tone had caused her instincts to flare. "Harry? What's wrong?"

Harry looked up and smoothed his features away from his previous dark scowl at the floor. "Hmm? Oh, nothing."

Tracey frowned. "I don't believe that," she challenged him flatly.

Harry shook his head. "Nothing."

"Liar," Daphne observed calmly.

Harry released a long breath, looking down again.

"Talk to us," Daphne gently urged him.

Long minutes passed in the silent room. The girls waited patiently, eyes on the most important person in their lives.

"I *know* that being a slave isn't something anyone wants to do. But sometimes life just gives you really shitty deals," he whispered.

Daphne stood and pulled his unresisting form down into the couch. She sat down next to him, swinging her legs primly across his lap and wrapped her arms around his chest. Almost of its own volition, Harry's arm settled across her shoulders. Nestling her head under his chin, she whispered, "Talk to us."

Slowly, haltingly, he did. The previous day, he had given them much of the story of his time in Hogwarts. Now he told them of the time before he knew he was a wizard. The abuse - physical and emotional - that he had received at the hands of his only family. His desperate attempts to get a kind word from them. His continued failures, no matter how hard he tried to please them. In a flat monotone, he revealed the crushed hopes, great and small, of the boy who slept in the cupboard under the stairs.

Finally, as the clock struck four, his eyes closed. A few tears escaped before he surrendered to his physical and emotional exhaustion.

Hermione, still rubbing sleep from her eyes, stumbled out of her suite. Bringing her hand down, she blinked at the unexpected sight.

Someone had expanded one of the couches and Harry and Daphne were entangled together upon it, covered by the duvet obviously dragged in from Daphne's bed.

Smiling tenderly at the scene, Hermione quietly stole over to the couple and shook Daphne's shoulder.

The girl slowly blinked her eyes open and stared at Hermione for a moment in blank confusion. As her memory came back, she looked at the arm thrown over her hip, and a small smile formed. She looked up at Hermione and simply nodded.

The other girl nodded back and left as quietly as she had entered.

After the door had closed behind the Head Girl, Daphne snuggled back into Harry's warmth, absently stroking his arm. Harry quickly roused, pulling away from her.

With a little frown of disappointment, she let his arm go.

As Harry woke further, he relaxed back down, curling one arm under his head and laying the other along his side. "G'Morning," he mumbled.

"Hey," Daphne whispered.

Harry luxuriated in a jaw-popping yawn. "Feels good to wake up like this," he observed.

Daphne allowed the small smile to return to her face. She reached back and pulled his arm back over her and around her front, careful to keep it from straying into dangerous territory. Not too dangerous, anyway.

Harry tensed as she took his arm but slowly relaxed again as she simply lay there, absently playing with his hand.

"Uh, I'm not sure whether I should be apologizing for . . ." Harry started.

Daphne gave a low, raspy chuckle. "We didn't do anything untoward. Besides, if we *had*, you would have no reason to apologize to me, my lord."

Harry frowned. "How many times do I have to tell you -"

"I know, *Harry*," she emphasized, "but I'm making a point. And anyway, I assure you that if we had done something, I certainly would've been a willing participant."

Harry blushed, his arm still around the beautiful girl.

Tracey chose that moment to exit her shared room. She took one look at the blushing Harry and the smug Daphne, both dressed but still curled up on the transfigured couch, and burst into laughter.

Harry grumbled inaudibly for a few moments before gently untangling himself from Daphne and climbing out of the couch. Harry stretched out the kinks. "What time is it?"

"If we hurry, we can still make breakfast," Tracey said.

Harry nodded and headed towards Hermione's door. He knocked and waited.

"She's already left," Daphne informed him.

His head whipped around, eyes wide.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, she found you, fully clothed, lying on a couch with your betrothed, soon-to-be chattel. I'm sure the scandal is making the rounds as we speak," she finished dryly.

Tracey laughed as Harry shook his head and headed toward Hermione's shower.

He pretended to ignore Daphne's offer to wash his back.

Harry, again with the two girls flanking him and a step behind, entered the Great Hall and headed toward his usual seat.

Ron and Seamus smirked at them. "Noticed your bed was empty, Harry," Ron said with an obscene leer.

"Found somewhere more comfy to sleep?"

"Warmer?"

"Softer?"

"Don't forget the curves."

"Yes, mustn't forget the soft, warm curves," Ron agreed with a lecherous smirk at Daphne.

Harry rolled his eyes. "You two aren't funny, you know," he informed the two as their respective girlfriends gave them frosty glares. Ignoring his snickering roommates, Harry seated himself and filled a plate.

The sounds of utensils on plates was interrupted by Draco Malfoy. "Hey, Pot Head," he said from behind Ron, "I haven't gotten anything for Goyle for Christmas yet. What're you charging for Whore Number One, here?" He nodded his head toward Daphne while smirking at Harry.

"You can't afford either of them, Malfoy," Harry said evenly.

"I'm far more wealthy than you, Scar-Head. Come on, name a price."

Harry slowly shook his head and sighed sadly, ignoring the looks of concern both Daphne and Tracey shot him. "I'm afraid you'll never be able to afford them, Malfoy. You're proving conclusively that you don't understand the right kind of coin."

Malfoy's face twisted into an expression of confusion. "Huh?"

"If you don't understand it, I can't explain it to you," Harry said simply, returning to his meal.

Tracey and Daphne turned full wattage smiles onto him. Hermione gave him a pleased grin. Even Dean and Neville nodded approvingly.

Most of the rest of the table - as well as Malfoy and his two sycophants - looked at the Boy Who Lived in confusion. "What do you mean, Potter?" Malfoy tried to sound as if he were sneering, but it came out more as whiny confusion.

Harry waved his fork negligently. "Maybe I'll explain it when you're grown up."

The listening Gryffindors broke into laughter. This finally drove Malfoy away and let the table finish their breakfast in peace.

"So, you three are going to be here over break?" Dean asked after he had pushed his empty plate away.

Harry looked over at Tracey with a raised eyebrow.

She gave a slight shrug. "We go where you go, my lord," she answered the unspoken question quietly.

Harry turned back to Dean. "I suppose we are."

Dean nodded. "Right. See you Wednesday."

Standing, Ron smirked down at the three. "Well, *do* enjoy yourselves."

Daphne watched him walk away then turned her head. "My lord?"

Harry looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Has he always been such a boor?"

Harry sighed. "He can be a thoughtless git. For a while, it looked like his going out with Hermione was having a good influence on him. Our new status apparently strains his bonds of tact."

Daphne snorted quietly, not the least impressed by Ron's sense of restraint. "I had wondered. As former Slytherins, we had little contact with him.

Now that we're at your side . . ."

Harry nodded. "He's been worse than usual. Hopefully after the hols, he'll be more polite to you."

Tracey made a rude noise. "I highly doubt it. As I keep telling you, from a pure-blood point of view, and the Weasleys can trace back as far as anyone, chattel don't require any more consideration that you'd pay to a footstool."

Harry frowned. "You keep bringing it up, Tracey."

Her voice dropped as more and more students stood and moved toward the Entrance Hall and the waiting carriages. "And I'll continue to do so, my lord, until you realize the truth of what I'm saying without trying to argue it."

Harry's face twisted into a grimace. Intellectually, he knew what she was saying, but emotionally was another matter entirely.

After the crush of students had left, he stood and assisted his two ladies to their feet. The three ambled toward the doors of the Great Hall and then toward Gryffindor Tower. "So, what do you two want to do today?"

Tracey opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off. "No, wrong question. Let me try again. What do you two think I should do today?"

Daphne's mouth twitched into a smile. "You're learning, Harry, you're learning."

"To answer the question, there is a fair amount of business that requires your attention in Gringotts. After our marriage, you will inherit all of our property."

"You two own homes?" Harry asked in surprise

Tracey shook her head. "We don't own real property like houses or land, but what she's saying also covers everything from our personal vaults all the way down to our knickers."

Harry blushed brilliantly. Both girls laughed.

"There's also some paperwork at the ministry that needs to be done," Daphne went back to the previous topic.

Harry nodded. "Okay, then. Do you two have your apparation licenses?" They both nodded, giving him 'of course' expressions. He raised a hand. "I had to ask. Okay, let's get our cloaks and head on down to Hogsmeade and Apparate to the ministry, then."

"If we're right there, why not Floo?" Tracey asked.

Harry ducked his head and mumbled something.

"What was that?"

Harry sighed and looked up. "Cuz the Floo doesn't like me."

Both girls looked at him oddly. "The Floo doesn't *like* you?" Daphne asked carefully, lip twitching.

"I'm serious," Harry whined. "I wish someone could explain it to me, but every time I Floo somewhere, I end up falling flat on my face."

The girls glanced at each other and then burst into laughter.

Harry huffed and crossed his arms.

"I'm sorry," Daphne said, still chuckling. "That's just something that is an old, old tradition. Everyone has to have a spell put on them. Sort of a specialized stabilization charm. Something about our sense of balance. That'll fix it."

He stared at her. "And nobody ever bothered to tell me this?" he asked incredulously.

Tracey took over, "That's the tradition. Nobody's supposed to tell you the reason why *everyone* falls after Flooing at first. Now that you asked, we can tell you."

"Why isn't this a more widespread a problem, then?"

They shrugged. "Wizard-raised kids generally ask their parents when they're still real little. Muggle-born kids get it put on them by whichever professor visits their home, I understand. I think you said it was Professor Hagrid who visited your relatives' home?"

Harry grumbled and nodded.

"And as he isn't allowed to do magic . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. So I can just *ask* McGonagall and she'll put the spell on me?"

"Probably."

"Figures. I go through years of falling on my face and getting laughed at. You'd think one of the Weasleys would mention the solution. Well,

someone other than the twins anyway."

They shrugged. "Tradition."

He leveled a glare at them. "May I point out that it is also a *tradition* that forced you two to pick me as your champion in the first place?"

They flinched.

He held up a hand in apology, face contrite. "I'm sorry, that was inexcusable."

"No, actually you're right. Well, more or less. That particular law should've been rescinded centuries ago, but *tradition*," Tracey sneered, "kept it in place. And here we are."

Daphne, face a grimace, nodded agreement.

"Well, look at it this way," Harry said in a clear attempt to cheer them up. "At least this gets you out of the dungeons and among a better class of people."

Daphne laughed, but Tracey took on a haughty expression. "Slytherin, I will have you know, has far more class than Gryffindor."

Harry smiled back good-naturedly, holding back the comment that it also included the people who had literally enslaved the two of them.

Professor McGonagall had seemed genuinely distressed that Harry had never received the Floo Stabilization Charm. She cast it upon him without further delay.

Afterward, she was hesitant to let the three out of the castle to visit Diagon Alley and the ministry. Harry testily pointed out that not only did they have perfectly legitimate business in both locations, but all three of them *were* of age. McGonagall bowed to the logic with only an admonition to be careful.

"Like I haven't proven capable of protecting myself," Harry grumbled on the path from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade.

Tracey, moving quickly to keep up with Harry's angry pace, said, "Hey, don't knock it. She cares, Harry. It'd be worse if nobody tried to stop you, considering who you have after you."

That cooled Harry's ire slightly. "You're right," he admitted.

"Don't you forget it," Tracey said with a grin.

He gave a grunt of semi-amusement. "Hey, I noticed something about you."

"My sparkling personality?"

"Her suspicious and cynical nature?" Daphne suggested back.

Tracey glared at the innocent-looking Daphne as Harry laughed.

"No," he said, fighting down the chuckles. "Well, yes, that too, Tracey, but not what I was going to say. No, what I meant was that in front of others you're quiet and . . . well, subservient. When it's just the three of us or with Hermione, you're much more outgoing. A lot like a girlfriend is supposed to act or like my friends who are girls - you know, how Hermione or Ginny are around me."

Tracey nodded. "I act subservient in public because I must. I act like a girlfriend for you because you've said that that is how you *want* me to act. Well, not in so many words, but as we're going to be married in two days, I figure it's appropriate."

Harry nodded acceptance of her words before he turned to Daphne. "You're quieter in front of others, but more affectionate in private."

She smiled brightly at him. "Thank you for noticing."

"Little hard not to after sleeping together," he said dryly.

"That could've been either of us," Tracey pointed out. "You and I *will* be married in a couple days, after all."

Harry nodded again, privately surprised that he was actually getting used to that thought. "True, but also some other things. She's more apt to touch me, whether to lay a hand on my arm, run a finger over my shoulder, whatever."

"You're right," Daphne said quietly. She sighed. "I don't like how it's happened, but I don't mind the end result. Harry Potter, you're one of the few wizards in the school that I find attractive. In all the ways that matter, we're a good match from my point of view."

Harry looked at her in surprise. "Before this whole thing blew up in our faces, you never gave me any kind of indication."

She shrugged. "Gryffindors don't date Slytherins."

He gave a crooked smile. "We don't?" he asked pointedly.

"You know what I mean. If this weren't forced on us all, would you have ever seriously considered going out with me?"

He thought about that for a few moments. "If I thought you were attainable, I may have," he said eventually.

"Attainable?"

He shrugged. "You have a reputation as cold and aloof."

"Ooh, big words," Tracey teased him.

"Hermione has rubbed off on me."

Daphne pointed a finger at Tracey, cutting off the other girl's comment. "Don't say it."

Tracey pouted.

Harry, realizing just what it was that he had said, stammered, "I mean . . ."

Daphne laughed. "I know what you *meant* . It's what you *said* that is the problem, my husband."

"Not yet," Tracey said pertly.

Daphne's eyes sparkled at Harry. "Not yet," she agreed.

The clerk at the licensing department in the ministry was by turns awed at Harry's presence, surprised at the requested forms, then shocked at the girls' status after the ceremony. Once the pimply young wizard had recovered himself, he looked up the appropriate forms and handed them over.

The three looked at the form, written in Olde English. Pursing his lips, Harry blew at the parchment, sending up a small cloud of dust. Waving the dust out of his face, he gave the clerk an eloquently expressive, arched eyebrow.

The clerk shrugged nervously. "Hey, I don't make the laws. I agree that this should've been removed a long time ago, but I don't have any choices here." He leered from one girl to another. "Besides, what're you complaining about? Seems to me you're on the good side of this transaction."

Harry growled.

Tracey's hand grabbed his wrist before his wand cleared its holster. "Easy, husband. Young Mister," she glanced at the nametag on the now pale clerk, "Hornswallow has done nothing to us."

Harry relaxed by degrees before he snatched the form and moved off with Daphne in tow. Tracey stayed behind. "Forgive my master," she said, eyes still tracking him to a table with quill and ink. "He is under a great deal of stress due to the upcoming wedding."

Eyes huge, Hornswallow swallowed on a dry throat and nodded vigorously. He rapidly moved away once Tracey joined the other two.

Tracey and Daphne spent the next hour helping Harry fill in the form, resorting to a translation spell on parts of the archaic document. Finally finished, the trio approached the desk again.

Hornswallow, who had been researching the rest of this uncommon situation, was now even more nervous than he had previously been. Wetting his lips, and ignoring the trickle of sweat rolling down his temple, he read over the completed form that Harry handed him. Minutes ticked by before he looked up again. "Everything is in order," he stammered. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath to calm his nerves. Opening them again, he looked directly at Harry. "Mr. Potter, please understand that this situation only comes up at most every few years. I have some things that I must, by law, give to you. Please understand that I have no choice in the matter."

Harry nodded, understanding the unspoken parts as well. This poor clerk was not at fault and asked not to be blamed for what was going to be an uncomfortable few minutes.

First to cross the counter was a small handbook, The Master's Guide . "This is for you." Next were two brochures, The Slave's Responsibilities . "And these two, sir, are to go to your . . . chattel."

Red-faced in anger, Harry accepted the items.

Hornswallow, thankful that his life was not in immediate danger, said, "Only a few last things, sir."

Harry, jaw clenched, stared at him, waiting.

"I must inform you that concubines are not permitted to wear wedding bands."

A short cyclone of wind sprang up and as quickly dissipated, leaving the loose parchment scattered about the room. Harry's eyes, which had flared, were closed as the clerk nervously pulled out his wand and re-ordered the office.

Once everything was back in place and Harry was again looking at the clerk, Hornswallow said in a small voice, "Next, per the laws, sir, they must be given a Mark of Ownership." Hornswallow, correctly guessing that this would not be taken well, immediately ducked behind the countertop.

A bright flash of light and an odd swooshing noise came from above him.

After checking that he still had all his limbs, Fred Hornswallow cautiously came up and looked around.

Harry Potter stood with both hands planted on the countertop. Around each hand, a scorch mark radiated outward in the wood.

Hornswallow stared at the wood. It had been spelled with anti-damage charms long ago and renewed every year by one of the mysterious Unspeakables.

"I. Will. Not. Give. Them. Dark. Marks," Harry bit off.

"No, sir!" Hornswallow immediately agreed. "That was not at all what I meant. A Mark of Ownership *can* be a mark like that used by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or it can simply be a hair band or bracelet or something. The only requirements are that it be readily visible and contain your family mark."

"Family mark?" Harry asked, surprised out of his smoldering anger.

"The Potter crest," Tracey answered. "The symbol that has always been associated with Potters."

"There is one?"

All three looked at him in surprise. "Yes," Tracey answered simply. "Haven't you actually *read* any of the books about you?"

Harry grimaced. "I suppose what they say about me before I was 15 months old is probably right, but based on how many misconceptions everyone always has about me, I can't believe that anything after that point is worth reading."

Hornswallow looked down at the hand-shaped scorch marks on his countertop and found that he was re-evaluating his opinion of the Boy Who Lived.

Harry turned back forward. "So a hair band with the Potter crest on it is sufficient?"

Fred nodded. "As long as it's spelled correctly, yes."

"Spelled?" Harry asked lowly.

"Several different spells, actually. For instance only the master may remove the item," Tracey answered.

Harry frowned at her. "I don't like that, but it makes sense."

"Why aren't they allowed wedding bands?" Harry asked, turning to Hornswallow again.

"Anyone seeing a wedding band would assume it's from a proper marriage. As they're going to be chattel -"

Harry waved him off. "Yeah, we absolutely *must* keep them as humiliated and downtrodden as possible, right?" he asked in deep sarcasm.

Hornswallow shrugged nervously as Tracey lightly touched Harry's shoulder.

Taking a deep breath to calm down, Harry shook his head, resigned to the situation. "Can any jeweler do this, or is there a list?"

Finally able to give some good news, Hornswallow handed over the list of ministry approved jewelers.

Perusing the list, Harry asked, "Why just these and not anyone?"

"We have to be sure the right charms get put onto the right pieces and nothing extra goes onto them."

"Extra?"

"Dark jewelers have been known to put mind-controlling spells on items," Tracey explained.

Harry blanched. "Okay, this list it is, then." He ran a finger down the parchment. "I've heard this place in Hogsmeade is good."

"Joyero's?" Daphne asked.

Harry nodded.

"Yeah, he does have a good reputation. Jewelry for a previous girlfriend, my lord?"

He gave her a wry look. "Yeah, right; Ron mentioned that he wished he could afford that place to get something for Hermione."

"Once you have the items finished, the jeweler you select will contact us with the specifics, so you don't have to do anything more on that end," Hornswallow added.

"Now, who will officiate?" the clerk went on, filling in the 'office use only' portion of the marriage form.

Harry groaned and buried his face in his hands.

Both girls broke into laughter as Hornswallow looked on in confusion.

"My great uncle is an elder on the Wizengamot and can officiate," Daphne offered quietly.

Harry looked at her gratefully.

"Philosophoclies Greengrass," she said to Hornswallow.

Harry and Tracey stared at her.

She shrugged, mildly embarrassed. "Don't ask me, I don't have a clue."

"When is the service?" Hornswallow asked.

"The twenty-fourth."

"Where?"

"Er . . ." Harry was stumped.

"Greengrass Manor?" Daphne offered.

"The ministry atrium is sometimes used," Hornswallow suggested.

Harry shook his head. "I've several friends coming and both girls' families have already said they want to attend. Hogwarts?" he suggested to the girls.

Both frowned but nodded. Nobody was all that happy with the compromise, but it was a palatable answer for everyone even if it wasn't anyone's first choice.

The rest of the questions were easily and quickly dealt with and Harry paid the three galleon filing fee.

"We should see Daphne's uncle and then we can hit the jeweler," Tracey suggested. At everyone's agreement, Daphne led them to her uncle's office, leaving behind a pensive clerk.

The conversation with Daphne's Uncle Phil, an ordinary-looking wizard with a mid-sized office down a long hallway with all the other Wizengamot offices, went much smoother than Harry had worried it might. He had already heard the story from his brother and not only harbored no anger toward Harry, but he actually thanked the young wizard for what he was doing.

Similarly, the visit with the jeweler in Hogsmeade went smoothly. Both girls opted for a headband and a bracelet, switching back and forth as desired. Mr. Joyero explained that Harry needed to wear a Master's Band ring worn on the right hand that would connect him with each girl. The set of magical jewelry had only a few spells embedded into each piece. Tracey had already explained that the hair bands and bracelets could only be removed by the master. The ring could put out a mild summoning impulse and could also indicate direction to each of the items tied to it. Harry questioned the man closely, concerned with the similarities he heard in comparison to the Dark Mark. He was assured that it was a very limited set of spells and it would destroy the item if anyone tried to manipulate any of the current spells or add anything beyond what had already been described. Harry authorized payment and then agreed to pick up the items the next afternoon.

It was on the way out of the jewelry shop that all further plans for the day were shot to hell.

Chattel The Wedding

It was on the way out of the jewelry shop that all further plans for the day were shot to hell.

"Daddy!" Tracey squealed, running past Harry.

Harry's head snapped up in time to see Tracey throw herself into the arms of a burly wizard. A well-dressed witch stood nearby, watching the two with affection.

Harry walked toward the trio, a grinning Daphne trailing him.

The witch nodded to Daphne before fixing her attention to Harry. "Lord Potter, I am Anna Davis, Tracey's mother."

"Ma'am." Harry nodded politely, more than a little scared of her reaction to the situation.

She apparently saw his nervousness and gave a relaxed laugh. "Don't be so nervous, young man. I'm not angry at you for what is going on, nor what will happen. In fact, I'm relieved that Tracey ended up with you instead of Vin Crabbe."

"Indeed," the elder wizard agreed. He stuck out his hand. "Randall Davis."

"Harry Potter."

He nodded. "Yes, I know." He fixed Harry with an intent stare. "You know, when I approached Anna's father for permission to marry her, the evil man grilled me for hours. How was I going to support her, whether I understood what I was asking, whether I loved her, and so on. I was a gibbering wreck."

Harry nervously shifted. "Well . . ."

Davis waved him off. "Much as I want to, I have no right to do the same to you." His face clouded. "It's my own stupidity that forced this situation upon you and my daughter."

Tracey hugged her father and laid her head upon his shoulder.

Harry kept very still, not wanting to disrupt the fragile, emotional scene in front of him.

Anna picked up the thread, "What my husband is trying, in his own bumbling, *male* way, is that we're grateful to you for what you have done for Tracey."

Harry let out a relieved breath.

She smiled at him in amusement. "That was Randall's reaction when my father let him off the hook finally."

"Evil man," Randall grumbled.

Anna smacked him on the shoulder.

Surprised, Harry let out a laugh at their antics.

They both grinned at him. Randall waved toward a pub. "Come. I'll buy you a drink and we can get to know our daughter's . . . husband."

Shortly after settling down, Daphne's parents and younger sister, a Slytherin fifth year that Harry recognized only by her family resemblance, had arrived. Daphne's mother and sister - Lauren and Astoria he later learned - immediately settled around Harry's fiancée and started chatting with her.

"Walk with me, Mr. Potter," Mr. Greengrass said.

Harry, resigned to the necessity, stood and followed the slight but well-dressed man out of the pub.

Tracey and Daphne watched him leave with trepidation, but they were held in place by their mothers.

Outside, the older man started walking casually down Hogsmeade's High Street. "Paul Greengrass," he introduced himself, not offering a hand and instead keeping his face up and studying the passing clouds.

"Harry Potter, sir," Harry quietly replied.

"Yes," Greengrass absently replied.

The two continued in silence for so long that Harry grew nervous.

Greengrass finally broke it. He grinned at Harry in embarrassment. "Sorry. I tend to ignore the rest of the world if I'm thinking about something."

Harry nodded hesitantly, not sure what kind of response he should give.

"Oh, relax, young man. I'm not mad at you." He let out a long breath. "In point of fact, I should thank you."

"Sir -" Harry started.

Greengrass waved him to silence. "Let me say my peace, please.

"Now, from what Daphne has said, she and Tracey sprung this on you only a couple days ago. That had to be . . . shocking." He grinned at Harry's snort of humor. "Quite. At any rate, I'm aware that this was all dumped on you without any kind of warning. You were wizard enough to take on the burden without complaint, and for that I thank you."

Harry kept his ironic thoughts about dark lords and prophecies to himself.

Greengrass continued quietly, "In an effort to save my family, I agreed to give one of my daughters away." He sighed. "Randall and I tried to protect them as much as we could. Tried to keep them away from Draco, or so we thought. That bastard Lucius managed to design that betrothal contract . . . Well, Daphne said she'd given you the specifics already."

"Yes, sir, she has."

He nodded. "So I don't have to get into how badly Lucius managed to hoodwink us." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry you had to get pulled into this, Lord Potter, but I feel much better about you than I do about that Goyle boy."

They walked a bit further before Harry asked, "Is it true that Malfoy threatened to kill you?"

Greengrass grunted in reply. "Threatening to kill me wouldn't have gotten my cooperation. No, he threatened line extinction. Not only killing me, but also everyone with the name or two generations removed from it."

Harry grimaced. This kind of threat did not surprise Harry at all. Malfoy had bought his way out of trouble after the Department of Mysteries. When Fudge was impeached, the former minister, in a vain attempt to keep himself out of prison, blamed Malfoy for having driven him into breaking the law. Malfoy, unsurprisingly, simply bribed, blackmailed, or intimidated the court into releasing him once again.

"I have no doubt that he and the Death Eaters are capable of carrying out this threat to me and my house," Greengrass added.

"Agreed," Harry said. "With that in mind, though, sir, what's to stop them from attacking you now?"

"What's that?"

"Presumably Malfoy was doing this to punish you, scare other neutral families, or reward the Crabbe and Goyle families. Now that Tracey and Daphne are out from under Draco's thumb, so to speak, none of those things have occurred. What's to stop them from targeting you, just to make a point?"

"What stopped them from doing so two months ago?" Greengrass responded. "More importantly, the fact is that the contract is public, including who the arranger was. If we're attacked now, it'll look like Malfoy is lashing out at us in anger."

"Which would be true."

"Which would be true," Greengrass acknowledged. "However, it won't happen, at least for some time. If it happened now, he'd lose a lot of the pureblood support he and his dark lord rely on. Remember, everything you've done is perfectly legal and according to the traditions. So if he attacked now, he'd be flying in the face of those traditions."

"His own need to follow the pureblood traditions will keep you safe?"

"In the short term, yes. In the long term, we're in the same danger as anyone else."

"I respectfully suggest, sir, that you'd be in much more. After all, you're going to be tied to me through your daughter."

Greengrass looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Hmm, you have a point, young Potter. I'll have to speak with Gringotts about improving our wards and suggest that Randall do the same."

The elder man opened the door to the pub and moved to take a seat next to his wife, leaving Harry to sit between him and Mr. Davis.

Harry did not for a moment believe that the seating arrangement was a coincidence.

Listening to the conversations between the two families and within each one, Harry slowly relaxed. His is what he thought family should be. Fun,

laughter, and easy conversation.

Harry, Daphne, and Tracey left after dinner and began walking back to the school through the lengthening shadows.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Daphne asked quietly.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, I'm fine."

She visibly relaxed. "After Dad pulled you outside like that, I was worried. I mean, you seemed fine afterward, but . . ."

Harry chuckled. "No harm done. Mostly, he wanted to thank me for rescuing you from Goyle."

She nodded. "And *rescuing* is about the right term, too."

"I spoke with your fathers, obviously, but hardly said a word to either of your mothers. How are they taking all of this? And your sister, Daphne?"

"Astoria doesn't know how to take it. I mean, she feels bad for what almost happened to me, but she hardly knows anything about you. That, and she looks at me and knows that it could easily have been her bound into a sham of a marriage contract like that instead. I just hope Mom and Dad do better with her."

"Mom is . . . unhappy with the situation. Oh, don't worry, Harry, she isn't mad at you. Like everyone keeps telling you, we're thankful to you for what you're doing for us."

Tracey nodded her agreement. "Mother feels the same. This mess is of her and Father's making. She's just grateful to you for making this as easy on me as it has been so far."

"I missed you this morning, my lord," Daphne said, trying to stifle a yawn.

Harry looked up from his breakfast. "Good morning."

Tracey grinned as she slipped in beside him. "Thank you. You, too. Daphne is still miffed at waking up alone, though."

Harry turned to his other fiancée. "I got up at five for training," he said. "If you want me to wake you up that early next time . . ." he trailed off with a dry tone and slight smirk.

Daphne blanched. "Thank you, my lord, but I prefer to be asleep at that time." She seated herself on his other side.

"That's what I figured."

As the girls were tucking in, Flitwick stopped on his way from the head table toward the doors. "Good practice this morning, Harry."

Harry smiled at the diminutive professor. "Thank you, Fil. I enjoyed it."

"You *enjoy* the dueling lessons?" Tracey asked incredulously.

"Sure. Learning new fighting tricks is great. Besides, a good duel is stimulating."

Daphne's head came up and she quirked a smile at Harry.

Harry blushed at her arch look. "You know what I mean."

"Any bruises I have to heal this time?" she asked.

"Your own private nurse, Harry?" Filius asked with a smile tugging at his mouth.

Harry rolled his eyes. "She's been taking lessons from Madam Pomfrey."

Flitwick nodded. "So I've heard. This, Harry, is a good thing. Be grateful for a healer you can trust." He smiled at all three. "Do let me know if you three need any extra Charms lessons. Totally discreet, I assure you." He ignored Harry's blush. "Keep up your exercises, Harry. I'll see you tomorrow and then when the next term begins?"

Harry nodded, blush fading. "Thanks for everything, Fil."

"Think nothing of it, dear boy," Flitwick said cheerfully as he walked off.

"You two are getting along a lot better than I'd heard," Tracey observed.

"He's been giving me private lessons for a year and a half. He gave me permission to use his first name in private almost a year ago now. He's become a good friend in addition to a professor I can trust." He scowled. "There aren't many of those, unfortunately." He shook his head, trying to rid himself of the unpleasant thoughts.

"So what is the plan today?" Daphne asked.

"Yesterday before we met your parents you said something about needing to stop at Gringotts?" Harry asked.

"Mr. Potter." Slipknot the goblin glanced at both witches flanking Harry. "My apologies. *Lord* Potter. How may Gringotts serve you today?"

"You are in charge of the Potter account, correct?"

"Among others, yes."

"As you're apparently aware, these two ladies are about to become my chattel."

Slipknot nodded. "You wish to arrange to move their vault contents to yours?"

"I would prefer they retain their own, actually."

"They cannot," Slipknot stated flatly. "As property, they are not permitted to hold property. You can keep the vaults open if you wish, but they must, by ministry and goblin law, transfer to you."

Tracey laid a hand on Harry's arm. "Don't worry about it, my lord. We knew this was going to happen. Go ahead and transfer the contents and close down the vaults. It's not like Daphne or I will ever be able to access them again even if they were separate."

Harry winced at the reminder that their slavery would be permanent for them. "Okay, go ahead and transfer the contents and close down the vaults."

Slipknot started filling out a few forms, sliding them across the desk for signatures as needed.

"While we're at it, I understand that the girls' school tuition next term is not covered as of yet. Please deduct that from my vault."

Both girls relaxed slightly and graced Harry with smiles.

Slipknot merely nodded and continued processing forms.

As the last parchment settled down, Slipknot settled a monocle to his right eye and ran a thin finger down a column of numbers. "After these transfers are completed and after your marriages, your total assets, Lord Potter, will include one Unplottable home, an empty parcel of land in Godric's Hollow, some twelve thousand galleons, and two under trained witches."

"I was under the impression that the Potters owned significantly more than that," Harry said in surprise. After all the fuss people made over his family name, he expected there to be more money left in his vaults. He was not destitute by any means, but could hardly live the life of luxury that Sirius had hinted such old names were entitled to.

Slipknot gave a negligent shrug. "I am not responsible for what you believe."

Harry grimaced. "That wasn't what I was implying, sir."

The goblin glanced at the clock on the wall. "Was there anything else?" he asked, sounding immensely bored and slightly impatient.

"Is there a way I can give these two access to my vaults?"

"You may give them your key. In the eyes of goblins and your wizarding law, they have roughly the same rights as house-elves. They are permitted to make transactions at your instruction."

"They can't have their own money?"

"No."

Harry looked increasingly frustrated and angry, so Tracey interceded. "Harry, really, we knew this was going to happen. Don't worry about it."

Grumbling, Harry dropped that topic and started another one. "The Unplottable property: I'm aware of it. How would I go about selling it?"

"What is the address?"

"It is under a Fidelius Charm."

Both wizard and goblin ignored the stares from the two witches. "The Fidelius Charm would need to be dropped, the property assessed, and all back taxes would have to be paid," Slipknot said as if reading from a list of things to do.

Harry winced. It had not even occurred to him that taxes may be owed. "When was the last time the Black family paid taxes on a home in London?" he asked, trying to get at the information he wanted indirectly.

Slipknot snapped his fingers and a weighty ledger popped into existence in front of him. After several moments of turning pages, he ran one finger down the page. "1980," he stated, closing the book again.

"How much in taxes would I owe if -"

Harry stopped as Slipknot shook his head. "You do not have enough cash in your vault to cover the back taxes, which would be the first step in trying to sell it."

"You can't do anything about it now," Tracey pointed out. "Just leave it all as it is. We'll worry about it after graduation."

"Or after Voldemort, anyway," Harry reluctantly agreed. He stood. "Thank you for your time, Slipknot."

The goblin turned to the piles of parchment on his desk without a word of farewell.

Harry woke up on Christmas Eve alone in his bed in Gryffindor Tower.

For some reason, that felt wrong to him. After a few seconds of thought, he realized that even after only two mornings, he was already accustomed to waking up entangled with Daphne.

He snorted quietly. After meeting her less than a week previously, he was already used to sleeping with her. And he'd be marrying her that afternoon. And she would immediately become his property, his *slave*.

The world was truly mad.

Sighing at the perversity of fate, he headed off to his shower.

Toweling his hair, he found his four roommates had returned to the castle and entered the room while he was gone. "Hey, guys."

"Surprised to find you here and alone, mate," Ron said.

Harry stopped in the act of pulling a pair of boxers from his dresser. "What is *that* supposed to mean, Ron?"

He shrugged casually. "Two hot babes, soon to be concubines . . ."

Seamus smirked, but the other three boys frowned at Ron.

Surprisingly, Neville spoke up, "Grow up, Ron. Harry is trying to be a gentlemen to them. It isn't like they *want* him to be rutting with them like rabbits in heat. They, and Harry, were forced into it. Personally, I'm impressed with how they're handling it."

Dean nodded his agreement as Harry smiled at his normally shy roommate. "Thanks, Nev."

Ron and Seamus shared a shrug before Seamus started rummaging around in the rucksack he had brought along. Presently, he pulled out a bottle of firewhiskey.

Harry rolled his eyes. "How you can drink that stuff is beyond me," he grumbled.

"Hey," Seamus objected. "You're going to get married today. No time for a real stag party, so this'll have to do."

Dean grimaced at the bottle. "Couldn't you at least have gotten some Ogden's? That cheap stuff tastes like lighter fluid."

"It probably *is* lighter fluid, whatever that is," Neville said with a matching grimace.

Harry laughed. "Seriously, Seamus, get some better taste. That back alley stuff'll rot out your stomach lining."

"I'll have you know that this is the best brand that ten sickles will buy."

Everyone winced. "I rest my case," Harry muttered.

"No taste," Seamus sniffed.

Dean gave an eloquent snort.

Seamus ignored him. "It's a wonder I offer to share this with you."

Harry rolled his eyes as he was pulling some casual clothes on. "If you insist, I'll have one shot, but I want a clear head for later."

Ron leered. "I bet."

"Grow up," Neville repeated in disgust.

"Why?" Ron asked.

"Because Hermione will dump you if you don't," Dean answered.

That at least shut Ron up. Harry gave Dean a look of gratitude.

Together, the five boys walked down for breakfast.

The instant Harry entered the Great Hall, Hermione let out a high-pitched, "Eep!" and stood, holding out her arms so her robe blocked his sight of Daphne and Tracey. "Harry, leave!"

Neville and Ron looked at her like she had lost her mind.

Harry gave her a small smile. "I asked, Hermione, and that's a muggle superstition."

Hermione stilled. "It is?"

Dean turned to Harry. "It is?"

"What are you talking about?" Ron asked.

"Bad luck for the bride and groom to see each other before the ceremony," Hermione answered, looking closely at Harry.

"They saw each yesterday, didn't they?" Ron asked blankly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "On the day of the wedding, Ronald," she huffed.

"Huh," Neville said wonderingly. "Never heard that one."

Harry turned to her with a clear "I told you so" look.

Hermione, face pulled down in a disgruntled grimace, dropped back into her seat.

"I told you," Tracey said lightly as the boys sat down across from the girls. "Good morn, my lord," she added with a bright smile at Harry.

"Tracey, Daphne," Harry said, smiling at the two. "Sleep well?"

"How kind of you to inquire, my lord. I'm quite well rested and ready for any exertions," Tracey answered with a grin.

Harry choked on a rasher of bacon.

Ron and Seamus howled in laughter.

Daphne winced as if in pain.

"Must you encourage them?" Hermione asked pleadingly.

"Must? No, I suppose not," Tracey said thoughtfully. "Though it is a lot of fun."

"You do realize what the red-headed git is thinking right now?" Harry demanded.

"Yep," Tracey said. "Did you need me to explain it to you, my lord?"

Daphne buried her face in her hands.

Harry sighed, glaring at Tracey.

Neville's mouth twitched. "You have to admit that it was funny, though," he said to Harry.

The side of Harry's mouth curved into a small smile as his color returned to normal. "I suppose it is." He turned to Tracey, "You remember what I was saying about you being so reserved?"

She nodded.

"I take it back."

She grinned. "You've made it clear, my lord, that you want us to continue to act as we wish."

"Don't, Harry," Neville spoke up abruptly.

Harry turned to him. "Huh?"

"You were going to say something like, 'But not at my expense,' right?"

Harry blinked. "Yeah."

"Remember, as your chattel, they must follow your orders. If you say that, then they can't tease you. That'd break the spirit of your previous order to them, right?"

Harry and Hermione looked at him in respect. Ron just looked confused.

Neville shrugged in embarrassment. "I'm the only one here who has elves, right?" He smiled at the two girls. "At least of those who can still contradict Harry."

They relaxed fractionally and nodded to him.

Neville turned back to Harry. "Since I've had elves since I can remember, I've had to think about these kinds of things before. Granted, not to the same degree or for the same reasons, but the idea holds."

Harry smiled at Neville. "You're right, of course. Thank you for pointing these things out."

Neville shrugged but gave him a pleased smile in response.

"So when's the ceremony?" Dean asked, changing the topic.

"Five."

"Why so late?" Hermione asked.

"It'll be a simple service," Tracey answered. "Malfoy's contract dictated the particulars."

"So what're we supposed to do all day?" Seamus complained.

Ron had the good sense to keep his mouth shut in the face of Hermione's frosty glare.

"The Davis and Greengrass families will be here in a bit, so the girls and I will be busy," Harry said.

"Meeting the in-laws?" Dean asked with a grin.

Harry chuckled, knowing it was not a malicious tease from the tall, black boy. "I met 'em on Monday. No, this is more a case of getting to know each other better."

"Don't you think you should've met the mother-in-law further ahead?" Neville asked, getting in on the teasing.

"It hasn't exactly been a traditional engagement," Harry answered dryly.

"Winning 'em on the field of battle? No, not exactly the usual way it's done," Ron observed with a snort.

"I didn't have much of a choice, Ron," Harry said testily.

"Whoa, mate. I didn't mean anything by it."

Harry frowned. "Then why do you keep thinking that they're toys, making these little digs?"

Ron looked blankly at him. "They're going to be your property," he said as if it were obvious.

Everyone except Seamus glared at him. "They're *people*, Ronald," Hermione said frigidly, "despite the stupidity of current wizarding laws."

Ron winced, knowing that tone of voice. "Sorry," he mumbled, ducking his head.

"Hey, Harry."

"Hmm?" Harry asked, straightening the collar of his robes in the mirror.

"Haven't you forgotten something?"

Harry checked himself. He was wearing his dress robes, they were fastened up properly, he was wearing shoes, and he had even convinced Hermione to put his hair like it had been at the Yule Ball. One hand felt his pockets. Yes, the case for the girls' headbands, the item the three of them had agreed to use for the ceremony, was in one pocket and his Master's Ring was in another. Harry had seen Daphne's uncle earlier, so he was present. McGonagall had long since convinced the Headmaster to allow the ceremony to be held in the Great Hall. A quick check of the clock at his bedside showed that there was more than enough time to make it there before the ceremony.

"I can't think of anything," Harry said, throwing a questioning look at Ron.

"You need to pick a Best Man," he said. He puffed up his chest, standing beside Harry's bed in his dress robes.

Harry managed not to roll his eyes. "Thank you for offering your services, Ron, but there won't be one."

The other three boys stopped what they were doing and looked at him in confusion.

Harry shrugged. "Remember, Malfoy wrote out all the particulars for the ceremony; no Best Man."

"Who's going to Witness?" Neville asked.

"Huh?"

"Sign as the witness. Just sign their agreement that the ceremony occurred." Neville shrugged. "Traditionally, it's been the Best Man and Maid or Matron of Honor, but technically anyone who actually watched can do it. It's a requirement for the marriage to be legal."

At that moment, Nit the elf popped into the room, handed a note to Harry, and popped out without having said a word.

Our Lord,

Susan just pointed out that you are probably unaware of the requirement of a Witness.

It is merely a legal requirement, signing that they witnessed the ceremony take place. Per the agreement, our fathers are Witnessing for each of us.

We beg of you a favor, Our Lord: Allow Hermione to Witness for you. She is not only one of your best friends, but has become a friend to us in the preceding few days as well.

(Almost) Yours,

Tracey and Daphne

"Well, that answers that." He handed the parchment to Ron and turned back to the mirror.

After reading it, Ron walked over to his bed and dropped into it with a grunt.

Neville caught Harry's eye in the mirror and rolled his eyes. Harry grinned back sadly, knowing exactly what the problem was with his best male friend.

Minutes later, the five young men walked into the Great Hall.

Harry immediately moved to join Tracey and Daphne near Elder Greengrass. The two girls smiled greetings to him, both visibly tense.

Harry ran one hand up Daphne's arm. "Relax," he whispered.

"Easy for you to say," Tracey muttered.

He half smiled at her. "I'm just as nervous," he confided. "Just no point in being so jittery. It wastes energy."

Daphne closed her eyes and took a few deep breathes. Upon opening her eyes again, she was calmer. "Professor Flitwick's lessons?"

Harry nodded.

She smiled. "Thank you," she whispered, nodding toward his hand that was still running up and down her arm.

He jerked it back as if suddenly scalded.

Tracey smirked faintly.

"Are we ready?" Elder Greengrass asked the three.

Glancing at each other, they turned to him and nodded.

He waved them toward the front where the staff table had been removed. Once standing about where Headmaster Dumbledore's lectern usually sat, he addressed the small audience composed of Davis and Greengrass families, Molly and Arthur Weasley, a handful of professors, and Harry's Gryffindor friends, and a few other student friends of theirs.

"We are here to witness the marriage of Harry James Potter to Daphne Queenie Greengrass and Tracey Rosalie Davis." Elder Greengrass paused and shifted slightly before resuming, "This is not a standard marriage. Even in a society where marriages of alliance are hardly unknown, this marriage is more unusual yet. In point of fact, it was arranged in such a way to present the worst kinds of insult to both the Greengrass and Davis families. On behalf of both families, I have been asked to express our gratitude to Mr. Potter for his part in mitigating the situation. He has our heartfelt thanks for his actions these past days, unusual though those actions may have been.

"This ceremony was delineated by the originator of the original contracts. This is *not* a standard wedding ceremony. So, for you students, don't feel that this is the way a wedding usually happens." He unrolled a scroll and looked down at it before glancing back up at the three nervous teens. "Mr. Potter, do you have the . . . items?"

Harry nodded and pulled out the case containing the two headbands. They were both sterling silver and bore the Potter crest in addition to sporting several enchantments.

Elder Greengrass said, "Daphne, read your vows."

Taking the scroll, Daphne read, "I, Daphne Queenie Greengrass, of my own free will enter into the Marriage of Chattel, binding myself to Harry James Potter as my Master. So mote it be."

Tears leaking out of her eyes, she handed the scroll to Tracey, who recited the line as well.

Harry, with a heavy heart, pulled out the first headband and gently slipped it onto Daphne's head. The second headband went into Tracey's hair.

Taking the scroll, he swallowed past the lump in his throat and got out, "I, Harry James Potter, of my own free will enter into Marriage of Chattel, accepting Daphne Queenie Greengrass and Tracey Rosalie Davis as my concubines. So mote it be." He handed the scroll back to Elder Greengrass. With a trembling hand, he pulled out the Master's Ring and slipped it onto his right hand.

A short flash of light came from the headbands and Harry's new ring. Two newly bound witches and one wizard took a deep breath.

Daphne and Tracey both immediately lowered their gazes. Harry kept his head up, but his expression was anything but happy.

"That concludes the ceremony," Elder Greengrass said quietly. "If the Witnesses will come forward to sign the contract?"

Both Mr. Greengrass and Mr. Davis came forward immediately, faces unhappy but determined. Harry looked around for a moment before moving over toward Hermione and leaning down to whisper to her. "Hermione, could you Witness for me?"

She blinked in surprise through her tears. "Me?" she squeaked in a whisper.

Harry smiled faintly. "You."

"I . . . I'd be honored, Harry."

Hermione stood and walked over to Elder Greengrass, signing on the indicated lines.

While she was doing that, McGonagall had announced that all visitors were encouraged to stay for dinner. After her announcement, she walked over to Harry. "Mr. Potter," she said quietly, "I have arranged for the three of you to have rooms at the Leaky Cauldron for the remainder of the holidays."

Harry smiled at her to cover his surprise. "Thank you, Professor. That's very kind of you."

McGonagall sighed. "The enchantments on the Head suite or your dorm room would prove . . . problematic. This is the only thing I could think of to do to give you the most freedom possible."

Harry nodded. "I appreciate the thoughtfulness."

Flitwick walked up to Harry and handed him a shrunken trunk. "Min told me what she had planned. I've already packed you three and placed the gifts you received into this trunk and shrunk it. It is a Portkey that will take you to Diagon Alley at five thirty."

Harry glanced at his watch and growled when all it showed was a broken face.

"Five-ten, Master," Daphne said quietly from beside him.

Flitwick nodded. "Hagrid has a carriage ready for you. It may seem I'm pushing you out the door, but I'm trying to lessen the spectacle."

Harry smiled gratefully at the small professor as he took the trunk. "Thank you, Fil. I owe you one."

Flitwick smiled sadly. "No, dear boy, you don't. It is the least I can do under the circumstances."

"Now, you three need to go. Don't worry about them," he waved at the crowd sitting at the tables behind him. "I'll explain that you've left to get some rest. Just go."

Harry nodded and thanked the professor again. Turning, he indicated the girls should precede him out the door. Tracey subtly shook her head and muttered that they must follow, never lead their master. Flushing at the deserved rebuke, mildly as it had been delivered, he led the two girls out the front doors of the castle and toward where Hagrid was holding a thestral-drawn carriage in place, clearly waiting for them.

The overly-large man smiled as the three approached. "Hiya, 'Arry. Been waitin' fer yea. Got a carriage all ready fer ye three." He opened the door and helped each girl into the carriage.

"Thanks, Hagrid," Harry said.

Hagrid gave an embarrassed shrug. "The carriage? Ah, 'twern't nuthin', 'Arry."

Harry shook his head. "Not that. I mean being so . . . I mean not making a big deal about . . . well, everything that's happened today."

"Ah," Hagrid observed. "Ye haven' done nuthin' wrong. Ye 'ave jus' done what ye needed to. No matter wha' anyone else says, ye done good by 'em, 'Arry."

Harry let out a long sigh. "I hope you're right, Hagrid."

"I know I am," Hagrid said comfortably. "Now, ye need to be goin' to make yer Portkey time. Off ye go, now."

Giving his large friend a smile, Harry entered the carriage and closed the door. It immediately started in motion, the thestral pulling it along knowing its route.

An uncomfortable silence settled in the carriage.

"Well," Harry said for lack of anything better to say.

Tracey smiled slightly. "Very eloquent, Master."

"Was that teasing or sarcasm?"

Daphne's smile matched Tracey's. "Both, I believe."

Harry smiled self-deprecatingly. "I'm afraid I don't know what to say."

"Then say nothing," Tracey advised him.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Makes sense, I suppose. Is that a Slytherin philosophy?"

"A closed mouth gathers no foot."

Harry laughed. "I'll have to remember that one, Daphne. Thank you."

She smiled and nodded.

Harry sighed. "Now I remembered what else I wanted to ask." Both girls gave him their complete attention. "What, precisely, are the terms of a Marriage of Chattel?"

"It is a legal term. We are now your property, have to answer to you, must obey all commands, and can never, ever lie to you."

"So you're legally required to follow my orders, but it isn't magically enforced?"

"Correct, Master."

Harry gave Tracey a dirty look. "I seriously dislike being called Master by anyone."

"Very well, *Harry*, but in public we must, you know."

Harry sighed but nodded in resignation. "Okay, how about this: In public, you do what you must and I'll do what I must. In private, please act as you have been." He grinned at Tracey. "As you put it, as girlfriends."

Both girls nodded agreement, relaxing a fraction.

"I don't get it, though. Malfoy clearly set this up so you two would be the utter slaves of Crabbe and Goyle and by proxy the ferret." Both girls shuddered. "If you still have free will, which I presume you do -" He paused, and they nodded. Nodding in satisfaction, he continued, "If you have free will, that wouldn't fulfill his ego."

Tracey frowned in distaste. "Legally, what is our status?"

"My chattel."

"Yes, but what rights do we have? What is our condition according to the law?"

"Property."

"Exactly. Last and most important, the Unforgivable Curses are defined as those three curses *when cast upon a wizard or witch*. We are not people. We're now property."

Harry looked at them in horror. "He expected you two to be under the Imperious Curse?"

Daphne shrugged and nodded. "Probably. We can both throw it off, though."

"Good. That makes me feel a little better."

Daphne smiled. "Do let me know if there is *anything* else I can do to make you feel better, My Master."

Harry groaned as Tracey snickered. "You are one tenacious witch."

Daphne continued to smile.

The carriage stopped at the edge of town. Harry opened the door and waved the girls out.

"Master is last in and first out," Tracey whispered. "He wastes less time that way."

Grimacing at all the little rules he never would have thought about on his own, Harry exited the carriage and ran a hand down the scaly neck of the thestral. "Thank you," he whispered to it.

It bumped its head to his arm in a friendly manner and turned back, dragging the empty carriage back toward the school.

"It is almost time to go, Master," Daphne said.

Harry nodded and pulled the trunk out. Holding it out in his flat hand, each girl cupped her hand around his and each other, all three firmly in contact with the trunk.

"Two . . . One . . ." Daphne counted down before the familiar sensations of a Portkey pulled all three through space.

Harry managed a shaky landing, staying on his feet. "Hey, the Stabilization Charm helps Portkeys, too?"

Daphne grinned, and Tracey let out a sharp bark of laughter. "The great Harry Potter," she teased. "Slayer of basilisks and dark lords, he's happy not to fall arse over teakettle after a using a Portkey or the Floo. What's wrong with this picture?"

Harry smiled at her teasing, even if it was directed at him. "Hey, I take the small victories where I can get them." He headed toward the back door of the Leaky Cauldron, as they had appeared in the short alley between the inn's back door and the entrance to Diagon Alley. "How'd you know about the basilisk, anyway?"

"You told us Saturday night, remember?"

"Right." Harry nodded as he led the two into the Leaky Cauldron, flipping the hood of his cloak up as he went, an action mirrored by the two girls.

Once the three stepped up to the bar, Tom the barkeep smiled his gap-toothed smile. "Perfesser McGonagall arranged rooms fer ya, sir, ladies. If ya'll just sign in, I can take you up ter yer room."

One by one, the three signed. As the girls were signing, Harry kept his eyes up, looking around the small pub. Fortunately, after five o'clock on Christmas Eve, the place was nearly deserted.

Once Tom got the guest log back, his eyes flicked to the first name. "That explains that," he murmured. "Happy Christmas, Mr. Potter . . . er, Mrs. Potter, and . . ." Eyes wide, he gulped and looked at all three. "Er, Mrs. Potter again?"

"Bine Potter," Tracey quietly corrected him.

Eyes flicking to Tracey in confusion, Harry kept his voice low as he answered Tom, "It is a long story, and I'm afraid we simply don't have the energy to get into it tonight. I will tell you the story, Tom, I promise."

Eyes still wide, Tom nodded jerkily and led them up the stairs and to a room with a tarnished number seven embedded into the scarred wooden door. He unlocked the door before handing the key to Harry. "G'Night," said the still shocked man, clearly moving on automatic.

Harry entered their room with a grin, idly wondering how much of that kind of reaction the news would produce in the wizarding world. "What's with the 'Bine Potter'?"

"As chattel, we take your name but are not permitted the honorific of 'Miss' or 'Missus' - which are both contractions of 'Mistress'. 'Bine' is short for 'Concubine'."

Harry grimaced at yet another tidbit of knowledge before he looked around the room properly. "Uh . . . there's only one bed in here."

"How very observant of you," Tracey said.

He glared at her.

She grinned back unrepentantly. "In case it slipped your mind, Harry, we just became your concubines. It's rather expected that you would want only one bed."

Ignoring the implications of her statement, his eyes went back and forth between the two girls. "I remember your reaction when Ron insinuated you two sharing a bed a couple days back." He phrased it as a statement, but the question was still clear.

Daphne shrugged as she removed her cloak and hung it on one of the pegs beside the door. "I'm not interested in snuggling up to Tracey as a warm bed partner. You, on the other hand . . ."

That implication was more difficult for Harry to ignore.

Tracey said, "If you will it, Master, I will of course do as you command."

Daphne tilted her head as she looked at Tracey. "You don't want to," she stated.

Tracey shrugged. "I don't have any kind of a choice, do I?" Hanging her own cloak up, she went to the unresisting Harry and took his cloak as well.

Harry, meanwhile, was thinking furiously. "What are the . . . ah, *requirements* here?"

"Only your will, Harry," Tracey said, sitting down onto the bed, curling one leg under herself.

Harry gave her another dirty look.

She shrugged as Daphne said, "You may not like it, Harry, but she is correct. Our only requirements are to do as you tell us. We are bound; you are free."

Harry sighed again. "This will take some getting used to." He pulled the trunk out of his pocket and placed it down at the foot of the bed. Once expanded, it showed six wand touch pads, marked as each individual's clothing and other possessions.

Harry smiled at the Charms Professor's handiwork. He tapped the first pad, marked **Harry's Clothing** , and opened the lid to reveal his clothing packed away neatly. Grabbing a school robe, he said, "I don't know about you two, but I'm getting hungry. Let's change out of the formal robes and get something to eat downstairs."

Tracey bit her lip and said, "If I may make a suggestion?"

Harry stopped on his way into the loo, turning and looking at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Wearing school robes will mark us as students." She peered into the selection of Harry's clothing and frowned. "Do you not have some every-day clothing?"

Harry shook his head. "Just school robes and Dudley's muggle clothes."

Both girls frowned. "We have *got* to get him to go shopping," Daphne commented to Tracey.

The other girl nodded. "For the sake of our privacy, then I respectfully suggest I go and get some dinner for the three of us and bring it back up here."

Harry thought about that for a few seconds and then nodded. "Good idea." He reached for his money pouch.

Tracey waved him off. "I can charge it to the room."

Over the dinner and butterbeer, the three gradually relaxed again and idly spoke together.

Harry suddenly perked up. "I know what I'm missing!"

"What's that?"

"A Christmas tree."

Tracey arched an eyebrow before she pointed to the dresser top. When Harry turned, he spotted a small but realistic looking Christmas tree, complete with a little star on the top.

Harry smiled at it for a moment, idly wondering how he had overlooked it previously, before he rummaged around in the trunk. Giving a muffled exclamation of success, he pulled out two poorly wrapped gifts. He gently placed them under the tiny tree before returning to his chair.

The girls glanced at each other. "I am sorry, Master, but I'm afraid I don't have anything to give you."

Harry waved it off. "I didn't expect anything; it's okay. I just figured I should get my new wives *something* ." He gave a slight grin.

"Usually it is the husband's place to get his wife, or wives in this case, a present, yes," Tracey agreed. "Nice to see you have the proper instincts."

"We'll see how his instincts lead him tonight," Daphne said with a grin. She checked her watch. "Speaking of which, I suggest we turn in. It's getting late."

Smothering a yawn, Harry pulled out his toiletries and his preferred pajamas from the trunk. "Mind if I get ready for bed first?"

"Chattel don't have a vote," Tracey gently reminded him.

He blushed. "Yeah, right. Uh, do either of you need to use the facilities immediately?"

When the girls shook their heads, he headed in and quickly got ready for bed. Stepping back out of the loo, he said, "So who gets the . . ."

He stopped dead in his tracks at the scene that greeted him, his words trailing off.

Chattel Christmas and Boxing Day

He stopped dead in his tracks at the scene that greeted him, his words trailing off.

Tracey knelt in front of the trunk, putting her robes away for the night. She looked up and smiled a little self-consciously at Harry.

Daphne, however, was standing between the bed and Harry, hands clasped loosely behind her back and grinning confidently at Harry.

Neither wore a thread of clothing.

"Do you like what you see, My Master?" Daphne whispered, chest thrust slightly forward as if inviting inspection.

Harry's eyes were riveted to that bare chest for several long moments before his eyes drifted down her toned skinned midriff and stopped again. He distantly noted that she kept herself trimmed, but it was all still the same dark brown.

His eyes flicked over to the now-standing Tracey. Her head was tilted forward enough to hide her face with her hair, but she made no further attempt to cover herself. She was better endowed than Daphne but not by much. Neither girl was beautiful in the way that the Patil twins or Cho Chang were, but that was not to say either young woman had anything at all to be ashamed of.

Harry's mouth snapped closed with an audible click, and he shut his eyes almost as violently. Taking several deep breaths, he tried to get himself calmed back down, knowing at least part of him would not be calming down anytime soon.

"Why are you two starkers?" he asked in a mostly steady voice.

"Would you believe me if I said I was hot?" Daphne asked in a teasing voice.

Harry let loose a low growl, almost but not quite against his will. He opened his eyes again, keeping them trained on Daphne's face. "I know you're hot," he teased in a rough voice, rather pleased with his double entendre under the circumstances, "but I asked why you're starkers."

Tracey looked up and smiled at Harry's comment. With a blush visible over a great deal of exposed skin, she quietly said, "It is in the contract, Master, that we wear nothing to our wedding bed."

"Merlin, Malfoy's a controlling bastard," Harry commented.

Daphne, showing only a slight blush, gave a tiny smile. "Yes, he is.

"If Master permits, I shall prepare myself for bed." At Harry's jerky nod, she slinked over to the chest and closed the lid. Changing the compartment and opening it up again, she leaned forward more than absolutely necessary to retrieve a small bag of items. Slowly standing again, she brushed past Harry, with a great deal more contact than really necessary, and entered the loo.

Harry gave a strangled groan. "You two are trying to kill me, aren't you?"

Tracey grinned at him. "No, I believe that Daphne has something else entirely in mind. *I'm* not trying to force you, though. The contract really does state we must come to bed naked. It was kind of assumed our husbands would consummate the marriage the evening after the ceremony."

"Everyone, you included, expect me to . . . uh . . ."

"Have sex with us?" she suggested in a helpful tone.

"Yeah."

She shrugged, which resulted in movements that attracted Harry's eyes again. Fighting a smirk, she said, "It is your right, and that rather *is* what newlyweds usually do the evening after they get married."

Harry blushed brilliantly. "Um . . ."

"I haven't either," she stated matter-of-factly to his immense relief. "As I've said from the beginning, I was trying for a pureblood marriage. Bringing purity to my wedding bed would have been an asset."

Harry finally fought through the haze that kept trying to settle over his mind. Bringing his eyes back up, he carefully asked, "What do you want out of tonight?"

She shrugged again. Harry carefully did not let his eyes go back down. "I will do as you wish, Harry."

"That isn't what I asked," he pointed out.

"True. If you're giving me the honest choice, then I ask you not to bed me," she stated plainly, "not tonight."

He slumped minutely, whether in relief or sadness, she could not distinguish.

"In any case," she continued, "I get the strong impression that Daphne is more than willing to . . . uh, take care of the situation." She nodded toward his boxers, showing the unmistakable reaction his body was having to the naked women in front of him.

"Did I hear my name?" Daphne asked as she re-entered the room from behind Harry. Walking past, again generating far more skin contact than strictly necessary, she let one hand trail softly over his shoulder as she casually dropped her bag into the still-open trunk. Crawling onto the bed on top of the comforter, she stretched one leg out and curled the other one up a bit, foot planted down near the opposite knee. Propping her head up on one hand, the other patted the duvet in front of her. "Come to bed, Master."

Harry was saved from a mental melt-down by Tracey's snort of amusement. "Oh, very subtle, Daphne. Very subtle."

Daphne gave the other girl a dark look as Tracey, laughing lightly, stepped into the loo.

Harry did not dare ask Daphne what *she* wanted out of the evening. "If you'll give me one of those pillows, I'll just settle down in the chair for the evening."

Daphne raised one slim eyebrow. "If you so wish it, Master, then it shall be. However, may I point out that the bed will be much more comfortable for us?"

"I'm sure it will," Harry choked out. "But as you and probably Tracey will be sleeping there -"

She cut him off quietly, "But it is not Tracey whom I wish to snuggle up with, Harry." Her face relaxed. Her leg came down and her hip tilted forward so that her posture was no longer quite so blatantly seductive. "If you don't wish to consummate our marriage, then I shall, of course, leave you be; honestly, however, I *do* want to curl up with you. In the dorms, I often use Warming Charms on my sheets and wrap myself up as tightly as possible. I would much rather have a husband perform the same functions. And as I know you're very good at them from the other night on the couch . . ."

She trailed off with an impudent grin.

He laughed, partly at her words, but mostly in a release of tension. "So I'm little more than a blanket and bed warmer for you?"

She laughed lightly in return. "Hardly. I have much higher hopes for you than that." She hurried on before he spoke, "But I understand that you're . . . uncomfortable with anything more for now." She patted the duvet again. "Please, Harry. Come to bed."

Harry stood still for several long seconds, eyes searching her face for something he himself could not verbalize. Eventually, he released a long sigh and moved forward.

Tracey found them both under the covers when she emerged. Harry was in the middle of the bed, stretched out with one arm plastered to his side and the other gripping his pillow. Daphne was curled upon her side, back very nearly touching his shirt-clad chest. Raising an eye at the unexpected sight, Tracey merely waved her wand to douse the gas lights before she crawled into bed on Harry's other side and made herself comfortable a fair distance away.

Daphne shifted a short time later. She shifted again a few minutes later and again after that.

Harry switched to lying flat on his back.

Daphne scooted around again before draping herself over Harry and laying her head upon his shoulder.

"Are you two quite finished?" Tracey asked sardonically.

"No," Daphne stated. She sat up, making no effort to cover herself as the sheets fell to her waist.

"No?" Harry asked, eyes sparkling at her in the candlelight.

"No. You're entirely too tense."

"I'm in bed with two naked witches," he pointed out.

"You just figured that out?" Tracey teased.

"Why would that make you tense?" Daphne asked, humor evident in her tone.

Tracey gave a snort. "With his sense of nobility?"

Daphne let out a bark of laughter. "True. Only one way to fix that."

"I'm afraid to ask," Tracey said. "Should I leave before I get pushed or maybe thrown off this bed?"

"Funny," Daphne said flatly. "No, I think he needs a backrub."

Oh, thank Merlin," Harry said with a relieved breath.

Daphne laughed. "What did you think I was going to suggest, husband mine?" she asked sweetly.

"I don't think I want to answer that one. Er, if you're sure a backrub will help," he trailed off hesitantly.

"It should. Roll over and lose the shirt."

After a momentary pause, he did as he was told. She immediately straddled his back and started running her hands over his back, shoulders, and neck.

Harry tensed into a rigid board when he realized just what he was feeling against his lower back.

She leaned forward just enough so that he could feel two spots of warmth on his upper back. "Relax, I won't hurt you," she whispered into his ear. Sitting back up, she resumed her massage.

After two silent minutes, Harry said, "Thank you for trying, Daphne, but this isn't working."

Her hands stopped. "You're still too tense."

He mumbled something.

"What was that?" the previously silent Tracey asked.

He sighed. "Daphne, I don't mean to be cruel with this, but even when I relax, your rubs don't feel very good."

Though neither of her bed-mates could see it, her face fell into a pout. "Drat. I thought I was getting better."

"Huh?" Tracey asked. She rolled over to look at Daphne, having expected more anger in the other girl's reaction.

"Madam Pomfrey tried to teach me how to give a massage. Even after a lot of practice, I'm still not very good at it."

"I'm sorry," Harry said from underneath her.

She laid a hand flat upon his shoulder blade. "No need to apologize, Master. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Maybe not, but I still feel bad."

"Don't." She laid back down and pulled the blankets up to her chin. "We still need to figure out how to relax you."

Tracey sighed. "Harry, roll over."

He turned his head to regard her quizzically.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to ravish you; I'm just going to sing you a lullaby."

"You can sing?" he asked as he rolled over to his back again.

Daphne scooted closer until her chest was just touching his arm. At his questioning look, she said, "You're my bed warmer, remember?" she asked teasingly.

Giving a soft chuckle, he turned back to Tracey.

She rolled her eyes at Daphne's actions. "Yes, I can sing," she answered the question. "Fortunately, I can even sing well. I took lessons as a child." She cleared her throat and hummed for a few moments before she started softly singing.

Feeling very foolish for letting Tracey sing a lullaby to him, Harry forced his eyes closed and let the soothing tone and Daphne's warmth relax him.

Tracey was the first one to wake the next morning. As was her habit, she immediately headed to the loo and the shower. Emerging again wearing only two towels, she smiled at Harry and Daphne.

Once again, they were tangled together, Harry spooned to Daphne's back. With the sheets and duvet covering them, Tracey had no idea if any hands had strayed during the night.

Getting dressed, she dropped the wards and headed down to the taproom of the Leaky Cauldron to gather breakfast for the three of them.

The closing door awakened the other two.

Daphne hummed in the back of her throat and moved further back and into Harry's embrace.

"This does feel good," Harry observed, wide awake in an instant.

"Hmm-hmm," she agreed, not at all wanting to wake further.

"So do I make an acceptable blanket and bed warmer?"

She chuckled on a raspy throat. "Very." She rolled over, pushing Harry onto his back. Once he was situated, she threw a leg over his near leg, leaving it entangled with both of his and draped her arm across his chest. Her head tucked under his chin nicely.

Without any conscious thought on his part, one hand came up and started running through her hair.

Tracey, balancing a tray, opened the door a couple minutes later.

Harry's wand appeared in his hand, pointed at the fuzzy shape he could see but not identify.

Tracey froze in place, eyes focused on the glowing end of Harry Potter's wand.

Daphne raised her head only for a moment. "It's Tracey," she mumbled, laying her head back down.

Harry's hand fell to the bed, and his head dropped back to the pillow.

Tracey kicked the door closed behind herself and carefully laid the tray on the dresser top. "You two look comfortable."

"Very," Daphne agreed without moving.

Harry chuckled, his right hand resuming its trips through Daphne's hair. "Thank you, Tracey."

"What for?" she asked as she kicked off her shoes.

"Singing," he answered with an embarrassed little shrug.

She smiled softly at him. "Happy Christmas," she said instead.

"Happy Christmas."

"It will be if I can stay right here," Daphne said with a voice still roughened by sleep.

"Lazy slug," Tracey accused her cheerfully, curling a leg under herself as she sat on the bed by Harry's feet.

Harry pulled his arms away from the quietly protesting Daphne and moved to the side of the bed. He put his wand down and pulled his glasses on.

Tracey frowned at him. "Was your wand under your pillow all night?"

"Hmm?" he asked, slowly climbing out of the bed and stretching himself in all directions to work out the kinks.

"Your wand. If it was on the table there, how'd it show up in your hand when I came into the room? No matter how fast you were, you couldn't reach the table with Daphne laying on you like that."

Harry looked at her, a mischievous grin in place. Instead of answering, he opened the trunk, pulled out some clothing, and padded into the loo.

"He didn't answer me," Tracey complained.

"He also didn't tap the chest to change compartments," Daphne said around a yawn as they heard the shower start up.

Tracey blinked, realizing that Daphne was correct. "How'd he do that?"

Daphne ignored the question. Instead, she stood and headed toward the loo.

Knowing what the other girl was trying to do, Tracey smirked. "Good luck."

Daphne grinned at her over her shoulder.

Tracey counted five seconds before she heard a bellowed, "WHAT?"

"I just wanted to wash your back, Master," Daphne pouted.

Harry grunted and gave her a dark look.

"And I can't reach mine, so I was hoping . . ." She trailed off.

Harry ignored her, pulling one of the trays toward himself and uncovering it.

"Daphne?"

"Yes, Tracey?"

"Stop acting like a tramp. You and I have both made it clear he has the right to us if he wishes. He obviously doesn't want you to seduce him."

Daphne withdrew into herself, quietly eating her breakfast.

Harry slowly calmed himself as the mechanicals worked through his food.

After she finished, Daphne got up, retrieved a bathrobe and put it on. Gathering an armload of clothing, she quietly excused herself to the loo to finish her exceptionally short shower.

"What am I going to do with her?" Harry asked with a long sigh.

Tracey paused in collecting the dishes and tray. "I have a couple obvious answers, if you're really looking for suggestions."

Harry nodded. "Please."

"Take her to bed; consummate your marriage to her. It's what she wants, and it won't hurt you in any way. No possibility of her getting pregnant, even. We're both on the Prophylaxis Potion."

He first nodded in acknowledgement before he scowled. "I don't want to make love to her, or you for that matter, just because I have the right."

She sighed, unsurprised but still relieved at that answer. "Okay, next choice is to order her to stop trying to seduce you."

His scowl deepened, but he held his tongue.

"What is wrong with that?" she asked in a neutral tone.

He mumbled something.

"Sorry?" she asked.

"I said," he repeated with a sigh, "that it's fun."

She fought against a grin.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Laugh if you want. The flirting is fun. The touching is nice. Skin to skin and she's all warm and cuddly . . ." He trailed off for a moment, eyes taking a vacant look.

Shaking his head, he went on, "Telling her to stop would also hurt her. She seems to genuinely *want* to do what she's doing. And it's -" He cut himself off abruptly.

"I believe that what she genuinely wants is you, Harry. Remember what she wants out of life. You're one of the few wizards at Hogwarts who fulfills all the requirements."

He nodded.

"May I ask what the last reason was? The one you just stopped yourself from saying?"

Harry kept mute, staring at the wall.

"Please, Harry," Tracey whispered. "You have nothing to fear from me. I won't - and can't - do anything to hurt you with anything you say."

He nodded slowly. "I suppose that's true," he agreed absently. He took a breath. "It's flattering that she wants me."

Tracey's eyebrows tried to crawl off her face. Keeping her tone low and even, she asked, "Surely you've been chased by other girls at school?"

He made a disgusted noise. "You mean the ones chasing Gryffindor seeker, the ones trying to nail the Boy Who Lived, or the ones who were after me due to the names I've inherited? No, I can count on one hand the girls who actually know *me*."

She thought that through and came to the conclusion that he was probably correct. Prior to approaching him on Saturday, how much did she really know about him? "That makes sense."

He smiled without humor.

Daphne opened the door to the loo and re-entered the room, fully clothed. Nodding politely to Harry, she crossed the room and retrieved the brush from her portion of the trunk. Sitting in front of the vanity, she started brushing out her hair.

"Daphne?"

"Master?"

He sighed at her defeated tone. "You surprised me in the shower. When surprised, I don't always react very well."

"You have no need to apologize to me, My Master," she said softly.

Harry cocked his head in thought for a moment. "Perhaps I don't, but for my own peace of mind, I am."

As I was saying, I reacted badly when you startled me. I am flattered by the attention, I really am. It's just that I'm not comfortable with the thought of making love to someone I don't love. Yet. That aside, your pursuit of me is very . . . nice."

Tracey made a rude noise and only smiled when he gave her a dark look.

"Fine. It's flattering to my little, wretched, ego-challenged self. Happy?"

"Ecstatic," Tracey dead-panned.

Daphne's lip twitched into a smile that she quickly squashed.

Harry rolled his eyes at Tracey before turning back to Daphne. "Amazing as it sounds, as a healthy, heterosexual male I rather enjoy a gorgeous, naked female throwing herself at me."

Daphne's small smile returned.

Now looking slightly uncomfortable, Harry said, "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I suppose I don't mind the pursuit, so long as you are . . . a little less forceful, I guess."

"So no crawling on top of you in the middle of the night and having my wicked way with you?"

"No."

"No jumping into your shower and offering to wash your back?"

Harry's mouth twitched into a smile. "No."

"Not even if my naked body, glistening with moisture, needs to be lathered up as well?"

"Er . . ." He shook his head to dislodge *that* persistent memory. His smile expanded just a little more. "No."

Daphne pouted. "Oh, drat."

Tracey asked, "How about running around our rooms in all her natural glory?"

Harry paused. "Not when we're expecting company."

Daphne brightened back up.

"How about bouncing into bed naked and curling up with you?"

Harry sighed and his face fell forward. "You're trying to kill me, aren't you?"

"It's called the 'Little Death' for a reason, Harry," Tracey pointed out with a smirk.

He groaned, and both girls broke into giggles.

After breakfast, the girls opened their presents, finding a pair of school robes with the Potter crest on them. "Seemed appropriate," Harry said with a shrug.

Smiling their thanks, each girl gave him a kiss on the cheek, causing their husband to blush.

Later that day, Harry was reclining in the bed, reading over The Master's Guide that the ministry had given to him. Giving a sudden growl, he chucked the thing toward the waste bin.

Daphne looked up from her homework. "Something vexes thee?"

He blinked at her. "Huh?"

She shrugged. "I dunno. I heard one muggleborn say it, and another laughed. I figured it'd make you smile."

He gave her a strange look.

Tracey rescued the two of them after rolling her eyes, "What's wrong, Master?"

Harry's scowl returned. "That damn book," he waved irritably at where it had come to rest against Daphne's chair. "It's telling me how to be a good *master*." His voice dripped with disgust at the last word.

Daphne picked it up and flipped through it quickly. "'Disobedient Slaves'," she read. She looked up at Harry, eyes sparkling. "Bondage, Master?"

Harry blushed crimson.

"To change the subject," Tracey said with a gusty sigh, "the goblin said something about a home you own?"

"Yeah, inherited it from Sirius."

"It's in London, right?"

Harry nodded.

"Should we stay there after school? I mean, it was nice of Professor McGonagall to pay for us to stay here at the Leaky Cauldron, but wouldn't you feel better at your own home?"

"Nope. I hate the place. That's why I asked about selling it."

"Well, if you hate it, we'll have to find somewhere else to live once we graduate."

"Hmm. Good point. Any suggestions?"

Tracey shrugged. "We'll have to check out the housing market then."

"We'll have to find jobs, too, otherwise we won't be able to afford anything."

"True, but with your fame, you'll have no trouble finding employment somewhere."

Harry kept silent about his expectations about surviving to graduation.

Friday morning dawned clear. The sunlight that snuck behind the blinds awoke Harry, causing him to grunt irritably and hide his face in the soft mass that smelled of jasmine. His mood immediately improved.

"Good morning," Daphne whispered.

"So far it is," Harry agreed, unsurprised to find himself with an armful of naked witch, comfortably warm, and relaxed. "I could definitely get used to this."

She scooted backward, further into his embrace, wiggling as much as she felt she could get away with. "You only have to will it, My Master."

He chuckled, well aware of what she was doing. Pulling away from the disappointed witch, he said, "You are tenacious."

She smiled adorably at him as she climbed out from under the covers and sat upon the bed cross-legged. Running a hand through her hair in a vain attempt to comb it into place, she said, "It's Boxing Day."

Harry pulled his eyes back up to her face. Clearing his throat, he said, "Yes, it is."

"You know what this means, of course."

Harry frowned at her. "Well, it's a shopping day for muggles."

"Really? How odd. No, what I meant is that we have to spend the day wearing, at most, a pair of boxers."

Harry quirked a grin. "I may be ignorant of many wizarding customs, but I know better than that one."

Daphne pouted. Tracey, sitting at the small desk in the room, laughed.

Daphne rolled out of bed, gave an exaggerated series of yawns and stretches and then pranced into the bathroom. Within an instant, the sound of running water began.

"This shower's going to be a lot longer than yesterday," Tracey observed. "She can spend half an hour in there, easily."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope," Tracey replied. "Remember, I've roomed with her for six and a half years."

Harry laughed quietly before he pulled his Defense text out of the trunk and settled on the bed to read.

"May I ask a question?" Tracey asked some time later.

Harry turned his head and smirked at her. "You just did."

She rolled her eyes. "You know what I meant."

Summoning his most pompous tone, he said, "I permit you to ask your question, dear lady."

"In the eyes of the law, my dear Master, I'm not longer a lady; but I digress. What are your intentions towards us?" Tracey asked.

"In what way?" Harry responded uneasily.

"Do you intend to consummate our marriages?" she asked bluntly.

"Did Daphne set you up to ask that?" he asked with a frown.

Tracey snorted. "No, Master, I'm capable of thinking about things all on my own."

"I'm sorry; that was out of line," Harry said. "Uh, no, I don't intend to. Consummate the marriages, that is. I don't have to, do I?"

"No, *Harry*, you don't," Tracey said pointedly. "Might I ask why?"

Harry was silent for a while, frowning at the wall. "It seems too much like rape, I guess," he said finally.

"Rape assumes lack of consent; I assure you that Daphne is quite willing."

"And you?"

"If you call me to your bed, I will give you my best efforts, Master," Tracey said, looking straight into Harry's eyes.

"And that's the problem," Harry said with a sigh. "I assure you that on the abstract level, I like girls, and I think both of you are beautiful, nice girls - gorgeous, really. But neither of you can say 'no' to me, and I can't live with that. For 'yes' to mean anything, you have to be free to say 'no'. If I give in to Daphne's advances, then I'm no better than Malfoy, am I?"

"In that case, I think we need to arrange separate beds."

"Don't think you can hold out much longer?" Harry asked with a grin.

"As desirable as I may find you, I assure you that my self-control is in good shape," she said dryly. "On the other hand, I don't know how much longer *you* can keep playing with fire every night, sleeping next to a very determined, very naked chattel-wife."

In an apparent change of topic, Tracey said. "You do know that we can wear clothes to bed now?"

"You can?" Harry asked.

"The starkers thing only applied to our wedding night."

"But last night..."

"Last night I thought you were still keeping your options open," Tracey explained simply.

"Oh," Harry replied as the implications sunk in.

The bathroom door opened with a cloud of steam, admitting a towel covered

Daphne to the bedroom. After giving Harry a blinding smile, she walked over to the dresser. "Can I ask you a question?" she said, frowning at Harry's clothes.

"You just did," Harry repeated mechanically, his eyes bobbling as Daphne dropped her towel.

"Why do you wear such wretched clothing when you're not in school robes?" Daphne asked. "I heard the numbers from that goblin the other day, which, despite what you seemed to think, sounded about right. The Potters were never filthy rich, but you can certainly afford some casual clothes of some kind."

Harry's expression darkened, his anger burning through the fog his hormones were casting over his mind. "My aunt and uncle gave me Dudley's old clothes. Once I had something else to wear, something that actually fit, I was happy with that."

Daphne winced after pulling her shirt on. "Sorry, I should've remembered."

"Well, at least that gives us something to do today," Tracey said.

Harry looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

"We can all go shopping."

Both girls laughed at the horror-struck look plastered on Harry's face.

"See? This isn't so painful, is it?" Tracey asked him later in a soft voice.

It was, in fact, not entirely unpleasant. Shopping for himself was a novel experience, even with two teasing girls giving advice all the way through.

Not that he was going to admit that.

"I've spent worse mornings. In the hospital wing having the bones in my arm regrown for instance."

Daphne rolled her eyes and pointed to a small storefront. "Last place, Master. Eduardo is kind of expensive, but his styles are very good. He can also do muggle-style clothes, which I expect you'll feel most comfortable with."

Harry obligingly entered the store, ignoring the half-dozen reporters standing nearby and shouting questions. He looked around at the store layout, seeing something that would not look out of place in the muggle world. The only two differences were the wizarding clothing styles and that the interior size was larger than the space between the neighboring stores. Magic was wonderful.

"Dee!" A wizard rushed from a back room and engulfed Daphne in a quick hug. He was a slender, tall figure, wearing a loose-fitting shirt and trousers in a subtle but magically sparkling material. Daphne returned his hug with a resigned look on her face. "You won't believe the story I heard about you!" the man prattled on.

"That I got married two days ago?"

"You read it, too?" he stepped back to arm's length without releasing her.

"Yes, I did, Eduardo, and it really happened."

The wizard's face took a stern mien. "Is he treating you well? He's not too demanding of you, is he?"

Harry grinned at the irony.

Even Daphne smiled. "No, he's not too demanding. Not demanding enough, actually."

"The cad!" Eduardo exclaimed melodramatically. "How dare he deny you!"

"You do know who we're talking about, right?"

Eduardo waved one hand dismissively. "Bah! I don't care if he's now your husband. I don't care if he's the Boy Who Lived. He is to treat you right, no matter who he is."

"He does, Eduardo. Don't worry about me." She looked over at Harry and grinned. "And I'll wear down his resistance sooner or later."

Eduardo turned to Harry and folded his arms, glaring as menacingly as possible. "You treat Dee right. I've known her since she was a little thing and you will do right by her!"

Harry felt one eyebrow crawl upward at the obvious ire of the not very intimidating wizard. "I'll do my best, but this whole thing wasn't my idea, you know."

"I know, I know. The whole duel against that little Malfoy cretin. Still, you treat her right or you will answer to me!" he said, brandishing a gleaming pair of scissors.

Harry inclined his head, inwardly amused by the man's attempted threat.

Eduardo gave a sharp nod. "Good. Now, why did you come to see Eduardo? You need more clothes?"

Daphne shook her head. "Harry does."

The tailor looked Harry up and down professionally. "Dark colors, simple designs." He pulled a tape measure from his pocket and started measuring every dimension on Harry's body.

Tracey and Daphne watched the next few minutes in amusement as Harry was directed to raise and lower his arms, turn around, and bend in various directions.

At one point Harry cleared his throat. "I didn't realize that measuring me for clothing was such a . . . hands-on job. I may have to get a tape measure for my wife."

Eduardo looked up from measuring his inseam, smiling innocently. "Well if little Dee doesn't attract your attention . . ."

Harry glowered as the girls burst into laughter

As the three entered their room in the Leaky Cauldron, Tracey let out an exaggerated breath. "Vultures."

Harry laughed, removing the shrunken bags from his pockets and enlarging them. "Welcome to my life," he intoned ironically, referring to the media frenzy created by the three of them walking down Diagon Alley.

Tracey just let loose a nearly sub-sonic growl.

Harry's grin remained in place for a moment before it melted into a look of confusion. "What I don't get is all the looks we got."

"How so?"

"The range of expressions, I guess. Some people didn't seem at all phased by us, some were angry, and some confused. Well, I guess I can

understand the confused ones as I'm still confused by it all, but why are some people fine and some not?"

"I think I can answer that, if you're actually interested," Tracey offered. At his nod, she said, "The neutral and dark pure or fullbloods don't think this is at all odd. The light purebloods are upset that a Potter has chattel. Probably think the vaunted Boy Who Lived is turning dark. The muggleborn and those who don't know the whole story are angry. The ones who didn't read the article are confused at not recognizing the two girls with you."

Harry sorted through that in his mind for several seconds before he concluded that she was probably right.

Daphne pulled one small box out. "Master?"

"How many times -" Harry started in a resigned tone.

"As I did something that you may be angry about, I feel it is appropriate," Daphne whispered.

Harry's eyes focused intently on her. "What did you do that I may be angry about?"

"I used your money for something that you didn't pick out."

He relaxed, face falling into a look of confusion. "I've told you that you're allowed to ask for things you want or need," he reminded her.

She twitched. "I did not want or need this."

Harry's brow furrowed further. "Then why did you buy it? Come to that, *how* did you buy it?" he wondered, remembering that as chattel they were not allowed to have money of their own.

"I slipped it into a pile of things you were buying."

"Okay, what was it?"

She extended the small box to him. "Happy Christmas, Master." She smiled hesitantly.

Harry stared at the box for a few seconds before a small smile appeared. Without taking it, he said, "You didn't need to do anything."

She shrugged. "You got us some things for Christmas. Besides, I know you need this."

Curious, he took the box and opened it to reveal a tasteful wristwatch.

When he spent several seconds just staring at it, Daphne started speaking, "I couldn't decide what style you may want, so I got a plain one. I mean, if you wanted something more elaborate, you could exchange it, of course. For that matter, you could just return it completely if you wanted to, My Lord." She firmly closed her mouth, realizing that she was babbling.

With a soft smile, he looked up at her. "I love it, Daphne. Thank you."

She visibly relaxed.

"Told you," Tracey lightly teased her sister-wife from her seat at the desk.

Daphne shot her a foul look. "You could've helped."

The other girl shrugged, unconcerned.

"I'm glad you like it, Harry," Daphne said.

After fastening it around his wrist, he pulled the standing girl into a hug, followed by a hug to the seated girl. Smiling happily, Harry flopped onto the bed.

Daphne sat on the bed. "So what's the plan for the rest of today? Studying? Reading? Orgy?" She batted her eyes theatrically as Tracey groaned loudly.

Harry sighed and gave her a tolerant smirk. "I need to do some training. I've been lazy."

"Yeah, well, you got married two days ago and yesterday was Christmas."

Harry's face fell. "Voldemort's not taking the day off," he muttered, referring to the headlines, beating out their marriage, of a series of Death Eater attacks resulting in dozens of muggle deaths and two wizards needing time in St. Mungo's.

"While you're out, can we go somewhere?"

"Sure."

Tracey leveled a glare at him.

"Okay, I'm supposed to ask - no, demand - to know where and why, aren't I?"

"You're learning," Tracey praised him blandly.

"Fine. Explain to me why I should let you two miscreants out without adult supervision."

Both girls laughed at his over-the-top stern tone. "Because I can definitely make it worth your while, and we're both older than you?" Daphne offered.

Harry rolled his eyes and then waited for a real answer.

"We promise to behave. And if you're not here . . ." Tracey trailed off.

Harry nodded. "Where did you want to go?"

"The Dursley's," Tracey answered.

Harry's eyebrow shot up. "Why?" he asked curiously.

"I've never seen a walrus or a giraffe, and I figure that it's cheaper than the zoo."

Harry laughed, but it was a bit forced. "No, seriously, why?"

Tracey chewed her lip. "I want to see them for myself."

"And this is a good opportunity for us to learn more about our husband," Daphne added.

Harry was silent for a few seconds. "You'll be careful?"

Both girls nodded so Harry moved back into the main area of the Leaky Cauldron with the girls in tow. "Tom, can I borrow your Floo?"

The proprietor looked up from the Prophet and waved a hand in invitation. "Ye already know where the powder is, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded. "Thanks." He tossed a pinch of the powder into the fireplace and said, "Arabella Figg!" Taking a deep breath, he stuck his head into the fire. After a moment of vertigo, the scene stabilized with a view of old Mrs. Figg's living room. "Mrs. Figg?" he called out again.

A clatter of pans from the direction of the kitchen provided his immediate answer.

From upstairs and from two different doorways, some of Mrs. Figg's cats, which he now knew were actually kneazles, came streaking into the room to stare at his floating head. All three of them cocked their heads curiously but none made any fuss about his appearance.

Not getting any kind of warning from her guardians, Mrs. Figg came tottering into the room, looking toward the fireplace. "Harry! Heavens, child, you gave me a fright. I hear that congratulations are in order?"

Harry smiled slightly, fighting the wince at yet another reminder that the Daily Prophet made a spectacle in his wedding announcement.

Figg continued on, "Neither of the girls are . . . in the family way, are they?" she asked delicately.

Now Harry did frown. In addition to the announcement itself, the Daily Prophet printed some wild speculation as to the 'why'. "Mrs. Figg, I read the Prophet article, too. The three of us did get married, that is true. The reason was to rescue them from becoming the slaves of Malfoy and his thugs. Neither of them is expecting."

She blushed and looked down uncomfortably. "I'm sorry for asking, Harry, but you must understand that the announcement was unexpected."

He nodded, relaxing just a bit.

"As is this Floo call," she went on more briskly. "What can the crazy cat lady of Wisteria Walk do for you?"

Harry laughed. "Now that I know *why* you were like you were, you're hardly crazy, Mrs. Figg."

"Thank you, dear." She smiled at him but still looked at him expectantly.

"I was hoping you'd let Tracey and Daphne through and point out Number Four to them," Harry went on, getting to the point.

She frowned. "I can do that," she answered carefully, "but that is kind of dangerous."

"For the girls or the Dursleys?" Harry asked blandly.

Figg barked out a laugh completely unlike her batty persona. "Both," she admitted with a lingering grin.

"They want to meet my family," Harry explained with a shrug.

She nodded slowly. "Very well. Send them through. The address is 'Wisteria Walk'." She blinked. "But if you're speaking with me, you already knew that."

Hiding his confusion - that is not what he called out to contact her - Harry nodded and pulled his head back out. He stood and said, "Mrs. Figg is a

squib that lives close by. She was sent by Dumbledore to keep an eye over me while growing up. She's read the article, apparently," he said with a grimace of distaste. "Anyway, she'll point out the Dursley house to you. Her Floo is 'Wisteria Walk'." He held up the urn of Floo powder. "Be careful," Harry finished.

Nodding, the two girls Floo'd out. Frowning at the again-orange fire, Harry slowly put the pot of floo powder back on the mantle. He just hoped his wives would survive the visit with his "relatives". No, he was not worried for their physical well-being. He was hoping their opinion of him would not suffer. On the other side of the coin, he also hoped they would not end up in prison.

"I now know why those girls signed in the way they did," Tom said to Harry. When the younger wizard turned, he continued, "I've been reading the Prophet for years, Mr. Potter. I don't know the real reason you married those two lasses, but I don't for a moment believe all the gossip."

Harry relaxed. "Thank you, Tom. I could write a letter to the editor explaining it was to save them from slavery to the Malfoys, I suppose."

"Is that what it was? Good job, lad. At any rate, I'll do what I can to quash the rumors."

"Thanks, but don't put yourself out for me." With a final smile, Harry turned and headed toward the stairs and his room. He barely heard Tom's response.

"The truth is worth the effort, innit?"

Tracey appeared at Mrs. Figg's house to find the elderly squib peering closely at her and Daphne. "Thank you for letting us use your Floo," Tracey cautiously said, unnerved by scrutiny.

Mrs. Figg nodded as her face relaxed. "Think nothing of it, dear.

"Now, I'm to point you to Number Four. Before you go, what do you know of the Dursleys?"

Both girls frowned. "Some," Daphne said. "Harry has told us some things about them."

Not surprised at the reaction, Mrs. Figg said, "Harry's aunt is Petunia Evans-Dursley. Her husband is Vernon, and their son is Dudley, though he may or may not be in at this time of day."

"If his parents are home, where else would he be on Boxing Day?" Tracey asked blankly. *Holidays were for family, weren't they?*

Figg scowled. "Those boys . . . Let's just say that he's the leader of the local gang and leave it at that, shall we?" Without waiting for a reaction, she pointed out the picture window. "Down to the corner, turn left, two streets, turn left again, and it's the third house on the right. Will you be apparating out from there, or should I expect you back?"

"We'll Apparate from there," Tracey said, looking at the old minder. "May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly, dear."

"You had to know what Harry went through growing up."

Figg abruptly sat down. A pale face looked down at hands that were suddenly turning over themselves. "Yes," she admitted in a quiet voice. "I had some idea that dear Harry was . . . mistreated."

"Why didn't you do anything?" Daphne asked in a tight tone.

"I couldn't!" Figg burst out, startling both girls with her sudden vehemence. "If I brought the authorities into it, I'd only get them obliterated, and the Dursleys would take it out on that poor boy later." She took a shuddering breath and leaned forward, wrinkled hands covering her face. "So I did what I could," she said sadly. "I became the batty old lady who would mind young Harry for free. I kept some of the neighborhood gossips from digging too far into Harry's situation." Her hands came down, and she looked through her tears at the two girls in front of her. "I am not proud that I couldn't help that dear boy, but my hands were tied."

"Getting the muggle aurors involved wouldn't have helped?" Daphne asked.

Figg slowly shook her head. "Getting the bobbies or child protective services would only have run the risk of Malfoy and the Death Eaters finding out where he was hiding."

The girls frowned at each other.

"To my dying day, I will wish that I could help that young man more than I did. The Good Lord knows I spent a decade trying to figure out how."

Tracey stepped forward and laid a hand upon the elder woman's shoulder. "That can't have been pleasant. For what it's worth, I thank you for trying, Mrs. Figg."

She smiled mistily up at the younger woman. "Thank you, dear." She stood and made for the door. "Now, you remember the directions I gave?" Both girls nodded.

Figg paused with her hand on the doorknob. "I don't know what to believe about the Prophet, so I will believe Harry when he says he did it to rescue you from that family of lying French goatherds." She leveled a stare at both witches. "That boy has had a tough life. You two be good to

him."

The girls nodded solemnly.

Smile blossoming, Mrs. Figg said, "And at least one of you come back here after . . . speaking with the Dursleys. I have some things I wish to send to Harry for Christmas."

"You don't have to -"

Figg waved a hand, cutting Daphne off. "I want to.

"Do either of you cook?" she then asked in an abrupt change of topic.

"I do," Tracey hesitantly volunteered.

"Good," Figg said simply. "You come back after your visit." She then opened the door and ushered the two girls out.

Standing on Mrs. Figg's front stoop, Daphne looked at Tracey for a moment before flipping the hood of her cloak up. "That was . . . odd."

"Harry said she acted like a crazy old woman," Tracey agreed.

Tracey shared a glance with her companion before pressing the doorbell of a house that was a particularly dull shade of beige.

Thunderous footsteps approached before the door was yanked open. "What?" Vernon Dursley demanded, gaze alternating from one hooded girl to the other.

"May we come in, Mr. Dursley?" Daphne asked quietly.

His face clouded over. "You're some of those freaks, aren't you? I thought we were through with that when the boy left during the summer."

"Would you like to discuss this here, or shall we go inside?" Daphne asked reasonably.

"Unless you're here to tell me the little freak died, I don't want to hear it," Dursley growled, moving to close the door.

Tracey stopped it from closing by wedging her foot in the way. She pulled out her wand such that Vernon could see it, but not anyone from the outside. "Mr. Dursley, we've asked nicely. If you continue to be obstinate, we will *make* you listen to us. Do you understand me?" she asked flatly.

Grumbling about overbearing freaks, Dursley pulled the door back open. The girls entered, and he immediately slammed the door closed. Spinning in place, he loudly said, "Now see here -" He abruptly stopped as he had to go nearly cross-eyed to look at the glowing tip of the wand hovering right in front of his face.

"I came here to meet the family of my new husband," Tracey said with icy calm. "I was hoping to find some redeeming feature in my in-laws, despite Harry's stories. It's already becoming painfully apparent that I was naively optimistic."

Dudley Dursley ponderously came down the steps and stopped as he spotted Daphne's slim hands lowering her hood. His eyes never made it as far as his father being held at wand point. "Hey, Dad, who's the babe?"

Daphne rolled her eyes. "He forgot to mention that they don't know the meaning of 'tact', either," she commented to Tracey. Turning back to the obese boy, she said, "I am your cousin by marriage, Daphne Potter *nee* Greengrass."

"But this freak said *she* was married to the boy," Vernon objected.

"I'm married to Harry, yes," Tracey agreed.

"But she said *she* was," Vernon said, swiveling his attention to Tracey.

"Yes, I am," Daphne said.

"Wait, you're married to the freak?" Dudley asked incredulously in delayed comprehension.

"Is English your first language?" Tracey asked the boy snidely as she stepped away from Vernon and tucked her wand into a pocket.

"And you're freaks like him?" Dudley went on.

"Are we sure that our Master is related to him?" Daphne asked Tracey, ignoring the question.

"I'm beginning to wonder."

"You're *both* married to the Potter boy?"

"You finally figured it out, did you? Bravo," Tracey said sarcastically and with an eye-roll.

"Is that legal?" Dudley asked, openly ogling Daphne.

"In our world? Clearly," Daphne drawled, feeling soiled by the look she was receiving.

"You're both knocked up, aren't you?" Vernon said gleefully. "That's the only explanation on *why* you two and your parents would agree to something that idiotic."

The girls shared a mutual look of confusion. "Knocked up?"

"You know: bun in the oven," Dudley said.

At their continued blank look, Vernon rolled his eyes. "*Pregnant*. Your kind *do* become pregnant, don't you?" he asked acidly.

Tracey sighed. "Morgana! Why does everyone assume we're pregnant when they hear that we got married?" She turned a disgusted look at Vernon. "And yes, witches and wizards have children just like you muggles do." She shot a sideways glance at Dudley. "Well, not like *you*, so much."

"Hey," Dudley objected with a confused look on his face.

"If you're not carrying Potter's devil spawn, then why'd you marry him?" Vernon asked in clear confusion.

"Oh, it was all very romantic," Daphne said. "He fought a duel in front of the school to win us and everything. We got engaged six days ago and married Christmas Eve."

"You can't possibly love a freak like him," Dudley objected.

Daphne shook her head to the Dursleys' continuing confusion. "No, not yet. I am, however, deeply in lust over him. I hope to bear at least three of his children."

Dudley stared at her, slack-jawed. He clearly could not comprehend what he was hearing.

Vernon made a disgusted noise and gave Daphne a look of utter loathing. Turning to Tracey, he asked, "And you?"

"Me?" A slow, languid smirk formed on Tracey's face. "I'm just using him for the mind-blowing sex."

"That was fun," Tracey said cheerfully as they entered Mrs. Figg's home.

"Did you have a good visit?" Figg asked ironically as she shut the door behind the two girls.

Tracey grimaced. "You didn't tell us they were so revolting."

Figg shrugged. "Would you have believed me if I told you about them?"

"True," Daphne admitted with a frown. "How Harry can get out of that environment and still be as . . . as *good* as he is, I'll never understand."

"Me neither, dearie, me neither."

"Now, however, I have something to give you two." She turned and picked up a card that was on the end table near the door. She presented it to Tracey. "Here's a recipe for the treacle tart that I know Harry likes."

Tracey blinked once then smiled slightly at the peace offering. "Thank you," she said honestly, taking the card.

Figg smiled timidly. "He was always such a sweet boy when I had to mind him. I know he didn't enjoy looking through my albums, but he put a good face on it. In exchange, I gave him sweets while he was over here." She waved at the card Tracey held. "That is the one he likes best. Oh, and he doesn't like walnuts. Just letting you know so you can tell your elf, if you three have one, or when you're planning meals for him. Though he's a decent cook himself, you know."

"No, I didn't," Tracey said with an encouraging look.

"Oh, yes," Figg said, settling herself into a chair near the fireplace and waving the girls onto the couch. "No real creativity to his meals, of course, but that's the way the Dursleys trained him." She frowned in distaste at the thought before shaking her head again. "He's a good boy. Always willing to help out with anything I asked whenever he was over. Why I remember one time -"

Figg continued on for quite awhile, reminiscing on the times Harry had visited. Tracey and Daphne paid attention, finally getting the kinds of details from his batty squib neighbor that they had originally gone to his family to learn.

Finally, some two hours later, Figg glanced at the clock. "Merciful heavens! I've been chattering up a storm for hours. I'm terribly sorry for keeping you two for so long. Let me get some things for you to take with you, and I'll let you be on your way."

"The stories and the recipe are more than enough," Tracey tried to demure.

"Not that," Figg disagreed. "I mean for the kneazle."

Tracey glanced in confusion over at Daphne only to find a kneazle curled up in the other girl's lap and fast asleep.

"Oh, I couldn't take one of your -"

Figg waved one hand irritably. "Nonsense. Kneazles are very good judges of character, and she has clearly attached herself to you." She bustled into the kitchen and came back into the front room quickly, handing a couple bowls and a few days worth of food to Tracey. "I can give you a litter box, but Magical Menagerie carries better options than anything I could find here in the muggle world." She turned to the now-awake white and black kneazle still sitting in Daphne's lap. "Now you behave yourself, you hear me? Both Mrs. Potters seem to be good witches, and I know their master is a good man. So you be a good familiar to them, you understand me?"

The kneazle stood and gave a firm meow, bumping her head into Mrs. Figg's hand.

She smiled fondly down at the highly intelligent magical feline before looking up at the girls. "Now go on home and give your husband a hug for me." She gave them an exaggerated wink. "Anything more than that is up to you two."

"She did what?" Harry asked in amusement as he absently ran a hand down the kneazle's back to its clear pleasure.

"Told us stories about your formative years, gave me a recipe for treacle tart, and then just gave us the kneazle."

Harry laughed. "She remembered I liked that treacle tart, did she?" he asked fondly.

"Harry, you're missing the point. She gave us a very expensive animal."

Harry looked down at the feline who was doing a credible imitation of a boneless mass while purring loudly. "I heard that she raises them, so it's not surprising that she has a bunch. I also found out that she'd set several to keep watch over me while I was there at Privet Drive." Giving the kneazle a scratch between the ears, he asked, "Were you one of my guardians?"

The kneazle opened one eye and let out a chirruping kind of a noise before closing the eye again.

Harry laughed, and the girls blinked in surprise.

"So," Harry went on, transferring his attention back to his wives, "how did your visit with the Dursleys go?"

Both girls grimaced.

With a bemused grin, Harry asked, "I'm not going to get in trouble for anything you two did there, am I?"

"Oh, we didn't *do* anything to them," Tracey said with a wave.

"Pity," Harry observed idly, turning his attention back to the animal.

"Hey, what is this kneazle's name?"

Both girls blinked at each other. "Er, she never did tell us."

Harry smirked. "Not really surprising, I guess. After all, she always told me their names were Mr. Tibbles and Snowball and other such things."

Tracey shuddered.

"Exactly," Harry agreed. He looked down, pondering.

The kneazle looked up at him, fixing him with her eyes.

"Dawn?" Harry asked.

"Why Dawn?" Daphne asked.

Harry gestured between the three of them. "Rather the start of a new chapter in our lives, isn't it?"

Tracey let out a grunt of amusement. "Quite." She thought for a moment. "Genesis?"

The kneazle gave a loud sneeze and shook her head violently.

Daphne laughed. "I don't think she likes that one. How about Aurora? That's Latin for 'Dawn'. Do you like that one?" she asked the kneazle.

The animal thought about it for a few seconds before repeating her chirruping noise.

"Aurora it is, then," Harry said with a grin. He gently put the kneazle down and then stood. "So, I guess we need to go get some supplies for you, huh, Aurora?"

The next evening, Tracey brought up something that had been bothering her. "Master?"

"Hmm?" Harry asked, looking up from his essay. The way she chose to address him told him that this was going to be a serious discussion.

"After everything you've told us about your destiny, I'm still confused on how exactly Dumbledore expects you to defeat Riddle."

Harry sighed and carefully put his quill down. "I don't know."

The girls stared at him. "You don't *know*?"

Harry shook his head and shrugged. "You already know that he spent most of the past three years ignoring me, other than showing up at the Ministry to rescue some of us. After telling me the prophecy, he's left me to my own devices." Harry frowned. "A little assistance in learning would've been nice, but he's not done anything, even hiring reasonable Defense professors."

"What, he thinks a standard Hogwarts education will help you win?" Tracey's tone of utter disbelief matched her expression.

"I guess," Harry answered with another shrug. "I finally asked Fil for some instruction. He's been a great help."

"Your plan is to *duel* him?" Daphne demanded.

"Well, yeah."

Tracey sighed. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," he answered, giving her a strange look.

"And how old is Voldemort?"

"Seventy or so."

"How many of those years was he studying the Dark Arts?"

"Most of them. Look, I know I'm outclassed, Tracey. I don't like it, but I don't see a way around the problem."

"You need help."

"I *know* that! That's why I asked Fil for lessons on how to win a magical fight."

"That's good, but you need more help than that, Harry. You need allies. You need people to fight with you."

Harry's face closed down. "Leading my friends into the Ministry a year and a half ago didn't work out so well," he said sarcastically.

"You self-obsessed *idiot*!" Tracey raged. "Just because your friends got hurt, you now refuse to accept their help? How bloody arrogant *are* you, Potter?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, keeping a rein on his temper with difficulty.

"You think you can win on your own?" She went on without giving him a chance to reply. "If you go after him alone, you'll get killed, and you know it. What happens to everyone you're trying to protect once you're dead?"

Harry stayed silent, but he looked conflicted.

"We all get stomped under Voldemort's boot," Daphne answered the question.

"That's right," Tracey said. "Now, to stop that, you need to win. To win, you have to do several things. Obviously, you need training. You're getting that with Professor Flitwick. Fine. Next, you need help. Once school starts back up, you need to gather a few of your D.A. members together and train us into a small force that can help you in that final fight. Lastly, you need to convince yourself of something."

"What's that?" Harry asked curiously, no longer angry with Tracey's words.

"The winner is the person who walks away from the fight, no matter who plays fair."

Hermione tapped on the doorway to the train carriage the Potters were sitting in. Harry looked up from the book in his lap and waved her in.

"Thanks," Hermione said as she dragged her trunk into the room.

After Harry helped secure it, she dropped into the seat across from the three. "The platform is a madhouse."

Harry glanced out the window, giving an eloquent snort of disdain. "I'm sure you read that article Christmas morning. The press has been shadowing us ever since."

Hermione nodded sympathetically. "I can imagine. Did you three have a good break, all things considered?"

Harry smiled. "I did. I discovered that Tracey has a very talented mouth."

Tracey blushed and looked down demurely. Daphne smirked.

Hermione's jaw dropped open. "Uh, Harry? There are things about what the three of you get up to as husband and wives that I not only don't need to know but really don't *want* to know."

Harry looked at her innocently. "I meant her singing. What did you think I was talking about, Hermione?"

The bushy-haired witch glowered at him. Tracey stifled her laughter.

"Oh, very funny," Hermione finally conceded sarcastically and with a small grin. "To answer your earlier comment, yes I did read the Prophet articles. Just be thankful that Minister Bones managed to get at least some libel laws passed since taking office. If it weren't for that, they would have completely roasted you."

"Yeah, I know. Nobody even tried to ask us *why* this happened. They're just speculating."

"You could let Luna interview you for The Quibbler," Hermione suggested.

"If I may be so bold: it has worked before," Tracey offered.

"True," Harry agreed with a thoughtful nod. "Do you think it would be better if they interviewed me or one of you two?"

"All three of us," Daphne answered after several seconds of thought. "We can't speak without you present, but everyone will want to hear from us about how we're treated. You . . . well, you're still the Boy Who Lived."

"Which sells papers no matter what is said," Harry said in resignation.

"True," Hermione said with a sympathetic look. "Want me to talk with Luna?"

"Erm, maybe we should handle that," Harry temporized. "Nothing against you, but this *is* going to be about the Potters. If you are part of the process, that'll just confuse the situation."

Hermione nodded agreement at his explanation. "Just let me know if you need help with anything."

"Thanks for the offer, but we're going to have to start doing these things without your help, Hermione."

"If you're sure."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yes, mum, I'm sure."

Chattel Snape's Detention

Sitting at breakfast Monday morning, Tracey gently nudged Harry and nodded toward the doorway when he turned toward her. Looking over, Harry stood and flagged Luna Lovegood down as she drifted past. "Luna, could you or another Quibbler reporter talk with us sometime soon? With all of the crazy speculation going on about *why* I married these two gorgeous witches, I want the chance to get my side of the story out there."

Luna seated herself at the Gryffindor table. "Certainly, Harry. Who would you want to interview you?"

"Doesn't really matter to me so long as they're honest."

"All of Daddy's reporters are honest, Harry."

Ron took a seat next to Luna and across from Tracey. "Hey, Harry," he said distractedly, his focus clearly on Daphne.

"Ron."

"Hey, could I ask a favor?" His attention never flickered.

"What's that?" Harry asked, getting annoyed.

"Could I . . . um, *borrow* this one?"

Harry's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Why?" he asked in a low tone.

Ron finally looked up from staring at Daphne's chest. "The same thing you've been using her for," Ron replied with a smirk.

Harry silently looked at him long enough for Daphne to fidget nervously. "Have you always been such an arse, or is this just since I rescued these two?"

Ron sat up and took on an affronted expression. "Hey! No need to be rude. I was just asking, one mate to another."

"Does Hermione know you're asking me permission to use Daphne as a sex toy?"

Ron glowered but did not respond.

"In case you haven't figured it out: the answer, Ron, is *no*. You may not now, nor in the future, *borrow* either of my wives to satisfy your sexual curiosity."

Ron rolled his eyes. "Is that it? Fine, then. May I *rent* her?"

Luna sighed loudly, causing Ron to look at her in surprise. "You didn't listen to the important part of what Harry said," she told the red head.

"What? I -"

"Shut up, Ron," Harry ordered flatly. "Even asking that question is a horrible insult, not only to Daphne but also to me. Just shut up and leave us alone."

Ron, going back and forth between confused and angry, stood and moved down the Gryffindor table before sitting down to breakfast.

Harry rested his head in his hands. "I'm sorry you had to suffer through that, Daphne," he said, words muffled by his head-hanging posture.

She placed one hand upon his near shoulder. "Thank you, My Lord," she whispered into his ear.

He nodded and let out a long breath. He looked up again and focused on Luna. The blonde's eyes were studying Daphne. "And I'm sorry you had to witness that, Luna."

She shrugged carelessly. "Ronald's tone and words made me uncomfortable, but it wasn't directed at me."

Harry took another breath, visibly relaxing as he exhaled. "Back to our conversation, could you recommend a reporter for us to talk with?"

Luna shrugged again, idly propping her chin on her raised arm. "Several. It may be easiest if I interviewed you, though. I'm already here."

"True. And you're already a friend, so -"

"Lord Potter."

Harry stiffened in his seat as Malfoy's voice spoke from just behind him. Tensely, and somewhat surprised he had not already been cursed, Harry turned to look at the calm scion of the Malfoy name. "Is there something I can do for you, Malfoy?"

"I figured out what you meant," he announced.

Harry blinked once in confusion. Turning to Tracey, he raised an eyebrow in query. She just shrugged. He turned back to the patiently waiting student. "Could you refresh my memory?" Harry asked cautiously.

"When you said I wasn't offering the right kind of coin," Malfoy said, just a hint of impatience creeping into his voice.

"Ah," Harry said as he slowly relaxed. "And what did you think I meant?"

"You don't want money." Harry nodded agreement, but Malfoy was already continuing, "Instead, you want a favor from the Malfoy family." Harry's jaw dropped. Malfoy, oblivious, went on in a magnanimous tone, "Name your terms, Lord Potter, and I shall decide if either or both of your chattel are worth it."

"Are you naturally a deluded berk, or did you have to strive for this level of idiocy?" Neville cheerfully asked as he seated himself next to Luna.

Malfoy barely glanced over. "I was not speaking to you, Longbottom." His eyes went back to Harry. "Name your price, Potter."

Harry shut his mouth with a click and shook his head at the other young man's cluelessness. "Malfoy, you just don't get it. These two aren't for sale, rent, or borrowing. No matter how much money or favors you offer," he finished with a frown of distaste.

Malfoy's calm expression melted, and he looked at Harry with a combination of annoyance and incomprehension. "Everything has a price, Potter."

"That highlights my morals against yours, I guess," Harry said. "Now, as I believe our conversation is finished, I would like to get back to my breakfast."

Malfoy, frowning in confusion, just turned and walked over to the Slytherin table.

As Harry turned back around to his plate, Daphne loudly whispered, "You are so getting lucky tonight."

Neville learned that in drinking coffee near Daphne can be a dangerous task.

Chuckling, Dean whacked him on the back a few times.

Luna smiled distractedly. "I told you chorflumps were dangerous." She turned her gaze back to Harry. "When I find my reporting quill, I'll go to your apartments for that interview, shall I?"

Early that evening, Harry was studying in the small front room in the apartments he and his girls had been given.

A knock interrupted his transfiguration revision. He looked up as Tracey opened the door to admit a fuming Hermione.

"That unmitigated arsehole!" she snarled as she pitched her book bag to the floor.

"Good evening, Hermione," Harry said sardonically.

"What did he think he was doing, asking you that?"

"Welcome to my Master's home," Tracey said dryly as she shut the door and moved back toward her abandoned potions text.

"That bastard!" Hermione finished, dropping into a chair. She folded her arms and glowered at the small fire.

Harry leaned back from his books. "Are you finished?"

"No. What in the name of God was he thinking?"

Tracey looked up again. "Your God has nothing to do with it," she said simply. "You're both muggle-raised." She held up a hand at Hermione's frown. "That wasn't an insult. Just a fact, explaining what I'm about to tell you.

"He's making an assumption based on the pure-blood traditions. From his point of view, it's perfectly reasonable to ask his good friend for the use of one of his chattel. Would you get upset if he asked to borrow Harry's charms textbook?"

Hermione frowned deeply. "Of course not, but -"

"The book is not human," Tracey interrupted. "I understand your point, but what you're not seeing is that from his point of view; neither am I. And legally, he's right. I'm no more important, legally, than a book or a chocolate frog card."

"That's inhumane!" Hermione objected, sitting up.

Tracey shrugged, unperturbed. "Chattel-wives," she answered succinctly.

Harry, having had more time to adjust to this new way of thinking, asked, "What about the fact that he is dating Hermione?" He ignored Hermione's derisive snort of disgust. "I mean, it's clear he wanted to have sex with Daphne. Wouldn't the fact that he's dating someone matter?"

"Remember, the wizarding world doesn't bat an eye at mistresses and concubines," Tracey answered.

"That's disgusting," Hermione said.

"To a muggle-raised, maybe," Tracey answered. "To us, it's just the way it is."

"So I was supposed to not even care if he drags you off and shags you?" Hermione asked incredulously.

Tracey shrugged wordlessly.

Hermione gave a small shout of frustration before burying her face in her hands. Harry could see the sobs begin immediately. Hesitantly, he moved over to her and knelt next to her chair. Laying a hand on her arm, he started, "Hermione -"

She flung her arms around his neck and started crying onto his shoulder.

Harry, not knowing what else to do, awkwardly held her, making small noises of sympathy into her ear. He looked at Tracey helplessly, but the other girl did not offer any help. Instead, she just gave him a small smile and a nod. Deciding that this meant he was doing the right thing, he continued rubbing her back.

Presently, Hermione's uncharacteristic crying jag ended. Giving one final sniff, she pulled away but kept her hands laced behind Harry's neck. She gave him a concerned expression and a tremulous smile. "Sorry, made your shirt all wet."

Harry ignored the irrelevancy. "Are you okay?" he immediately shook his head. "No, wrong question. Are you better?"

She gave a watery chuckle. Turning to Tracey, she said, "You've been training him."

Tracey looked up and grinned. "You should know how long a process that is with this lug."

"Hey, I'm right here," Harry mildly objected.

"Why yes, you are," Tracey agreed. "I'm proud of you, Harry. Your powers of observation are improving."

Harry turned to the giggling, red-eyed Hermione. "See the abuse I have to put up with?"

She patted his cheek. "Aw, poor baby. Is Tracey teasing the big, bad, Gryffindor hero?"

Harry tried to keep an affronted look on his face, but he soon lost it to chuckling. When the three calmed back down, he asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

She sighed and leaned her head forward to rest on his chest. "No, I don't think I do. At the moment, I'd rather do some revision here where it's quiet."

Harry waved his hand, indicating the other half of his table.

The three settled into a comfortable silence. For perhaps fifteen minutes the only sounds in the room were the turning of pages and scratching of quills.

The bedroom door opened and Daphne walked in, nude body glistening with moisture. Her eyebrows came up in surprise at Hermione's presence, but she just shrugged and turned to Harry. "It's getting late, Master. We really should be getting to bed."

Head still down, Harry said, "Yeah, keep your knickers on." He looked up and laughed. "Well, you know what I meant. Soon," he promised.

She nodded. "I'll wait for you there. Good night, Hermione." She turned and headed to the bedroom.

Hermione, eyes blazing, slammed her book closed and roughly stuffed all of her books into her bag. Standing, she slammed out the door without a word.

Harry stared at the door in bewilderment. "What was that about?"

Tracey sighed. "I think I'd better talk with her." Without waiting for an answer, she hurried after the retreating Head Girl.

Two hallways later, she called out, "Hermione, wait up."

The bushy-haired Gryffindor came to an abrupt halt and spun in place, eyes flashing in anger. "What?"

"Do you want to know the truth, or is Harry already condemned?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked coldly.

Tracey waved a Privacy Sphere into existence. "Get over yourself," Tracey flatly suggested. "You're mad at Harry for what you *think* is going on. You've formed that opinion without all the facts. Now, are you going to actually listen or not?"

"What the hell else do I need to know?" Hermione demanded hotly. "She's going to bed stark naked and reminded him to join her. Do I need to draw you a picture? After all, you're shagging him, too," she finished bitingly.

Tracey's hand flashed up as if she was going to bring it down on the other girl in an open-handed slap. She stopped herself at the last moment, instead closing her eyes and breathing deeply for several seconds. After calming herself minutely, she opened her eyes and said in a cold voice, "By any definition you care to use, I'm a virgin. To the best of my knowledge, so is Harry. Since sharing a room with her, I do not believe Daphne has done more than kiss *anyone* .

"Yes, Daphne was running around the room naked. She's been trying to seduce Harry since before our wedding night. He's resisted the temptation, though Merlin knows how he's made it this far. We've all had separate beds after the second night, which I'm sure helps. Now, I think, he finds her prancing about starkers more amusing than anything.

"I'm sorry you just learned that your boyfriend thinks it's acceptable to screw around on you, I really am. But Harry doesn't deserve the shite you're about to pile on him.

"I'm telling you all of this for one reason and one reason only, Granger: I don't want my Master to lose his best friend through her ignorant and arrogant stupidity."

She turned and stomped back toward her rooms.

"What'd you do last night, mate?" Neville asked as he took a seat across from Harry at breakfast the next morning.

"What do you mean?"

"Ron and Hermione. After the rumors I heard about what Ron asked of you, I expected there to be a blazing row in the common room."

"There wasn't?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Nope. Oh, they broke up. Ron still doesn't understand what he did wrong, and he begged, pleaded, and whinged about it. No, what surprised me was that Hermione never got angry."

"Well, I did talk with her last night. Tracey explained a few things to her, and me for that matter, about how pure-bloods view this kind of thing."

Neville grimaced. "I figured that would've happened. The thing is, if that were all, she'd just break up with him, quietly but a little . . . frostily? You know what I mean. Anyway, that wasn't what happened."

"What *did* happen?"

Ginny slid into the seat next to Neville. "She was distracted all night. Oh, she had her homework out like usual but she never actually did any of it."

Harry looked over at Tracey. She continued eating her breakfast quietly, not looking up. "Do you know anything about this, Tracey?"

She swallowed the bite of eggs and said, "Yes, Master, I do. However, I respectfully suggest that it is something she would not want mentioned."

They were silent for several seconds before Neville muttered, "Now I'm *really* curious."

"You and me both," Harry agreed, looking at Tracey pensively.

"She . . . misunderstood something. I just explained the truth to her," Tracey said, clearly taking great care in picking her words.

"Oh." Harry paused as her words sunk in. His eyes widened and shot over to Daphne. "*Oh* ."

Ginny grinned. "Now I'm really, *really* curious!" She and Neville laughed.

Tracey wore a smile that nearly slipped over into a smirk. Harry blushed mildly. Daphne kept her face down.

Composing herself, Ginny said, "On behalf of the rest of the Weasleys, I wanted to apologize for Ron's actions yesterday."

Harry waved it off. "Forget it."

Tracey put a hand on his arm as Neville said, "No, Harry, listen. I know you don't like or understand some of the pure-blood traditions, especially as they relate to . . . some subjects, but you have to start learning. From one pure-blood family to another, this is important."

Harry looked from Tracey's solemn nod to Ginny's anxious expression back to Neville. "Okay, explain it to me. I don't hold the rest of the Weasleys responsible for Ron being an arse."

"But you should," Neville bluntly stated. "Generally, there are so few of a given family that the actions of one reflect on the rest. Therefore, by pushing on his request, especially as he should have known how you would react to it, he insulted you. Now, another member of that family, Ginny here, is trying to apologize."

Harry frowned. Turning to Ginny, he said, "Okay, fine. Apology accepted."

"Dammit, Harry, listen to me," Neville growled lowly. "I know you don't understand all of this and think it's pretty silly, but this is our *culture* we're talking about! By not taking her apology seriously, you're insulting them back. Line wars have been started over shite like this."

Harry looked at his normally quiet friend in surprise.

"Listen to them, Harry," Tracey whispered.

Ginny cleared her throat in the uncomfortable silence that followed. "Generally, apologies like this would be much more public and formal, but our families have been friends for a very long time. Therefore, I hope that we can do this informally. Lord Potter, on behalf of the rest of the Weasleys, I apologize for Ron's behavior over the entire chattel-wife situation and especially his questions yesterday."

Harry took a breath. "Thank you, Miss Weasley. I accept your family's apology. I strongly suggest you convince your brother that this is a very tender subject for me and therefore such questions should not be brought up again."

Down the table, everyone could hear a series of thumps. Looking, they saw that Errol, the ancient Weasley owl, had landed on Ron's plate, scattering food everywhere, before sliding further along and knocking the jar of maple syrup into Lavender Brown's lap. Considering the owl's spectacular crash landing, nobody noticed the Howler it had been carrying until it went off.

"RONALD WEASLEY! WE WILL BE AT HOGWARTS THIS WEEKEND TO HAVE A DISCUSSION WITH YOU ABOUT PROPER BEHAVIOR, AS YOU CLEARLY DO *NOT* KNOW WHAT YOU SHOULD. IN THE MEANTIME, YOU WILL LEAVE HARRY AND POOR HERMIONE COMPLETELY ALONE!"

Wide smirk in place, Ginny turned back to Harry. "I don't think it'll be a problem to keep him away from you for a while."

"Oh, that was just evil," Harry said with a chuckle.

Ginny shrugged. "Hey, I wasn't the one who told Mum.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to talk to Hermione, too." Ginny stood and walked toward the doors, stopping the just entering Hermione from approaching Harry. She pulled the other girl to a seat at the Gryffindor table just as a fuming Lavender came stomping past.

"What was *that* about?" a confused Hermione asked Ginny, voice raised to be heard over the laughing and excited chatter still echoing in the room.

Grin still in place, Ginny said, "It all has to do with the apology I need to make to you. Have a seat, please. This'll take a while."

"As I told you before the break, silent casting is essential if you wish to survive a duel."

Harry, sharing a table with Tracey, Daphne, and Hermione, didn't even blink when Snape spun and stared at him.

"Let us test to see how our very own . . . *Chosen One* ," he growled out snidely, "does without shouting out incantations for all to hear. Potter, come up here." As Harry stood and moved across from Snape in the front of the room, Snape ordered, "I shall cast a hex at you. You will cast a silent Protego Shield." In a single smooth motion and without warning, Snape brought his wand out and flicked it at Harry. A bright yellow spear of energy formed and flew at him.

Harry's eyes widened. "*Contego* ," he shouted. Instead of a standard Protego shield of energy, a solid, bronze shield appeared on Harry's arm. The spear hit the shield and deflected into the ceiling with a gong-like sound.

"That will be twenty points for failing to follow instructions, Potter," Snape said with an oily smirk.

Harry clamped his jaw shut, a murderous glare aimed at the Defense professor. The Slytherins in the class laughed.

Tracey was ready to shout out her anger, but Hermione laid a hand on her arm. Giving the other girl a shake of her head, Hermione kept her from making a noise.

The remainder of the class passed without any problems, though most of the Gryffindors shot angry looks at Harry. Once the bell rang and everyone was filing out, Ron grabbed Harry by the shoulder and spun him around. "Why the hell did you lose us twenty points, Potter?"

Harry was surprised at the use of his last name but answered, "A standard shield wouldn't have stopped a Power Spear, Ron. If I had put one up, it would have broken through the shield and sent me to the Hospital Wing. And he would have still taken the points because he'd claim the shield wasn't good enough. You know how he works."

Ron frowned but nodded. He and the rest of the class moved toward the Great Hall. Harry, his girls, and Hermione followed at a slower pace.

"That is fundamentally unfair!" Tracey objected. "I can't believe how biased he is against Harry. What'd you ever do to him?"

"My father and godfather tormented him in school. He's had it in for me from the first day."

"How juvenile. He's abusing a student because he can't grow up past the emotional age of fourteen?"

"That will be a detention for the sub-human slave formerly called Tracey Davis," Snape drawled from behind them. "My classroom at eight tonight."

All four students tensed up but refused to turn. "Yes, sir," Tracey tightly said.

Not another word was spoken until all four were sitting down for lunch.

"Welcome to Gryffindor House," Harry wryly said.

Harry and Daphne were sitting in their front room that evening when the door to their apartments slammed open and Tracey flew into the room and crashed into him, sobbing loudly.

Harry, barely having retained his seat after the unexpected collision, took only a few moments before he realized what he had in his arms. "Dobby!" he barked. When the house-elf popped in, visibly excited, Harry snarled, "Seal the room. If someone, *anyone*, tries to enter before we give you the all-clear, incapacitate them immediately."

Dobby's eyes were huge as he took in the sobbing girl and Harry's flaring anger. "Yes, Harry Potter sir!" A wave of his hand and all the walls glowed silver for a moment and the Dobby popped out.

Daphne, ignoring the elf's actions, had come across the room and knelt next to Tracey, eyes assessing her friend. Nothing was visibly wrong, despite her crying. "What happened, Tracey?"

Tracey's sobs slowed to disjointed hiccups as she calmed under Harry's hands rubbing up and down her back. After one final snuffle, she kept her head down and said, "Professor Snape. He . . ."

Harry, all sorts of horrible scenarios running through his mind, grit his teeth at her pause.

"What did he do?" Daphne softly asked.

"He . . . he tried to rape me," she mumbled, clutching Harry's robe tighter.

Harry's arms convulsed once before he force himself to calm. Much as he wanted to roar out his anger and charge out the door to hunt the man down, his wife needed him more. "He *tried*," Harry stressed. "He didn't succeed?"

Tracey shook her head, slackening her grip on his robes by degrees.

"Can you talk about it?"

Tracey tensed back up for a moment. "I must," she said in a fragile voice. "Dumbledore needs to know."

"Okay," Harry said softly. "Then we'll all go to Professor McGonagall."

"Why her?" Daphne asked.

"When a Gryffindor has a problem with another professor, we're supposed to go to the head of Gryffindor first. I'm sure she's going to take us to Dumbledore immediately, but we want to follow the forms if we want any kind of justice to be done."

Daphne grimaced but nodded her acceptance of that point.

Harry turned to the girl in his arms. "Can you walk?"

One final, shuddering breath and she straightened up and nodded. Standing, she held herself erect and headed toward the door without looking right or left. Harry and Daphne shared a concerned glance before following her.

Once outside the quarters, they found Dobby standing beside their doorway. "Thank you, Dobby, for your help once again," Harry told him solemnly but without slowing.

The house-elf trotted to keep up with them. "You is most welcome, Harry Potter sir. Will Tracey Potter ma'am be well?"

Harry grimaced, his eyes not leaving the form of the wife walking in front of him. "I hope so, Dobby. I hope so."

The three magicians rapidly made their way to Professor McGonagall's office. Knocking, Harry called out, "Professor? We need to speak with you immediately."

The head of Gryffindor opened her door and peered at the upset Harry and Daphne for a moment before her eyes stopped on Tracey. Taking in the overly-stiff posture, she gently asked, "Whatever is the matter, Bine Potter?"

"I wish to report an attempted rape," she stated flatly, eyes not moving from a spot on the doorframe.

Harry moved up and put an arm around her. Tracey tilted her head to his shoulder and suppressed a shudder.

McGonagall's nostrils flared and her eyes narrowed. "By whom?" she asked in a deadly voice.

Severus Snape," Tracey said clearly.

McGonagall blinked rapidly, jaw dropping open. "Ah . . . that is quite an accusation."

After several seconds of McGonagall gaping at them, Harry said, "May I suggest we go speak with the Headmaster? Considering who this is, may I also request Professors Flitwick and Sprout attend?"

"What? Oh, er, yes, I suppose that is a good idea," McGonagall said, clearly rattled by the situation.

Impatient with the lack of action, Harry sent Messenger Spells off to the two professors, politely requesting their presence in the Headmaster's office. He gently turned Tracey away from the doorway and headed up to the seventh floor, finally coming to a stop in front of the gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office.

McGonagall, finally having regained control of herself, stiffly said, "Sugar Quills."

Harry and McGonagall led the girls up the revolving staircase and had Dumbledore's door open by the time the two girls made it up. Harry was unsurprised to find Snape already standing behind the seated Dumbledore, dark eyes boring into Harry and Tracey, a faint smirk lurking in the corner of his mouth.

"What can I do for you, Professor McGonagall?" Dumbledore asked easily.

"I believe we should wait for the other heads of house to arrive, Headmaster," Harry interrupted with an apologetic look toward McGonagall. "This is going to be a very trying conversation, and I don't want to stress Tracey unduly."

"How *touching*," Snape drawled. "Very kind of you to be so concerned about the feelings of your property."

"Professor Snape is deliberately trying to aggravate the situation," Harry stated, not directing his comment at anyone in particular as he helped Tracey into a small couch and sitting with her. Daphne stood quietly behind them.

McGonagall's frown became just a touch deeper as she glared at Snape.

They were all silent as they waited.

Sprout, the first of the remaining two to enter, raised her eyebrows at the crowd and took a seat near McGonagall.

Flitwick was the last one in and stopped cold as he entered the room. Taking in each face and the feeling of obvious tension, he chose a seat at the side of the room, away from Harry.

Dumbledore looked at Flitwick curiously for his seating choice but did not comment on it. Instead, he asked, "Minerva?"

"Bine Potter, Tracey, came to my quarters and told me that someone had just attempted to rape her."

"She's a slave. She has no rights," Snape promptly said.

"She is a student," Sprout pointed out with a deep frown. She turned and asked, "Who was it who tried to rape you, child?"

"Why does it matter?" Snape asked in a bored tone.

"Because she's a human being!" Sprout snapped at him. She turned back to Tracey.

"Prof – *Mister*," she stressed, "Snape."

The only one who looked surprised was Pomona Sprout.

"Already told you, did he?" Harry asked Dumbledore.

"Professor Snape told me that Bine Potter came into his classroom and made inappropriate advances to him," Dumbledore replied.

Harry made a rude noise of disgust.

"For being the supposed victim here, he's been trying very hard to anger her and belittle her position," Daphne observed, ignoring Harry's reaction.

"Yes," Minerva said, not taking her attention from Snape. "Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"What do you have to say for yourself, Severus?" Sprout asked sternly.

"The slave is lying," he said dismissively.

"Headmaster, it strikes me that we can solve this easily. May we borrow your Pensieve?" Harry asked politely.

"She'll give a false memory," Snape accused.

"As far as I know, there are only two Master Occlumens in the room, and she isn't one of them," Harry stated.

"Which means *your* Pensieve memories aren't to be trusted," McGonagall pointed out to Snape.

"And what's to stop Potter's slave here from giving a false memory? She could have learned Occlumency from any of a number of sources," Snape persisted.

Harry gave another disgusted snort. "As you made it abundantly clear that I'm abysmal at it, I certainly couldn't have taught her in the two weeks we've been together. I checked last year and I know there aren't any useful texts in Hogwarts's library nor in Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. I, for one, don't know of any other easy sources for that information."

"Neither do I," Sprout said.

"So, Albus, if you would be so good as to get your Pensieve out?" McGonagall asked.

"The Hat," Flitwick spoke up.

Most of the room turned to look at him. "What was that?" Sprout asked.

"Put the Sorting Hat on her head. It'll know if she has Occlumency barriers and know the truth of the accusation as well," he explained simply.

Harry, McGonagall, and Daphne looked triumphant. Snape's scowl increased.

Dumbledore appeared to be very uneasy with the direction of the conversation, but he asked, "Sorting Hat, will you be willing to help us in this endeavor?"

The dirty, frayed, old sorcerer's hat atop one of the shelves shook itself a little and said, "Yes, Headmaster. I can help if the young lady agrees."

"She is chattel," Sprout pointed out tentatively. Giving Tracey and Harry an apologetic shrug, she continued, "Should you not ask her lord for permission?"

"No matter her legal status, she is still a thinking entity and deserves consideration," the Hat replied matter-of-factly. "A fact that you should remember, Snape."

The defense professor made a sour face at being told off by an animated hat.

"Thank you," Tracey said respectfully but with continuing tension. "I am willing to let you examine my memory, as that seems to be the quickest way to convince everyone. I only ask that you keep any other memories you may see in confidence."

The Hat chuckled. "Fear not, young lady. I have kept all secrets for these thousand years. I shall continue doing so for as long as I exist.

"Professor McGonagall," it continued, "if you would?"

The Deputy Headmistress took it gently off of the shelf and placed it upon Tracey's head. As she had grown since her sorting, it now fit her as a hat should instead of slipping low over her brow.

"Hmm," the Hat said. "First off, let me state that she lacks sufficient Occlumency barriers to stop me. Do not fret, Bine Potter. Remember that the specifics of what I see, I shall forevermore hold in confidence." It seemed to turn to address Dumbledore. "To that end, I submit that it would be best if she were to tell what she wishes you to know and I shall simply verify that she is telling the truth."

"For this purpose, that should be sufficient," McGonagall said with a decisive nod.

"Well," Tracey said, licking her lips nervously, "after Prof – Mr. Snape manipulated Harry into losing the points in class today –"

"I did not manipulate him. He disobeyed my instructions," Snape interrupted.

"Give it up, Snape," the Hat said in disgust. "If he'd followed your orders, he'd have been in the hospital if not disemboweled and killed. Because he adequately protected himself from your cowardly, sneak attack, you took twenty points away from him. In fact, Potter, take *fifty* points for knowing the correct shield to withstand a Power Spear Hex. Continue, young lady."

Tracey ignored the apoplectic look on Snape's face in favor of speaking directly to Dumbledore. "After class, I asked Harry why Snape had always treated him so poorly. Harry said it had to do with his father and godfather and their time in school with Snape. I made what *was* a rude observation about Snape holding a grudge for so long." It did not escape anyone's notice that the other three Heads of House smirked at this. "He gave me detention for my comment. I showed up at the appointed time, but had no idea what to expect."

"What do you mean, dear?" Sprout asked.

"I've never seen him give a Slytherin detention before," Tracey answered with a shrug.

The other three professors turned glares upon Snape for a few moments. "Very well," Sprout said. "Please continue."

"As I said, I didn't know what to expect. I mean, I've heard the stories about students in the other houses: how the Puffs and Claws would prepare the normal ingredients or clean the classroom with magic and how Gryff's would scrub the cauldrons by hand or prepare the really revolting ingredients. I didn't know which category I would fall into."

"You reserve the worst punishments for my students?" McGonagall asked frostily of Snape.

"Oh, how very even-handed of you, Severus," Sprout said, sarcasm dripping off her words.

Snape, wisely, remained silent. Even Dumbledore looked at him disapprovingly.

"Well, I had come to the classroom, worried about what I would be forced to do. When I came in, he was grading papers. He looked up at me and apparently saw my nervousness. He said something like, 'No need to be nervous, little one. I'm not going to hurt you.' The fact that he called me 'little one' confused me, but I didn't think much of it. I asked him what I was going to do for the detention. He said I was going to 'work it off'. I asked what he meant. Instead of answering, he stood and walked up to me. I don't recall his exact words, but it was something like, 'Nothing more than what your Saint Lord Potter gets from you. You are, after all, a pretty little thing.'"

She took a breath, visibly squashing her emotions. "He then ran a finger down the side of my face. I backed up several steps. I was really nervous by this point, hoping I was reading the whole situation wrong. 'What do you mean?' I asked. 'Potter has already despoiled you,' he answered. 'I assure you that I can be a much more patient lover than an arrogant, bumbling schoolboy.'"

"Severus, how could you?" McGonagall's voice lashed out.

"That isn't all," Tracey said, eyes riveted on Dumbledore and voice turning fragile. "When I refused him, he grabbed my chin and pulled my face up. I kept my eyes away from his. When he couldn't catch my eye, he leaned in and whispered into my ear, 'Relax, and you may even enjoy it. Don't worry, you won't remember anything once I'm done.'"

All three professors shouted at Snape as one.

This was too much for Tracey and she turned, burying her face into Harry's robes and nearly crawling into his lap. His arms came around her as she clung to him and shuddered.

It took a few minutes of shouting, but Dumbledore finally restored order in his office. Snape was on one side, the other professors at the other and glaring at the Head of Slytherin.

"One thing I don't understand," Sprout said. "Why did she avoid Se- *Snape's* eyes?"

Tracey, dry-eyed but visibly distraught, looked up. "I was afraid of Legilimency. I was afraid he was going to rape me at that point. I didn't want to know what he would do to my mind if given the chance."

Harry gritted his teeth and glared at Snape harder.

Dumbledore spoke, "I have only one further question of you: How did you get away?"

Tracey made a noise of dark humor, and her face twisted into a slight grin. "I first thought about spiking his hand to the desk with his wand," she stated flatly. "He's reputed to be a good dueler, though, and I knew that trying to attack him that way would be a mistake. So instead, I kned him in the . . . groin."

Harry, Flitwick, and Dumbledore winced. Flitwick crossed his legs. Harry would have done the same except for his lap full of witch.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Yes, well, I believe that is all we need to hear. Bine Potter, Daphne, could you take the other Bine Potter to Madam Pomfrey? I daresay a Calming Draught would not be amiss."

Harry's head shot up. "Sir!" he objected.

Dumbledore held up a hand. "I'm afraid, Mr. Potter, that you need to remain here for the remainder of the conversation."

Harry frowned deeply. "But I need to take care of -"

"How very touching," Snape interrupted in a drawl.

"Shut it!" Flitwick barked, startling everyone in the room. With everyone silent and staring at the diminutive professor in astonishment, he nodded decisively. "Harry, would you feel better if I were to go along with your ladies?"

Harry relaxed. He knew he could trust the Ravenclaw professor. He looked at Tracey. "Would that be okay with you?" he asked softly.

She hesitated for a few seconds and then nodded.

As she stood, Dumbledore said, "Filius, you need to remain here as well."

"No, I don't," Flitwick stated flatly. "I name Harry as my proxy for these discussions."

Snape, paling just a little further, objected, "You cannot. He is not mature enough to -"

"He's far more mature than *some* here I could name," Flitwick acidly answered, staring Snape down. After several tense seconds, he nodded again, having gotten his point across. "Fine, Minerva can speak for me, then." He turned and opened the door, waving his arm. "Ladies?"

Harry helped Tracey to her feet. "I'll see you in the hospital later." He turned to Daphne. "Take care of her." Daphne nodded, but Harry had

already turned his head. "Thank you ," he silently mouthed to the Charms professor.

Giving a short nod, he retrieved the forgotten Sorting Hat from Tracey's head, handed it to McGonagall, and then followed the two girls out of the room.

"For the record," the Hat said as it was being placed onto the shelf again, "every word the young lady said was the complete truth."

"So," Harry said in an overloud voice, "we've proven that your little pet Death Eater is biased against Gryffindors and for Slytherin, attempted to rape my wife, threatened a memory charm, and is a known abuser of Legilimency. My only question is how long his prison sentence is going to be."

"YOU INSOLENT -" Snape started in a bellow.

"ENOUGH!" roared Dumbledore.

Snape's jaw shut with an audible click. His glare rested on Harry from across the room.

"Harry," Dumbledore started calmly, "you're aware of why I must keep Severus here."

"I'm aware of why *you think* you need to keep him protected, yes. I'm not convinced he's on our side, but that's a conversation for another time."

Dumbledore knew better than to respond to that, so he ignored it. "On another topic, your charge of attempted rape isn't valid." He held up a hand to Harry's gathering eruption. "Recall their legal status, Harry. They're property. At most, you could try to bring charges of attempting to damage your property."

"The fact that they're *students at your school* doesn't matter?" Harry demanded incredulously. "You're going to let him get away with attempting to rape her?"

"Alas, my hands are tied, legally."

"We're completely ignoring the fact that you're completely justified in sacking him for about twenty different reasons," Harry spat. "Fine, I give up." He turned his head to the absolutely incensed McGonagall. "Deputy Headmistress, could you please contact Madam Maxime and inquire to the possibility of three transfer students?"

Dumbledore half-rose out of his seat in alarm. "Harry!"

Harry glared at the man. "It's blindingly obvious that you're not going to do anything about the monster hiding in your shadow. Short of a public smear campaign against you and him, I don't see what I can do. Therefore, I'm going to leave you to stew in the problem of your own making.

"I'm sure I'll miss some of my friends, assuming they don't follow me, but getting out of this school is more than worth it."

"He's right, you know," the Hat said. "Until I perused Bine Potter's memories of classes with Snape, I didn't realize how bad it was. On behalf of Hogwarts herself, I demand you remove Snape."

Dumbledore looked at the Hat in shock. Minerva looked smug. Without taking her eyes from Snape, she said, "Recall how many complaints I have brought against him, Headmaster. I've counseled for years that you replace him."

"I, too," Sprout spoke up. "Headmaster, when will you see that *everyone* believes he should be replaced? Even Hogwarts herself, through the Hat, is stating the same thing."

"He is one of the finest potions brewers in Europe," Dumbledore objected.

"Perhaps, but that has nothing to do with his ability to teach," the Hat stated.

Harry's mouth closed, the same sentiment, using less than polite words, unvoiced.

"But he must be kept here for his protection," Dumbledore protested.

Sprout threw up her hands in exasperation. "So put him in the dungeons and let him spend all his time brewing! Just keep him away from the students, Albus."

Dumbledore looked down at his desktop, considering. Finally he looked over at the silent Snape. "Would that be acceptable to you, Severus?"

Snape's mouth twitched a few times as he continued to glare at Harry. Finally, he gave one short nod. "Acceptable."

Dumbledore turned to Harry. "Harry?"

"No," Harry stated flatly, eyes locked with Snape's. "He deserves Azkaban for what he's done. You all know that."

Harry let out an angry breath and transferred his eyes to Dumbledore. "But that isn't going to happen due to Tracey's legal status. So this is as good as it's going to get, I guess. Just tell the students that he has been removed for an attempted rape of a student."

"Tomorrow I will state that he is being dismissed," Dumbledore offered.

Harry's look turned to a scowl. "If you don't call it what it is, Dumbledore, I will."

McGonagall decided not to correct Harry's form of address.

Having gotten his point across, Harry's eyes went back to Snape, and he smirked. "After all, that won't hurt his reputation with Voldemort."

"And it will help you," McGonagall added softly.

It took several seconds for her words to make sense. Once the rumors of who the victim was coupled with Harry storming up to the Headmaster's office, it would help prove his interest in the girls' welfare.

Just like a good little master.

Harry felt slightly disgusted with himself over that thought but nodded his agreement.

Fuming, Harry entered the Hogwarts Infirmary and stopped short. Daphne, Hermione, and Neville were sitting around Tracey's bed. Before he could approach them, though, Madam Pomfrey saw him.

"Lord Potter," she greeted him.

He gave her a sour look. "Lord only by necessity, Madam Pomfrey.

"How's Tracey?" he asked next.

"There is nothing physically wrong with her," she answered. "I gave her a Calming Draught. It's helping for the moment. She may need one tomorrow morning, but I hope that a little time will help." Her voice dropped. "Staying away from whoever scared her so badly will be critical. Do you know who it was?"

Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Nobody told you what happened?"

The school nurse shook her head.

Harry glanced over at the corner where he could sense Professor Flitwick more than he could see the man. "You may as well come over, Professor, so I only have to explain this once."

Pomfrey blinked in surprise as Flitwick faded back into view, stepping over to the two.

"Thank you for standing guard, Fil," Harry said with a smile.

Flitwick waved that off. "You and your ladies more than deserve it, Harry."

Harry gave the man another smile before it faded. Turning to Pomfrey, he exhaled noisily. "Snape tried to rape her," he stated bluntly. He ignored her sharp intake of breath. "Due to her *status*, I can't get him arrested, though," he added in disgust. Shaking his head, he led the two over toward the bed.

As they arrived, Hermione stood and nodded politely to the professor and the school nurse. "We'll be going," she said. She turned to Tracey. "I hope you feel better soon."

Harry objected, "You don't have to leave."

"We've said what we need to say to her," Neville said calmly. He, too, nodded politely to everyone and led Hermione from the room, holding the door for her.

"They didn't have to go," Harry said to nobody in particular. "It was nice of them to visit, though." He turned to Tracey and his voice became much more gentle. "Will you be okay?"

Tracey, face serene, merely nodded.

"Well, we did come to an agreement on what to do with Snape," Harry went on with a grimace. "Fortunately, Professors McGonagall and Sprout convinced Headmaster Dumbledore to replace him. He won't be teaching anymore. I wanted to do more than that, but . . ."

Daphne frowned but slowly nodded. "I understand."

"I don't like it, either," Harry said before turning back to Tracey. He took the hand of the girl lying in the bed.

"But it's the best you can do, considering our status," Tracey said simply.

Harry nodded.

Tracey frowned faintly, clearly still under the effects of a Calming Draught. "You're unhappy, Master."

"Yes I am. I wish that Snape was being punished more."

"I know what would have made you feel better," Tracey announced. When Harry and Daphne looked at her, she continued in a level voice, "I should have spiked his testicles to his desk instead."

The next morning, Dumbledore announced that Snape had been dismissed.

Most of the students promptly started cheering.

The Slytherins shouted out their objections, resulting in a fair amount of shouting going back at them.

The disturbance between the houses went on for only a few minutes before Dumbledore quieted everyone down again. Once the noise level dropped, Dumbledore, twinkling conspicuously absent, went on, stating that the dismissal was due to his attempted sexual misconduct with a student.

Silence descended.

Harry, smirk hidden from his face, noted more than one face turned to him and his girls. The Hogwarts rumor mill moved as quickly as McGonagall had hinted.

After several long moments, Dumbledore further announced that until a replacement Defense professor had been hired, he, Flitwick, and McGonagall would be splitting the classes. Finished, Dumbledore sat down and calmly began his breakfast. Slowly, the students followed suit, though the sound level never rose above a low buzz, quite lower than usual.

Once he had finished eating, Dumbledore stood and made his way toward the doors.

"Headmaster?" Harry called.

He stopped. "Yes, Lord Potter?"

Harry ignored the form of address. "Did you notice the one similarity among everyone you've informed about Snape's actions?"

Dumbledore tilted his head in thought. "I am afraid that nothing comes immediately to mind."

"Two things, actually. None of them were shocked that he'd do such a thing, and none of them tried to defend him. What does that tell you about him?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I trust Severus," he answered, ignoring the question.

Harry nodded. "I know. And I hope it means something to you that you're the only one who does."

Life settled into an uncommon peace at Hogwarts.

With being taught by a Transfiguration Mistress, a former dueling champion, and the defeater of Grindelwald, Defense classes became much more instructive for the students, if somewhat jarring in that the topics kept shifting depending on who was teaching that particular class.

The pure-blood students left the Potters respectfully alone. The muggle-born, after seeing how well the girls were treated, watched them in curiosity but no antipathy.

Dumbledore, though he showed up for meals, kept to himself outside of the classroom.

Filius, during one of their regular dueling lessons, told Harry that Dumbledore had been spending a lot of time alone in his office.

Nobody had seen Snape since his dismissal. This pleased everyone except the Slytherins.

During a dueling lesson during the third week of the new year, Nymphadora Tonks showed up at the door.

Flitwick turned his attention from Daphne's practice of a new hex and smiled. "Ah, Nymphadora! Thank you for coming."

She gave him a wry grin. "Professor, you're one of the very few I let get away with that." Her usual happy expression flowed back over her face, and her hair turned purple. "Wotcher, Harry!" She came over and gave the young man a hug.

She jumped back when both Daphne and Tracey growled.

Harry laughed. "Easy girls," he said. "Tonks is a friend, and she's no threat to you." As the girls were calming down, he turned to the confused auror. "Tracey and Daphne are . . . protective of me."

"Good a word as any," a chuckling Flitwick agreed.

Harry graced the man with a grin.

"The hug?" Tonks asked.

Harry nodded. He turned to the two girls. "Don't worry about Tonks. She's dating Professor Lupin." He turned. "Or are you engaged yet?"

With a blinding smile, Tonks held up her left hand, showing off a ring.

The girls squealed and jumped at Tonks, turning from protective shrews into giggling teenaged girls in the blink of an eye. The three women moved to the corner of the room and started whispering, punctuated by the occasional giggle.

Harry turned mystified eyes to Flitwick.

"Auror Tonks will be working with your ladies while I continue to work with you," the professor explained.

Harry nodded. "Good idea, but I was more curious as to how girls can change emotional states like that."

Flitwick gave a small grin. "Harry, my boy, if I knew that I'd write a book and sell it to the male half of the planet."

Chattel Ambush and Prank

One morning in February, Harry noticed that not only Tracey and Daphne were moving slowly, but so were several others. "What, you guys have a party and didn't tell me?" Harry asked with a grin.

Neville looked up and grinned. "Naw. Just new, advanced D.A. lessons."

Harry's eyebrows crawled up. "How'd that manage to make you, Hermione, and Ginny sore but not the others?"

Ginny shook her head. "Tonks is teaching us in addition to Tracey and Daphne."

"Why?" Harry asked curiously.

Unnoticed by Harry, Hermione subtly shook her head at Ginny. Smoothly, the younger girl answered, "We have to learn the spells from somewhere so we can teach them to the D.A. Tonks was good enough to help us out."

"That's nice of her."

"Yes, it is," Hermione agreed.

By early March, Harry was getting comfortable with the new status quo.

The only dark part of the previous month had been Ron's continuing jealousy. Seamus was the only one at all sympathetic toward his position, causing him to drift away from his former best friends. That rift continued to widen as time went on.

This particular evening near curfew, Harry met the girls as they exited their training room, followed closely by the rest of the students in the advanced D.A.

"Hey," Harry called to them, causing Hermione and Neville to look up from their huddled conversation.

"Hi, Harry," Neville casually greeted him.

"How'd it go?"

Neville shrugged.

"Pretty good," Tonks answered, exiting behind the others. "Your two are working as hard as Professor Flitwick tells me you are. You'd be proud of them."

Harry smiled at the two. "I am," he said, causing them to blush and smile at him. He offered each an arm. Laughing, they took him up on that offer and the three walked on down the hall, away from the smiling students and Tonks.

"What all are you learning?" Harry asked.

"Auror spells for dueling, dueling practice, bodyguard techniques, all sorts of things," Tracey answered.

"We probably should start working together some," Harry thought aloud. "Your wanting to help me is appreciated, but if we can't all work together without getting in each others' way, it'd be worse than if we'd not gotten any training."

"True," Daphne agreed. She looked sideways at her master. "You really do appreciate us trying to help?"

He nodded firmly. "At first, I didn't like it."

"Heroically noble Gryff," Tracey teased him.

"Overly emotional and never thinks straight," Daphne added.

"That's what I said, wasn't it?" Tracey asked innocently.

Harry rolled his eyes and nudged each girl with his trapped elbows. "Hush, you."

They giggled and held onto the elbows more tightly.

"As I was saying," he went on, not at all bothered by the two women gripping his arms, "at the beginning I didn't want anyone to put themselves at risk to help me. You were right, though, Tracey. I can't do this alone. At the very least, I need someone to keep the deez off of my back as I battle Voldemort. Merlin knows they won't fight fair if they can help it. So that just means I need to be prepared for them to fight dirty."

"You should fight dirty, not just prepare if they do so," Tracey advised.

He frowned. "How so?"

"He's older, more powerful, and more knowledgeable, right?"

"Thank you for that cheery little pick-me-up."

"You know what I mean," Tracey said patiently.

Sighing, Harry nodded.

"And nothing in the prophecy says you can't have help, right?"

"Right," Harry agreed, clearly not seeing where the conversation was going.

"So why not let us help you duel him?" She squeezed his arm harder as his mouth opened to argue the point. "No, hear me out. Even if we do nothing more than jump around and cast stunners at him, that's more distraction for him, right? What if it is that little bit of distraction that can help you win?"

Harry frowned deeply. "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I don't want you to get *dead*," Daphne returned bluntly. "Look, we're training to help you. If you don't let us help, the training will have been worthless." She shook her head at his gathering frown. "You saved us, Harry. Let us help you back."

Tracey said, "If that reason isn't good enough, then think of it this way: If our presence increases your chances by even one percent, that makes it one percent more likely that you can save the wizarding world from utter destruction at the hands of a megalomaniac psychopath, right?"

Harry was silent for some time as they continued to walk. "That's just fighting dirty," he said lowly.

Tracey shrugged, completely unrepentant. "If it keeps my husband alive after the fight, I'm willing to fight a lot dirtier than that."

Before he could respond, Harry heard a triumphant shout behind him. Quicker than he could react, he felt a spell slam into his back and the world spun crazily.

Everything went dark.

"Headmaster, I demand that that dangerous brat be expelled!" Malfoy exclaimed from Dumbledore's fireplace.

"And a good evening to you, Lucius."

The senior Malfoy just glowered at him for a moment before looking around the room. He spotted the Head of D.M.L.E., Rufus Scrimgeour. With an oily smile, he turned back to Dumbledore. "I'm gratified to see you're bringing in the authorities. So he is going to Azkaban as well as being expelled?"

Scrimgeour and Dumbledore looked at each other for a moment. "You realize it is your son who is most likely to be disciplined?" Dumbledore asked carefully.

Malfoy blinked hard. "But that isn't what I was told. That Potter boy viciously attacked my son without provocation."

"I'd be interested in knowing what you heard, who you heard it from, and how you heard it so quickly," Scrimgeour growled.

Malfoy shook his head in an impatient gesture. "The who and how are irrelevant. Draco and some of his friends were walking down the corridor and were attacked by Potter and his two slaves. He should be arrested and the chattel given to me as recompense."

Any doubts that Scrimgeour had were dispelled. The attack had not in fact happened in a hallway, so he *knew* that this was a setup. The problem was that nothing was provable.

Dumbledore, meanwhile, invited Malfoy to come through the Floo. Once the Malfoy patriarch joined them, the three men walked down to the hospital in silence.

That silence was shattered as the doors opened before them.

Daphne and Tracey had their backs to a hospital bed containing Harry Potter. They stood with wands out and dangling by their sides, eyes trained on the remaining students.

Draco Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, Nott, Parkinson, and Bulstrode were in beds ranged along the other side of the aisle. Each of them alternated their glares at the threesome of Potters and complaining toward one of the adults in the room.

Madam Pomfrey moved from bed to bed, dispensing potions and healing the group of Slytherin seventh years. She ignored the students' attempts to explain to her what had happened.

Severus Snape, on the other hand, was moving from bed to bed, listening to the students and shooting Harry dark looks.

Professor McGonagall, too, was there, listening to Theodore Nott but keeping her eyes on Snape. It was unclear if it was Nott's words or Snape's presence that caused the pinched frown on her face.

Auror Tonks stood at the foot of Harry's bed, wand out and watching everyone.

As the three men stood in the doorway, taking in the scene, Neville Longbottom and Hermione Granger slipped past them and walked up to the Potters. Without a word, the two girls stepped apart, allowing the two Gryffindors to approach. After a quick glance at the unconscious form of his friend, Neville drew his wand and spun in place, glaring at the assembled Slytherins. Despite Dumbledore's momentary fears, he did not do anything untoward. Instead, he appeared to take on the attitude of an auror guard. Scrimgeour gave a sharp nod at this.

Hermione gave a small gasp at the sight of Harry's form before beginning a whispered conversation with Daphne.

"Father!" Draco called, bringing all the other voices to a momentary halt.

After a startled moment, the other five Slytherin voices picked back up, this time directed to the Headmaster. "Headmaster, he attacked us -" "- no warning -" "- just walking along -"

Dumbledore held up his hands in a placating gesture as Lucius Malfoy strode to his son's bedside. "Please, children. My hearing is not as quick as it once was. One at a time, please."

Almost in unison, the other five swiveled to look at Draco. The Malfoy scion held up his head, looking a little smug, and started speaking. "The six of us were walking along, minding our own business when Potter and his two whores ambushed us. We tried to defend ourselves, of course, and managed to stun Potter. He's not as invincible as all that, it seems," Draco added with an eye roll.

The Slytherins all snickered appreciatively, causing the students standing around Harry's bed grit their teeth and gripped their wands harder.

Draco continued, "We were about to stun the other two when this *auror*," he said with a sneer aimed at Tonks, "came up behind us and ordered everyone to lower their wands. Being law-abiding students, we, of course, complied immediately."

The other five nodded and muttered that they agreed with Draco's synopsis.

Dumbledore turned to Tonks. "Nymphadora?"

She made a face at his use of her given name but answered, "I heard the spells and came to investigate. Harry was at the bottom of a flight of stairs, apparently having fallen down. Both girls were over him, guarding him quite ferociously. These six," she nodded toward the Slytherins, "were ranged along both sides of the stairway above them near places of concealment and had some cover. When I ordered everyone to lower their wands, both Potters ceased casting spells. One final spell, red, came at me from Mr. Malfoy."

"She startled me, and I didn't know if Potter had more allies trying to ambush us," Draco said without a trace of remorse.

Tonks rolled her eyes. "After I deflected Malfoy's stunner, all the spells ceased. I sent those six to the hospital and they walked here under their own power. I levitated Mr. Potter."

"Did you see the fight start? Did you see Mr. Potter fall down the stairs?" Scrimgeour asked.

Tonks hesitated for only a moment. "No, sir."

"It is clear who is at fault," Lucius Malfoy said. He turned to Scrimgeour. "I demand the boy be put under arrest and shipped to Azkaban. I'll take the chattel as reparations for the injuries done my son and his friends."

"Now let's not be too hasty, Lucius," Dumbledore spoke calmly. "We have not yet heard all sides of this story." He turned. "Bine Potter?"

Snape spoke up before either Tracey or Daphne could say a word. "The chattel are not permitted to testify."

"A fact that you made more than clear when Bine Potter accused you of attempted rape," McGonagall growled. "Besides, you're afraid that their testimony will point out some hole in young Mr. Malfoy's story."

"Now, Minerva," Dumbledore said, "please let us keep our tempers in front of the students."

She gave an eloquent snort but held her tongue.

"You are correct, Severus, that her testimony isn't legally permitted, yet I wish to hear it.

"Bine Potter?" Dumbledore prompted again.

Daphne spoke up, "Harry met us after our lesson with Auror Tonks. The three of us were walking back to our apartment. At the top of the stairs, someone stunned Harry in the back without warning. He tumbled down the steps. Tracey and I hurried to him and stood guard over him until Tonks

rescued us."

"No matter what stories they come up with, chattel have no voice as witnesses," Lucius reminded everyone.

"True," Scrimgeour said with a frown.

Neville rolled his eyes. "So give one of 'em some Veritaserum," he suggested, chin jerking toward the Slytherins.

"I refuse to permit my son or his friends to be subjected to such a dangerous substance," Lucius instantly replied.

"So we're just supposed to take him at his word?" Neville asked dryly.

"He is a Malfoy," Lucius arrogantly replied.

Neville turned to Hermione. "I don't know about you, but I'll take that as a resounding 'No'."

"You *arrogant* -" Malfoy snarled, hand darting to his wand. This caused all the other students to pull out wands as well.

"Stop!" Pomfrey barked, bringing everyone to a halt.

Neville and Lucius's eyes remained on each other, wands out and up, but not quite pointed at each other. Neville's expression was calm yet watchful. Malfoy's glare tried to put truth to the phrase, "if looks could kill."

Pomfrey said, "I told you to put them away." Slowly, everyone relaxed, putting wands away.

Everyone except Neville. He brought his wand back down to his side, but kept it in his hand.

"Mr. Longbottom, I said put it away," Pomfrey said.

"Not until there are no more direct threats to me or Harry," he stated flatly eyes still on Malfoy.

"Arrogant Gryffindor," Snape spat.

Neville ignored him.

"Mr. Longbottom, put your wand away," McGonagall said curtly.

"Not until the room is safe for Harry," Neville repeated.

Scrimgeour almost smiled.

McGonagall's expression was not nearly so calm. "Five points from Gryffindor. Put it away, Mr. Longbottom," she repeated.

He shrugged but his wand stayed in his hand.

Merriment dancing in her eyes, Tonks offered, "Mr. Longbottom, will it make you feel better if I have my wand out?"

Neville paused for a few seconds before giving a curt nod. He waited until he heard her draw her wand again before he put his wand away.

Snape and Malfoy looked livid. McGonagall pursed her lips, but a smile was lurking at the corners.

"Young man, come and see me after graduation," Scrimgeour said.

Neville was startled for half a moment before he gave the head of the aurors a small nod and smile. Tonks smirked.

With a grin trying to force its way onto her face, Tracey said, "Back to the problem; how about if I volunteer to take Veritaserum?"

Scrimgeour frowned but shook his head. "Very noble sentiment, young lady, but I'm afraid it won't help. Legally, as chattel, your testimony won't be permitted, no matter what you do or say. Not only that, but you'd require . . . your master's permission to take the Veritaserum. Once he's awake to give it, he can testify himself."

"Okay, the same conversation but with the Sorting Hat reading our minds," Tracey next offered.

"My son is not under investigation here, so there is no cause for you to interrogate him with a filthy thinking cap," Lucius countered.

Scrimgeour shrugged to Tracey. "Same answer for the same reasons, I'm afraid."

"So we are at an impasse until Mr. Potter awakens?" Dumbledore asked.

"I'm afraid so."

"Unacceptable," Malfoy flatly stated. "My son has been injured by a cowardly attack and now he won't be punished for it?"

"Oh, I assure you there will be a thorough investigation once Mr. Potter awakens," McGonagall said, eyes firmly upon Lucius.

"Why do you need an investigation, Minerva? The auror agrees with Draco's words!"

"All I can attest to is finding your son and his friends in places of cover and mercilessly attacking the two Potter wives who were trying to defend their unconscious husband," Tonks flatly stated.

"Hardly sounds like a ringing endorsement for Draco's version to me," Hermione loudly whispered to Neville.

Lucius flushed but ignored her. He turned to Draco. "Be well, son. Rest assured, your injuries will not go unanswered." He dramatically turned and swept from the Infirmary.

"There's going to be trouble from him," Neville stated. He turned to Draco and shook his head at the blonde's attempt to speak. "And you agree with me, Malfoy. How many times have you threatened us all with, 'When my father hears of this'?" he asked, making his voice high and whiny at his 'impersonation' of Draco.

Malfoy and Snape glared. Hermione and the two conscious Potters smirked. Both McGonagall and Pomfrey had suspicious lip twitches. Tonks made undignified snorting noises.

Dumbledore, eyes twinkling, cleared his throat. "How are all of the students, Poppy?"

The school nurse waved at the Slytherin students. "These six had only minor injuries. A few scrapes. One bump on Mr. Crabbe that looks like the result of falling after he was stunned. Everything has already been fixed. They're all free to go." She gave them all a pointed stare, and they left, Snape trailing after them but not before another glare at the unconscious Harry.

When the seven had left, Pomfrey walked back over to Harry and waved her wand over him again. Frowning at the results, she said, "Mr. Potter, on the other hand, is much the worse for wear. He was stunned from behind, throwing him forward and down a flight of stairs. He has multiple broken bones, a collapsed lung, and a severe concussion."

Hermione and Daphne gasped at the news. Neville and Tracey's eyes hardened.

Before anyone else could react, Professor Flitwick entered and took in the scene in one glance. Grimacing at Harry's form, he walked to Dumbledore. "I have the results of the scan, Albus."

In a tight voice, McGonagall said, "Let me guess: multiple stunners from the top of the steps and several shields and a few stunners from the landing?"

Flitwick nodded. "What happened?"

"They stunned him in the back, he fell down the steps, and we spent the rest of the fight trying to defend him," Tracey summarized with a fierce scowl.

"No doubt Mr. Malfoy's version is radically different."

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed ironically. "Unfortunately, the results of your scan do not definitively prove either version."

Hermione broke in with an outraged expression. "Headmaster, you can't believe that Harry would -"

Dumbledore held up a hand. "Miss Granger, I am confident that Bine Potter spoke the complete truth. However, until we can prove that . . ." He trailed off, letting everyone draw their own conclusions.

He turned to Pomfrey, for once looking his century and a half of life. "How long until he awakens?"

Poppy's frown deepened. "It's a question on *if* he will awaken, I'm afraid."

"Come on, Harry, you have to wake up," Daphne pleaded quietly.

The unmoving form on the hospital bed made no response.

"Please, Harry." She sniffled. "If you don't, then Malfoy will get us in recompense." She let out a strangled laugh. "Recompense. Like we did something wrong when everyone but *everyone* knows it was his son who attacked us. Try proving *that*, though. No, legally speaking, he's in the right just because Tracey and I can't testify. Tonks didn't see anything to help us out. So it's the six of them testifying against two chattel. Without someone else testifying against them, then they will be assumed to be in the right."

"Daphne," Neville whispered from the darkness.

"So, you see, you *have* to wake up," Daphne continued, ignoring Neville. "If you don't, then Tracey and I will go to him in settlement. If that happens, then we'll probably kill ourselves instead of allowing Draco Bloody Malfoy get his claws into us." She sighed. "So, you see, not only would you save our lives, you'd also prove him to be a lying little ferret. You'd then get a settlement out of him as he's trying to steal us away from you. Sounds like all sorts of upside to me, Master. The only thing is, you gotta wake up first."

"Daphne, we have to go," Neville repeated.

"The day after you got in here, Dumbledore was served papers from the Ministry. He was ordered to hand us over to Malfoy. He's been trying to

help us out, though. He, McGonagall, Tonks, and Flitwick have been hiding us in guest quarters here in the castle. Neville and Hermione have been good enough to bring us the assignments and news and keep us company. Apparently neither Director Scrimgeour nor Minister Bones are happy about what's happening with us. The problem is that legally speaking, their hands are tied. Anyway, with how unhappy Scrimgeour is about it all, I don't think the aurors are looking for us too hard. So when this all blows over, remember to thank Bones and Scrimgeour."

"Daph, we don't have any more time until the patrol is here."

Daphne leaned forward and kissed Harry tenderly. "Please wake up, Master."

Still not receiving any reaction, she stifled a sob and hurried out, Neville following.

Moments later, Madam Pomfrey came out of her apartments, bare feet making no noise. She silently waved her wand above Harry's body and studied the softly glowing lights that resulted. With a sigh, she canceled the spells and tucked the sheets more firmly around the still body. Calmly, she spoke, "I'm going to be sealing the ward, Headmaster. You need to go."

Dumbledore faded into view, sad eyes resting upon the occupied bed. He nodded somberly to the matron and left without a word.

Looking back down, she tenderly brushed a strand of hair out of Harry's face. "You, too, Fil."

"No," Flitwick's voice floated out from another corner.

She nodded, not really surprised. With a series of wand motions, she erected the pre-set wards, sealing the infirmary from the rest of the school. "He's safe, Fil," she said quietly. "No need to stand watch all night." She held out a hand. "Come to bed."

"Urgh."

"Not your most eloquent, Mr. Potter. Still, I'm glad to see you awake."

"Wa - ter," he muttered in a dry whisper.

All bustling efficiency, Madam Pomfrey brought a glass of water over to Harry so he could sip at it.

"Harry! You're awake!"

Harry blearily looked over toward the voice, unable to see without his glasses.

"Good to see you, mate," the cheerful voice continued. "I'll let everyone know you're awake." The blurry form left the infirmary. It took Harry several seconds to identify the voice as Ernie Macmillan's.

After Harry had reduced the drought in his mouth, he asked Madam Pomfrey, "What happened?"

She placed his glasses into his hand. He slipped them on to see her scowl. "That depends on who you ask. Your ladies claim you were ambushed by Malfoy and his gang. Mr. Malfoy claims you ambushed *him*."

Harry made an explosive, snorting sound of disgust. His hand immediately went up to the side of his head. "Ow."

Pomfrey's lips twitched into a smile. "Indeed. You had a severe concussion. It wouldn't surprise me if you had headaches for the next week. I've already repaired the broken bones and collapsed lung."

"How long have I been here and how long until I can leave?" he asked quietly.

She rolled her eyes, relaxing by degrees. "It's been three days. As for when, be thankful that you can. As I told the Headmaster, it was possible that you wouldn't ever wake up again."

Harry blinked hard at hearing that. "It was really that close?"

She nodded solemnly, a single tear breaking through her armor.

For the first time in his life, Harry was thankful for the prophecy. It meant that Malfoy was unable to kill him. *How's that for a mixed blessing?* "So if the ferret said one thing and the girls another," he prompted her.

"As chattel, I'm afraid they're not permitted to testify. Due to lack of contradictory evidence, Malfoy is trying to claim your girls as compensation."

Harry's eyes widened, and he started to get out of bed. He immediately stopped as a white-hot poker of pain was stabbed into his temple. He squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, determined to do everything he could to protect them from Malfoy.

"I told you to stay in bed," she scolded him as she gently pushed him back down. "Now, the girls are safe, at least for the moment. Malfoy may be claiming them, but Bones and Scrimgeour aren't exactly helping him do so. Nor are Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, or Flitwick. Or Miss Granger and Mr. Longbottom."

"Huh?" he asked through the haze of pain. Even considering his head injury, that did not make any sense to him.

She gave him a malicious little smile. "Nobody is cooperating with Malfoy. Mr. Longbottom has the entire D.A. helping run interference, I've heard."

Well, that explained some of why Ernie was waiting in Harry's hospital room. Harry smiled a little. "Nice to know everyone's on my side. Now that I'm awake, what can I do to squash Malfoy?"

"Don't you mean his claim?" she asked with a grin hovering about her face.

"Oh, that, too," Harry replied with a smirk.

She rolled her eyes. "Now that you're awake," she answered the question, "you can testify, give Veritaserum testimony, use the Sorting Hat to validate your story, or give permission for your chattel to do the same. Considering your head injury, I recommend against Veritaserum being used on you."

Harry nodded. Not to mention that he had a lot of sensitive information in his head that could be in jeopardy if he were dosed with the truth serum. "I guess that the easiest answer is for the Sorting Hat to be brought in, then."

She nodded and moved off to make some Floo calls.

Presently, Headmaster Dumbledore arrived with the Sorting Hat in his hands. "Harry!" he greeted the student cheerfully.

"Headmaster. Madam Pomfrey has told me some of what's been going on. Where are the girls?"

His eyes twinkled brightly. "Officially, I do not know. Unofficially, I know they have not crossed the ward boundaries. If I were truly curious, I would begin by asking one of the leaders of the D.A. I suspect they know more than most on that particular topic."

Harry nodded gingerly, understanding that his position prevented him from investigating further, all in the name of protecting the girls in question.

Malfoy, both of them, and Severus Snape stalked into the Hospital Wing, closely followed by Hermione and Neville. The two students came to Harry's bedside. Neville smiled down at him. Hermione did as well, though the emotions behind it were softer and more relieved.

"As you can see," Dumbledore jovially began, "Mr. Potter is now conscious. Once Minister Bones and Director Scrimgeour arrive, we can question him as to the events, or at least as much of them as he may remember."

"Why do you have the Hat, Dumbledore?" Malfoy asked.

Pomfrey answered, "After his head injury, Veritaserum is ill advised."

Both Malfoys looked very sour at this. When Harry looked over at Snape, the former professor fired a Legilimency spear into Harry's battered mind.

With a scream, Harry threw a hand to his eyes as blinding pain threatened to overwhelm him.

Just as abruptly as it had started, the pain ended.

Harry spent several moments with his hand remaining over his eyes, panting. Finally, he got his breath back and he shakily lowered his hand.

Hermione had her wand out and pointed at Snape. The man was pinned, face upward, upon the ceiling of the Hospital Wing. Based upon the utter silence from him, Harry guessed he'd been Silenced.

Neville's wand was out and pointed at the Malfoys. The father and son had sour expressions on their faces, but neither currently had a hand near their wands.

The cold expressions that both Gryffindor students were sporting proved that they were quite willing to curse first and ask questions later.

Dumbledore remained as he had been, but his twinkle was absent.

The tense silence lasted for several long seconds.

"Are you alright, Harry?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

With one last deep breath, Harry nodded. "If you haven't guessed, he attacked me with Legilimency. It didn't last long, though. My shields held."

"Now will you believe what a threat this man is against Harry, Headmaster?" Hermione asked acidly.

Dumbledore sighed. "Please release Severus."

Shrugging, Hermione lowered her wand.

Snape promptly began plummeting toward the ground. Only a quick wave of Pomfrey's wand prevented the man's hard impact with the floor. The matron gave a chiding look at Hermione.

The Head Girl shrugged again but failed to look apologetic. "The next time he attacks Harry, we'll treat him as the Death Eater scum that he is."

By this time, he was on his feet and the Silencing Spell had been lifted. "You arrogant little mud-"

Eyes forward and OUT," roared Hermione, again pointing her wand at the incensed Potions Master.

"You see, Headmaster, what comes of allow-"

A silent Stunning Spell from Hermione dropped him where he stood, mid-word.

"I warned him," she fumed as she put her wand away.

"Hermione, I think I love you," Harry said in awe, looking up at her.

She blushed prettily.

Neville let out a guffaw. "Harry, you already have two pretty girls. Leave some for the rest of us blokes, yeah?"

Harry and Neville laughed. Hermione's blush deepened.

"I'm going to become ill if this keeps up," Draco grumbled.

Dumbledore cleared his throat as Pomfrey waved her wand over Snape, checking that he had not suffered any injuries. "As it was in defense of Mr. Potter, there will be no punishment for taking Severus to the ceiling, Miss Granger, however it will be fifty points for your unprovoked stunning of a man who was not threatening you."

Harry shrugged even as Hermione and Neville looked livid. "Fine, then I demand the aurors come here so they can arrest Snape for his unprovoked attack upon me, who was not threatening him when he attacked my mind."

Another tense moment was felt by everyone as Harry and Dumbledore stared at each other expressionlessly.

"You are quite correct, Harry," Dumbledore admitted, dropping his eyes for a moment. He looked over at Hermione. "My apologies, Miss Granger. No points will be deducted."

Hermione relaxed.

Madam Pomfrey re-entered the room from having levitated the unconscious Potions Master. "Are we all done cursing each other?" she asked, eyes going back and forth from Hermione to Neville.

"As long as everyone else in the room behaves themselves," Neville answered, eyes again focused on the Malfoys.

Lucius glared back but did not directly answer. "Where are Bones and Scrimgeour?" he grumbled.

Dumbledore looked out the windows. "I believe that they are just now entering the grounds."

As they waited, Pomfrey bustled about, checking Harry again and handing him his wand. Harry pointedly left it out, resting in his hand upon his lap. The fact that his eyes remained on the Malfoys escaped nobody's notice.

Finally, the Minister of Magic and the Director of Magical Law Enforcement, with an auror escort, arrived in the Hospital Wing.

"Amelia, Rufus," Dumbledore calmly greeted them.

"Albus," Minister Bones absently said. Her attention was on Harry. "It is good to see you well."

Harry smiled wanly at her. "Hale, perhaps, but hearty will take a bit more time, I'm afraid."

She laughed. "Indeed."

"By the by, I am told that I have to thank you for Susan's Defense O.W.L. score?"

Harry blushed.

Hermione, with a little smile, answered, "She is one of the participants in the study group that Harry led, yes. I'm happy to hear that she did well."

Bones nodded. "And she's confident in her N.E.W.T. score as well." She turned. "And I believe I have you to thank for that, Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville nodded, only a little of his nervousness showing through. "Yes, ma'am. Hermione and I are quite pleased with how it's going this year."

"Could we please get on with it?" Draco rudely interrupted. "This mutual admiration society is making me nauseous."

"Manners, Draco," Lucius gently chided him. "This is, after all, the Minister of Magic and the Director of Magical Law Enforcement."

Lucius turned. "However impolitely phrased, I feel that my heir *does* have a point. If we could clear up this trivial matter, you could return to your no doubt busy schedules."

"Trivial?" Neville asked, affecting a drawl. "After the ruckus you've raised these past few days, demanding aurors here at the school, interrupting classes and generally creating a nuisance of themselves at *your* insistence? Now, suddenly, it's trivial?"

Lucius pointedly did not look at the Longbottom scion. Instead, he turned to Dumbledore. "If you would, Headmaster."

Dumbledore did not comment on the smirks displayed by Scrimgeour and Bones. Instead, he simply put the Sorting Hat upon Harry's head.

"I'm to be a lie detector again?" it asked.

"If you please, Hat," Dumbledore politely said.

The Hat gave a sigh and settled more firmly upon Harry's head. "Sweet Merlin, Potter, it's a wonder your mind is still in one piece!"

"Are you saying the boy is mentally unbalanced?" Malfoy asked with poorly concealed glee.

The Sorting Hat gave off a disgusted snort. "Not at all. I was praising his mental strength. Snape's method of Occlumency *training* did more harm than good. I'm impressed with Mr. Potter's mental strength after the damage that man did in here." It tilted its tip back and forth a few times. "Oh, he doesn't have the barriers to stop me, so I'll let you know if he lies." The Sorting Hat changed over to speaking directly into Harry's mind. "*Mr. Potter, do I have your permission to . . . repair some of the damage?*"

"What? I mean, can you teach me Occlumency?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Unfortunately not. At least not any faster than any other Legilimens could. I can simply re-align some of your shields and mitigate the worst of the damage that Severus Snape did you."

"It won't . . . er, hurt, will it?" Harry switched to thinking aloud.

"Hmm," the Hat hummed in thought for a moment. *"I doubt there will be any physical pain to you, but you may relive some unpleasant memories as I work."*

"Perhaps you two could do . . . whatever it is you are discussing after our business here is concluded?" Dumbledore asked politely.

The Hat and Harry both jerked. "My apologies, Miss Bones and Mr. Scrimgeour," the Hat said. "By all means, Mr. Potter, please continue."

Harry looked up at Minister Bones. "What did you need to know?"

"After picking up your two . . . ladies from their lesson, what do you remember?"

"I was walking arm-in-arm with them back to our apartments. I heard someone shout behind us. I think I felt something hit me in the back. Next thing I know, I'm waking up here."

"To make it perfectly clear, you did not in fact ambush Mr. Malfoy and his friends?" Scrimgeour asked directly.

"No I did not," Harry stated unequivocally.

"Utter truth," the Hat said.

"Hmm. Imagine that," Neville said dryly. "Malfoy's been caught in a lie."

Both Malfoys glared at him. Neville just looked blandly back.

"Mr. Malfoy, unless you wish to take Veritaserum or wear the Sorting Hat and testify again, I'm afraid that Bine Potter's version of the full events will be considered the truth," Dumbledore said, focusing calmly upon Draco.

Draco opened his mouth a couple times, before any sound came out. Giving a disgusted shake of his head, he said, "Perhaps I was mistaken," he grumbled.

Harry rolled his eyes before he turned to the senior Malfoy. "Something occurs to me about all of this."

"Congratulations, you had a thought," Lucius snarked.

Hermione reddened at the insult, but Harry hardly raised an eyebrow. Unflustered, he continued, "Director Scrimgeour, what's the legal punishment for attempted murder of the three of us?"

Scrimgeour's scowl deepened.

Dumbledore coughed politely. "I'm afraid, Harry, that those are not the offenses which young Mr. Malfoy and his friends committed."

"At most, it would be attempted abduction of all of you," Hermione told Harry. "According to the spell residue, only stunners were used."

"And you can read spell residue, mudblood?" Lucius scoffed at her.

Her eyes tightened, but she answered levelly. "As a matter of fact, I can. The Revealing Magic Charm isn't that difficult."

Sneer reaching new heights, Lucius opened his mouth, but he was interrupted by Dumbledore. "Filius reported the same immediately after the incident. I trust you'll believe *his* findings?"

Lucius closed his mouth but did not acknowledge the question.

Going back to his previous thought, Dumbledore said to Harry, "Further, as chattel, the attack upon the young ladies would be legally deemed as attempting damage to your property."

Harry frowned. "Great. Yet another way in which Malfoy's machinations are degrading to the two of them and annoying to the rest of us. So we're down to attempted kidnapping of me and attempting to *damage* them."

Dumbledore sighed and visibly braced himself. "As he is still a student and it occurred here at the school -" He broke off as Harry turned an alarming shade of red.

"For three attempted murders, or perhaps kidnappings to deliver us to their half-blood master, they're going to lose points and get detentions? Is that what you're saying?"

Dumbledore winced. Lucius smirked.

Harry turned to Neville. "Purely hypothetically speaking, do you think the same punishment would be meted out to us if we did the same back?"

Lucius's eyes flared and then hardened. Dumbledore looked concerned.

Neville shook his head. "Nope. We wouldn't be nearly as incompetent in execution." He gave Draco the faintest of smirks. "Hypothetically, of course."

Hermione gave both boys scolding looks. "Harry, you already know the answer to your question."

Dumbledore sagged in relief until Hermione continued inexorably, "After all, after extreme provocation on the Quidditch pitch, you were given multiple detentions, lost points, *and* received a lifetime flying ban merely for punching him. With his father on the school board, punishments have been decidedly biased." She turned to Dumbledore. "How's removing that ban going, by the way?"

Dumbledore winced as if in pain. "While Cornelius was in power -"

Neville rudely interrupted him. "Minister Bones, how long have you been in office after that corrupt imbecile was voted out?"

"Over a year now," she answered, taking a perverse delight in the students verbally taking the vaunted Dumbledore down a few well-deserved pegs.

"Thank you," Neville politely said to her. He then turned to give Dumbledore a merciless stare.

The Headmaster squirmed as much as his dignity would allow. "I shall be looking into that again," he murmured.

"You do that," Scrimgeour said with a slight smile.

"As . . . *amusing* as this has been -" Lucius began.

"What's the penalty for attempting to end a pureblood line?" Harry interrupted him.

Neville's eyes widened before his grin returned. Draco paled.

"One half of the liquid assets of the guilty family," Scrimgeour answered.

Harry grinned. His goal was less about receiving the money than getting it away from Lucius and therefore Voldemort. This was worth no small amount of effort.

Scrimgeour nodded to Harry, understanding what the younger man was about to say. "I'll be contacting Gringotts first thing in the morning, Mr. Potter." He turned to Dumbledore. "Do please let me know the punishment you decide to give young Malfoy. I find myself curious on how you'll handle it." He nodded politely to Hermione, Neville, and Harry. With a last scowl at Draco and Lucius, he turned and limped out the door.

Amelia, highly amused at the Director's actions, stepped forward and gave Harry's shoulder a squeeze. "I'm glad to hear you're recovering, Mr. Potter. Do let me know if there is anything more the Ministry of Magic can do to help."

"About that lifetime flying ban that Umbitch - er, Umbridge - gave me?"

She glared at Umbridge with a cool look for a moment before turning to Harry again. "The school Headmaster must start the proceedings. Once it gets to me, I assure you I'll give it my immediate attention."

Harry grinned. "That's all I can ask, Minister. Thank you."

She looked around to see that the Malfoys had snuck off at some point and Dumbledore was off to the side talking with Pomfrey. She leaned over and whispered, "No, thank *you*, young man, for the past hour's entertainment." Also giving Neville and Hermione respectful nods, she turned and left the Hospital Wing.

Pursuant to your question of two days ago, I contacted Gringotts and had them transfer half of the liquid assets of the Malfoy account to your family vault.

I am told that came to a total of 113 galleons, 2 sickles, and 1 knut.

Finding myself highly suspicious of such a small total considering the size of the total Malfoy estate, I followed up with Gringotts immediately. They informed me that five days ago, Lucius Malfoy spent very nearly all the cash in his vault to buy various investments.

I trust that you find that timing as suspiciously convenient as I do.

Unfortunately, we have no recourse. The law very firmly states that it is only the *liquid* monies in the vault that can be confiscated.

Rest assured, I have my eye, and those of my aurors, firmly upon the Malfoy family.

My apologies for the paltry penalty they must pay, but as I said, the law as written has limited our options.

If you have any further questions on this matter, do not hesitate to owl me.

Rufus Scrimgeour

Director, Magical Law Enforcement

Ministry of Magic

The parchment crinkled as Harry's hand convulsed into a fist.

"What's wrong?" Daphne asked from beside him. Amusingly to him, the girls had just shown up at his bedside the morning after his talk with Scrimgeour. Nobody volunteered any information about where they had been.

Instead of answering the question directly, he handed the abused parchment to her.

Neville, sitting across from him, spoke up, "Malfoy is looking very smug."

Harry just growled.

"My offer still stands," Tracey said after reading the letter.

"Do I really want to know?" Hermione asked.

Tracey smirked faintly. "Nothing to offend your sensibilities, Granger."

"Not that there's anything offensive about you," Harry said, still trying to calm down.

Tracey preened. "Thank you for noticing, My Lord.

"No, I was just pointing out that we still can return the favor."

"Ambush him back?" Neville asked directly.

Tracey shrugged and nodded.

"He'll be expecting that," Harry said with an irritated wave of his hand. He paused in mid-motion. "On the other hand . . ." He trailed off, eyes focused through his lunch.

"Uh, oh," Neville said.

"What?" Daphne said, looking at Harry curiously.

"That's his 'I'm about to have a crazy idea' look," Neville explained with a grin.

"No," Hermione said authoritatively. "That's his 'I'm about to play a prank' look." She turned to Neville. "It's easy to get them confused, though. They're very similar."

"You two know me too well," Harry humorously objected.

Hermione ducked her head in embarrassment but smiled slightly.

Neville rolled his eyes. "I roomed with you for six and a half years, Harry," he observed dryly.

Harry stood. "See you two later."

Both of his girls hurriedly stood and followed him out of the Great Hall, throwing confused looks at the shrugging Gryffindors.

The next evening, Harry sat in Dumbledore's office, gazing at the makeshift council arrayed around the room. Dumbledore, the four heads of house, two of the Board of Governors, and Director Scrimgeour were all looking at him. The expressions ranged from amusement (Flitwick) to open hostility (one of the governors).

Tonks was also here, but she was standing guard at the door. He had only heard one noise from her, a more-or-less stifled snort of amusement.

Scrimgeour looked down at the results of the Transcription Quill. "I'm going to summarize what I understand of this so far. Please correct me if I get part of it wrong, Mr. Potter."

Harry nodded agreeably. "No problem."

"You arranged for a spell to strike the Slytherin upper years as some sort of revenge."

"A prank," Harry hastily corrected.

"A prank," Scrimgeour repeated with an almost straight face, "presumably because you are upset at how Draco Malfoy and his cohorts escaped any real punishment for their attack upon you. Now, the intended result of this prank is for the robes, shirts, and trousers of all the sixth and seventh year Slytherins to vanish during dinner and then for them all to be hit with a Stinging Hex in their . . . buttocks. Is this correct?"

"That was what I intended, yes," Harry said, chewing his lip nervously.

"You had a fellow Gryffindor, one," he scanned up the parchment until he found what he was looking for, "Colin Creevey come to dinner with his camera."

"My hope was that they would all suddenly stand up wearing only bras and knickers or boxers. I was planning on sending the pictures to some pranksters I know. I figured they'd get a kick out of seeing that."

McGonagall and Sprout began coughing violently. Flitwick's grin expanded. Even Dumbledore's previously grave expression lightened momentarily.

"Yes, well the prank didn't go as expected, did it?"

Harry shook his head regretfully. "Afraid not. I, uh, overpowered the spells, I guess."

"Hmm," Scrimgeour made an ambiguous noise. "In point of fact, you Vanished the robes and shirts of the students fifth year and above from all Houses. Fortunately, their wands remained behind. The intended Stinging Hex, instead of making them jump to their feet, hit all the Slytherins hard enough that most knocked themselves into the table hard enough to incapacitate them for a few minutes. Meanwhile, Creevey, being on his feet at the time, was taking pictures of everyone." He paused and glanced through a stack of photographs on Dumbledore's desk. "I notice that he took an inordinate number of pictures of . . . ah, well-endowed females."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Really? Huh. Well, just proves that Colin is a red-blooded male."

"Indeed," Scrimgeour said dryly. "Where were you during all of this?"

"I was standing by the doors. I admit that I was originally intending to be there just to have a good view of the prank."

"Now, we get to the important part." He held up one picture. In it, Draco Malfoy jumped up, grabbed his wand from the table, and ran out of the image. A tattoo was clearly visible on his left arm.

Harry nodded. "I saw the tattoo on Malfoy and a few others. That's why I started stunning them."

Scrimgeour looked at Flitwick.

The professor shrugged. "I, too, saw a very suspicious tattoo on several students that I've long suspected of having dark leanings. When one of them tried to hex Harry, I moved to defend him."

"Between the two of you, you ended up stunning . . . sixteen students. That is when the rest of the professors managed to regain control, correct?"

Dumbledore leaned forward, but McGonagall spoke up firmly before he could say anything. "Yes. Poppy began working on the injured students. I asked Pomona and Hagrid to move all the younger years out of the Great Hall and toward their Common Rooms. I then separated the males and females, putting a visual screen between the two groups. With the female professors checking the female students and the male the males, we examined each student before conjuring them a set of robes and sending them back to their dormitories."

"Why did you decide to check the students then?" Scrimgeour asked.

"Though it wasn't planned, this gave us an unparalleled opportunity to check each student for signs of the plague."

Scrimgeour looked at her strangely.

McGonagall blandly said, "It is well within the rules for the professors and the school nurse to check each student for indications of medical problems. Examining the skin for signs of the plague or various magical rashes, for instance."

"Catching sight of the Dark Mark on them was just an unintended side-effect of this *medical* ," he Scrimgeour stressed, "check, then?"

"I would not have agreed to their actions," Dumbledore murmured.

"Then perhaps it is a good thing you weren't present," Scrimgeour said crisply. "A total of twenty-one students were found to have the Dark Mark, correct?"

Dumbledore winced.

"That sounds about right," McGonagall agreed. "None were found to have the plague, incidentally."

Scrimgeour smirked for a moment. "Glad to hear that."

"How are the ones who hurt themselves?" Scrimgeour then asked.

"Nothing more serious than having the wind knocked out of them," Sprout answered. "The most serious injury was to Beth Hart. She was hit with a Bone Vanishing Spell to her rib cage during the brief . . . scuffle. She was an innocent casualty. She wasn't holding her wand and she had no Dark Mark. Madam Pomfrey got to her in time, fortunately, and she'll recover in a few days."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

Sprout smiled at him slightly. "I see you were as worried about injuries as I was."

Harry nodded fervently. "My . . . plan misfired. I'm just glad that the injuries that resulted aren't as bad as they could have been."

"Indeed," Dumbledore agreed gravely.

"Still, though it didn't go as planned, Malfoy pissing himself as one of the aurors dragged him out of the Great Hall was a memorable sight," Harry said, smirk firmly in place as he relived the memory.

McGonagall and Flitwick's faces twitched, but they managed to remain impassive. Tonks made an odd, gurgling noise for a moment before she became silent again.

Scrimgeour cleared his throat and said, "Yes, well, I think that concludes the investigation from my point of view." He picked up the Transcription Quill and rolled the scroll up. "Out of curiosity, what will Mr. Potter's punishment be?"

Dumbledore steepled his fingers and gazed at Harry. "That is yet to be determined."

Scrimgeour nodded. "Whatever it is, I'd hate to think that his punishment would be anywhere near as bad as whatever you gave Malfoy. After all, *that* young man attempted three murders or kidnappings. Mr. Potter just had a prank go bad. Hardly the same level of offense." He pierced Dumbledore with a direct look. "Don't you agree?"

Dumbledore sighed and nodded. "I take your point."

"Now, what will be the punishment for the . . . misguided students, Rufus?"

Scrimgeour gave a harsh bark of laughter. "'Misguided'? They're Death Eaters, Dumbledore, plain and simple. They'll be treated as such. Their age will be a mitigating factor, I'm sure, but prison time at the very least. My aurors are already transporting them to the Ministry holding cells."

McGonagall nodded. "I understand. I shall send their personal affects to their families, then."

"Thank you for coming to Hogwarts once again," Dumbledore added heavily.

Scrimgeour stood. "With so many . . . highly placed families involved, it seemed prudent. Good evening, everyone." Nodding politely to everyone, he left. Tonks threw Harry a wink before she followed him out the door.

"What will this . . . miscreant's punishment be?" ground out the wizard from the Board of Governors.

"As this is simply a prank gone wrong, we can only dock some points - fifty perhaps - and give him a week's detention," McGonagall said crisply.

"I'll take the detentions," Flitwick spoke up. "As poorly as his spells were cast, it's clear that he needs some help from me on that count."

"He got twenty-one students *arrested* and you're going to give him private lessons?" the wizard asked incredulously.

Flitwick looked at him coolly. "This is a place of learning. He clearly needs the extra instruction."

"This is an outrage! I demand that he be expelled for -"

McGonagall broke in, "I find it curious that you suggested points and detentions with Mr. Snape for Malfoy's attempt at multiple murders, yet you want Mr. Potter expelled for a misfired prank."

The man ground his teeth together for several seconds before abruptly lunging to his feet and stomping out of the room.

The witch from the Board of Governors sighed. "For what it may be worth, I agree that the punishment fits the crime." She gave Harry a quelling

look. "This time. I had better not hear of any other *misfired pranks* ." Without giving Harry a chance to respond, she stood up and headed out of the office with her head held high.

"I like her," Harry said, looking after the witch.

McGonagall's lips twitched into a smile.

Dumbledore deflated, slumping in his chair, the long fingers of one hand rubbing slow circles on his temple. "I seriously dislike what has happened," he said.

"You mean that I screwed up a prank or that almost two dozen students were exposed as Death Eaters?" Harry asked pointedly.

Dumbledore gave him an aggravated look. "Please, Mr. Potter, do not insult my intelligence. That *prank* went just as you intended."

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly. "Let me guess," he said bitterly. "You're *disappointed* in me."

Dumbledore slumped further in his seat.

McGonagall shared a look with Flitwick and Sprout over his posture.

"Disappointed?" Dumbledore asked as if testing out the word. "Yes, I suppose so, but not in you, dear boy. I am disappointed in the twenty-one lost souls. Mostly, however, I find myself disappointed in . . . myself."

Harry and the four other professors perked up at hearing this.

Dumbledore gave them all a weary little smile. "It pains me that such a situation could exist in the first place. Then that it requires a student taking it upon himself to rectify the situation. I should have dealt with it long ago. I also recall Miss Granger's words in the Hospital Wing and compare them to the stated wishes of Mr. Witherford." He sighed. "I fear, Minerva, that you have been right all along. My insistence on giving everyone a second chance has been counterproductive more often than not."

Flitwick said, "You've been at this for a very long time, Albus. Perhaps a sabbatical from the stresses of the school?"

Dumbledore smiled faintly. "Retirement would be more in order, Filius, as you well know. Nevertheless, I thank you for phrasing it such as you did."

He looked at Harry. "I fear that I have done the most wrong by you, my dear boy." He immediately shook his head. "No, you are not a boy, nor have you been for quite some time."

"Maybe failing to recognize that has been part of the problem?" Harry asked quietly.

McGonagall, Sprout, and Slughorn were scandalized at the question, but Dumbledore frowned pensively for several moments before nodding. "Quite possibly." He sighed again. "I shall endeavor to stop trying to control you."

Harry smiled. "That's all I can ask for, sir." He leaned back. "Well, the school should be a much . . . calmer place now that the Death Eaters have *mostly* been removed."

"Severus," Dumbledore observed heavily.

"Does anyone know if Tracey was the first student he attempted to rape?" Harry asked, unable to resist twisting the knife a bit.

Every professor winced at the question. "Nothing to suggest there are any others," McGonagall said. "A fair percentage of the students have visited the infirmary to have Poppy check for memory charms."

"Let me guess: the results were negative or inconclusive," Harry said. When he got an affirmative answer, he shook his head. "A good memory charm will leave the same evidence as no charm at all. Lack of proof isn't proof of lack."

"Lack of proof isn't proof of anything," Flitwick pointed out.

Harry scowled but grudgingly nodded.

"Honestly," Sprout spoke up, "I'm surprised you haven't done something about him already, Mr. Potter."

Harry looked at her with a raised eyebrow. "What would you have me do?"

She flicked a glance at McGonagall before focusing on Harry again. "Forgive me, but I had expected your Gryffindor impetuousness to push you into challenging him to a duel."

Harry smiled faintly. "Though I may be a reckless Gryffindor on occasion -" he ignored the noises of humor from Flitwick and McGonagall, "- I *try* to avoid being foolhardy. I have received a fair amount of dueling instruction, that is true, but Snape is rumored to be an accomplished duelist. Whether or not I could take him, I do know he's more ruthless than I am. Whether I won, I'd be far more likely to be maimed by a man who has shown illogical hatred of me and a willingness to break rules and laws to hurt me."

McGonagall nodded thoughtfully. Flitwick smiled proudly. Dumbledore slumped further, but he made no comment.

Harry offered, "Much as I still feel he should be imprisoned, might I suggest he be moved to a protected location outside of the school? Perhaps build him a potions lab in Headquarters?" He knew anything more punitive, no matter how richly deserved, would be dismissed out of hand.

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "That could well work out admirably. Excellent suggestion, Mr. Potter."

"He *does* occasionally have them," Flitwick dryly pointed out.

Harry grinned crookedly at the Charms Professor. Dumbledore and McGonagall smiled momentarily.

"Thirty points for holding your temper in front of Governor Witherford and another ten for the suggestion regarding Severus," Sprout said.

"And another twenty for clearing the biggest problems out of Slytherin," the previously quiet Slughorn added.

Harry's grin widened. He was up on points for the evening, even after the "prank".

Dumbledore winced as if in pain at Slughorn's words, but he rallied quickly. "I will leave it to you and Mr. Potter to arrange the detentions, Filius. Unless someone has anything else to discuss, I believe I wish to turn in after such an eventful evening."

"You think you're such hot stuff, Potter? Getting the ickle-baby Death Eaters thrown out?"

Harry looked up from his breakfast at Ron in confusion. "I didn't throw them out, Ron," he said slowly. "The fact that they were marked Death Eaters got them arrested."

Ron scoffed. "Despite calling it a *prank*, everyone knows you're behind them getting caught."

Harry shrugged, not understanding what the problem was.

Neville stood. "Come on, Ron. Harry did us all a favor. There's no need to get in his face over anything."

"Shove off, Longbottom. I'm talking to the high-and-mighty Potter." Eyes blazing, he turned and looked Tracey and Daphne over before letting his eyes settle on the seated Hermione. Keeping his eyes on her, he said, "You're already shagging two hot birds, Potter, why are you trying to pull Hermione into your perverted fantasies, too?"

Six people moved simultaneously.

Harry tried to lunge over the table. He was held in place by Daphne and Tracey each clamping down on his shoulders.

Neville grabbed Ron by the shoulder to keep him from launching a punch at the seated and temporarily immobile Harry.

All of this left Hermione free. She stood and brought her arm around in an open-handed slap that left a red mark upon his cheek. "What Daphne, Tracey, or I may or may not be doing with Harry is none of your damn business, Ronald Weasley!"

"Miss Granger!" McGonagall's sharp voice froze everyone into immobility.

"Yes, Professor?" Hermione asked, not taking her burning glare from Ron.

"Why did you just hit Mr. Weasley?"

Hermione had no chance to answer. "I didn't do anything to deserve that!" Ron whined, hand to his cheek.

"Mr. Weasley, I'll give you your chance to —"

"But you won't actually listen," Ron snarked. "You'll just listen to Hermione and rule in her favor without even talking to the rest of us! I don't know why you're even going to bother asking anyone else's side of the story."

McGonagall's lips thinned out into invisibility. "I see. Mr. Weasley, my office, right now. Miss Granger, please see me after classes today."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said.

Ron rolled his eyes and loudly huffed. "See what I mean?" he asked the sky. "She's not going to even bloody well listen to me. She'll just give me a detention."

McGonagall gave him a cold look. "I wasn't planning on doing so, but I could be persuaded if you say another word, Mr. Weasley. No, what I wanted you in my office for was so we could Floo your parents about your attitude and whether you really want to stay at Hogwarts."

Ron went pale. He threw first Hermione and then Harry dirty looks before stomping away from them and toward the Great Hall doors.

The other five sat back down as the volume of the remaining students slowly climbed back up after having fallen silent during the confrontation.

"He doesn't know when to bloody well shut up," Neville observed.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" Harry asked, truly bewildered.

He's angry at me for breaking up with him and you for having everything," Hermione answered without looking up.

Harry scoffed. "I'd trade my fame for his family any day of the week."

"You know that and I know that, but he doesn't see it."

"All he sees is what he *doesn't* have instead of what he does," Tracey said quietly.

Neville and Hermione nodded agreement.

Harry shook his head in incomprehension. "Whatever."

Next, he glanced at both girls. "Thank you two for stopping me," he whispered.

Both girls looked shot him shy smiles.

"However," Harry went on in a louder voice, "you both stopped me by physically restraining me. That, as my chattel, you may not do." He ignored the incredulous looks the three girls were shooting him. "I'll decide your punishment this evening when there aren't so many . . . witnesses."

Standing, he said, "Come along."

Slack-jawed, Daphne and Tracey climbed to their feet and hurried off after his retreating figure.

Fuming, Hermione did the same.

Neville followed the others. Once he caught them in an empty corridor, he chuckled, "You're learning, Harry."

Harry gave him a sideways glance. "How'd everyone else react?"

"You did good. All the other purebloods saw you do the right thing."

"That was a setup?" Hermione screeched, coming to a halt.

Harry also stopped and turned to her with an amused expression. "Yes. Everyone keeps telling me I have to act like a master to these two," he waved a hand at the two relieved girls. "I finally do so, and you're jumping down my throat about it?"

Hermione gave him a mock glare. "What was I supposed to think? It sounded like you were serious about punishing them, Harry James Potter."

"Oh, poo," Daphne said. "No spanking for me, then?"

Tracey and Hermione rolled their eyes. Neville very nearly swallowed his tongue. Harry just sighed.

"May I speak with you for a moment, Professor?" Harry asked as Transfiguration let out.

McGonagall looked over at Hermione.

The Head Girl tilted her head back toward Daphne and Tracey as they stood at the back of the room. "I'll wait, Professor."

The Deputy Headmistress nodded and turned her attention to Harry as Hermione moved away. "What can I do for you, Mr. Potter?"

"Please give me the punishment you would have given Hermione for hitting Ron."

She tilted her head curiously. "Why is that?"

"Daphne and Tracey stopped me from jumping over the table and throttling him," he answered simply. "If they hadn't, Hermione wouldn't have had the opportunity to slap him."

"So because you were prevented from attacking him, you should be punished in her place?"

"Well . . ."

She graced him with a half-smile. "It's very noble of you to attempt to take the punishment in Miss Granger's place. Still, she decided to act on her anger. I'm afraid that she must face the consequences of that." She turned her head. "Miss Granger?"

Hermione approached again, looking scared. "Yes, Professor?"

Neither woman made any effort so shoo Harry away from them, so he headed toward the door but did not exit.

"I spoke with Mr. Weasley at some length about what happened. What is your side of it?"

Hermione ducked her head. "He taunted Harry and me. My reaction was out of proportion to what he did."

McGonagall nodded. "That is what I gathered from speaking with him. You've been an exemplary Head Girl, and for that reason and that reason

alone, I'm not going to strip you of that title."

Hermione looked up, hope appearing in her eyes.

McGonagall continued, "However, with the Headmaster and other Heads' approval, I'm placing you on probation for the remainder of the year. Any further outbursts of the kind or other significant rule breaking, and I'll have no choice but to take your badge. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded, relief obvious in her stance.

"Now, you will also have one detention, served with Madam Pince. She tells me that she needs some help sorting out something or other in the library. I will leave it to you to arrange a time with her this week." She nodded at the girl. "That will be all, Miss Granger."

"Yes, Professor." Hermione turned and nearly skipped out of the room.

McGonagall looked at Harry and his girls still standing at the back of the room. With a respectful nod and a smile, Harry left in Hermione's wake.

Chattel Raid and Ron

"Have you given any further thought about how to defeat Riddle?" Tracey asked one evening.

Harry put down his potions book and sighed. "I can see three problems. First is finding him. Second is getting rid of his Death Eaters or at least getting past them. Third is making him weak enough that it's possible to bring him down."

"Don't you mean making you strong enough?" Daphne asked.

Harry shook his head. "He has decades of experience in the dark arts and he's widely regarded as one of the strongest duelers around. He fought Dumbledore to a standstill in the ministry atrium at the end of fifth year. If Dumbledore isn't strong enough to beat him, we have to bring Riddle's power down instead."

Daphne frowned in thought, staring at Harry's opened potions book. "I can think of one way," she said hesitantly.

"What's that?" Harry asked. He followed her line of sight and shook his head. "I thought of a poison already. I've heard through the Order that he tests everything before eating or drinking it."

"How about a binary poison?"

He sighed. "Do you know of any non-magical binary poisons? Besides, I already asked M- . . . one of the Order about that. Part of the tests he does checks against what is already in his system."

"That must be one heck of a test," Tracey observed.

"I don't know where he got it, but with Snape only supposedly being on our side . . ." He grimaced. "I heard some of the details. Honestly, this isn't something you want to hear about."

"I believe you. One thing you should think about, though: Sometimes the removal of a potion that someone is dependent upon is just as debilitating as a poison."

Harry frowned in thought.

Tracey went on, "About the other two problems: can't the Order help on the location?"

Harry snorted in disgust. "Even if they could, do you think they'd tell *me* ? I'm just the weapon. Not like they have to tell me anything."

Tracey frowned. "Stop it. The self-pity thing gets old really fast."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Regardless, my point stands."

"Dumbledore may not be willing to tell you anything, but what about the others?" Daphne asked

"Like any of them would buck Dumbledore's orders?" Harry asked incredulously.

"One of them may," Tracey said thoughtfully. She ignored Harry's curious glance. "Now as for the Death Eaters, leave that to us and your D.A."

Harry's face closed down.

She gave him a stern look. "I thought we'd talked about you trying to do it all alone."

He frowned. "We did," he grudgingly admitted.

"And it was decided that . . ." she prompted him.

"You've made your point," he grumbled.

Tracey nodded in satisfaction. Pushing aside her Transfiguration homework, she pulled out a fresh parchment and dipped her quill into the inkpot.

"What're you doing?" Harry asked.

"Trying to help my husband survive," she answered without looking up.

taking the hint that she preferred not to inform him, he picked up his potions text again, turning to the index.

The next evening in the Great Hall, Hermione dropped into a seat across from Harry with a huff.

"Hi?" Harry greeted the irate girl in the form of a question.

She just grunted as she pulled some food to her plate.

"What's wrong?"

"Ronald."

He waited for a further explanation.

After a few seconds, Tracey amusedly asked, "Okay, what about Weasley?"

Giving an exasperated huff, Hermione looked up and said, "He talked to me after Charms. He wanted to apologize for what he said last week."

"That's good, right?" Harry asked cautiously.

She rolled her eyes. "It would be if that was all he did."

"Before you get to the rest of it, what brought about his apology?" Tracey asked. At Harry's confused look, she elaborated, "*Why* he apologized may be more important than the fact that he did."

Hermione raised an eyebrow and slowly nodded. "That makes sense. Your suspicion is probably correct. He said Mrs. Weasley had a talk with him this last weekend."

Harry frowned sourly. "So he wasn't apologizing because he was sorry, he was doing it because his Mum forced him to."

"Most likely," Hermione agreed, "and after that, he asked if we could give dating a try again."

Daphne stared at her. "Why in the name of Morgana would he think that you two would work out this time?"

"I don't know," Hermione answered with a shrug.

"Didn't his blinding show of stupidity the first time with you make any kind of impact?" Daphne asked.

Hermione shrugged again and frowned.

"That's what has you so out of sorts?" Harry asked.

"Even if she is, you're not supposed to bring it up," Tracey pointed out.

Harry rolled his eyes. "If I were dating her, maybe that's true, but as she's my best friend, I figure I'm *supposed* to be concerned about her moods."

"Ooh, he's getting better," Hermione congratulated Daphne and Tracey.

Tracey surreptitiously looked around as Harry stuck his tongue out at Hermione. Seeing nobody besides a highly amused Neville listening, Tracey leaned forward and whispered, "It's been a lot of work, but I hope to have him ready for polite company by the time we graduate."

Daphne, Hermione, and Neville broke into laughter.

Harry groaned and put his face into his hands. "What'd I ever do to deserve this kind of abuse?"

"You got involved with three intelligent and strong-willed women," Neville pointed out with a grin.

"We're *involved*?" Harry asked Hermione with a querying look.

"Everyone seems to think we are, but I don't remember anything."

Tracey perked up. "Oh, good. They worked."

They all turned to her. "What worked?" Harry asked.

"The Memory Charms."

Hermione stared at her. "I don't remember you Obliviating Harry."

Tracey waved negligently. "Oh, I Oblivated you, too. And the point of it is that you *wouldn't* remember, right?"

"Er, right," Harry agreed, looking at her strangely.

"Why would you Memory Charm us?" Hermione asked in outrage.

"I could tell you, but then I'd just have to Oblivate you again," Tracey said sadly. Daphne nodded solemnly.

Hermione was all set to rail at her further when she caught sight of Neville's red face. She turned to him just as he broke into laughter.

Harry, cottoning on to what was happening, relaxed. "Minx," he grumbled affectionately.

Tracey gave him a blinding smile.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Neville gasped, "The look on your face, Hermione." He gave up and resumed laughing.

Hermione folded her arms and huffed in annoyance at the laughing young man.

Neville finally calmed down enough to speak. "I just meant *involved* as in *good friends with* , Hermione." He turned to Tracey. "Good joke, though."

She grinned toothily. "Who says it was a joke?"

Harry came back to his apartments from a long session with Flitwick. Rubbing a developing bruise, his only thought was for a long bath and some sleep.

He was completely unprepared for his sitting room to look like the waiting room of a muggle emergency room.

Stopping and blinking repeatedly at the unexpected scene, Harry looked around. Their kneazle Aurora sat atop the bookshelf, clearly annoyed at the D.A. students standing or sprawled about the room. Bruises and minor cuts were visible on everyone. They were all talking, the noise having masked his entrance.

While Harry stared around in bewilderment, a house-elf popped in with an armload of sealed pots.

Without looking away from holding a bandage against Ernie Macmillan's side, Tracey called "Alright, if all you have is bruises, take one of these and rub a bit in every two hours."

More than half of the students moved forward and took small pots from the elf and headed toward the door.

Ginny Weasley was the first to spot Harry and came to an abrupt halt. "Oh."

Harry surveyed the faces suddenly looking at him in a combination of surprise and slight chagrin. "Good evening," he said. "Does anyone want to explain why you're here?"

Silence reigned as most everyone shuffled their feet, looking down.

Neville finally eased forward from the back of the crowd. "I'll explain, Harry, but we need to get the wounded taken care of first."

Harry stared hard at Neville. The other boy held firm, gazing calmly back. Seeing the conviction in his eyes, Harry nodded and moved aside.

More than one person tensed up as Harry drew his wand, but he simply healed an oozing cut on Colin Creevey's arm. Moving around the room, he healed the small wounds he knew how to deal with, silently thankful for the handful of lessons he had taken with Pomfrey as an adjunct to his training with Flitwick. As he finished healing each of the students, they thanked him nervously before escaping.

As he was about halfway around the room, the door to Daphne's bedroom opened and a pale but smiling Hermione emerged, followed closely by Daphne. "- for a couple days and then you should be good as new, okay?" Daphne said.

Daphne followed the Gryffindor witch's eyes and found herself looking into the thunderous face of her master.

Eyes wide, Daphne swallowed hard. "Uh, hi?" she asked in a very small voice.

"Let's finish healing them, and then we need to talk," Harry said flatly. "Hermione, sit down," he ordered. He spoke quietly, but his words received instant obedience.

Without a further word, Harry resumed healing those he could, letting Daphne, with her superior healing skills, deal with those that he was unable to handle.

Finally, the room emptied until it was down to three Potters, Hermione, and Neville.

"Explain," Harry commanded as he sat down.

The four in front of him exchanged glances but nobody spoke up.

Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Where'd the medical supplies come from?" he asked instead.

"The infirmary," Daphne whispered.

"Do you think Madam Pomfrey just *might* report them stolen?" he asked sarcastically.

Daphne winced.

"Were there any fatalities among the D.A.?" Harry asked of Tracey.

She shook her head.

"Thank Merlin," Harry said. "What was the worst injury?"

Neville nodded toward Hermione.

Harry turned with a raised eyebrow.

"Laceration from flying stone," Hermione offered. She moved her right arm around experimentally. "Daphne already closed the wound. I'll be okay in a couple days."

"If that was the worst injury and there were at least a couple dozen D.A. going, then I'd guess this was a raid of some kind."

Neville nodded hesitantly.

"Where'd you hit?" Harry asked.

Tracey said, "We got the location of a small base. Three dozen D.A. Portkeyed in, crashed the wards, destroyed the house, and Portkeyed out. Took less than a minute."

"Very subtle," Harry observed dryly.

"We weren't going for subtle," Hermione said. "We were going for safe."

Harry looked at her mildly. "And how many people were killed by the collapsing house?"

All four of them winced. "We don't know."

"And how many of them were innocent bystanders?" Harry continued inexorably.

"None."

Harry laughed mirthlessly. "You just said you don't know how many were inside; therefore, you don't know *who* was inside. How do you know this place, whatever it was, wasn't a primary school?"

"According to the Ministry, it's owned by the Carrows."

"At least you did a *little* research," Harry admitted. "How'd you hear about it?"

"My great uncle," Tracey said.

"Who is that?"

"An Order member," Hermione interjected. "I can tell you if you really want, but there's no reason for you to know."

"Plausible deniability?" Harry asked sarcastically.

Hermione nodded. "That's why we did it while you were in a session with Flitwick."

"So I can honestly say I had no prior knowledge, didn't go on the raid itself, and even have an alibi."

Hermione smiled. "Exactly."

Harry smiled humorlessly. "Except for the minor fact that my chattel, these two who I'm legally responsible for, *were* on the raid and were, in all likelihood, instigators of it."

Hermione's smile fell. "Oh," she whispered.

"Ya think?" Harry sarcastically asked.

Neville spoke up, "Hey, now! There's no need to beat her up over it."

Harry glared at him. "You know I'm going to get blamed for this. And legally, I *am* at fault through them." He waved at Tracey and Daphne. "The problem is that *I didn't know about it*." He sighed. "Did anyone see you?"

All four shook their heads.

"Did you cover your tracks?"

"We cast Magical Signatory Suppression spells afterwards," Neville said.

"Where in the name of Merlin would you have learned how to do that?"

"I know more than a few aurors," Neville pointed out.

Harry just grunted. "Where'd you get the Portkeys?"

"It took some digging, but the information *is* in the Black library," Hermione said with a sliver of pride. "I found it when we were staying there last summer."

"What's to stop one of your D.A. raiders from blabbing?" Harry went on. "Colin and Dennis aren't exactly what I'd call subtle."

"Magically binding oaths to never speak of what we were up to."

Harry raised an eyebrow at Hermione. "And then how can you four talk to *me* about it?"

"As leaders of the D.A., Neville and I aren't bound by the oath. As to these other two, their Marriage of Chattel prevented them from signing the contract that the rest did."

Harry frowned in silent thought for a minute. "As far as I can see, other than trying in vain to protect me from your actions, it sounds like you did try to make it as clean as possible," he grudgingly admitted.

"Safety for us first; keeping everyone, especially you, out of trouble was the second goal," Hermione said.

Harry wordlessly looked at his chattel and then back to her.

She winced. "I forgot, okay?"

Neville almost smiled. "I heard her say it."

She smacked his arm.

"You all realize that you can't do this again," Harry said, ignoring the byplay.

Neville stopped rubbing his arm and looked at Harry in confusion. "Why not?"

"Voldemort and crew will make their wards harder to get through, so your lightning attack won't work next time. That, and the fact that you needed medical supplies from Pomfrey, without being able to tell her about it, means that they *can* find out who did it if they want to."

"You don't sound angry any longer," Tracey ventured.

Harry wagged his hand back and forth. "Sorta. My head knows you guys did something that needed to be done, despite the fact that Dumbledore and his vaunted Order refuse to use these kinds of tactics."

"Not very Gryffindor, was it?" Neville said pensively.

Tracey smirked at him. "Not hardly."

"We'll see if there is any fallout from this and what it is. Then I'll figure out if I'm angry at you all."

The expected inquisition occurred two days later. Harry had been called to the Headmaster's office following dinner, only to walk into a loud argument between Lucius Malfoy and Scrimgeour, with the not-very-amused Dumbledore and McGonagall looking on. Flitwick sat to the side of the room, supremely bored.

Harry sighed and turned to McGonagall as the two standing men continued to hiss and snarl at each other. "We have got to stop meeting like this, Professor," Harry observed dryly.

Her quick snort of laughter stopped the arguing men. Scrimgeour looked slightly apologetic and took a seat.

Malfoy put up his nose and turned to Dumbledore. "Now that the whelp is here, let us question him and be done with this."

"You sure you want to do that, Malfoy?" Harry asked curiously. When everyone turned to him, he explained, "After the last time this group questioned me, I showed his son to be an attempted kidnapper. His record in trying to get me in trouble hasn't been very good."

Malfoy glowered. Flitwick held a hand to his face, covering his mouth.

Without batting an eye, Scrimgeour said, "Mr. Potter, Mr. Malfoy has asked that you be questioned in regards to the attack on the Carrow estate."

"Why ask *me* about it?" Harry asked curiously.

"You have a habit of being at the center of . . . many situations."

Harry looked at Malfoy momentarily before turning back to Scrimgeour. "From what I read in the Prophet , there were a dozen dead Death Eaters found in the wreckage. I'd think that any honest and upstanding member of society would want to congratulate whoever is responsible instead of trying to blame me for the attack."

Scrimgeour's eyes flicked to Malfoy. "Yes, well, attacking the estate, bringing the wards down and then destroying the manor are illegal actions. Despite the fact that the only fatalities were Death Eaters, the attackers did indeed break the law."

Harry nodded. "I understand."

"First, where were you that afternoon from one o'clock until one-thirty?"

"I was in a private lesson with Professor Flitwick from noon until two," Harry answered, tilting his head toward the small man. Flitwick nodded his agreement.

"Did you know of someone else planning the attack?"

"No."

"Where were your chattel?"

"When I got back to my apartment, they were both there."

"What were they doing while you were in your *private lessons* ?" Malfoy asked acidly.

Harry gave the man a cool look. "So long as they don't break any school rules or do something against my morals, I give them a fair amount of freedom. Perhaps a bit more than is generally given to chattel-wives," Harry allowed, "but then I'm not generally around people who feel chattel are a part of a reasonable society."

"I know you were behind the attack, Potter," Malfoy growled.

Harry shrugged. "I know you're an unreformed Death Eater who bribed Fudge to pardon you before he was chucked out of office. Unfortunately, without proof, I'm unable to imprison you like you deserve."

Malfoy's hand darted to the head of his cane. "Insolent brat!"

"Mr. Malfoy!" McGonagall's sharp voice snapped out.

Malfoy's hand stopped before the wand hidden in the cane made an appearance, but his venomous glare stayed on Harry.

"Too bad you interrupted, Professor," Harry observed quietly, his own hand resting on his wand. "He was about to prove me right."

Malfoy slowly uncurled his fingers from the cane. "I demand his two slaves be brought in and questioned as well as Longbottom."

"You know you have no grounds to demand that, Mr. Malfoy," McGonagall responded.

"You only - barely - have the right to have Harry questioned," added Flitwick.

"Going on a fishing expedition?" Harry asked. He turned to the tense Scrimgeour. "Tell you what, if I allow that, then how about we question *him* about a few things." He turned and smirked at Malfoy. "Like his whereabouts after that Portkey took me at the end of the Third Task." Malfoy glared at him for several long seconds as he looked politely back. "How about it, Malfoy? I'll let them be questioned under Veritaserum if you're willing to give a Pensieve account of your time for . . . oh, three hours on either side of the Portkey taking me." He grinned predatorily. "You willing to tell us the truth about your time for the truth about my girls' time?"

Malfoy glared harder. "I shall consider it," he ground out.

"Ah, ah, ah," Harry chided him. "This offer isn't open forever. Once we leave this room, the offer is revoked." His tone turned flat. "I don't trust that you or Snape don't have a way to fake memories even under Veritaserum if given the time to prepare."

Malfoy's jaw muscles bunched, but he remained silent.

"How's your Death Eater son?" Harry goaded him further.

Malfoy made a low growling noise. Standing abruptly, he stormed out of the room.

"Must you provoke him?" McGonagall asked wearily.

Harry, slumping back into his chair, laughed humorlessly. "You think I can get any higher on his or Voldemort's 'to-kill' list?" He sighed and then mused aloud, "You know, I just don't get it."

"To what are you referring, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked before Scrimgeour could respond.

"Why Malfoy wrote the marriage contracts like he did. Oh, I get what they were intended to do, but what I don't understand is what he would get out of it." He was silent for a moment before continuing, "Punish Daphne and Tracey for something? But they haven't done anything to him. Punish

their families? But then why would they have let him write the contracts in the first place? Intimidate the neutrals? That would definitely help Voldy's cause, I suppose, so maybe that's it. Give his son an indirect gift? After all, Malfoy junior made it clear that the girls, even if technically wives of Crabbe and Goyle, were going to be community property. Maybe cement the loyalty of the boys' families?"

Scrimgeour grunted as he levered himself upright. "Who knows how that Death Eater's mind works. Any or all of those suppositions may be the truth, Mr. Potter. Unless we get some Veritaserum into him, we may never know."

"You wanted to see us, Madam Pomfrey?" Harry asked, leading his two girls into the Hospital Wing.

The matron waved the two girls into beds. "Just wanted to do a quick check of Tracey and Daphne's health," she explained casually. Once the girls were seated, she started waving her wand over the two girls.

All three Potters shared mystified glances.

"Er, not that I mind, but I don't remember check-up visits before," Harry observed.

"Hmm," Pomfrey made a non-committal noise, wand still waving.

Daphne suddenly smirked as her eyes continued to track the nurse. "Ah, that's why we're here."

Pomfrey paused.

"I assure you, we're not pregnant," Daphne dryly said.

Harry gawked before blushing furiously.

Tracey, smirking faintly, said, "Neither of us is pregnant, we're being well treated, and we're in good health. Was there anything else you were going to surreptitiously check?"

Chagrined, Pomfrey put her wand away. "I should've known better. No, that was it. Mr. Potter, may I speak with you for a moment?"

"You may, but I doubt I'm going to keep any secrets from these two."

She nodded. "First, thank you for how well you're treating them."

He blinked, not having expected that.

She grinned at his reaction. "Chattel-wives aren't usually treated . . . well. There have been a few in my time as school nurse. Not many, but a few. Unfortunately, I've had to treat them for a variety of things after their husbands' . . . ministrations."

Harry winced. "I'm treating them well," he objected.

She nodded. "I'm aware of that. Now. I'm just thanking you for being a good man." She smirked. "The fact that it cuts down on my workload is just a bonus."

All three of them laughed.

Pomfrey went on. "I'm surprised at a few items that came up during the diagnostics, but I'm satisfied that you're all in good health." She paused. "The other thing I wanted to say is that I did an inventory of my supplies a couple days ago." She studied Harry's neutral expression and then Daphne's utterly still face. Giving a decisive nod, she said, "The Bruise Balm isn't a big deal, but I'm concerned with one or two items. However, so long as someone with medical training is supervising their usage . . ." She trailed off, staring at Daphne pointedly.

Harry cleared his throat in the resulting silence.

Pomfrey looked over at him. "Based on the rumors I heard, especially after Lucius Malfoy was here, I think I can guess what happened." She held up a hand before anyone could react. "I'm not going to speculate. All I ask is that if some . . . dueling practice injury requires serious medical attention, you bring it to me. Agreed?"

Daphne nodded, eyes full of gratitude.

Now smiling fondly at the girl, Pomfrey waved one of her hands in a shooing gesture. "You're all healthy. Out with you."

The three made their escape.

Tracey saw Harry's faint smirk. "Yes, you told us so, Master," she said with a sigh, referring to his predications after the D.A. raid.

"That was good of her not to try to press us on it, though," Harry observed, letting her off the hook.

Daphne shrugged. "Patient confidentiality. As her *de facto* apprentice, it extends to anyone I treat, too."

He nodded before changing the topic. "What was with her surprise about a 'few things that came up in the diagnostics'?"

Probably our virginal status," Tracey bluntly answered.

Harry almost missed a step.

Both girls laughed at him.

He gave them dark looks.

Tracey shrugged. "We keep telling you that in your situation, it's fully expected."

He rolled his eyes. "Just because I *can* doesn't mean I *should*," he repeated patiently.

Daphne loudly sighed.

Harry grinned at her. "Even if you say you're more than willing." He paused. "So long as you can't say, 'No,' it's too much like rape for my peace of mind," he said quietly.

Tracey burst into the apartment. "Harry!" she called.

He was on his feet, wand in hand and through the bedroom door in two seconds. "What?"

"Hermione is in the Hospital Wing."

Harry paled. Tracey would not mention it unless it was serious. "What's wrong?"

She shrugged uncomfortably. "Don't know. I just heard that she was seen running that way, holding her side and crying."

Harry made for the door but was stopped by Tracey holding up a hand and quirking a grin. "May I suggest you put on a shirt, first?"

He gave a wordless growl and jabbed his wand roughly toward the bedroom door. One of the shirts the girls had picked out for him over the holidays came flying out, followed by Daphne who was adjusting her robe. Tracey raised an eyebrow at that but left the question unasked.

Harry stormed down the hallway, headed toward the Hospital Wing as he put the shirt on. The girls scurried to keep up with his rapid movements. Two hallways later, Harry spotted Ron moving along in the same direction, limping. "Ron!" Harry called. "What happened to Hermione?" he asked, pulling his friend around by the red-head's shoulder.

Ron came around with his fist leading.

Caught completely unawares, Harry took the punch to the side of the face and stumbled backwards into Daphne. The two of them fell to the floor in a tangle of limbs.

Face full of fury, Ron clenched his other fist and moved toward the fallen pair.

Tracey, not understanding the cause of the problem but clearly recognizing that Harry and Daphne were in danger, drew her wand and stepped in his way.

Ron sneered. "Out of the way, *slave*."

Her eyes narrowed, and her wand came up.

Harry finally got to his feet. Helping Daphne up, he glared and asked, "Ron, what the hell was that for?"

"You have two sex-toys of your own, Potter. You leave Hermione for me!"

Uncomprehending, Harry blinked at him. "What are you on about?"

Ron glared. "I know you're trying to steal her away. She is mine, you hear me? Mine!" With that, he turned and stalked off toward the Gryffindor Tower, still limping slightly.

"What the hell is wrong with him?" Harry asked.

"I don't think we want to know," Daphne said worriedly, drawing her wand and waving it over Harry's developing black eye.

Shaking off the mystery, he waited until Daphne was done before again moving toward the Hospital Wing. "Thank you, both, for what you just did," he said absently.

The trio made it to the Hospital Wing without further mishap. The curtains were drawn around one of the beds and they could hear Madam Pomfrey's voice muttering healing charms from behind it.

While Harry looked torn, Daphne spoke up, "Madam Pomfrey, it's Daphne. May I assist?"

The muttering stopped for a moment. "Bring me a jar of Bruise Balm and a dose of Calming Draught, please, Miss Gr-" she interrupted herself to change to, "Bine Potter." As Daphne moved toward the medicinal supplies, Pomfrey continued, "Mr. Potter, may I assume you are out there?"

"Yes, Madam Pomfrey."

"To ease your mind, Miss Granger will be fine, physically. Now, the best way you can help is to step out of the Hospital Wing and keep anyone else from entering with the exceptions of the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall."

Harry's face twisted into an expression of indecision.

When Harry failed to immediately comply with her order, Pomfrey continued, "Truly, Mr. Potter, she will be fine. Daphne is here to help me, and you may leave Tracey as well if it will make you feel better."

A slight smile came to his face. The women around him could read him entirely too well. He turned to Tracey. "I'm going to be on the other side of the door. Let me know when there is news?"

She nodded and drew her wand, taking what appeared to be a guard position within view of the door.

With one final, strained smile at his two girls, he moved outside the doorway. It gave an immediate squelching noise as it was sealed from within.

Harry only had a few minutes to pace nervously before Neville arrived at a run.

Without giving the other boy more than a fleeting glance, Neville pulled on the handle. When it remained unmoving, he gave a snarl of anger and reached for a wand.

Harry's hand captured his wrist. "Pomfrey told me to keep anyone from entering, Nev," he said quietly.

Neville Longbottom went still. "Remove your hand from me, Potter," he said in a flat voice.

Harry sighed and removed his hand. "Pomfrey said she'll be fine. Daphne and Tracey are still in there, and they'll let us know when there is news."

Neville took several deep breaths and slowly relaxed. His hand came up to wipe at his face.

Seeing that his friend was at least somewhat calm, Harry leaned against the wall. "What happened, anyway?"

"Ron," Neville growled back.

Harry blinked. He replayed his recent confrontations with his friend in his mind and frowned. "Please tell me that he didn't try to do what I think he did."

"Whaddya mean? You haven't heard what he's been saying in the dorm, so how can you know?"

"We ran into him in the hall on the way. He was warning me off of her, saying that Hermione belonged to him. Add in the fights we've had since the whole mess with the girls started, and this looks like he's done something - or tried to anyway - that I may have to kill him for."

Neville nodded shortly. "Yeah, more of the same boasting in Gryffindor Tower. Nowhere near where she can hear anything, of course. I've told him he's an idiot for what he's saying. Ginny's yelled at him a few times, too. He's just gotten more and more stubborn and obnoxious about it." He sighed. "Nothing more than his claims of ownership, so nobody knew what to do about it."

"If he tried to do what it sounds like -"

"You can have what's left after I get done with him," Neville interrupted coldly.

"Now, boys," a new voice cut in, "I hope you are not discussing harm upon a fellow student."

Both seventh year boys turned identical glares upon the approaching Headmaster, causing the older man's steps to falter.

"If what I fear is true, then I'm talking about far more than mere 'harm'," Harry countered flatly.

Dumbledore was taken aback for a few seconds as he eyed the two angry students in front of him.

McGonagall appeared from around the corner and walked up during this small stare-down. "Dare I ask what may have precipitated this?" she asked, eyes darting from one wizard to another.

Neville didn't take his eyes from the headmaster. "Just voicing our . . . opinion on what we think should happen to Ron," he answered.

"I . . . see."

A sad Dumbledore waved his wand at the door, causing it to open.

Harry immediately held out his hand, preventing the headmaster from entering. "Tracey," he called out, "the two requested professors are entering. No need to hex them as they enter."

"Kay," Tracey's voice answered. Everyone heard her footsteps approach. She exited the Hospital Wing and sheathed her wand. Stopping in front of Harry, she stated baldly, "Weasley attempted, but failed, to rape her."

McGonagall and Dumbledore winced. Harry and Neville's eyes flared before they both went cold.

"D.A. meeting, right here, right now," Harry commanded flatly.

Tracey nodded, turned on her heel, and moved down the hallway. Neville took a coin out of his pocket and started to fiddle with it.

"Harry, please do not do anything drastic," Dumbledore pleaded.

"My actions depend entirely upon how you handle this, Headmaster," Harry responded in a tone barely short of a snarl.

Dumbledore nodded sadly and entered the Hospital Wing. McGonagall, face set in a fierce scowl, followed.

Once the two professors closed the door, Harry slumped against the wall. "Damn him."

Neville, putting his D.A. control coin away, grunted angrily.

Harry looked over. "Sorry about that, mate. I just realized that I stepped on your toes by calling a meeting like that. The D.A. is yours now, not mine."

Neville waved him off. "If you hadn't called it, I would've."

The two friends sat and stewed for several minutes before the first of the D.A. started to appear. Whatever the students saw in the faces of the two Gryffindors quelled any questions.

A few minutes after that, Tracey reappeared from the direction of the seventh floor, leading a few more D.A. members. She approached Harry and lightly touched his shoulder.

Harry looked up at this and nodded his thanks to her. Looking around, he saw several dozen faces peering at him quizzically.

He cleared his throat. "This isn't everyone, but spread the word for those who are not here. The short version is that Ron was so disillusioned by my refusal to *share* Tracey and Daphne," Tracey made no effort to suppress her shudder, "that he somehow came to the conclusion that he owned Hermione."

The gathered students reacted in scowls and gasps of anger.

Neville said, "Less than an hour ago, he attempted to rape her."

Dead silence fell.

Tracey took up the story. "She fought him off but got hurt in the process. She should be fine, physically, already. She's had a Calming Draught, so I have no idea how or if this is affecting her emotionally."

"It will," Justin Finch-Fletchley said darkly. When everyone turned to him, he explained, "Attempted rape is more common on the muggle side. I saw a news report about the after-effects on the telly once."

With a sick look, Tracey said, "Snape trying to rape me was bad enough. Weasley is . . . was a friend and former boyfriend. This *has* to be worse for her than it was for me."

Harry put her arm around Tracey. She turned her face into his shoulder.

After a moment, Neville said, "Due to this incident, Ronald Weasley is hereby expelled from the D.A. Any further . . . punishment will hinge upon how Dumbledore and McGonagall react."

"Just say the word, mate," a stony-faced Dean offered as Ginny silently cried into his shoulder.

"No," Harry sharply said, drawing surprised looks from everyone. "*Nobody* takes matters into their own hands. You hear me?" He glared around. "If I hear about someone from this group going after Ron on their own, you'll have to answer to me. And I've been learning all sorts of interesting hexes from Professor Flitwick." His stern face dissolved into an evil smirk. "Now, if Neville and I give the go-ahead, on the other hand . . ."

Several blood-thirsty grins reappeared.

Neville rolled his eyes and spoke up, "We'll need a D.A. guard in the Hospital Wing until Hermione is released." He paused and grimaced. "Due to the . . . nature of why she's here, it should probably be only female guards." He turned apologetic eyes to Ginny. "Sorry, Ginny, but considering -"

She shook her head, swiping at the tears. "No worries. I can be on the guard detail if you want, or not. I understand your - and her - arguments on that either way." She scowled fiercely. "You can be sure the Weasleys as a whole will be responding to this. Our actions will be done separately from what the D.A. may or may not do." She turned her head. "I don't want to use Pig for this. May I borrow Hedwig?"

Harry nodded, recognizing that such a note from Ginny, using Harry's owl, would have a message all its own.

Damn him!

Two days later Harry was talking with Neville when the Great Hall fell silent. Both boys looked up to find a visibly nervous Hermione standing at the door.

Susan and Hannah stood beside her, whispering with the Gryffindor. At Hermione's shaky nod, they each squeezed her shoulder for a moment before they moved toward their regular seats at the Hufflepuff table.

Dumbledore stood in front of the room. "Our Head Girl has had a trying time over the past few days and has just been released from Madam Pomfrey's care. I implore you not to pester her about her ordeal. Now, everyone, tuck in." A sharp clap of his hands brought the breakfast foods to the tables.

The four sitting at the Gryffindor table ignored the food. Harry and Neville stood as Hermione nervously approached. She gave the two standing boys a timid smile.

"Hi, Hermione," Daphne quietly greeted her.

Hermione was visibly more relaxed as she nodded back to the girl. Taking a breath, she seated herself next to where Neville was standing. Only Daphne saw her twitch as the Gryffindor boy seated himself again.

"It's good to have you back, Hermione," Neville whispered.

She merely nodded, eyes still on her plate as she slowly filled it with her breakfast.

Harry and Neville shared a glance before they silently returned to their meals as well.

"Thank you," Hermione unexpectedly said.

"What's that?" Harry asked.

Her eyes came up and settled on Neville. "Thank you for the D.A. guard." Her eyes went back down, and she sighed. "I wish I didn't need one, but emotionally, it made me feel better that they were there."

"You're welcome," Neville said simply.

"What've I missed?" she asked more determinedly.

"I can let you borrow my class notes," Tracey offered.

"Thanks, but I was interested in any other news."

Harry grinned faintly. "Why, Hermione. You're after *gossip*? How very girly of you."

She mock glared at him. "I *am* a girl, you know. And after a few days in a hospital bed, I'm surprisingly curious on how everyone is doing."

"More attacks by Death Eaters of course, including a big one in Bristol. Here, nothing much has happened," Daphne answered, "with one exception. *He*," her emphasis made it clear that she was talking about Ron, "was . . . strongly encouraged to sit out the rest of the year."

Harry grimaced.

Neville frowned. "He should've been arrested for what he did," he stated bluntly.

"He still may," Tracey pointed out. At Hermione's inquiring look, she added, "It's up to you, actually. From what I understand, you'll have the option of pursuing further legal action."

Hermione blinked and opened her mouth once before shutting it again, a stunned look on her face.

"Write down the date. Hermione Granger is surprised speechless," Harry gently teased her.

"Git," she rejoined, not paying much attention.

Ginny approached them hesitantly. "May I?" she quietly asked, gesturing at the empty seat on Hermione's other side.

Hermione nodded and scooted over fractionally.

Ginny sat and looked down forlornly. "Sorry."

"For what?" Hermione asked, visibly bracing herself. "You didn't do anything wrong. It was . . . your brother, not you."

Ginny nodded tightly. "I know, but I still feel like I should apologize for his actions."

"*He* should apologize for his actions," Harry pointed out.

"But since they're inexcusable, there wouldn't be much point," Neville added.

"Yeah," Ginny agreed with a sigh. She glanced at Hermione for a moment. "I was just worried that you'd hate me for what happened."

Hermione looked at the smaller girl for a long moment. "Is that why you weren't on guard detail?"

"We didn't know how you'd react to me," Ginny explained.

"We're good," Hermione assured the girl. "It's only . . . *him* that I have a problem with in your family."

"How about Percy?" Harry asked with a grin.

A smile flitted about Hermione's lips for a moment.

Ginny rolled her eyes and smirked. "I didn't think it was possible, but Mum is even more mad at Ron than she's disappointed in Percy right now. Dad called a family meeting and even pulled Percy in to talk about what to do with Ron. There was a serious discussion on whether to disown him." Neville, Tracey, and Daphne gasped as Harry and Hermione's eyebrows went up. Ginny nodded solemnly. "In the end, Dad didn't do it, but it was close. He's restricted to the Burrow until next year starts."

The six were silent for a few minutes before Hermione guessed, "It was Molly who prevented him from being disowned, isn't it?"

Ginny nodded. "Speaking of Mum, I was asked to assure you that if you wished to pursue further legal action, we'd support you." Ginny turned to Harry. "And Mum wanted me to assure you that we hold no ill feelings toward you for any of the circumstances around Ron's expulsion. On her behalf, I'm to apologize to you, as well."

"What for? You already made a formal apology for how he acted just after winter hols."

She shook her head. "Not that. This is from her, not the whole family. It's about how she's treated you since the whole thing with the two girls started. For the longest time, she believed the rumors on why you married them instead of just asking me or even Ron about what was going on."

"Well, *he* wouldn't have been an unbiased source of news," Hermione pointed out.

"Hermione," Harry quietly caught her attention. "For the same reasons Dumbledore and I encourage everyone to use Voldemort's moniker, you should call Ron by name." He watched her face go through several uncertain expressions. "I've never known you to be afraid of anything, least of which is a prat of the first order." He smirked. "After belting Malfoy in our third year, I hardly think the likes of Ron Weasley would frighten you."

"What's this about ferret-boy?" Ginny asked curiously.

Harry grinned and leaned back. "I'll let 'right-hook Granger' explain that one," he answered cheerfully.

Hermione's tension visibly abated another degree. Giving Harry the barest of smiles for his attempts to lower the tension, she turned to tell the story.

On a Friday evening in the middle of May, Tracey entered their quarters clutching a slip of parchment. "I know where Voldemort will be in two days," she announced.

Harry's head shot up. "How?" he demanded.

She handed the note to him.

LV will be moving to the Dolohov estate on 17 May.

- AM

Harry recognized the spiky lettering. He looked up at Tracey. "Alastor Moody?"

She gave him a nod. "My great uncle."

"Huh. Small world." Harry stared into space for several long seconds. Moving to the side of the room, he pulled down a copy of Most Potente Potions then flipped through it for several seconds before a finger trailed down the text. Giving a decisive nod, he replaced the tome and moved toward his desk. "Dobby," he called.

The elf popped in as Harry pulled out a fresh sheet of parchment.

Harry started a quick note as he spoke, "Voldemort will be moving on Sunday."

Dobby started wringing his hands. "Ooh, Master Harry sir. Dobby not knowing if Dobby can continue to do what Master Harry sir ordered."

Harry smiled fleetingly. "Don't worry about it. You've done brilliantly. I'm telling you so that you know to stop first thing Sunday morning."

The elf visibly relaxed. "Yes, Master Harry sir."

Harry gently blew on the parchment before handing it to Dobby. "Take this to Remus, please."

The elf took the parchment, bowed, and popped out.

"Why not use Hedwig?" Daphne asked.

"Much as I love and trust her, she can still be intercepted. Be it by Dumbledore or deez." He leaned back and let out a breath. "Okay, we have two and a half days to plan. Daphne, go talk to Pomfrey. We'll need her to *quietly* get things ready in the Hospital Wing."

Daphne nodded and left.

"Tracey, find Neville and Hermione and send them here. Then let Flitwick know."

"McGonagall? Dumbledore?" Tracey asked in a neutral tone.

Harry frowned. "Get Fil's opinion on McGonagall. The Headmaster won't know until the last minute."

"He won't like that," she observed.

"He won't like a lot of things I have to do in the next three days," Harry replied crossly.

Tracey held up a hand. "I know. I'm just saying."

Harry grimaced. "Yeah."

As she left, he put away his unfinished essay and pulled Dirty Dueling Deeds from the shelf.

Monday the 18th of May, 1998 started like any other Monday during term.

Some students came to breakfast earlier, some later. Mostly, though, breakfast passed in the usual conversations, clink of cutlery, and occasional laugh or shout.

If one was looking, however, one could see the tension and lack of appetite in the faces of some of the students. If one noticed and then thought about it, the observer would also realize they were all members of the D.A.

Albus Dumbledore was, above all things, observant.

Just as he turned to his deputy to ask just what she thought about this, he noticed that the tension and lack of appetite also affected a certain member of the staff, namely Pomfrey. Looking more closely, he also saw indications of tension in McGonagall and Flitwick.

Once more, Albus Dumbledore opened his mouth to query his deputy but was interrupted yet again as he saw over a dozen members of his Order of the Phoenix walk through the Great Hall doors.

Harry Potter, showing no signs of surprise, stood and greeted them.

"Oh, dear," the Headmaster said with a resigned sigh.

"Albus?" Professor Sprout asked from two seats away. "Is something the matter?"

Dumbledore glanced over and met McGonagall's eyes for a few seconds before he looked at the frowning Sprout. "Unless I am very much mistaken, yes, there is something the matter. Most unfortunately, there is nothing you nor I can do about it."

This only confused Sprout further, but before she could respond, Harry Potter approached. "Headmaster."

Dumbledore simply gazed at the one student who had by turns produced the most headaches and pride in him. He sighed again. "I was going to accuse you of co-opting my Order," Dumbledore started, causing Harry's eyebrows to shoot up. "However, I realize that they are not *mine*, as such."

"The Order's mandate is to fight evil," Harry agreed, silently thankful that the man was not going to make a scene.

"Indeed." Dumbledore looked over at the man approaching. "*Et tu*, Alastor?"

"The lad's plan can work," the former auror grunted unapologetically.

Dumbledore nodded sadly. "Very well. What would you have of me, Mr. Potter?"

Harry tilted his head slightly. "If I may say so, you're taking this much calmer than I would have expected."

A brief smile flickered across Dumbledore's features. "I wish that it had not come to this, but yet here we are." He paused for a moment in thought. "As well, I am trying to mend my ways with you."

"I'd like to talk about that later," Harry mentioned.

Dumbledore inclined his head once. "I look forward to that." He looked at the student attentively, clearly awaiting instructions.

"Dobby is having the Hogwarts elves shepherd all the students in the school into this room," Harry said crisply. "I know you would be an asset in the fight, but keeping Hogwarts safe is at least as important."

Dumbledore nodded and closed his eyes.

Everyone watching heard a series of distant bangs and felt a surge of magical energy.

While the Headmaster was communing with the Hogwarts wards, Harry's gaze rested momentarily on Flitwick, McGonagall, and Pomfrey. Each of the three stood and hurried toward the Order guests. This caused the various members of the D.A. to abandon their untouched breakfasts and join the knot of people.

"Hogwarts will be here when you return, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore quietly said. "Best of luck to you." He stood and addressed the people standing at the door. "Merlin go with you," he offered solemnly.

Not wanting to waste any more time, Harry turned and strode back to the gathering. As he passed, his girls fell into step to either side and a pace back. Wordlessly, the throng opened up ahead of him. His fighting force flowed out of the Great Hall behind him, all ignoring the increasing volume of confusion they left behind. Without breaking pace, Harry led them through the Entrance Hall, unsurprised to find the front door still open for them. Once they were all outside and the castle doors had shut behind them, Harry stopped and turned.

His eyes went from face to face, noticing without surprise the frightened but determined expressions almost all of them wore. All of the remaining D.A. members were looking back at him. They were mostly friends, but some were little more than acquaintances. Harry's gaze moved on to the Order members. Bill and Fleur, the twin Weasleys, Tonks and Remus, Mad-Eye, McGonagall, and Flitwick were the ones he knew. There were a few more faces he recognized, but was unable to put a name to. If they had Remus and McGonagall's trust, however, that was enough for him.

Clearing his throat against a sudden lump, Harry said, "Before we go, I just want to thank you all. This isn't necessarily your fight." He waved a hand at Tracey and Hermione's open mouths, cutting off the objections. "Though some will disagree," he said dryly.

A nervous chuckle ran around the gathering.

"I think you will find, Harry," Flitwick said gently, "that it is indeed our fight. Our world will suffer if we don't win. Isn't that enough to make it our fight?"

"I suppose so," Harry acknowledged. "However, I'm the only one prophesied to take down Tom."

Silence fell.

"So that's what dad was guarding," Bill observed quietly.

Harry nodded. "So that means that I can use the help, but nobody is to get into a one-on-one duel with Voldemort."

Hermione spoke up, "Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, Tonks, Lupin, Tracey, Daphne, and I will work with you to take him down and guard your back. Everyone else will keep the rest of the Death Eaters occupied."

Harry looked a question at Neville and Alastor, the two commanders. They both nodded and Moody spoke up, "Aye, lad. We've discussed it already."

Harry nodded, not really surprised. "Okay, then, you lot listen to Neville and Moody and maybe we can all come back here and have a kick-arse party after we kick some Death Eater arse!"

A cheer, fueled by nerves as much as anything, went up among the students.

Harry turned and started down the road to Hogsmeade to get out from under the Hogwarts wards.

"Very inspiring," Bill Weasley said dryly.

Harry made a face at the elder Weasley.

Bill laughed as Fleur smacked his shoulder. "Bill, be nice to the poor boy."

Harry smiled at the French part-Veela. "Thank you, Fleur.

"By the way, I notice your accent has gotten much better since the last time I spoke to you."

She rolled her eyes expressively. "When was the last time we spoke, 'Arry?"

"Ah, there's that adorable accent," Bill teased.

She smacked his shoulder again.

Harry chuckled before pondering the question. "I wasn't back to the Burrow at Christmas, was I?"

"You were kinda busy," Tracey dryly said.

Harry grinned at her. "Quite." He turned to Fleur. "Last summer?"

"Bill and I were out of the country last summer. It was the Christmas before last that we saw each other."

"Has it been that long?"

"Yes, it really has, Harry," Bill spoke up. "But if I may point out, we're kinda losing focus, here."

Harry nodded, chagrined.

"Back to the point, please let us and maybe Professor Flitwick examine the wards wherever we're going before your little army here crashes them. You're much less likely to get yourselves killed that way." He shook his head. "You lot were lucky the first time that they didn't blow up in your faces."

Harry raised his hands. "Don't look at me; I wasn't there. Hermione and Neville did that one."

Hermione spoke up from behind the two men. "I've read more about bringing down wards since the Carrows' place. I agree; we *were* lucky."

"At least you recognize that," Bill said. "Anyway, I'd like to take a look at them before you do the same thing you all did last time."

"You don't have to convince me," Hermione said. "Since we have two, maybe three ward professionals along, I'd feel much better about it if you *did* look at them before we just threw spells at it."

"Conjuring dense objects, rock and metals and the like, above the wards would be a quicker way of bringing them down by brute force," Flitwick spoke up.

"Would doing a Switching Spell, bringing rock in, work as well?" Hermione asked.

Flitwick blinked once and looked at her with a smile. "It would, and it would probably be less energy intensive if it's less than thirty miles away. Capital idea, Miss Granger. Twenty points to Gryffindor."

Tracey made an amused noise. "Not exactly a school outing we're on, Professor," she pointed out.

McGonagall said, "That may be true, Bine Potter, but learning and using the mind should always be encouraged."

"As to the current situation, I happen to know of a stone quarry in Dover near the Dolohov estate. I'll produce the first Portkey and take all of us there before we head to our final destination."

Moody wordlessly pulled a length of string from his pocket and handed it to McGonagall.

Still walking, the transfiguration professor muttered over it for a bit. As she finished, the group passed the gates. She spoke loudly enough for everyone to hear, "Our first Portkey will take us to a stone quarry so you know its location for later. The second Portkey will take us to within walking distance of our target."

Hermione turned toward the students. "Remember, shielders, it's your job to protect your shooters. You've practiced conjuring stone to block the Killing Curse. You all know your jobs. Nobody get fancy, don't do anything stupid, and we'll all go home." Glancing over the serious, and slightly scared, group of students, Hermione sighed. "I don't like the situation any more than you do. I wish we didn't have to do this, but the fact is that we do." She straightened up. "After getting a good look at the quarry, Disillusion yourselves but stay within audible distance of each other."

Moments later, the string had been stretched out and was being held by everyone. With a final tap of McGonagall's wand, the light side's fighters went off to finish the war.

"Arry?"

Harry turned toward the sound.

"Over here, Delacour," Moody grunted quietly from beside the near-invisible Potter.

Harry heard the rustling noise as Fleur moved toward them.

"It is 'Weasley', Alastor, as you well know," she huffed quietly.

Harry chuckled. "How's it going?"

"Bill and Filius 'ave identified the wards and are bringing some of them down. Once they 'ave done all they can, it will be up to your D.A. to overwhelm the rest. By that point, it will be safe to use the . . . cruder methods."

Harry felt Hermione tense up from five feet away. He forced another chuckle and tried to head off an explosion. "Don't knock it, Fleur. They may have been crude methods, but they worked. It's fast and easy, which is what we need."

"True," the French witch acknowledged grudgingly.

"Glad we have your approval. How long?"

"Ten, fifteen minutes. Filius will send you a Messenger Spell."

Moody spoke up, "Longbottom, take two-thirds of your force and go around back. I'll take the other third and the rest of the Order and cover the front. Potter, you and your little hunting party would be better to go in through the side."

"There aren't any doors on the side," Hermione objected.

"See that wand in your hand, Granger? With the right spell, I bet you can make a nice hole in that wall."

Harry tried very hard to not laugh aloud at Moody's snarky comment. He heard more than one student fail to completely resist the same temptation.

"Apologies, Granger," Moody went on in a more mollifying tone, "but this isn't the time for neatness. Speed and firepower might keep you alive for the rest of the day. Remember that."

"Yes, Professor," an audibly subdued Hermione responded.

Moody just grunted in response to her. Raising his voice, he continued, "Potter, once you get Flitwick's Messenger, you send to me and Longbottom. We'll all be waiting for your signal to start the assault on the wards. Once those are down, our job is to keep the Death Eaters penned up inside the building. Weasley, you and your husband put up Apparition and Portkey wards as quickly as you can. They don't have to be pretty or last long, but they *do* have to keep the Death Eaters from leaving the party early. Once those are up, guard or collapse the hole Potter makes on the side. Questions?"

"How will we know Harry's signal to assault the wards?" a voice asked from the nearly invisible crowd.

"It will be rather obvious, Mr. Hawke-Thorne," McGonagall said in a very dry tone.

Chattel The Battle

Bradley Hawke-Thorne crept along after Professor Moody, wondering why in the name of Merlin he had ever agreed to do this.

Sure, he could remember each individual step of the journey, but that still failed to explain just how he was here, about to participate in an illegal raid on a pureblood estate in order to help assassinate the most feared Dark Lord in living memory.

"Hold here," Moody's gruff voice broke him out of his incredulous introspection. "You D.A. kids, stay disillusioned and spread out. When we get the signal, do your best to help bring the wards down. If you can, do Switching Spells and swap granite from that quarry with the air above the house."

"That's what Professor McGonagall meant!" Brad blurted out.

Moody grunted. "Wouldn't surprise me if she managed half a ton of granite at a go."

Brad was not the only one to blink hard.

Moody gave a harsh bark of laughter. "She's not a witch to cross, and a Transfiguration Mistress to boot. Remember that.

"Anyway, if you don't think you can do a Switching Spell to get enough granite, throw whatever other spells at the wards. You kids brought down the Carrows' wards, so you presumably know what works and what doesn't. Questions?" There were none from the D.A. members.

With a curt order, Moody pulled all the Order members aside and gave them a series of quiet orders.

While the adults were doing that, the D.A. spread out some, everyone keeping the front door in sight.

Brad heard the adults break up. He quickly lost track of them as they moved further away from him.

Everything settled down into a tense silence for several minutes, most everyone shifting anxiously from foot to foot.

Moody suddenly hissed out, "Get ready, you lot. Party's about to start."

Brad raised his wand and took a deep breath, trying to focus for the upcoming fight.

The next moment, his jaw dropped open, and his concentration shattered. A virtual mountain of rock had appeared above the large home in front of them. Gravity immediately pulled it down and into the wards.

The magically inert granite impacted the wards with a resounding gong and a shower of sparks. The wards themselves flared a vibrant yellow for a long moment as they tried to support the massive weight, visibly warping their shape. The rock finally tumbled down the side of the wards, crashing into the ground with an earth-rumbling roar.

Brad's dumbfounded stare was broken when a dark blue spell came flying out from behind him and impacted the still-visible wards, causing another brief flare.

Shaking himself back to the task at hand, Brad started chanting. Being an upperclassman Ravenclaw, he had researched what he could on the art of ward-breaking since the first raid. Not much was available in the Hogwarts Library - every professional ward-crafter or ward-breaker guarded their secrets with a tenacity that would do a goblin proud - but Brad had come across several generic spells that could be used to drain energy from a shield. Shields had enough in common with wards that he knew that, while not quite as effective against the more complex warding spells, would still be useful. He went through the long incantation now to begin one of those spells.

Finished with the minute-long string of syllables, a steady silver beam came out of his wand and impacted the ward. At the point of impact, the wards glowed steadily before a series of lines began crawling out from that point, almost as if a pane of glass was slowly cracking.

Brad smiled slightly, keeping most of his concentration on the spell. Leave it to the Gryffs and Puffs to throw everything but the kitchen cauldron at the wards. The Claws would do the same job with much less fuss.

Under the strain of at least two ward-draining spells, a continued hail of granite, and a wide variety of incoming curses, the wards messily shattered after only a few minutes.

Brad heard a splintering crash come from the side of the house and turned to look. Harry Potter lowered his wand and visibly took a breath as two members of his escort jumped through a large hole in what used to be a stone wall. Professors Flitwick and McGonagall were the next two through the hole followed by Harry himself and then the rest of his select group of commandoes.

Brad's attention was drawn back to his appointed task at Moody's bellow, "Save the gawking for a bloody quidditch match! Pay attention to yer

jobs!"

Properly chastised, Brad - and nearly a dozen other students - turned back toward the front door. Remembering that his job was to keep the Death Eaters penned up inside the building, he threw a Blasting Curse through the hole where the front door had been and then conjured marble slabs to plug a hole that some random curse had made in the upper story.

Brad then conjured planks of wood and was about to place them over a hole in the roof that the last falling granite boulder had formed when a figure in a dark cloak came shooting out of the hole riding a broomstick. Brad was not the only one to throw a curse at the quickly moving figure. All of the spells missed, but someone in a Hufflepuff quidditch uniform rose from the far side of the mansion in pursuit.

Not seeing the pursuing broom-rider, the Death Eater turned to make a strafing run at the raiders on the ground.

Moving in, the pursuer shot the inattentive Death Eater off of their broom. The Death Eater, shoved sideways and with one leg showing an extra bend where it should not, flailed about for only a few moments before gravity claimed its prize and pulled him down. With a sickening crackle, the Death Eater fell to the ground between Moody's group and the front door.

Swallowing to keep his suddenly queasy stomach under control, Brad levitated the conjured wood to cover the hole in the roof. He was well aware that none of his stop-gap measures would prevent the Death Eaters from blasting a hole open again, but it would slow them down. At this point, that was the main goal.

By this point the front door - or at least the ragged hole that used to be an entrance - had several bodies scattered around in front of it. Even as he watched, another Death Eater ran out and tried to curse the attackers. He was torn apart by six curses before he got off his second spell.

Brad magically froze the ground and debris around the door. No sense making it easy on them to run out.

A fan of flame from inside the dark hole - someone trying to counter Brad's Freezing Spell - simply drew more blasting and cutting spells.

With a sharp crack, a wide area of the first floor wall blasted outward, revealing a dozen Death Eaters with wands out and immediately raining spells down at the attackers.

Forced to defend themselves from the falling masonry and hail of spells coming at them, none of the students could do anything about the half-dozen more Death Eaters who started climbing down from the first floor.

From three directions, ribbon-like spells came from previously empty patches of ground. Where the spells hit, Death Eaters were cut in half. The adult members of the Order of the Phoenix had lain in wait for just such a moment.

Freed of many of the harassing spells, the D.A. and Order members made short work of the remaining Death Eaters who suddenly had no option but to retreat back into the darkness.

Brad held his stomach under control until the holes in the walls were patched. During a momentary lull, he lost what little he had managed to eat that morning.

He looked up just in time to see a massive hole get blown out of a corner of the upper floor from the inside and a pale, thin figure jump out without hesitation.

Even before the figure made it to the ground, Professor Flitwick jumped out in pursuit.

Both managed to land without injury, but only Flitwick cast further spells against his target.

While Flitwick continued bombarding the figure, Harry and a pink-haired witch in auror blue robes both also jumped out of the hole and joined in the attack.

"You've lost, Tom!" Harry shouted.

"Never!" the figure, stumbling and casting only shield spells, called back in a weak voice.

Finally, one of the auror's spells slipped past the shield and tore a leg off of the figure.

Shrieking, he fell.

Harry quickly had him disarmed. Standing over the fallen wizard, Harry called, "Any last words, Tom?"

"I am LORD VOLDEMORT!" he choked out. A sudden, pulsating blue light came from his hand as Harry cast a wickedly powerful slashing curse that Brad had only heard whispers about.

The blue light threw Harry through the air to land a dozen yards away. He limply fell to the ground, below the ragged hole in the upper story of Dolohov manor.

Harry's spell cleanly decapitated Voldemort. The evil wizard's corpse immediately started falling to pieces, decomposing unevenly but rapidly.

"Harry!" a dual feminine shriek drew every eye on the battlefield. Tracey stood in the hole in the wall, leaning on Daphne's shoulder. They both stared down at the unmoving body, eyes huge. Daphne started to awkwardly help Tracey down the rubble, hampered by Tracey keeping her left hand pressed to her side, fingers slick with blood.

The auror that had accompanied the commandoes swore violently and rushed to Harry's side. Her wand started waving frantically.

Completely forgotten, the rest of the fighters on the battlefield were jolted back to their own situations when a masked Death Eaters roared wordlessly and fired a bright orange spell at the unconscious and defenseless Harry.

With a scream, Daphne dropped from under Tracey's shoulder and jumped from the pile of rock. As she fell, Brad spotted a faint shield forming around her. She landed between Harry's prone form and the incoming spell, falling to one knee. She tried to turn to face the Death Eater just as the spell crashed into her. The power of the curse catapulted her up into the air and threw her well beyond where Harry lay.

Even before she came to a tumbling halt, Lucius Malfoy was torn to shreds by curses from twenty wands.

Flitwick began to systematically demolish the area around the front door with an expression of utter fury on his normally cheerful face.

Brad and the remaining D.A. members, remembering their duty, turned back to their responsibilities.

Having just watched their leader fall, under anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards, losses mounting, and surrounded by a force that was proving they were willing to kill, the Death Eaters did not take long to realize the impossibility of their situation. The remaining survivors surrendered and were quickly stunned.

Once all the visible Death Eaters had been neutralized, the Order members began cautiously moving into the wrecked Dolohov estate.

The pink-haired auror and another Order member that Brad did not know continued to work on Harry as nearly every D.A. member from the front of the manor gathered around. Several of the D.A. were leaning on shoulders of nearby comrades and almost everyone had a cut or other minor injury, but Brad saw no major injuries.

Tracey, helped down the final meters of rubble by Hermione, moved toward Harry as quickly as she could, tears coursing down her face.

Neville, a smear of blood along one cheek, intercepted her, easily keeping the smaller, wounded witch from approaching.

Tracey called out Harry's name once before collapsing against Neville's chest, sobbing.

Hermione moved to check on Daphne. Even before the brunette got to her fallen friend, she slowed and then stopped. Head dropping forward, she slowly turned and headed back to the crowd gathering around her best friend.

"Dammit!" the short witch tending to Harry screamed. She slumped back and hung her head.

Tracey let out a started gasp before her hand went up to her hair and came back down, grasping a metal clasp of some kind.

Tracey, Neville, and Hermione gaped at it for a moment before Hermione shouted, "No!" She pushed her way through the crowd and started pushing on Harry's chest.

"Granger, he's gone," the adult softly spoke.

Hermione ignored her. "Dammit, Harry, don't you leave us like this," she said, continuing to rhythmically press upon Harry's chest.

Almost everyone in the crowd stared at her in incomprehension. The auror, though, moved over and started kissing Harry.

Brad turned to the student next to him. "What in the name of Merlin are they doing?" he asked softly.

Dean Thomas answered without looking away. "I should've thought of it. They're doing C.P.R."

"Huh?"

"They're trying to revive him. Get his heart going again and let him breath on his own."

"But," Brad glanced at the again-sobbing Tracey and the mystified medical witch, "he died. You can't come back from the dead."

Dean shook his head slowly. "If they can get his heart going -" He suddenly jumped forward, drawing his wand. "Stand clear!"

Hermione looked up, anguish clear in her eyes. She saw Dean with his wand out and a determined look in his eyes. Everyone could see the calculation going on behind her eyes. With a sharp nod, she stood and took a step back. "Tonks, give him a chance," she choked out.

Tonks, as the hair-color-changing auror was apparently called, immediately moved back. This caused everyone else to move away as well.

Dean touched his wand to Harry's chest. A short sound and a spark caused Harry's body to convulse.

Brad realized he was holding his breath. He had no idea what the muggleborn wizard thought he was doing, but if Hermione and the auror thought it was worth a try . . .

Harry Potter took a deep, ragged breath and started coughing.

Hermione, Tonks and the medical witch all converged on Harry, wands flashing.

The D.A. collapsed upon itself, laughing, back-slapping, and screaming.

Chattel One Week Later

Tracey Davis, hood up and face hidden, sat in the Three Broomsticks, finishing her dinner and listening to the townspeople as they discussed the news that had been all over the Prophet for the previous week.

". . . did the elf come into it, again?"

"It was a former Malfoy elf. Potter had the elf giving Riddle a Strengthening Potion."

"What? That sounds backwards."

"That's what I thought, too. Apparently the one they used was addictive. When Riddle and the Death Eaters moved to the Dolohov place, the elf stopped giving him the potion. So Riddle was not only out-numbered but also going through potion withdrawal."

"Ah, that makes more sense, not to mention why the fight was reportedly so short. The Malfoys didn't change their wards to keep the elf out after they lost it?"

"Parently not."

"Not very bright of 'em."

Tracey smiled slightly as the pair at the next table laughed.

". . . Snape?"

"He keeps claiming he helped Potter bring down You Know Who and deserves most of the credit. Potter denied it."

The other man gave a disgusted snort. "My nephew took classes from him. From what Alex said, I think I'll believe Potter."

"You and me both. I also heard that Snape's under investigation from the potions guild, the Hogwarts board, and the ministry."

An angry grunt. "Good."

"Hey, where's Potter?"

"Nobody knows. After one of his girls died and he lost that court case to the other, nobody's seen him."

"I'm surprised at that. He just saved us all, and she has some kinda lawsuit against him?"

"I dunno. Never did hear what it was about. Still, I've wanted to thank him. Every owl post I send to him returns without being opened, though."

Having heard all she wanted, Tracey laid a couple galleons on the table and left, walking down the street. At the Scrivenshaft's building, she moved to a hidden door and walked up the stairs. At the top, she simply knocked.

Seconds later, the door opened to reveal Dobby the house-elf. He took one look at her, frowned at the young woman, and moved to the side. "Master Harry sir, you have a guest," the elf called as he busied himself at the side of the room.

Tracey smirked at the elf's rude actions. She could not blame him.

Harry entered slowly, leaning on an ornate walking cane. "Miss Davis," he greeted her neutrally.

She pulled her hood down. "I'm sorry for what I had to do."

"I'm not angry with you," he calmly returned. "I understand why you did it."

She quietly continued, "I had to. To get my freedom, I had to follow through on the lawsuit."

He sighed. "Tracey, I said that I understand. You wanted to be free. I'd died, temporarily, so you used that to sue for your freedom. It makes perfect sense."

"I didn't want to have *all* of your will executed."

He shrugged. "It was an all or nothing thing from your point of view."

"Yous took all of Master Harry sir's money and properties," Dobby complained, glaring fiercely at the girl.

"Dobby," Harry gently chided the elf.

The elf scowled more deeply, but he subsided.

"What I do regret is that Daphne had to die," Harry said.

Tracey sighed. "Me, too." She shook her head at his guilty look. "Don't fret, Harry; she died defending you. That's what she wanted, remember?"

In an obvious ploy to distract him, she pulled an ornate key out of her pocket and presented it to him. "As we agreed."

Dobby's eyes widened at seeing the Potter Family vault key. "Yous . . ."

Harry took pity on his small friend's confusion. "We made a deal, Dobby. I didn't fight her getting her freedom, and she would give me back most of my estate."

"I even talked my parents into paying off the back taxes on Grimmauld Place."

Harry smiled as he took the key. "Thank you for that."

Dobby flushed a bright green. "Dobby is sorry, Miss Tracey, for thinking that Miss Tracey took Master Harry sir's money and properties."

She knelt down to look the elf in the eye. "I forgive you, Dobby. Nobody but us knew about it." She smiled as the loyal elf again flushed and dropped his head.

Standing, she turned back to Harry. "One last thing."

"Yes?" For the first time since she had known him, Harry Potter looked both happy and relaxed.

"I'm free," she stated.

He tilted his head in confusion. "Yes, we've established that. It's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Originally," she agreed. "Now there is something else I want." She stepped forward, deliberately invading his personal space. Placing one hand on his chest, she kept her head down and quietly spoke, "When my family had sold me into slavery, you rescued me. When I was naked, shamed, and vulnerable, you treated me with dignity." Looking up at him, she concluded, "I think I've found someone worthy to call husband." She smiled impishly. "Oh, and I can say 'no' now, Harry." She leaned forward and gently kissed him.

After several long seconds, she released the kiss and looked into his eyes.

One hand came up to brush along her hair, and he smiled sadly. "I'm sorry, Tracey, but with all that we've been through since Christmas, it would just be too weird."

She released a sad little sigh and nodded. "Yeah." She stepped back and turned, flipping the hood of her cloak back up. Before she got to the door, she looked over her shoulder and grinned at him. "Maybe in a couple years, though?"

He laughed. "Goodbye, Tracey Davis."

"Goodbye, Harry Potter."

Chattel Epilogue

Harry heard a knock at his office door and looked up. "Come in."

His assistant entered and said, "You have two . . . guests."

Even as she was speaking, Hermione Granger and Tracey Davis entered from behind the slightly older witch and took seats on Harry's large visitor's couch.

"Thanks, Nancy," Harry said, smiling at his two visitors.

"Have fun, boss," Nancy said with a smirk as she closed the door.

Harry sighed and shook his head.

"She thinks we're -" both Hermione and Tracey broke off and turned to stare at each other.

Harry snickered. "Yep."

"But you and Longbottom -" Tracey said as Hermione objected with, "But you and Blaise -"

They both broke off and again in chorus said, "What *about* me and -"

Harry laughed at the pair.

They both turned to him and glared. "*Harry!*"

"Yes, dears?" he asked with an attempt at an innocent expression.

Tracey rolled her eyes and leaned back on the couch.

Hermione huffed in exasperation.

"What can I do for you, Tracey?" Harry said, bringing a bit of seriousness back into the conversation.

She perked up. "I've finally got the votes. I just need you to propose the legislation."

His eyes lit up. "You do? Great! Will the March session work?"

She nodded, settling back again with a satisfied smile in place.

"Congratulations, Tracey," Hermione said honestly. "I know what this means to you."

The other girl nodded. "Just trying to stop that archaic law before another poor witch gets caught."

"Hey, you got my vote," Harry said with a grin.

"Well, I kinda figured that out when you agreed to sponsor it to the Wizengamot," Tracey observed dryly.

He just smiled at her. Turning, he asked, "Hermione?"

"Just thought you should be warned: Ron was arrested last night. Again."

Harry sighed. "What'd he do this time?"

"He hit his girlfriend."

"Is she alright? Romilda Vane, wasn't it?"

Hermione nodded. "St. Mungo's has already released her."

"When will he ever learn?" Harry asked tiredly.

"He won't," Tracey stated plainly.

"Yeah," Harry agreed in disgust.

"Oh, and we're about to move on Snape." Hermione ignored Tracey's low growl of anger. "He sold a level 5 controlled potion to an undercover auror."

"About time we got him off the street." He smiled at Hermione. "Nice to have friends in the judiciary."

She smirked faintly. "That's everything I needed. Tracey?"

"Naw, that was it."

"C'mon, Tracey, tell us how everyone is doing."

"You're after *gossip* ?"

Harry waved a hand vaguely around. "Not like I hear anything in here."

Hermione gave him a disapproving look as Tracey barked out a quick laugh. "If you say so, Harry.

"Minerva finally got full use of her leg back. Everyone else is the same. Filius and Remus say, 'Hi.'

"Oh, and the board finally agreed to add an elective on Warding. Bill Weasley has agreed to teach it."

The three spent several more minutes idly chatting before Hermione became visibly anxious to leave. Laughing, Harry escorted them out the door, a hand gently guiding each with a light touch on their backs.

Once in front of Nancy's desk, Hermione turned to Harry and gave him a not completely innocent peck. "Be good, Harry," she teasingly admonished him.

Tracey smiled lazily and said in a sultry purr, "It was a *pleasure* , Minister Potter."

- The End -