

# Dumbledore's Army and the Year of Darkness

by Andrew Blake



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Book One



## Chapter One The DA Reborn

"Any witch or wizard who marries a Muggle is taking a terrible risk. The children born from such unnatural unions -" Alecto Carrow motioned with her wand towards the blackboard, the points appearing there in her heavy, scrawling handwriting as she named them off. "Can expect deformity, retardation, severe anti-social tendencies, and often a complete lack of magical ability. In addition, as Muggle females are ill-bred to handle magical children, serious complications can result in such pregnancies, leading in some cases to the death of the female. Likewise, an attempt by a witch to carry the child of a Muggle male – yes, Mr. Finnigan?"

Seamus stood, his face a study in scholarly innocence as he lowered his hand. "Please, ma'am, those anti-social tendencies, they'd be the reason You-Know-Who's so delusional, then?"

Neville felt as though his stomach had abruptly dropped into his feet. Had Finnigan lost his mind? He wished it weren't too late to catch his friend's eye, to warn him off of saying something so crazily inflammatory, but the damage had been done. The words on the blackboard dissolved in smoke as Carrow's face slowly turned a deep scarlet.

"The Dark Lord carries the blood of the great Slytherin himself through generations of powerful wizarding families such as the Gaunts and the Peverells," she hissed between clenched teeth. "More than powerful enough to counteract the pitiful influence of any Muggle... *if* you choose to believe disgusting rumors spread by petty, small-minded, Mudblood-loving fools. But you are certainly proof that no ordinary slum-dragging witch can marry filth without consequence!"

To Neville's surprise, Seamus seemed to take the attack on his mother in stride, nodding as if her answer had been perfectly reasonable. "Then if we're to be takin' the example of the Gaunts and keepin' it all in kin, can I ask when you and Amycus'll be expecting?"

A collective gasp sounded through the classroom, and Neville slipped his hand into his pocket, closing his fingers unobtrusively around the handle of his wand. Seamus had brought whatever punishment was coming on himself, without a doubt, but if it was going to be too much, Neville was prepared to fight to save his fellow Gryffindor's life. The look on their new teacher's face certainly suggested it might come to that.

Seamus, however, simply stood silently, facing her with the same look of serene curiosity on his face until the moment her wand snapped towards him. " *CRUCIO !*" she shrieked, and the curse hit Seamus with such force that he flew backward over his chair, crashing into the desk behind him. Lavender Brown jumped to her feet and screamed as he slid down to the floor, his body thrashing and writhing against her legs as the agony of the curse swept through him.

At the head of the class, Carrow watched, her teeth bared in feral glee at Seamus' pain. Neville's hand grew so tight on the wand that his fingernails cut into the flesh of his palm, but he made no move, forcefully reminding himself that it was only the second day, too early to do anything rash or foolish. If he made any move towards Seamus, he would join him instantly on the floor, helpless under the wracking pain of the curse he remembered all too well from the night he had faced the Death Eaters at the Ministry of Magic.

After what seemed like years, a hand appeared on the surface of Lavender's desk, and Seamus slowly pulled himself upright. He was trembling, his chin scarlet and his shirt stained with blood where he had bitten almost completely through his lower lip, but incredibly, he was smiling. "Touch a nerve, there?"



Slowly, Carrow stalked across the classroom, her squat, round-shouldered form moving with bullish intensity towards the taller student. Reaching him, she stared nastily up into his face, putting the tip of her stubby wand directly under his chin and forcing him to look upwards. "I take no disrespect from half-breed Irish dung, Finnigan." Lowering her wand, she unleashed a thick gob of spittle that hit Seamus directly in the face, then, with a quick, harsh motion, snapped the wand up again.

Before she could utter the curse, however, Seamus's own wand was in his hand, dropped out of his sleeve in a motion that seemed almost magic in itself. "*Ionsaigh!*" he shouted.

Carrow doubled over as if punched, beady eyes bulging in pain, and Neville gasped in shock. Silently, he urged Seamus to run, to flee, to Stupify her and get away before she could retaliate. But it was too late. Already, Carrow had recovered enough to jab her wand towards the young Gryffindor, and all Neville could do was wrap his arms around Parvati, who was sitting next to him, and hide her face in his robes so that she didn't have to watch.

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"What in Merlin's name were you thinking?" Ginny Weasley spoke for all of them the moment Seamus' eyes eased themselves open in the Gryffindor common room, barely visible as blue and white slits beneath the puffy swelling of two massive bruises.

"Izzazmple l'arridadun." The words were utterly unintelligible through the cracked and bleeding lips, and Neville knelt, raising a small bowl to his classmate's mouth.

"Here, drink this." He shot a look at Ginny. "You can wait to tell us all what possessed you once you're patched up."

"Winasplwen?" Neville tilted the bowl, and the protestation stopped as Seamus began to drink the murky green liquid.

Ignoring the faces his patient made at the taste, Neville gently wiped away a few stray dribbles from Seamus' chin, then refilled the bowl from the cauldron that sat on the low table next to the couch that was being used as a makeshift hospital bed. "You're not in the hospital wing," he explained, "because the Carrows wouldn't let us take you there. Alecto wanted you to suffer for what you've done. None of us wanted to try healing spells on you while you were unconscious, but I've brewed up a mixture of Dittany, Murtlap, and a few other things that should help a lot, and Ginny is going to give the spellwork a try for the rest – oh, don't give me that look, this isn't Potions, it's Herbology."

The swelling had already gone down by nearly half, and Neville was pleased to see that his concoction was already restoring a more normal appearance to the battered and bloody mouth, though the two front teeth were still badly broken. When Seamus spoke again, it was surprisingly clear. "I wanted to set an example like Harry. I thought if someone stood up to her straight away, folk'd see it could be done, you know?"

"What we saw, Finnigan, you ass, is an excellent alternative if poking the Whomping Willow is inconvenient!" Parvati's cheeks were flushed mahogany, but she could not entirely hide the relief in her voice. It had looked for almost two terrifying hours as though Seamus might not wake up,

so badly had Carrow worked him over for his insolence, but merely having him conscious and seeing the first signs of healing had done wonders for them all.

Neville nodded towards Ginny. "You can give it a try while I add a little more tincture of Mandrake, I think."

The younger girl raised her wand, and Seamus drew back painfully into the mountain of pillows that had been piled under him. "Now wait a moment..."

"Hold still." Ginny's voice was crisp and matter-of-fact, the tone one that Neville knew without ever having spent more than a moment with Mrs. Weasley had been learned from her mother. "Do you really think I could have lived in that house with six brothers all my life and not learned a thing or two about healing spells? If we'd had to take Fred and George to St. Mungo's every time they blew themselves up, we'd have been out on the street."

Reluctantly, Seamus held still, and Ginny placed the tip of her wand against the broken teeth. "*Episkey Dentata!*" With a faint "pop!" the teeth regrew instantly, and Seamus tried to raise a hand to feel his mouth, but stopped mid-motion, groaning in pain.

Neville lifted his head from the cauldron where he had been carefully stirring in the Mandrake, one drop at a time, allowing his instincts to tell him when the texture was exactly right. "You have a broken wrist, a few cracked ribs, a sprained ankle, and more bruises than if you'd been used for practice by every Beater in the school. That's not to mention a knot the size of a Snitch on that thick head of yours, two black eyes, a few wand scorches, and a mouth that is just starting to look human again. I suggest you lie back and think about Gryffindors having a tendency to be brave to the point of stupidity, and then we need to talk about what you originally had in mind and make some decisions." The tone of cool authority in his voice surprised him, and he stopped, blushing and looking back down into the green mixture. "If that's okay with everyone."

"Wow, Neville," gushed Colin Creevey, "you sounded just like Harry there for a minute! It was like the DA again!"

"Yeah, well..." Neville mumbled, embarrassed, "Harry's gone, and so is Dumbledore, and so are Ron and Hermione and Dean and Justin and another dozen from the DA, and another hundred from the school. It's not like when all we had to worry about was Umbridge and her little Squad."

"But this is why we had the DA in the first place, isn't it? Because Harry knew it might come to this?" Parvati asked, and Neville wondered hotly why everyone seemed to be looking to him, even Ginny, who seemed to him the far more natural successor to any kind of leadership in Gryffindor.

"That's true," he agreed slowly. Finally satisfied with his brew, he scooped up another bowl and began to daub it onto Seamus' wounds, using the busywork to avoid everyone's eyes as he spoke. "But I think this is worse than even Harry ever guessed it would be. I mean, Dumbledore dead, Snape in charge of the school, Death Eaters teaching classes, the Ministry under You-Know-Who...I don't think anyone could have seen this coming this fast and this completely even six months ago."

Ginny scowled up at him from where she had been using her wand on the sprained ankle.  
"You're not suggesting that we should just roll over?"

"Or that we let ourselves be punching bags in the style of the brilliant Mr. Finnigan, I hope," added Lavender.

"I don't know what I'm suggesting," Neville admitted. Then he looked at Seamus again, a thought occurring to him. "I've wanted to ask you, what was that hex you used on Carrow? I didn't recognize it. Is it something Harry taught you personally?"

Seamus blushed, adding an overall pink tinge to his multi-colored features. "Nah, it's not even approved. I shouldn't have done it."

Colin's eyes widened. "It's like an Unforgivable, then?"

"Not even!" Seamus started to shake his head, then thought better of it and closed his eyes, moaning softly before he spoke again. "It's one of the old ones from my Nana – Gaelic. All the Ministry-approved spells are off of nice, proper, respectable Latin, you know, but the Celts had their own brand of magic, even if it got pushed off as all backward. It's mostly died out now, but some of the old ones still remember a bit here and there, mostly hexes and jinxes and the odd witch's charm, you know, for tellin' what kind of baby you'll be having and the like."

Parvati looked suddenly fascinated, sitting up very straight and tossing back her heavy black braid. "My grandfather was a Fakir in Bombay, he used to tell us that there was all kinds of magic we would never learn at Hogwarts – he tried to have us sent to India to learn – but when our parents refused, he taught us a few spells. Padma can even control snakes."

Ginny gasped. "She's learned Parseltongue?"

"No, she can't talk to them, only make them do what she wants."

"Great!" Seamus grinned. "Tell her to make that big one You-Know-Who's got eat him."

Parvati gave him a look of exasperation. "That'd be nice, but it's just little ones – *normal* ones – like cobras and adders. And I know a few French spells from one of the boys from Beauxbatons."

Excited now, Lavender leaned over the back of the couch. "Anthony Goldstein comes from a family of wizards that go all the way back to the Essene scholars, I bet he knows some stuff in Hebrew. Vane's always going on that her family are genuine Rom – those are gypsies – and Ernie's family was so deep in the Clan wars that they didn't start going to Hogwarts until a hundred and fifty years ago, so maybe he has something like Finnigan, old Gaelic magic."

"His'd be *Erlie*, not Gaelic. We're not the same, and we whipped Scotland at Quidditch last year." Seamus pointed out defensively.

Neville and Ginny stared at one another, startled by this sudden burst of exotic spell knowledge that had broken out, and then Ginny giggled. "I don't know about you, Neville, but I feel rather plain all of a sudden."

He couldn't help grinning back. "Yeah. I mean, my family's just been, you know, *wizards*. Normal old British wizards. Tut tut, conjure you a cuppa?" He put down the bowl and waved his wand, summoning an empty teacup from across the room and lifting it to her in an extravagant motion, pinky broadly outstretched.

Ginny curtsied with a flourish, imitating an arch, aristocratic drawl that everyone instantly recognized as a viciously accurate exaggeration of Draco Malfoy's cultured pronunciation. "But certainly, daah-ling..."

Everyone laughed. It felt good, a warm burst of happiness and fellowship in the midst of the darkness that had closed over all of them, and Neville gave himself over to it, roaring with mirth along with everyone else until his sides ached and tears were running down his face. It seemed like a wonderful forever before it finally died away, and he wiped his cheeks with the back of one shaking hand. The others surrounding him were still beaming, and he didn't want to bring them back to earth, but the reality of their situation was as unmistakable as the bruises still yellow and green on Seamus' swollen face.

"Really - " Neville gasped. "It's good, though. I mean, Carrow didn't know what hit her, did she? She couldn't have blocked that one if she'd tried. And the Death Eaters are going to know all the usual spells. No matter how much we practice, Protego and Stupefy and Impedimenta aren't going to be enough on their own against fully-qualified Dark Wizards. You remember what Snape said about the Dark Arts. They're unpredictable. We have to be too."

Seamus frowned. "I thought you were against me fightin' back at them?"

Neville shook his head. "Not like that. We've got to think more like your brothers, Ginny. Like the twins. Mischief and little rebellions. We'll take some hits, get punished, sure; but Seamus took it too far. He nearly got himself killed on the second day of the school year over nothing at all. Beaten is fine, but no more unless the situation really calls for it." He could hardly believe the words coming out of his own mouth, and he hurried on, afraid of losing his nerve. "We keep the DA going, but just enough to get under their skin and keep the other student's hopes alive. Nothing full-fledged until it's time."

"What do you mean, until it's time?" Parvati asked.

"Well, until we have to. We all know what's coming." He thought that the realizations he had come to since Harry and the others had failed to return to the school were obvious, but seeing the expressions surrounding him, Neville came to the slow, horribly dawning understanding that perhaps he alone had been able to see what faced them. "Come on..." His voice was pleading. "Ginny, Seamus...haven't any of you figured it out?"

"I guess not," Lavender said.

Neville took a deep breath and licked his lips, uncomfortable with the spotlight he was suddenly in. Reluctantly, he held up a hand, extending four fingers. "The way I see it, things can only go four ways. One, we all become good little followers of You-Know-Who." He put down one finger. "I don't see myself doing that. Even if I could live with myself, Gran would kill me."

"Me neither, mate," Seamus agreed.

"Likewise," Ginny nodded as Parvati, Colin, and Lavender all made sounds of assent.

"Two -" Neville continued, "Harry finds a way to stop You-Know-Who and end all of this clean and quick before the end of the year, all the Death Eaters get rounded up, and things go back to normal."

"I'm for that one," Colin blurted, and several people smiled and nodded.

"But I'm not putting all my gold there. It would be great – and I believe with all my heart Harry's going to get him in the end – but doing it in one year with only Ron and Hermione's help seems like a tall order." Colin looked like he was about to argue that there was no such thing for the great Harry Potter, but Neville went on, ignoring him as he lowered another finger. "Three. We graduate, and we're not safe here any more."

"Sorry to interrupt, there," Seamus broke in, "but I don't feel so bloody safe, personally."

"Cormac is dead. Cho and Lee are in hiding. Roger is in St. Mungo's in worse shape than you, Seamus, and that's just what's in the Prophet, or what Ginny's brothers have managed to pass on in news under labels. Right now, he thinks there's still a chance to brainwash us in school, but once we're graduated, we lose the safety of numbers and the protection of being kids. He doesn't want the public outcry that would happen from a massacre at Hogwarts, but once we're out, we're on our own."

Parvati's voice was hushed. "What's four?"

He lowered the last finger. "We fight. If Harry comes back and needs us, we fight then. Personally, that's what I believe – that he can do this, but he'll need our help. It's only a matter of time before he's back, but we don't have infinite time, so on the very last day before school is over, if there's no word from Harry yet, we go all out. Either way, we make a proper battle of it. Take out every last Death Eater we can manage, hopefully Snape in the bargain. Use every exotic spell and dirty trick we can think of. Make them pay for everyone missing, everyone terrorized, everyone killed. Even the odds a little for Harry and the Order, and give the public that massacre that You-Know-Who doesn't want – get people outraged in a way the Prophet can't cover up. We still die, but we die on our terms, and we die accomplishing something, not just picked off one by one in back alleys with our deaths glossed over and ignored."

There was a long, terrible silence following his words, and Neville stared at the floor, unable to quite believe what he had just said, even though he had been thinking it for almost a week now. It had seemed like the only sensible thing to do inside his head, but when spoken, it sounded like some kind of grand, brave gesture, even something heroic. Colin was right, it did sound like something Harry would say, and the comparison made Neville deeply uncomfortable.

Finally, Ginny stood, tossing back her mane of bright red hair defiantly. "I've been looking for a way to top Fred and George on their exit," she said. "I'm in."

Seamus reached out his left hand, his right still cradled against his chest, and took Ginny's small white one. "I don't see myself winning any Death Eater popularity contests anyway, so why the hell not? I'm with you."

Parvati's hand joined the other two. "I can't speak for Padma, but count me in. I just hope my next life is something quieter."

"And me!" Colin thrust his hand out with an excitement that made Neville shiver.

"What else is a Gryffindor girl to do?" Lavender's hand joined them.

Slowly, Neville placed his hand atop the cluster of others, hoping that no one would notice how badly it was shaking. "I said it, so I guess I can't back out."

"I'd hope not, Neville," Ginny's brown eyes flashed at him in the firelight. "You're our leader."

Neville gaped at her. "I'm -"

"All in favor of Neville taking over for Harry as leader of the DA?" Ginny's voice carried over his protestations, and Neville was shocked to see heads nod all around him. She grinned, showing the dazzling white smile that had laid boys all over the school, including the famous Boy Who Lived, helpless at her feet. "Then that's settled. We'll talk to the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs later, but I think as of right now, Dumbledore's Army is back."

Neville's eyes swept the faces of his friends, taking in the belief in all of their expressions, and lingering on each in turn. Bright, fiery Ginny, the last Weasley left at Hogwarts. Cool, exotic Parvati, her dark eyes utterly trusting. Tempestuous Lavender, her best friend, standing at her side more like a sister than Parvati's own twin, and just as ready to lay down her life. Colin, his expression guileless and determined, brimming with the endless bravery of the naïve. Seamus, still in so much pain, his eyes still swollen nearly shut but resolute nonetheless.

In the flickering, deceptive shadows of the firelight, it almost seemed as though other Gryffindor faces were there as well. Bushy-haired, sharp-eyed Hermione. Stalwart Ron, red hair glowing beside his sister. The twins, laughing with some secret joke, Lee Jordan beside them like a mismatched triplet. Dean, eyes and smile gleaming from his dark face. And Harry. Harry with the lightning scar that marked him as so different from the rest of them, black hair sticking out in all directions, glasses glinting over that piercing green gaze that he had always relied on to take the lead.

Neville looked at all of them, there and there in spirit alike as he nodded. "Dumbledore's Army!"

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"Six hundred eighty one, six hundred eighty two, six hundred eighty three ..." Neville sighed and sat up, grabbing his pillow and punching at it in hopes of somehow knocking it into a shape that might be more conducive to sleep. There was nothing wrong with it, no lumps or really anything uncomfortable at all, but it gave him the feeling that he was doing something besides uselessly counting Hippogriffs. With a deep sigh, he flopped back down. "Six hundred eighty four ..."

A faint knock sounded at the door of the boys' dormitory, and Neville sat bolt upright, grabbing his wand off of the nightstand as he swung his legs off the side of the bed and parted the curtains with one hand. "Who is it?" he whispered.

"Ginny."

Letting out a sigh of relief that it wasn't Snape or the Carrows there to announce that they knew what he had done that afternoon, Neville climbed out of the bed and started towards the door. He had only made it a few steps across the pitch-black room when his toe abruptly met something painfully unyielding, and he let out a sharp yelp. Biting back the urge to yell out a few of the better swear words he had learned from his uncle, he hopped awkwardly in a circle,

grabbing his foot until the worst of the throbbing stopped. *Why* did stubbing your toe have to hurt so much?

Gingerly lowering his foot to the floor again, he held his wand out ahead of him and muttered "*Lumos!*" The tip ignited with the familiar blue light, and Neville was able to see that his assailant was actually what had once been his own bed. With Harry, Ron, and Dean missing, the two remaining boys in their dormitory had been moved from the third and fifth beds into the first and second, and the change had not quite registered in Neville's mental map of the tower room.

Using the wand light to avoid any more unpleasant encounters with furniture, Neville made his way across to the door and opened it. Ginny swept past him in a blur of red hair and blue and white stripes, moving so quickly that he barely stepped back in time to avoid being run into. "What took you so long?" she hissed.

"Sorry. Stubbed my toe."

She was perched cross-legged on Dean's old bed now, arms folded tightly across her chest, and as Neville shut the door and crossed towards her, he was struck suddenly by how young and tiny she looked. Her hair was in two long braids that fell forward over her shoulders, and she was almost lost in a pair of pajamas that had been rolled up a dozen times at the arms and legs, but were still at least four sizes too big for her.

Following his eyes, Ginny blushed. All of the Weasleys, he noted, did this with gusto, and the red tinge was clearly visible even in the blue cast of the wand's glow. "They were Ron's," she explained, and there was a touch of defiant embarrassment in her tone. "I usually don't get hand-me-downs from the boys, but things are ... well, Bill just got married, and we don't know how much longer Dad or the twins are going to be able to work, so – I mean, they're just pajamas."

Well aware of how touchy Ron was on the subject of his family's finances, Neville smiled gently. "They're kind of cute, really. It looks sort of like you've borrowed them from your boyfriend or something."

She snorted. "If I'd done that, I could have saved myself six inches in the arms and legs."

Neville couldn't help but smile at this as he climbed up onto the bed next to her. "You didn't come here at three in the morning to show me Ron's pajamas."

Ginny looked down, fidgeting with the turn-up on one leg. "It's stupid."

He shrugged. "I was up anyway. Couldn't sleep."

"I had a nightmare," she confessed. "I dreamed that I'd messed things up with Seamus, and his ..." The last part came out in a single humiliated rush, and she covered her face with both hands. "Oh, it sounds so ridiculous now that I've come all the way up here!"

Neville shook his head. "No, it doesn't. You were just worried about him. Parvati and Lavender have been up to check too. We're all worried about him. He took a hell of a beating, and none of us are exactly certified Healers."

She nodded gratefully, not bothering to hide as she looked towards the far bed where Seamus was just visible as a long lump beneath the covers. "Is he still sleeping well?"

"Romilda made a really good Sleeping Draught - she's great with Potions. He hasn't stirred since we gave it to him, but he's still breathing and everything just fine. Having a rest really is what's best for him. You can check on him yourself if you want."

"No, that's okay. As long as you're sure all his arms and legs are still attached."

"As much as they have been since Carrow finished with him." Neville smiled.

Nodding, she uncrossed her legs and started to get up. "I should get back to the girls' dorm, then. I'm sorry I bothered you."

"Wait!" He put out a hand, and she stopped, looking curiously at him. He shifted uncomfortably, suddenly not sure whether he wanted to say what had been keeping him awake. "I just ... never mind."

"What, Neville?" She sat down again, her legs dangling over the edge of the bed as she leaned back, propping herself on her arms. Her hands and feet vanished into the pajamas, and she looked smaller than ever. Neville felt the sense of guilt rise to a level that seemed to choke him. For all her fire, she was still Ron's baby sister, and he had all but agreed to kill her today. He had no right. He had no right with any of them.

"I just ... what happened earlier. I've been thinking about it. You guys made a mistake, a big mistake." He looked pleadingly at her. "Just because I was the first one to say something, doesn't mean – you would have figured it out, I know it. That doesn't make me the leader. I can't be the leader. I can't do this, I can't take that kind of responsibility, I'm not good enough."

Ginny frowned at him. "Why not?"

"Because ..." He trailed off, gesturing at himself as if to indicate that the answer was obvious.  
"You know."

She tilted her head at him, seeming to give the matter serious consideration for a few seconds, then spoke, her voice lightly tinged with an edge of sarcasm. "You know, you're at least as tall as Ron, your voice has changed, and I think you shave more often than Harry, so it really confuses me."

He blinked. "What?"

"Well, that would seem to indicate that you've got a working set of what they do, so I don't see why you constantly refuse to use them."

Neville blushed fiercely. "Ginny!"

"Oh, come off it!" She rolled her eyes. "I'm the only girl in a family of seven! I could belch the entire Chudley Cannons fight song by the time I was four, but Katie Bell had to tell me when I needed a bra and show me how to put the effing thing on, so don't act like I'm supposed to be some sheltered little flower about how boys are put together."

"I don't ... I mean ... I just ..." He was at a complete loss for words, but Ginny was not.

"I don't understand you, Neville Longbottom. The only person I've ever known who sells themselves as constantly short as you do is Ron, and even he's not that bad. You seem dead set on proving to everyone that you're worthless, and woe be to anyone who says differently. And don't start on your Gran, either. Even Professor McGonagall says she needs to stop –"

"Yeah, I know," Neville broke in. "Stop trying for the grandson she wishes she had and start being proud of the one she has. That's not something you say to someone whose kid is something great, Ginny. That's something you say when someone needs to settle for what they've gotten."

"That's not what she meant, and you know it!"

"It's true, though!" He stood, aware that he was using his height over her, but determined to make her listen to what seemed to him to be the inescapable truth. "I'm not half the wizard my Dad was. He was an Auror! He and my –" Neville stopped abruptly and looked away, feeling suddenly sick as he remembered that Ginny had been there that awful day at St. Mungo's and seen what had become of his parents.

A long moment passed, and then he felt her hand on his arm. She had stood as well, and her touch was surprisingly gentle. "What?" Her voice was kind, but held a deep undercurrent of stubbornness as well. "Neville, what exactly happened to your parents? I've seen the Cruciatus Curse now, I know how awful it is, but it's not that simple, is it?"

"It was my fault." Neville was stunned to hear the words come out of his mouth. He had never spoken them aloud before, no matter how many times they had repeated in his head and heart, but now it was as if some invisible line had been crossed, and he couldn't stop it. "They were after me. I don't know why, no one knows why – but they thought if they could get me, they could figure out what Harry had done to make You-Know-Who disappear. Maybe they thought it was something in Aurors' kids, or kids born in July, or one-year-olds, or ... my parents hid me in a closet. Put a Silencing Charm on it and concealed the door. It cost them their chance to get away ... They couldn't tell them where he was, they didn't know, but if they'd said where ... If they'd just ..."

He buried his face in his hands and sank down to the bed again, ashamed to feel hot tears seeping between his fingers but unable to keep them back. "Fourteen hours. Oh, God, Ginny, they tortured them for *fourteen hours!* The Healers ... the body protects itself. Anything that causes that kind of pain for more than a few minutes ... it should be an awful injury ... injuries cause endorphins, shock, you pass out, you die. A person isn't meant to be in that kind of pain that's just *pain* for that long. The brain can't cope! If they'd just ..." A sob so deep it hurt choked the words. "I wasn't worth it! I wish they'd known I wasn't worth it! They let themselves be worse than killed for me, and I'm *nothing* compared to them!"

All the shame, all the pain, all the guilt of sixteen years had come to the surface now, and Neville could say nothing more. He didn't even care if Ginny was there or not. His knees drew up to his chest, and he wrapped his arms around them in a tight ball, as if he could make himself disappear, undo the very fact of his existence. The sobs came from somewhere so grievous that they didn't even have sound, they were just great, heaving gasps that seemed to tear him apart as the tears soaked the knees of his pajamas in wide dark patches.

Neville wept until his throat was raw and his chest ached. He did not know if it had been minutes, hours, or even days, but at last his swollen eyes seemed to run dry. Only then did he

notice that something soft and warm was curled against his back, slender arms encircling his shoulders in a gentle embrace. Immediately, an awareness of what he had just done came flooding over him, and he sat up quickly, shaking her off with a look of horrified embarrassment. "I'm ... I'm so sorry ... I don't know -"

Her face held none of the contempt or pity he had expected to see. Instead, the brown eyes were looking at him with an expression so unexpected that he was at a loss to identify it. She reached towards him again, placing one small hand unflinchingly on his shoulder, and said the last thing he had ever imagined she would. "You are so much stronger than I thought you were."

"What?" His voice was hoarse, almost gone entirely.

"Harry's got half the wizarding world petting him and calling him a hero and consoling him about his parents. Ron's down on himself all the time, but it's all in his head, and he's going to figure that out one of these days, even if Hermione has to write it down on something heavy and beat him with it. You...you've carried that around all these years alone, and when it's weighed you down, people have just added to it without even knowing it was there ... and the one person who did know has made it the heaviest of all. That you've managed to keep going is strong enough, but you've done so much more than that. It's amazing." The respect in her voice was completely genuine, but Neville shook his head in confusion.

"I haven't, though. I screw up everything I try. I'm not a hero at all," he protested.

"I saw you fight the Squad in Umbridge's office, and the Death Eaters at the Ministry, and again at the tower. You're not nearly as bad as you think you are most of the time, but when you fight ..." she shook her head slowly, "you're amazing."



"Harry—"

A hand over his mouth cut him off, and now those sharp brown eyes were only inches from his. "I've watched you both. Harry fights bravely. So does Ron, so does Hermione – hell, we're Gryffindors, we all fight bravely. But you're something else. I've never even seen anyone in the Order who fights with the kind of *rawness* and intensity you do. It's a little scary, honestly."

Neville pulled her hand away from his mouth, turning so that he didn't have to look at her. "That's not the same. I'm not *me* when I fight. It's like something happens," he tapped his chest, "like something starts screaming or roaring or something, and it drowns out everything else and I just lose it."

Ginny came up behind him again, draping herself across his shoulders and placing her hand flat against his chest where he had gestured. "I think that thing *is* you, Neville. It's who you really are – a brave, powerful wizard, the son of two famous Aurors and a courageous soldier in your own right – and if I'd been cooped up and shoved down and hidden that long under such a heavy load, I'd probably start screaming if I had half a chance to get out too."

He shook his head, not bothering to move her hand this time. "You just don't get it."

"Fine." She tossed her head, swinging the braids behind her, and now her lips were barely an inch from his ear, and her voice held a low, almost savage intensity. "Let's say you're right. That you're worthless. A complete failure as a wizard and as a man. What are you going to do about it?"

Neville was unsure of how to answer this complete turnaround, and he shrugged, half in confusion, half in defiance. "There's nothing *to* do. I've been trying for years."

"No, you haven't. You've just accepted that it's how things are. Is there any hope for your parents?"

The question caught him off guard. "No. They say there's the faintest chance if LeStrange dies, but even that's thinner than the odds of You-Know-Who just deciding to turn himself in."

"So they gave their sanity – really, their lives – for you. What do you think they would say if she *was* killed and they *did* wake up tomorrow? 'Gee, son, we're so glad to see that you've tortured yourself with our gift?' Or maybe, 'How touching to see that they actually broke all three of us?' Or do you think that it might be a little better to be able to say to them: 'You thought I was worth everything, and that love was worth more than what anyone else could say, and I have lived every moment as though you could see me.'"

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"If it had never happened, if your parents were still fully themselves, what would they be doing?"

For the first time in what seemed like forever, Neville knew exactly what to say. "They'd be in the Order."

"Sort of like my parents, then?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"And would they be proud to know that you were leading Dumbledore's Army here at Hogwarts, or would they want you to back down and say you weren't sure if their kid was good enough?"

"They would want me to lead the DA," Neville said slowly.

Her voice was softer now, but no less firm. "So maybe it's time to stop living because of them and start living for them."

There was a long pause in which neither of them moved or said a word, and then Neville reached up and silently shifted her away from him. Ginny did not protest, but sat back on her heels and watched as he crossed the room to his bed, stopping briefly to check that Seamus was still sleeping in peaceful oblivion.

Without looking at her, he reached under his pillow and withdrew something small and square, then rummaged in his nightstand, using his wand to search through the empty sweet wrappers, bits of parchment, spare quills, and half-packs of playing cards until he found what he was looking for. Placing the small picture frame on the top of the nightstand, he opened the latch at the back and removed the photograph of himself, Dean, and Seamus with their faces painted crimson and gold at the victory party for Gryffindor's first Quidditch Cup. In its place, he slipped in the one he had pulled out from under his pillow.

It was a picture of a young family. A wizard with Neville's nose and straight brown hair smiled proudly next to a witch who could only be his mother and who held a six-month-old baby in her arms, tickling his belly to make him laugh and wiggle for the camera. Satisfied that it was secure in the frame, he turned the picture to face his bed, then looked up. "It's a picture of my parents and me from before," he explained, aware that Ginny could not see it.

Raising an eyebrow curiously, Ginny hopped off the bed and shuffled over, not bothering to pull up the legs of the pajamas where they had unrolled over her feet. She stared at the picture for a long moment, then smiled. "You were cute." She paused, cupping her chin in her hand and regarding him with mock severity. "Still are, now that I really look at you...but taller. And more hair."

A thin smile passed over his lips at the jest, and he pointed to the picture. His body felt odd, even alien, and he realized that he was standing differently now: his spine straight, his shoulders back, his chin raised defiantly as he met her eyes without allowing any trace of shame to drop his gaze. "I'm not going to hide that any more."

"Oh?"

He shook his head, then looked at the picture, for the first time not feeling the stab of guilt that usually shuddered through him at the sight of the bright, lively expressions on their faces. When he spoke, Neville heard a voice that was deeper, stronger than it had ever been before, a voice that was surprisingly familiar from old family recordings. It was his father's voice, but it came from his lips.

"I want them to see me."

OOO

"The Chinese Chomping Cabbage, or *Brassica oleracea var. carnivorus*, as it is scientifically known, is, like its Muggle cousin, a member of the mustard family. The common name, however, is somewhat misleading. Although certainly a cabbage, and if you have any doubts about the chomping portion, I would advise you against putting your fingers too close to it, it is actually native to the Korean Peninsula. The extremely piquant nature of this particular vegetable has lead to the development of a popular native dish, which attempts to replicate the flavor with somewhat less danger to the gardener. In addition to the culinary uses, which I recommend sparingly and only to extremely adventurous souls, the Chomping Cabbage is a primary ingredient in Pepper-Up Potion, used in cases of hypothermia ..."

Neville listened only half-attentively to Professor Sprout's lecture. He had already studied the chapter before class, and he could have recited the information by heart before she ever began. Herbology had always been both his favorite and his best subject, but now it was even more so, as it was one of the few courses that had remained completely untouched by the school's change in administration. Usually, no matter how well he knew the material, he would always pay close attention in hopes of picking up a few extra tidbits of knowledge, but today, he had more important things on his mind.

Pretending to take notes, he shifted a little on the bench, poking Hannah Abbott gently in the ribs. She jumped, then shot him a glare that could have wilted every plant in the greenhouse. He sighed. They had been partners in Herbology since the first year, but for some reason, she was ignoring him today. Neville would have been willing to write off her sudden iciness to the endless incomprehensible vagaries of female behavior, but that was not an option under the circumstances.

He poked her again, this time shifting his notes so that they were almost directly in front of her. With an annoyed little sniff, she looked down at what he had written. *Everything okay?*

Her look was more than answer enough, and she crossed her arms, keeping her attention resolutely on Professor Sprout, who was demonstrating the proper protection needed against both teeth and burns when harvesting leaves. As if by accident, the wand held loosely in her left hand brushed against the parchment, and the words changed. *Picking up where Harry left off, are we?*

Neville's eyes widened. She knew already! He had been trying to alert her to the resurgence of the DA, but apparently, someone else had gotten there first. A feeling of mingled excitement and fear coursed through him as he wondered whether the news was just being that eagerly received, or whether it had somehow leaked out through less desirable means. He gave the parchment a subtle tap of his own. *Who told you?*

Her eyes never seemed to leave the front of the class, but her spine straightened until she held herself with almost painfully flawless posture. *I have friends in Gryffindor other than you.*

Slowly, a possible reason for her displeasure began to dawn on him, and he tried to catch her eye with a sheepish, apologetic little smile. *I'm sorry. You should have heard it from me first. I wanted to tell you myself.*

*Don't bother.* The letters seemed unusually dark this time, and then he realized that they were actually burned into the parchment. Moreover, they were continuing to smolder, expanding into formless dark patches as the interiors burned away in glowing red circles. Suppressing a cry of alarm, Neville grabbed a nearby watering can and put out the burning scrap, causing Professor Sprout to pause, one eyebrow raised beneath her flyaway gray hair.

"Mr. Longbottom?"

Neville felt his cheeks heat, and he looked down, waving his wand at the sodden, blackened mess and vanishing it. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I guess I wasn't paying attention to what I was doing ... thinking about the heating properties of the cabbages and all."

She gave him the endlessly tolerant look that he was so familiar with from other teachers, and he felt a surprising surge of resentment towards Hannah that he had received it now from Professor Sprout, of all people. "That's all right, no harm done. Now, as I was saying, contact with the sap on bare skin must be avoided if at all possible ..."

As soon as her attention had returned to the plant in front of her, Neville leaned in close to his partner. "Why did you do that?" he hissed as quietly as he could.

Hannah did not respond, but merely flicked her wand again. For a moment, it seemed as though nothing had happened, and then he felt the front of his robes grow warm, and realized in a single moment of near blinding terror that his pants were about to catch fire. Desperately, no longer caring whether anyone noticed, he pointed his wand at himself and yelled "*Protego!*" The burning sensation stopped instantly, and he thought he caught a tiny, vindictive smile on Hannah's lips as Professor Sprout turned again.

This time, however, Hannah raised her hand before the teacher could ask him what had happened. "I'm sorry, Professor," she said with a horrible sweetness, "it's my fault. I think I've developed an allergy to something over here. My wand just went off. Can I be assigned another partner, please?"

The look on the Professor's face made it perfectly clear that not only did she not believe a word of it, she was starting to seriously doubt Neville's previous excuse as well. However, this was clearly not the first time she had seen something go roots-up between class partners, and she simply motioned towards an empty spot on a bench a few rows down. "Dean Thomas is no longer with us, Miss Abbott, so you may partner with Mr. Finnigan if you wish."

"Thank you, Professor," she said with the same cloying sweetness, and without looking at Neville, she scooped up her book and gardening tools and glided across the greenhouse to sit next to Seamus.

Now completely confused, Neville did his best to try and catch her eye for the rest of the class – with the result being that he nearly choked his cabbage by forgetting to chop the grubs they were feeding it and had to use a last-second Anapnea Charm to save the rapidly purpling plant – but she steadfastly ignored his attempts. What's more, she seemed to be uncharacteristically fawning over Seamus. As far as Neville knew, she had never been more than polite acquaintances with him, but now she seemed to be going out of her way to laugh at all of his comments, fuss over the remains of the bruises he still bore from the previous day, and sit so close to him that it seemed to him a miracle either could even move.

When the lesson had finally ended, Hannah was gone from the greenhouse so quickly that he thought for a moment that she had Apparated, before he finally caught a glimpse of yellow-trimmed robes and long pigtails vanishing around a large Flutterby bush. "Hannah!" he shouted. "Wait!"

She did not acknowledge having heard him, and Neville broke into a sprint. By the time he caught up with her outside the farthest greenhouse, he was red-faced and panting, as well as more than a little bit peeved. She tried to sweep away, her chin raised haughtily, but he grabbed her elbow. Hannah stopped then, turning to stare at him with fierce indignation. "Let go, you ..." Her face screwed up as if she couldn't find a word bad enough.

Neville glanced in all directions, then, satisfied that no one else was nearby, he lowered his head near hers and spoke sharply but quietly. "Look, it's not as if I'm writing Harry off or anything, if that's what you're mad about. No one is. But he's not here now. I don't understand why you're being this way; we've always been friends. I would have thought you'd be ... well, proud of me, I guess."

To his utter shock, Hannah's eyes abruptly filled with tears. "I suppose I should be, shouldn't I? I mean, it's not like Harry was the only one who thought ... and I guess ... I guess it's certainly a step up for you."

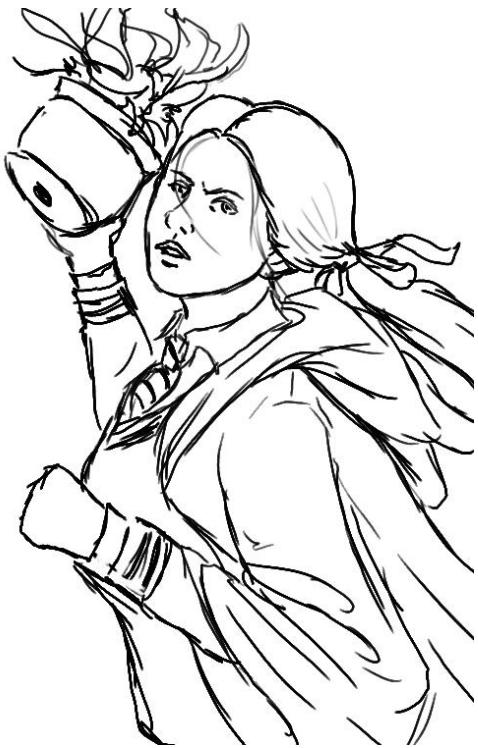
Confused at the tears, but glad that she seemed to be grasping the necessity of the situation, Neville nodded. "Exactly. I'm so glad you understand, that really means a lot."

At this, she broke down completely with a loud, wailing sob. Dumbstruck, he stared at her, frozen to the spot until, with a cry like a scorned banshee, she grabbed up a Fanged Geranium off a nearby rack and flung it directly at his head. He ducked, and the snapping plant missed him by so little that he actually felt a tooth graze his ear. "Hannah!"

Another Fanged Geranium flew his way, and this time, he dove for cover behind one of the larger terracotta urns that would hold Devil's Snare later in the year. "Don't 'Hannah' me, you son of a bludger!" she screeched. "You could have at least had the guts to tell me yourself, but NO, I have to hear it from Demelza!" A Snargaluff pod burst a few inches from his right knee. Her aim was disturbing, "That little ..." - he batted the next one away with his wand - "... red-headed ..." - he ducked, and this time, the writhing green tentacles hit exactly where his shoulder had just been - "BITCH!"

Surprise overtook safety, and Neville stood up, blinking. "What?"

"You and Ginny Weasley!" The next pod hit him full in the face, and Neville dropped his wand as he toppled backwards, clutching desperately at the foul-smelling tendrils that were shoving into his mouth and nose, choking him. "She was up there for over an hour last night, you git! Did you think no one would *notice*? No one would *say* anything?"



"*Expelliarmus!*!" Still on the ground, fighting for air against the increasingly ferocious plant smothering his face and neck, Neville heard a howl of indignation from Hannah as another voice shouted out the disarming spell. He recognized it instantly, but was not sure if it was the best or worst person that could have come to his aid.

"YOU!" Hannah's cry was pure murder.

The tentacles had choked off his air completely now. His attempts to pry them away grew weaker with each passing moment, and as blackness closed in around the edges of his vision, the last thought Neville was completely aware of was that it shouldn't have been any surprise that the craziest Death Eater out there was a girl.

OOO

"Neville? Neville? Neville, say something. I'm so sorry. Please say something. Neville?"

It seemed to take a very long time for the sounds that filtered through the spinning blackness to mean anything, even though he was rather sure that they should. Gradually, awareness dawned, bringing with it three equally concrete certainties. First, that 'Neville' was his name. Second, that his throat and nose felt as though they had been scoured out with steel wool. And third, that he had apparently been completely unconscious through the most unlikely event of his entire distinctly odd time at Hogwarts: two witches fighting about him.

Slowly, his head pounding, Neville opened his eyes and pushed himself to a sitting position on the damp ground. Hannah and Ginny were kneeling a little ways away, matching looks of concern on both their faces. Both also sported hair and robes that were badly disheveled, and Ginny had a rapidly swelling and darkening black eye that complemented Hannah's bloody lip.

He touched his own burning face, feeling the raised welts there from the Snargaluff's attack. What a pathetic group they made.

"Oh, Neville, I'm sorry." Hannah started to reach towards him, then stopped, her hands fluttering uncertainly about a foot away from him. "You must be furious."

"No." He shook his head, still trying to process the entirety of what had happened. "Not furious. Think maybe Confused, but not furious."

"Well," Ginny said helpfully, "Demelza had a crush on Dean."

Neville frowned. "Thomas?"

"Exactly." Hannah spoke as though he obviously understood the entire thing now. He did not.

Thankfully, Ginny continued. "But I was going out with him, so she decided he was a prat anyway, and she went back to her *other* crush, which had been on Harry, but he had been going with Cho, and Demelza hated Cho, so she stopped crushing on Harry while he was with her, but then *she* went back with Roger, and so that made Harry okay to crush again. So Demelza starts going after Harry, not as if he noticed or anything, and then I break up with Dean, and she tries to go with Dean again, but he doesn't have time for her because he got back on the Quidditch team as a favor to me, and then I started going with Harry, and now I'm not with Harry any more, but he's gone, and so is Dean. So of course, when I went out last night, it was obvious that she'd try to use that to trash my reputation as much as she could. I mean, I didn't know she knew, because if I'd known, I'd have told you so that you knew."

Neville blinked very slowly. "Completely obvious. You were - weren't - were with Dean, who Demelza did - didn't - did like, and you were - weren't - were with Harry, who she also did - didn't - did like, so Hannah Abbott nearly kills me after trying to set my pants on fire in Herbology. Makes perfect sense."

Ginny looked at him the way that a parent looks at their beloved but rather dim baby. "Demelza told Hannah – and every other girl in the school she could get a hold of – that you and I were snogging for hours last night, when, like I've told her now, we were actually looking after Seamus and making plans for the *other thing* ...which, by the way, she said yes to, and she's going to tell Ernie and the others after dinner."

Little by little, like the sun breaking the horizon on a badly overcast morning, the truth began to come clear. "And you ..." -he looked at where Hannah was sitting, looking deeply embarrassed with herself - "wanted to kill me, because only a complete git would try to steal Harry's girl the moment he left, and you thought I was a better friend to him than that."

The two girls exchanged a look that spoke volumes in a language of which Neville was completely ignorant, then Hannah nodded. "More or less." There was a pause, and then she turned to Ginny as though killing her had never even crossed her mind. "Are they always this dim?"

Ginny gave the matter a moment's thought, then shook her head. "No. Remember that time last year when Ron looked like he'd been attacked by a flock of birds?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's exactly what had happened, Hermione Granger had done it just after the start of the Lavender fiasco, and they're not always this dim. If they're Weasleys, they're worse." She patted the older Hufflepuff consolingly on the shoulder. "There's always hope."

Neville's eyes narrowed. "Hope for what?"

Hannah gave a great, deep sigh and stood, offering him her hand to help him stand up again. He did so, still slightly dizzy, though he was not sure if that was from the near-suffocation or the conversation surrounding it. She was looking at him now with an expression that seemed to be made of pieces of most of the feelings Neville had ever heard of and several more that he was sure he hadn't, and at last she spoke. "Hope for all of this, Neville. Hope for us."

He nodded, pleased at last to have something simple he could agree to with no possibility of misunderstanding. "Yeah, there's always hope."

A bell rang inside the castle, and Hannah jumped. "I've got to go, I'm going to be late for History of Magic." Then she was gone in a flurry of black and yellow robes, and he was alone with Ginny, who was gathering up her bag, where, he realized, she had probably dropped it in the course of saving his life.

He knelt down, picking up a loose quill and handing it to her. "Thank you, by the way."

"No problem. My fault anyway, really." She smiled sheepishly, patting her hair back into place. "But I guess Hufflepuff knows now, and Parvati told her sister this morning, so that's Ravenclaw, too."

Neville picked up his own bag and slung it over his shoulder as they began to make their way back up the path that led to the school. "If everyone still has their coins, I'll get the information out as soon as I have it figured."

She nodded, turning as the path split to follow it down towards Hagrid's hut, where he could already see the other sixth-years gathering for Care of Magical Creatures. "Okay, I'll make sure to keep it where I can feel it."

"Great. Oh, and one more thing ..." he called after her, and she paused. "Make sure that when *it* happens, you remind me to see that Hannah has something to throw. That girl doesn't miss."

Ginny gave him a very odd little smile. "Well ..." she said, "... most of the time."



## Chapter Two Growing Up

There were so many more of them than he had expected. Neville had added up the remaining members of the D.A., and the numbers had worried him deeply. Only twelve of the original thirty were still at the school - scarcely enough for a good brawl, much less a serious battle - but as he looked around the Room of Requirement, easily three times that many faces stared back at him. He had hoped his count might be off, but this was absurd.

He shifted nervously, clutching the scrap of parchment that held his notes as though it would protect him from the expectant stares of so many pairs of eyes. "Well ..." His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat, feeling himself flush with embarrassment. "Um ... this is ... there's a lot of you. I'd really thought ... uh ... that it would be just ... a couple of us." *Fantastic. Just fantastic. Real way to inspire them in their choice of leader.*

Romilda Vane tossed her head, sweeping her thick, dark hair out of her eyes with one hand. "You don't mind having a few more wands on your side, do you?"

"No! It's just ... not what I expected." He looked around the room again, realizing that he didn't even know most of the people there. "I guess ... we should start with a count or a roll call or a sign-in or something. That's what Harry did last time."

On cue, the air shimmered, and a quill appeared on the table at the head of the room, neatly sitting in a bottle of fresh ink alongside a long roll of parchment. Neville gestured to it. "Everyone knows that Hermione put a jinx on it last time. I'm not going to do that." Now that he was back on the ground covered in his notes, he grew more confident, and the words started to come easier. "Marietta deserved to have to carry around what she had done for a year when she ratted us out, but if anyone does something like that this time, well, we won't have to worry about being expelled. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that we'd probably be killed or at

best sent to Azkaban, much less what they'd do to our families, and personally, I think having that on your conscience would be a lot worse than anything that you could have on your face."

In the front row, Michael Corner crossed his arms and smirked. "That's a real nice sentiment, mate, but I'll be the first to say I'd rather not trust my life to no one here having a streak of yellow." Ernie cleared his throat indignantly at this, and Michael shot him a look of exasperation. "Oh, really, Ernie, that was nothing against you lot. It was one of ours last time, anyway!"

Ginny stood, her pretty face set in surprisingly harsh lines of determination. "I think we should trust each other. Neville's right, the stakes are too high for anyone to sell out their friends. It would be – "

"No. Michael has a point." Neville was surprised to hear the firmness in his own voice as he cut her off. "And I wasn't finished before. I agree with him completely. If being friends was enough, Harry would still have parents."

The words seemed to echo through a room that was abruptly deafening in its silence, and Neville cleared his throat again.

"You all read about Peter Pettigrew after the ... you know, the whole thing at the Ministry. He betrayed James and Lily Potter, even when he knew it meant they'd be killed, and that should have included Harry, too. If someone can betray his best friend and his whole family, even a helpless baby, we can't say it won't happen to us. But we can't expect it to be just a simple matter of some ugly pimples warding it off, either."

Neville looked down at his notes, reminding himself that he had decided on this before the meeting ever began. That didn't make it any easier. As he forced himself to raise his head and seek out the wide, eager blue eyes he was looking for among the crowd, he felt almost dirty for what he was about to do. "Colin, would you come up here, please?"

Colin Creevey bounced to his feet and almost sprinted to the front of the room, snapping to attention. "Sir?"

Neville smiled gently at the boy who was only ten months younger than he himself, but still seemed so much a child. "Colin, I want to do something. There's a spell called the Fidelius Charm. It's pretty complicated, but I think it's our best hope. Trusting that none of us will tell that the D.A. has come back, where we're meeting, or who's in it is a lot to gamble on, but if I do this, you would be the Secret-Keeper, and that would mean that the only way You-Know-Who and his followers could find out about us is if *you told willingly*. It couldn't be broken by the Imperius Curse, Veritaserum, or anything like that, but if you told: even if you were under the Cruciatus Curse, even if they were going to kill Dennis ...."

The rosy, freckled cheeks burned a brighter red as if in shame from the very thought of such a thing. "Even if!"

Ritchie Coote, a fifth-year who had played Beater for the Gryffindor Quidditch team the year before, jumped to his feet. "But that's what you just warned us about, the thing Peter Pettigrew broke!"

"I know." Neville did not allow himself to break eye contact with Colin.

"And Colin knows, and I think that's exactly why we're safest. Would you betray us the way Harry's parents were betrayed?"

There was not the faintest trace of hesitation. "I'd die first."

"Then –" He was cut off as Ginny seemed to appear out of thin air at his side and grabbed his arm, pulling him away from Colin with surprising force.

"Neville, you can't! You're using him!" Her voice was both pleading and appalled.

"Of course he is." The words, spoken in a voice that was utterly calm and matter-of-fact, shocked them both, and they turned slowly, feeling every eye in the room join them in staring in disbelief at Colin.

For the first time since Neville had known him, Colin looked his age. He had brushed the messy fringe back from his eyes, and he was standing at the front of the room remarkably casually, his hands in his pockets. He was not tall, nor strongly built, but it was suddenly apparent that his shoulders had broadened over the past year or so, cheekbones had emerged from the round face, and his voice held a depth that excitement usually erased as he met the looks from his audience without flinching. "He'd be a fool not to."

Colin took a few steps to his right and turned, now directly in front of the assembled group. "We're all going to be used. This is a war, and we're here because we're agreeing to be soldiers now. Soldiers are meant to be used. Harry's out there right now, fighting for our lives and our freedoms, and those of our families, and he's definitely being used. He's being used for his bravery, Hermione's being used for her brains, Ron's being used for his loyalty. They might die. They know that.

"Neville's using me because Harry is every hero from every book I used to read as a child, and I had the privilege to know a real, breathing person who made those stories real and showed me that not only did magic exist, but that the people who had made magic worth dreaming about existed too. Betraying him would be betraying everything I have ever believed about what Good meant, and there would be no reason to keep living if I had to stop believing that Good will triumph in the end. Maybe that's stupid, maybe it's naïve, but Neville knows it's true, and I am proud to be used for that." The soft blue of his eyes suddenly took on the vividness of a summer sky just after a storm. "Don't ask Neville why he's using me. Ask what you can be used for, or leave."

There was a long silence, then Luna stood. "I'm Luna Lovegood, in case some of you who aren't in my house or my year don't know me. I think I can be used because my father prints the *Quibbler*, the primary alternative news source of the wizarding world, and anything you need to tell the public, I'll find a way to get it in. We have excellent connections among a lot of witches and wizards who have never subscribed to the Ministry. Some of them aren't even known to the government at all."

"Not to be materialistic, certainly," Ernie looked a bit embarrassed, but still determined as he got to his feet, "but my family has done rather well for themselves, and shall we perhaps say that the Malfoys are not the only ones who can make generous endowments should the need present itself for monetary resources. Oh, and I'm Ernie Macmillan."

A blonde, freckle-faced Hufflepuff who seemed vaguely familiar but whom Neville couldn't quite place was the next to rise. "Fritz Bagman. My Dad was a Beater for the Wasps, and I've been training for pro most of my life. I could give a few pointers on good old-fashioned brawling if we lose our wands, how to take hits, physical conditioning -" he gave a good-natured shrug, "or whatever."

"Terry Boot. I've memorized all seven Standard Books of Spells, as well as eighty-six of the supplemental and complimentary texts in the library, and four from the restricted section with special permission of Professor Flitwick."

Ginny muffled a giggle behind her hand. "I guess we won't miss Hermione that much after all."

Boot raised an eyebrow archly, but there was a smile on his lips. "Miss Granger's absence gives me a chance to catch up ... I trail her by half a percent in one subject for highest marks in the school."

"Susan Bones. I have an invisibility cloak my Aunt gave me before...." She trailed off, then caught herself, and her voice rose defiantly again. "It's kind of old, but it still works okay in dim light, or if you hold really still under it."

"Camellia Parkinson. My sister's in Slytherin, but I'm Ravenclaw. I'll say up front that I don't believe Muggle-borns belong in wizarding society, but I believe in Dictatorships less. People should have their minds changed by rational argument, not at wand-point. Pansy doesn't care as long as it doesn't affect her, but I think this affects all of us, so I'm willing to fight with you, and spy on Slytherin if you want me to."

Neville stepped forward again, spreading his hands to stop the half-dozen others who had risen to their feet. "Whoa – this is pretty incredible, but I don't have the best memory at Hogwarts." There was a ripple of giggles at this, and he gave a small, bashful smile. "If you'd all just jot down what you've got – just briefly, like 'invisibility cloak' or 'can spy on Slytherin' next to your names, that would be a lot better. Otherwise, I'm going to wind up asking Anthony to put something in the *Quibbler* for us. I'll go first." He picked up the quill and signed his name at the top of the parchment, then paused before writing: "*Fool in charge.*"

To his surprise, the parchment shimmered with the look of a heat wave, the same way everything did when the magic of the Room of Requirement was adapting to their needs. Now, the words read: *Neville Longbottom – Commander, Dumbledore's Army*. He blushed, turning away from the line that had already formed behind him.

Colin was next, and as he finished marking *Soldier and Secret-Keeper* beside his signature, Neville tapped him quietly on the shoulder and motioned him aside. "That was some speech, Colin."

The younger boy shrugged, beaming with as much of the familiar bright sparkle as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. "I just said what's true."

*Yeah, Neville thought ruefully, that's all I did on Tuesday, and look where that got me.* "Still," he said, "I really appreciate it. I just wanted you to know that I didn't think of it as using you when I decided on you for the Fidelius Charm. I was honestly thinking of who cared about Harry the most, and I thought about Ginny ..."

"But she's got five more people than I do who could be used against her."

"Exactly." He glanced over to make sure that she was out of earshot, then dropped his voice. "And I think Harry would kill me if he ever found out."

Colin grinned. "So I'm your man!" He pulled out his wand, shoving up his sleeves. "What do we do?"

"Give me a second." Neville reached into the pocket of his robes and pulled out a piece of parchment that had clearly been copied from one of the older spell books in the library. He squinted at the elaborate old-fashioned script, then took a deep breath, concentrating with all his might on the secrets he would be trying to conceal. At last, he drew his own wand, holding it out in front of him as he turned in a slow circle. "*Fidelius Incorprium.*"

Everything in the Room of Requirement took on a vague golden glow, but it seemed to Neville as if only he could see it, because no one else reacted, not even Colin, who looked almost painfully cherubic in the shimmering light. He took another deep breath, focusing on the terrible stakes that made the charm necessary. "*Fidelius Sanctus.*"

The glow became brighter, so much so that he had to squint as everything surrounding him appeared to have been dipped in sunlight.

Now he traced his wand carefully in the air, forming the outline of a cube. The light seemed to gather and coalesce, contracting in and leaving everything oddly dull-looking as it formed a gleaming golden box a little smaller than a deck of cards floating in mid-air. "*Fidelius Imperium.*"

Plucking the box out of the air, Neville held it out on the palm of his hand. It reflected brightly in Colin's eyes as he took it. There was no hesitation, only acceptance and a sense of deep gratitude, and Neville could barely maintain the eye contact so necessary to seal the spell. "Colin Creevey," his voice was barely more than a whisper, "do you swear to become the Secret-Keeper for Dumbledore's Army and all those who are now, ever were, or ever shall be in it? That you will be solely responsible under magical oath for the knowledge of membership, purpose, missions, and all functions and places of meeting? That you understand the nature of the Fidelius Charm, and hold it to be true and binding upon you for all time, or until it is released by the one who placed it upon you?"

"I do."

"*Fidelius Finite.*" The box lifted out of Colin's hand, turning three times in the air. Then, with the speed and abruptness of a bullet, it sped towards his chest, vanishing into his body directly over his heart. Colin gave a great gasp, and his spine arched backwards, his body stiffening, the whites of his eyes showing in eerie, gleaming crescents as his eyes rolled back in his head and the brilliant gold glow enveloped him. For a single, breathless moment, he was suspended, then the glow faded, and he fell to the floor like a rag doll.



"Colin!" Terrified that something had gone horribly wrong, Neville dropped to his knees, but before he had even reached a hand towards the Secret-Keeper, Colin had begun to stir.

He sat up, shaking his head as if trying to clear away the last remnants of a dream, blinked twice, then fixed Neville with the grin of a kid who had just ridden his first broomstick. "Wow."

Relieved almost beyond words that he had not killed one of his fellow students at their very first meeting, Neville reached out one shaking hand and ruffled Colin's hair, letting out a tense laugh as he did so. "You little Stinkpellet, you scared me!"

Someone coughed, and Neville looked up, surprised to see Ginny standing there. "If you're finished throwing people around with your fancy spellwork," she smiled, "the rest of us are trying to have a meeting here." She motioned behind her, and he saw that everyone had finished signing their names and had returned to the chairs and cushions strewn around the room. The weight of their combined stares found him again, and he sighed as he stood, helping Colin to his feet beside him.

"Right." He looked around as Colin scampered back to sit next to his brother as though he became a Secret-Keeper twice daily before breakfast. Neville shook his head, trying to recover his bearings as he fished the crumpled notes from his robes. "Yeah ... so ... looks like the next order of business is to set up some kind of system for how we want to do this. I mean, we already have the coins to communicate – and Terry, if you could Gemino those so everyone has one by the time they leave, that would be great – but this is a little different from when it was just a class we were hiding. We're at war now, and we need a chain of command, as well as some way to handle things if we can't all meet up. I want to assign a ... well, a Lieutenant, I guess, for each house."

He motioned towards Ginny. "I think Ginny Weasley should take Gryffindor. She's got eight family members in the Order of the Phoenix, and her brother's with Harry now. If Dumbledore trusts the Weasleys that much, it's good enough for me. Gryffindors vote?"

Parvati raised her hand, but there was a frown of confusion on her face. "I don't understand, Neville ... you're a Gryffindor, why would we need anyone else?"

"Because," he explained, "I'm going to have my hands full with the whole D.A.. Ginny would take care of stuff that's just our house and report directly to me, just like the other Lieutenants."

Satisfied, Parvati nodded, then raised her hand again. "I vote for Ginny, then."

Hands went up scattered throughout the room, and Ginny seemed to be the only one surprised to see that her housemates had voted her in with unanimous approval. She turned the famous Weasley shade of deep magenta and gave a little curtsy and a wry smile. "Well," she said, "I guess that either means they like me, or they know the twins send me a lot of stuff."

Chuckling, Neville craned his neck over the crowd until he found the next person he was looking for, sprawled on her back almost invisibly in a pile of cushions and twisting a strand of hair around the end of her wand idly. "Luna?"

"Hmmm?" Her voice was as dreamy as ever, as though he were merely going to ask her opinion on what color socks he should wear rather than offer her the command of a group of soldiers.

"Will you take Ravenclaw?"

With an awkward glance at Michael Corner next to him, Anthony Goldstein raised a hand. "Not to be rude, Neville, but, um ... I mean, I don't think she's crazy like some people, but ..." His words trailed off, and he gave a despairing *don't-make-me-say-it* look at the pile of cushions.

"Okay," Neville shrugged, "show me another Ravenclaw who's held their own against a dozen fully-grown Death Eaters – twice."

Anthony blushed as if caught, and Neville realized that until that moment, Luna's participation in the two fights had been written off by her fellow students as another of her fantasies. Now Anthony cleared his throat and asked tentatively, "You've really done that, Loon – I mean, Luna?"

She sat up, tucking her wand behind her ear and crossing her legs casually. "Oh yes. They're not that scary without their masks on, really. I find it's a lot easier to confront them if you take care of those little psychological games first, so I like to use a Banishing Charm on the masks as soon as it's convenient." The absolutely effortless conviction in her voice had a clear effect on the others, and Anthony's hand was the first into the air by less than a heartbeat.

"Okay," Neville smiled, "we have Luna Lovegood for Ravenclaw." He glanced around. "Hufflepuff ... Ernie?"

"Not meaning to second-guess your decision," Ernie said slowly, "but Hannah's a Prefect too, and I would frankly have expected you to choose her, as you have been known to be friends for some time. I hope that I'm not being selected because ..." he paused, then shrugged, "well, it's no secret you two had a bit of a tiff the other day."

"Actually, it's because she's my friend that I picked you." Neville met Hannah's eyes, hoping she would see that he was sincere. "I want to play to everyone's strengths in this, and for Hufflepuff, you're all such hard workers, that might not always mean the nicest jobs, and I don't want anything to get in the way of what's best for everyone. No offense, but you're not as likely to set off any Gryffindor chivalrous streak, Ernie." To his relief, Hannah didn't look angry at this. If anything, she looked rather touched, and he gave an inward sigh of relief.

Satisfied, Ernie made a little bow. "No offense taken, and I assume the position with the honor it was given."

"Great." Neville said, checking his notes again. "Then we just –"

His words were cut off by a loud *crack*, and three dozen wands appeared as if out of thin air, pointing at the bizarre figure that had just appeared in the middle of the room.

It was short, coming barely to Neville's waist, and wore what appeared to be a large copper cooking pot on its head, only the mouth, chin, and the tips of two bat-like ears visible beneath this strange helmet. One of Ron's unmistakable lumpy maroon Christmas sweaters had been shrunken into a kind of tunic, and two bandoleers of Tasmanian Thumping Toadstools were slung criss-cross over the thin chest. Each long foot was clad in a half-dozen wildly mismatched socks that dragged the floor, and the spindly hands clutched a rusty, ancient saber easily as tall as the entire creature, propping it over one shoulder like a rifle.

Ginny was the first to recover her voice. "*Dobby?*"

The house-elf snapped smartly to attention, clicking his heels together as crisply as the many socks would allow, though not seeming to realize that he was facing the blank wall. His high voice echoed oddly beneath the cavernous pot. "Dobby has come to join the friends of Harry Potter, sir!"

All of the veteran D.A. members exchanged a nervous glance. "Does Professor Snape know about this?" Neville asked.

"No, sir! Professor Snape cannot forbid Dobby from joining something he does not know about." The little mouth broke into a wide grin.

"Dobby can say nothing bad about Professor Snape, but Dobby can say that he is a very good Death Eater, oh yes, and that he is most faithful to the Dark Lord, and Neville Longbottom can make of that what he will!"

Neville smiled and lifted the pot off of the elf's head, revealing the huge eyes, which stared up at him with the open adoration that was reserved for the very closest friends of the idolized Harry Potter. "The house-elves do not like their new masters, sir. Dobby has formed H.E.L.P. for you!"

"H.E.L.P?"

"House-Elves to Liberate Potter! We are resisting, sir, in all the ways we can." His eyes narrowed, and he glanced around the room with a vindictive little look. "The Death Eaters, sir, we have neglected to salt their food! And we do not clean their washrooms quite as often! And

sometimes..." He swallowed hard, trembling slightly with his own audacity. "... sometimes, we leave dust bunnies under their beds."

Neville barely managed to keep a straight face. "You don't dare."

Dobby nodded solemnly. "Oh, yes, Neville Longbottom, sir. We are most serious. We will assist the friends of Harry Potter any way we can. Dobby has come prepared to join the battle!" He made several swiping and thrusting motions with the immense sword, but it was too large for him, and he overbalanced, tripping on the dangling socks and falling to the floor in a heap of gangly limbs.

Giggling madly, Ginny extended a hand to help the now slightly cross-eyed elf to his feet again. "That's really brave of you, Dobby, but we're not fighting yet. This is just the first meeting."

Dobby looked crestfallen, and Neville knelt down so that they were at the same level. "You can still be helpful, though. I'm going to give you this;" he reached into his pocket and pulled out the charmed Galleon, "as a real D.A. member, so you know when we have meetings, and I want you to come and report on everything that Snape and the Carrows and the other followers of You-Know-Who have been up to. You're going to be our eyes and ears. It's a very important mission, can you handle it?"

The round eyes brimmed with tears of joy, and Neville had the breath driven from him as the surprisingly heavy elf threw himself onto Neville's neck in an enormous hug of gratitude. "Oh, yes! Yes! Dobby will tell Harry Potter's friends everything! Everything!"

Thankfully, Ginny saw that their leader was beginning to turn rather purple, and she gently pried the enthusiastic little creature's arms away. Her voice was still shaking with giggles, but she managed to keep her expression serious. "Okay, now you'd better get going before anyone misses you."

Dobby grabbed up his pot-helmet and planted it back on his head again, then snapped to attention and saluted the assembled D.A. with a loud clang. "Dobby will do his duty! And H.E.L.P. will see to it that best cakes and tea are in all the common rooms after the meeting, and that your rooms are most perfectly clean!" With another clangy salute and a crack, the elf was gone.

There was a long silence, and then Ernie Macmillan spoke, his face utterly deadpan. "Well, it's good to know we have allies."

Fritz Bagman nodded, though he could not keep his own laughter back so easily. "Thank goodness, or we might be facing dust bunnies as well as Death Eaters!"

This was the last straw for most of them, and the room dissolved into the giggles, laughter, and outright guffaws that had been held back while Dobby was there. It went on a long time, and as it was finally dying away, Neville wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his robes and looked out across the room. Their numbers had stopped being intimidating now that they weren't all lined up in strict rows staring at him. Over the course of the meeting, the tight little groups of veterans and new people had collapsed. Now they were all mingled together: tall, confident seventh-years next to nervous fourth and fifth-years, bold Gryffindor scarlet, cool Ravenclaw blue, and bright Hufflepuff yellow mixing freely.

So many different skills and personalities, so many different backgrounds, hopes, and fears, but they were all there for one reason: the same reason that had driven the most servile and accommodating creatures in the magical world to what was for them the very extremity of revolt. They were there to fight, to defy the cruel, unjust tyranny that had been forced upon them. They would break this siege, and maybe, just possibly, it did not seem too much to hope that they might even win this war.

He wondered if this was how Harry had felt that first night in that dark, filthy pub in Hogsmeade, and he wondered where his friend was now. Somewhere You-Know-Who wouldn't like, he was certain. Neville closed his eyes, willing Harry and the others to know somehow that they were not alone. Whenever, wherever, however they were needed, they would be ready. He had an army at his command, and he was not afraid.

OOO

"Neville!" The suit of armor in the fifth-floor corridor seemed to have suddenly developed a girl's voice, and Neville jumped, snatching his wand out of the inside pocket of his robes as his bag hit the floor with a loud thud. "What? Who?" There was no one there, not even in the dark shadows of the helmet's open faceplate, and he frowned. "Who said that?"

"It's me, Luna." As she spoke again, he recognized the voice, oddly distorted by the armor's tinny echo.

"Where are you?"

"In the Ravenclaw common room. I put a *Ventriloquist Charm* on my voice. Can you hear me?"

It was very strange to be talking to an empty suit of armor, but Neville nodded, then paused, unsure if she could see him as well as hear him. He decided to play it safe. "Yes, what's going on?"

"There was something in the *Quibbler* this morning. The *Prophet* hasn't said anything, but I think people need to know. Can you call another meeting?"

"Not yet. It's only been three days since the last one, and I don't want to make them too close together."

Luna's soft voice had an edge of excitement to it that Neville had rarely heard before. "It's worth it, really!"

Taking a deep breath, he considered it for a moment. It would be risky, but anything that could get Luna Lovegood so worked up probably was worth the chance. *Although, he thought, if it's just that someone has sighted a Blibbering Whatsit or a Crinkle-Horned Thingy, I'll kill her.* "All right," he agreed, "watch your coin ... I can't chance another full meeting, but I'll call the Lieutenants."

The faceplate of the helmet clanked shut in answer, and Neville picked up his bag again, breaking into a jog as he continued down the corridor towards the now-renamed Dark Arts classroom. Lateness was not as tolerated as it once had been.

OOO

He had thought that the Room of Requirement would seem cavernous and empty with only four people present, but it had proved adaptable as ever. Although it had been vastly proportioned every time he had been in there before, it was now no larger than a modest sitting room, comfortably furnished with four leather chairs surrounding an elegant wooden table in front of a crackling fire. The banners of their three houses hung above the stone mantle, and quills, parchment, and ink had been ready at each place, a shining silver Sneakoscope perched silently in the middle of the table.

Neville looked at the three fellow students sitting around him. Ernie had come directly from Quidditch practice, and his hair was still wet from the showers, a white towel slung around his neck against the canary yellow and black trim of his track suit. Ginny had a quill stuck behind one ear and a splotch of ink on her nose, her sleeves rolled up to reveal a half-dozen notes on spell pronunciation jotted on the back of her hand and forearm. Only Luna seemed to have not been caught in the middle of something else, sitting neatly in her uniform with her usual radish-shaped earrings dangling beneath her long mane of pale blonde hair.

Ernie looked at her with barely-concealed annoyance as he took the towel from around his neck and rubbed at his head vigorously, scattering a few drops of water over the rest of them. "You said it was important, Luna?"

"It's about Harry."

With those words, Luna captured the undivided attention of all three of them, and Neville leaned towards her, propping himself on his elbows. "Is he all right?"

She reached into her bag and pulled out what looked like a roll of class notes, but as she spread them on the table in front of them, they transformed into a copy of the *Quibbler*. The headline seemed to scream up at them:

### ***Harry Potter Defies Ministry with Daring Break-In! Dozens of Muggle-Borns Spirited to Safety!***

"It happened a week ago," she explained, "but it was completely hushed up by the Ministry, and Dad didn't start getting reports from witnesses who had escaped until the weekend. He printed a special edition for it."

Neville squinted at the blurry photograph on the front page. It had clearly been taken by someone who had no chance to properly aim the camera, but it seemed to show a large, burly wizard with a thick beard shoving a middle-aged couple into one of the Ministry fireplaces as he fired a spell back over his shoulder. "I don't see Harry anywhere."

"That's him." Luna tapped the photo with her wand, indicating the tall wizard. "It looks like the Death Eater, Runcorn, but witnesses say he broke into the courtrooms where the MBRC was holding those awful trials, Stunned Umbridge and Yaxley, and produced a *stag Patronus* to get past the Dementors and help about fifty people escape!"

Ginny let out a little gasp. "Polyjuice Potion! It's what we used at the wedding to hide Harry! They must have nicked some!"

Ernie leaned in close to the picture, his eyes searching it hungrily. "That might be Harry's wand, now that I look at it."

"And Mafalda Hopkirk was helping him, and Reginald Cattermole, and they don't even work in the same Department ... and Cattermole himself swears that Mafilda called Runcorn 'Harry,' and that *their* Patronuses were an otter and a little dog."

Neville jumped to his feet, unable to suppress a cry of triumph as he pumped his fist in the air. "Ron and Hermione, I knew it! I *knew* they'd fight him!"

"Did they get away?" Ginny's voice was barely more than a whisper, her face pale as she trailed her fingers almost wistfully over the newspaper. Luna nodded, and her eyes closed. Neville thought he saw a glimmer of tears beneath the thick, coppery lashes, and she let out a thin little laugh. "He's alive."

He wondered if she meant Harry or her brother - or if she even knew herself - and he placed one hand on her shoulder, giving it a small, comforting squeeze as he leaned in over the table. "You're right, Luna, that *is* fantastic news. Do you have any more of these?"

She shook her head. "No, but I'm sure we can figure out a way to smuggle them in. I'll put Ravenclaw on it. If there's a spell out there that will get them in past the new security, we'll find it. I can get this one because my Dad and I have Encrypting Amulets that let him send me the *Quibbler* as simple letters, but it only works for one copy at a time, and it might look a little suspicious if he started writing me dozens of letters at once."

"Speaking of dozens ..." All eyes turned to Ernie, who was smiling a bit ruefully. "I was going to wait to tell you, old chap, but we may have a wee problem with Hufflepuff."

Neville frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, of course, no one has been able to say anything with the Fidelius in place, but there's been a good amount of guessing, and I've been getting a lot of requests. There are a few more who want to join, it seems."

"How is that a problem?" Ginny asked.

Ernie gave a nervous little laugh. "I think it might be noticed if every Hufflepuff in fourth year and up vanished at the same time every week or so."

"*All* of them?" Neville was dumbstruck.

"All but six, to be exact. And those six are new to Hogwarts this year; they were being taught at home before it became mandatory."

"But ... *all* of them?"

His disbelief seemed to have rather offended Ernie, and he crossed thick arms over his chest, his chin thrust out as if daring anyone to question him further. "*All* of us who were there for Cedric Diggory."

Neville blushed, feeling abruptly stupid. "I'm sorry. I should have –"

"You're usually the house that turns out the heroes, no one's going to pretend you're not." Ernie gave a respectful little nod towards Ginny and Neville. "But Cedric was *ours*, and he was bloody

magnificent. Brave, smart, good-looking ... everyone said he was the best Hufflepuff had to offer in fifty years, and that's not saying so little as you lot might think. More Orders of Merlin have gone to Hufflepuff than Gryffindor, you know. You might go leaping to the front when a fight breaks out, but we're the ones who never even think of giving up, no matter what."

Nodding, Neville sat down again, looking at Ernie with a touch of shame. "I never meant it like that. I used to wish desperately I was one of you."

Now it was Ernie's turn to look stunned. "But you're a Gryffindor."

"Well," he cast a quick look at Ginny, "I'm willing to try to be one now, but I've never really felt like I fit there. I used to watch you guys during Herbology, or out on the grounds and think that you'd care that I always try, that I always work my hardest, that I'm always loyal, even if I usually fall on my face when I try to do anything heroic. I mean, the greatest glory I've ever brought to Gryffindor before now was getting ten points for being Body-Bound by Harry, Ron, and Hermione as they went off to save the school." He pointed to the yellow and black badger banner hanging over the fire.

"I cried myself half sick when Cedric was killed. Don't ever think I don't respect you."

Ernie seemed as though he had been given a gift that he could not quite comprehend as he dipped his head towards Neville. "Thank you. Truly." Then he smiled. "And good to hear, as you are up to your eyes in us now."

Neville laughed. "I guess I am." He thought about it a moment. "How about you, Hannah, and two more from forth, fifth, and sixth years who are already D.A. come to the official meetings, and then you can have your own meetings inside Hufflepuff for everyone else? I'll get with Colin later tonight to extend the Fidelius Charm over the whole upper years for you."

"Well," Ginny broke in, "now that you boys have finished sorting out whose house has the bigger recruitment, have you given any thought to what this —" she tapped the *Quibbler* "— really means?"

Luna gave her a quizzical stare. "It means they're alive and fighting, of course, and that they set all those poor Muggle-borns free."

"That's all very nice, don't get me wrong, but they wouldn't have broken into the Ministry itself just for that. It says here that they took a locket from Umbridge, according to Mrs. Cattermole. When I found Harry by Dumbledore's body this spring, he had a locket in his hands. And at Grimmauld Place, there was a locket nobody could open...they had all kinds of weird Dark artifacts." Her eyes flashed vividly, and her small hand curled into a fist, striking against the table for emphasis. "It's too much to be a coincidence .... I bet they're the same one! We have *got* to know what's so important about that locket, so we can help them!"

"Did you get a chance to see what it looked like?" Neville asked.

She closed her eyes, screwing up her face in concentration before she spoke. "I only saw it clearly at Grimmauld Place. It was silver. Pretty good-sized. With a letter on the front. I think it was 'S'."

Luna's protuberant eyes widened. "Oooh, 'S' for Slytherin, maybe?"

"I doubt Harry wanted it because it stood for Seeker," Ernie said sarcastically.

"Slytherin, Seeker, Snargaluff, whatever ... why was Harry willing to risk everything to get it?" Neville stared at his hands as if he might find that he was accidentally holding the answer. "He's not going to defeat You-Know-Who by waving jewelry at him. It's got to have some magical function or property, or maybe there's something *inside* the locket he wants. What would be small enough to fit in a locket that could be that important?"

There was a long pause as they all considered this. Luna's mouth opened several times as if she were going to say something, but each time she stopped, shaking her head in dismissal before resuming her stare at the ceiling. Finally, Ginny spoke. Her voice sounded oddly hollow, and even in the warm light from the fire, her face was ashen. "Maybe not what. Maybe who."

Neville's expression of confusion was mirrored in the other two faces at the table. "Ginny?"

"The Chamber of Secrets. Harry never talked about what had happened because he didn't want me to get in trouble. There was a diary. It used to belong to Tom Riddle. That's who You-Know-Who was before he was You-Know-Who, only I didn't know that. I just thought it was a magic diary that had belonged to a really nice boy who wrote back to me when I wrote in it." She hid her face in her hands. "I was so stupid!"

Neville reached out and gently pulled her hands away from her face, taking her chin in his palm and turning her to face him. "You were eleven. Don't beat yourself up over what's past. Whatever happened because of that diary, no one was killed, or even permanently hurt in the whole Chamber business. Now, tell us why you think that the locket has something to do with the Chamber of Secrets ... or, I'm guessing, the Heir of Slytherin."

She took a deep breath, pulling back from his hand and tossing her hair defiantly as she pulled herself together again. "Tom Riddle *was* the Heir of Slytherin. He...he possessed me. Made me do things. It wasn't just his diary, it had a sort of living memory of him in it. Like a portrait, but stronger."

"And you think," Neville said slowly, "that the locket might have the same kind of memory in it?"

"Exactly. And I think ..." Ginny trailed off a moment, then when she began again, her voice was shaking, barely audible. "... oh, God, I think Harry is trying to get himself possessed."

Ernie swore. "Why would he do something that ..." Clearly at a loss for words, he swore again, and Neville found himself quite agreeing with the sentiment.

Ginny's eyes seemed to have gone utterly dead now, her voice toneless. "When his scar hurts him, he can see into You-Know-Who's mind. Luna, Neville, you remember: that's why he thought Sirius was at the Ministry. But it wasn't trustworthy. He tricked Harry. I think that Harry wants to get himself possessed to make the connection complete. Because with Dumbledore gone, the only wizard as strong as You-Know-Who *is* You-Know-Who. Harry is going to become him to stop him. If he has the locket, maybe he's already done it."

"I don't think so." Luna seemed amazingly calm in light of what Ginny had just said, even though Neville felt as though he'd been struck full in the face with a particularly well-hit Bludger. "I think you're right about the locket being some kind of memory-keeper, like the diary, but if

Harry had already used it, he'd either have killed You-Know-Who or lost himself and joined him by now." "Unless," Ernie said quietly, "he *did* lose himself and Ron and Hermione had to kill him."

Neville shook his head quickly, forcing his voice to be strong and confident as he stood up. "No! We can't let ourselves start thinking that way ... there's too many 'ifs' there. If the locket is Slytherin's. If it's got a memory-thing in it. If Harry got possessed. If he couldn't handle that. There's at least four ifs before we get to Harry being dead, and I'm not going to believe that."

He looked at Ginny, who had pulled her knees up to her chest and sat huddled in her chair, looking very tiny indeed. "I'm with Luna as far as I think you're right about what the locket is, but I don't think Harry would take any chances of letting it possess him. If it's like a portrait of You-Know-Who, I think he would question it any way he could, that he'd want information from it, and then he'd destroy it. I don't think he's done it yet because we have what he needs to destroy it, and he doesn't want to let it out until he can."

"The Room of Requirement?" Luna asked.

"No. Ginny, how did he stop the Heir of Slytherin last time?" He looked around, his eyes gleaming wildly with the thrill of having, for once, put the pieces together himself. "Remember, he told us all the very first time the D.A. ever met. The Sword of Gryffindor! Harry needs the sword, and we have it here at Hogwarts!"

Ginny uncurled, leaning forward, hope flooding into her eyes even as the color returned to her cheeks. "You're right, Neville! It's the Sword! If he gets the Sword ... oh, and I bet that's what he has to have to kill him, too! Only the Sword of Gryffindor can defeat the Heir of Slytherin ... and You-Know-Who is the Heir!"

Ernie frowned. "But if Dumbledore had the Sword all those years, why not just take out You-Know-Who himself?"

"Only a true Gryffindor can wield the Sword," Luna informed them.

"Dumbledore told Professor Flitwick that he always considered himself very nearly a Ravenclaw. It's something Professor Flitwick's always felt proud about and reminded us. Maybe it kept him from being able to use the Sword, though."

"Maybe." Neville agreed. "But it means that sooner or later, Harry is going to come back to Hogwarts for the Sword, and that's when we're going to have to fight. I mean, even if Harry takes out You-Know-Who himself, I don't intend to just let Snape and the Carrows and – *"Bellatrix Lestrange*, he thought. "And all the Death Eaters walk free, or just assume they'll let Harry walk up to You-Know-Who and say 'Hey, I have something here, let's see if it'll kill you.'"

"I wonder," mused Luna, "how he's going to get in? Polyjuice Potion won't get him through all the security into Hogwarts. All the secret passages are sealed. The Death Eaters know all about the Vanishing Cabinets. And I bet there's extra security on the Headmaster's office."

"Blimey –" Neville let out a low groan, sinking back into his chair.

"That's lovely. It's in Snape's office."

"So?" asked Ernie stubbornly.

"Well, it's not going to be a cakewalk for him to get in there," Ginny said.

"Then we help. That's what we're here for, if I'm not mistaken." The Hufflepuff had crossed his arms again, planting himself in the chair as though someone were going to try and physically force him to back down.

"But," Ginny protested, "breaking into Snape's office? That'll take weeks of planning if we want half a chance of pulling it off!"

"So it takes weeks. Or months." Ernie shrugged. "We work from the inside, he works from the outside, and whoever gets to the Sword first, it's all for the better. Either Harry already has a plan, or we have a rather lovely present for him when he shows up thinking he'll still have half the job ahead of him." He glanced across the table. "Neville, you're our leader, the final word is yours. What shall we do about the Sword?"

Neville did not hesitate. "We get it. You're right, we take as long as we need to, and we use that time to train ourselves into fighters, because Harry could show up any day now, and this isn't just about defensive magic any more. I'm going to ask Dobby to find out everything he can about the security on Snape's office, that's a start." He reached for the quill and started to make notes on the parchment in front of him. "Luna, I want you to get the Ravenclaws on two things: first, every spell you can find that we could use on the Death Eaters that they'll have never heard of. Arcane, foreign, outright bizarre, whatever ... as long as they're workable. If you want us to attack them with Crinkly-Horned Snorkles –"

"Crumple-Horned Snorkacks," Luna corrected him, a bit snippily.

"Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. That's fine with me as long as you can produce one and show us how to aim the blasted thing. Second, anything you can get about Slytherin having a locket." He turned to Ginny. "I want anything we can get to try and sort out what Harry's up to. This has been his house, and he's been a celebrity since before he got here. You're a girl, so you should be even more suited to this. I want every rumor, every piece of gossip, every hint of anything that has gone around about him for the last six years. Anything people have seen, heard, read, or been told. And I want you to sift through that as someone who *actually* knows him and see if you can filter out anything that could help us get inside that scarred head of his and help him."

Ginny grinned rather wolfishly, and he had the feeling his orders were going to be used to settle a few private scores. "With pleasure."

Neville paused, noting the assignments on the parchment, then turned to his last Lieutenant. "Ernie, I'm going to be honest with you ... the only reason Slytherin had the Quidditch Cup all those years before we had Harry as Seeker is because they play dirty. You guys always turn out the best athletes."

"There is nothing," Ernie pointed out, "glorious, cunning, or particularly learned about a pushup."

"Exactly. And fighting is about just as much running and ducking as it is Hexing and Charms." Neville swallowed his pride with some difficulty and took a pinch of his own waist to demonstrate his point to the other boy. "I'm not the chubby little kid I used to be, but I'm not in

that great of shape either. A lot of us aren't. I want Hufflepuff to whip us into fighting trim. No one needs to die because they were too out of breath to cast a Shield Charm."

Ernie leaned back, stretching his own brawny arms in front of him and cracking his knuckles. "I hope you're prepared to be rather sore, dear chum."

Neville looked down at the list in front of him. At the top, the words *Get Gryffindor's Sword* seemed to mock him. It seemed so easy just written there. He looked up again, meeting Ernie's eyes as a great wave of exhaustion seemed to crash over him. "Ernie, being sore is the least of my problems now."

OOO

"She's not human, I swear. Absolute heart of stone." Lavender Brown gave the chocolate gateau in the center of the table a look of the deepest longing, then sighed, staring down at the apple that sat forlornly in the middle of her plate. "I mean, maybe I'm not going out for the Holier-than-thou-head Harpies any time soon like *some people* think they are, but there's nothing wrong with me, either."

Parvati nodded, slicing her own apple in half with unnecessary violence. "Neville, she's a monster. She made us do situps and jumping jacks until I thought I was going to *die*. I was *dripping* sweat. Harry never made us do anything like that!"

Neville glanced around, then gave the two of them a warning look as he pulled out his wand beneath the table. "*Muffliato*." Satisfied that the charm was in place, he leaned forward. "Could you please keep the whining down? Harry was teaching us what to do if we found ourselves in a bad situation. That's not the same as being at war. We're not trying to get out of a fight alive, we're planning to start one and last as long as we can in it. And I'm not sympathetic. Rowan Glynnis is taking it easy on you."

"You weren't there," Lavender announced in a martyred tone.

"No, I was with Bagman and the rest of the blokes. I'd be happy to switch. Look -" He held up his goblet in one hand, and the pumpkin juice almost sloshed over the edge. "- I'm still shaking. Did either of you need to tie your shoes with magic this morning because you were too sore to bend over?"

Neither girl answered, though he was quite sure he heard Parvati mutter something under her breath that involved what she would like to do if he bent over. Ignoring her, Neville sat back, being sure to not even glance at the pyramid of cream puffs heaped tantalizingly in front of him as he reached past them for an orange. He was their leader, and it wouldn't do to show that he was having second, third, and even fourth thoughts of his own. There was something insult to injury about laying your life on the line in noble resistance also meaning that you had to turn down custard tarts and toffee pudding.

His bitter musings were interrupted by the sound of a throat clearing at the staff table. Neville looked up as the entire room fell stonily silent. Professor Snape got to his feet, sweeping his black robe around him like a regal mantle. Neville's hands clenched into fists, and he felt a vein begin to pulse in his temple. The sight of Snape at the throne-like Headmaster's chair - *Dumbledore's chair* - still filled him with a choking rage.

He took what comfort he could in the rigid postures and disapproving glares of the other teachers. Only the Carrows, themselves seeming thuggishly out of place at the staff table, looked anything other than incensed, and Neville allowed the tiniest of bitter smiles. *It's not just us. They know what you are, you filthy traitor. They know, and one of these days, we'll all make you pay. They're not afraid of you, it's You-Know-Who that scares them. Even I'm not afraid of you any more, because I've realized you're a coward. You'll terrorize kids and murder a defenseless old man in cold blood, but you ran when you had to confront what you'd done. You ran and hid behind your Master, and now you'll only face us because he's got your back.*

"Silence." The order was unneeded. Although the waves of hate rolling up from the students were almost palpable, no one seemed to have even breathed since Snape stood. He looked down his hooked nose at the assemblage, his lip curling into a familiar sneer. "Well, apparently, it does not take long for gratitude to wear thin. Only a little more than one week into the school year, and already the Carrows and Mr. Filch tell such tales. Tsk tsk. The Dark Lord values your education more highly than you do, it would seem."

His black eyes swept over their faces, settling at the Gryffindor table. For one horrible moment, Neville thought that they were staring directly at him, that he somehow knew, but then he realized that they were focused on Seamus, only two places to his left.

"Mr. Finnigan showed profound disrespect in Muggle Studies. Miss Lovegood" - the dark gaze turned to the Ravenclaw table- "thought she would favor her classmates with a very unflattering artistic rendition of her Dark Arts teacher, which was intercepted and destroyed. And the younger Mr. Creevey" - Dennis shrunk down on his seat as Snape found him - "seems to think that he has a talent for mimicking me in the corridors. And this does not even begin to address the overall lax attitude that the Carrows report being shown toward the subjects that the Dark Lord himself has personally chosen for you to study."

Snape strode around the staff table to stand in front, one long, sallow hand tapping his wand into his other palm. "Your Heads of House have assured me that they will address these matters, but in my years here as a teacher, I have observed a certain ..." he cast a distinctly nasty look at Professor McGonagall, who bristled, her lips vanishing in a thin line of fury, "*inability* on their part to control those students who are determined to misbehave. Professors Alecto and Amycus Carrow will therefore be handling *all* matters of discipline here at Hogwarts from now on. I believe you will find them far more ..." He paused, then smiled humorlessly. "Motivating."

Behind him, the Carrows stood, and Neville shivered at the toothy leers they gave. There was pain in those smiles. "All of you," Snape went on, "are here because you carry true magical blood. This school may have been allowed to run riot in the past, but the Dark Lord has higher expectations. I suggest you live up to them."

He waved his wand, and the plates and goblets disappeared, leaving the tables bare. A few first-years who had not yet finished let out cries of dismay, but they were quickly hushed by the older students at their tables, and Neville thought he saw a flicker of triumph cross Snape's face as he resumed his seat. "You may go back to your dormitories now. Some of you have Dark Arts tomorrow. I recommend you take the time to study."

There was no sound but the scraping of benches and the shuffling of hundreds of feet as the students made their way out of the Great Hall, but the moment they crossed the threshold, whispered conversations broke out so furiously that it sounded as though a swarm of bees had

been waiting for them. Seamus was at Neville's side in an instant. "The *Carrows* handle discipline? Is he mad? They'll make Umbridge look like a fairy princess!"

Neville nodded gravely. "If we're lucky."

"What do we do?" Colin had pushed his way through the crowd, one arm wrapped protectively around his younger brother's shoulders. Dennis was trembling and looked as though he might be sick at any moment. "We can't let him get away with this!"

"There's no choice. He's the Headmaster; if he thinks that discipline needs to be tightened, he can choose whoever he wants to do it. It's his right, whether or not we like it. I mean, we're just kids." Colin gaped at him as though he had uttered a terrible obscenity, but Neville jerked his head slightly towards a handful of green-robed fifth-years that had clustered by the staircase only a few paces away. *Slytherins*, he mouthed, and was relieved to see understanding dawn on his friends' faces as he continued loudly. "We'll simply have to behave ourselves."

"I'll practice my puckering up," said Seamus wryly.

"Just be careful." Ginny had joined them, and she kept her voice low as they moved up the stairs past the lingering Slytherins. "If you're planning to kiss Alecto's arse, you'll have to look twice to make sure you're not aiming for her face."

Neville started to laugh, then clamped his hand over his mouth, his body shaking as he held it back, every sore muscle aching with the effort. Finally, shaking his head, he managed to gasp out, "Ginny, I think I know why Harry fell for you."

She gave a cheeky grin, tossing her hair and pretending to preen her reflection as they passed a window. "Oh, I don't know. I think he just likes living dangerously."

Seamus grinned back at her. "You mean the six overprotective twits you call brothers, or just yourself?"

"I'm more than you can handle, Finnigan," she shot back.

He raised both hands in a gesture of surrender. "Love, I may mouth off at the Carrows, but I don't fancy myself brave enough to argue with you."

Neville allowed the laugh this time, and it almost seemed like old times again as he listened to them banter back and forth while they climbed the stairs to the familiar portrait that covered the entrance to Gryffindor Tower. The Fat Lady looked as nervous as she had since school began, and the moment she saw them coming, she shooed away the pinch-faced witch in medieval robes whom she had been whispering with. "Password?" she asked with stiff-backed propriety.

"Blood Status," Neville said, exchanging a distasteful little glance with her as she swung open and revealed the entry.

As soon as the portrait hole had shut behind them, Gryffindors seemed to materialize from everywhere at once, and Neville found himself surrounded, the babble of fifty voices rendering any individual question, outburst, or demand utterly meaningless. He spread his hands desperately, shouting to make himself heard. "Whoa! Everybody calm down! Back off! I can't listen to all of you at the same time!"

The outcry faded away, and he took a step forward away from the portrait hole, grabbing a chair and dropping into it backwards, his elbows resting on the back as he ran his fingers through his hair. "I know what's going on. We all heard it. I just have to think."

He closed his eyes, feeling once again like he had never given Harry enough credit for how hard it was to simply have so many people looking at you. They expected him to have answers instantly, and for everything, as if the past six years of utterly dismissing him had never happened. *Everything's changed so much*, he thought bemusedly, *I guess it's not that big a deal to have the house loser suddenly in charge.*

Finally, he opened his eyes again and looked up, taking a deep breath as he saw that everyone had formed a circle around him, waiting as if for some grand revelation. The idea that had formed seemed pathetically feeble in the face of all their expectations, but it was all he had. "I'm going to have to find out for myself what this really means."

Ginny frowned, two thin vertical lines of worry appearing between her brows. "Neville, I really hope you aren't planning to get in trouble on purpose."

"It's the only way." He shrugged, but his voice was firm. "We can sit here and speculate all we want, but we can't really decide what to do about this until we know what it actually means that the Carrows are going to be handling discipline. I mean, who could have guessed what Umbridge was going to do? We know what happens when Alecto loses her temper," he gestured at Seamus, "but not when they're planning it. It could just be awful detentions like Snape gives, or it could be getting horsewhipped by Filch, or anything, really. We can't know until it happens to someone, and we can't decide what to do about it until we know."

The younger students gazed at him with a mixture of horror and awe, but it was the uncomfortable looks exchanged among the sixth- and seventh-years that told Neville he was right. Finally, Lavender shook her head. "I don't know. What if it's something terrible?"

"I don't expect it to be a hundred lines of 'I will be a good little minion' and then tea and biscuits," he retorted.

"You can't." It was Parvati who spoke, and although her voice was soft, there was a finality to it that carried across the outbreak of muttering that had come behind his last statement. She took a step forward, and Neville felt a chill as he saw that everything in her bearing had changed. Her head was held high, the firelight shining off her skin like a bronze statue as she seemed to glide into the center of the ring of Gryffindors to stand next to him.

"If you do it, Neville, we won't really know what the Carrows will do to the rest of us. You were at the Ministry, you were at the tower, your parents were Aurors. They'll come down on you hard, no matter what. It has to be someone who's never been in trouble with them before." Each syllable was clearly enunciated with a sickening decisiveness. "Like me."

Neville shook his head. "No, I won't let you."

She turned on him, her eyes flashing with sudden ferocity. "Why?"

He floundered, trying to explain what seemed so obvious that he couldn't find the words. "Well, you're -"

"If you're going to say 'a girl', then why don't you go fetch Hermione from wherever you've been keeping *her* safe?" Parvati spat. "Or for that matter, tell Alecto Carrow or Bellatrix LeStrange that they're supposed to be sheltered and dainty."

The mention of Bellatrix sent a hot flush into Neville's cheeks, but he bit his lip, looking down at the carpet to avoid the intensity of Parvati's stare. Feeling cornered, he glanced around the faces of his classmates, but it only made the growing certainty that she was right intensify. The thought of using one of the younger kids was too repellent to contemplate, and all of the seventh-year Gryffindors that remained had, as she had pointed out, reasons to draw unusual fury down on themselves. The only other possibility that he could see was Lavender, and she had not volunteered. Slowly, reluctantly, he nodded, and his voice was a rough whisper when he finally spoke. "All right."

"Good." Parvati gave a grim smile. "But everyone had better behave themselves tomorrow. I want to stand out."

OOO

The Dark Arts class had been in session for ten minutes with no sign of Parvati, and Neville had not heard a word that Carrow had told them about creating Inferi. Normally, no matter his distaste for the subject, the sight of a corpse on the teacher's desk would have been more than enough to hold his attention, but he was utterly preoccupied with a growing hope that she would not show up. He didn't think she would have chickened out, but maybe something at breakfast had made her sick? Maybe she had sprained an ankle on a trick step?

He had just made up his mind to pay attention enough to think of something infuriating to say when the door burst open. Parvati breezed in as though she hadn't a care in the world, plopping her bag onto the desk and taking her customary seat next to Lavender Brown.

She swept a stray tendril of hair out of her eyes and looked up at Carrow with wide-eyed innocence. "Sorry I'm late, Professor," she said airily, "I have all my important classes written down, but I just forgot about Dark Whatsits."

Amycus Carrow seemed to inflate with fury for a moment, then the redness that had begun to creep up from his collar receded, and he fingered his wand almost lovingly. "No, Miss Patil, I oughta thank you," he sneered. "Fer lettin' me demonstrate to the class jes' how serious Professor Snape is about maintainin' order in his school."

For the first time, Parvati noticed the dead body at the head of the classroom, and her eyes flickered to the pictures still on the wall from Professor Snape's tenure the year before. The bloody mass that he had indicated as the wrath of the Inferi writhed pathetically in its frame, and she turned a sickly greenish shade, genuine fear reflected in her eyes as Carrow advanced across the room.

Neville wanted to look away, but he couldn't, fixated by the terror that he felt radiating from every other Gryffindor there. *What have I done?* he thought desperately. *I should never have let her ... what have I DONE?*

After what seemed like an age, Carrow reached the petrified witch and extended his wand. She closed her eyes, her hands tightening on the edge of the desk, but he only placed it beneath her

chin obscenely gently as he raised her face to him. "Let's see ..." His coarse voice was a terrible purr. "Mister ... Nott."

Parvati's eyes opened, staring up at Carrow in confusion as the Slytherin stood, bowing obsequiously. "Yes, sir?"

"I don't like wastin' the chance ta teach." He didn't break eye contact with Parvati as he raised the wand to caress her cheek. "Miss Patil can learn 'bout punctuality, and you can practice one of the three Primary Curses. I don't reckon Imperio's what we need here, Avada Kedavra might be a bit extreme, but I think Crucio's 'zactly what she needs to help her remember 'Dark Whatsits.'"

Nott's thin face gleamed with sadistic pleasure as he pushed up the sleeves of his robe and drew his wand. "Yes, *sir!*"

Everything had taken on a horrible air of unreality. As if in a dream, Neville watched helplessly as Nott advanced on Parvati, still held frozen in place at the tip of Carrow's wand. Then the Slytherin snapped his wand at her and shouted the curse, and he closed his eyes. Parvati screamed. It was the worst sound Neville had ever heard in his life. High and shrill, it cut into him as though the pain were his own. It went on and on. Each shriek crested like a scarlet wave before spending itself into thin, razored gasps of agony, and then the screams rasped away as her voice broke, and now there were other sounds: hisses and anguished breaths punctuated by the dull clatter of flesh flailing uselessly against wood and stone.

He couldn't look. Already, he felt as though he were teetering on the edge of losing his mind. It hadn't been this bad when Seamus was being tortured. He too had gone into it knowingly, but there had been a difference there, and it wasn't just the difference between boy and girl. Seamus had approached it out of his own bravado. Parvati was their sacrificial lamb, and each scream was an accusation, a condemnation of his failure as a leader to find another way, any other way.

The sounds faded to a silence so thick it felt like a tangible thing, oily and dirty against his skin. Then Carrow laughed, and it was too much. Neville leaned over, barely managing to clear the edge of his desk as he was violently, brutally sick.

OOO

"Calm down, mate. A person'd think Parvati was up there havin' your baby to look at you." Seamus spoke soothingly, but his only reward was a dirty glare as Neville continued to pace the Gryffindor common room in long, rapid strides, running his hands through his hair every few passes as if he could push the sounds of Parvati's screams out of his memory.

"It'd be less my fault if she was." He cast another longing look at the entrance to the girls' dormitory, hating the charm that kept him locked out. "Isn't there any way I can get up there?"

"Guys have been tryin' for centuries." The other boy shook his head regretfully. "Not a chance."

"Why did they have to hide her away like that?" Neville made no attempt to hide the anguish in his voice. "I just want to know if she's all right!"

"It was no big deal strippin' me down to my shorts to check me over," Seamus pointed out gently, "but girls are a bit touchier about things."

She pounded against that chair something wicked, and Ginny and them'll have to take her to what she was born with or at least to knickers to make sure they've got her properly taken care of."

Neville stopped his pacing at the closed door, staring at it as though he could discover what was happening on the other side by sheer force of will. The door remained mockingly opaque, and he slammed his fists against it, rattling the hinges and sending a small cluster of first and second-years scurrying for cover. "It's my fault! It's all my fault!" He struck the door again, reveling in the pain that shot through his arms and shoulders at the impact.

"Hey, now." Hands had grabbed him by the upper arms now, pulling him back, and Neville twisted in his friend's grasp, infuriated to find that Seamus was much stronger than he had imagined from someone half a head shorter and a good thirty pounds lighter than himself.

"Let go! Let go before I —"

"Do somethin' really stupid, I know." Neville twisted to reach his wand, but his arms were pinned behind him now, and he could only thrash uselessly.

"Now, don't make me take you down." The voice in his ear was all the more enraging for its calm, and Neville let out a roar of fury and summoned all his strength, throwing off the restraining hold and whirling around, wand at the ready.

He had not even steadied his aim before the jet of light hit him full in the chest. "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

The all-too-familiar sensation of complete immobility seized him, and Neville crashed to the ground, unable to so much as twitch a finger as Seamus leaned over him. "I didn't want to do that, mate, but you'd bloody lost it, and I couldn't have you raisin' enough ruckus to bring the Carrows in."

Neville hoped that his eyes could convey the filthy names running through his head, but Seamus seemed to guess them well enough. "I'm goin' to take this," he felt his wand slip from his stiffened fingers, "and then I'm goin' to count ten and release the Body Bind, and we're goin' to deal with this like grown men and wizards, not Bludger-headed giants. The last thing Parvati needs is to hear you carryin' on down here. She's liable to think the battle's started without her. All right? One ... two ..."

At ten, Seamus waved the two wands together, and Neville felt a sense of freedom return to his body. He flexed his fingers, satisfied to feel them responding to his command again, and then pushed himself to a sitting position. He had expected to want to throttle Seamus, but it seemed as though all the fight had drained out of him as the ability to move had poured back in, and all it had left behind was a horrible void like a gaping, bleeding wound. Shaking, he ran a hand over his face, startled to feel that it was slick with sweat. "I ... I'm sorry," he managed.

"No worries." The sandy head tilted curiously. "Did you go that nuts when I was down? I might be flattered."

"You did it to yourself, you moron." Neville allowed himself the faintest ghost of a smile. "Why would I feel bad about that?"

"True enough."

He got up, contemplating resuming pacing again for a long moment before simply dropping onto the nearest couch in defeat. "I don't get it."

"What?"

"How you can be so calm." Neville motioned towards the closed door.

"You were there too. You saw, you *heard* ..." He couldn't finish.

"Dean." Seamus sat down on the arm of the couch and handed back the confiscated wand as he explained. "Dean's my best mate, and he's always been the one in our year with the most plain horse sense, as Mum called it. I was ready to go flyin' off at Carrow myself, but then you sicked all over, and it was like I could hear him in my head. 'Seamus,' he said, 'Neville's not takin' this well, and he's the best hope all of you've got. What's done to Parvati's done, but you'd better watch out for him, or you're all as good as wandless.' That helped, odd enough. Gave me somethin' to do, and the helpless bit is always the worst. So Ginny and the girls are seein' to Parvati, and I'm here preventin' our fearless leader from tearin' down the castle."

"I'm not your leader anymore. I'm disbanding the D.A.." He sat up and fished in his pocket for the fake Galleon, flinging it across the room without looking at it.

"You can't!" The shock in the other boy's voice gave Neville a dark pleasure, and he felt guiltily pleased that he had finally broken the maddening composure. "This time last week, you're sayin' we've got to be ready to die, and now you're givin' up because one person got punished?"

"He had her Cruciated." Neville turned, gesturing fiercely towards the girl's dorm. "*Cruciated* for something that Snape would have taken fifty points for on his worst days. I can't make you all go through that!"

Seamus' cheeks were flushed, and his blue eyes glinted defiantly. "Speak for yourself; I've had it done, and I'll take it again if need be!"

"I've had it too! And I know what it can do better than you! There's things worse than death, Finnigan! There's things you don't even –"

He broke off, and a long silence lingered between them before he could force himself to speak again as he stared into the common room fire. They had the room to themselves now, the few other students having long fled, but he still kept his voice low, barely above a whisper. "I wasn't raised by my Gran because my parents are dead. I've just let people think that."

"I don't –"

"They were tortured by Death Eaters. Cruciated until they lost their minds. They've been in St. Mungo's for sixteen years now. They don't even know who they are. They don't even know who I am. I'm not going to see that happen to any of my friends because I have to prove I'm a great, heroic Gryffindor after all."

"Bloody hell." Seamus slid off the arm of the couch to sit closer to Neville, placing one hand gingerly on his friend's back. "That's ..."

"That's why I'm disbanding the D.A.," Neville said firmly. "I couldn't live with that."

"Fair enough." There was a long pause, and then Seamus spoke again. "But if we're comin' clean about things, I'd ask you to listen to why I'm going to keep fightin', whether or not you disband Dumbledore's Army."

Neville nodded, not sure if he was unable or just unwilling to say anything more.

"When you go home, you go home to two parents who don't know you, and that's a terrible thing. But they're at peace in whatever place they've gone to inside their heads, sure as if they were dead. I don't go home to peace. I go home to Belfast. Pipe bombs and assassins in the night. You-Know-Who is full of hate, and I *know* what hate does." Seamus' voice choked, and when he continued, there was a desperation in his words, almost a pleading.

"If we let this keep on, as soon as he's done with the Muggle-borns, he'll move on to the Muggle world in whole, and when he's done with that, it'll be Half-Bloods, and then he'll find somethin' else to hate, and somethin' after that. People who're driven by hate never have peace, and they never allow it. I know. I'm Irish, and that means I root for a Quidditch team with leprechaun mascots, but it also means that for me, this isn't the world going to war, it's just war coming into the part of my life I thought knew better. You say there are worse things than death, and I couldn't agree with you more. I just don't agree about what they are."

"Harry's going to stop him." Neville waved a hand towards the window. "He's out there now, following some kind of plan that he and Dumbledore had. They were locked up together half of last year. He knows what he's doing, and he doesn't need us."

"Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't." Seamus shrugged. "But I know that I need to be able to look myself in the mirror when all this is said and done, and I don't reckon I could do that if I just sat on my thumbs ... and I've known you for nearly seven years, whether or not I knew about your parents, and I don't think you could, either."

Neville opened his mouth to protest, but before he could say anything, there was the sound of a door opening behind him, and both wizards jumped to their feet, turning just in time to see Ginny step into the common room. She looked tired, and several strands of red hair dangled limply in her face, but she was smiling. "It's okay."

"Parvati –" The two boys spoke at the same time, and she raised a hand, cutting them off.

"Parvati's going to be just fine. She's much better off than you were, Seamus. Alecto got a lot more creative than just Crucio, but this was just some bad bruising from when she was thrashing around. That awful smelly green goop Neville made cleared it all up like it had never happened. She'll be down in a few minutes. I tried to tell her to rest, but she wants everyone to see that there was no serious harm done."

His knees felt as though she had hit him with a Jelly-Legs Jinx, and Neville sank to the floor, bracing himself with one hand. "She's not ..."

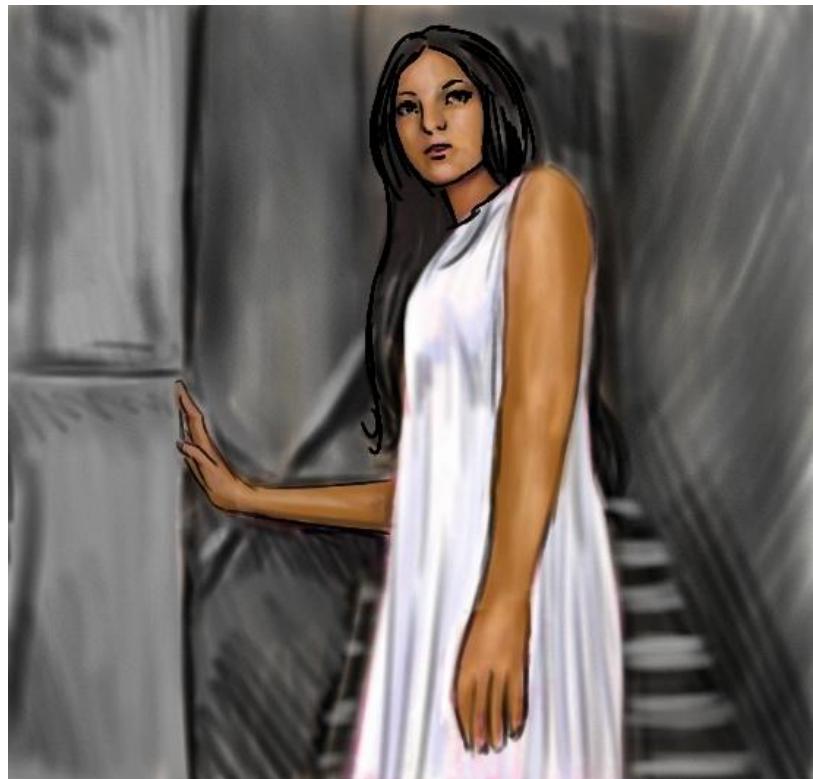
Ginny's brown eyes were soft with deep understanding. "No. She's not. And she's not mad at you, either. I think she's actually going to be a little insufferable for a while. Really feels like she's proven her own, you know?"

"Yeah." The word came out weakly, and he shook his head, trying to wrap his mind around the idea that Parvati was all right. Ginny's words and the truth in her expression fought bitterly with the echoes of the screams from only hours before.

"What do you say, Neville?" Seamus turned to him, a challenge gleaming in the blue eyes. "Does she get a medal at the next D.A. meetin'?"

He paused for what seemed like years before answering, his eyes fixed on the warm yellow glint of the Galleon that lay in the corner of the room where he had thrown it. At last he answered, though he was unable to meet either pair of eyes that he could feel looking at him. "No. Don't want everyone else doing it ... I'll let her out of training for a few days, though."

"That's the least you can do." Parvati sounded raw, as though she was getting over a bad bout of laryngitis, but there was a smile on her face as she came down the stairs. Her steps were a little hesitant, she leaned on the railing a little more than usual, but otherwise, she seemed to have just woken up from a nap, her dark hair cascading loosely over her shoulders and her arms revealing not so much as a single bruise in her sleeveless nightgown.



"Parvati!" Neville dashed across the room, unable to help himself as he swept her up in an enormous hug that lifted her completely off her feet. He spun her around, and she laughed like a child, clinging to his neck in a grip that was wonderfully, giddily sure and real and healthy and sane and whole and alive. Setting her down, he felt his breath catch in his throat as he looked at her, just looked at her, drinking her in as though the reality of her being there could drown the memory of her torture.

He hadn't destroyed her after all. She was looking at him now through bright, clear eyes, and she was fine, more than fine. She was beautiful.

Neville felt a strange clutching sensation in his chest, and he was suddenly aware that he was holding a girl in his arms, her small, delicate body close against his, her skin warm and soft beneath his hands. He had never particularly noticed girls before, had even wondered occasionally if there was something wrong with him as every other boy in his year had lost his mind over them to various degrees, but he abruptly understood what all the fuss was about. Parvati was the most beautiful thing he had ever laid eyes on, and it was the most natural thing in the world to tighten his arms around her, bringing her in and lowering his head to catch her lips with his.

The kiss was awkward at first, his nose bumping up against hers, but she seemed to know what she was doing more than he did, and she tilted her head, bringing her hand up to slide her fingers through his hair and pull his mouth onto hers. Then it became deeper, more passionate, and Neville's head seemed to spin with the wonderful insanity of it all. His mind and heart and body were flying apart at the seams with more new sensations than he could even begin to deal with. When they finally broke apart, he gasped, his eyes wide. "Parvati ..."

She smiled, and placed a single finger over his mouth. "Thank you."

He blinked, aware that he was grinning stupidly and that he shouldn't be. "For what? You were tortured."

"You let me prove I can take it. I've been afraid I couldn't. My parents have always protected me, and I've been afraid that when it came time to fight, I would break. I know I won't now, and you let me do that. It must have been so hard for you ... I could hear you down here yelling."

He nodded dumbly. "I couldn't forgive myself for letting them hurt you."

"There's nothing to forgive." Her hand traced down and settled on his chest over his heart. "I know I have courage now, but it took courage for you to send me, too. You're going to be a great leader, I think."

Neville thought of the Galleon, abandoned in despair. He thought of how he had wanted to let it all go, of how he had wanted to give up, to leave the fight to others, and he dropped his eyes in shame. "No ...."

Then she kissed him again, and again everything else melted away. His skin had taken on a life of its own, a pulsing, hungry thing, and he had never really realized how much he had changed, how much they all had changed over the years since coming to Hogwarts. It was a man's body he wore now, tall and broad-shouldered, his stubbled chin scraping lightly against her face as they

kissed, and somehow he had missed that she was no longer a little girl, but a woman whose body was made of endless curves that his hands now traced through the thin nightgown.

They were adults now, adults and soldiers who still had to be children and students, and this was war, and this was hell, and this was heaven, and he was a victim and a leader and terrified and fearless and everything - *everything* was different than it ever had been before. Neville knew that he had turned some kind of corner in that moment, and whatever happened from now on, none of the old rules about how he thought things were or who he thought he was were going to matter. He would have to find out from scratch, and somehow, that didn't seem as terrifying as he thought it should have been.

Everything was different now. He was different. The worst had happened, he had sent someone to suffer the Cruciatus Curse, and the world had not ended. Instead, it had begun. He had grown up.



## Chapter Three Cat and Mouse

"Are you sure they're down, Dobby

The little elf nodded enthusiastically, his large ears flapping. "Yes, sir. We put the potion in their drinks just like you told us to, and they're all sleeping most soundly. Professor Snape fell asleep right on his desk!"

"I still wish we had Harry's map," Ginny muttered.

Neville shrugged dismissively. "We all wish a lot of things, but we're going to have to make do. Now, let's go over things one more time." He looked around at the circle of faces, then tapped his wand against the map of the school spread out on the table in front of him. "Does everyone know what names and classrooms they're taking?"

There were nods all around, and Neville made a small, satisfied noise, then held up his fake Galleon. "Something goes wrong, don't try to solve it. Squeeze it twice and get out of there. It'll turn cold for the rest of us, and that means one team has aborted and we have to be on alert. If something goes *really* wrong and you get caught or are about to, squeeze it *four* times, and it'll heat up for the rest of us -"

"- And that means we all run back to our common rooms like we had a herd of dragons on our heels," finished Lavender.

"Exactly. Now, there's fourteen pairs of us, and only the two Carrows and Snape. Even if you count in Filch on their side, that means no matter what, twenty of us will get away. Those are good numbers, *soplease*," he cast an imploring look at his fellow Gryffindors in particular, "no one get any ideas about trying to rescue each other if you feel the Galleon heat up. Just run.

Hopefully, nothing goes wrong, but if it does, we need to save as many people as possible to keep fighting them. *Please.*"

After a reluctant pause, a murmured chorus of 'yes' and 'all right' broke out, and he took a deep breath as he stood up from his chair, reaching into the pocket of his robes for his scarf, no longer striped with the crimson and gold of Gryffindor, but solid black. "Everyone remember to cover your faces, just in case. And take your time with the Flagrate ... we want those names carved in good and deep. These last ten days have really taken a toll on morale, and we don't want them to be able to erase what we've done before everyone's had a chance to remember what's really at stake. Ginny, do you have the Garbling Gum?"

Ginny dug into her pocket and dumped a large fistful of brightly wrapped sweets onto the table, each emblazoned with the bold "W" of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. "It'll last about an hour," she informed them, "but if you spit it out, your voice goes back to normal instantly. It doesn't taste all that bad, either. Sort of a cinnamon-minty flavor."

They each took a piece, and as he popped it into his mouth, there was a bizarre fizzing sensation, as though he had just sucked the foam off a flagon of butterbeer. When he spoke again, his voice sounded as if he were talking through a mouth organ; tinny and unnatural, neither male nor female and utterly unrecognizable. "Let's get ready, then." He checked his watch. "We move out in five minutes."

There was a flurry of activity as all around him, people made last-second checks of wands, belts, and shoelaces, wrapping scarves around their faces and unwrapping gum. Neville was pleased to see that no one looked afraid, and although his own heart was pounding, it really seemed more out of excitement than fear. It felt good to be doing this, striking out and taking a real action after almost three weeks of this new, sick parody of the school they all loved. He grinned as he imagined the looks on the faces of Snape and the Carrows in the morning when they discovered that every single classroom and the Great Hall had been emblazoned with the names of the missing, the banished, the 'undesirable' and 'impure' that they all missed so much.

He wrapped the scarf around his face, checking in the large full-length mirrors that the Room of Requirement had sprouted for the occasion to ensure that nothing but his eyes were visible. Neville made sure the knot was tight so that it wouldn't slip down if he had to move quickly, then double-checked his partner, Ernie Macmillan, before submitting to the same scrutiny. There was no room for error here. They all knew that with the Cruciatus Curse being used so freely – a dozen times in ten days, and twice on helpless little first-years! – the penalty for getting caught at something like this did not bear thinking about.

At last, with a minute to go, they were all ready. Neville shivered as he surveyed the two neat lines. They no longer bore any resemblance to the underground study group they had once been. A Chromomorphus Charm had turned their uniforms solid black, erasing any sign of house allegiance, and their faces and hair were completely hidden by scarves and the hoods of their robes. The eyes that burned out at him were hard and fiercely determined, and he nodded in satisfaction before jabbing his wand towards the ceiling. "Dumbledore's Army!"

Twenty-seven wands joined him, and the echo of the battle cry, eerie and inhuman from more than two dozen voices disguised by the magical cunning of the Weasley twins, rang through the secret room as silver sparks shot into the air. They all met in the center of the ceiling in a single, vivid burst of light that was dazzling, even blinding in its intensity.

When the last of the glare had finally faded away, the room was empty. They had vanished like ghosts into the darkness. The mission had begun. Dumbledore's Army was on the move.



OOO

Neville had never been out in the corridors this late at night before. He and Ernie didn't dare light their wands, afraid of waking unfriendly portraits or alerting some patrol that Dobby hadn't known to warn them of. In the near-total darkness, the only light spilling thinly from the crescent moon in occasional windows they passed, the familiar halls became utterly alien. Everything seemed to echo horribly, every breath, every cautious footfall impossibly loud, and he was certain that they must be making enough noise to rouse the entire castle, even though he knew otherwise.

By the time they reached the doors of the Great Hall, he could feel sweat running down the back of his neck inside his robes. It itched, but he refused to stop and remove his hood to scratch. Even with the scarf still wrapped snugly around his face, it felt like bad luck. They paused at the doors, and Neville made eye contact with Ernie, motioning silently at the hinges.

His Lieutenant nodded in understanding, and Neville raised three fingers, counting down and then flicking his wand at the huge brass hinges, concentrating with all his might on the silencing charm. He had never been great with non-verbal spells, and he crossed his fingers as they each took hold of a handle. Holding his breath, Neville pulled, and he had to stop himself from letting out a sigh of relief as the huge doors gave way without the slightest squeak or groan.

They opened the doors just enough to allow themselves to slip inside, closing them again the moment they were through. Ernie tilted his head at the bolt, a question in his eyes, but Neville shook his head. If they had to run, he didn't want to have to remember to unlock their only escape route.

The Great Hall was usually the center of activity at Hogwarts. In addition to being packed with students and staff three times a day for meals, people could always be found at the four long tables, gathering to study, read their mail, or simply socialize and exchange gossip with friends from other houses. It was like one big common room, sunlit or glowing with the warm flicker of candles bobbing above the tables, flagons of pumpkin juice and trays of tea and coffee always at hand along with whatever snacks the house elves had cooked up for the day.

Now, however, the room was utterly deserted, the tables bare; heavy and medieval-looking rather than sturdy and welcoming. The charmed ceiling was dark, forbidding, the slivered moon sliding in and out behind thick clouds that hid the stars completely. At the end of the Hall, seemingly miles away, the staff table stood like a judge's bench, staring down at them across the huge, terribly exposed expanse of stone floor.

Taking a deep breath, Neville motioned to Ernie, and the two boys split up, crouching low and scurrying almost on hands and knees along the edges of the room beneath the tall windows. When they finally met at the far end of the Hall behind the staff table, he felt as though they had been reunited after a long and perilous journey, and by the wild relief in Ernie's eyes, he knew that he was not the only one.

Even when he had broken into the Department of Mysteries with Harry, Neville had never felt this on edge. Then, for all the fear, it had been easy simply to trust that Harry knew best, and by the time that was proven to be terribly wrong, they were in a fight for their lives. The strange thing was, he couldn't decide if he hated the sensation or loved it, this hyper-extended world where every breath seemed to have weight, every moment a palpable potential for so much to go right or unspeakably wrong.



Standing, he switched his wand to his left hand so that his handwriting would not be recognized, then pointed it at the stone wall directly above the Headmaster's chair. *Flagrate*, he thought, and a jet of orange light shot out of the end of his wand, shockingly vivid in the near-total darkness. At almost the same moment, Ernie did the same, aiming a few feet lower. Slowly, the fiery jets traced a path along the stones, leaving letters in their wake that burned like embedded embers, spelling out first letters, then words.

*Long Live Harry Potter*

*Remember Cedric Diggory*

At last, their task was done, and they stood back. Their mouths were completely hidden, but he could see the grin in Ernie's eyes and knew it was mirrored in his own as they admired their handiwork. Emblazoned above Snape's ill-gotten seat of power for all to see were a mere seven words that they knew would be more than enough to cause a reaction in everyone who would fill the Hall in only a few hours.

Then the smile froze on Neville's face, and his heart seemed to stop, the blood turning to ice in his veins as a sound echoed through the still night air like the crash of a gallows' trap door. The slow, deliberate, mocking clap of hands.

Once, twice, three, *four* times. His hand squeezed the Galleon in the pocket of his robes, and as it began to burn, he released it. All over the school now, he knew, the rest of the D.A. would feel the heat of the coin and know that the worst had happened. They had been caught, and all he could do now was buy time, time for his friends and comrades to flee, to get to their common rooms and dormitories, to restore color to robes, change into pajamas, pretend to be sleeping in harmless innocence.

Slowly, he turned, Ernie doing the same, and it was with a horrible absence of surprise that he saw the dark figure standing in the aisle that ran up the center of the room, a smirk twisted into his thin face as he held them at wandpoint. "Out for a little evening vandalism, are we?" Snape asked mockingly.

"Hex yourself!" Ernie spat, the fury and hate in his voice clear even through the distortion of the twins' invention.

Casually, Snape flicked his wand, and they found themselves suddenly under a harsh, spotlit glare. Neville drew back, raising his hand involuntarily to shield his eyes as spots burst and danced in his vision. From somewhere beyond the blinding whiteness, Snape laughed coldly. "Neville Longbottom, I see. Your little costumes are quite effective. I can't say I recognize your friend, but I would know that flinch and cower anywhere."

Fury made the wavering green spots seem to glow red, but Ernie was the first to react, his movements a blur as he jerked his wand towards the center of the light. "Imped—"

The spell was cut off half-formed as a jet of red light struck the Hufflepuff directly in the chest, and he fell backwards, unconscious before he hit the ground.

Neville dove, taking advantage of the split-second opportunity to throw himself to cover behind the tall, heavy wooden shield of the Headmaster's chair. He didn't care what happened to him, but he knew that the longer he kept Snape there, the more chance the others had to escape. Still, he knew he had bought himself seconds at the most. Snape was only toying with him, and could toss away his feeble shelter with the merest twitch of his wand whenever he felt like it.

Desperately, Neville's mind raced through every spell he knew, searching in vain for something that could get him out of this, then suddenly, he noticed a tiny black envelope with silver lettering resting in the open fingers of Ernie's limp hand. As he recognized it, a plan came to him, reckless and half-formed, but all he had. Quickly, he spat the gum into the palm of his hand and pointed his wand at it. "*Waddiwassl!*"

The little yellow wad shot into the air and flew over the table, and Neville did not waste the time to look as he heard Snape's roar of outrage as the gum shot with violent precision directly up his left nostril. Barely a second later, he shouted, "*Expulso!*" but Neville didn't care. He had lunged, and now the little packet was in his hand, and in a single motion he tore it open and scattered the contents into the air.

The Great Hall was instantly plunged into utter, inky darkness.

For a moment, there was silence, then Snape's voice rang out, seeming to come from everywhere at once. It didn't just echo or reverberate, it issued directly from the floor beneath him, from the chair against his shoulder, as though the entire Hall were one immense wireless set. "Poor Neville. Always so very close, but always some simple, fatal flaw. Counter-clockwise instead of clockwise. Ten scoops of beetle eyes instead of a tenth of a scoop. Attempting to slip a potion to the Potions Master of fourteen years."

Neville bit his lip, letting his head slump in frustration. The awful truth was that Snape was right. He had been a fool to try and drug his old Potions teacher, and twice a fool to simply accept Dobby's word that they were all sleeping without checking himself, assuring himself that they

weren't going to be undone by something as easy as pretending to be asleep. He wanted to try and answer, to defend himself, but he caught himself at the last moment.

*No, no more childish errors. He says he recognized how you flinched, but he doesn't know for sure it's you, does he? That's why he's baiting you, because if you get away, he still won't know for sure who it was. He's waiting for you to say something - to defend yourself or to try and defend your friend - because he'd assume something like this would be done by Gryffindor.*

He started to edge towards where he thought Ernie lay in the blindness. If he could Ennervate him and they could find a way to get past Snape while the darkness held ....

An incredibly loud groaning and scraping, as if from ten thousand old doors being forced open at once, stopped him cold, and he covered his ears against the awful, spine-shivering noise. Bizarre imaginings of what Snape had done reeled after one another, the most vivid among them the recollection of Professor Flitwick making a table do a jig in Charms. Was he about to be pummeled to death by furniture?

"Not so quickly. I can hear you moving, but you may wish to reconsider it." Once again, the voice seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, making it impossible to know where his nemesis was. His heart hammered with the wild certainty that Snape was behind him, right behind him, about to reach down and—*no*. He closed his eyes, taking a long, deep breath to snuff the burgeoning panic. It made the dark better somehow to shut his eyes, creating the illusion that something would be there if he opened them.

Snape's tone was casually superior, as if he were simply in class again, informing them all of the ingredients and procedures for a potion he considered particularly elementary. "The tables and chairs in the Great Hall are extremely adaptable to the will of the Headmaster. You're a mouse, Longbottom, a mouse among lions, and you've set your own trap. You no longer know where anything is in here, not even me, not even really, I would venture, yourself. You're disoriented, uncertain, hunted. And if you touch anything now - if you so much as brush the hem of your cloak or the tip of one finger against the edge of a table - you will find it's a very ... sticky situation."

His hand tightened on his wand. He was trapped. He wanted to jump to his feet, start firing off the worst hexes and jinxes he knew, go down fighting, but he held himself back. This was cat and mouse, *but, Neville thought with a grim smile, this mouse has a few tricks up his sleeve. You think you can hear me? Not anymore.* Concentrating hard, he waved his wand. *Muffliato!*

"*Potter!*" Snape's voice was harsh with shock, but he quickly recovered. "So, you've come back. Taken a page from Barty Crouch, have you? I commend you. Neville was an inspired choice. But you've given yourself away. Didn't I tell you never to use my own spells against me?"

Neville had no idea what Snape was talking about, but it didn't matter. If Snape thought he was Harry under Polyjuice potion, so be it. He had to get out, and he would worry about that later. With another flick of his wand, he thought *Proximitus!* The wand began to vibrate in his hand, and he extended it cautiously, feeling as the vibration increased, became faster, harder as he approached something. It didn't matter what it was, touching it would mean he would be stuck there until the Peruvian Darkness Powder wore off, and he backed slowly away, using the wand to replace his eyes as he got carefully to his feet and began to move in tiny, hesitant steps towards what he hoped was the doors. If he could just get beyond the reach of the

darkness...but he didn't know how far it extended, it would be so easy to wind up stuck in a corner, trapped in a dead end of tables and chairs ....

For a single regretful moment, he thought of Ernie, stunned and helpless, but he forced himself to dismiss the other boy from his thoughts. Ernie knew the risks. Better one of them escape. He took another step, sweeping the wand back and forth in front of him like a blind man, feeling the subtle changes in vibration ....

Then another voice rang out, distorted and inhuman. "*Stupefy!*" The red light was swallowed invisibly, but Neville could hear the spell sizzle the air, and he braced himself for the impact, for the nothingness, but there was only the muffled thud of a body hitting the floor, and then the voice again. "*Aeolum!*"

With the whistling howl of a winter storm, a gale blew through the room, nearly knocking Neville off his feet with its force. The hood was ripped from his head, and he felt his robes snap and ripple as he turned, curling his back to it, his hands clutching the scarf to keep it from being yanked from his face. His eyes were still closed tightly, but as the wind died down, he became aware of an indefinable difference to the quality of the darkness through the lids, and when he opened them, he found that he could see again.

The powder had been dissipated by the magical windstorm, and two figures were standing by the doors, black-robed and hooded, their faces swathed and their wands raised. Relief swelled in Neville's chest at the sight of his fellow D.A. members, even as he felt a twinge of frustration that they had disobeyed his orders. They started forward towards the dizzyingly complex maze of chairs and tables that now divided the Great Hall, and he waved his arms, motioning them back. "Don't touch anything! It's charmed! You'll stick!"

Catching his bearings more completely now, Neville realized that he had barely made it a few paces from the staff table, but more chillingly still, the crumpled, black-robed form of Professor Snape lay less than ten feet away. A bitter, vindictive thrill surged through him as he pointed his own wand at the hated teacher and added his Stunning Spell to the first, smiling as the greasy-hair figure twitched at the impact.

Crossing carefully to Ernie, his robes pulled tight around him so as not to touch anything, he placed one hand restrainingly on the Lieutenant's shoulder before tapping him with the wand. "*Ennervate.*"

Ernie's eyes blinked open, and he started to sit up, but Neville held him back. "Snape's down. We've got to move fast, but *don't touch anything*. Questions later. Just run." Ernie gave a nod of understanding, and he released his hold, letting the other boy to his feet.

The sprint through the jumble of furniture was like running a minefield. Tight corners, nearly impossible angles, dead ends ... and then they were trapped again. There was no way out. Neville swore. The chairs had formed an absolute barrier, and not even Luna or Dennis could have squeezed their way past without touching anything, much less two good-sized young men. He paused a moment, certain he could hear Snape breathing behind them, that he would wake at any second.

A hand grasped his shoulder, and he turned. Ernie's eyes were gleaming with the triumph of an idea, and he made a flipping motion with his hand. "*Levicorpus?*"

Neville nodded, bracing himself, and the next thing he knew, it felt as though he had stepped into a snare. An invisible rope tightened around his ankle, and he was jerked bodily into the air, flying up fifteen feet above the stone floor. Ernie moved his wand carefully, and Neville floated across the barrier of chairs as if dangling improbably from a broomstick, then, with a twitch of the wand, he fell. Remembering at the last possible moment what Bagman had taught them about taking a fall, he twisted in mid air, the breath driving from him in a gasp of pain as he hit the floor shoulder-first, rolling with the impact and swaying to his knees at the feet of their two rescuers.

The taller of them had already hoisted Ernie into the air with the same spell, but he was spared the pain of such an undignified landing, rather lowered gently to fall less than a foot. Neville was already standing, but his right arm was not responding correctly, and somewhere through the adrenaline, he had a suspicion that he was probably hurt, that there was pain to come in the near future, but right now, it didn't matter. Switching his wand to his uninjured left hand, he broke into a sprint.

There was no stealth now. They crashed through the doors of the Great Hall and out into the entry way, then paused. Three sets of eyes turned to him, and he made the decision instantly, gesturing to Ernie. "Down. Common room." By the light of their wands he finally recognized the protuberant, pale eyes of Luna Lovegood, and he knew that the cobalt blue of her taller companion would belong to her partner, Terry Boot. He jerked his head towards the stairs. "Your tower. Run!"

Scarcely waiting long enough to see the three of them scatter, he flew up the stairs towards Gryffindor tower, taking them three at a time. By the time he had reached the seventh floor, he was out of breath, his head reeling, but Ginny was there, dressed in Ron's oversized pajamas as she reached out for him through the portrait hole, and then he was inside and he was on the floor and someone was ripping the scarf from his face, the robes from his shoulders.

It was Seamus, and Colin was there with Neville's pajamas in his hand. His injured shoulder screamed in protest, but Neville didn't care. Without a thought for who might be in the common room or who might see, he stripped down, grabbing the pajamas and pulling them on as he followed Seamus up to their dormitory. The covers of his four-poster were already turned back, and he jumped in, yanking them up to his chin and throwing himself down on the pillow.

He was gasping for air, his heart pounding so loud he was surprised it didn't wake students in other houses, his cheeks flushed, his entire body shaking and his shoulder throbbing with deep, burning pulses, but he was laughing. The mission was a success. Snape had no idea who he had caught after all, and they had gotten away.

He had done it. They had done it. And tomorrow ... well, that was tomorrow.

OOO

Parvati's fingers were gentle as she prodded his shoulder, but it seemed to scream at the slightest touch, and Neville pulled back, screwing up his face as he hissed in protest. She rolled her eyes, swatting him on the chest. "Oh, stop it. How am I supposed to be impressed by my brave warrior's heroic injuries if he's such a baby about them?"

Neville smiled ruefully. "You're not supposed to poke them. You're supposed to look at them and make sympathetic noises."

"Sympathetic noises won't help that sprain." She took hold of his shoulder again in an iron grip, and he gasped out loud, biting back a swear word as she aimed her wand. "Now hold still, and I'll kiss it better after."

"Kiss my mouth, not my shoulder, and we have a deal," he managed through gritted teeth.

Parvati waved her wand, then tapped it against the swollen, discolored skin, but the itching sensation of healing had barely begun when there was a knock at the door. They both froze, breathless, as Seamus climbed down from where he had been sitting on the end of his bed and answered it.

To Neville's relief, but also to his confusion, it was Professor McGonagall who entered. He could count on one hand the times their Head of House had been up to visit the tower dormitory, and he felt himself flush scarlet as he realized the position he had been caught in. It did not look good to be found awake at half-five in the morning with your shirt off and a girl sitting on your lap.

Seeming to come to the same conclusion, Parvati gave a strangled little squeak and jumped to her feet, smoothing her hair and robes awkwardly. "Professor!"

McGonagall raised an eyebrow, but did not appear in the least bit scandalized. If anything, she seemed a bit annoyed as she swept into the room and crossed to the window seat where Neville sat. "Settle down, girl. These rooms have more charms on them than Gringotts. If you'd been doing anything untoward, I'd know well enough. Still -" She paused, and what almost seemed like a sort of smile quirked her lips. "I suppose that it does mean the rumors are true."

The idea that someone might consider him to be a worthy subject of rumor had never occurred to Neville, and he gaped at her, fighting back the surge of curiosity about the gossip that had apparently been surrounding himself and Parvati. He would ask Ginny later. It didn't seem possible, however, that McGonagall had come up just to confirm schoolyard tales, and his brows drew together in curiosity. "Professor?"

She did not look at him directly, but rather past him, out the window and over the Hogwarts grounds, where the first blue light of dawn was just beginning to show, and her voice was deliberately, even excessively casual when she spoke. "Argus Filch came to see me this morning at just past four. I do not like to be awakened so early, and even less so when it is to tell me my classroom has been vandalized. Apparently, someone had carved the names 'Ronald Weasley' and 'Justin Finch-Fletchley' rather deeply into the walls. Nor was mine the only classroom so affected."

Neville tried to force an expression of innocent shock onto his face. "Really?"

Her gaze remained steady through the window. "Indeed. Each and every one, and the Great Hall besides, and all with the names of students who are not with us this year. Professor Snape claims he came very close to catching the culprits last night, and he says he has his suspicions of who is at fault. He plans to do something about it later today."

"And do you know what he's going to do to them?" Neville tried in vain to keep his voice as casual as hers.

"I do not think it will be very pleasant, but the specifics, no." Now she did look down, seeming to notice his state of undress for the first time. He reached for his pajama top, suddenly self-conscious, but the movement caught his injured shoulder, and he stopped, grabbing at it instinctively with his other hand. She watched him silently, and he felt utterly exposed under that flinty stare. "Have you lost some weight, Mr. Longbottom?"

The question baffled him a moment, and he looked down at himself, then up at her again. "A few pounds, I guess ... not much."

"The quality of our food remains excellent, so I would assume you have taken up some sort of strenuous extra-curricular activity. Perhaps the kind that would also have injured your shoulder? Are you considering going out for Quidditch? I have never understood why so many students feel they must prepare for that in secret." Neville's eyes widened. *She's offering me an alibi!*

He nodded quickly. "Um ... yeah."

"I will be sure to make a note of it. And Miss Patil —"

Parvati's voice was unnaturally high-pitched, and she had blushed from her collar to her hairline. "Yes, Professor?"

"I hope you understand that if Professor Snape questions me about Mr. Longbottom's whereabouts in the early hours of this morning, I will not be able to protect your reputation."

With an immense sigh of relief, Parvati nodded, smiling as her eyes shone with understanding. "Of course, Professor."

"Very well." Professor McGonagall swept her long robes around her and crossed back to the door, but at the last moment, she stopped. As she turned back, Neville caught the briefest glimpse of what she must have looked like as a very young girl as she cast them a rare, mischievous smile. "One last thing. The next time you're planning an adventure, please inform whichever of your little friends is appropriate that Mr. Finch-Fletchley hyphenates his name. I had to correct that myself."

OOO

By the time they went to breakfast, Neville's shoulder was healed well enough that he could sling his schoolbag over it with only a slight wince, but there was still a vivid yellow and green discoloration to the skin beneath his robes, and they had decided it was best to leave it that way in light of Professor McGonagall's suggestion. None of the Gryffindors in the D.A. had been able to sleep properly, and he noticed a lot of dark circles and growling stomachs as they made their way downstairs.

As the crowd grew thicker and it became clear that the students were buzzing with the excited hum of officially-suppressed news, he caught Ginny's eye, and she grinned at him. He grinned back. Whatever was waiting for him from Snape, it would definitely be worth it. The feeling of despair that had been settling over the school had vanished like a fleeting morning mist, and in its place, they seemed to have charged the very air itself with hope and defiance. All around him, the names were being murmured, but he stopped short as he heard his own name muttered in the same breath as Harry's from a Gryffindor first-year.

The child glanced up at him as she noticed, and Neville saw to his surprise the same worshipful look that he was accustomed to seeing the likes of the Creevey brothers give to Harry. As he looked around, he caught half a dozen more of the same, and not just from young Gryffindors, but from older students who weren't even in the D.A.. The Slytherins, however, were regarding him with expressions of open hate, and Blaise Zabini bumped into him rather too hard for accident, deliberately ignoring the collision, but raising his voice so that Neville clearly heard "—know *we* aren't responsible for such childish prank. *Some* people understand the value of keeping their skins intact."

It seemed that somehow, the insightful spotlight of gossip had picked him out as having had something to do with it all, and the familiar desire to duck his head and blush fought with his new instincts as a leader, and he settled for something in the middle, raising his head proudly and continuing into the Great Hall with his cheeks burning.

The moment he crossed the threshold, however, his heart stopped, and all color drained from his face. All around him, as though a Silencing Charm had been cast, conversations were trailing to a halt, and only the Slytherins seemed able to continue talking as they took their places at the tables and chairs which, he noticed vaguely, had been restored to their customary places.

Snape sat in the Headmaster's chair as they had all come to expect, his black robes spread around him, his face looking even more sallow in the golden light of the autumn morning, but there was a horrible smile on his thin lips. On the wall behind him, a newly-hung Hogwarts banner looked awkward and out of place, the fiery letters still half-visible through the thick tapestry, but that was the source of the scowls on the faces of the Carrows and the downright murderous look on Filch's cadaverous face. The source of Snape's smile stood on either side of his chair.

Luna Lovegood and Hannah Abbott.

The two girls stood at rigid attention, still in their nightgowns, gagged and immobilized by thin, magical silver ropes to a pair of gleaming stakes that had been sunk deep into the stone. They looked horribly like the etchings of witch burnings from their History textbooks, only a pile of kindling at their feet needed to complete the image. Luna seemed completely unaffected by her situation, even on the verge of dozing off, but Hannah was terrified; her eyes huge, her cheeks gleaming with tears.

*You sick bastard,* Neville thought fiercely, *you know it was two boys, no matter what, you know it wasn't....* Then across the long room, Neville's eyes met Snape's black gaze, and he knew. If Snape had taken his victims from Gryffindor, the surprise would have been lost, but in all the rest of the school, he could have chosen no two people who would have torn into Neville's heart as deeply, no two dearer friends. Now, he would have to watch them suffer punishment he knew to be his, or come forward freely, and either way, Snape would have won. It was checkmate.

Ginny grabbed the sleeve of his robes, and Neville felt himself pulled down onto the bench, shaking in helpless anger as they all took their seats. He tried to catch McGonagall's eye, but she too appeared to be holding back more anger than he had ever seen in her, clutching her wand in her fist as she stared down at her plate as though vividly imagining Snape transfigured into something small, writhing, and very stabbable.



Food appeared in front of them, but no one moved towards it, waiting breathlessly as Snape got slowly to his feet, leaning forward and spreading his hands on the staff table as he looked out over them. "Last night," his words echoed through the silence as though he had used a *Sonorus* Spell, "I caught two students in this Hall committing a most ill-advised act of vandalism. They managed to escape, but they have been apprehended since."

He turned towards Hannah, and she began to struggle wildly against her bonds, a thin trickle of blood appearing on her chin as the fragile skin of her lips split under the chafing of the gag. Snape was utterly unmoved by her terror. If anything, it seemed to feed his overall attitude of satisfaction as he continued. "Miss Lovegood and Miss Abbott will be demonstrating for all of you the extreme foolishness of such actions. The *Cruciatus Curse* would not seem to have been enough of a deterrent, but the Carrows assure me that they have many other means of enforcing discipline which they are eager to show you."

The two squat siblings stood, tiny eyes shining with malice in their pale, doughy faces as they pushed up the sleeves of their robes and approached the bound girls, wands in hand. Alecto reached Luna first and stood only inches behind her, leaning forward and running her wand along the white cheek like a lover's caress. Their eyes met, and something in Alecto's gaze made Luna scream.

It was the final straw. Never, in all their time as friends, had he ever seen Luna Lovegood frightened. Even when they had faced certain death in the Ministry, she had been like a rock to them. No matter what she wore or what strange things she believed in, he could always count on her to face the worst with a calm detachment that made it easier for everyone around her to find their own bravery. Now she was screaming, screaming silently beneath the gag, her blue eyes impossibly huge and pleading.

Neville stood.

"No!" Parvati was yanking at his robes now, pleading with him to sit back down, but it was too late, and he would not have taken it back if he could. He shook her off and stepped into the aisle, pulling himself up to his full height as he stared unflinchingly at the man he hated more than anything else in the world. Triumph gleamed in Snape's eyes, but he did not care as he began to walk forward. He knew that the Fidelius Charm would prevent him from being able to betray the D.A., but it would not prevent him from taking what was rightfully his.

Snape tilted his head, one eyebrow raising in mock surprise. "Mr. Longbottom? Do you object to my authority as Headmaster of this school to punish troublemakers?"

"They didn't do it."

"And do you know," he sneered, "who did?"

Neville took a deep breath. "Take me. Punish me instead."

"Very noble, but there were two." Snape turned back to the Carrows, who were all but drooling over their would-be victims; human attack dogs on the thinnest of leashes. He raised his hand, but stopped as a second voice called out.

"Then take me as well. I shall be the other." Neville felt a swell of pride as Ernie Macmillan rose to his feet and joined him in the aisle.

There was a long, torturous pause, and Neville wondered suddenly if this was the punishment. To draw them out, make them admit themselves, and then go ahead and brutalize the girls anyway. Then Snape gave a wave of his wand, and the Carrows were unceremoniously pushed back from their victims. The silver bonds and stakes faded like smoke, and Hannah broke away instantly, flinging herself into Professor Sprout's open arms as she burst into tears of relief.

To everyone's surprise, Luna did not move so quickly. For a long moment, she stood there, staring at Alecto, and then she spoke, her dreamy voice unusually clear. "I do not think," she said simply, "you are a very nice person, even on the inside." Then, with a toss of her head, she joined the Ravenclaw table as though nothing had happened, reaching for a slice of toast and beginning to spread tomato sauce on it before Alecto had even finished processing what she had said.

Now Ernie and Neville stood alone, and he could feel every eye in the school upon them as Snape crossed his arms and tapped the end of his wand against his chin. "Ah, yes. The brave, chivalrous Gryffindor and the strong, loyal Hufflepuff. You must feel so proud, flinging yourselves into harm's way to save the fair maidens from a fate worse than death. But, if you are determined to make examples of yourselves, I can accommodate you."

Snape gave a twitch of his wand, and thick iron chains burst like snakes from the wall behind him, shooting forward to clamp around their wrists and ankles before either boy had a chance to react. Neville dug in his heels, struggling with all his strength, but it was utterly useless as the chains began to retract, dragging him forward until he was pressed against the cold wall beneath the words they had carved the night before. His face twisted, and he started to speak, but before the words could leave his lips, a gag had tightened around his mouth, all but choking him.

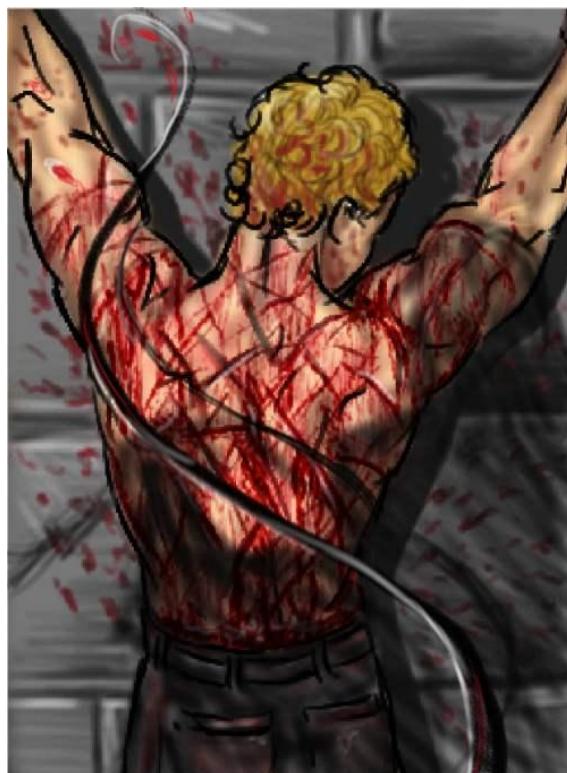
"You will remain there," Snape said smoothly, "without food or water until the damage has faded. I believe you will find that it was done quite thoroughly. It should take two or three days at least before the last has gone." Neville could hear the chains rattling as Ernie fought against his own restraints, and then he gasped beneath the gag as a sharp, burning sensation like the blade of a hot dagger ran swiftly down his back, and he was stripped naked to the waist, his torn clothing falling in a heap at his feet.

Somewhere behind him, there were muffled sobs as a few of the younger students began to cry. Then there were gasps, a few moans, and Snape's voice again. "Mr. Filch, I believe you have waited for this for a very long time."

The gag vanished, and Neville turned his head with difficulty, his cheek scraping against the rough stone as he caught Ernie's eyes in a silent pact. Then he closed his eyes, clenching his teeth and opening his hands to brace his palms against the wall.

There was a swish, a crack, a slap. Once. Twice. Three times. Again and again. A dozen times now. Two dozen. Three. Forty times in all. More were crying, older students now, and a few of the little ones were in complete hysterics. Then again. Once. Twice. Forty again.

Neither boy made a sound.





## Chapter Four

### Taking Sides

The first thing he saw was that the world had turned from gray to crimson. Neville blinked slowly, his eyelids feeling ridiculously heavy, and everything seemed to double, spin, and then resolve itself again into the same flat redness. He tried to move, only to discover that he could not feel his own body, and he began to wonder if he was hallucinating. If he was, it wasn't so bad. The red was strange, but the numbness was a blessed relief after the endless, grinding pain that had been his world for so long.

"You're awake!" The voice seemed familiar, and as he struggled to place it, his thoughts responding with the same reluctance as his eyes, a face appeared in the middle of the red. It was a girl. A pretty girl, with long red hair that had been braided back, and she looked both worried and very happy. The red. It was above the girl. Familiar. The canopy of his bed! Then he wasn't hallucinating. He was in his own bed, and he knew the girl. What was her name?

"Uhnnee." The word sounded like it had come from a badly wounded stranger, hoarse and ragged, and he tried again, but this time only a rasp emerged from his lips.

"Shhhh...." Soft, gentle hands slipped beneath his head, lifting it slightly, and he felt something against his mouth as the girl – Ginny – smiled kindly at him. "Here...drink this."

It was water. Nothing more than cool, fresh water, but the moment it touched his tongue, he knew that he had never tasted anything so sweet and wonderful. He gulped at it greedily, but she pulled it away, and he heard himself moan in despair. "A little at a time, you'll make yourself sick." She allowed him another mouthful, and he held it as long as he could bear before swallowing, feeling the parched, shriveled tissues of his mouth and throat seem to come alive again.

He was starting to be able to feel again. Neville became aware that his tongue was grossly swollen in his mouth, his lips like sandpaper, cracked and rough. Still, however, he could feel

nothing at all from the neck down, and this began to worry him. He tried again to move his arms and legs, but it was impossible to tell if anything had happened.

With a sense of rising panic, he looked up at Ginny, gratefully accepting another sip of water before he attempted to speak again. "Ca't...fee...m'seff...."

The words were still husky and half-formed, but she seemed to understand. "It's okay. You've been given enough Painkilling Potions to numb a Hungarian Horntail. It's really better that way right now. You should still be in the hospital wing, but Professor Snape only let you stay there until you were out of danger. I don't know how much you remember, Neville, but you and Ernie almost died."

He frowned, trying to shake his head. The beating had been excruciating, the hunger and thirst unbearable, but to say they had nearly died.... "Zaashrat'n."

"I'm not exaggerating. Madame Pomfrey made them take you down at the end of the third day. You'd been completely passed out since that afternoon, Ernie'd only lasted about an hour longer. It was the dehydration after...after you lost all that blood. She said you'd both have been dead by morning at the latest."

Neville tried to say something again, to ask about the brave friend who had taken the terrible punishment alongside him, but Ginny lifted the cup to his lips, and this time, the water was sour, almost lemony, with a strangely bitter aftertaste. He wanted to ask what it was, but everything was growing dim again, and the last thing he heard as he slipped under was Ginny's voice, strangely maternal for a girl so young. "Just sleep for now, there'll be time later...."

OOO

When Neville awoke again, it was to far greater awareness, but also to far greater pain. His back felt as though it were on fire, but when he tried to roll over to ease the discomfort, every muscle and joint let out a howl of agony, and he groaned.

"Fearless Leader has returned to us."

Recognizing Seamus' distinctly accented voice, he turned his head stiffly, and was surprised to see that a good-sized crowd had gathered by his bed. Next to Seamus, there were Ginny, Parvati, Colin, and Lavender, but also Luna and two young fourth-years he didn't recognize who were clad in the emerald-trimmed robes of Slytherin. His eyes widened. "What –"

"Terrance Runcorn and Malcolm Braddock," Ginny explained. "New recruits. They wanted to see for themselves that you had survived in one piece."

"We're not enlisting in something that's scrambling to find a new leader," said the taller of the two boys. He was stocky, with a shock of deep chestnut hair and the beginnings of a beard already darkening the line of his jaw quite strongly for only fourteen.

Neville blinked, wondering if he had returned to consciousness as completely as he had first thought. "But you're –"

"Slytherin." The second of the boys was almost half a head shorter, as fine-boned as a girl, with a nervous, fluttery air about him. "But this whole business has just gotten so...." He waved his

hands as if shooing away something nasty. "I mean, people aren't going to stand for it once it starts to come out, and there's always talk. I just don't think it's going to work out for the Dark Lord overall. There's always going to be people like you lot, and I've read enough history to know how things go when there's a really strong resistance movement...the regime has to crack down harder and harder, more people get unhappy, then...you know. I'd like to be on the winning team early, if you don't mind."

He seemed more to find it distasteful than actually morally distressing, but Neville supposed that it didn't really matter, provided he was sincere. His eyes flickered to the first one, Runcorn. "Your name seems familiar."

"My father's a Death Eater. I think what the Dark Lord's doing is great, myself. I'd love to never have to brush shoulders with Mudbloods again, but Potter impersonated my father at the Ministry, and the Dark Lord had him...." The dark, hooded eyes squeezed shut, and Neville recognized the boy's expression all too well.

"Tortured?" He asked gently.

The boy nodded. "Awfully." His eyes opened again, and they were blazing with a helpless fury. "He hadn't done anything wrong! That little Mudblood dropped something into his coffee while the other one was asking him some stupid question right after he'd Apparated in for work, and the next thing he knew, he was practically bleeding to death out his nose! The Dark Lord's gone insane!" A wild, hunted look had come over Runcorn's face. "The Malfoys are as good as dead - the next time his wand hand gets itchy, and they're one of his most faithful, the most powerful - he doesn't know the difference between friends and enemies any more!"

Despite the slurs against Muggle-Borns, Neville actually felt far more certain about Runcorn than Braddock. There was something there far more powerful than any historical deduction, and the value of having a Death Eater's child among them was not something to be taken lightly. On the other hand, Dumbledore had learned a lesson about trusting apparent turncoats that Neville would never forget. He looked past the two Slytherins to Ginny and Luna. "Let me talk to my Lieutenants. Seamus, take them out into the common room...and see that no one messes with them. They're our guests for right now."

As soon as the door had closed behind the three, Ginny made a face. "First order of business is going to be Scourging Runcorn's mouth."

"First order of business," corrected Neville, "is giving me a *really* good explanation of why you trusted them...." He shifted, giving another low moan as his back let loose with a burst of pain that clutched his throat with the urge to be sick. "Scratch that. First order of business is more of that Painkilling Potion."

"Madam Pomfrey said you can't have any more for four hours." Lavender informed him regretfully. "It's really strong, and she says if you stay on it too long at a stretch, you can get addicted, and that's worse than having to deal with the pain on and off. The same with the Sleeping Draught. Although we have been able to get about two gallons of water and a couple bowls of porridge into you, so you should feel a lot better on that front."

Neville swore, then looked back to Ginny. "*Slytherins?*"

"Right." She scooted her chair in closer, propping one elbow on the bed and leaning towards him. "The thing is, I don't trust them as far as I can spit them, but Luna had a really good point." She nodded her red head towards the Ravenclaw Lieutenant, who shrugged.

"They came to us. That means they had guessed. The way I reasoned it out, if we deny them, they'll be bitter, angry, and free to gossip and spread assumptions and rumors among their House. If we accept them, they're under the Fidelius Charm, and we're a lot more protected, because they *can't* rat us out. Oh, and I made you some flowers." The word 'made' seemed odd, but then she held out one dainty, pale hand, and he saw a small, folded piece of paper in it. As she opened her fingers, it burst into a cascade of beautiful, vividly painted crimson and gold flowers that bloomed extravagantly all over her lap.

He smiled, remembering again why Luna had been more than worth the amount of pain he was now in. She really was a wonderful friend. Seeing her suffer what he had or worse at the hands of the Carrows would have been a truly unbearable ordeal. "Thanks," he said, hoping she understood that he meant a lot more than just the flowers, "—and I guess you're right about the Slytherins. They just make me really uncomfortable."

Colin made a face and an extremely descriptive gesture, and Lavender stifled a snort of laughter. Ginny was less successful. "Colin, sometimes you hit it right on the nose," she giggled.

The Secret-Keeper shrugged, blushing. "I try."

"We all do." Neville let his eyes close for a moment, shifting his shoulders as carefully as possible to try and find some position that was at least fractionally more comfortable. As he did, something occurred to him, and his eyes flew open. "Merlin's pants – Ernie!" He struggled to sit up, scarcely noticing the fresh eruption of pain, but Parvati and Colin grabbed him in a gentle but unshakable hold and kept him down.

"It's all right," Luna soothed, "Ernie's fine. He's got...well, his entire year has skived out of lessons for the last two days to look after him. The Carrows wanted to have them all punished, but Professor Sprout was kind of amazing. She blocked them off from the common room and said if they lay one more finger on Ernie or anyone helping him, they'd have every past and present Hufflepuff to deal with personally." She tilted her head with a fascinated look. "They really do mean it about the loyalty, you know."

Neville thought of how much strength he had drawn from those resolute hazel eyes, and he gave a quiet, deep smile. "Never underestimate it, Luna. It's an incredible thing." He shifted again, wincing. "Is there *anything*..."

"Now that you're awake, we can use some better healing spells, and we still have some of that ointment of yours. If you want, we can step out a moment, and Parvati can do that for you." Ginny exchanged a meaningful glance with Lavender, who took hold of Colin's shoulder in the kind of grip Neville had usually seen mothers use to lead their small children past Honeydukes.

"It's okay," Neville said, "I mean, there's no point in being modest about taking my shirt off when I've been used as a wall hanging in front of the entire school."

"No," and now there was an odd tone to Ginny's voice that he recognized as meaning she was communicating something on the frequency only other girls could understand. Even Luna

looked up as if receiving a private wireless signal, getting to her feet and scooping the flowers onto his nightstand. "We'll just go. You and Parvati need some alone time."

Colin's eyes widened, and Ginny gave a little huff and grabbed his other shoulder. "Oh, for goodness sakes, not even Harry could, you dirty-minded little...and *believe me*, I'm sure. Neville's still getting over being heroic." She exchanged another significant look with Lavender. "Nothing gets past that." The two girls steered a baffled and protesting Colin out of the dormitory with Luna close on their heels, and then the heavy door closed with a very solid click.

There was a moment of silence, then Parvati turned the covers back and climbed up onto the bed beside him, the familiar bowl of thick green ointment in one hand. Her dark eyes were soft as she looked at him, and she settled her free hand on his chest as lightly as a butterfly. "Does it hurt?"

Neville's mouth twisted in a wry smile. "Oh, a bit."

"Let me do what I can. Please." She pulled the covers off of him completely, and he realized for the first time that there was a layer of bandages wrapped around his torso from his shoulders to the waistband of his pajama trousers. "Can you turn over?"

He tried, but was surprised to find that the simple movement was beyond the limits of his strength. He gasped, "I'm sorry...."

"No." She set the bowl down and drew her wand. As she waved it over him, he felt an odd sense of lightness, as though flesh and bone had turned to air, and she turned him over as easily and lightly as a doll. Neville felt embarrassed by his own weakness, but she shook her head. "It's a miracle you're alive. Don't worry. You'll get your strength back quickly enough."

Another wave of her wand, and he felt cool air strike his skin as the bandages peeled away. He smiled bitterly. "You do that a lot more gently than Snape."

"I would hope so." There was a faint slurping sound as she dug some of the ointment from the bowl, and then he felt her begin to daub it on the raw wounds that criss-crossed his back, and he sighed in relief. The healing itched, but the burning, stinging, aching aftermath of the flogging had eased almost instantly. "Does that help?"

"Lots, thank you," Neville said gratefully.

Parvati worked in silence until his entire back had been coated in the mixture, the strong smell permeating the tower room. Then she waved her wand again, and the bandages folded over, their gentle pressure now soothing rather than arduous, and she settled him onto his back again. With another flick of her wand, the Featherlight Charm lifted, and Neville felt himself sink down into the mattress again. She leaned down and kissed him carefully on the forehead. "I'm so sorry."

Neville frowned, staring at her in complete confusion. "What on earth are you sorry for?"

She looked down, twisting the bowl in her hands and biting her lip. "Neville...I have to tell you something."

He raised an eyebrow curiously. "If it's that you were snogging Seamus while I was down, I'll forgive you, but I might have to punch him when I'm feeling up to it."

"No, I haven't been snogging anybody." She paused again, then her cheeks flushed, and when she looked up, her eyes were gleaming wetly. "Neville, I can't do this."

"Are you leaving the D.A.?"

"I mean us. It's just...I'm being weak, I know. Ginny's still in love with Harry, even though we don't even know if he's dead or alive, but that's just it, Neville. I'm not in love with you."

"I know." Neville was surprised by the words even as he said them, but he knew they were true. He'd never really thought Parvati loved him, nor, for that matter now that he thought about it, did he love her. He liked her, they were great friends, and the things they had done together were certainly wonderful, but that powerful connection, that something extra that he had seen form between some of his other friends was missing. She was a friend and a beautiful girl that he thoroughly enjoyed kissing, but nothing more. "You don't have to cry, Parvati. I *like* you plenty, but I'm not in love with you either."

"You don't understand." He felt entirely sure on that count, but he kept his mouth shut as she went on. "I *could* love you, and I don't want to. There's a lot more to you than I thought there was, and there's something about doing this, about leading the D.A....you're changing. You're turning into a real hero, and —" She broke off, looking away as if suddenly embarrassed. "—Oh, you'll realize it eventually, but you're not bad-looking now that you're not walking around with your head down biting your lip and cringing all the time."

Neville frowned at this, slightly offended. "I hope you don't think I'm all that repulsive if you've been snogging me for two weeks."

"Of course I don't! But I thought you were cute and sweet...you're becoming handsome. Never mind." She shook her head in a frustrated little gesture. "It's a girl difference, it doesn't really matter to you, actually. But there will be other girls, Neville, I want you to know I know that, and I'm okay with it."

"Thanks." He didn't know what else to say.

"I want you to know I'm okay with it, because there won't be any other boys for me, and I don't want you to think that I'm pining for you." Her tone was firm, but there was no sense of sacrifice, and a slow, dawning thought occurred to Neville as he thought of a distant Aunt he had once met at Christmas.

"Have you decided you fancy...." He paused, remembering what his Gran had called it. "That you like to stir your cauldron in the same direction?"

"What?" She looked at him as though he had sprouted tentacles from his ears, then rolled her eyes. "No, Neville, I would have thought you noticed that I definitely like boys." Parvati gave an exasperated sigh, then her voice became serious again. "It was the second day you were up there. You hadn't moved, your back looked so awful...and Ernie there next to you...oh, Neville, it was just terrible to have to watch you both suffer like that."

Parvati shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself tightly. Neville started to reach a hand towards her to comfort her, then stopped, unsure if he was allowed to do that any more. Thankfully, she didn't seem to have noticed. "I was watching Susan – she's been in love with Ernie for ages – and what she was going through, and I realized that if I'd loved you, it would have been too much. Ginny's said the only way she can stand it is that she doesn't have to know. If I fell in love with any boy in this school right now, I could lose him tomorrow in the most horrible ways and have to watch it happen. I can't deal with that."

"So don't fall in love with me." Now he did put his hand on her thigh, and he was relieved that she made no move to swat it away. "We can still be friends and snog sometimes."

"We can still be friends." And now she did move his hand away. "But if we keep snogging, it's going to be too easy to...just trust me. We can still be friends, but that's all."

There was a long silence between them, then Neville nodded. "Okay."

She blinked. "Okay?"

"Yeah. I don't want you to be hurt."

"But just...okay?" Parvati was staring at him in what seemed like offense.

"Well, if we're still friends, and we've already agreed we don't love each other, what else do you want me to say?"

She gave him a long look that implied there were a great many things *she* wanted to say, but then tossed her head, setting the bowl back on the nightstand as she reached into her pocket. "Don't worry about it, Neville. It's just something we have to put up with when we don't 'stir our cauldron in our own direction.' But my Galleon's gone off. I have to get ready for the meeting tonight." She stood up, and Neville called after her.

"Parvati!"

She turned, her eyes unreadable. "Yes?"

"Tell Ginny and Luna I'm coming to the meeting." His voice was as strong as he could make it, and he seemed to have surprised her as much as he did himself with the steadiness of it.

"Neville, you can't even turn over on your own!"

"Then I'll have help. But I'm coming tonight." He locked eyes with her, willing her to see, to understand how much he needed to be back with all of them, to feel their strength, their determination, to *know* why he had given himself over to three days of torture and who knew how long before he was properly back on his feet. "Please, Parvati, I *need* to go. You said it yourself; it was hard for the people who watched, too. I want them to see they didn't break me, and I've got to know that they aren't broken either. This thing is just getting started. Tell Ginny. As a friend."

Parvati was silent for so long that he felt sure she must be deciding how to refuse him kindly, then at last she nodded solemnly. "As a friend."

She turned away, and as she opened the door and slipped out, leaving him alone, Neville wasn't sure whether her last words were meant for him to hear or not. "Gryffindor boys! Oh, thank goodness it's just as a friend."

OOO

"Speaking as the Gryffindor Lieutenant, your second in command, your friend...oh, hell, and Harry Potter's girlfriend, Ron's sister, and the Captain of the Gryffindor Quidditch team if adding any of that helps, I think you're out of your mind to do this." Ginny glared at him disapprovingly, her arms crossed tightly over her chest.

"I have to do it. I've already told you why. Now, are you going to help me?" Neville allowed the exasperation he was feeling to show freely in his voice, his own chin thrust out in a defiance that matched hers.

She sighed. "Yes, I'll help you, but only because I don't want to guess at what kind of stupid thing you'd do if I didn't. Michael and Terry are waiting out in the common room already. I didn't think I'd be able to talk you out of it."

He frowned. "Michael and Terry?"

"To carry you." Ginny gave him a truly filthy look. "Because if you think you're going to walk there, be my guest. I'd love to see you try."

Neville blinked, then thought of how Parvati had moved him so easily earlier that day. "Can't you use a Featherlight Charm?"

"Neville, how tall are you?"

He frowned, thinking about it a moment. "Honestly, I'm not sure exactly. I don't think Gran's measured me since I was about fourteen. Now...somewhere around six footish, I'd reckon."

"Six foot one." She announced crisply, and he stared at her.

"How the heck do you know that?"

Ginny shrugged. "Because you were about two inches shorter than Ron when you were slouching all the time, and that's how tall he is. But the point is, even if I did use a Featherlight, I'm five foot six if I'm standing perfectly straight and wearing decent heels. Just how would I be supposed to get you there? Drag you?" She motioned to the door. "Michael and Terry are the only guys we've got who are tall enough and aren't in Hufflepuff joined at the hip to Ernie."

Seeing her point, Neville nodded. "Then get them in here."

She gave him another long, reproachful look, then left with a final toss of her hair. He could hear her through the open door as she went down the stairs to the common room. "You can come up, boys. The Idiot in Chief is in the bed, meeting starts in half an hour. You're so brilliant, see if you can make him see reason."



Within a few moments, Michael Corner and Terry Boot entered the tower dormitory, and Neville smiled awkwardly at them. "I'm sorry you guys have to do this."

Michael shrugged. "No worries, mate. We all saw what happened to you, no one thinks you should be strolling down the halls yet. But we're not going to argue you. I mean, if you can stand up to beauty, brains, and the best Bat-Bogey Hex in the school, what hope would we have if we wanted to talk you out of it?" He motioned to the foot of the bed. "Is this one your trunk?"

Neville nodded, and Michael knelt, opening the lid of the large trunk and beginning to pull out a Hogwarts uniform. As he watched it pile up, from socks and tie to belt and vest, he realized that only on days when he had been late to class had he ever come close to the sudden understanding he had of how many pieces were involved in simply getting dressed. It seemed like a rather imposing undertaking, all things considered, but he didn't want to go looking like an invalid, and he was grateful that he hadn't needed to explain that to the two Ravenclaws.

Terry pulled back the covers and placed one hand beside his back, then frowned. "Neville, is this going to rip your back up worse? I don't mind helping, but I'm not going to exacerbate those injuries."

"No," he answered honestly, "Parvati put some stuff on it that's closed the actual wounds. It's really just that I'm stiff, sore, and weak as a Pygmy Puff right now. A day or two of food and rest, and I think I'll be ready to go back to Bagman, I'm serious."

"Fair enough." Terry slipped one long arm under his back and carefully pulled, the other hand braced against Neville's chest as he eased him to a sitting position. Below the newly healed surface, the deeply bruised muscles cried out, and Terry hesitated, seeing the color abruptly drain from his commander's face. "Are we still okay?"

"Did I mention sore?" Neville tried to summon a wry smile, and it seemed to satisfy the others.

Terry smiled back ruefully. "Yeah, you did, as a matter of fact. And I guess you were telling the truth." He looked up, seeing Michael had arrived at his side with the uniform bundled in his hands. "Let's just start with the shirt, these bandages will do well enough for an undershirt."

The two young men worked in a smoothly coordinated team, taking turns bracing him upright as they helped him slip his arms into the crisp white cotton. Neville was pleased to find that his strength was already beginning to return a little, though rather embarrassed that it was worth noting that he could raise his arms by himself. He glanced up at Michael. "You guys have a really good system. You done this before?"

They exchanged a look over his head, then Michael laughed. "Nah. Terry and me've just been best friends since first year. I think we can read each other's minds on just about anything by now."

"I'll remember to team you up more often," replied Neville.

Terry shook his head as he looped the crimson and gold tie around Neville's neck. "Not if it's anything too dangerous. I think I'd have lost my capacity for rational thought if it had been Mike on the wall."

"I didn't think that could happen to a Ravenclaw!" Neville gasped in mock horror, and they chuckled.

"Only in the most dire of circumstances," said Michael somberly.

"Speaking of dire circumstances," Neville lifted his arms again as they slipped the vest over his shoulders and tugged it down, "I had a lot of time to think up there, and it's been really bugging me. How did you hit Snape with that Stunner, Terry? It was dead dark."

"Automatic Aiming Charm." The reply came without the slightest hesitation. "Logically, Snape would be closer to the doors than anyone he had caught, since you were planning to put the words above the Headmaster's chair at the far end. So I figured it was safe to just take down the nearest person."

"What if you'd been wrong?"

"Then I'd have kept firing, cleared the darkness, and Ennervated whoever didn't have a sadistic streak and a Dark Mark."

Neville nodded. "I'm still mad at you for defying orders, but thanks for saving my life."

"Don't mention it."

Michael took hold of his legs and swung them off the edge of the bed, then knelt to peel the socks from his feet. "I'm glad the girls changed these," he noted, "Five days, half of that soaked in blood...." He made a face, and Terry swatted him on the back of the head.

"You're just thinking of your own socks." He gave Neville a look of protracted suffering. "The Ravenclaw dormitory will never have a Doxie problem. We get fumigated every night when Mike takes his shoes off."

"Keep it up, and I'll jinx your lips shut, Boot." Michael blushed.

"Note," Terry said archly, shaking out the black robes, "that he does not argue my essential point."

"Hey," Neville laughed, "that's the one reason I'm grateful Harry and Ron left. They'd leave their Quidditch bags lying around until it would've knocked out a Mountain Troll."

"Seriously, mate." Michael looked up from where he was tying the laces on Neville's shoes, and the sparkle in his eyes had vanished. "There was a *pool* of blood under you two. That was sick. Just sick. I can't believe Snape actually did something that...*barbaric*."

"Yeah, but it could have been fatal, and that I'm still here tells us something important," Neville pointed out, and they both stopped, tilted their heads at him curiously. "They won't kill. Not while we're still at school, anyway. Whatever they're willing to do, they'll stop just short of actually killing us. I think for all their screaming about 'Mudbloods', they know we're a dying breed. That pure blood is worth more to them in my veins than on the floor."

"Amicus," Terry's voice sounded haunted, "*licked the whip* when Filch was done. Those people are not rational, Neville." He paused, cinching the belt around Neville's waist and then leaning back. "Your hair looks like Harry's and you've got a good start on a beard, there. You got a comb in the trunk?"

"Sure, but don't worry about the fuzz for now, I don't think we have time." Michael started to dig in the trunk again as Neville went on. "No, they're not rational, or, for that matter, sane. But Snape is, and he's also smart enough to know that their biggest strength right now is that the Pureblood families feel safe, even if they don't agree. They can justify punishment and claim the severity is exaggerated, but if they start littering the wizarding world with the bodies of Pureblood kids...."

"Good point." Michael ran the comb quickly through Neville's hair, then they each slung an arm over their shoulders. "On three...one, two, *three*."

They stood, and Neville swayed drunkenly between them for a moment before finding his balance. Supported like this, he was pleased to find that his feet seemed steady enough under him, and he was actually able to take a few tentative steps before the world spun alarmingly.

"Easy there," Terry cautioned him. "Let us." Their shoulders tensed beneath him, and he felt himself lifted easily as they began to make their way down the stairs.

"Thanks again for doing this," said Neville.

"Don't mention it. Just know that we'll call in the same favor if it's ever one of us strung up there," said Michael.

"I hope it isn't," Neville's voice was sincere as they paused at the portrait hole, and Terry planted his feet firmly, taking Neville's full weight as Michael climbed out and reached through.

"It might be." Michael's pleasant face had grown stony. "I'm not going to just let that happen again. They try to do it to someone else, and I swear on my father's grave that I will come back in the middle of the night and cut them down if I have to. Seeing you hanging there day after day...it was hard on all of us, but I think some of those poor first-years are going to be scarred deeper than you and Ernie. We've had one little bloke in our House who's been waking up with screaming nightmares every single night since."

"Just be careful, Mike." There was an air of gentle terror in Terry's tone, and Neville knew from that more than anything that Michael was dead serious. They made it the rest of the way to the Room of Requirement in silence, concentrating on the effort of maneuvering Neville as quickly as possible with what minimal help he could offer, but as the door appeared and opened before him, a wave of noise erupted that stopped all three in their tracks.

The entire D.A. was on their feet. Applause, whistles, whoops, and cheers rang out in a deafening wall of enthusiasm. Hannah Abbott ran forward, throwing her arms around his neck and nearly hitting the two boys on either side of him as she covered his face with grateful kisses.

And then Ernie was there, himself supported by Bagman and another boy that Neville recognized as his fellow Hufflepuff Beater, Derek Adams. He wondered if he looked as pale and sunken as Ernie did, but it didn't matter as the Lieutenant held out a hand, and Neville took it, pressing it in both of his. There were no words, there never could be, but seeing his friend there and alive seemed to charge him with new strength, and he pulled himself away from the Ravenclaws and took an unsteady step forward as Ernie did the same.

The two boys embraced, and he tried to silently communicate all the gratitude, all the feeling of brotherhood that had formed over their shared ordeal, and he knew it was understood. They had survived, they would go on fighting, and it wasn't just he and Ernie, it was all of them who had been through the fire now. Snape didn't know it, but he had ensured his own eventual defeat when he had ordered their torture, creating a deeper unity and sense of purpose than Neville or Harry had ever managed on their own.

The knowledge of that filled every blazing pair of eyes that shone in the room, no matter what color edged their robes. The survivors broke apart now, shaking as they supported one another and drew their wands. Silver sparks from not just two, but nearly forty wands collided in a burst that was brighter than hope as their voices rang out in a victory cheer that simply had yet to be fulfilled. "Dumbledore's Army!"

OOO

"All right, this is tonight's drill." Ginny stood in the center of the large circle, turning slowly to address each of the people who stood around her, sleeves rolled up and wands in hand. "Luna and I will be firing Stunning Spells. You won't know when, you won't know at who until we do it. Your job is simple. Block them. But no Impedimenta, no Protego, no Expelliarmus, and no Stupifying us back. You've had three days to find another way, let's see how you've done."

Neville watched in admiration from the couch at the side of the room, wishing he could be there with them, but aware that he had exhausted himself completely just joining them in the Room of Requirement. After the initial tumultuous greeting, things had quickly settled down, and he was pleased to see how well Ginny and Luna had the D.A. in hand without him, even if it was a little humbling to see how easily he could be replaced.

The two girls stood back to back, rotating slowly, then Luna abruptly flicked her wand, shooting a jet of scarlet light towards Seamus. "*Sgaith!*", he shouted, and the light went veering off wildly to careen against the ceiling with a deafening *crack*.

At almost the same moment, Ginny fired, striking out towards Fritz Bagman. "*Duradermis!*" His forearm took on the hardened, leathery texture of crocodile skin as he brought it up, and the spell bounced off harmlessly.

Luna sent one at Padma, but there was no incantation in reply. Instead, Padma seemed to vanish from the waist up, the spell shooting harmlessly into the wall behind her, and it was a moment before they realized she hadn't used any magic at all. She had folded herself almost completely in half backwards, bracing her palms on the floor behind her for a split second before bouncing smoothly to her feet again. Padma tossed her head, poised like a cat to move again, but a dozen people were staring at her open mouthed, and she blushed. "What? She never said it had to be magic, it's yoga."

"I'm in love." Seamus put one hand dramatically over his heart and gave her a suggestive grin. "If you can twist yourself up like that, darlin', I've been havin' all the wrong fantasies about you and your—" He was cut off as a stunner hit him full in the chest and he collapsed bonelessly.

Ginny gave a warning look around the circle. "No distractions. Minds on your wands, boys, not in your trousers. Let's go."

"*Kir!*" Luna's stunner towards Anthony Goldstein cracked against a solid brick wall that had sprung up out of thin air.



Susan Bones said nothing, but reached out towards the red light, jabbing at her empty, open palm with her wand, and the left hand suddenly seemed gloved in a shimmering silver mesh as she caught the spell in a single flicker of fading scarlet.

"*Mortuscantum!*" The jet of light Ginny had sent towards Terrance Runcorn dissolved into black smoke, shooting back up towards her wand and knocking her flat with a gasp of pain. She dropped her wand, holding up her hand and staring at it as if it belonged to someone else as fat blisters began to swell on her reddened palm.

Runcorn was smiling in smug self-satisfaction, but Lavender was shaking with fury as she spun towards him from a few positions away in the circle. "That's Dark Magic! You hurt her!"

"I blocked it, didn't I? I assure you, Princess, the Dark Lord doesn't limit himself. Neither can we," Runcorn sneered.

"Yes we can." Luna's soft voice carried surprisingly strongly over the blossoming argument. "We have to." Runcorn opened his mouth to argue her, but she cut him off. "Oh, I actually don't

believe there's any difference between 'normal magic' and 'Dark Magic.' I think it's all in how the spells are used, but that's not the issue. Where did you learn that spell, Terrance?"

"My father." He spoke proudly, his dark eyes flashing as though daring anyone to challenge him.

"And he's a Death Eater, isn't he?" Luna asked the question as casually as if she were inquiring his father's first name, or what town they lived in.

"A damned good one."

"Then I would assume that would be a spell the Death Eaters would be familiar with...and know how to block. That seems to me like it defeats the entire purpose of this exercise."

Ginny had gotten to her feet now, waving her wand over her injured hand and flexing the fingers cautiously as the blisters retreated into the whitening skin. "No Dark Magic," she agreed firmly, nodding to Luna. "Avada Kedavra if you *absolutely* have no choice, but that can't be blocked if it's meant deeply enough, and any situation where you'd need to use it, you'd mean it. Otherwise, Luna's exactly right." Her cheeks flushed as she narrowed her eyes at Runcorn. "But I should have known a Slyth –"

"*Lieutenant Weasley!*" All eyes snapped to Neville as Ginny turned, her mouth falling open in shock. He had never called any of them by their formal titles before, nor had he ever spoken to her with such disapproving authority.

Neville pushed himself up on his elbows, trying to muster the same withering look that McGonagall used so effectively. "We leave our Houses at the door in this room. In here, we're all Dumbledore's Army. I agree, no Dark Magic, but *that's it*. My whole House has rallied around me while I'm hurt, Ernie's too, and if they had gotten Luna or one of the others, Ravenclaw would be there. If Slytherin finds out where those two are tonight, they'll be lucky if there's much left of them to be turned over to the Carrows. If you're going to say anything about what House they belong to, you should say you respect the sheer guts they've shown."

Then he turned his gaze towards Runcorn, his frown deepening. "But if you ever hurt a fellow D.A. member again, or if I ever hear you calling *anyone* 'Mudblood' or 'Blood-Traitor', you will have me to answer to personally, and I promise you, once I'm back on my feet, I'm a lot bigger than you. *Is that clear?*"

Both the red and chestnut heads nodded, chastened, and Neville settled back on the couch again, wincing as his sore joints protested the exertion he had put them through that night. "Go on."

The exercise proceeded without further incident until each person had taken their turn to try and block the Stunning Spell. Neville was proud to see that by the end of it, only three people needed to be Ennervated, not counting Seamus, and even tiny Dennis Creevey had acquitted himself well with a nice little Deflecting Jinx that was effective, even if not particularly impressive or unusual compared with some of the other spellwork that had been demonstrated.

Finally, when everyone was conscious and seated again, Ginny strode to the front, pushing her hair out of her eyes as she turned to address them. "That was really great, I mean it. You did some really incredible stuff, things that I've never even heard of before, and that's exactly what we wanted to see tonight. Thinking outside the box. We're going to need that when it comes time to fight, because we'll be up against the best You-Know-Who can throw at us, not just Snape and the Carrows."

Luna came up next to her, a small brown-paper parcel in her hands, and Ginny took it, her smile changing in a way that reminded Neville strongly of the twins. "Now, *some* people don't know when to quit, but we are an army here, and we follow orders. Although, Ernie, I want to let you know that on the other side of this door, House rivalries are firmly in place, so Hufflepuff had better change their hand signals before the next Quidditch match."

Ernie laughed, raising his hand in a signal that was universally understood, and had nothing to do with Quidditch. Ginny stuck out her tongue at him and returned the gesture, then looked back at the others. "Our bravely battered leadership told us to keep going and make another attack, so that's exactly what we're going to do. Tomorrow morning, everyone will take one of these -"

Slitting the paper with her wand, she opened the box and pulled out several small bundles of tissue and began handing them out to the front row, where they were passed back until everyone had one. Satisfied, she took one herself and handed the box back to Luna, who extracted the last one before vanishing it. "Scatter them wherever you can, just don't get caught. Classrooms, hallways, common areas, the grounds...." She paused, then gave a deliberately inclusive glance at the two Slytherins. "Terrance, Malcolm, if you could get some into the Slytherin common room or the dungeons, that would be great. We want them everywhere. Dobby will even be helping us get them into the Staff Lounge."

Lavender opened her bundle and stirred the contents with her finger, frowning at what looked like a handful of burnt rice. "What are they?"

"Leaflets." She tapped a grain with her wand, and it exploded in a tiny puff of smoke, then the smoke resolved into a sheet of parchment. Ginny grabbed it as it floated towards the floor, waving it in demonstration. "Anthony wrote them, they're fantastic. It's an article about great Muggle-borns in wizarding history. These -" She shook the little tissue bundle, " –won't be noticed when you're scattering them around, but they're set with delayed charms to go off at

random times tomorrow afternoon, so if we do it right, the whole school will be filled with these things and we'll all be somewhere completely innocent."

In the front row, Romilda Vane raised her hand. "Won't they be able to just vanish them?"

Luna smiled happily. "Oh, please, Romilda, try."

With a skeptical frown, Romilda waved her wand at the parchment in Ginny's hand. "*Evanescō!*"

A cascade of parchment flooded from Ginny's grip like a waterfall, and she was forced to drop the original copy as her hand grew too full of the replicas. "They multiply by one hundred every time you try to destroy them. I'm sure there's a way to do it, but the ten most common spells to get rid of something are covered." She took a little bow as a ripple of applause burst out.

"Thanks, but credit for *that* set of spells goes to my brothers and Weasley's Wildfire Whizbangs."

"If they feel like finishing their education, let them know they're really missed, will you?" Colin said, and there was a round of nostalgic, knowing chuckles among the older students who remembered Fred and George's reign of mischief most vividly.

Ginny smiled brightly. "I will, I promise." Turning down the cuffs of her sleeves, she picked up her robe from the chair she had tossed it over at the beginning of the meeting and pulled it on over her jumper. "That's all for tonight, guys. It's twenty to, so let's start getting back to our common rooms. Remember: small groups, don't rush, have an alibi agreed on for where you've been. Meeting dismissed."

As the meeting began to break up, students separating into innocuous pairs and trios of Housemates and friends, Neville motioned towards the sturdy young Slytherin who was standing apart from the others, looking at his Housemate with distaste as Braddock chatted with a Creevey-like eagerness to two Ravenclaws. Runcorn scowled, then crossed over to where Neville lay, his arms folded defensively across his broad chest. "Sir?"

"I stood up for you, Runcorn. Now I want to know why I won't regret that." Neville did not flinch as he met the younger boy's insolent gaze, aware that in his weakened position; he could not afford any chinks in his apparent authority.

"I already told you," Runcorn spat sullenly, "he had my father tortured."

"And if your father is in favor tomorrow, if he's You-Know-Who's right-hand man, how do I know you won't betray us?"

Runcorn shrugged. "Fidelius Charm. What could I say?"

"I didn't ask why you couldn't betray us, I asked why you wouldn't." The younger boy's mouth opened, then shut again, and Neville continued. "My grandmother is Augusta Longbottom. You're too young to remember, but about ten years ago, Lucius Malfoy put a bill before the Ministry that would have legalized use of magic against Muggles who were causing 'harm' as he very loosely defined it. A lot of people tried to have the bill banned before it hit the floor, but my Gran led the movement to have it introduced."

"But I thought –" Runcorn stopped himself, clearly baffled.

"She's always been proud it was defeated in open debate. She taught me that the most dangerous thing that can happen to a civilization is when it starts to prevent people from having their own beliefs and being able to speak those openly. That's what we're fighting for. Not Muggle rights, not Wizard rights, but the right to live and believe whatever we want without fear. You-Know-Who isn't fighting for Pureblood Superiority, Runcorn, he's fighting for his own absolute power, and you've seen what he does with that power."

The room was almost empty now, only a handful of people lagging behind, and Runcorn glanced around before looking back to Neville. When he did, the bravado had melted away, and he suddenly looked very much a child of fourteen, his eyes wide and vulnerable. He knelt down next to the couch, leaning in close so that his next words were between them alone. "I'm scared," he said simply.

Neville shifted, lowering his voice to give the boy privacy. "Of what?"

"Everyone. You were right earlier." His hands twisted the green satin trim of his robes. "If the others find out, I'm dead meat. And the Dark Lord would...." He bit his lip, unable to continue, and Neville reached out a hand, placing it gently on Runcorn's shoulder.

"I know. You're being very brave. I just want you to understand that you really are doing the right thing...do you go by Terrance or Terry?"

"Renny."

"Renny. I think if he really understood what was going on, your Dad would have made some different choices. Because if you really do believe in Pureblood Superiority, you'll have a better chance of seeing it happen – *really* happen, not some twisted version of it – under an honest government." There was a long pause, and he felt the arm under his hand begin to shake. Over Runcorn's shoulder, he could see Ginny beginning to approach them, and he shot her a warning glance, thankful when she understood and turned away to help see Ernie and his little cluster of Hufflepuffs out the door.

"Dad was with the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He's tough, really tough. Our family's been Enforcers for generations. I wanted to be one when I grew up. My Mom's letter said he...he'd *begged*." Runcorn looked like he didn't quite know whether to be more horrified by this apparent weakness, or the torture that had caused it.

Neville's voice was gentle but firm. "Your Dad has been loyal to the Ministry, he's a Death Eater and a Pureblood. If You-Know-Who is going to repay him like that, he doesn't deserve your loyalty."

"Are you guys going to kill all the Death Eaters?" The question was barely above a whisper, and Runcorn's swarthy face had fallen pale.

"We're at war, and people die in war." Neville decided not to make any effort to shield the truth. "But after that, if we win, it will be like last time. Your Dad and all the others will get trials, not summary executions."

"If I fight with you, would that help my Dad at his trial?"

Neville thought about it a moment, then nodded. "Probably. It certainly wouldn't hurt."

The shaking had become harder, and now when Runcorn looked up, his eyes were shining overbright in the flickering candles of the Room of Requirement. "I hate this. I hate all of it. It's not fair. I hate Mudbloods, I hate the Dark Lord, I hate *you*, I hate this stupid war...I hate...." His voice choked off, and he cuffed his fist hard against his eyes.

Ignoring the use of the slur, Neville nodded sympathetically. "None of this is fair. You're fourteen years old. You shouldn't be having to make these kinds of decisions."

"I'm only three years younger than you!" There was a fragile defensiveness in the declaration that made him seem even younger, but Neville felt no urge to smile. It was all too true.

"Yeah, I shouldn't be here either. But if we stick together, maybe we'll all grow up, and then you and your Dad and me and my Gran can hate whatever we want to, even each other."

"I lied."

The confession took him by surprise, and Neville blinked. "About what?"

His voice was stronger now, but still shaking, the hate making the words seem to burn off his lips. "It wasn't my Mum who wrote to me. My Mum died when I was six. Mrs. LeStrange wrote that letter. She said she wanted me to know that my Dad had been weak, and weakness was punished. She said I'd better learn from his mistakes and be careful and...he's *not* weak!"

"Bellatrix LeStrange," Neville allowed his own pronunciation of the name to come like venom, infusing it with all the hate and revulsion he had ever felt for its owner, "is a sick, foul, twisted, sadistic excuse for a woman and a witch. Don't you ever believe anything she ever says or writes to you." He locked his eyes with Runcorn's, allowing him to see the honesty behind his words. "If your father is anything like you, Renny, he's not weak at all. And I think he'll be proud of you in the end."

There was a pause, and then it was all too much. With a shuddering, choking gasp, Neville found his arms full as Runcorn collapsed against him. He stroked the smooth emerald fabric of the hood on the boy's back, and he was still burning, aching, throbbing from the pain of the flogging and the long hours chained to the wall, but he was making hushing noises and comforting a young Slytherin, the child of a Death Eater who's strong body was trembling violently as he wept hot, bitter tears against Neville's chest.

It should have been twisted, surreal, but he felt no hesitation as he whispered into the dark chestnut hair. "It's okay to hurt. None of this is fair. None of this is fair at all."



## Chapter Five

### The Sword of Gryffindor

The next few weeks passed relatively uneventfully. Snape was enraged by the leaflets, but his efforts to trace even a single one of them to their source met with complete failure. In his fury, he even confiscated Neville's wand, along with a dozen others, but the charms had been in the leaflets themselves, and *Priori Incantatem* revealed nothing, forcing him to return the wands to their owners in defeat.

He had retaliated by reinstating Umbridge's ban on teams, societies, and clubs, but that had done nothing other than bring howls of outrage from the members of the now-disbanded Quidditch teams. The D.A. continued to meet a few times a week in the Room of Requirement, practicing spellwork and preparing their plans for the raid on Snape's office to retrieve the Sword of Gryffindor. As Colin had defiantly pointed out, they were a military force now, not a homework club, and so he had been able to look the Carrows in the eye and swear without a moment's guilt that he belonged to no such organizations, nor did he know anything about them.

Neville and Ernie had recovered fully from their punishment, and he had even joked about it with the Lieutenant, who insisted that the network of thin white scars that now crossed their backs would only prove their bravery and therefore be extremely attractive to witches. Susan Bones certainly seemed to agree with this theory. She and Ernie had finally gotten together, and were taking every opportunity to make Ron and Lavender's antics from the previous year look subtle. Neville had only barely convinced his friend that sending a thank-you note to Filch might not be an altogether good idea.

Their ordeal had also, Neville discovered, stripped away the last few pounds of lingering baby fat, and he was beginning to look forward to the training sessions with Bagman. They still left him sore for days afterwards, but it was a different kind of pain, and it was more than countered by the feeling of accomplishment as he watched himself and the other young men of the D.A. push their limits further and further, achieving levels of strength and endurance he would never have imagined himself capable of. Watching them, he felt a tremendous sense of pride, as well as a vindictive pleasure at the very unpleasant surprise they were preparing for You-Know-Who and his followers.



Six days before Halloween, the Saturday of their first Hogsmeade weekend dawned crisp and clear. The trees surrounding the grounds had erupted into a riot of color, and Neville smiled as he made his way down the stairs to join the cluster of students waiting to go into the wizarding village. He fingered the handful of money in his pocket that he had saved up from the allowance his grandmother sent him, deciding that he would probably grab a butterbeer in the Three Broomsticks before embarking upon proper shopping.

Greengages had recently gotten in a shipment of Egyptian Moon Lilac seedlings, according to their advertisement in the *Daily Prophet*, and he figured he might drop a few Sickles on those. A new quill and a few fresh bottles of ink were a necessity, as his N.E.W.T. year was proving to involve an alarming amount of homework, and the rest of it, he knew, would almost certainly be left at Gladrag's Wizardwear, considering the dwindling amount of clothing he had that still fit him properly. He shook his head as he added up Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts. Maybe no butterbeer after all. It was a marvel that adult wizards ever had two Knuts to rub together, given how quickly it spent.

"Neville!" Luna bounced up on the tips of her toes, waving to him above the crowd. Beneath her winter cloak, she was wearing a very fuzzy sweater almost the exact same shade of pale blue as her eyes, and an enormous tam of the same wooly knit was perched atop her blonde hair, threatening to slip down and obscure most of her face. In place of her usual necklace of butterbeer corks, a large amulet shaped almost like a Snitch hung from a chain around her neck, and he peered at it curiously as she darted over to him.

"What's that?" He motioned at the necklace, and she fingered it, smiling dreamily.

"Daddy sent it. It's a billywig. Helps me maintain an elevated frame of mind even in the worst situations. I've been thinking that we should get them for everyone, what do you think?"

Neville cleared his throat, trying not to make eye contact as he searched for a gentle way to tell her that most of the students at Hogwarts would not be caught dead wearing such a ridiculous charm, but he was thankfully saved by the arrival of Hannah Abbott. "So, are you two going to Hogsmeade together today, or can I tag along?"

He was staring, he knew, but he couldn't help it, and he felt his cheeks beginning to flush in the kind of sheepish embarrassment he hadn't felt for weeks. Hannah was wearing a simple heather-gray sweater and blue jeans, her sandy hair loose rather than tied back in its usual pigtails, but she was practically unrecognizable. In her robes, she seemed quite plain, even a little dumpy, but he now realized that the loose black garments were simply extremely unflattering to the rather extraordinary figure they had been concealing. With a great effort, Neville tore his eyes upward to hers. "Um...." To his horror, he found that he was completely unable to remember what she had asked.

The knowing glitter in Hannah's eyes told him that she had not in fact missed where his attention had drifted, and she giggled. "I said, can I tag along?"

"Sure." He wanted to say more, but his brain seemed to be malfunctioning due to the Confundus Charm that had clearly been placed on Hannah's sweater.

Filch had to tell him twice to empty his pockets, and he turned the wrong way under the Secrecy Sensor three times before he finally made it through the heavy oak doors and down towards the winged boars that stood sentry at the gates of the school. Some part of him was, he knew, making completely empty-headed noises of acknowledgement at the conversation the two girls were attempting to have with him, but the majority of his attention was focused on the argument that had erupted in his own head.

*Hannah's PRETTY.*

*She's my friend, I've known her since we were eleven.*

*But look at her!*

*She doesn't know me as the hero of the D.A.. She knows me as the guy who's barely been able to keep from jinxing himself into the hospital wing for most of the last six years. I'm the sweet, kind of stupid, kind of chubby little kid who can't remember anything for more than two minutes, partners with her in Herbology, and barely belongs in the same House as the Almighty Harry Potter.*

*She kissed you.*

*She was grateful that I'd saved her from the Carrows. That's all. Besides, she didn't kiss me the way Parvati did. There's no way she'd be into me like that. She knows too much.*

"So shut up!" There was a stunned silence as Hannah and Luna stopped talking abruptly and turned to look at him, matching expressions of confusion on their faces, and Neville was horrified to realize that he'd said the last bit out loud. Feeling as though his face was about to burst into flame at any moment, he ducked his head, avoiding their eyes. "Just...thinking about...Snape," he mumbled.

He received a long, hard stare, but then Luna shrugged, and they resumed talking about the best way to combat Lacewing Flies on Dirigible Plums. Apparently, Luna's father grew quite a large patch of them at their House, and she was eager to glean tips from his fellow star Herbology student.

As soon as they reached the village, Neville made a hasty, muttered excuse about needing to see to a few things alone and maybe meeting them later at the Three Broomsticks or something. He

tried not to notice the look Hannah gave him as he dashed away, or how very much it seemed to resemble disappointment. Staying with them was simply not an option. It made his brain hurt too much.

Then he collided with someone, hard, and staggered back, the breath half knocked out of him. "I'm sorry!" he gasped, "I wasn't watching where I was – Ernie?"

"Neville! Just the man I was looking for!" Ernie was utterly unfazed at having been nearly knocked over, and slung one thick arm jovially over Neville's shoulders. "Join me in the Broomsticks, my good lad? There is a matter of the utmost importance before us!"

"Of course." He fell into step beside his friend, turning down the cobblestone alley towards the main road that led to the little pub.

Hogsmeade had changed, Neville noticed now. More of the stores were boarded up, posters of 'Undesirables' hung everywhere, offering reward money for information or capture, and he was both dismayed and rather proud to see that at least half of these bore Harry's familiar bespectacled face with the dour caption "Undesirable Number One."

The people had also changed. The locals he recognized seemed subdued - even frightened - and he spotted half a dozen witches and wizards unashamedly clad in Death Eater robes striding down the street as though they were the Lords and Ladies of a feudal kingdom. His jaw clenched as he watched them pass. *Enjoy your little power trip while you can*, he thought with bitter satisfaction, *because your days are numbered*.

The Three Broomsticks was still as bustling and packed as ever, though conversations were more cautious, and there were a greater number of rather unsavory-looking individuals scattered among the usual crowd. Ernie slipped away towards the bar to order for them, and Neville managed to find a single small table crammed into a corner that was unoccupied, unclasping his cloak and tossing it over the back of the chair before he sat.

Ernie was back shortly, and Neville blinked in surprise as he looked at the two tall pewter tankards that he set on the table in front of them. "What's this?"

"Don't worry about the gold, it's on me." He made a dismissive gesture, then lifted his tankard, taking a sip and smiling in satisfaction. "Hot oak-matured mead with a goodly toss of the best aged firewhisky in it to give it a nip."

As he stared at the drink, Neville realized abruptly that he had come of age since the last time he had visited Hogsmeade, and that Ernie had actually turned eighteen only a few days before. Not wanting to seem naïve, he tried to appear simply surprised at the indulgence as he raised his own tankard to his lips. "Uh, thanks, that's really nice of you."

He took a swig, then coughed as the liquid scorched down his throat with alarming violence. Tears came to his eyes against his will, and his breath burned as he gasped for air. Ernie looked at him with confusion at first, then laughed. "Galloping Gargoyles, Neville, have you never –"

"If you would keep your voice down," Neville hissed through clenched teeth, "I happen to live with my Gran, who happens to be a bit of a teetotaler, and I also happen to be almost a year younger than you. I didn't turn seventeen until the very end of July...so no, as a matter of fact, I have never."

"Blimey, I'm sorry. Would have ordered you something a bit gentler." Neville shot him a filthy look, and Ernie grinned, showing off a little as he took another deep draught of his own. "Just take it careful," he advised sagely, "if you don't know what kind of a tolerance you have for the stuff yet. I don't want to be holding your head over the gutter."

"That's nine months between us, not nine years." Steeling himself, Neville picked up the tankard again and took a hefty swallow himself. It was easier this time, both because he was ready for it and also because his throat seemed to have gone slightly numb. A warmth was beginning to spread through him, rather like Pepper-Up Potion, and the tips of his fingers and toes had begun to tingle pleasantly. "So," he asked, "what's this big important thing you had to tell me?"

Ernie fished in the pocket of his robes a moment, then pulled out a small crystal box. Setting it on the table in front of him, he tapped it with his wand. The crystal shimmered and flushed to a lovely rose shade, unfolding like the petals of a flower to reveal a ring nestled on a tiny cushion of white satin, a rather impressive diamond glimmering brightly even in the dim light. "Goblin-made, cost enough that even I felt a bit of a pinch. What do you think?"

Neville stared in amazement at the ring, then looked up at his friend, eyes wide. "Susan?"

"Who the bleeding hell else?" Ernie seemed rather offended at the question.

"But you're...I mean, really, Ernie, don't you think you're a little young? And you've been seeing her less than a month!"

"Yeah, I know." He tapped the box with his wand again, and it folded back in on itself as he picked it up and returned it to his pocket before leaning in across the table, his face intent. "But it's *there*. I mean, I've certainly had my share of dalliances in the past, but this is *different*, and I do not refer merely to the vast improvement in the quality of the snogging. There's something real between us, and I'm going to marry her over Christmas if she says yes. That's why I asked you here. I want you to be Best Man."

Neville shook his head slowly, taking another pull of the mead to buy himself time. Whether or not he had ever had something like this before, he knew that he hadn't drunk nearly enough to account alone for the sense of disorientation he felt. "You're still taking this way too fast if you ask me."

Ernie's expression darkened, and he tugged the collar of his robes, pulling them away enough to expose a few tendrils of scar tissue that had curled onto the top of his shoulder. "I thought you would understand better than anyone that we might not have the luxury of years to wait." He let go and took a drink before continuing. "Odds are she'll be my widow within a few months of being my wife anyway."

"Are you coming back to school?"

"Of course. I made a promise to the D.A., and I intend to keep it. It won't be easy, I know, but we're in the same House at least, and I'm going to want to keep it a secret from the Carrows that we're married."

There was something in Ernie's tone, a deep certainty, and Neville knew without quite knowing how that this whole thing had been thought out a lot more than it had first seemed. He nodded,

extending his hand across the table and grasping his Lieutenant's firmly. "Congratulations, then. Best of luck to the both of you, and I'd be honored."

"Grand. Of course, it will all be a moot point if she says no." He shuddered a little at the thought, fingering the box in his pocket.

Neville thought of what Parvati had said the previous month, and he shook his head. "I'm pretty sure you won't have to worry about that. She went half-mad when we were...you know. According to Parvati, she's been in love with you for ages."

"Then here's to hope, and here's to love, and damned if You-Know-Who can stop us in either." Ernie raised his tankard, and Neville clanked his own against it.

"To hope and love." As he drank, Hannah seemed to appear out of nowhere in his mind's eye, glowing and laughing, her sandy hair framing her pretty face in shining waves, and he squeezed his eyes shut, trying to dismiss the image with another gulp of mead. He'd gotten her out of his mind once, it was no good getting stupid again.

By the time they left the Three Broomsticks, sunset had turned the sky to the west to a vivid orange. The two young men had discovered that they both favored Puddlemere United, and they were singing the fight song together at the top of their lungs, their arms across one another's shoulders as much for support as for camaraderie.

The world didn't seem to be particularly inclined to remain level or steady to Neville, but it also seemed like a much better place overall than when he had gone in. A second tankard of spiked mead had gone down so much easier than the first, and everything had taken on an immensely friendly appearance, if also somewhat blurry. Vaguely, he was aware that he had once intended to do things, and that he was also more than probably drunk, but it didn't really seem to matter. Shopping could be tomorrow. Today, there was friendship, there was the prospect of said friend getting married with himself as the Best Man, and the entire world was grand and worth celebrating.

They were just launching into the second chorus when a hand plucked at his robes. Grinning, Neville looked down to see a hunched figure wrapped in a ragged cloak reaching for him out of the doorway of a boarded-up shop. These unfortunates had become a not-uncommon sight that summer since the Ministry crackdown on Muggle-Borns had begun, and Neville gave the beggar a sympathetic look as he dug in his pocket. "Poor bloke." His voice sounded slightly slurred as he pulled out a Galleon, barely remembering to give it a second look to ensure it was genuine. "Here. Best luck t'ya. Things'll be better soon 'nuff."

"Why, Neville Longbottom, I do suspect that you are intoxicated." The hooded face raised, and Neville was shocked to see the familiar dark eyes of Lee Jordan sparkling up at him in amusement.

"Lee!" Ernie yelped.

Lee pulled back further into the doorway, glancing around in alarm as he waved a hand furiously at the two. "Shhh! You idiot, don't yell my blasted name unless you want every Death Eater in Hogsmeade down on us!"

Casting a quick look around himself to ensure that they were still alone in the alley, Neville crouched, frowning. "Whatcha doin' here if they're lookin' for you?"

"Hoping to find someone like you. The twins and I have started an underground wireless thing, we're calling it *Potterwatch*." His voice was barely above a whisper, and Neville had to strain to hear him over the noise from the nearby pub. "They nearly got us last time – we managed to Apparate just as they blasted the door in, but I splinched myself something wicked, and I've got to find somewhere to lie low for a while." He drew back the filthy, ragged robes, and Neville recoiled when he saw that Lee's entire calf was gone, the unnaturally narrow remains of his leg wrapped in a makeshift bandage that was dark with dried blood.

"Can you walk?" Ernie seemed to have entirely shaken off the affects of the mead, and his voice was steady, if deeply concerned as he drew his wand and looked around them.

"No. I Apparated to the Lupins' place at first. They bandaged me up, stopped the bleeding, and Remus let me borrow these so I could seem like just another beggar, but I couldn't stay there. They're gonna be having a baby, and I'd never forgive myself if I brought Death Eaters to their door. But I'm...." He hesitated, swallowing back his pride as he looked up at them again. "I'm in pretty bad shape. I've been here since Thursday. I knew it was a Hogsmeade weekend, so I took my chances, but I've been sleeping here in the doorway, and Madame Rosmerta gives me something after they close, but that means one meal a day and freezing my bum off at night. I could eat a Hippogriff."

Neville noticed for the first time the ashen tinge to the older youth's dark skin, how sunken his eyes and cheeks looked, and the warm, giddy feeling seemed to retreat into a vague dizziness and a certain amount of uncoordination in the way his limbs responded. "Don't worry. We'll help you." Even as he said it, he wasn't sure how, but he knew that leaving their old friend and fellow resistance fighter lying wounded in a doorway was not an option.

The door to the Three Broomsticks opened, and all three froze. A tall, blonde man in Death Eater's robes was standing in the doorway, silhouetted in the warm light that spilled out into the rapidly darkening evening as he ogled one of the pretty witches who helped Madame Rosmerta serve drinks. "C'Mon, darlin'," he leered, "get yerself in good with the folks what's got power these days...jes askin' ye ta come fer a little walk...lovely night 'n all...."

Lee seemed to have vanished entirely into the shadows, and before Neville knew what was happening, Ernie had kicked him in the back of the knees, knocking him forward onto all fours on the cobblestones. Neville's head reeled, he tried to regain his bearings, but then Ernie had one arm wrapped around his shoulders, his wand poking into Neville's neck. "*Emeticus!*"

Neville threw up. Spectacularly. He had never been so violently sick in his life, his entire body convulsing in great heaves as he splattered sick across half the alley. The Death Eater looked over at the sound, and as he continued to vomit uncontrollably, he could hear Ernie's voice call out apologetically from over him. "Sorry about this, my dear sir, but my companion has overindulged a bit. You might wish to take your constitutional in another direction."

"T'hell, ye say?" The blonde Death Eater frowned in confusion.

"My mate got pissed, now he's sick as a dog. Best walk the other way."

With a disgusted grimace, the Death Eater closed the door, and the wand jabbed into his neck again. "*Finite Incantatem.*"

Shaking, Neville got to his feet, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his robes as he gave Ernie the filthiest glare he could manage. "That —" he stepped carefully around a puddle of sick and poked his friend harshly in the chest, "—was not very nice."

Ernie shrugged and gave an embarrassed little smile. "Best I could think of at the moments notice, old chum."

Lee slid forward again from the shadow of the doorway, pushing away a long dreadlock that had fallen over his face under the hood. "You guys are going to get in trouble. I never should have —"

"I meant it that we're going to help you. I've got a plan, and it doesn't —" he shot another pointed glare at the burly Hufflepuff, "- involve making anyone puke." Casting another quick glance at the door of the Three Broomsticks to ensure it was still closed, Neville turned towards the empty alley and called out towards what appeared to his companions to be thin air. "Mimsy!"

There was only a moment's hesitation, then with a loud *crack*, a house-elf stood in the little alley in front of them. She was as tiny as most of her race, plump and prim-looking, with a little web of wrinkles around her large hazel eyes and a doily of elaborately tatted lace wrapped around her like a toga, fastened at one shoulder with an immense brooch of paste gems. She curtsied deeply, not apparently fazed by finding herself in a sick-spattered alley outside a pub in Hogsmeade.  
"Master called?"

"Mimsy, I want you to meet Ernie Macmillan and Lee Jordan." He gestured to the two baffled-looking young wizards. "Guys, this is Mimsy, my Gran's house-elf."

"Mistress," Mimsy gave a rather disapproving sniff, "wishes Master Neville to know that she has been most worried about him. Letters from his school saying he has been very, very naughty. Mistress says if Master Neville does not write soon, she will begin sending Howlers again, and Mimsy thinks this might be embarrassing now that Master Neville is supposed to be a grown wizard."

Neville blushed and shuffled his feet. The elf, like his grandmother, had an amazing ability to make him feel perpetually as though he were six years old. "Tell Gran I'll write, I promise," he muttered.

"Mistress," the little house-elf addressed his companions with an air of infinite long-suffering patience, "puts up with much from Master Neville, but he tries to be a good boy, Merlin knows."

Lee was trying not entirely successfully to stifle giggles, and Neville felt immensely satisfied when Mimsy silenced him with one of the looks he had spent his entire childhood attempting to avoid. Taking a deep breath, he forced a somber expression onto his own face as he turned back to her. "Mimsy, tell Gran that I will be sending someone to her. His name is Lee Jordan. He looks like a beggar, but he's in disguise. He's a friend of Harry Potter and the Weasley family, and my friend too. Tell her that he's been splinched badly, and he needs help and food and a place to hide until he's strong enough to go on his way. He's being hunted by Death Eaters, so you'll have to be very careful."

Mimsy gave another low curtsy. "Mistress will be happy to help the friends of Harry Potter do anything against those nasty Death Eaters. Lee Jordan will have food and the best care and a nice bed and..." she wrinkled her button-like nose, "most certainly a hot bath as soon as possible, because Master Neville's friend does not smell very good."

Lee shrugged, grinning white in the gathering dark. "Hey, you try living in a doorway for three days wearing something Remus Lupin had consigned to the rag bag."

To his shock, Mimsy swatted him swiftly upside the head, and Neville barely managed to stifle a giggle. "Mistress will not take cheek, and neither will Mimsy! Lee Jordan smells bad, and Lee Jordan will be washed and fed, and he will be grateful!"

"I'm sure he will, Mimsy," Neville said solemnly. "Thank you, and send Gran my love. Tell her I'm fine."

"Yes, Master Neville." With another deep curtsy, Mimsy took the collar of Lee's robes in the very tips of her fingers, then there was another loud *crack*, and Ernie and Neville were alone in the alley again.

When they finally made it back up to Hogwarts Castle, it was long past full dark, and they knew that had missed the time they were meant to have returned by several hours. It was therefore no surprise when the double doors opened to reveal the menacing figure of Professor Snape backlit against the warm candlelight in the entry hall behind him.

They exchanged a quick look, and Neville slung an arm around Ernie's shoulders again, leaning into him sloppily. "I think our best bet is to play it like we're still toasted," he whispered, "then at least he won't think we were up to anything else." Ernie nodded, his own gait becoming more unsteady as they approached the castle and the silent, black outline that awaited them there.

"Where," the question was asked with a deadly calm, "have you gentlemen been for the past two hours?"

Neville did not hesitate as he swaggered up the steps directly towards the Headmaster, his arm still around Ernie's shoulders as they stopped on the landing, swaying slightly. He looked up at Snape with complete innocence painted over every feature, slurring his words deliberately. "Cel'bratin'."

"Celebrating what, if I may ask?"

"That whippin' us haff dead don' seem've made yer life 'ny eeshyer." Neville replied with a broad, insolent grin.

Two red spots appeared high on Snape's sallow cheeks as his black eyes flashed in fury, and Neville's grin widened as he jabbed his own wand unseen into Ernie's ribs beneath his robes and thought *Emeticus!*

Ernie's aim was beautiful.

OOO

It was almost midnight by the time Neville climbed through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room, but he had scarcely taken a few steps when a small, redheaded figure leapt up from one of the armchairs near the fireplace and streaked towards him. Ginny hit him at a full sprint, leaping up and flinging her arms around his neck in an enormous hug. "Neville!"

He staggered backwards, hitting the wall as the breath was driven out of him, but she had wrapped herself around him like Devil's Snare, her legs clamped tightly around his waist, and he couldn't help but chuckle as he reached up and tried to pry her hands apart. "Missed me that much?"

"You ass, hardly." Her words were muffled against his neck, but the relief in her tone was still clear. "I was worried sick about you. I heard what happened." She sniffed deeply, then planted both hands on his chest and hopped off of him, pushing him to arm's length as she made a face. "I guess it's true, then. You smell like our back shed the first time Lee and the twins got a hold of a bottle of firewhisky."

"Yeah, it's true. Ernie got Snape pretty good." He grinned, savoring the memory. "You should have seen the look on his face, Ginny. I can die happy."

"We thought you might." Her expression had become somber, and her voice softened. "There's nobody here but me, Neville, you don't have to play brave. McGonagall made everyone go to bed at ten like the Carrows ordered, but she knows I'm your second, so she *happened* to miss me curled up in the chair. What did they do to you?"

He shrugged. "It wasn't that bad, honest. They let Crabbe and Goyle have a go at us with the Cruciatus, and that wasn't a lot of fun, sure, but I don't think Malfoy left them instructions on how to think for themselves, and their hearts weren't really in it because they thought what Ernie did was pretty funny, too. Beyond that...." Neville raised a hand, ticking off the elements of their punishment on his fingers. "Had to clean up the steps without magic, no Halloween feast, notice to all the barkeeps in Hogsmeade that we're banned from drinking for the rest of the academic year, no Hogsmeade at all tomorrow, and Ernie and I aren't allowed to see each other outside of classes any more, but that's not a big deal considering the D.A.."

Ginny seemed to consider it for a moment, then smiled. "You're right, it isn't that bad." She punched him in the ribs, and Neville had to stop himself from wincing. For a girl, she hit pretty hard. "That's for making me worry!"

"If that's for making you worry," he rubbed at the spot with a look of mock agony, "I feel sorry for Harry when he gets back."

"Oh, I've already decided what I'm going to do to him," she nodded.

"And what's that?"

"Kiss him until *he* can die happy, then kill him."

"Sounds like a good plan to me." Neville took off his outer robe and dropped it in a pile on the floor, settling himself into one of the overstuffed armchairs. "But from what I've heard, I'm not the only one who got in trouble today. Snape said you got yourself banned from Hogsmeade altogether, but he didn't say why."

"I didn't do anything nearly as dramatic as you two." She sprawled out upside-down on the couch across from him, her bare feet dangling over the back. "Actually, they couldn't prove I'd done anything wrong, so that's why I just got the ban."

"So what was it?"

"Travers - he's one of the Death Eaters - caught me at the Post Office getting a package. They searched it and didn't find anything illegal. It was a new scarf, a batch of homemade cauldron cakes, a letter from my mother and a couple of underthings...but they were really suspicious because it was addressed to Virginia Weasley at the Hogsmeade Post Office," Ginny explained.

Neville frowned. "I thought your name was Ginevra."

"It is. He guessed rightly that it was addressed like that to avoid getting to me at Hogwarts where it would be *really* searched, but everyone in Hogsmeade has just known me as Ginny since I was tiny, so they let me pick it up...well, for a couple of minutes before Travers confiscated it."

She flipped over and made a truly pathetic face, her lower lip trembling as her large brown eyes welled with tears. "Oh, *please*, sir, I'm *so sorry*...my Mummy thought they weren't letting us get packages any more, and everything's so *scary* right now, I miss her *so much*... I just wanted a few *eensy* little things from home." Burying her face in her hands, she burst into loud, wailing sobs, then looked up, grinning and abruptly dry-eyed. "Worked like a charm. He gave me back the box as soon as he'd finished searching it. Even apologized. Snape didn't believe it of course, and he confiscated it for good, but I had what I wanted by then."

"Which was?" Neville leaned forward eagerly, then looked away as Ginny reached under her pajama shirt and seemed to be about to remove her bra. "Ginny!"

"Witches leave each other's personal things alone, and a wizard wouldn't know where to look." She squirmed around another moment, then pulled out two small, cloth-wrapped bundles and set them on the low table in front of the fire. They unfolded as she pulled her hand away, revealing several dozen minuscule but brightly colored boxes and parcels, the largest of them no bigger than a postage stamp. Ginny drew her wand and tapped the little pile. "*Engorgio.*"

The pile abruptly expanded to cover the entire table, several parcels that were now easily two feet square tumbling off the sides and onto the floor. Each bore the 'W' of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, and she motioned proudly at them. "Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder, Guaranteed Gripping Gloves, Skiving Snackboxes, Shield Shirts in four sizes, two Deflagration Deluxe packs, Decoy Detonators, Garbling Gum, Daydream Charms, a Portable Portal, Tranquilizing Teacups, U-No-Poo, Edible Dark Marks, Coding Quills, Love Potions in both standard Crush formula and Extra-Strength Infatuation, Imperceptible Ink – oh, yeah, and some Pygmy Puff treats for Arnold."

Neville let out a low whistle and shook his head slowly in amazement. "Remind me never to mess with your family."

"I'd think," she giggled, "you'd have learned that before now. But seriously –" She reached down and scooped the fallen parcels onto the larger heap. "—some of this stuff should help us figure out the last couple of things we were having trouble with for the mission. I figure one more meeting, and we should be ready to go, don't you think?"

"Probably," he nodded. "I'll call it for Monday, and if everything goes right, we should be ready to strike on Wednesday."

"Good." Ginny shuddered. "The waiting's almost worse than the idea of the actual mission at this point. I just want it over with, you know?"

"As long as we don't let ourselves get sloppy," he cautioned.

"Then you'd better make sure your forbidden friend is paying attention." She gave a sigh that was equal parts disgust and exasperation. "If I have to sit through one more meeting watching him and Susan try to crawl down each other's throats, I think I'll throw up."

Neville kicked off his shoes and picked up a box of Guaranteed Gripping Gloves, turning them over slowly to read the information on the side of the label as he spoke, trying to keep his tone casual. "He's planning to ask her to marry him. If she says yes, they're doing it over Christmas break."

"He's *WHAT?*" Ginny sat bolt upright, her cheeks flushing as bright as her hair. "They're barely of age!"

"I know." He shrugged. "But he's afraid they won't have a lot of time, what with what's coming at the end of the year. He said he'd rather they both live to be able to change their minds than to have one of them survive with the regret. There's kind of a point there, really."

She frowned. "But what will the Carrows –"

"They're not telling the Carrows."

"They might as well tell them the moment they put in to the Ministry for a Marriage License," she pointed out derisively.

Neville gave a sheepish little smile. "Well, that's kind of where your father comes in, we're hoping."

Ginny's scowl deepened. "*What?*"

"I'm his Best Man."

"And the part," she crossed her arms tightly over her chest, "where Dad has something to do with this?"

"They want it to be a real marriage, but it needs to be secret, so Ernie was kind of intending to get it done in the Muggle world, but, well...he asked Colin about it. His mom's a Squib and his dad's straight Muggle, so he was raised in that world completely, and he says they'll need identification."

"But don't they have their birth certificates and wand registries, even if they don't have their Wizarding Licenses yet?" Ginny's glare of disapproval had been replaced with a look of confusion, and Neville, considering this to be progress, pressed on quickly.

"Colin says that's no good. They'll need *Muggle* identification, and I don't even know what that sort of thing would look like, but we figured your Dad could probably get a hold of some and just, you know, switch around whatever needs to be switched to put their names and birthdays and wand types and whatever else on it." He gave her a hopeful smile, and was relieved to see that she seemed to be giving it genuine consideration.

"A Muggle ID wouldn't have wand type," she said finally, "but I think you have to have a finger on it."

Neville gaped at her. "Like cut it off?"

"Only the tip, the swirly part of the skin. That heals up, you know, like when you burn it bad enough to blister and the skin all peels off." She held up her own hand, extending one finger and indicating the fleshy pad at the end. "It's different for everyone, see...yours and mine don't have the same swirls; it's how Muggles tell each other apart when they have to be sure."

He stared at his own fingertip, surprised to find that the little pattern of ridges was indeed quite different, then shivered. "I still say cutting off your fingertip for an ID is medieval."

"Don't be judgmental. Besides, I think you only have to do it the once, and then they just match it or something." Ginny gave a little shrug and took the box of gloves from his other hand, adding it back onto the pile and tapping it with her wand again. "*Reducio!*" The heap shimmered a moment, then shrank back down to fit easily within the two squares of cloth which she quickly bundled again, shoving them down the front of her shirt. "Anyway, it's late. I'll talk to my Dad about getting Muggle ID the next time I have a chance, but we should be getting to bed before McGonagall comes in here and throws a fit at us."

Nodding, Neville got to his feet, picking up his shoes and giving her a quick, one-armed hug. "See you tomorrow, then...since we're both banned, maybe we can get some homework done before Monday."

"Sure, I've got a mountain of it. Oh, and Neville...." She stopped in the doorway of the girl's dormitory, looking back over her shoulder with a smile that gleamed brightly in the dying light of the fire.

"Yeah?"

"Tell Ernie I'm not helping him because I think he should get married. I'm helping him because he puked on Snape."

OOO

"Parvati, you and Padma will be here, at this end of the hall. Hannah, you and Susan at the other end. Terry, Mike; you guys in the middle, right at the foot of the stairs going up to the office." Neville turned, looking away from the schematic drawn out on the blackboard to scan over the faces of the D.A.. "Now, this is a smaller mission than last time, just the four Command Staff for the actual break-in and the six I just named guards, but I don't want anyone thinking they've been left out because I don't like them or they're not good enough."

He took a deep breath, waving a hand at the board. "This is the riskiest thing we've ever done, or ever will do until the final battle, and the Lieutenants and I don't feel right asking anyone else to

take that on. As for the others, they've been chosen off two criteria. The first is that you've probably noticed they're all seventh-years. No offense – Ginny and Luna are both six, so's Colin, so I obviously trust out of my own year – but they just know the most spells. Second, we're using two pairs of long-term best friends and a set of twins. They'll be under Disillusionment Charms and Garbling Gum, so we need people who can work together under pressure with minimal communication. Any questions so far?

Lavender raised her hand, a worried look on her face. "Why all four of you? If you get caught, we lose everyone."

"Each of us has chosen a second. Seamus, Parvati, Hannah, and Terry are ready to take over if something happens to us." Neville nodded to the four, who stood, Seamus taking a little bow, even as the others looked rather intimidated by the prospect. "As for why all four, that'll make sense in a minute. We could technically do it with two, but my Gran taught me if you absolutely need something, make sure you have more than one in case the first fails. If I wouldn't go into a test without a backup quill, I'm not going into this with just Ginny. Ernie and Luna are our backup."

Camellia Parkinson was the next to raise her hand. "So how are you getting in?"

"The weakest point of the defense is from the outside." Ginny stepped forward to stand beside him, motioning at the blackboard with her wand. The schematic of the hallway vanished, to be replaced by a floor plan of the Headmaster's office shown from above, each item clearly labeled, and vaguely glowing, multicolored auras indicating spells surrounding many of them.

"Because it's seven stories up." Camellia appeared less than pleased with Ginny's explanation, and her scowl deepened.

"With an Anti-Levitation Jinx so you can't use brooms or anything like that, and the window is charmed to seal shut if anything larger than a bird touches the outside." Luna pointed to the purple glow that surrounded the cross-section of the wall, her voice utterly casual.

Colin leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "A bird! You've all become Animagi, is that it?"

Neville laughed. "Hardly. We're climbing."

"You're mental!" Romilda blurted, and a dozen heads nodded in agreement.

"Probably," Neville shrugged, smiling, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of thin black gloves, the palms of which were covered with tiny hooks like a cockleburr. "But we've got the Guaranteed Gripping Gloves from the twins, and the walls should actually give pretty good handholds."

"But the window, you said it's charmed." Camellia's hand was still in the air, utterly unconvinced.

"Portable Portal." Picking up a small box on the table, Neville opened it and pulled out what looked like a folded square of black cloth. As he shook it out, however, it was revealed to be a circle about a foot wide, paper-thin, transparent and shadowy. He placed it against the wall of the Room of Requirement, and it clung there, then expanded to about four times its size, offering them all a brief glimpse into the hallway outside, as if a door had suddenly been cut through the

stone. He left it there only a few seconds, then peeled it away, folding it into its box as it shrank back down. "It's meant for interior walls, so it won't expand very far through two feet of solid stone, but it'll be just big enough for the girls to squeeze through. Thankfully, they're tiny little things, even if I wouldn't want to cross either of them in a duel. They can open the window from the inside and let me and Ernie in."

"Then what?" He was rather pleased to see that Camellia's expression of doubt had been replaced by a look of distinctly impressed curiosity.

"That's where the lovely ladies do need a touch of brawn." Ernie stepped forward, flexing his heavily muscled arms with a half-joking grin. "The case is protected against every spell in the book, and it's about an inch and a half thick, but it should give in to brute strength. We smash the case, grab the Sword, toss it out the window, and get out of there."

"It'll probably set off an alarm of some kind when we break the case," Luna acknowledged, "so we aren't taking the time to climb back down. We're using Featherlight Charms and jumping. We should float down as lightly as a sheet of parchment. After that, we'll have brooms waiting to get me, Ginny, and Neville to our towers, and Ernie is going to make a run for the kitchen door, where Dobby will be waiting to let him into his common room. Ernie's also going to give Dobby the Sword, which he's taking in here where Snape can't get it back."

Bagman let out a low, impressed whistle. "You guys have thought of everything."

"No, they haven't." Runcorn stood, casting a glance around as if ready to be attacked for daring to say such a thing, then continuing, chin thrust out pugnaciously. "What exactly do you think Snape's going to do when he finds the case smashed and the Sword missing? File a report with the Ministry and wait for the Enforcers to come take a statement and examine the scene?"

"We think he's going to go off like we've never seen before," admitted Neville. "But if we do it right, it'll be like the leaflets. He can't level anything too harsh against the entire school, nothing more than those stupid decrees Umbridge did in fifth year. But the leaflets also taught us that if we don't use wands, we can't be traced if we aren't caught. You'll notice the only wandwork is the Featherlight, which will only be on Ginny's wand, and isn't at all incriminating."

Runcorn sat back down, and Neville was rather touched to see that the scowl on the boy's features had dissolved into lines of worry. "You guys had better really hope you do it right, then."

Neville exchanged a look with his Lieutenants, then nodded, no trace of humor in his smile. "For all our sakes."

OOO

His hands were shaking. Whether it was from fear or excitement, Neville couldn't tell, but he pulled the thin black gloves over them anyway, clasping them tightly at his wrists. His heart was pounding, he felt almost light-headed, but he held his features in an expression of stony determination, knowing that he did not have the luxury of anything less. He was their leader, and tonight of all nights, he had to live up to it.

Looking around, he allowed himself to watch his fellow students turned fighters as they took their own last moments to prepare. Only Ginny, Luna, and Ernie, like himself, looked as though

they were actually dressed for battle. Despite the bitter chill of the late October night, they had stripped off their loose outer robes as far too easy to become entangled in on their long climb, and their uniforms had been charmed to the same featureless black as on their first mission, scarves ready to swathe their faces, hands gloved. The guards were all dressed in sleepwear – pajamas, nightdresses, and dressing gowns – but they would be using Disillusionment Charms for concealment, and the casual clothing would be easier to explain if they were caught and needed an alibi for being out so late at night. Nonetheless, the air of something impending hung over all of them, a near physical weight suspended from a thinning thread.

Ginny had taken out the contents of the little bag she would be wearing at her waist, checking and repacking the Portable Portal, a bottle of water, an extra pair of gloves, and the handful of fireworks they had decided to bring as an emergency distraction. He had seen her do this three times already, but he said nothing. There was no need to ask her why. He had checked his own wand at least fifty times.

Luna was sitting alone, writing a letter to her father, and he wondered what his most enigmatic of friends would write at such a time. Would she be going over all the final words and loose ends like most people, or would it just be a casual note mentioned between complaints about homework and amusing class anecdotes? *P.P.S. By the way, Daddy, I'm taking a terrible risk tonight, and Hannah says try Durwidge's Deterrent Spray on the plums.*

Michael and Terry were reviewing spells, their faces set in expressions as forcibly defiant as he knew his own must be; the Patil twins sitting with their palms touching one another's in the motionless meditation that they had said strengthened the natural connection between them in times of great stress.

Ernie and Susan had moved off to a corner together, but it did not seem to be, as he had first suspected, a passionate last-moment snogging session. Susan was wearing the ring on her left hand now, pressing the tips of her fingers against Ernie's lips as he held her hand in his, clutching her so closely to him that it seemed as though someone were going to try and tear them apart at any moment. His lips were moving, whispering something that made tears glitter on her cheeks, or perhaps was meant to soothe them. As his head tilted, Neville caught sight of his face, and it was an expression so intimately loving and tender that he looked away, flushing as though he had committed some shameful intrusion.

His eyes scanned the room, seeking somewhere else to look, and his breath caught as they fell on Hannah. She was staring at the young couple in the corner, and her shoulders were shaking, her fists balled at her sides as if in rage, but her face bore nothing but naked pain. It confused him at first, but then he remembered that he had paired her with Susan because of the closeness of their friendship, and he knew that she must be fearing for Ernie's safety now just as much as the other girl. Without thinking, he took a step towards her, reaching out to touch her shoulder.

"Hannah?"

She jumped and gasped, and as she whirled to face him, something indefinable flashed through her wide green eyes in the split second before all emotion was forced out of them. "Yes?" Her voice was flat, unreadable.

"I swear I'll do everything I can to see that he's okay." He squeezed her shoulder, trying to infuse his voice with confidence that would ease her fear, but she looked away, and her body stiffened under his hand for a moment before she shrugged him off.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah." Hannah's tone remained stiff, flat, and he could think of nothing more to say. The silence hung awkwardly between them, and he slowly returned his hand to his side, not wanting to keep it hovering over her shoulder, but not really wanting to draw it back, either. He took a breath, searching for something to say, but the words stuck so far back in his throat that he didn't even know what they had wanted to be.

It was only then, as he stared uselessly at her, that Neville noticed that she was wearing the same nightgown that she had been when Snape had held her prisoner in the Great Hall. It was loose and white, with little flowers embroidered on the neckline, and a smile quirked his lips despite the darkness of the memory that followed the last time he had seen her in it. There was something ethereally feminine about it, but not at all girlish or innocent, though it rightfully should have been. "If you let your hair down, you'd look like a wingless angel."

She blushed fiercely, looking down at the floor, and Neville was shocked to find that for the second time in as many days, words had slipped out of his mouth that he had thought were only in his head. "I...I'm...I'm sorry—" he stammered.

"It's okay." Hannah's eyes never left the floor, but her hand came up and pulled away the two ribbons that held her hair in the pigtails, and she shook her head, letting the long waves come loose over her shoulders. There was a long pause, and then she muttered, clearly embarrassed, "It's so thick, I just keep it up all the time. I didn't know you liked it down."

"It's not a big deal, really." He didn't understand why his heart was pounding so hard, why it seemed as though all the air had been sucked out of the room. Neville had never felt anything like it before, and now, on the edge of a mission, was not the time for something clawing and wanting and needing that didn't even seem to know what it so desperately demanded to have begin to tear at his throat. "You're pretty either way."

She let out a little gasp, almost as if he'd hurt her, and he felt abruptly sick. He'd done something wrong, said something stupid, and now their friendship would be over, and not only that, but she'd never...but she didn't...and he didn't even know *what*, really....

The large grandfather clock in the corner began to chime, and the entire room jumped, wands drawn from every corner. There was cry, a burst of light, and the clock blew apart, shattering into a thousand tiny pieces with a tremendous blast that rattled the walls of the Room of Requirement before the echo of the first chime had even faded. All eyes turned to Ginny, who was poised like a cat on the tips of her toes, her face stark white and her wand still held high where she had lashed it back after casting the hex. "That —" she gasped, "—scared me!"

There was a long pause, then Michael finally spoke, his voice still rather higher than usual despite his obvious efforts to keep it casual. "Terry, make a note: *never* startle Weasley."

"So." Neville took a deep breath, striding just a little too quickly to the front of the room as they all gathered. "That would mean it's eleven, and so it's time to get moving. Is everyone ready?"

Nine heads nodded in response, and he drew his wand, sending the now-familiar stream of silver sparks towards the ceiling and willing his voice to remain strong, not to crack, not to tremble as he signaled the beginning of their mission.

"Dumbledore's Army!"

### OOO

"I don't think...this was such...a good idea...after all." Luna's voice was as composed as always, even as she panted for air, each breath coming in a smoky puff against the cold night.

Neville couldn't help but smile, though he was breathing pretty hard himself, and he was praying for his shoulders and legs to cross the line from screaming to numb, the sweat so cold on the exposed skin at his eyes and the back of his neck that he wondered honestly if ice had begun to form. "As always, Luna, you have...an amazing talent...for stating the obvious."

The climb up the side of the castle had been far more difficult than they had imagined. The rough-hewn stones that had seemed like they would offer such accommodating hand and footholds actually proved a treacherous collection of tiny slides and angles; not quite enough to grab, but enough to make a foot slide down a few inches, a grip be not quite solid. There was also a flourishing crop of lichens, mosses, and slime molds that slipped and crumbled at every opportunity, and after an hour and a half of hard effort, they were only at the sixth floor, already forty-five minutes behind schedule and becoming dangerously exhausted, cold numbing their wearied fingers even further.

There had been a few close calls, and Neville had resolved to send the twins a thank-you note of epic proportions. He knew that the Gripping Gloves were the only thing that made the climb possible at all, and that they had saved his life at least three times already, clamping on to the wall as if glued there and releasing again at mere force of will. Pausing a moment, he glanced down and to his right a few feet to the second of the two smaller figures as he tried to wipe the sweat from his eyes against his shoulder. "Doing okay?"

Ginny's eyes glinted stubbornly up at him, but he could see the pain and exhaustion in the lines between her ginger brows. "I'm fine. Castle's a skrewt-faced son of a poxy hag...but I'm fine."

"Not far now, kids. Fifteen feet, and we get to be in a nice, warm, cozy little office. I wonder if Snape's redecorated? Umbridge had that appalling fancy for fluffy kittens and chintz, but I don't know, I see him leaning more towards pickled students in jars, though he might have a charmingly framed signed photo of You-Know-Who on the desk." Ernie's words came with maddening ease, and Neville tried to force down the very-unleaderlike resentment. He knew the other youth wasn't showing off, but it was obvious that the climb had barely begun to tap his strength.

Gritting his teeth, Neville closed his eyes, forcing himself to hear Parvati and Luna's screams, to see the sick look on Dennis Creevey's face, Snape's smug smile of triumph, blood running over Ernie's shoulders, the terror in Hannah's eyes, the shattered remains of Seamus' mouth. The pain dulled, driven back by anger, determination, a desire to strike back that pushed away the cold and fatigue. His shoulders tensed, and he reached out, grabbing the ledge that separated the sixth and seventh floors and hauling himself upward.

A *crack*, loud and sudden as a lightning strike, shot through the still night air.

For a moment, Neville froze, certain that someone had Apparated nearby, but at almost the same instant, he knew the sound for what it was. Breaking stone.

"Don't move, either of you!" Ginny's voice was tight with terror. "Let me get to my wand. I'll repair it."

He obeyed, holding perfectly still, not even daring to breath, then Ernie's voice came from only a few feet to his left, no longer above, but directly beside him. It wasn't a warning, a plea, or even a cry of fear. Instead, it seemed almost a prayer, whispered so quietly that if he had been a foot farther away, he knew he would have heard nothing. "I'm sorry, love...."

Another *crack*, not as loud but twice as ominous, and the ledge gave way. The combined weight of the two young men had been too much for the ancient stone, and it shattered under them, casting them mercilessly into the empty night.

"*Microgravitas!*" Luna shot the spell towards them, her own wand yanked from behind her ear, and the jet missed Neville by inches. He twisted in the air, flailing out as blind, panicking instinct erased all thoughts of technique or training.

Then he stopped, yanked to a halt with a jerk so abrupt that he thought his arm had been ripped from the socket. It was the glove. It had struck against a window sill only thirty feet below where he had fallen, and he was now dangling three stories above the ground, watching Ernie float gently to earth below him, Luna's spell having hit its mark on one of them at least. The glove was beginning to slip, his shoulder threatening to tear apart, and he reached out with his other hand, anchoring it beside the first and hauling himself up to plant his feet on the lower sill.

The perch was precarious, but it offered him a chance to rub at his burning shoulder and assess that no real damage had taken place. He looked up as he heard Ginny hiss down to them. "Stay there, we're coming!"

"No!" Neville waved her back, signaling both the girls to stop their downward climb. "Keep going, rest on the seventh-floor ledge – just strengthen it first – and wait for me. I'll be back up."

"Me too." Ernie had gotten to his feet on the grass, planting both hands on the wall as he searched for a first foothold.

"You're scrubbed." He looked down, shaking his head at his friend. "We've gone way over already. We can't wait for you to climb an extra thirty feet. I'm sorry, but this is why there were two of us. Abort and go back. That's an order, Lieutenant."

It was painful to watch the warring loyalties of a friend and soldier tear over Ernie's normally good-natured features, but finally, they resolved into a stoic acceptance, and he nodded crisply. "Yes, sir."

Sparing only a second to watch Ernie turn and disappear towards the kitchen doors, Neville looked up again along the endless towering stretch of stone that separated him once again from the seventh-floor window. There was only one way to do this, and that was, as his Gran used to say, to simply do it.

He began to climb, the stone hard and rough beneath the gloves, and his shoulder was aching...pulsing...throbbing. Cold air and stone against his skin. The wall against his skin. The wall. The damned stone wall. It hurt. It throbbed and ached, and he was back on the wall.

Hazel eyes, holding his, an unspoken oath not to scream, not to beg, not to cry out for mercy, because that would just make it so much worse, and there wouldn't be any mercy, they knew it. No mercy as the whip came down, again and again, tearing into wounds it had already opened, flesh already violated, raw and bleeding. Bucking against the blows, unable to stop himself, even

though it made the manacles cut into his wrists, yank his legs until they trembled, barely able to support him, but the chains did that, holding him up against the unforgiving wall that scraped his face, his chest with every movement.

And then the hours, the days, the cramps that seized his muscles, the screaming agony of the stretched and tortured joints, the burning, the awful burning in his back, and those eyes still there, sharing the pain, making it bearable by knowing it, knowing the pain and the hunger and the thirst, and how they faded until you just didn't care, and all you could do was keep going, hanging against the wall, and after a while you didn't care, and old memories swam against reality, and reality itself came apart, and you didn't care, because this was just how things were, the pain and the numbness and the burning and the hollowness and the retching and don't say a word, because there's nothing to say and nothing that will matter and you don't need to say anything, because there's someone else who knows, knows what it's like to lick your own blood that runs down your wrists because it's liquid, and then to heave because your body has lost its mind from the torment and rejects what it needs so desperately.

It was just the pain and the eyes and the wall, always the wall, stone against skin, shoulder throbbing, joints aching, muscles cramping...and then there was a hand. A girl's hand, delicate yet strong, closed around Neville's wrist, and suddenly he was back on another wall, and Luna had reached down for him, and he was there, he'd made it. They were seven stories above the grounds, outside the office window, and he pulled himself up to sit on the newly-strengthened ledge, gasping for breath as he trembled with the exertion and the throbbing ache from every muscle in his body.

His head swam, and Neville forced his eyes to remain open. He didn't remember the second climb, but he was *here*, and he forced himself to be utterly aware of it. A cold sweat soaked his uniform, making it cling to him like a second skin, but it was the cold of late October, and he had a mission. They had a mission, and he couldn't let them down.

"Thirsty." Neville's voice was hoarse, and he wondered if they could tell what had happened, how he'd – he wasn't sure, really – but Ginny's eyes held no sign of suspicion that he'd lost his mind as she handed over the water bottle from her bag. He took a long swallow, then passed it back, grateful to feel the thirst simply retreat like a normal thing.

"We should get moving. It's almost two," Ginny said nervously. "Are you...do you think you're ready?"

He nodded, forcing himself to his feet again. "Get the Portal in place, and I'll help you through."

She reached into the bag and pulled out the flimsy disc, then, taking a deep breath, she smoothed it against the lichen-encrusted stone. It quavered as if struggling, then slowly stretched a few inches, finally shuddering and stopping altogether. The resultant hole – or tunnel, rather – was only about eighteen inches wide, but it bored all the way through the heavy tower, letting out a wave of warm air that smelled of candles and woodsmoke into the night.

Ginny went first, wriggling in as she angled her shoulders through the tiny opening like a snake into a drainpipe. She stopped partway, and for a heart-stopping moment Neville thought she might be stuck, then her waist vanished, her hips, and finally her legs slid smoothly through, and she was in. He let out a huge sigh of relief, fogging the air with his breath as she bounced to her feet neatly on the other side of the window and gave him a jaunty little wave. Her voice echoed oddly through the hole. "Easy as pie."

Luna started to make her way towards the Portal, but she had barely braced her hands against the sides when the window opened, and Ginny leaned out, propping her chin in her hands as if it were her own bedroom window at the Burrow. "You can both come in this way, you know."

He smiled, and it felt wonderful. Peeling the Portal from the wall, he gave Luna a boost over the windowsill, following a moment later and climbing through himself, then dropping lightly into the office before shutting it behind him.

Neville had never actually been in the Headmaster's office before. It was a large room, perfectly circular, with portraits almost completely covering the walls. Witches and wizards in various styles of robes from old-fashioned to positively ancient slumbered against their frames, while dozens of tiny, spindle-legged tables were arrayed around the room, delicate silver instruments whirring and spinning quietly, some emitting rhythmic puffs of sweetly scented smoke. And above the heavy wooden desk, over the chair, the largest portrait was of -

"Dumbledore!" Ginny almost shouted the name, dashing forward to lean against the desk as a dozen portraits startled awake. Luna spun, casting a Silencing Charm before there had been a single sleepy moan, and they looked horribly offended, waving canes and in one case an ear trumpet in indignation at her impertinence. Within his frame, their beloved old Headmaster sat up, blinking blearily and adjusting the half-moon spectacles that had been sitting awry on his crooked nose. The familiar bright blue gaze looked down at them, and his eyebrows raised as if they had simply presented him with an unexpected box of sweets rather than broken in at two in the morning.

"My goodness!" He looked around at each of them in turn. "Miss Weasley, Miss Lovegood...and dear me, could that be little Neville Longbottom?"

No longer caring about anything but the prospect of getting the chance to talk to the teacher they all so desperately missed, Neville stripped the scarf from his face and nodded eagerly. "Yes, Professor, it's me! I've...we've...I mean, we've kept it up, Professor. Harry's had to go...well, wherever you sent him, I guess, and Ron and Hermione, too, but we're not letting them have your school!"

"And you broke in here at this time of morning just to tell me that?" He sounded rather bemused, and Neville blushed.

"Um...actually, we came in here to get the Sword of Gryffindor for Harry. You wouldn't be able to help us with that, would you?" he asked hopefully.

"Very ambitious, and extraordinarily clever of you if you've figured out what he needs it for, but alas, no. I am only a portrait, and this," he drew his wand from within one loose, flowing sleeve, "is little more than a brushstroke, rather than little more than a stick, no matter how many people may want to believe otherwise." There was something odd in his tone, but Neville had often overheard Harry complaining about Dumbledore's cryptic sayings, and he began to understand what the other boy had meant.

"How do we get it out of the case?" Luna queried. "Our original plan was to smash it."

"That will do well enough, although, I would appreciate a word with Miss Weasley while you proceed." He motioned to Ginny, and she stepped around the desk, stopping right beside the large, high-backed chair, but he beckoned her in closer, until she was finally mere inches away.

Neville wanted desperately to know what Dumbledore was whispering to her that was making such a wide array of emotions play across her face, but he knew that they were almost certainly private things that she deserved to know as Harry's girlfriend and Ron's sister, and being neither, he had no right to be nosy. Besides, as Dumbledore had pointed out, they had come for something else entirely. Looking around, he picked up a heavy iron poker from the fireplace and assessed the glass case standing on a marble pedestal next to the desk.

The Sword was larger than he had thought it would be. He had never seen it before, and somehow, his mind's eye had always pictured it as fitting neatly and heroically in the hands of a twelve-year old, really a long dagger at most. This was a proper medieval broadsword, easily almost as long as a twelve-year old, with a heavy, beautifully worked hilt encrusted with several large rubies and the name *Godric Gryffindor* etched down the blade itself in gold. It stood without stand or support, perfectly on end behind the thick, transparent barrier, waiting for them.

Flexing his fingers around the handle of the poker, Neville took a deep breath and planted his feet, choosing a spot in the center of the pane where he thought the case might be weaker than at the corners. He had wondered if he would still be able to do it, but being inside in the warmth with a sturdy floor beneath him and the thrill of seeing Dumbledore again – even in a portrait – was enough to charge him with a vivid new strength.

He swung the poker, swiveling to put his entire body behind the blow as he slammed the metal barb into the case. A spiderweb of cracks radiated from where he had hit, the barb now sunken deep into the once-shining surface, and he wrenched it out, striking once, twice more until the entire surface of the case was thickly networked with silvery lines and three small holes bored through. Putting the poker down now, he ducked his head and lunged into the weakened case shoulder-first, and it nearly exploded, dissolving into a glittering crash of crystalline shards that covered the floor.

Luna lunged and grabbed the Sword before it fell, its magical support gone, but before she could make another move, it happened. There was no alarm as they had assumed, but a woman's voice, cool and melodic yet utterly unfamiliar sounded from the walls themselves, "*Thou beist non trewe.*" Luna let out a yelp of pain, dropping the Sword and yanking her hands away as if burned.

"Only a Gryffindor!" Ginny yelled, sprinting around the corner of the desk, and Neville nodded, crouching and scooping up the heavy blade as he swiveled to the window and flung it like a javelin towards the opening.

It bounced off. The window was gone, the rough-hewn walls suddenly smooth and featureless as glass, and the tables had vanished, the portraits, the instruments, everything. The office was no more, and they were trapped in a room that had become as blank and glossily black as the Department of Mysteries, only the single door that led to the staircase still remaining. It was over, Neville knew with a sick, sinking feeling, but they couldn't give up, and he grabbed the Sword from the shining floor, waving his arm at the door. "Run!"

But when they threw open the door, the steps had also changed. The stairwell was narrow and circular, but where there had clearly once been a spiral staircase, now a thousand stone hands writhed and twisted like living statues. Ginny recoiled, but Neville lowered his head and jumped into the middle of them, stomping and kicking at the fingers that snatched for his feet. "Come on, it's the only way out!"

It was too late to worry about wandwork, and he drew his wand, switching the sword to his left hand and raining jinxes and hexes down onto the hands. For a few seconds, it seemed to be working. Fingers blew away from palms, spiraling crazily through the air. Hands shriveled, shrank, froze, and twisted as the two girls added their spells to his own, but now the hands were sprouting from the walls as well, their arms growing longer, and for every one they stopped or destroyed, ten more seemed to sprout from the floor in its place.

Fingers plucked at him everywhere, and he twisted, feeling clumps of hair yanked away and clothing tear as the air filled with the sizzle and snap of spell after spell. Then Ginny screamed, and he saw that the hands had her, holding her in a grip that had frozen back to solid stone as hundreds of fingers sealed her helplessly against the wall.

He turned, but the moment had cost him, and now the hands had him as well, locking around his feet and legs, crawling their way over his back, grabbing more of his hair until the wand was ripped from his fingers, and they had closed over every inch of him, even wrapping bloodlessly around the blade of the Sword itself.

Luna lasted only seconds longer, the lightest and quickest among them, shooting hexes and curses in a dozen languages, but they pulled her feet from under her, and then she too was the prisoner of the hands.

Somewhere below, there was a battle going on, he could hear it faintly over his own pounding heartbeat and the terrible rasping and grating of the writhing stone fingers. Voices, mangled by the Garbling Gum, shouting spells he could not make out, cracks and bangs as spells struck and ricocheted, and other voices, faint but horribly familiar. He struggled harder against the entrapping hands, the Galleon in his pocket burned a hot, useless warning against his thigh, but the hands refused to yield.

He wrenched his head to the side, gasping as more hair tore away. "They're coming!"

Somehow, Ginny had kept her wand, and she twitched her fingers, the hands around her wrists preventing her any more freedom as she aimed the spell first at herself, then down the wall at her two companions turned fellow prisoners. "*Disilliusory!*"

A tingle went through him, then a sensation as if she had thrown an egg against his chest, cool, almost wet trickles spreading from the point the spell had hit him over his entire body, and he watched Luna and Ginny vanish as if paint had been poured over them, pale skin and black cloth now flawlessly matching the cursed hands in both color and texture.

The door opened below, and within a few seconds, a figure in black robes swept past them, his wand held lit in front of him, the hands not attacking, but lacing open palms together to provide him stairs as solid and friendly as they ever had been. Snape swept into the empty office, his black eyes narrowing as he turned, surveying the empty room. Then, with a cold, predatory look on his sallow face, he returned to the stairs.

Neville didn't dare move. He held his breath, pressing himself back into the hands deeper now, willing, hoping with a last, crazily desperate spark of possibility that Snape might not see them, might think they had escaped, that there might be any sort of chance remaining. But the Disillusionment Charm could not protect them from the fact that the hands all along the walls and floor had formed a perfectly flat interlock of fingers and palms, except in three places, where they jutted out, grasping, holding, confining their invisible prey.

Snape strode forward, a look of terrible triumph gleaming in a cold, cruel smile as he flicked his wand. Something hot seemed to spread over Neville in the same trickling sensation he had experienced a moment before, and he knew the charm had been lifted as Snape leaned in, his breath sour as he slipped the Sword from Neville's helpless grasp. "I think this is mine. As are you."



## Chapter Six The Forbidden Forest

"It's been two weeks! They can't just lock us up down here for the rest of the school year!" Neville slammed his fists against the unyielding metal bars in frustration as the house-elf piled the remains of his dinner onto a large tray. "Come on! Tell me something, *anything!*"

"Krimpet is sorry, sir, but Krimpet has orders from the Headmaster." The elf looked ashamed, but his large blue eyes were fearful, and he kept glancing at the walls as if they were watching him. "Krimpet brings the food for the prisoners, and he takes the dishes, and he has been given the strongest orders. He would have to punish himself most terribly grievously, and Krimpet is not brave like Dobby, oh no. He is scared of Headmaster Snape." He gave a thin, desperately servile smile, bowing as low as he could with his awkward burden. "But he brings the mustard for Luna Lovegood, and he makes the chicken for Neville Longbottom with not too much gravy, and he never forgets that Ginny Weasley likes the lemon with her tea, not the milk, so Neville Longbottom should not be so angry with Krimpet."

Neville let out a long sigh, sliding slowly down the bars until he was on his knees in the dank cell, his head sagging in frustrated defeat. Taking a deep breath, he looked up and tried to produce what he hoped was a kindly apologetic expression. "You're right, Krimpet, it's not your fault. I'm sorry. I just...I thought we'd be Cruciated at least, but they've only...it's making me mental. How are the girls?"

"Ginny Weasley is angry, just like Neville Longbottom. She yells things – most horrible language for a witch to use – but she forgets that there is powerful magic on the dungeons, and she cannot be heard upstairs or from inside other cells. But she is still well, oh yes, well enough to throw her cake and smash the plate into very tiny pieces." Krimpet shook his head sadly, clearly mourning the waste of pastry, then he brightened. "But Luna Lovegood is not angry, Neville Longbottom, sir. She sings and she paints with the food she does not eat, and Krimpet thinks she is much nicer."

"Have they sent me any messages?"

"Every day, Neville Longbottom asks this, and every day Krimpet must tell him that it is forbidden. Why does Neville Longbottom still ask?"

The question was asked with innocent, genuine curiosity, and he was forced to shrug, smiling sheepishly. "I don't know, really. I guess I just hope something's changed."

He had stood again, turning to resume the pacing that had become the constant staple of his existence, but stopped dead as the little being spoke again. "Dobby sends a message."

Neville whirled, fighting the urge to grab the towel and shake the elf until his brains rattled for not telling him sooner. Instead, he gritted his teeth, forcing his voice to remain calm and gentle. "What's that?"

"Dobby says that something big is coming very, very soon. That is all, Neville Longbottom, sir, and before he asks, Krimpet does not know what he means by this either, but Dobby is a free elf and very strange." The look on Krimpet's face clearly implored the young wizard to take anything from such an unbalanced individual with the deepest skepticism, then he bowed again. "Krimpet must go now." A loud *crack* echoed through the tiny stone chamber, and the elf was gone.

Something big. Neville ran his fingers maniacally through his greasy hair as he resumed pacing, his long strides covering the confines of the cell so quickly that he felt rather dizzy with the rapidity he was forced to turn. Something big. Was the D.A. planning a breakout? Had Snape finally decided to punish them? Were they being sent to Azkaban? Turned over to You-Know-Who himself? Or had he heard from Harry? Was the war won? Was it lost? Were they going to be executed? It could mean anything!

"Blimey, lad, I reckon I smelt yeh before I saw yeh. How long's it been since you had a bath?" Neville skidded to a halt, whirling towards the barred front of the dungeon cell as his jaw dropped open in shock. Dobby's cryptic message was immediately, wonderfully clear.

"Hagrid!" He covered the cell in two paces, pressing himself against the bars and reaching through to grab the gamekeeper's dustbin lid-sized hand in both of his. "What are you doing here?"

"Fetchin' you lot." A fond smile appeared beneath the wild black beard, but his beetle-black eyes were solemn. "An' I'm 'sposed ter tell yeh that if yeh try any funny business, they ain't gonna do naught ter yeh, but they'll start pickin' random first-years ter take whatever you'd be gettin'." He made a face. "Right nasty pair, them Carrows."

Hagrid reached into one of the pockets of his moleskin overcoat, and Neville heard several things rattle, clank, and even something that squished before he withdrew a large, old-fashioned key. There was no lock or door on the cell, and it struck him as odd, but Hagrid simply pressed the key against the nearest bar, and it slid in as easily as if there had been a keyhole all along. With a half-turn, the bars in front of Neville vanished.

"Ginny!" He shoved through the opening, already at a sprint, barely nodding thanks to Hagrid as he flew past and down the hall in the direction Krimpet came from after delivering his friends' food. Despite the accuracy of the elf's descriptions, part of him had never let go of the terrified possibility that he might be lying, so it was to a wonderful surge of joy and relief that he heard

her call out back to him, saw a puff of dust fall from the ceiling as she flung herself forward into the bars, her slender arms reaching through into the hall.

"Neville!" Barely avoiding crashing headlong into the bars, he slid to a halt and reached out to grab her up in a tight hug that crushed the bars between them awkwardly. She gave a laugh that was almost a scream, almost a sob, her hands searching over his body as if unable to quite believe he was real, even as he held her as tight as he dared without hurting her.

"Where have you been? What have they done to you? Are you okay? Tell me you're okay! I've been trying...but they won't tell me...that sniveling little...I didn't know...I thought it was over...I thought we were...and then Snape...oh, the Sword...and he stunned you...and then me...woke up here...days and days...and no idea...." The words were broken, half-sobbed with relief, excitement, hope, fury, and a dozen other things that tumbled the sentences against each other too fast to finish. She didn't need to. He understood, and he nodded at everything as she rained kisses over his face, but he felt no guilt because there was nothing wrong there, just the love of a friend and a comrade who had become almost a sister to him.

"Now if you'll two peel apart for a sec', I can go 'head and let Ginny out 'o there fer yeh." Hagrid chuckled deeply from behind him, and Ginny pushed herself away with a delighted gasp, her eyes wide.

"*You're* the one helping us escape!"

"Fraid not, love." He shook his great, shaggy head ruefully. "The Carrows've ordered me ter fetch yeh up to 'em."

Neville saw the same spark of defiant hope in her eyes that had flared in his, and he cut her off before she could speak. "No, we can't make a run for it. They've said they'll punish the little ones in our place if we do – just random first-years."

Her face twisted in disgust. "That's sick!"

Hagrid pushed the key into her bars, and Ginny jumped through the opening, wheeling back to let fly with an impressive gob of spit into the empty cell. "At least I'm out of that effing place!"

He grabbed her arm. "Which way's Luna?"

"This way!" With a jerk of her head, she led him off at a run around a bend in the hall, and they soon heard the familiar dreamy voice echoing softly ahead.

*"...and the climbing roses twine.  
You were waiting for me there,  
I held your hand in mine.  
I cried that you went off to war,  
But darling, don't be afraid.  
I'll transfigure my spindle to a sword,  
And fight at your side, a soldier maid..."*

They exchanged a look, shouting her name as they neared the glow from the single candle in the occupied cell, but as they reached it, they stopped, struck dumb by the sight in front of them.

Luna was sitting peacefully cross-legged at the base of the wall, a pot of mustard in one hand as she daubed petals onto a platter-sized sunflower.

The entire cell looked like a fanciful garden; a riot of vivid color and beautiful, skillfully painted plants, fruits, and flowers that bloomed over the walls, the floor, even the sides of the narrow wooden bunk. Unlike their own squalid, disheveled appearance, Luna was clean and neat, her pale blonde hair shining in a twist on top of her head that appeared to be secured by a spoon tucked through the long tresses, her clothing mended and returned to its usual gray sweater and crisp white shirt with blue and bronze at the trim and tie. She got to her feet at their approach, brushing dust off the seat of her trousers and turning to them with a smile. "Oh, hello. Have we been released?"

"How..." Ginny started, then shook her head, unable to finish.

"I painted with my food," she replied simply, then paused a moment, tilting her head slightly. "And used some magic so it didn't rot."

"How did you keep your wand?" Neville felt a new hope begin to rise. If at least one of them was armed, maybe they could figure something after all, despite the Carrows' attempts at blackmail.

Luna gave them an odd look, then pulled the spoon from her hair. "I didn't. I used this."

He would have thought this absolute proof that Luna Lovegood had finally crossed what he had always deep down suspected was the extremely fine line separating her from actually being insane, but the evidence that she had in fact produced magic was strong enough that he hesitated. "A spoon?"

"Krimpet let me keep it. I asked nicely." She spoke as if that should explain everything, and Ginny frowned.

"But...a spoon?"

"You need a wand to do spells, of course, or to aim them precisely, but we can all do *magic* without them. We did it when we were kids. It's just not fancy or exact when you focus it through something else. I couldn't use *Scourgify* or *Impedimenta Mortificus*, but I could focus my mind and magic on wanting to be clean and not wanting the food to rot." Luna shrugged as if it were all common knowledge anyway. "There wasn't anything I could do about being down here, so I thought I'd just make it a nice place and find a way to occupy myself."

Neville exchanged a look with Ginny, relieved to see that she appeared to feel as abruptly stupid as he did for driving themselves half-mad screaming and raging uselessly. They had accomplished nothing but sore throats and bruised, scraped fists, and looked as haggard, filthy, and worn as could be expected, while Luna had kept her head about her and seemed ready to stroll into the next D.A. meeting without needing a moment's recovery.

As they stared at each other in growing embarrassment, she looked past them and gave a little wave. "Coming to take us up to the Carrows, Hagrid?"

"No, sorry, I'm jes'—" He stopped, blinking. "—Wait a minute. Them two's already told yeh."

"No, but if you were here to break us out, they would have. Just give me a minute." She turned back to the cell and gripped her spoon in both hands, holding it outstretched and squeezing her eyes shut as she concentrated. The little pewter utensil began to glow, and the walls shimmered a moment, then the textures of mustard, pea soup, chutney, and tomato sauce faded, and it seemed instead as though the stone itself had been dyed the same vivid tones.

"What was that?" Neville asked.

"I just focused on wanting it all to stay forever so the next person doesn't have to be depressed." Coiling her hair with one hand, she tucked the spoon back in neatly and stepped out into the hall, taking a few steps before glancing back over her shoulder to where the other two were still staring incredulously into the elaborately decorated chamber. "Well, are you coming?"

They followed, Hagrid bringing up the rear as they began to make their way back through the twisting network of tunnels that made up the dungeons. Ginny cast him a sidelong glance, then mouthed silently, *Spoon?*

He shrugged, mouthing his reply back in equal silence. *Luna.*

OOO

"We've given ourselves a good long think on this one, we have." Amucus Carrow's doughy, pallid face was twisted into a self-satisfied grin as he paced in front of the three prisoners. The entry hall was deserted, and Neville could see light through the cracks of the doors that led to the Great Hall and hear a low babble of voices that told him it was dinner time. Outside the windows, the light had turned livid with sunset, and it gave the round face and sunken eyes of the Death Eater the look of a living, demented jack o' lantern.

Despite the threats, he had taken no chances, locking each of them with a full Body Bind the moment they had been brought in front of him, and adding a layer of magical ropes for good measure as he reminded them that the slightest move would result in their punishment being given to helpless children. The elaborate precautions, rather than engendering the despair they had been meant to, had only filled Neville with a sense of pride. A fully grown and qualified wizard, one of You-Know-Who's own Death Eaters, felt he had to use two different restraining spells, threats, and a half-giant to handle three wandless teenagers, two of them sixth-year witches. It would have made him smile if he could have moved his face.

"We reckoned that you've been a stubborn little buncha gits, but they say you can ketch more pixies with honey, so we're takin' it easy fer what you did. Yer goin' out into the Forbidden Forest with 'Agrid tonight. He'll be leavin' you there ta spend the night. If you come back out in the mornin', you can have yer wands back and go back to classes, no more said." He gave a horrible, shrill laugh, then wagged his wand at Hagrid.

"And dontcha get any ideas about hangin' back with 'em, you stupid animal." He raised his voice, standing up on the tips of his toes to shout loudly and slowly into the buttons on the front of Hagrid's waistcoat. "One hour, you go in. One hour, you come back. You no come back, I kill big doggy. Still no come back, I kill ugly Skrewty-nasties. Still no come back, I send little firsties go find you. Savvy?"

Neville could not turn his head to see the look on Hagrid's face, but he could hear the tightly restrained fury in the giant's voice. "Oh, I 'savvy' perfectly fine what yer about, Amucus."

"Good." Carrow turned towards them, then hesitated, his wand drawn. He paused a moment, then jerked his head towards Hagrid. "Take 'em outside, I'll let 'em go once yer ta the edge 'o the Forest." His face split in a horrible, leering grin, revealing stained, crooked teeth and making him look more than ever like a badly carved pumpkin. "Best hurry. Sun's settin'. Full moon tonight."

Carrow waved his wand, and the front doors opened, revealing the grounds that stretched to the edge of the forest, already shadowed nearly black against the ruddy light. Somewhere, deep in the distant mountains, so far away that it could have been a trick of the wind, a wolf howled, and Neville felt his heart stop.

He knew. With a sudden burst of sickening terror, he knew why Amycus was smiling, why they weren't expected to return, and exactly what waited for them in the forbidden forest under the dark shadows and the full moon.

OOO

Through the thick canopy of trees above them, a few slivers of sky still showed gold and blue with the dying sunset, but on the forest floor, night had already fallen on the heavy underbrush. The tree trunks stood no more than an arm's length apart this deep in the forest, old and gnarled, and the shadows they cast were an inky black. They had been walking for what felt like days, pushing their way through knotted brambles that plucked at their clothing and scratched their skin, leaving the path far behind as they stumbled over unseen roots and caught their feet in rabbit holes, every fluttering bird and snapping twig harsh against their tightly-strung nerves.

Finally, Hagrid stopped, and Neville tripped as he came up short to avoid running into the broad back. "Got ter leave yeh here." He turned, and even in the darkness, his face was flushed, great, fat tears running down his cheeks to drip into the wild tangle of his beard. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!" With a loud sob, he pulled a tablecloth-sized handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn. "Yer jus' babies, 'taint fair ter leave yeh here ter...." There was another sob, and Ginny reached up to lay one hand against the massive elbow.

"It's all right, Hagrid. We know you don't have a choice. He'd kill —" Her voice was soothing, but he cut her off with a wave of the huge hankerchief.

"I'd give Fang fer yeh in a moment!" The announcement came with a heartfelt resolution that was all the more wrenching for the sacrifice they knew it would mean. "It's the little ones, yeh see...not that you lot are half older!"

"I'm a grown man now, Hagrid. I can take care of myself." Neville spoke with confidence, only to find the statement met with a look of rather patronizing skepticism through the still-falling tears.

"Yer seventeen. I don't care what the Ministry says, that's still a ruddy child, or it should be, right 'nuff." Hagrid dug in his pockets again, pulling out an object the size of a loaf of bread. "I'd give yeh my wand if I could — they snapped it when I got expelled, and I weren't 'sposed ter keep it, but I sort of hid the bits, see — 'cept Snape knew where I kept it, an' he took it from me at the start o' the year. So best I can give you's this. It's jes' a pocketknife, but it's all I got that ain't too big fer yeh ter manage proper." He held it out in one vast hand, and Neville took it, unfolding a foot-long blade like a small dagger.

He tested the thick handle in his grasp, finding it surprisingly well balanced, and a few practice swipes at the underbrush cut through with razored ease. Neville looked up in genuine gratitude. "Thanks...I mean, yeah, it's your pocketknife, but it's a real weapon for us."

"You have to go, Hagrid. You can't be late." Luna gestured to the sky. "Please. We don't want this to be any worse than it needs to be."

With another foghorn-like blast into the handkerchief, Hagrid nodded miserably, then Neville found himself lifted fully off his feet and crushed against the homespun waistcoat in a hug that drove the breath out of him as his ribs groaned in protest. The girls had been swept up into the same colossal embrace, and he tried to squirm away from where Ginny's elbow jutted into the pit of his stomach, only to have them crushed in even tighter. "Blimey, I'll miss you all jes' awful!" Hagrid wailed.

"Hagrid –" Ginny managed to gasp, "—you're going to crush us...."

"I'm sorry!" He dropped them immediately, and Neville felt to his knees, sucking in a great, gasping breath of wonderfully available oxygen. gingerly feeling his sides, he satisfied himself that no ribs had actually snapped under the well-intentioned assault, and he got to his feet, pulling his shoulders back with all the authority he had ever used as leader of the D.A..

Though a tall young man, the top of his head barely came to Hagrid's armpit, and he felt slightly ridiculous staring up at someone so much bigger and older as he forced his voice to belie the feeling of creeping dread that was growing as the blue above them deepened. "Hagrid, you aren't doing us any good by staying just long enough to cause more bloodshed. Give our families our love, but get out of here! Go! Now!"

Still weeping, Hagrid gave them each one final, deliberately gentle hug, then turned and left back the way they had come, his loud sobs carrying back to them long after his gargantuan form had vanished completely into the trees. Then even that died away, and they were left in the forest that seemed at once alive with tiny, ominous noises and yet utterly silent.

Instinctively, the girls had moved in close to him, and they were now standing in a tight circle in the little clearing, their backs to one another as they scanned the shadows in vain for some sign of their fate. Neville fought the urge to brandish the makeshift sword at nothing, forcing himself to fold it and tuck it into the waistband of his trousers, hiding the handle under the back of his shirt. If it was their only weapon, he wanted it to at least come as a surprise to their enemies. "Ginny?" He didn't know why he was suddenly whispering, but his voice refused to come any louder.

"Yes?" Though she didn't whisper back, her own voice was thin and trembling around the edges.

"How well did you know Professor Lupin?"

"Not all that well. You think so too, then?" There was a sick resignation in her voice, as if she had hoped he would have come to some other conclusion, anything but what they both knew to be the truth.

"Why else hold us for more than two weeks to wait for the full moon and then turn us loose like this? I mean, the Forbidden Forest just isn't worth what we did on its own. And they didn't lay a

finger on us. They even fed us well, but they didn't let us bathe or change clothes. I think we're supposed to smell."

He could feel her nod against his side. "Easier to find." She paused. "Luna, do you still have your spoon?"

"I lost it when I caught my hair on a branch a little way back. Do you think we should try to go look for it?" Even her words were quavering with fear, and Neville felt their hope of seeing the morning alive fade a little bit further away.

"Don't worry about cutlery, darling. We aren't picky eaters." The voice was chilling, a harsh, rasping bark coming from only a few yards away in the shadows of the surrounding trees, and Neville felt himself break into a cold sweat as the owner of the voice stepped forward into the clearing.

He wore black Death Eater's robes, but they barely clung to his big, rangy form, stretching precariously at the seams over his chest and shoulders. He was filthy beyond description, his callused and dirt-caked hands ending in long, yellowed claws. His hair and beard were as long and gray as Dumbledore's, but rather than falling in smooth silver sheets, they were clumped in thick mats and snarls, dreadlocked with dirt, grease, and other, darker, less savory things. When he smiled, he revealed jagged yellow teeth that gleamed unnaturally in the moonlight, and as the wind shifted, it brought a sickening stench of sweat, dirt, decay, and unmistakably, blood.

Neville knew him instantly. Indeed, he had, like every wizarding child, known him by reputation his whole life; and despite himself, he felt his knees begin to tremble. He was the nightmare. The creature that will get you if you're bad. The reason not to go into the forest alone or leave the house at night. The thing that waited under your bed. The monster that preyed on children and was all too real. Fenrir Greyback.

Suddenly, Ginny bolted forward, her face flushed and blazing with rage, her hands stretched ahead of her with the fingers crooked into claws as she flung herself towards the newcomer. "YOU!" Neville lunged, grabbing her around her waist and dragging her back as she kicked and writhed, utterly deranged with hysterical fury. "Bill! He attacked — *you* attacked — my brother! You attacked Bill! You *monster!* You *foul, loathsome...* I'll tear you to pieces, I'll —" Her words dissolved into an incoherent shriek of hatred, and Greyback laughed.

"Should have seen the family resemblance. Same hair, I'd even say his was as long as yours. Pretty lot, aren't you? Well, at least, I suppose *he's* not so much any more." He licked his lips slowly, obscenely, reveling in the memory and the pain it caused her. "Went down smooth, that one. But faces are always the best parts."

He turned away, ignoring her cries and increasingly desperate attempts to break free from Neville's hold as he approached Luna. Neville felt sick with helplessness as he watched the werewolf extend one thick nail to run ever so gently along her pale cheek. He knew if he let Ginny go for even a moment in her current state, she would fling herself to her own death, but to see that beast touch his friend....



"They've been good to us." Greyback's voice had taken on a grotesquely sensuous appreciation. "I've always liked my dinner delivered." He drew away from Luna, stepping back to look at all three of them with a greedy gleam to his narrow eyes. "Nice-sized bit of good lean meat for starters, and for dessert, we get our choice...strawberry or vanilla." A coarse, barking laugh sounded into the night, and to Neville's horror, it was answered from all sides. They were surrounded.

Ginny froze in his arms, and he felt her suddenly clutch against him instead, even as Luna latched herself onto his other side in a death grip of her own. Seeing their terror, Greyback leered at them again. "Why, don't they teach you anything? Wolves travel in packs."

There were at least thirty of them emerging from the woods. Men, women, and most appallingly, children as well, the youngest a scrawny boy no older than four who slunk through the underbrush with a look of hunger on his already-cruel face. Only Greyback himself wore robes. The rest were clad in a haphazard collection of crudely sewn animal skins, their hair and the men's beards long and matted, their limbs and faces dark with filth, strings of what were unquestionably human finger bones and vertebra hung around their necks. Even with the moon still tucked below the canopy of the trees, they looked barely human; a primitive, feral tribe from some distant, uncivilized past that was best forgotten.

Shoving the girls behind him, Neville grabbed for the knife, flicking it open and brandishing it in front of him in wide, sweeping strokes. "Come any closer, and I swear I'll—"

"*Expelliarmus!*" The knife flew from his hand, spiraling uselessly through the air to vanish into the trees, and Neville gasped in shock as another figure in ragged wizard's robes stepped into the clearing, a wand outstretched in his hand towards the three helpless teenagers.

"Professor Lupin?" Neville felt shell-shocked. It couldn't be, and yet, the man standing in front of him now was nothing like the sickly, kind, almost retiring teacher he remembered. The features were the same, perhaps a little thinner, a little more gray prematurely streaking his hair, but his expression was one of open hate and mocking vengeance.

"Don't call me that, boy." It was the same voice that had once asked him whether his grandmother carried a handbag, but now it growled around the edges and snapped through the air with the crack of shattering hope. "I'm not Dumbledore's lapdog any more, curling up and cringing and biting my own flesh instead of his precious students so he'll throw me a few

crumbs." Wand still outstretched, he turned to Greyback and flicked his head at the three.  
"Mine. I claim kill."

"You want the boy, you can have him. I'm still deciding between the two little lovelies,"  
Greyback answered as he circled.

"I want all three." Lupin seemed unfazed by the depth of his own betrayal, running his tongue over his teeth as he grinned viciously at them.

"You can't have all of them, you wizard-loving *pet*." Greyback's voice was even thicker with scorn, and now the two werewolves were circling each other, shoulders tensed, hands raised like wrestlers about to attack. Neville watched in fascinated dread, uncertain whether what he was seeing was really as hostile as it appeared, or some form of ritual challenge in this strange animal society.

"How many do you have wanded, Greyback? You can't even use that stick of yours," sneered Lupin.

"You've mated with a witch!" The words came with as much disgust as Neville had ever heard from anyone before, and it struck him as hideously ironic that such a creature could find anything distasteful.

"I've *bred*. You want them young," he waved a hand at the feral child who's eyes were beginning to shine in the growing light of the rising moon, "it will be one of us from *birth*. And my dear, darling, *tolerant*, Dora -" his lips twisted in a mocking smile, "- doesn't exactly want me anywhere near her at these times."

"They were given to me, not you!"

"Fine!" barked Lupin, and he turned away in a swirl of shabby robes, stalking towards the trees as if leaving them all. "Your master can let you in when it's time, and you can search to your heart's content. And then I will go back after you've slunk away with your empty bellies and open every secret chamber, closet, crack, and corner where they've hidden their precious children, and stuff myself on sweet young meat."

There was a silence that seemed to stretch an eternity, then Greyback barked once, stalking over to Lupin and actually biting him on the shoulder with a snap of his head and jaws, blood welling through the ragged fabric. It seemed expected, and Lupin scarcely reacted, returning to them with anticipatory malice greedily lighting his eyes. He waved his wand at them. "*Incarcerous!*"

The thin silver ropes shot from the end of his wand, binding them securely, too disbelieving to give much of a struggle, and he gathered the ends of the ropes in one dirty hand, holding them deliberately like a master walking a brace of hounds. He yanked them towards the trees, and they were forced to follow, stumbling awkwardly in their restraints.

Neville's mind raced. Their situation was hopeless, there were too many of them, but a bitter, white-hot hatred that had grown towards the enemy he had once looked up to filled him with a terrible resolve not to go easily, not to simply let himself and his friends become prey without a fight. There would be a moment of transformation, he knew, and he flexed his fingers. Never had he imagined himself capable of such a thing, but he vowed he would tear out the traitor's

throat as he shifted, rip it away with his bare hands, and take as many more as he could before he himself was downed.

They were alone now, and Neville tensed his legs, ready to spring at his first opportunity. Then Lupin turned, and desperation had replaced malice on every feature, his voice a plea. "We have no time, it'll happen any minute now! *Please*, listen to me...I'm going to take some blood, try and convince them that I got in at least a bite before you pulled a wizard's trick on me when I changed, but you *must* do as I say. All of you must run as fast as you ever have in your lives. Run and don't look back. No matter what happens, what you hear, *no matter what*." He waved his wand and the silver ropes vanished as he reached out, "Your arm, Neville –"

Hatred replaced by a sudden, resurgent hope, Neville thrust out his arm, and Lupin grabbed a tear in the dark sleeve, ripping it open and slashing his wand across the exposed flesh. Blood welled instantly from the shallow cut, and he could not suppress his shudder as the werewolf lowered his face to the wound and lapped at it, his tongue already too long and flat to be quite human, his face growing scruffier against Neville's skin.

When he raised his head, his mouth was smeared lurid scarlet, and he snarled at them, his teeth too long, his eyes slit-pupiled in the sudden silver light of the moon that had just now come into view above them. "*Run!*" The word came in an inhuman growl, and his head snapped back, his body twisting and contorting, the wand falling from his fingers as they knotted into heavy paws. For a moment, Neville considered trying to grab it, but Luna had his wrist, and behind them, only a dozen feet away, they could hear the shrieks and moans of agony as the pack began to transform.

They ran.

Pushing through the underbrush like a battering ram, he threw himself headlong into the forest, his legs driving him forward faster than he had ever thought possible, the girls close on his heels, propelled by raw fear and survival instinct to ignore the slicing thorns and grasping roots as they fled. He didn't know if they were headed towards the castle or only deeper into the woods, but it didn't matter, because behind them rose a terrible howl of triumph, and he knew the pack had their scent, and it was a race now, a race for their lives.

A sharp stitch had seized his side, his breath was coming in gasps, but he kept running until the trees vanished and the ground abruptly fell away at his feet. He caught himself barely in time, throwing out his arms as Ginny slammed into him and he caught her only inches from falling over the precipice that had appeared before them, Luna striking his back a second later.

Silver moonlight lit the clearing, and below, in the wide scoop of the valley floor, a thick spider's web stretched gleaming white across the entire vale. It was wild and knotted, and like blackberries heavy in twisted briars, a hundred spiders the size of small cars crouched on the rope-like strands, their tiny eyes glittering a thousand reflections of the round, shining moon. They were trapped.

The embankment began to crumble under his feet, and Neville took a step back, but a thin trickle of pebbles clattered down the side of the valley, and he watched in wide-eyed fear as they struck the edge of the web, plucking it like a piano string to announce the arrival of prey. The nearest spider twitched, then rose, long, hair legs extending with monstrous grace as it began to make its way across the web towards the edge, a dozen fellows rising at the movement to join it.

Behind them, they could hear the snapping of underbrush, eager bays and howls as the pack drew nearer, and he looked from Ginny to Luna and back in desperation, his mind clutching for something, anything that could be used against the monsters closing in from all sides now. They had minutes at most, utterly unarmed, and in that moment, he would have given anything, everything for a wand, for Luna's spoon, for anything at all but the terrible fear that was all they had.

*We can all do magic without them.* Luna's words echoed in his head as if she had just spoken them again, and Neville fell to his knees at the edge of the underbrush, stretching out his arms to wrap his hands around the thick bases of two briars, scarcely feeling the thorns that stabbed deep into his palms. He closed his eyes, reaching deep inside himself for what he knew had to be there, that spark of power that had so long been so faint he had wondered if it even existed at all.

His lips did not move, but his heart called out a desperate prayer to the parents he still loved. *You were Aurors. I know it's there. If you can hear me from wherever you've gone, if some part of you knows you still have a son, help me now. Help me find you. Help me save my friends.*

In the darkness of his mind's eye, a tiny light seemed to gleam like a single star in the night sky, and he reached towards it, pulling it, calling on it, willing it to come to him. It grew, and now it was like a tiny sun, a glowing orb becoming larger, brighter, hotter as he focused, concentrating everything on what he now realized he had always been so deathly afraid of, the something in him that didn't just exist, but shone with a power that would have scorched his eyes to blindness had he been forced to look on it in reality.

It was the something the Death Eaters had come for. The thing that Harry had just begun to coax into life. The thing that when he cut himself adrift from it left him barely able to remember his own name. The thing that roared and screamed when he fought. The thing that in presence and absence had defined his entire life.

A woman's voice, familiar but alien in its strength and sanity, screamed out in unendurable agony. *I won't tell you! You can't have him! You'll have to kill me first!* Then another voice, shrill and mad and laughing the Unforgivable, *CRUCIO! CRUCIO! And CRUCIO again and again until you tell me where they are, the Dark Lord and the brat...I can do this all night! CRUCIO!*

And everything was darkness and yet everything was light, a light that burned now hotter than the brightest summer sun, that filled everything, that had replaced bone and muscle to become him, swelling into something larger and deeper and stranger and more terrible and more wonderful and more right than anything he had ever known before. The screaming went on and on, a man and a woman's voices both raised in shrieks of anguish, and they pulsed through him like lightning.

Then the light flared with the intensity of a star reaching nova, and his back arched like a drawn bow, his body nearly snapping itself in half as the light burst, tore, and collapsed into nothing.

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There were hands stroking his hair. Gentle hands, combing their fingers back from his forehead in soothing, rhythmic passes as his head lay cradled against something warm and soft. Neville opened his eyes, blinking uncertainly as Luna's pale, heart-shaped face came into focus above him. There were dark circles of exhaustion under the large blue eyes, but there was an oddly

secretive little smile on her lips that grew a bit as their gazes met. She glanced up and away, "Ginny..."

He heard movement nearby, a rustling of leaves and twigs, and he suddenly realized that they were outside. The forest. The Forbidden Forest. It all came back in a rush, and he sat bolt upright off of Luna's lap, his heart racing as his head snapped around, his shoulders tensing, ready to fight. Then he stopped, and a frown of confusion creased his brow.

They were still outdoors, certainly, but the eerie, deep-shadowed silver light of the full moon had been replaced by the warm glow of dawn. The air was soft with morning mist, his breath just barely fogging in the early chill, but the knotted trees, the precipice, the monstrous creatures that had been attacking them were gone. Instead, they seemed to be inside a strange domed structure of some kind. It was about the size of a large tent, without windows or doors of any kind, the walls and ceiling tightly woven in a wild, haphazard snarl of what he gradually realized were living thorn briars, still deeply rooted in the soil on all sides of them.

Gradually, more of his last moments before losing consciousness came clear, and Neville raised his hands in front of him, staring at the deep puncture wounds that stabbed his palms in a half-dozen places. Slowly, he curled his fingers into fists, feeling the injuries throb in protest, somehow needing to prove to himself that they were real. Then he felt a hand on his arm, and he turned, seeing Ginny beside him.

She looked just as tired as Luna, and she was staring at him with that same cryptic expression. When she spoke, her voice held the attentive concern that Neville associated with someone addressing a seriously ill loved one. "How do you feel?"

"Did I –" he motioned around at the bizarre shelter, "Did I do this?"

"Luna and I thought it was over. I'd decided to jump, take the spiders over the wolves – I thought it would be over quicker – but then you...you grabbed the briars, and they started *growing*, just shooting up so fast and thick...and then you opened your eyes, and there was this *light* pouring out of them, and I had to look away it was so bright," she shook her head, as if still not quite believing her own memory. "The next thing we knew, the briars had wrapped over us and knotted together into this place, and it just kept getting thicker and thicker until you sort of jerked back and collapsed."

Neville reached out a hand, running the tip of one finger along a long, dagger-like thorn. "And it kept you safe?" It wasn't really a question, their living presence in front of him proved as much, but he still half-expected to hear that their salvation had come from something else, some fortuitous last-minute intervention.

Luna got to her feet and crossed over to them, nodding. "We could hear them all night. They tried to get through, but the thorns were too thick. It was pretty horrible – we think they were fighting each other for a while – but that stopped a little before it started to get light, and it's all been quiet since. I think they're gone."

"I just..." he closed his eyes, thinking of how he had called out to his parents, the desperate last hope, the plea for something, anything. "I don't know what I did, really."

"You saved us." Luna's voice was matter-of-fact, but it was so far from that simple.

He shook his head as if trying to dispel a dream. "I don't even know what spell would do this if I meant to!"

She shrugged. "You've always been good with plants, Neville. I think you reached out towards where your strength lies instinctively, and they just responded to what you needed...something to keep those —" a little shudder went through her, "—those *things* away from us."

"Just because I get high marks in Herbology doesn't mean...." He trailed off. One of the vines had untangled itself from the wall and reached out towards him, brushing over his hand like a dog sniffing its owner. The leaves quavered a moment, then an entire section of briars began to unweave, unfolding themselves from their protective barrier to form an opening in the side easily large enough for them to step out into the forest again.

Not quite believing what was happening, Neville stepped through the newly created doorway, and the girls followed close behind him, so near that he could almost feel them at his sides. The moment they passed through the magical thicket, there was a loud rustling, and all three whirled around only to see that the shelter was dissolving, whipping apart into independent vines and brambles that were shrinking down into the earth once more. Within moments, all sign of their fortress had vanished, the underbrush there no thicker or stranger than it ever had been before.

They were standing on a battlefield. Blood and ichor were sprayed and splashed everywhere, even gathering in half-clotted pools where it had not just been spilled but gushed. A dozen spider's legs and twice as many pieces of them littered the earth like branches after a windstorm; hairy, twisted, and as thick as saplings. Neville took a single, hesitant step forward, and something squished beneath his feet. He looked down, and saw that he was standing in a pile of offal, a pale loop of intestines coiling wetly beneath his shoe.

Recoiling in horror, he suddenly recognized the remains of Greyback's fallen, less easily recognized than the spider's legs, but left behind in chunks and splatters only for the same reason. The ground surrounding where their shelter had stood had been torn up in great heaps and gashes, the underbrush crushed flat, the rim of the valley collapsed back several feet from the edge, and everywhere, not only the signs of a ferocious struggle, but of things being dragged. Both sides had eaten their dead.

His eyes fell on a hand that lay half-buried in the leaves, the fingers slightly gnawed, but still recognizable as having belonged to a young woman, the nails filthy and long, the palm callused, yet still as dainty as the hands that had coaxed him awake. Neville looked back at his two friends. Hate and disgust at the wanton savagery was clearly twisted into Ginny's face, but Luna seemed only saddened and resigned, though her normally pale complexion had faded to the color of ash.

He felt horrified and slightly ashamed as he thought of what the night must have been like for them, huddled together beneath their shield next to his own unconscious body as this battle raged mere feet away. For all their beauty and the delicacy of their bodies, they were both so strong, so brave in their own very different ways, and he was filled with a new respect for them.

Then a twig snapped, and all three of them jumped, every nerve and muscle firing to alert. Ginny moved like a cat, snatching up the sharp and shattered end of what had once been a human thighbone and holding it in front of her like a sword, Neville's fists raised to fight, as Luna seemed to produce a rock from thin air, her arm cocked and ready to hurl it towards the first enemy that presented itself.

There was a heartbeat of terrible silence, then the auburn muzzle of a fox appeared through the underbrush at the edge of the forest, the golden eyes regarding them placidly before, with a whisper of leaves and a flash of white at the end of its bottle-brush tail, it wheeled and vanished again into the morning mist. The trio let out a deep sigh of relief, and Neville turned, unclenching his fists and wiping his sweating palms on the thighs of his trousers. "We should get out of here before something bigger comes back."

The girls nodded, and without further discussion, he took his bearings off the newly risen sun, and they set out, still alert for any sign of the creatures they had barely escaped the previous night, or anything else the forest might have lying in wait for them. For the first few minutes, they traveled in silence, picking their way through tangled bushes and stepping carefully over roots and fallen logs, but after the embattled clearing had fallen far enough behind that they had begun to relax a little, Ginny pulled up beside him, and he saw that the oddly cryptic look from earlier had returned to her face.

"Neville?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes?"

"There's something I need to tell you." There was such a tone of regret to her voice that he paused, turning to look at her more directly.

"Were you hurt?" His eyes scanned over the filthy, shredded remains of her uniform, but he could see no evidence of anything worse than the scratches that crossed all of their limbs from the headlong flight away from the pack.

"No." She shook her head, then resumed walking, using the obstacles to avoid his eyes. "But when we were in the office, Dumbledore wanted to talk to me."

He nodded. "I remember. I assumed it was about Harry or Ron."

"Sort of. He said –" She took a deep breath. "He said that I needed to understand and be prepared that Harry, and maybe even all three of them might not make it. That they had been given a task that would ensure You-Know-Who's defeat, but it was very dangerous, and there was no guarantee they could manage it alive, especially Harry."

Neville frowned, then spoke cautiously, not wanting to seem callous or uncaring. "But we already knew that, Ginny."

"Then he said –" she went on as if he had said nothing, "—that I needed to watch out for you in case Harry failed."

"Watch out for *me*?" he asked bemusedly.

"Neville, there were two of you." Ginny grabbed his arm, and he stopped, shocked by the intensity of her blazing look. "The prophecy...Snape heard it, he told the Death Eaters all those years ago, and it was about *both* of you. You and Harry. You-Know-Who chose Harry, but that's why they went after your family, because he could just as easily chosen you."

Neville felt like he had been punched. His voice was dead. "They thought something about me...."

She nodded, and now her eyes held only a deep, sorrowful sympathy. "You're the backup plan, Neville. It's why Dumbledore let you just flounder, so no one would suspect. If Harry fails, you're the only other one who can kill You-Know-Who, because Dumbledore said '*only to give one's self and soul can be a sacrifice as great and powerful as the gift of a life, and that gives him a strength and protection almost equal to Harry if he is willing to use it.*'" Ginny swallowed hard, looking away now. "I didn't believe it. I'm sorry. I knew you had *guts*, but your magic's been pretty weak, honestly. I thought he was trying to make me feel better, you know, not feel like *everything* was riding on Harry and them. But last night...I think it really might be true."

Slowly, Neville sank down to the damp leaves of the forest floor, his legs no longer able to support him. It was ridiculous, it was impossible, he was stretched to and beyond the absolute limits of anything he had ever imagined of himself just with the D.A.. If taking on Harry's role as a leader at Hogwarts was so nearly too much to bear up under, how was he possibly supposed to...there was no way he could...he shook his head, trying to banish the entire ridiculous concept. The very idea that he could have anything in common with Harry besides being a Gryffindor and the little coincidence of sharing a birthday....

His mind was spinning. The protesting evidence of his entire life – almost a squib, the school joke, the fiasco of broken wand, nose, and prophecy at the Ministry, twice being captured already in his attempts to lead the D.A., and how *hard* it was, and if he was supposed to be some great hero, shouldn't leadership come easily – pushed against other things; other, fainter voices from deeper places in his memory that had only surfaced in the blinding light among the screams of his parents he had never even known he remembered.

Where have you hidden the other one?...Tell us what it is!...What does your brat have in common with the Potter creature that could possibly harm my Master?...We know the prophecy, Longbottom, we know there were two...we know there were two...we know there were two...we know there were two....

Neville buried his face in his hands, feeling as though an impossible weight had just been laid across his shoulders. He was shaking, though he barely felt the morning chill. He wanted to argue that she was wrong, that Dumbledore was wrong, that it couldn't be true, but he knew better, even as he knew with equal certainty that the task would be too much; that if it came to him, he would let down not just his parents, his Gran, or his friends, but the entire wizarding world, maybe even the entire world at large. "I can't," he whispered.

Luna knelt on the ground in front of him, gently pulling his hands away from his face to meet his eyes with her serene, sky-blue gaze. "You can. You found what you're really capable of last night, the magic that's always been there, and it's still there. I can feel it. Don't push it away again." She reached down into her sock and pulled out a faded chocolate frog card, the wrinkled picture barely recognizable as the wizard Nigel Gamp. "I still have the last thing my mother gave me, even if it's silly. Don't throw away what your parents gave you."

"But, Luna, I'm *scared*." He made no effort to conceal the tremor in his voice. "Harry's not afraid of You-Know-Who. I am."

"Nonsense. Harry's terrified of him." Ginny tossed her tangled red hair, "He just knows what he has to do. The question isn't if you can, Neville. Dumbledore knows you *can*. The question is what you will do. Are you going to disband the D.A. and run off to hide somewhere, or are you going to keep fighting and be ready to take this as far as it has to go, whatever that means?"

He thought of Seamus, hot-tempered and steadfast. The trusting, innocent Creevey brothers. Parvati and Lavender, willing to throw aside boys and gossip for pain and danger. Ernie and Susan, putting their love and future on the line for a battle that could tear them apart. Hannah's gentle green eyes gleaming defiance under a black scarf. Runcorn risking everything to turn traitor on his own father to do what was right. Luna and Ginny, with him now after lying awake all night through a nightmare he had led them into. There was only one answer he could live with, and he nodded. "I'll do it, then."

Getting to his feet, Neville brushed the leaves from his knees, and stood, a wry smile on his lips. "But I'm going to be rooting for Harry like you wouldn't believe."

Ginny grinned back at him, but there was relief in her eyes. "That makes...well, all of us, I think." With a quick squeeze of his shoulder, she set off again through the forest. "Now come on, I want my damned wand back!"

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"...as you already know, which, although severe, we felt to be appropriate given the extreme nature of their infraction. However, it is with the deepest regret that I must inform you that someone did not feel the same way. Our gamekeeper believed that a month was too much, and last night, he abused the privilege of the keys which his position allowed him, and attempted to release Mr. Longbottom and his companions. They were last seen being taken by him into the Forbidden Forest, presumably to hide. However, they became separated..." Snape's voice sounded clearly through the double doors into the entry hall as Neville pushed open the front doors of the castle.

He had wondered why no one had come to greet them, but now he saw a black swag of cloth hung over the Hogwarts banner, and the three of them exchanged a look as Snape's speech echoed into the chamber. Ginny's cheeks flushed. "He thinks we're dead, and he's trying to blame it on Hagrid!"

Even Luna seemed offended by the audacity of the former Potions Master. "I think that was the plan all along."

Neville felt a mischievous smile begin to spread slowly over his face, and he made a show of brushing off his sleeves, though the cloth hung in tatters and crackled with blood, dirt and sweat. "Then I think a correction is in order. Ladies first?"

Ginny gave a haughty sniff, her own brown eyes sparkling. "Mr. Longbottom, didn't your grandmother teach you a gentleman always opens the door?"

Taking a deep bow in reply, he led them to the doors of the Great Hall, then took a deep breath and seized the handles in both hands and pulled.

The colorful house hangings had been replaced with black, just as they had after Cedric's death, and Snape stood at the Staff Table, his mouth falling open in shock mid-sentence as the crash of the doors being flung open sounded through the Hall. Hagrid was standing next to him, his immense wrists shackled together by iron manacles as thick as anchor chains, a gag like a bedsheets wrapped around his mouth, and he had clearly been crying, the floor at his feet spattered with huge droplets, his eyes red and swollen. At Snape's sudden silence, he looked up, and his eyes lit with a pure and wonderful joy.

Every eye was on them. Neville had cringed under such attention before, but now it filled him with a vindictive thrill as he looked around, his gaze searching hungrily for the faces of those he had missed so much in the past weeks. They were there, they were all there, alive and well, if struck dumb with shock to see him standing in front of them after being told their leader was dead.

Then, at the Gryffindor table, a gangly, sandy-haired boy stood, and Seamus stepped out into the aisle as he drew his wand, raising it in front of him and then snapping it neatly to lay diagonally across his chest. "Gryffindors!" His voice rang out, crisply disciplined even as his eyes burned with elation, "Salute!"

There was a loud scraping of benches, and then every Gryffindor, from their fellow seventh-year D.A. members to the tiniest first-years who had no idea such a thing existed were on their feet. Wands came out of sleeves and pockets and from inside robes to join Seamus, but before they had even finished standing, Ernie Macmillan was on his feet, and Terry Boot at the Ravenclaw table, and within moments, all three houses were arrayed in a half-dozen lines as precise as a military parade in a show of honor and defiance that made Neville's breath catch in his throat.

Then another figure stood. For the first time since the doors had opened, all eyes turned away from Neville and his two companions. A stocky boy with a shock of chestnut hair was standing at the Slytherin table, his own wand raised in a salute that mirrored that of the other three houses as his fellows stared at him in a mixture of disbelieving shock and open horror. He did not flinch, but rather regarded them with open disdain. "My father is a Death Eater," he announced boldly, "and he has told me the Dark Lord values courage. I share those values, don't you?"

Silence met his words at first, then to Neville's amazement, Gregory Goyle stood, raising his own wand and crossing it over his barrel-like chest, his piggy little eyes fixed on Neville. "I don't like you none," he announced in a voice that was surprisingly soft for such a massive youth. "But Professor Snape says there's werewolves and all sorts of monsters out there, and I reckon if you faced 'em wandless, that's sumthin'."

Slowly, reluctantly, Slytherins began to stand, first in twos and threes, and then more, until the entire table was on their feet and had joined the salute. Neville was speechless, but beside him, he heard Luna's almost inaudible murmur. "...*for our Hogwarts is in danger from external deadly foes, and we must unite against them, or we'll crumble from within....*"

Filled with a new sense of hope and purpose, Neville drew back his shoulders and raised his chin as he stared up the aisle at Snape, who stood quivering in silent rage at the sight of his entire school united to honor the three students he had thought disposed of for good. He held out one hand towards the Headmaster, his voice ringing clear and strong through the Great Hall. "We had a deal. I want my wand back."



## Chapter Seven

### The Noble Thing To Do

The day passed in a haze of triumph. Snape had recovered as best as he could, his eyes burning resentment even as he was forced to declare himself relieved at their miraculous survival. He had taken his revenge after returning their wands by stripping Hagrid of his keys, meaning that the gamekeeper would now have to come to him a half-dozen times a day to ask permission for access where he had once moved freely, but that was a small and petty thing, and even Hagrid knew it.

Snape had also insisted that they return to classes immediately, giving them no time to change, wash, or even eat breakfast. He had been assigned the entire two week's backlog of homework from a livid Professor Carrow in Muggle Studies, but Professor Flitwick had not only excused him from it, but given him full marks for all the missing work, and Professor Binns seemed not to have noticed he was ever missing at all, nor that he looked as though he had been through a meat grinder.

All throughout, in notes passed in classes, stolen encounters in hallways, and giddy smiles under Snape's disapproving glare at the Gryffindor table, his fellow students and D.A. members had found ways to make clear their excitement and relief at having him back. He felt for the first time the good side of his unwilling celebrity, seeing it in every glowing face, every mouthed "*Way to go!*", even in the back-pounding embrace from Bagman in the corridor outside Charms that had left him rather bruised. He had seen Ginny only once since that morning, and Luna not at all, but the dizzy grin she had shot him from the middle of a knot of sixth-year girls told him that she was experiencing much the same.

Even still, it was a relief to have his final class behind him. He had bolted his way through dinner and hurried up the stairs ahead of the other Gryffindors to avoid a scene in the common room, heading instead directly for the showers. As much as he appreciated their adulation, he was utterly exhausted, and all he wanted at that point was just to rest and finally get out of the reeking uniform he had been wearing for more than two weeks.

The remains of his old clothes had been whisked away while he was luxuriating under the bliss of the steaming water - undoubtedly by a house-elf who was even now wondering how garments could wind up in such a condition - and he was newly dressed in a pair of wonderfully clean and soft pajama bottoms and his old but comfortable bathrobe. He had taken the time to shave, managing to nick himself only once despite having a little trouble dealing with what had at some point crossed the line from stubble to a short beard, and as he rubbed at his hair with a towel and stepped out into the tower dormitory, he felt like a new person.

There was a girl on his bed. Neville stopped short, the towel falling from his hands as he blinked in disbelief. "What -?"

Before he could finish, the figure had crossed the room at a sprint, but even as he braced himself for the impact, she stopped, her hands reaching out to hover a few inches from the open front of his robe. He saw now that it was Hannah Abbott, still dressed in her own yellow-trimmed uniform, though he had not recognized her at once without the distinct outline of her signature pigtails. Her normally rosy face was pale, and she had lost weight, her cheekbones standing out more strongly beneath the wide green eyes as she stared at him with a strangely haunted look.

Worried, he reached out to put a hand on her shoulder, but she flinched back, and he stopped, confused as she wrapped her arms around herself tightly. "I really thought...." Her voice was hollow, strained. "Oh, Neville...I...I thought I'd lost you." Her eyes had closed, and her arms clutched tighter as she began to shiver.

"I fought as hard as I could. I took down Amycus, but Snape was better. We had to run. I left you. I can't forgive myself. I left you, and he caught you, and they said they were locking you up for a month. Didn't know if it was true. Didn't know if they had just locked you up, or if it was like before. If they'd hurt you. I left you. I left you, and I lost you. I left you, and I lost you. I lost you. I lost you." There was a horrible, dead rhythm to the words as she repeated them, her lips having faded to a sickly pallor, her eyes still closed as she rocked back and forth in time to her own drumbeat of regret.

"It's all right. I'm here. You didn't lose me." He spoke as gently as he could, wrapping his arms around her trembling body and pulling her in, one hand stroking her hair. "There's nothing to forgive, Hannah. It wasn't your fault."

He had expected her to cry, to burst into tears, but instead, she pushed away from him, and a flush had risen high on the pale cheeks, an almost fevered ruddiness as she tore the robe away from his shoulders with a wild look in her eyes. Neville froze, too stunned to protest as she ran her hands over every inch of exposed skin on his arms and torso, lingering over and tracing the outline of every bruise, every cut, even the thinnest scrapes and scratches. At last she came to his hands, and there she stopped, raising the punctured palms to her own face and cupping them together to bury her lips against the wounds.

Now she did look up at him, and the expression in her eyes as she kissed the places the thorns had stabbed him made his heart stop. Another kiss, deeper and without any sense of hysteria, and then he felt her warm breath on his palms as she spoke, her voice still shaking at the edges but utterly composed. "I thought I'd lost you forever."



"I know." It was stupid, he knew, and he hated himself for having nothing else to say, but his brain seemed to have stopped working, and he felt his cheeks heat, not with the familiar flush of embarrassment, but something deeper. His heart was beating fast now, and it was becoming harder to breathe as he stared into those jade-colored eyes he had known for six years without somehow ever knowing at all.

Hannah let go of his hands, but rather than letting them fall to his sides again, he found them following the line of her body to slip around her waist. Her eyes never left his, and he felt dizzy as he stared into them, noticing whirling little flecks of gold and turquoise among the green that he had never seen before. They were mesmerizing, beautiful. Her lips parted, and her voice was low but steady. "If I'm going to lose you again, I want to know why."

She kissed him. The kiss was soft and deep, filled with hunger, but completely different from anything he had ever felt with Parvati. It seemed to go beyond his mouth and his skin, gathering something deep in his chest that had been growing in a way that he hadn't even been fully aware of, and now his arms were around her, their bodies pressed together as they swayed slightly in place, her fingers sliding up the line of his shoulders to tangle in his over-long hair and pull their mouths even tighter onto one another.

It was wonderful, it was *right*, and he wanted it to go on forever. It seemed impossible that he had ever dismissed her as just a friend, because he knew now that she was so much more than that to him, that there was a reason her face, her voice, her eyes had come to him so many times in the dungeon cell, that he had looked to her table, sought out her face first when he had returned. It was like being drunk, spinning and giddy, but this was real, and the smooth, cool feel of her hair over the backs of his hands and the heat of her mouth and the softness of her skin was all real, and there was something in her kiss that told him that she had loved him for a long time, and that too was amazingly real.

Hannah was kissing him. The boy who partnered with her in Herbology and could barely keep from jinxing himself into the hospital wing, the stuttering, blushing, chubby little boy whom everyone made fun of when they weren't looking at him in tolerant pity. And yet, Neville realized, maybe it wasn't so crazy after all. He wasn't that child any more, and she wasn't the dowdy Hufflepuff with the pigtails who always hung back and chewed her lips when she was nervous. They had both changed, and their friendship had changed, even though he hadn't seen it until now, and somewhere along the line, that thing that had been missing between he and Parvati had appeared for her.

They kissed for what felt like blissful days before they finally broke apart, but he kept his arms around her as she lay her head against his chest, tracing her fingers gently over the lines at his ribs where the brush had snagged his skin. Her voice came in a whisper of warmth. "I love you."

"I love you too." It surprised him a little how easily it came, but it was said now, and he knew it to be true. He did love her, and as he thought about it, he realized that he had loved her for weeks, maybe even longer, though it was far easier to pinpoint when he had noticed her beauty than it was to note when the friendship itself had grown into more, and he knew now that *wanting* and *loving* a girl were as different as night and day. He had wanted Parvati. He loved Hannah.

The motion of her fingers had stopped at his words, and she pulled away enough to look up into his eyes, and for the first time, there were tears glimmering in hers. "You do?"

He nodded. "Yes, I really think I do."

"Neville...." She kissed him again, and this time it was slower, softer, but no less intense, and he wanted to touch her, envied her hands on his skin. He wanted to be closer to her with a desperation that ached and burned almost painfully. Hannah did not protest as he pushed the robes from her shoulders, breaking the kiss only a moment to let him pull the sweater over her head, but as his hands went to the tie at her throat, pulling it loose to reach the buttons beneath, the door opened, and he froze as a stern and familiar voice sounded behind him.

"Mr. Longbottom, as pleased as I am that rumors of your demise were clearly exaggerated, neither my relief nor your new celebrity allows for carnal impropriety in the dormitories."

The two teenagers sprang apart with an audible *pop* as their mouths separated, and Neville felt not only his cheeks, but his entire face and neck burn with a blush so intense he thought his ears might catch fire. "P-P-Professor McGonagall!" He stammered.

She raised one eyebrow at him in reproach, then turned towards where Hannah had dropped to her knees, scrambling to pull her sweater back on without noticing it was still inside-out. "Miss Abbott, I would assume you were a willing participant, of course?" The answer was mumbled under a scarlet blush, but clearly assenting, and McGonagall nodded crisply as she regarded the two of them. "I will forgo punishment in light of the circumstances, but I am going to have to insist that you take things down to the common area. Having other students watching tends to ensure a certain modesty."

He nodded eagerly, "Yes, Professor. Sorry, Professor. Of course it does...I mean, we will...I mean, we won't...."

The thin lips curved into a faint smile. "Believe it or not, Mr. Longbottom, I was young once upon a time. I know that these are difficult times, and passions run high in difficult times. I am not attempting to be an ogre, but I would caution you against moving too quickly. There are many kinds of regret." Her eyes beneath the square spectacles turned to Hannah, now fully dressed and on her feet again. "Miss Abbott, if you don't mind, I would like a word with your friend in private...and turn your sweater right-side-out, girl, if you don't want people to talk more than they already will."

Hannah's blush deepened further still, her face now almost purple as she hurried towards the door and down the stairs that led to the common room. There was a moment of silence, then

McGonagall closed the door behind her, crossing to take a seat on the foot of the nearest bed. She regarded him sternly, "You are aware, I would assume, that the young lady is in love with you."

Neville shifted nervously, pulling his robe closed and cinching the belt tightly at his waist. "Yes, ma'am."

"And your feelings for her?"

He met her eyes as boldly as he dared, "I love her."

To his surprise, a sadness came into her eyes at this, and she nodded. "I see." There was a long pause, and he felt as though she was looking not merely at him, but through him, those implacable eyes boring through to lay bare his heart and mind. "I have spoken to Miss Weasley," she said finally, "she says you have been told about your...situation."

Neville faltered, surprised. "You mean, about me and Harry...about the prophecy?"

She nodded. "Indeed."

"She told me I'm the only one who can kill You-Know-Who if Harry fails. Dumbledore thinks I can do it...." He trailed off, looking down at his feet. "But I don't know. It seems like...an awful lot."

"Your grandmother and I were friends. I knew your father quite well. It was a dreadful shame what happened to them." Her voice held a softness and compassion he had never heard before, and he looked up. "I have always believed that there was more to you than Augusta feared, but then, I have the advantage of a bit more distance than a mother who has lost her son and is hoping to get him back in her grandson. You will never be your father, Neville."

He winced at the words, at the quiet fears they seemed to confirm, but she went on. "You are your own man, not Franklin, no more than Harry is James, but both you and Harry have proven yourselves to be strong and brave in your own right. I am going to ask you something now that I have no right to do as your teacher or your Head of House, but I would ask you consider it nonetheless as coming from a friend of the family."

"Of course, Professor."

"You may wish to think about taking the same care with Miss Abbott that Harry has taken with Miss Weasley. I know that at times like these, young people tend to want to cling to each other all the more for fear of loss, and that is a perfectly understandable impulse. Last time You-Know-Who was in power, there were a dozen weddings within a week of each graduation, and you could scarcely see my desk through the birth announcements each time the owls came." He wondered if she knew about Ernie and Susan, but there was no hint of it in her expression. "I was a bit of a war bride myself."

Neville blinked incredulously. "*You?*"

"He was a Muggle-Born. A Gryffindor, like myself, and he chose to join the RAF – that's a branch of the Muggle military – after his brother was killed in the Battle of Britain. I married him less than three hours after we'd finished our N.E.W.T. tests, and I lost him over the North Sea

five weeks later." McGonagall's voice was matter-of-fact, but there was something deep in her eyes that hinted at a wound never fully healed. "I have no place to judge such things, but I want you to consider that your situation is rather different from most. Any wizard or witch in this school may lose their lives in the coming months, but you and Harry have chosen to take on an even more dangerous position. Even if it does not come to a showdown with You-Know-Who, you have still made a target of yourself through...other choices."

"Hannah knows that," he protested. "I mean, she doesn't know about the prophecy, but she knows about the other thing. And if she does love me, it would hurt her no matter what if something happened to me...besides, I haven't asked her to marry me."

"No matter her feelings now, if you begin a relationship with her, whether or not you decide to marry any time soon, those feelings will become stronger, and the potential loss more painful. Miss Weasley is just beginning to understand this. She knows that if there had been more between them, or if more had been promised, Harry's absence and the danger he is in would be very nearly unbearable. If you love her, by all means do your best to keep yourself in one piece, but if your feelings are real, they should not be entirely for yourself." She stood now, smoothing her robes neatly before making her way to the door.

"That is all I have to say. I hope you will take it under advisement." She placed a hand on the door, then nodded to him, the same thin smile returning to her lips. "And I am very glad to have you back in my house. Things have been distinctly less interesting since you and Miss Weasley left, and Professor Snape has been in a good mood far too often."

OOO

Hannah was waiting for him when he came down to the common room. He had pulled on his pajama top before coming downstairs, but as she looked up from where she had been sitting with Ginny next to the fireplace, he still felt utterly exposed, and he tucked his robe tighter around him as he sat down next to the two girls.

Ginny exchanged a quick, meaningful look with Hannah as she stood. "I think I'll go to bed now," she announced, "it's been a long day."

She left, and Neville slid over on the couch as Hannah curled her knees up to her chest, regarding him with an expression of wry resignation on her pretty face. "You don't look like you've come down here to start snogging again."

"No." He took a deep breath, licking his suddenly-dry lips as he reached out to take her hands. The warm glow of the firelight made her hair shine like molten gold, her eyes sparkle, and he didn't want to do this. He wanted to pull her close, to ignore the few small clusters of students doing homework at the corner tables and just kiss her, lose himself and the sickening reality of what he now knew he was in the softness of her lips, but it was impossible. "Hannah, there's something you need to know."

"Ginny already told me." She smiled ruefully. "I've known you were a hero ever since the Ministry, but it still came as kind of a shock, I'll admit."

"Then you'll understand why we can't...." Neville trailed off, unable to finish. He didn't want to say it. Something inside him seemed to rebel, to scream out against the idea of pushing away something so wonderful before it had even really begun. It wasn't fair. He loved her, and the idea

that the same people who had come to his parents' house sixteen years ago could still hurt him, could still take things from him burned with a bitter resentment that choked his throat and made it impossible to speak.

"Neville...." Hannah's voice was quiet, but there was a gentle strength there that he had always admired in her. "I know what you're trying to do, and I appreciate it, but it's not the same."

He shook his head. "It *is*, don't you see? Snape and the Carrows already have me marked, and Bellatrix and the others know what I am. They destroyed my parents, and they won't be afraid to come after anyone else I love to get to me if they have to. I couldn't let them do that to you."

"And that's very noble of you, but I'm not a Gryffindor, Neville." She fingered the golden hem of her sleeve, holding it up in the firelight. "Maybe I won't be as quick to leap into danger beside you as Ginny would be, but I'm also not about to just accept that of course the noble and chivalrous path is the right one. It's worth it for me to risk being hurt a little more to know I've been there for you. What tore me apart these last weeks wasn't that I'd lost you, it was that I'd lost you because I'd left." Her eyes bore into him with an intensity that made his heart nearly stop. "Don't make me leave again."

Neville didn't know what to say. He hadn't been prepared for this, for her to refuse to accept what he was trying to do to spare her own feelings, and he stared at the little strip of yellow satin as if it would somehow explain what he should do next. "But, Hannah," he protested, "It's not the same for us as it is for Ernie and Susan –"

She cut him off with a little laugh. "I'd hope not! If you're asking me to marry you after one kiss, I'm going to have to let you down, whether or not I love you, and whether or not you're a good kisser!"

"No...." he floundered, "...I'm not...not to say I won't...I mean, I might someday...you know, if we...I mean, I don't plan on...not that I don't...."

"Neville –" She had leaned in close now, and their faces were only inches apart, "— shut up."

He did. What they had to say to each other now really didn't need words anyway.

OOO

November rolled on, and snow fell over the grounds of Hogwarts, softening the bare earth and stringing sparkling icicles to hang from the leafless branches of the trees. To an outsider, the castle appeared unchanged, but students now scurried to Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures in silent lines of steaming breath, no longer dallying or laughing, and there were no clusters of snowball fights, no snow wizards or witches with bright scarves wrapped at their necks. The reign of Snape and the Carrows had placed a heavy pall over the once-lively school, but sparks of resistance continued to flare in the darkness, and glints of defiance could be seen in even the downcast eyes.

Every restriction Umbridge had ever laid on them had been returned, and more. Students were now forbidden to speak to one another in hallways or at meals. The Houses had been strictly segregated, visits between them banned, and a curfew of nine o'clock had been laid, requiring all years to be in bed with lights out by that time each night. Classes that had once been shared between two or more Houses were now divided. Not only had clubs been disbanded, but all

extracurricular activities had been stopped, and even bathroom visits had been limited to no more than five minutes in an attempt to prevent them from using that meager time to communicate.

Yet to Snape's fury and frustration, all the rules and regulations did nothing to stop the constant level of rebellion. He knew where it was coming from, but despite having all but attached Crabbe and Goyle to the hem of Neville's robes, he was unable to catch any sign of he, or any of the suspected D.A. members actively engaged in wrongdoing. The two additional batches of leaflets, the graffiti in the hallways announcing that Kingsley Shacklebolt had taken down three Death Eaters, the charming of the suits of armor to broadcast *Potterwatch* at ear-splitting volume...it all seemed to happen entirely on its own.

Once, he had even caught Neville with a smear of lipstick down his neck and a hair ribbon of Hufflepuff yellow in his pocket on the way down for breakfast, but an interrogation of the Fat Lady had revealed no breach in security of Gryffindor tower. Snape was beginning to stalk the hallways himself, patrolling the corridors at night, his sallow face growing paler from the stress and lack of sleep, but this only seemed to fuel the rebels, and he received an anonymous gift: a Sleeping Draught, some chamomile tea, a copy of the latest Easy Listening music from the *Chesterfield Charmers*, and a note cheerily suggesting that these things might be useful if some remains of a conscience were giving him trouble at night and signed "*You-Don't-Know-Who*."

The Room of Requirement had proven to be more versatile and useful than any of them had initially expected. Neville had discovered that the trick lay in asking it for exactly what was needed, down to the tiniest detail if at all possible. The most valuable thing so far had been the ability for the door to open again into any part of the school, which had made their efforts possible now even under the new, tighter security.

As long as someone could get into the room - usually a Ravenclaw or Gryffindor due to their closer proximity to the seventh-floor entry, and usually aided by a Disillusionment Charm or Susan's old cloak – they could open it into each common room in turn, allowing the D.A. to gather without anyone having apparently left their approved areas. Only the two Slytherins faced greater problems in joining them, but their House was not being as closely monitored as the others, and so far, though Braddock had missed several meetings, Runcorn had found a place to meet up with the magical doorway every time.

By the end of the first week in December, the disappointment of finding out that Snape had sent the Sword of Gryffindor to Gringotts for safekeeping had been entirely overshadowed by their subsequent victories, and they were beginning to feel like they might even be winning; one small, nagging step at a time.

Decorations had been banned from the rest of the school, but the Room of Requirement looked like the holiday displays of Diagon Alley had exploded; garlands and tinsel hanging from every available surface, and Neville sipped at a cup of warm eggnog Dobby had provided as he sat casually draped over one of the large couches in the Room of Requirement, Hannah's head on his lap. At the front of the room, Michael Corner and Terry Boot were giving a spirited performance of some of the unique Christmas carols they had written to be sung by the armor over the holiday season.

*"Carrows roasting on an open fire,  
Doxies biting at their toes.  
You-Know-Who is feeling quite blue,*

*'Cause he knows his reign is at a close  
They say that Harry Potter's on his way  
Bringing Aurors here to help the D.A.  
And every mother's child is gonna spy  
To watch him making Amycus cry....'*

Something began to heat up against Neville's thigh, and he shifted, fishing the charmed Galleon from the pocket of his trousers. The numbers along the rim had turned to letters, and he frowned as he read the message. *They got me.* T.R. Nudging Hannah off his lap, he sat up straight, looking around the room. Sure enough, the young Slytherin was missing, and his frown deepened.

Drawing his wand, he tapped the Galleon, and the letters glowed briefly as he sent his own message in return. *Where are you?*

He had to wait less than a minute before the coin heated again, and he had his answer. *Hosp wing.*

Reaching down to Ernie, who was sitting on the floor with Susan in front of them, he tapped the Lieutenant on the shoulder. "Renny's in trouble," he whispered, "I need your help." He nodded his head towards an empty corner, and Ernie got to his feet, joining him away from the others, who were still absorbed in "Carrows Roasting on an Open Fire", now into the final verse with great gusto.

"What's going on?" Ernie asked.

"I don't know, exactly." He held up the Galleon. "I got a message from Renny saying 'they' had gotten him, and that he was in the Hospital Wing. I need to find out what's happened."

Ernie nodded in understanding, but his tone was skeptical. "Problem is, mate, they're not going to let you just casually fraternize with Slytherins, especially ones who've gotten in trouble for some reason. You're tops on Snape's list, but it's not the good one."

"I know," Neville agreed. "That's why you're going to punch me."

"Wait a second...."

"I need to get into the Hospital Wing. I'll tell Madam Pomfrey I had an accident with my Charms homework, that I put a Jumping Jinx on a book and didn't get out of the way in time. I've been in there enough with backfiring homework that there won't be any problems believing me." He gave Ernie a pleading look. "Come on, we owe it to the kid."

Ernie sighed deeply, then before Neville quite knew what happened, he had cocked back one massive fist and let fly. Pain exploded through Neville's head, and he dropped to his knees, clutching his face in both hands as he gasped for air, blood pouring through his fingers to spatter the stone floor in fat, scarlet drops. "Dabbid, Erdie!" His mouth had filled with bittersweet copper, and he spat, another thick gob of red joining the growing mess on the floor. "I dik you broke by dode!"

The Hufflepuff looked at him in widely exaggerated innocence. "Dreadful thing, those homework accidents. I reckon you should get yourself to the Hospital Wing, old chum. That looks rather nasty."

Shooting a filthy look at his friend, Neville pulled out his handkerchief and balled it up against his gushing nose in an effort to stem the worst of the bleeding as he approached the blank wall. "I deed do go do de 'allway by Gryffiddor Dower!" he announced. Thankfully, the room seemed to understand him well enough, and when the door opened, he was standing only a few feet from the Fat Lady, who began humming rather loudly as she made an elaborate show of looking away and seeing nothing.

By the time he had made his way down to the Hospital Wing, the handkerchief was sodden, and he had begun to silently curse his friend for hitting him quite so hard. His entire face had begun to swell, his nose was unquestionably broken rather spectacularly, and it had begun to throb with deep, painful pulses that stabbed through his entire head. When he pushed open the door, he found Madam Pomfrey bent over a single occupied bed at the far end.

She looked up as he entered, her eyes widening. "Mr. Longbottom! Good heavens, what in the name of Merlin has happened to your face?"

"Jubig Jix wed bad. 'obework." He tried to manage a sheepish smile as she pulled his hand away from his nose and surveyed the damage, clucking her tongue fussily.

"Well, it's certainly broken." She shook her head and sighed. "Nothing I haven't fixed before...no different than what a Bludger will do to you, really - not that you want to get me started on letting children play such a dangerous sport." Motioning him towards the opposite bed, she turned and started towards the dispensary. "You just wait here a moment. You can take the bed next to him as long as you promise not to get into some silly House nonsense."

He nodded solemnly. "I probise."

With a satisfied little sniff, Madam Pomfrey bustled into the other room, and he hurried across to where Runcorn lay. The young Slytherin looked as if he had taken several solid hits with a Bludger himself. His entire face was swollen and discolored, his arm splinted, his ribs bandaged, and a bottle of Skele-Gro sat on the bedside table. Neville reached out a hand and gently shook the boy's shoulder. "Reddy, whad habbed?"



Runcorn rolled over gingerly, clearly in a great deal of pain as his face paled beneath the bruises and he clutched at the bandaged ribs. "They noticed I kept going missing." When he spoke, his mouth was bloody, and Neville recognized the slightly too-white shine of newly repaired teeth. "Searched my bag. Must have missed a grain, because they found a flyer." He grimaced. "Decided to teach me a lesson about House loyalty. Their teaching methods involve a lot of hitting."

"I cab see dad." Neville said. "Who wad id?"

"Crabbe and Goyle. We've all really started missing Malfoy. He kept a leash on them, but now they think they're practically Prefects...which is a problem, because thinking is not their strong suit." Runcorn gasped as he accidentally shifted the broken arm, then gritted his teeth, bitter resentment flaring in his dark eyes. "Why couldn't they have left with him? You're not supposed to leave your pets behind at school."

Neville gave a brief chuckle, then his expression turned serious again. "Do de Carrows dow?"

Runcorn nodded. "Slughorn wasn't going to say anything. He took me up here...I think he's sympathetic, but don't trust him. He's just a fussy old socialite in wizard robes. But Crabbe and Goyle told the Carrows, and they told my father, and...." He hesitated, and the bravado cracked, the pain and fear leaking through at the edges of his eyes and voice. "...They're coming for me."

Before he could say anything more, Madame Pomfrey came back into the room, a goblet of potion in her hand that was sending up faint blue tendrils of steam. The boys sprang apart at the first sign of a creak from the door, and she showed no sign of having noticed anything out of the ordinary as she handed the goblet to Neville and waved her wand at his nose. "*Episkey!*"

Instantly, the worst of the pain subsided, and she motioned to the goblet. "This will take care of the rest of the pain, as well as the swelling and the blood in your throat and sinuses. The blood on your robes, I'm afraid, is another matter."

"How touching: you're afraid for stains on a known Blood-Traitor's robes, but you'll let the son of a Death Eater lay here in agony when his father's on the way? Father will love to hear that, I'm sure. God, I should be grateful they're pulling me out of school...it really is still going downhill here, isn't it?" Neville's eyes widened as he drank the potion, but Madam Pomfrey had turned pale with both anger and fear, and she gave a resentful little curtsey.

"I'll get you some more Painkilling Potions then, *sir*. I didn't realize you were still in pain."

His face twisted into an exaggerated look of terrible suffering. "*Agony.*"

She disappeared back into the dispensary, and the moment the door shut behind her, Runcorn actually giggled. "I think Malfoy had the whole school trained. Just imitating him still makes people jump."

Neville grinned back, fingering his now-repaired nose cautiously. "I thought I recognized that god-awful little drawl. Quick, though, I'll send word to the D.A., we'll hide you in the Room of..."

Runcorn shook his head, his face now ashen. "They'll kill my Dad if you do that, Neville. I just wanted to give you this." He held out the Galleon. "So they don't find it when they search me. I'm sorry I never managed to do anything much for you guys."

There was a terrible finality in his tone that sounded utterly wrong coming from the lips of a boy of fourteen, and Neville nodded, his voice low with saddened understanding. "You're not coming back, are you, Renny?"

The response was a slow, wordless shake of the head as the Galleon was pressed deep into Neville's palm, but the look of fear and loss and betrayal in his eyes said it all. He wasn't just being pulled from school, he was going to be punished, or his father was, and it was going to be a lot worse than anything the Carrows or Snape dished out on their worst days. He reached down and carefully squeezed the younger boy's shoulder. "Well, you did manage to make history before you left...I think this is the first time a Gryffindor is going to be sorry to see a Slytherin go."

The tiniest ghost of a smile crossed Runcorn's swollen lips. "Don't get sentimental, Longbottom. I was fighting for the right to hate you."

"And you're nasty, conniving, Muggle-hating slime. But you've got guts," Neville replied. "Hang in there as best you can, okay?"

Runcorn nodded, and Neville took the charmed coin, slipping out of the hospital wing and turning back towards the stairs with a look of sadness on his face. Up in the Room of Requirement, he knew, the rest of the D.A. would be laughing at carols and preparing for further adventures, and he wasn't looking forward to the news he would have to bring them. They had lost their first.

OOO

"...they just drop dead.' The Healer thinks about it a minute, and suggests she try *Silencio* the next time things are gettin' to that point. Well, the Banshee comes back the next day, and he asks how it worked. 'Not half bad,' she answers, 'they don't make near so much noise when they're fallin' off the bed.'"

Neville barely caught himself in time, burying his face in the pillow until he got himself under control again, then raised his head as he wiped the tears from his eyes and turned back towards Seamus in the darkness of the tower dormitory. "I've got one, I've got one..." he whispered eagerly. "So this wizard goes to the Ministry of Magic and offers ten Galleons to any Auror who'll watch his house while he's at work in the morning. 'I think my wife is having an affair with the milkman,' he says. 'Every time I open the door to get the milk, my Kneazle goes mental!' One of the Aurors agrees to watch, and the next day the wizard asks what happened. 'I have good news and bad news,' the Auror answers. 'Your wife is faithful, but you don't want to know what the milkman is doing to your Kneazle.'"

Seamus let out a tremendous snort of laughter, and Neville grabbed at his pillow, flinging it at the vague outline that was all he could see of the other boy. "Idiot! It's past ten! We're supposed to be asleep!"

"Sorry!" He did not sound the least bit sorry, but the last of the giggles were suitably muffled behind his hands, and at last he drew a great, shuddering breath. "Anyway, I've got another.

There were these three witches who decided they wanted to go out and buy new broomsticks, see? And so the first one goes into the store, and the salesman shows her the latest —"

Seamus' joke was interrupted by a sudden crash against the window, and Neville heard the bedclothes rustle as they both sat instantly bolt upright. He snatched his wand off the bedside table, leveling it at the curtains as he reached out and parted them cautiously. The light of the half-moon through the blowing snow outside cast crazed shadows on the stone floor, and he hardly dared breathe, unable to tell if any of the wavering figures belonged to more than snowflakes.

There was the sound of bedsprings creaking, then bare feet hitting the floor, and then Seamus cried out. "It's an owl!"

Neville blinked, slipping out of his own bed and hurrying across to join his friend at the window. "At this time of night?"

But sure enough, it was an owl. A large tawny owl lay on the windowsill outside, a heavy-looking bundle tied to one leg as it lay motionless against the glass in a deep drift of snow. Neville's initial fear and confusion vanished, and he cast Seamus a stricken look. "It's hurt! It's going to freeze out there!" Without a moment's hesitation, he tapped his wand against the window latch, barely even feeling the icy blast that tore into the cozy room as he opened the window and gathered the owl gently into his arms.

It barely stirred as he carried it back to his bed, laying it carefully on the soft comforter as Seamus re-latched the window behind him. The owl looked to be on its very last legs. It was more than half-frozen, its beak and legs blue, its feathers caked with ice, and someone had clearly tried to stop it from reaching its destination, because its entire tail had been reduced to a charred mess of scorched feathers, and it was trembling with exhaustion, cold, and pain as he stroked it. "You poor thing," Neville murmured, "you shouldn't have tried to fly like that, not in this weather."

"Neville, look." Seamus was at his shoulder, and he was pointing to the bird's leg where the package was still attached. "It's Banded." Sure enough, a glossy black band was sealed magically around the bird's leg, unmistakably printed with the horribly familiar sign of the skull and serpent. The sandy brows above the blue eyes creased in worry. "Why would a Death Eater be sendin' an owl to Gryffindor tower?"

"We don't know for sure it's a Death Eater," Neville protested. "Maybe someone just used it to get past the security because they don't get checked?"

"Aye, of course. Because Banded owls are so easy to come by." Seamus' voice was rich with sarcasm as he used his wand to sever the strings that held the package to the battered bird. As he pulled it free, a small piece of parchment that had been tightly rolled beneath the strings fell loose and fluttered to the bed. He picked it up, and his ruddy face went pale beneath the freckles. "Oh, no...."

He passed the parchment to Neville, who had knelt to rummage in his trunk for the flask of Pepper-Up Potion he knew he had saved from Herbology homework earlier that year. Neville tried to wave it away, but Seamus leaned down and held it directly in his face, and he stopped as his eyes caught the jagged, thick, ink-blotted handwriting, the dark red finger-marks on the edges

that could only be blood. Rocking back on his heels, he took the scrap and tilted it to the moonlight.

The handwriting was a rude scrawl at best, so blotted with ink that he had to squint to make out some of the words, blurred further still by the wide stains at the edges, but as he deciphered the hurried, desperate missive, his hands begin to shake, and he felt his face go pale.

*Hurt me dad stoppd them but theyre killing him will get me next I know take thes maybe you can use them make him pay long live HP*

**T R**

*PS unband mercury theyll kill him too*

He looked up, feeling dazed and heartsick, and he saw that Seamus had the package in his hands now, the brown paper wrapping torn open as he stared inside in stark disbelief. "Neville..." He knelt, holding out the bundle as he shook his head slowly. "Are these what I think they are?"

Carefully, Neville reached into the parcel and lifted out a heavy, wrinkled bundle of luxurious black cloth. As it unfolded, something clattered from within, something that gleamed a bright and terrible silver in the squares of moonlight on the floor. "Death Eater's robes," Neville whispered, awestruck, "and...one of their masks. They're...they're *real*. Blimey, they're thick." He fingered the embroidered Dark Mark that lay almost invisibly on the left sleeve, ebony thread on black; a detail he had never noticed before. "Do you think they were his Dad's?"

"Well, you can't buy those at Madame Malkin's!" Seamus retorted.

The owl on the bed gave a feeble hoot, and Neville shook himself, scooping the robes and mask into his trunk and burying them deeply as he snatched up the little flask and hurried to the injured bird. Carefully cradling the head in his hand, he raised the mouth of the flask to the beak. "Here you go...so you're Mercury, huh? Well, Mercury, let's get you warmed up a little, then we'll see what we can do about your tail and that nasty thing on your leg, okay?"

"What are we goin' to do with the owl, Neville?" asked Seamus. "It's not gonna be easy explainin' where we got him, especially if they're lookin' for him, and those bands don't just come off without fuss. I don't think the poor little bloke knew that."

"We take him to the Room of Requirement, and we take care of him until he gets better," Neville declared fiercely. "Then if we can't get the band off his leg, we transfigure him a little, and Renny's given us an owl that won't be searched as well as the robes and mask."

"And what, pray tell, are we doin' with those?"

"I haven't really decided yet." The owl had managed a few swallows of the Potion, and steam was beginning to seep from the feathers where his ears were hidden as the ice on his wings began to melt and he slowly took on a slightly less frigid color. "But he sent us those as his last request, and I don't intend to take that lightly."

The blue eyes widened. "So you really think they killed him, then?"

"He wasn't the kind of kid to panic if it had just been a bunch of noise." Neville's jaw was set in determination, and though no tears came to his eyes, his heart ached for the young Slytherin. As much as he hated everything the boy had believed in, he had been brave and true to his own beliefs, even as he had done what most would have considered a betrayal of them, and he had paid the price willingly and courageously and far, far too soon. "I'm going to do what he asked. I'm going to find a way to make them pay."

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Xenophilius Lovegood surpassed himself, getting out a special one-sheet edition of the *Quibbler* within twenty-four hours, and within a few hours more, the charmed grains were ready. Neville scooped them into the hands of each of the D.A. members in turn, his face solemn. "Make sure you get rid of every last one of these before they go off, but don't be careless about it. You can't let yourselves get caught. Whatever you might have thought of Runcorn as a person, or as a Slytherin, he was one of us, and we won't just let this go.

"He's the first the D.A. has lost, but he's not the first who's paid with their life. Susan, your aunt. Hannah, your Mum. Mike, your Dad. Cormac McLaggen, Cedric Diggory, Lynn Fawcett – not to mention half the Auror Department now – and we don't even know how many more of the ones who are out there running and hiding. This is the first strike, and the first strike only. The Lieutenants and I know that he gave us more than just that owl. We're still working out how to use the second gift, but the biggest thing he gave us was his life. Let's make sure people know that."

As the last of the grains were dolled out, Neville pocketed his own fistful and raised his wand to signal the start of the mission. The sparks that shot into the air were not solid silver this time, but a mixture of silver and the emerald green of Slytherin, and today, the rallying cry was different.

"For the Fallen!"

By dinner they were everywhere. Charmed sheets of parchment bearing the banner of the *Quibbler*, and beneath it, a picture of Runcorn that Camellia had gotten for them. It showed him in the Slytherin common room, dressed in green pajamas with a silver snake on the pocket as he lay sprawled upside down in a chair, playing Exploding Snap with a handful of other boys who had their backs to the camera, then laughing so hard when the cards erupted that he fell head-first into the remains of the game.

It was the only picture Camellia could find – most of Pansy's photo album was of her own year, most notably Draco, on whom she had a crush of epic proportions – and there had been a great deal of concern over whether it was heroic enough to be a fitting tribute to a fallen soldier. Neville thought it was perfect. He wasn't supposed to have been a soldier, none of them were, and it showed him as a boy, his house affiliation clear and unashamed, but in a picture that could have been taken in any common room in the school.

Below the photo, the headline blared in bold, black type, and below that, an article that had been written in combination between several of the Ravenclaws and Malcolm Braddock, who made it his own last act before tearfully confessing to Neville that he was leaving the D.A., too frightened for his own safety and family to continue. Neville had expected the move, but he discovered that as strange as it had been to have Slytherins in the D.A., it seemed even more so

when the green banners disappeared from the hangings in the Room of Requirement, leaving red, yellow, and blue to stand alone.

The flyers were strictly banned, of course, but Neville didn't need to see them again to know what they said as he watched Filch laboriously piling them into the fireplaces of the Great Hall from under benches and tables, where they had to be burned by hand one at a time.

## **NO ONE SAFE! YOU-KNOW-WHO MURDERS OWN!**

*On Tuesday, during the evening of December 9th, Terrance Quincy Runcorn, 14, of Slytherin house, and his father, noted Death Eater and former member of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement Albert Runcorn, were murdered in their home by the followers of You-Know-Who.*

*Terrance, known as Renny to his many friends, had been selected to play Keeper on the Slytherin Quidditch team before their disbanding earlier this year, and was well-known for his athletic prowess. "I could see him having gone professional, certainly," says Professor Horace Slughorn, "he had a great deal of drive in everything he pursued. Excellent in Potions, always followed the instructions to the letter."*

*Following instructions, however, proved of little help in the face of You-Know-Who's increasingly deranged and paranoid anger. Renny was a Pureblood wizard for thirteen documented generations, from an unbroken line of Slytherins, with a family tradition of service as Enforcers that had been passed from father to son for seven. Albert was twice commended for service to the Ministry, distinguishing himself particularly in the capture of infamous forger Mortimer Luggfetter six years ago, and boasted a spotless record which his son had intended to emulate. The Runcorn family was also very vocal in their support of Pureblood Superiority, and Albert joined the Death Eaters within a few months of You-Know-Who's return, earning a name for himself there as well by reporting Muggle-Borns who had attempted to protect themselves by falsifying family documents.*

*All of this loyalty should have offered some protection to father and son, but You-Know-Who does not show such reasonable behavior. The public claims put out by the Ministry and by You-Know-Who directly say that anyone who is willing to cooperate with his efforts to oppress and attack Muggle-Borns and his violent reign over the wizarding world will be granted safety and protection, but he has proven with the horrific murders of the Runcorns that this is yet another lie!*

*If the Daily Prophet dares to print anything about this double homicide, they will undoubtedly try to paint it as an accident, or as the execution of traitors, but the public deserves to know the real truth! Here at the Quibbler, we have never been afraid of printing the unpopular, and we will now bring you the real, exclusive reason that You-Know-Who ordered their execution.*

*On September 2nd, Harry Potter – known to the Ministry as Undesirable #1, but to faithful thousands as The Chosen One or The Boy Who Lived – broke into the Ministry of Magic and freed dozens of Muggle-Borns who were awaiting mock 'trials' at the hands of the Muggle-Born Registration Commission, as was previously reported in a Special Edition of the Quibbler. Polyjuice Potion was used in this brave infiltration, and Albert Runcorn was the unwilling provider of Potter's disguise, having been sent to St. Mungo's by a Nosebleed Nougat dropped surreptitiously into his morning coffee by an accomplice of Potter already disguised as a fellow Ministry employee. For nothing more than talking to a co-worker, Albert Runcorn was tortured extensively by his fellow Death Eaters.*

*This action showed young Renny the true nature of You-Know-Who, and he participated in efforts at Hogwarts School to open the eyes of the wizarding world. At no time did he in any way abandon his beliefs about Pureblood Superiority, or betray any member of his house, nor any of You-Know-Who's followers. He merely exercised what should have been his rights in any free society to express an opinion about his leaders. Nor was he caught in these*

*actions. A copy of one of the leaflets like you now hold in your hand was simply found on his person during an unauthorized search, and for this alone, without recourse or trial, he was severely beaten, pulled from school the same day, and the following night, he and his father were murdered in cold blood.*

*No matter what your stance on Muggle Rights vs. Pureblood Superiority, let this stand as a lesson and a warning! If You-Know-Who is willing to wipe out an entire line of the pure wizarding blood he claims to hold so dear, and on such meager evidence, can anyone count themselves safe? Reliable sources tell us that the Malfoy family, among the most highly-esteemed and prominent of You-Know-Who's inner circle, are now living as prisoners on their family estate, Malfoy Manor, under frequent torture and constant threat of death at You-Know-Who's slightest whim, and Peter Pettigrew, the traitor who turned over the Potters sixteen years ago and who facilitated You-Know-Who's return to corporeal form by cutting off his own hand in a show of loyalty, is now being used as little more than a house-elf.*

*Are these the glorious rewards he promises his faithful? Is this why we are supposed to turn in our friends, betray our families, and turn against one another? Are murder, torture, slavery, and imprisonment what we are supposed to consider the benefits of his rule? Witches and wizards, consider your choices carefully, and remember the Runcorn family and all the other victims of You-Know-Who's bloody regime by joining the Quibbler in supporting Harry Potter at every opportunity!*

*Long live Harry Potter!*

At the Staff Table, Snape's thin features showed all the rage Neville had come to expect after such acts of defiance, but gradually, he began to realize that the black eyes were not fixed on Gryffindor as usual. Instead, they were turned to the Ravenclaw table as he leaned towards the Carrows and exchanged a whispered conversation, gesturing at a copy of the flyer that lay on the table in front of them. Slowly, a pair of hideous smiles spread across the two doughy faces, mirrored in Snape's own satisfied smirk, and Neville felt his blood turn cold as he saw where the three sets of eyes had fallen.

Luna.



## Chapter Eight Dreams and Realities

Neville pressed back tightly against the cool stone wall, holding his breath as he listened for the sound of a footfall, the whisper of a cloak, anything but his own speeding heart. Every nerve was on edge, and he didn't dare let go of his wand long enough to wipe the sweat from his palms. They were out there, somewhere, hunting him, and a moment's distraction was all it would take. Allowing himself a deep, cautious breath, he eased silently around the corner, leading with his wand.

He could see a figure crumpled motionless on the floor ahead. The thick, glossy black plait told him the fallen was one of the Patil twins, but he spared no time to check whether the trim of her robes was crimson or blue. There would be time to tally their losses later. Now it was just the thin piece of wood in his hand and he didn't know how many Death Eaters somewhere out there. He had felled two already, his vivid green jets evening the odds against their own as much as he could.

A flash of motion caught the corner of his eye, and he spun, crouching low to reduce himself as a target as he steadied the wand in both hands. It was Michael, his handsome face shining with sweat over an ashen pallor, his eyes haunted. The Ravenclaw gasped as he snapped his own wand up to the ready, then let out a deep, shuddering breath as he recognized Neville. "Holy – Neville, I could have –"

"You could have nothing," Neville hissed in a furious whisper. "Keep your wand up, Corner! I could have killed you three times before you had it aimed!" His eyes flicked down the corridor. "Where's Terry?"

"They got him." He wiped one shaking hand across his forehead. "This is too much. We can't win...they just come out of nowhere, and they're out to kill! You can't block it!"

"Then duck it, or get them first, or keep them dueling until you have a clear shot. This is a battle, not a skirmish. A battle is always too much, I've been in two. Just stop thinking and keep your wand up!" He'd been in one place too long, his instincts were beginning to scream an alarm, and he didn't spare a glance back as he slipped away down the hall, leaving Michael behind in the dark halls with his advice and the young man's own fear.

There was the sound of movement from the Charms classroom ahead, but before he could reach the door, the faint rustles and footsteps erupted into the sizzles, cracks, and screams of an outright duel. There were at least two Death Eaters, their voices muffled beneath the masks, but Ernie's Scots burr was unmistakable, and the witch's voice made his heart freeze. It was Hannah, her voice tight, strained, clearly in pain as she fired off spell after spell in increasing desperation.

Without another thought, Neville sprinted down the corridor and threw open the door to the classroom. Hannah was on the floor, her legs useless beneath her in the misshapen knot of a Jelly-Legs Jinx as she fought to hold a Shield Charm against the Death Eater who towered over her, firing jinxes and hexes down against the silvery barrier. Across the room, Ernie crouched behind Flitwick's desk. He was dueling two at once, one side of his face twisted in a dark, ugly-looking burn.

Neville did not hesitate. Green light shot out towards the Death Eater attacking Hannah, and before the black-robed figure had hit the floor, he was at her side, scooping her up in his arms to get her out of there, get her somewhere safe to find out what had put the pain in her voice. One of the Death Eaters fighting Ernie turned, and he realized in horror that his wand was trapped in the hand now wrapped under Hannah's knees. She twisted in his arms, raising hers, but it was too late.

The world flared green, everything spun cold for a split second, and then he knew nothing at all.

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"That was a complete effing disaster!" Neville yanked off his sweat-soaked robes and flung them to the floor in disgust. Ginny, still in her Death Eater's robes, offered him a glass of water with a rueful, wordless smile, but he waved it away, stripping out of his shirt and tie to throw them down in a pile on top of the robes. Down to his undershirt now, he sank into a crouch, bracing his elbows against his knees and running his fingers through his hair as he looked out across his exhausted troops.

The Room of Requirement no longer looked anything like the halls and classrooms of the school beyond. Instead, it had transformed into an odd cross between a gymnasium and a meeting room. The floor was smooth golden wood, the walls were mirrored, except for the one Neville stood in front of, which sported a large blackboard in place of one of the mirrored panels. Large cushions on which most of the D.A. was now sprawled were scattered everywhere, a table beneath the blackboard set with water, tea, and various snacks being attentively presided over by Dobby.

Half the D.A. were wearing black robes the room had copied for them off of those provided by Runcorn, the other half still in their school uniforms, but all looked the worse for wear, dripping sweat and scattered with scrapes, burns, and the ghoulish effects of various spells. The initial flare of anger fading now, Neville sighed. "Just...undo the jinxes, heal it up if you're hurt, and for goodness sakes strip off, get some water, a bite to eat, whatever. It's no use yelling at you when everyone's still too beat to listen anyway."

There was a ripple of sighs, murmured thanks, and even a few chuckles as the floor became immediately littered with heaps of black cloth as robes and ties came off everywhere. Almost all of the boys stripped down to undershirts, if not completely shirtless, the girls primly contenting themselves with rolled-up sleeves and collars unbuttoned low enough that Dennis Creevey was not the only boy to accidentally make matters worse while trying to heal a minor wand scorch.

Neville took the opportunity to seek out Hannah, who was mending the bloody lip of Orla Quirke, a fourth-year Ravenclaw girl. She gave him a withering look as she saw him approach, and he offered what he hoped was an appeasing smile. "Look, Hannah," he started, "I didn't mean to get us –"

"We're going to have to be soldiers now, not just friends and classmates. I don't care who it is, I don't want to see anyone doing anything stupid because they feel like they have to play the hero, and that goes doubly for us Gryffindors." She was good, and Neville winced slightly to hear his own words flung back at him in precise imitation, down to the more pronounced than he would have liked Yorkshire edge of his accent. He spread his hands in helpless acknowledgement.

"Yeah, I know. But you were hurt, I couldn't just let you –"

"I hit my funny bone really hard when I went down with the Jelly-Legs, for your information, Neville. It hurt like dragon's teeth, sure, but I was fine. That's not the point. I don't mind you barging in to save me, in fact, I'm kind of grateful. But you should have stopped at the point you took out the one attacking me. Blocking your own wand hand with your white-knight heroics...what were you thinking?" Red sparks shot out of Hannah's wand in anger as she snapped at him, and Orla ducked, doing her best to pretend she wasn't noticing anything.

"Okay!" Neville was surprised to find that he was shouting back at her. "So I wasn't thinking! I'm sorry. I thought you were hurt, and I didn't think beyond that, is that what you want me to say?"

"No, it's not!" Hannah whirled to face him fully now, and Orla slipped away quickly to join the other Ravenclaws, leaving her two commanding officers to battle it out. "This is what scares me about you, Neville! Not some prophecy, not you being in command of the D.A.. It's that you always put yourself last. It's not just that you made that mistake for me. I can forgive you that. Love messes with people's heads as much as their hearts. But you'd have done it for Fritz bloody Bagman just as fast!"

"And if I would?" Neville crossed his arms over his chest defiantly.

"Don't you see?" Her voice had become shrill with anger and frustration. "Lose Bagman, lose me, lose Anthony, Vane...lose any of us, really, and we're down numbers. *Just numbers!* Lose you, and we're out a lot more than another wand, we've lost our leader! You matter, Neville Longbottom, and not just to me, you matter to everyone, and if you want to be in command, you'd better start acting like you know that!"

"Ginny, Ernie, Luna –"

"There's three of them! That's three people to have to agree to get anything done! Can't you get it through that thick head of yours?" She shook her head fiercely, her pigtails whipping, then glared at him, her own arms crossed tightly to match his. "If you do it again, Neville, it's over between us. I love you, goodness knows I do, but I'm not going to have any part in this stupid

self-destructive streak of yours. If you really care about the D.A., if you really care about *me*, you start watching your own back as well as you do everyone else's."

"I do!" He protested, "I watch my back as much as I can!"

Her eyes became bitter, and her voice dropped, trembling slightly as her gaze fell on his scarred shoulders. "If you did, Neville, it might be in one piece."

"Is that what this is about? The flogging?" Neville frowned, suddenly confused. "That doesn't have anything to do with the exercise tonight!"

"Oh, never mind!" She stomped her foot in frustration, then her face was suddenly inches from his, her chin thrust out stubbornly. "Don't look out for yourself, then. But if you care so much about the rest of us, you'd damn well better stay alive for us, because it would be a far sight more useful than dying for us!" Then she turned on her heel and stalked away, and he was left standing there, angry and confused and increasingly embarrassed as he realized how silent the room had fallen, how many people were looking at him. All of them, in fact.

There was a long, awkward silence, then Camellia Parkinson spoke. "She's right, you know, and I don't even like you."

"I'm not about to start snogging you either, old chum, though I am rather fond of you, and I was there on the wall with you, when it comes to it," Ernie shrugged, gesturing at his own scars. "But Lieutenant or not, I fancy the D.A. would miss you a lot more than it would me." He glanced around. "Show of hands, who thinks Longbottom needs to start watching the backside of which he does not appreciate the value a wee bit more closely so we can all sleep better at night?"

Hands went up all around the room, and Neville was stunned by the unanimous show of support. He did not know what to say, and it hung awkwardly in the air until Natalie MacDonald, a Gryffindor fourth-year, gave a cheeky little grin. "Well, if it's for the good of the D.A., I volunteer personally to watch Neville's backside. It's gotten rather nice."

A roar of laughter broke out at this, and Neville felt his face turn scarlet as he waved his hands to quiet them down. "Thank you, Ms. MacDonald," he cast her a reproachful look, only to be met with an utterly unashamed wink. "But that will not be necessary." He scanned the room again, satisfied that everyone was pretty much settled. "I guess everyone heard that I'm not immune from the fact that mistakes were made. A lot of them. But first, I want to point out that a lot of people did things well, too."

"Romilda, your aim has gotten loads better. Dennis, I'm starting to see some real confidence in your spell work, and that's the most important thing. Luna, that Vanishing Charm on the stairs was genius. Padma, your Shield Charms are at least twice as strong as last year. And Susan, that was a great Confundus." He pointed to each in turn as he praised them, then turned back to the blackboard, where two columns of names had appeared, one peppered with lines, the other completely stricken out.

Neville tapped the columns with his hand. "These should by all rights be even, people. We've all had the same training, practiced together, the teams were divided evenly. But our Death Eaters only lost a little less than half their number, while the D.A. was wiped out. Does anyone have any ideas why?"

Ritchie Coote raised his hand. "I know I hesitated on using the Killing Curse, even though I knew we were just doing green Stunners."

"A lot of us did, that was one of the biggest things. Ginny, our Chief Death Eater for tonight, told me that she felt a lot more comfortable doing it in those robes, because she doesn't feel like it's something 'good guys' should ever do." He took a deep breath. "It's not. It's an Unforgivable Curse for a reason, and it's a terrible, terrible thing to do; I will never, ever deny that. But in peace time, killing someone is murder. In war, it can be a duty. I think we're all hoping, for example, that Harry does not stun, jinx, or try to capture You-Know-Who. We're hoping he kills the snake-faced son of a hag."

Applause broke out at this, and he waited for it to subside before continuing, his face solemn. "Look, I'm being honest here. We all know that at the end of the year, or when Harry comes back, what we just did will be real, and they won't be our friends, they'll be You-Know-Who's elite, and they *will* be out to kill. Most of the people in this room will never see the summer. There's no use giving our lives if at the end of things, all of his get up again and none of ours do. Normally, even in a fight for your life, you take down the enemy and try to get out intact. For us, there is no getting out. So we can't take them down, we take them *out*. I want everyone here to choose someone they knew who's never coming back, and keep that person in your mind and heart when it's time to do it for real. Me, I think of my parents. You decide who matters the most to you."

He turned to the board again, and next to the list of names had appeared the number one and: *Hesitation with Killing Curse*. He tapped it with his wand, and a number two formed below. "Next?"

Lavender raised her hand. "The Death Eater outfits. They really do mess with your head." She shivered. "It's not like fighting a person. You can't see their faces, so it's like you're scared out of your mind, and they're always completely calm and nothing you does rattles that, and those robes make me think of the Dementors."

*Psychological intimidation of Death Eaters* appeared next to the second number.

"Luna has a good method with that, get the masks off as fast as you can if they bother you. Personally, they help me, because I don't have to think of them as people. They can all be the monster that hurt and killed people I care about, but everyone's different. If it helps you to assign a face under there, do that, if not, strip the mask, or tell yourself they're scared to death under it. Number three:" He tapped the board again. "Stupid mistakes."

"Adrenaline," Neville smiled dryly, "is your best friend and your worst enemy. On the one hand, you can be really badly hurt or tired or thirsty or whatever and it won't even slow you down. I nearly broke my shoulder earlier this year and it took me about a half hour after everything calmed down to even care. I also discovered that with werewolves on our tail, Luna, Ginny, and I can outrun a Firebolt." More laughter at this. "On the other hand, it pumps you up so much you make stupid decisions. How many of us can honestly say we fell because we did something completely moronic?"

He raised his own hand, and gradually, reluctantly, with a lot of sidelong glances at each other, almost twenty more joined his. "You all know what I did," he shrugged, "let's hear some others. Colin?"

"I got myself trapped when I got all turned around and opened the door into a broom closet."

"Fritz?"

"Left myself open when I was firing."

"Lavender?"

"Didn't look before I went around a corner."

"Anthony?"

"Mixed up two different spells."

Neville nodded in satisfaction. "That's your second assignment. I did this just before Christmas break for a reason. This is our last D.A. meeting before we all go home on Saturday. I want everyone to really think about their own performance, and about what they saw other people do; good and bad. Decide what you can improve, learn from other people's successes and failures, and we'll do it again when everyone gets back, and we'll do a lot better, hopefully." He slipped his wand back into his belt, and the blackboard vanished.

"So that's it for the official stuff. We've still got half an hour, 'cause the Lieutenants and I wanted to make sure everyone gets a chance to say goodbye to their friends from other Houses...I think we have a lot more of those now. So...uh, meeting dismissed, but you don't have to leave yet."

Dobby began to scurry around the room, passing out little bundles to everyone as they got to their feet and a babble of conversation broke out. Everywhere Neville looked, people were hugging one another, exchanging owl addresses, Floo Network information, or reviewing their performances together. He also noticed that he and Hannah did not appear to be the only couple to have crossed House lines over the course of the autumn. Several other pairs were locked together in corners, not caring who saw as they took the last opportunity to hold each other before their time apart, and he thought of what Professor McGonagall had told him about war. It really did bring love and hate in equal measure.

"Neville Longbottom, sir...." He looked down at the tug on his trouser leg to find Dobby staring up at him in unabashed adoration. "Dobby thinks you has been very nearly as brave as Harry Potter this year, so Dobby does not give you cookies like everyone else, no sir." The elf held up a lumpy, garishly ribboned parcel, and Neville took it bemusedly, pulling open the bright paper and rather uncomfortably aware of the huge eyes fixed on his every move. "Dobby gives you *socks!*"

They were indeed socks. Vividly knitted out of Gryffindor crimson and gold (but the colors reversed on each sock) they showed two hideously distorted shapes that he did not want to guess were faces, much less whom they belonged to. He smiled in genuine gratitude at the gift, having heard from Harry and Ron – not to mention nearly endlessly from Hermione when she was on her S.P.E.W. kicks – what that particular garment meant to Dobby. "Thanks, Dobby. These are really...amazing."

"The Carrows, Neville Longbottom! On your feet, so you can stomp on them!" Dobby did a gleeful little stamping dance, and Neville laughed.

"Dobby, that's brilliant!" He sat down immediately and pulled off his shoes and socks, replacing them with the gaudy new gift. "My Gran will think these are fantastic." He turned, giving the elf a tight hug, but unlike Mimsy, who rolled her eyes at such unseemly displays from Master, Dobby appeared nearly overcome with joy. He wiped his eyes on the hem of his knobbly sweater. "Neville Longbottom will have a good Christmas and come back safe?"

"I will." A sudden idea came to him, and he leaned in close. "Dobby, I know you're great at keeping secrets...Ernie and Susan are getting married over the break. Because of the war, they're going to have to do it as just a tiny little thing in the Muggle world, just at an office with me and Hannah to witness. If they make it, they're having a proper wedding later, but do you think you and H.E.L.P. could prepare a party for them when they get back? You know, a cake and all that?"

"Of course!" The huge eyes lit up with a conspiratorial gleam. "And it will be most secret!" He Disapparated with the customary loud *crack*, and Neville got to his feet, turning to find Terry a few feet behind him.

"What will be most secret?"

"Can't say, or it wouldn't be a secret, now would it?" Neville grinned. "But put that Ravenclaw brain of yours on that giant rock that appears on Susan's hand every time she's in here and you can take your best guess."

"Ah...." Terry nodded in dawning understanding. "A Mrs. Macmillan in the near future then?"

"You didn't hear it from me." He slung an arm around the other youth's shoulders, leaning in close and dropping his voice low. "How are things with Luna?"

"We've got her on a twenty-four hour watch." Terry's eyes grew serious. "The girls are sleeping in shifts. You'll know the instant anything happens, and we're ready to whisk her in here at a moment's notice."

Neville nodded in satisfaction. "Good. I'm getting nervous that he hasn't done anything yet. There's only three days left before break. I'm convinced he's going to try and keep her here at the last minute."

"If he does, mate, he'll have all of Ravenclaw to deal with. Odd little thing, sure," he shrugged, "but she's really grown on us this year, you know?"

"She does that," Neville smiled. "Oh, and Terry...?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. I know you guys really prefer the library to the battlefield, but Ravenclaw's been amazing this year. I wanted you to know I noticed, and I really understand that it's harder for you than for the rest of us, but we couldn't have gotten this far without you."

The cobalt blue eyes grew soft with gratitude, and he shook Neville's hand firmly. "That means a lot. It *hasn't* been easy, but we *do* understand that some things are more important than good marks. I guess there's all kinds of learning, though." He grimaced comically. "Mike and I, for

example, have learned that we can do a hundred push-ups for Bagman if we give him a smart remark."

"Terry," Neville laughed, "we've *all* learned that." He hugged his friend. "Happy Christmas, and that's for Mike, too. I was kind of hard on him in the drill. Now, if you excuse me...." He nodded his head towards Hannah, "There's someone I want to patch things up with before we have to go."

"You mean," Terry leered, "there's someone you want to snog madly for the next ten minutes."

Neville laughed again, shooting a look back over his shoulder as he crossed the room. "There's that brain again, always hits it right on."

"Our Fearless Leader." With a huge, dramatic sigh, Terry rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. "Merlin knows, if the Death Eaters don't get you, we're all going to lose you to profound exhaustion of the lips."

"Hasn't killed Ernie yet!"

"Give it time, my friend." Terry shook his head. "Give it time."

OOO

Snape made no move the following day, nor that night, nor the next day. Indeed, for all the notice he and the Carrows seemed to pay her, Luna might not have been attending the school at all. Neville paced the Gryffindor common room in frustration, tapping his wand against his palm in the staccato rhythm of jangled nerves. "It's got to be tonight. We're leaving tomorrow morning first thing, so it's got to be tonight. Parvati, I want you to get a message through to the Ravenclaws. Ginny, Hufflepuff...everyone needs to be on the alert. Potions if they have to, but none of the D.A. sleeps tonight. I'm going to get to the Room of Requirement; someone needs to be ready to yank her in there when they strike."

Ginny's voice was soothing, with the maddening air of someone addressing the unhinged. "Neville, maybe he's not going to do anything to her."

"No!" He whirled, his expression tight and almost pleading. "I know the look he gets when we've bested him! He's won, Ginny. He's won, or he thinks he's won, and he's been *gloating*, and whatever that means for Luna, it's not good!"

"Maybe it's not Luna." Colin sat forward in one of the armchairs, a thoughtful frown across his cherubic features. "Maybe that's why he's gloating."

Neville shook his head. "No, it's Luna. He and the Carrows were looking right at her after the *Quibblers*, and that's when he got like this. He hasn't even glanced at the rest of us."

"That's not what I meant." Standing, Colin crossed over to where Neville was pacing and began to follow him, leaning in with an excitement that contained none of the usual puppyish enthusiasm, but rather a surprisingly mature intensity. "He knows we've got him outmaneuvered at everything he's tried, but he doesn't know how. He wants to strike back about the *Quibblers*, but he expects something like what we're doing now – not the Room of Requirement, necessarily, but that we'll have a plan – so he goes after something just as punishing, maybe even

better than hitting Luna directly as far as stopping the leaflets, and something we can't stop him in."

Impressed, Neville stopped pacing and cocked his head at the younger boy. "Go on."

"I think he's had something done to her family, to Xenophilius. I think Luna's going to come home to an empty house, or at the very least, to a father who's been punished badly enough to make her think twice about staying with the D.A.."

Ginny gasped, and Lavender let out a little moan of dismay, even as Neville felt his heart sink. "You know, Colin," he sighed, "I think you might be right...it makes an awful kind of sense."

Colin blushed, giving a tiny shrug, but there was something haunted in the wide blue eyes. "I've been thinking about it for months. I haven't said anything, 'cause I don't want it to get back to Dennis."

"You've been thinking about something happening to Mr. Lovegood for months?" Parvati asked.

"No, but we got our Blood Status just barely. My Dad's a Muggle, had no idea the wizarding world even existed until we got our owls. Mum was pretty shocked, too. Dumbledore had to have a long talk with both of them. She was a Squib, you see, but she was born a LeStrange, and they're Pureblood way back."

Neville nearly choked. "Your *mother* is related to *Bellatrix LeStrange*?"

"By marriage!" Colin raised both hands in a defensive gesture. "They sent her off to live with the Muggle relatives of some half-blood friends when she was only six! She was told her childhood had seemed a little odd because her parents had been professional magicians, and that they'd left her with these people while they went to Australia to perform, and their plane had crashed. She *really* had no idea."

"Deep breath, Neville. You're turning purple. Try to remember we're pretty much all related, okay?" Ginny lay a hand on his arm with a wry smile. "Hell, Harry's related to You-Know-Who when it comes to it...the Potters and the Gaunts both go back to the Peverells."

"Sorry." Neville sighed, shaking his head in embarrassment. "I don't...I've got problems with Bellatrix."

Lavender gave a tense little laugh. "That's got to be the worst-kept secret in Gryffindor, unless you count that Harry's scar keeps hurting him, or that Ron's had a thing for Hermione since fourth year." She paused, then allowed a cheeky smile. "Although, if you want to toss in a couple of Sickles in the pool, I'm putting mine on within twenty-four hours of You-Know-Who going down."

"The pool?" asked Neville.

"The betting pool on how long it's going to take Ron and Hermione off alone out there to figure out that they're mad for each other. I've put in mine for New Years. It'd be sooner, but I've lived with both those guys, so I know just how dense Ron is and just how much of a wet blanket Harry's whole hero business can be," Ginny informed him calmly.

"Easter, eight Sickles." Neville answered without thinking, then shook himself. "Never mind – I'm sorry. Colin, please, go on...."

The boy took a deep breath before continuing. "It's just...well...I know that her family is just barely enough to get me into Hogwarts. It's not enough to keep them safe. If anything, it probably makes them more at risk, because they'd hate people to know they had a Squib in the family who'd married a Muggle and raised her kids as Muggles. I've been pretty much expecting an empty house and a lot of blood, to be honest. I've already reserved a cab to take us home if no one meets us at the train, and I've got some Muggle money in my trunk to pay the cabbie to wait with Dennis while I go check."

His voice was calm, but his eyes showed the still-painful resignation of someone who had long accepted the diagnosis of a terminal illness. "There haven't been any answers to our letters since the first week of school. That's part of why I was okay with Secret-Keeper. I don't think I have anyone but Dennis to use against me, and I know he'd be just as willing to die for the cause as I am."

A long silence answered his words, then Lavender spoke. "But, Colin...what will you do if they *are* gone?" she asked hesitantly.

"They wanted to give me the option of what world I'd live in when I grew up, so I still have a University fund, so does Dennis, and we both have all our Muggle papers. If we survive the end of the year, I'll get us a place, get a job, do the best I can." He shrugged. "What else? If I've got to go it alone, I know that world better than this one outside school."

The portrait hole opened, and they all turned as Seamus climbed through, struggling slightly to control what appeared to be a rather vicious-looking footstool with stubby, clawed legs and a white streak of bristly hair down the middle of the cushion. "It's supposed to be a badger," he explained, panting slightly, "McGonagall says I can still get partial marks if I can finish the transfiguration by tomorrow morn – what's goin' on?" He stopped, his forehead furrowing with worry as he saw all the solemn faces.

"Colin thinks they're going after Luna's Dad, and we think he might be right," Parvati explained.

Seamus swore. "Do we have a plan?"

"No," admitted Neville, "but Ginny, you live in Ottery St. Catchpole, right?"

She nodded. "The Lovegoods are just over the hill."

"Then I want you to go home with her if nothing happens tonight or tomorrow morning. Word has it we're being split up by house on the train, but if Colin's right, I don't want her spending the next few weeks fending for herself in an empty house. Do you think she could stay at the Burrow?"

"Absolutely!" Ginny gave a warm little smile. "My parents would be thrilled, actually. Bill's spending Christmas with his wife at their new place, Charlie's in Romania, Percy's still being a twit, the twins are on the run, Merlin knows where Ron is...it'll just be me and them, so we'd love a little more company."

"Okay, then." Neville flicked his wand, Stunning the footstool that had wandered away from Seamus and begun to chew the leg of a table. "I still want top security on Luna tonight, just in case, and I want everyone to sleep in robes, ready to go at a moment's notice, but we do need to pack. I've still got my stuff spread out over half the dorm. Although, Colin, can I have a word with you for a second?"

They split up, Seamus hefting the limp footstool over one shoulder as he started up the stairs, the girls hurrying off to their own dormitories while Neville took Colin over to the far corner of the common room. It was after eight, the firelight beginning to die in preparation for the nine-o'clock curfew, and the ruddy glow made Colin's flaxen hair seem almost as red as Ginny's. Despite only a year's difference in their ages, the other boy barely came up to Neville's chin, and he sat down on the window ledge, not wanting to seem like he was trying to tower over him.

"Colin, I had no idea about your parents. I mean, I knew what they were, but I didn't know you had reason to believe they'd been hurt. Why didn't you say something before?" he asked gently.

"I didn't want you to have more to worry about," he answered, a little fiercely. "I can take care of us."

"I'm sure you can. I think we've probably all underestimated you, and I'm sorry. You can be a little...."

Colin laughed, and Neville winced to hear that it was still the laugh of a child. "Lavender says I'm sparkly."

"That's one way to put it." Neville smiled. "It seems like all of this just bounces off of you, all this darkness that's making me feel like I've aged about twenty years in the last three and a half months...but I think you do understand it, don't you?"

"Of course I do. We're a lot less sheltered out there, you know." There was an almost patronizing tone that surprised him, and Colin seemed to see this. "The Muggle world is an ugly place a lot of the time. We grew up with Football gangs and muggings and double locks on the doors and newspapers full of rape and murder and wars every day. *My* Granny still has scars from a fire during the Blitz. Dennis was named after a friend's older brother who had been killed in the Falklands, and I bet you don't even know what I'm talking about with either one of those."

He thought of what Seamus had said about Belfast, and felt suddenly almost ashamed of his own quiet, pastoral country upbringing. "No," he confessed, "I don't know. But if it's like that, why aren't you hardened?"

"I don't think you can understand." Colin sat beside him, placing one hand firmly on Neville's knee. "I said something about it earlier, but I don't think you *got* it. All the fantasies came true when I was eleven. I've seen *dragons*. I have a *wand*, a real magic wand, and I cast spells with it. I've eaten dinner with ghosts under *real fairies*. And even when there's evil, it's grand, terrible *evil* that's clear and worth fighting, not some knotted mess of social problems when some hooligan shoots someone for drug money. I'm already living in a dream, Neville. I'm not afraid of never waking up."

"You're right, I don't think I can ever really understand, but I think I do as much as I can." He met the other boy's eyes directly, and with a new respect. "I was going to bring you over here to try and tell you that you can't take care of your brother by yourself, but I think I was wrong."

"Still..." Neville held out a scrap of parchment, tapping it with his wand. "You can send an owl here, and if not, you can send Muggle post to the village and I'll check when we go down to do the shopping each Saturday. We're not the Malfoys by a long shot, but my Gran and I get along okay, and we've got a couple of spare rooms. If you think you're in danger, or if they've seized your vault or something, you let me know. Promise?"

"Promise." Colin took the parchment and stood, then turned back and flung his arms around Neville's neck in a hug that took the older boy completely by surprise.

"What was that for?" Neville laughed.

"If I don't see you again." There was no trace of regret or sorrow in his voice. "That's for letting me be part of the dream."

OOO

The Hogwarts Express had changed. The compartments were gone, and as Alecto Carrow marshaled the Gryffindors into their car in silent, straight lines, Neville saw that the interior had been stripped to bare, raw wood panels, the floor lined with an array of rough benches. Only the overhead compartments remained, and he stared at the benches in growing alarm as he wrestled his trunk into place. He shot a look at Seamus, who was securing his own trunk beside him.  
"Why have they -?"

"Silence! No talking!" Alecto's voice was shrill, and she jabbed him painfully in the back with her wand. "One more word, Longbottom, and it's the Cruciatus!"

He gave her a filthy glare over his shoulder, then tightened the straps holding his trunk in place and turned, waiting for her next command with hatred burning in his eyes as she finished prodding the others into the car. When she was finished, there were just over fifty students packed into the tight space, and most of the younger ones, who had been shoved in last, were forced to stand with their trunks at their feet as she surveyed them with a vicious grin. "Sit!"

Neville sat on the nearest bench, sliding over against the window as far as he could to allow Seamus, Parvati, Lavender, and Ginny room to squeeze in next to him. Carrow glared at the five of them and motioned with her wand again. "No, I don't want you lot together. Yer trouble. Finnigan, you switch with Frobisher. Patil, switch with Abercrombie. Brown...Hooper. Weasley...Coote."

When the changes had been made to her satisfaction, her smile widened, and she gave a little flick of her wand. Manacles burst from the floor at his feet, and before Neville could move, they had clamped tightly around his ankles, shackling him immovably in place. Several students screamed, and his fist tightened on his wand, his fingers aching to jinx the ugly grin from her pallid face, but he couldn't. There were too many innocent victims for her to use against him if he made a foolish strike, and as her narrow eyes found his, the triumphant gleam in them told him that she knew it too.

With a swirl of black robes, she strode out of the car, and he heard the door slam and bolt like the sound of a crypt sealing. Barely a second had passed before Seamus spoke, his lilting voice heavy with sarcasm. "They could have just told us they were sick of us runnin' in the corridors, you know."

A few weak giggles came in answer, and Neville wanted to say something back. A retort had been on the tip of his tongue, he was certain, but the air had suddenly taken on a sweet, cloying aroma like rotting fruit, and his lips had fallen numb. It was hard to think. Vaguely, he was aware that he should be panicking, that they were being drugged, but it just didn't matter. His eyelids grew unbearably heavy, and he slumped against the window, scarcely feeling the soft thud of the fifth-year girl, Victoria Frobisher, as she collapsed against his side, unconscious mere seconds before him.

He awoke to screams. Neville's head was spinning, he felt sick, dizzy, but the screams pierced through the fog like knives, and he fumbled for his wand, trying to force the numb, reluctant fingers to find the weapon in the folds of his robes. His hand closed over the thin, polished handle, and he tried to stagger to his feet, only to be tripped by the manacles still clamped on his legs and stumble hard back against the side of the car.

The train had stopped moving. Through the windows, Platform 9 ¾ of Kings Cross Station was unmistakable, if as blurry and vague as everything else seemed to be, and he could see people waiting silently, a ring of dark-robed, silver-masked figures standing sentry, and all around him, students were stirring, coming slowly awake as the sweet scent faded from the air. And still the screams.

High and sharp and terrible, they pierced the air again and again, but as his head began to clear, he realized that the sense of distance had nothing to do with the lingering effects of the gas. They were coming from somewhere else, from another car, and they were words. He shook his head harshly, forcing himself to take deep breaths of the clearing air, and then he understood, and a horrible knot of defeat clenched his heart as he began to struggle so hard against the merciless bands that cloth tore and flesh chafed bloody against their sharp edges.

"LUNA! LUNA! She's GONE!"

With a loud clatter, the shackles all over the car retreated back into the floor, and Neville sprang to his feet, wand held tight as he shoved his way through the tangle of groggy students. Forcing a path to the front of the car, he pointed his wand at the latch on the door. "*Alohomora!*" Nothing happened.

Not wasting a moment, he yelled back over his shoulder, "Seamus!"

The young Irishman was already at his side, his blue eyes dark with understanding as he nodded. "We'll force it. On three. One, two —"

Before they could throw themselves against the door, the bolt vanished, and they exchanged a quick glance before throwing it open and leaping down onto the platform below. His legs were still uncertain, and he stumbled, skinning his knee, and then he was on his feet again, sprinting down the length of the train to where a river of pale-faced, panicked-looking students were pouring out of the Ravenclaw car.

Michael seized him as he came out of the car. He was almost unrecognizable, his handsome face beet red and contorted in helpless rage. "They chained us up and drugged us!" he spat. "We were treated like animals!"

Terry had appeared at his friend's side, nodding furiously. "When we woke up, she was *gone*, mate! Her trunk's still there, but Luna's just vanished!"

"Signal her with the Galleon, keep doing it until she responds. Even if they've taken her wand and she can't get a message out, she can make it heat up if she just has a hand free to squeeze it. Terry, I want you to get her trunk. Use *Reducio*, get it down as small as you can, then give it to Seamus." He turned to his fellow Gryffindor. "Seamus, you get Ginny. Give her the trunk, tell her to keep it safe, and I want her to keep an eye on the Lovegood place. I need a message the second there's news: about her father, about a ransom demand, about—"

An anguished, inhuman wail carried across the platform, and the young men turned. Two Death Eaters were holding the elbows of a wizard with bright turquoise robes and frizzy white hair and a beard the texture of candy floss. His face was twisted into a look of heartbroken pain and loss as he writhed in their grip. "*Luna!*" he howled. "My Luna! What have you done with my Luna?"

"Your daughter is better off away from you, you crazy old liar!" growled the taller of the Death Eaters. "We'll take good care of her 'less you give us reason to do otherwise."

"*Please...*" begged the wizard whom Neville now realized had to be Mr. Lovegood. "Give me back my Luna, she's all I have! I love her!"

"Touching," the other Death Eater sneered. They let go, flinging Mr. Lovegood harshly to the platform, where he lay; a crumpled, sobbing wreck of a man. "You come to your senses, take some time to think about the lying trash you print in that stupid rag of yours, and maybe we'll talk about your Luna later." Mr. Lovegood made no effort to rise. He lay on the platform, weeping convulsively, his thin hands opening and closing against the boards like the wings of a dying bird as he moaned his daughter's name over and over in a funereal chant.

"Disgraceful! Taking *children* hostage because you don't care for their parents' politics. Those are the actions of a coward, if you ask me." A tall, dignified elderly witch with an enormous stuffed vulture perched on her hat strode forward, looking down her nose at the Death Eaters with undisguised contempt as her voice rang out over the hushed crowd.

"Watch yer mouth, Granny. Best show some respect to the Dark Lord." The taller Death Eater turned to her, flexing his fingers menacingly. Neville's jaw clenched, and he took a step forward, but a single look from his grandmother stopped him dead in his tracks. She drew her wand and gave it an almost casual flick, and the silver mask fell with a clatter to reveal the scarred, shocked face of a middle-aged wizard with a patch over one eye.

"Walden MacNair." Her voice was arch, sharp with disdain. "You should be ashamed of yourself, torturing an old man and kidnapping a little girl. But if I remember correctly, I stopped letting you play with Frankie because you liked hurting anything weaker than you were. I see it's a nasty habit you haven't grown out of."

The single eye darted around, taking in the looks on the surrounding faces and darkening as he realized that he had utterly lost the advantage. He swore bitterly, then reached down and snatched up the mask before stalking away. She watched him go, then turned to face her grandson with a thin smile. "I do believe," she commented coolly, "that he may still be in a bit of a bad mood about what you did to his eye, Neville."

"Gran!" Neville ran forward and embraced her tightly. "I've missed you!"

She returned the hug, her eyebrows raising almost to the brim of her hat as she felt the newly-hardened lines of his body beneath his robes. Gran pushed him back to arm's length, studying him from head to toe. "Goodness...what's happened to you?"

He chuckled darkly, hugging her again. "The whole term's been mental, Gran. I'll tell you later...there's a lot to catch you up on."

Her shrewd eyes narrowed. "I would say so. You've changed a great deal more than losing a bit of weight, young man. I saw the way you came off that train. Other than ruining a perfectly good pair of trousers, you had those boys reacting to you like you were the General of some kind of army. I half expected them to snap you salutes! I think I would be foolish not to guess this has something to do with what you have to tell me...as well as my little houseguest earlier, not to mention the letters from Professor Snape calling you a 'serious discipline problem' and threatening to have you expelled!"

Neville hesitated, smiling uncertainly. "You're not angry about those, are you?"

"Angry?" All the sternness melted away, and she drew herself up to her full height, her eyes glowing. "I don't think I've ever been prouder of you! A 'serious discipline problem'...I should have it framed."

He felt himself blush, and he looked down at his feet, but Gran put a finger under his chin, lifting his face again. "No you don't. You keep your head up. You have nothing to be ashamed of unless you plan on telling me you're going to stop."

He shook his head fiercely. "They'd have to kill me first."

"That's what I want to hear from Frank and Alice's boy." Gran smiled, patting his cheek. She glanced across the platform to where Mr. Lovegood was still curled in a ball amid a knot of other parents and some of Luna's classmates, who were trying in vain to console him. Her expression was one of deep pity - and for the merest moment, a flash of fear - and he knew that in that second, she had imagined if the one to never get off the train had been him. The look was gone as quickly as it had appeared, and she took hold of his elbow, slinging her large red handbag over her arm. "Come along, Neville. Let's get home. We have a lot to talk about."

Pulling his arm away, he shook his head reluctantly. "Gran, I can't. I'm sorry."

She nodded without any trace of the protest he had thought would come. Indeed, she seemed almost to have expected it. "Is this for what you're doing at the school?"

"Sort of," he answered honestly. "It's a personal promise, but it's to one of my Lieutenants."

"Your *Lieutenants*?" Gran exclaimed in a tone of mock scandal. "Will I be seeing anything of my young General this Christmas?"

"I'll be home in three days at the absolute most, I swear."

"You take care of your people, then," she said. "I think I can manage three more days without someone to see to the Fainting Fichus in the parlor."

Neville frowned. "Is it sick?"

"Oh no," she made a disapproving little huff. "Poor thing's just been dreadfully high-strung since that young man was in the house. I pity his parents, and that's the truth. He must have been a handful!"

"Try giving it a good strong cup of chamomile tea with a little lavender oil just before bed, and make sure it's not in any drafts," he suggested. "That should help settle it down until I can take a good look at it."

"I'll do that," she nodded. "You just come back safe, and we'll go see your parents for Christmas."

He leaned down to let her kiss his cheek, then smiled. "I'd like that. I think I have a lot to tell them, too."

After his grandmother had left, Neville turned back towards the train, scanning the little clusters of families for the familiar faces of the D.A., and of his Lieutenants in particular. He spotted Ernie first. The Hufflepuff was standing next to his trunk at the far end of the platform, toe to toe with a red-faced man who could only be his father. The elder Macmillan looked exactly like his son, with the addition of a few strands of gray that dulled the sandy curls, and a rather impressive belly that stretched his robes over the same powerful build.

As he drew nearer, the distinct faint buzz of a Muffliato Charm filled his ears, but the topic of the oddly silent screaming match was easy enough to guess. Neville cringed. It had never occurred to him that Ernie would not have found a way to tell his parents – Susan, he knew, had already informed hers – but it was rather obvious that this was the first time Mr. Macmillan had heard of his son's intentions.

Neville turned, trying to slip away back to the train to retrieve his trunk and let things blow over a bit. Unfortunately, he had already been spotted. Ernie waved his wand, and the buzzing stopped, replaced by his friend's shout, the burr thicker than he had ever heard it before in his voice. "Neville, git yerself over here, ma Dad's bein' a fair dragon's arse!"

"Ernie, it's really not –"

The sudden deepening of Ernie's accent became clear the moment his father's voice boomed out across the platform. "Nae ye don', laddie!" Mr. Macmillan brought up his own wand, and Neville felt as though an invisible hand had grabbed the collar of his robes, hauling him unceremoniously backward. "If ye are keen enough tae git ma son flogged, ye can be man enough tae stand't it!"

"Then this isn't about Susan?" he blurted.

Mr. Macmillan's brow creased. "*Susan?*"

He had no idea Ernie knew so many remarkably fluent ways to swear. Within minutes, however, he learned that Ernie's father knew even more.

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Half an hour later, Ernie was still rather pink in the face as he stood on the other side of the magical entrance to Platform 9 ¾ with Susan, Neville, and Hannah, their trunks piled at their

feet and Hannah's barn owl, Orion, dozing placidly in his cage. All four were still dressed in their Hogwarts uniforms, complete with robes, and they were attracting quite a few stares and half-hidden giggles from passerby. One young man with vivid orange hair had even smirked at them and asked where the graduation was, but Ernie had drawn up one sleeve and flexed a fist, and both the boy and his smirk had vanished as if he had Disapparated.

Susan had a handful of small, colorful cards in her hand, as well as several bundles of thin, flimsy parchment, which she passed out to each in turn. "These are from Ginny's dad," she explained. "Muggle identification. I had to promise Mr. Weasley that we won't try to use them to operate Muggle cars since we haven't taken the classes. I told him I probably wouldn't even know where to put them in, myself, but I gave my word for all of you, so please don't do anything silly."

Neville looked down at the ones he had been given. His own face looked back at him from the card, the photograph eerily still and frozen beside tiny black type listing his name, birthday, address, and a handful of other information, including a few sets of letters and numbers that he assumed were in some kind of governmental code. There was also a green booklet made of the oddly delicate parchment and covered in endless boxes and lines, but seemingly printed with the same information, and another scrap that stated at the top that it was a Birth Certificate, though nowhere did he see the customary picture of the newborn aging to his current self and back down again. There were just more words and boxes. Muggles seemed to really like boxes. And addresses. They were on everything!

"This stuff is really neat," he murmured. "Can I keep it?"

"Sure." Susan shrugged. "We just need them to show the people who're going to handle things. So...we've got until four o'clock tomorrow afternoon to figure out what to do with ourselves, and we want to stay as far as possible from Diagon Alley and wizarding places considering what just happened to Luna. So I guess the question is, since we're all Purebloods: who's spent the most time in the Muggle world?"

The four young witches and wizards looked at one another, each clearly expecting someone else to come forward. Finally, Neville spoke. "I've gone down to the village with my Gran to shop, but we shop at a wizarding store; we just pass Muggles on the way and say hello sometimes."

Hannah fidgeted with the end of her pigtail. "I don't think I've ever come any closer than the Muggle-borns at Hogwarts. Unless you count that my family and I once looked after a Muggle neighbor's cat while she was in hospital."

A worried look passed between the intended bride and groom, and Ernie cleared his throat. "I do believe, my friends, that we may have a bit of a problem."



## Chapter Nine A Different World

"What do you mean you won't change our money?" Neville gestured furiously at the sign above the window. "It says right there you change money!"

"*Money*." The plump, elderly man behind the counter crossed his arms, thrusting his little round chin out stubbornly. "Dollars, Yen, Marks, Francs, Yuan, what-have-you. Not trinkets."

"Listen, my dear man," Ernie was making every effort to keep his tone reasonable, but the strain still showed. "Surely, even if you are not familiar with the precise currency, you do still recognize gold when you see it."

He shook his head, pushing the pile of wizarding money back at them. "I recognize four teenagers who are up to something a lot faster."

Susan and Hannah exchanged a look, then Hannah leaned forward across the counter with a smile as sweet as Honeydukes. "Okay," she purred, "So maybe we are up to something a *teensy* bit naughty. We're on our way up to Scotland so our friends can elope, and we're in an *awful* hurry, so I'd be really grateful if you'd be an absolute darling and help us out. Pretty please?"

The beady little eyes softened. "Young love, eh?"

Hannah giggled. "Exactly."

"No deal." All the softness vanished, and the man's face set as he shook his head again with immovable finality. "Whatever you've nicked from Mummy and Daddy's coin collection, you can go somewhere else to fence it. Now get out of here before I call someone."

Neville sighed. "I really hate to do this, but you're not giving me a lot of choices." He drew his wand and waved it in the man's face. "*Confundus!*"

The moneychanger gave a little jerk, then blinked several times, removing his small, rimless spectacles and rubbing them on his shirttail before replacing them and staring at the four as if he had never seen them in his life. "May I help you?"

Ernie shot a grateful look at Neville, then pushed the pile of coins across the counter again. "We need to change these for Mug – er, for pounds sterling, if you please."

He picked up one of the saucer-sized gold coins and tilted it to the light, staring quizzically at the figure of Gringott the Great standing astride a vanquished dragon. "And these are...?"

"It's a Gallus. They're each worth a hundred Galleons, which are each worth...." Neville closed his eyes for a moment, trying to remember the sign on the exchange booth near the entrance to Diagon Alley. "Five pounds. So those are five hundred pounds each, and we've given you ten, so that's five thousand, minus your one-percent exchange fee, which would make it four thousand, nine hundred fifty."

Still looking befuddled, the moneychanger nodded slowly as he took the coins, then opened a drawer and began to withdraw a stack of brightly colored parchment slips. "Yes...." he said slowly, "I suppose that's exactly how it would work out, isn't it?" He lay the piles on the counter, counting them out as he did so. "So that's one, two, three, four thousand, five hundred, six, seven, eight, nine, and twenty, forty...fifty. Pleasure doing business with you."

"Thanks!" Ernie scooped up the Muggle money and folded it hastily into the pocket of his robes, hurrying off before the charm had a chance to fade. As soon as they were a safe distance away, he stopped, pulling out the thick wad and separating it into four piles. "I hope this is enough," he frowned, and Neville shook his head.

"Ernie, you just dropped ten of a coin that most wizards never even deal with, and you scarcely blinked! Hell, you could buy a Nimbus 2005 with that kind of gold! It's got to be plenty, no matter what prices are like in the Muggle world." Neville stared down at the stack of notes he now held, restraining the impulse to examine them with too much curiosity. They had to try and pass as Muggles now, and they would certainly not be fascinated by their own currency. Carefully folding them, he pushed them into the deepest pocket of his trousers.

"I suppose so," Ernie admitted cautiously, "but I do have more, just in case...so what now?" He looked at Neville expectantly. Despite the fact that he had no more experience in the Muggle world than anyone else, the other three seemed to be turning to him for leadership out of habit, and Neville took a deep breath and looked around the cavernous station.

"Uh...well, we should probably do something about how we're dressed," he suggested. "We're getting a lot of funny looks. Let's get rid of the robes and try to break up how much we all match until we can get some proper Muggle clothes...it's still pretty obviously a uniform, even with three in yellow and one in red."

He shrugged out of his own robes as he said this, bundling them into his trunk, and the other three followed suit quickly; Susan performing an amazing maneuver that involved taking her shirt off under her cardigan without ever actually removing the latter, leaving it as a rather daringly low-cut sweater, then using her tie to pull back her hair. Hannah, meanwhile, simply stripped off the cardigan and tie entirely, packing them away with her robes and leaving just the white shirt and gray skirt, and Ernie stripped down to just his t-shirt and trousers to set himself apart from Neville, who got rid of the vest, but kept his shirt and crimson and gold striped tie.

As they looked at each other, trying to decide if they blended in sufficiently with the Muggle crowd, a loud whistle went up nearby.

They turned, and Neville saw a group of teenaged Muggle girls leaning over a railing on the level above, leering at Ernie, whose muscular build was rather explicitly outlined by the tight-fitting t-shirt. "Oh, come on!" the boldest of them called, "Chuck the rest, why don't you? Ain't a thing to be ashamed of, and we were just starting to really fancy the show!" Susan gave them a filthy glare, extending first the finger with the ring on it, then two others entirely, but the girl only laughed. "Lucky you! Although if you ever get sick of her, handsome, you can feel free to look me up!"

"No thank you," Ernie called back up at them, slipping an arm around Susan's waist and kissing her on the cheek. "I'm done looking!"

With a few dramatic moans of disappointment, the girls continued on their way, and Susan turned, swatting her fiancé playfully on the chest with a scowl of mock jealousy. "Put your shirt back on. I don't want to defend my territory all the way from here to Scotland."

"Yes, ma'am." He pulled the shirt back out of his trunk and slipped it on, leaving it unbuttoned and untucked. "So...." he nodded his head towards the ticket windows. "Which one?"

Neville fished out the piece of parchment Colin had given him and squinted at the lettering that had faded over the weeks it had spent in his pocket. "National Express East Coast. Northbound to Edinburgh." He looked around at the dizzying array of constantly changing signs, then gave up and tapped a gentleman who appeared to be in a railway uniform. "Excuse me...where do we buy tickets for the...well, this one?" He showed the slip to the man, who gave him a rather patronizing look in return.

"You're standing not ten feet from it, boy. That queue right there." He pointed behind them, and Neville blushed. The man laughed. "Never been anywhere by train before?"

"Um...." He didn't know how to answer that, but the man seemed to take that as answer enough and patted him fondly on the shoulder. "It's all right, first time for everything, and at least it's not an airplane. Hate those, myself. Just get your tickets, check your trunks there —" he pointed across the concourse, "—get your claim slips, and get on your train. Nothing to fret about. You'll have a great time." He hurried on his way before Neville could quite thank him for his help.

"Okay, then, let's get in queue." Neville reached for his wand, intending to charm his trunk to follow him, but at the last moment, he remembered that they needed to be extremely careful using magic and bent to take the handle instead and drag it behind him. It was a lot heavier than he had really realized before, and they seemed to make an alarming amount of noise and attract an even more alarming amount of attention as they joined the queue, because the scraping had upset Orion, who hooted indignantly and flapped in his cage.

When they reached the window, Neville was relieved to see a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman who reminded him a great deal of Mrs. Weasley, despite her salt-and-pepper brown hair. "Destination, dear?" she smiled.

"Four one-way to Gretna Green on the Edinburgh train, ma'am," Neville replied, pulling out his share of the money and laying it on the counter.

She laughed. "Which of you boys is marrying which of you ladies, so I can get the congratulations right?"

Neville blinked, stunned, then gestured at his two friends. "Just them, actually. We're witnessing. But how did you...?"

"There's only one reason young couples have gone to Gretna Green for the last three hundred years." She slid four tickets across to them, and began to count out notes from the bundle.

"That'll be two-forty and seventy-three pence. Good luck to you, then, and congratulations. My husband and I have been married thirty years this April, and I have one piece of advice for you, young man -" she handed the change back to Neville, but her eyes were on Ernie. "—She's always right. That, and don't miss your train. It leaves at four."

Ernie laughed and shook her hand. "Thanks, ma'am. I'll remember that." He paused, then tilted his head, "Say, you wouldn't happen to know somewhere around here we could buy some clothes, would you? We, uh...forgot a few things."

"Of course," she nodded helpfully. "There's a Marks & Spencer not far from here on Liverpool. Go left out the doors there, left again on Upper, then it's just a wee left onto Liverpool and you can't miss it. It's about a mile, so you can walk it or take a cab if you like."

They nodded, thanking her once again, and Neville smiled as they began to drag their trunks towards the baggage check. "This isn't so bad, really. Great idea asking her about the store, though. Let's get our trunks checked, and we'll just walk there and pick up a couple bits and pieces so we can blend in better."

They showed their tickets to the boy manning the luggage check, and he took the trunks happily, but Orion was another matter entirely. He folded his arms across his chest, shaking his head fervently at the brass cage. "No way. No how. No can do."

Hannah reached through the bars and nuzzled Orion's softly feathered face with the back of her finger. "But he's just an owl," she protested. "He's really well behaved, I promise."

"Look, sister, I don't care if he's a bleedin' budgie who sings God Save the Queen and can serve high tea. No birds on the train." He lifted the cage off the trunk and handed it to her. "And don't bother cryin'. I hate it when girls cry, and it still don't get no owl on the train."

"It's okay." Hannah took the cage, looking a little miffed that he had suggested she might burst into tears, and opened it. Several people screamed as Orion soared out, flying in a wide, silent circle to stretch his wings before landing lightly on his mistress' outstretched arm. The luggage attendant was speechless, but Hannah just gave him a frown of completely innocent confusion. "I'm not letting him go, I'm just sending him ahead."

She looked into the bird's large, intelligent golden eyes. "We're going to Gretna Green, Orion, but we're not leaving until four, and we're taking an ordinary train, so you can do whatever you want until you're ready to meet us there. Just don't get in trouble."

The owl bobbed his head in understanding, then hooted once and took off, gliding smoothly towards the exit. The attendant had grown pale, his jaw nearly on the polished floor.

"It...it...it *understood* you!"

"Of course," Hannah answered calmly.

"What are you, a witch?"

"As a matte—"

Neville grabbed her arm, cutting her off before she could say anything more as he scowled at the attendant. "What did you call my girlfriend?" He took a step forward, using his height over the smaller man as he balled his hands into fists and tried to manufacture the most intimidating look he had ever seen used by Crabbe and Goyle. "Say it again so I have reason to jin—hit you."

"Look, mate," the attendant raised his hands defensively, "I'm sorry. Owl speaks English, owl speaks French, owl speaks Chinese...none of my business as long as owl ain't on the train!"

"Well, owl went out the door, so why don't you just give us those—" he motioned to the claim slips, "-and we'll be on our way."

"Gladly!" Neville took the little slips and pocketed them as they started towards the exit themselves, trying to ignore the number of stares they had attracted.

Hannah gave him an amused little smile and slid one arm around his waist. "Am I supposed to say 'my hero'?"

He chuckled, nuzzling his cheek against her hair. "Next time I get chained to a wall for you, sure, but not for scaring some poor Muggle bloke to cover up that you were about to blow it that you're a witch."

"Fair enough."

They pushed open the doors leading to the Camden streets outside, and Susan gave a little shriek, ducking back as the icy December wind struck her. "We checked our cloaks," she moaned. "We'll freeze solid!"

Neville looked around at his friends, feeling embarrassed at having not thought of that himself. "Have we all passed our Apparition tests yet? I did mine in August, just before school."

All three nodded, but Ernie frowned. "Don't you think people will notice if we just twirl around and vanish into thin air?"

"Good point." Neville nodded. "All right then. It's too cold to walk, so you two south-coast girls stay in here. Ernie's Highland stock, and I'm a Dales kid, so we can handle it long enough to get us a cab." He gritted his teeth in preparation for the bitter cold, then the two young men stepped outside.

There were an entire line of taxis waiting at the curb, and it took only minutes to find one who was willing to ferry the four teenagers to the nearby store, but by the time he had fetched Hannah and Susan from the station and climbed into the cozily heated interior, Neville was shivering fiercely. Hannah noticed, sliding tightly up against him in the rear seat and wrapping his chilled fingers in her own warm hands. She lifted them to her mouth, taking the fingertips between her lips, and he gasped as an entirely different kind of shiver shot through him.

"I've never ridden in one of these before," she whispered, her breath tickling his hands. "It's fun."

He smiled back at her, and the cabbie looked back over his shoulder. "Oi there, no funny business in my cab!"

"Sorry, sir." Neville shifted awkwardly, pulling his hands away from Hannah's mouth and folding them stiffly in his lap.

The ride took only a few minutes, and then they were there. Neville had wondered if he would be able to find the store when they got there, but it was clear that would not be a problem. *Marks & Spencer, PLC* was emblazoned across the front in huge, brightly lit letters, and below it, the holiday displays in the windows snowed, spun, glittered, and danced so vividly that it was hard to believe that it was all accomplished somehow without so much as a trace of magic. Shoppers laden down with all manner of packages and bags hurried in and out of the doors in a steady flow of holiday bustle, and music rang out from an unseen wireless, serenading them with what seemed to be a Muggle version of "God Rest Ye Merrie Hippogriffs."

Ernie paid the cabbie, and they scurried quickly inside, only to find that the interior was even more astonishing than the windows. It was as though all of Diagon Alley had collected into a single giant store, everything from shining silver Muggle-style cauldrons to sequined and ribboned hats piled onto tables and shelves wherever they looked. A Christmas tree as tall as the ones Hagrid brought into the Great Hall at Hogwarts stood in the center of the entryway, glittering with mirrored balls and tiny, twinkling lights, and garlands strung lavishly from every possible place they could be hung. The air was rich with the delicious scent of apples and spices, and everywhere, bold signs advertised all manner of savings and discounts to attract the attention of the shoppers who seemed utterly unimpressed by the surroundings that were making the young wizards gape in awe.

Neville pointed above them to a sign that indicated a dozen types of goods from Housewares to Shoes, each marked with arrows. "It looks like we'll need to split up. Women's things are that way, Men's on the next floor." He glanced at the two girls with a look of concern. "Do you think you'll be okay?"

Susan laughed. "Don't worry about us. Girls can figure out how to shop pretty much anywhere. Meet back here at half two?"

Ernie nodded, giving her a quick kiss. "Sounds good. And if you need more money...."

"We'll put something back. Honestly, Ernie, I don't think I could bring myself to spend that kind of gold, even if it is in little parchments. I wasn't raised with it the way you were." There was a slightly scolding edge to her tone, and Neville was surprised to see a flash of pain in his friend's hazel eyes.

"All right, then. See you at half two." The girls disappeared quickly into the crowd of shoppers, and after they had braved the moving stairway to the second floor, Neville turned to the other young man in concern.

"Ernie, is everything okay? I mean, your Dad did seem to come around to it. Is there something else?" He asked gently. "Cold feet?"

"Not in the least!" They made their way through a display of blaring Muggle wireless sets and flashing, wildly moving portraits that made Neville dizzy to look at, and Ernie shrugged, clearly trying to brush it off as nothing. "I'm just worried, that's all."

"About what?"

"I can understand where he's coming from...I mean, he doesn't want me marrying some Galleondigger who thinks she'll come into a pile of gold if I don't make it, but you heard him. Susan gets nothing when I die if we haven't been married at least a year. She hasn't been spreading it around, but the Ministry seized her family's assets earlier this summer because of her aunt, and her parents are Order sympathizers, too. They're flat broke. If something happens to me...." He trailed off with a little shiver, then pointed ahead. "There we are: Men's section."

A tall, thin Muggle in a pristinely pressed suit met them at the edge of the clothing racks, his meager, gingery hair combed uselessly over his gleamingly bald scalp as he looked down a long, crooked nose at the two young men, his eyes narrowing at Ernie's open, rumpled shirt and the tear in the knee of Neville's trousers. "Is there something I can help you...gentlemen with?" His pronunciation was overly flawless, with an aristocratic drawl that was distastefully reminiscent of Malfoy.

"Possibly." Ernie had drawn himself up with immaculate posture, and he met the salesman's stare with one of equally arch superiority. Neville barely managed to keep a straight face. At Hogwarts, Ernie often came off as dreadfully pompous himself to those who didn't know him well enough to know that he was just insecure about coming from a family who remained determinedly rural despite their wealth. Now he was calling on every inch of that image, and the look on the face of the Muggle salesman was priceless as he withdrew the thick wad of notes with a flourish. "My associate and myself have recently returned from an extremely difficult journey, and we will be needing a few accoutrements before our train leaves this afternoon."

The salesman gave a deep, ingratiating bow. "Of course, Mr...."

"Macmillan, from the Inverness Macmillans. Exclusive suppliers of Demiguise and fine woolens to all the best establishments, but I'm sure you know that."

He nodded, though both of them knew that the odds were he did not even know what a Demiguise was. "Ah, yes, now I recognize the name, certainly...I am Mr. Dinwitty, but you may call me Lawrence, if you wish."

"Thank you, Laurie." Ernie glanced around, then pointed to a statue of a Muggle man wearing what appeared to be a version of dress robes with a short, tight-fitting jacket instead of the loose outer robe. "I'll be needing that, and something a little more casual. My friend will be wanting the same. Price is not a factor, but I would insist on quality."

Mr. Dinwitty bowed again, unable to hide the greedy flush that had appeared high on his thin cheeks. "Two tuxedos, then, and...are you looking for sportswear, suits, outerwear? I'd be happy to help you with whatever you need."

Ernie hesitated only a moment. "Something for the weather, of course, and something for the train. Nice, but not ostentatious, and not too trendy. Classic, you know. But not old-fashioned...we're young enough lads, we have no particular wish to dress like our grandfathers. Perhaps two outfits and something for the cold beyond the...the tuxedo for each of us?"

"My pleasure. Come with me...." He motioned them forward between the racks, and Ernie strode ahead as though he had not only been there a thousand times, but quite probably owned the entire establishment, even as Neville followed along behind Mr. Dinwitty with distinctly less confidence. He knew very little about fashion even in the wizarding world. His Gran had always bought his clothes, and what few things he had gotten for himself were the same exact items in different sizes as needed. Although a great many things had been purchased second-hand or handed down from his father, it was more from thrift than poverty, and he had never felt poorly dressed among his friends at Hogwarts when they had cause to wear anything other than uniforms.

Listening now, however, to Ernie deftly handle questions about notched collars and French cuffs, dodging neatly around the differences between the wizard and Muggle clothing when he ran up against it, Neville knew that for the first time since stepping off the train that morning, he was truly in far, far over his head in a very, very different world.

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By the time they finished, both Neville and Ernie were dressed in brand new Muggle clothing, their other parcels having been sent ahead to the station with Mr. Dinwitty's assurances that they would be checked onto the train under the appropriate names without the slightest trouble, thanks to Ernie's generous gratuity. Neville kept glancing at himself in the mirrors they passed, not quite able to believe that the wealthy-looking young Muggle man who looked back at him was his own reflection. He seemed older somehow, more refined, and he wondered rather nervously what Hannah would think.

After a great deal of debate between Ernie and the salesman, of which he had very little part, he was wearing a pair of tan woolen trousers and an olive-colored turtleneck sweater made of the softest material he had ever felt, and he had a new coat that was a dark brown, buttery leather with lamb's wool at the collar, which Mr. Dinwitty had called a 'bahmer.' The sleeves of the jacket felt oddly tight and constricting, but it was overall much more comfortable than he had expected, and he had to admit that they blended in completely. For himself, Ernie had chosen trousers of deep navy, with a cream-colored, thickly knit sweater that emphasized his broad shoulders, and a vaguely military-looking overcoat of navy wool with two rows of brass buttons down the front, which he had left open to let it swirl behind him almost like a cloak, the red satin lining flashing in the bright lights of the store.

They took the same moving staircase down to the lower floor just as his new watch – a bizarre affair with no hands at all, but rather little numbers made of black dashes on a flat silver background – told him it was half two, and the girls were already waiting for them. Neville froze, scarcely aware of the moving staircase continuing to slide under the heels of his shoes as irate Muggle shoppers pushed past him on either side and Ernie hurried forward to sweep Susan off her feet in a hug as if he hadn't seen her for years.

Hannah looked stunning. She had cut her hair; the thick, heavy waves that had once come nearly to her waist when they weren't tied up in pigtails now snipped into shoulder-length layers of loose curls that framed her heart-shaped face in a soft cloud of gold. Shimmering green outlined her eyes, making them gleam like emeralds, and she wore a black top that was cut low and clung magnificently to every curve of her figure over a knee-length skirt of a slightly deeper green and tall, black, high-heeled boots. Her coat, like his, was leather, but it was almost floor-length, glossy black and belted at the waist. She smiled at him uncertainly, blushing. "Neville...is it...you don't

hate it, do you? I know it's kind of different, but the salesgirl said I should try something a little more grown up, and...."

Susan turned in Ernie's arms, laughing as she saw him. Her own coat was heather gray wool, similar in style to Hannah's, though what she wore beneath was hidden in their embrace. "I think we might have to take him to St. Mungo's. Poor boy's speechless."

Neville shook his head harshly, only then realizing that he was still stopped at the foot of the staircase. He stepped quickly aside, his mouth opening and closing without managing to form words. Hannah giggled, then leaned forward to kiss him. "You look very nice, too."

Ernie frowned anxiously at Susan. "Did you have enough?"

"Plenty." She pointed at an impressive pile of bags near where Hannah had been standing. "And that's including her haircut and some Muggle cosmetics for both of us. There was a really sweet lady who showed us how to use them and everything. She didn't even seem suspicious that we didn't know how; said she knew every way there was to doctor a uniform and knew we'd been at boarding school." Susan pulled away from Ernie's arms, and as she turned, he saw that she had on a pair of closely fitted blue jeans and a shimmery, scarlet top. "I don't know about you all, but I'm starving. Want to get something to eat before we head back to King's Cross for our train?"

Neville nodded, grateful for a reason to attempt to use his brain again. "Probably should. We don't know if they'll have a trolley on a Muggle train, and it's a four-hour trip to Gretna Green."

Hannah tugged his sleeve, pointing at the sign above them. "They have a café here, want to try?"

"Sure." She slipped her arm through his as he and Ernie gathered up the bags and they followed the direction the arrow was pointing. He knew he was probably being rude, but he couldn't stop staring at her, and she seemed equal parts delighted and a little uncomfortable with the open attention as she nervously fingered the ends of her new haircut.

"It's still me, you know," she said.

"I know...." He hesitated, searching for words. "It's just really different, but in a good way."

She chuckled, and there was an oddly sad edge to her smile as she looked up at him. "Well, I suppose so much is different this year, something had to be in a good way."

"I know what you mean." Neville sighed. "Sometimes, I don't think I know who I am any more, and I don't even know if that's something that should scare me or something I should be proud of."

"It's something you should be proud of," Hannah replied firmly. "I've known you for six and a half years now. It's not so much that you've changed, it's really more that you're everything that you almost used to be. And you've been amazing with the D.A.."

He shrugged. "I've just picked up where Harry left off. I keep asking, you know, what he would have done, and I just try to do that."

"But you're better than he is at some of it. You have a real gift for teaching."

"That's not mine," he protested. "The spellwork's been coming mostly off the Ravenclaws, some of it from Ginny, like Muffliato and Levicorpus, and Ernie's the real tactical one —"

"—and that may be." She cut him off. "And Harry was a genius at Defense Against the Dark Arts, but he could only explain about half of what he did. You make things make sense to people, you know how to put the really hard stuff into plain English, make people *get* things, make us not feel bad about messing up, even while you're making sure we all know there won't be any margin of error. I really think you'd be a great teacher someday."

"I'd never want to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts. It's an awful subject, and the more I have to get into it, the more I hate it. I don't *want* to understand the way those people think." He shuddered. "It's like eating something rotten to make it go away."

"Then teach Herbology." Hannah's tone had taken on the familiar stubborn edge that he had come to know meant no hope of retreat. "Professor Sprout will be retiring eventually, you know. And you *do* love that. I've seen you make things grow I would have thrown on the compost heap for dead."

"Maybe." Neville conceded, though it was more to try and close the subject than any real consideration. "What about you? What do you want to do if we get through this somehow?"

"Babies." She responded instantly. "I want to have great, wiggling, gurgling, happy piles of babies. There's been so much death, I know a lot of the girls feel the same way." Hannah patted her flat stomach over the skirt, "We can't stop the death, but we can make life, and I think there's going to be a lot of families with more kids than the Weasleys when this is over."

Neville laughed. "My Gran says my Mum wanted a big family before —" he stopped himself abruptly. "So what else are you going to do besides have a bunch of kids?"

"My Gramps owns the Leaky Cauldron. He was gonna leave it to my Mum, but...well, you're not the only one who can dodge a subject. Anyway, it'll be coming to me soon enough, and I've always liked helping him out there. I wouldn't want to sell it, anyway. It's been in the family too long. So I think I'll go work in the pub proper, then run it myself when he dies."

They had reached the café, and they settled into the queue behind other shoppers waiting to be seated by a harried-looking young woman with a pair of rather wilted pasteboard antlers perched on her head. Hannah was quiet for a long moment, then she drew in closer to him, leaning her head against his shoulder. "Do you think it'll matter?"

"That what will matter?"

"All this talk about teaching and pubs and babies. Ernie and Susan getting married. The D.A.. I mean, will it really matter what we want to do with our lives if we're all just going to die at the end of the year anyway?" Her voice was quiet, tentative, and he thought carefully before he answered.

"I think it matters a lot. Because if we have things and people we love, plans for the future, we'll fight harder for the slim chance that we might survive. If that chance comes true, we'll have something to help us move on — because we're going to lose a lot of friends, no matter what, and we'll need that." He paused, then went on, the words coming easier now. "But if it doesn't, then we'll have fought a little harder to live, and we'll have gotten that much further before we died,

and our lives will be worth that much more, whether it's tending bars or gardens or kids or just taking out one more Death Eater than we might have otherwise, and not letting that Death Eater go on to take someone *else's* future."

They were almost at the front of the queue now, and Hannah squeezed his arm tightly, a look on her face of such intensity that he shivered. "Then let's have Muggle food for lunch, and go on an adventure on the train, and help our friends elope in Gretna Green, and name babies and plan lessons and find Luna and help Harry and do all of it today, and twice that tomorrow, and the day after that, because if I'm going to die, I want them to pay dearly for it."

"If they kill you," Neville set down the bags, reaching to cup her chin in his hand, "I'll make sure they pay more dearly than they can imagine."

A thin, dark smile touched her lips, and she drew back, tossing her hair as her green eyes flashed. "Then I won't be sorry if they do."

OOO

The train ride itself was surprisingly similar to the Hogwarts Express the way it had been before Snape and the Carrows had modified it, and there was, in fact, a trolley. Despite having already eaten lunch at the café in Marks and Spencer, the four still bought their dinners and quite an impressive pile of snacks from the little cart. The meals themselves were exciting in their blandness, as apparently, Muggles preferred to avoid flavor of any kind while traveling, and had managed to somehow extricate it from food that seemed otherwise perfectly normal. The snacks, with their brightly colored, motionless packets, were surreptitiously reduced and hidden to show their wizarding friends when they returned to school.

Finding a place to stay was not as daunting as they had imagined, as the entire town of Gretna Green appeared to have been built entirely for the purpose – so far as they could tell – of exactly what they were doing. Ernie was stunned. When he had asked his Half-Blood classmate Morag MacDougal where a person got married in the Muggle world, he hadn't realized that they all did it in one place! Everything and everywhere was covered in images of weddings and romance, frozen pictures of couples kissing, laughing, walking, holding hands, exchanging vows.

Every shop and business they passed tried to find a way to appeal its wares to the engaged and the newlywed, which soon became so ridiculous that Neville and Ernie began to make jokes about it, taking turns inventing imaginary establishments if such a place existed in the wizarding world, such as the *Swept Away* Broomstick Emporium and *I've Fallen for Floo* Chimneysweep Service. The two witches however, seemed to find the whole thing utterly charming, and Neville couldn't help but notice somewhat nervously how much of their eager whispering and pointing seemed directed not at Ernie and Susan, but at Hannah and himself.

They had to admit that it was quite a relief how helpful everyone was, and how no one seemed surprised at how clueless they were about the Muggle world. It was apparently common enough for young couples to be traveling alone for the first time to Gretna Green, and the more egregious errors were indulgently written off to nerves. Finding a hotel to stay the night was easier than they had feared, and they soon acquired two rooms, helping Hannah and Susan settle themselves in one while the boys took the other.

As soon as they were in their own room, Neville stripped off his new Muggle garments, exchanging them gratefully for his familiar old pajamas. Despite the novelty and relative comfort

of the new things, it was still a relief to return to something that was exactly the same. Ernie had done likewise, as well as discovering that the small, humming box near the dresser was freezing cold on the inside, and contained a great number of small bottles, which he had arrayed on top of the box and was now staring at very intently as he sat on the end of the dresser.

"I really hope you aren't considering drinking unfamiliar potions," Neville cautioned him. "We don't know what's toxic...those might be Muggle cleaning things."

Ernie turned, and Neville was surprised to see that his normally rosy cheeks had fallen to the color of parchment. "No, mate, it's alcohol. Look!" He held up one little bottle, pointing to the label, which showed a man in an elaborate red costume and declared the contents to be gin.

Neville's eyes widened. "Why do you suppose they've got all that in here?"

"Because," Ernie opened the bottle, tipping the contents back in a single swallow and grimacing only momentarily as it burned smartly down his throat. "They know the people in here are getting married tomorrow."

"And want to be hung over for the wedding?" He raised one eyebrow skeptically.

"And are scared to bleeding death," Ernie corrected him, assessing the other bottles before selecting one marked *Bacardi* and subjecting it to the same treatment as the gin.

Neville sat down on the edge of the dresser next to his friend, frowning in concern. "You having second thoughts?"

"Second, third, fourth, fifth...quite the mathematical array, actually," he nodded, and the *Absolut* bottle clanked hollow into the rubbish bin.

"What's worrying you?" Neville asked gently. "I mean, there's still time to change your mind if you actually don't want to...hey, be careful, Ernie. You don't know how strong that stuff is. Don't make yourself sick."

"Not trying to make myself sick. Trying to get myself drunk. Vast world of difference, I assure you, even though there are occasionally similarities in the precise outcome." He let out a cry of indignation as Neville confiscated the next bottle from his hand before he could drink it.

"Let's wait and see what five of those have done before you have any more, okay? Now, what's got you so worked up? You've seemed really sure this whole time."

The color had returned to Ernie's cheeks now, though it was the flush of the drinks rather than any healthy ruddiness. He nodded his head towards the wall dividing their room from the witches. "You know what they're in there talking about, don't you?"

"No," Neville admitted.

"Me. What it's going to be like for her being married to me." He stood up, blinking in a bit of surprise as he wavered for a moment, then picked up another of the little bottles over Neville's protesting look. "I'm not having any questions about if I want to spend the rest of my life – however long that is – with her, not in the slightest, no. I love her with all my heart, and doing

that lightly doesn't tend to go with yellow trim on black pajamas, if you follow me. You should know that about Hannah."

"I'll remember."

"However," he continued, gesturing with the now-empty *Don Julio*, "this does not mean that everything is just brilliant." A panicked look came over his friend's face, and his voice dropped to an urgent whisper. "What if we *live*?"

Neville blinked. "You mean, you haven't considered being married to her for more than six months? Ernie!"

"No, I've thought about that a lot, I've *hoped* for that, even though I know there's not much chance. I want kids; little witches as lovely as her to spoil madly. But if we live, it'll mean she meets my family, and...." He trailed off, sitting down again. For a long moment, Neville let the silence linger, then when Ernie spoke again, his words had become a little blurred at the edges, but he had also dropped every trace of the educated refinement from his pronunciation, and his burr was as thick as his father's. "She'll ken me fer a fraud, Neville."

"That's ridiculous." He reached out, putting one hand on his friend's wide shoulder. "I don't mean to be harsh if you didn't know it, but if you've been trying to hide that you're Scottish...."

The hazel eyes blazed up at him sharply. "Nae fer a moment! I've nary a shame o'it! But ye dunna know, ye see...ma family has a fair bit a gold, and een if she's nae a Galleondigger, she'll expect t'same as anyone that we're proper Lairds, same as t' Malfoys. An' it isna so. I'm t'only one knows or cares different tween one fork and t' next. She's ma fair maid, an' I'd have her a castle, but truth's we dunna een have a house-elf!"

"I wish you'd let me go next door – not you, you're well on your way to getting your wish about the drunk, and it's bad luck anyway – and let me tell her that. It'd really make her feel better." Neville smiled. "She's been panicking that as much as she loves you, she'd never fit into some high society world where witches sit around and tear each other to pieces because someone's wearing last month's robes and you have to Entertain, not have friends over. Hell, Ernie, I'd not be surprised if Hannah's over there trying to keep *her* out of the little bottles."

"Truly?"

"Truly. She loves you *despite* what kind of society she thinks you're from. Hannah's talked about it. She's been mad about you since second year – I think she's the only girl in your house who didn't go through a phase of being in love with Cedric – and the reason she's never said anything before recently is that she's thought you were too good for her." Ernie gave a shocked kind of hiccup, and Neville nodded.

"Susan wants to be your wife because she thinks you're brave – which I know is true – honest – which is true for anyone but Snape – strong – which is an understatement – and smart...and that one I'm willing to agree with most of the time, except when you've cleaned out seven bottles of Muggle alcohol in fifteen minutes and are sitting there losing the ability to focus your eyes." He pulled open the box and scooped the remaining bottles back inside. "I'm willing to write that off to premarital brain damage if you're willing to accept that there's a witch in the next room who loves you exactly the way you are, and if you love her just as much, then you're not making any

kind of mistake tomorrow, and I think you'll be really happy for the next six months or the next sixty years."

Ernie sat up very straight, swaying only a little as he fixed the other young man with a determined look, enunciating with extreme care and almost managing to sound like his usual self, with the exception of what had become a distinct slur. "Then it will be my ushmost pleasure to b'come joined with her t'morrow in the state of wedlock, I b'leive."

"And it will be my utmost pleasure," Neville smiled, grabbing one arm and hoisting Ernie to his feet, "to aim you for the bed, get out my potions kit from my trunk, and try to put together something that will keep you from feeling how stupid you were in the morning, because I am your Best Man and your friend, and I hope that when *I* am about to get married someday, someone would do the same for me."

OOO

Neville thought that it was, all things considered, a great success that they managed to navigate the entirety of the Muggle bureaucracy in only six hours, three Confundus Charms, and one Memory Charm, albeit on no less than twenty people who had seen Orion come soaring into the courthouse with the Muggle Birth Certificate Susan had left in the hotel. By three o'clock, everything was in order, and the four of them had signed the last of the endless documents and were standing in front of a kindly-faced gentleman in a dark suit who had the unmistakable air of someone who thought they had the best job in the world.

Ernie and Neville were wearing their new Muggle tuxedos, and he was even willing to admit that they looked perhaps almost as dashing as the girls seemed to think they did, but it was Susan who was turning heads. Twice the Best Man had needed to prevent the groom from walking into pillars or falling down stairs, but it was understandable.

Susan had chosen a white satin dress, long-sleeved but bare-shouldered, with a skirt that swept the floor and swirled like a dancer with every step. Her hair was loose rather than in its usual long plait, and it cascaded raven-black in rich curls halfway down her thighs, pinned back with combs at the sides that were covered in delicate silver roses, which Neville recognized as real blossoms which had been cunningly transfigured. More of the gleaming flowers were scattered through her hair, and a sash of Macmillan tartan was tied at her narrow waist, trailing nearly to the floor behind her. Her pretty face was radiant, and her wide, dark eyes seemed to sparkle as much as the necklace at her throat as she smiled.

The man cleared his throat, reaching across his desk to take both Susan and Ernie's hands in his, his eyes twinkling, but his voice deep and solemn. "For hundreds of years, the town of Gretna Green has born witness to love of every kind, in her churches, her forges, on her bridges and hills, and here in the halls of her courthouse. She is a safe haven for those whom would be held apart by family, class, fortune, or fate, and has come to symbolize the strength of marriage and the bonds of true love for untold many."

"We are here today to bring another couple into that fellowship of faith to one another, and to begin a single new life in partnership where once there were two alone. The legal requirements have been filled, but it remains for the two of you to make your own promises to one another for your life ahead, and to finalize the vows."

He released their hands, and they turned to one another, Ernie taking Susan's left hand gently in his as Neville handed him a prettily tooled gold band and he slipped it onto her finger. "Susan," he said quietly, "we cannot know what lies ahead for us, but we can know our own hearts, and mine belongs to you. With this ring, I swear to you on my most solemn oath, and by all that is magic, that I will be true to you and faithful, in heart and body, that I will love you, care for you, provide for you, protect you, cherish you and keep you, as long as there is breath in my body."

Tears had begun to trickle down Susan's cheeks, but her voice was steady as she took a second, thicker band from Hannah and placed it on Ernie's rough hand. "Ernest, no matter what tomorrow has for us in darkness or light, life or death, hope or despair, I know that I have loved you for as long as I can remember, and will love you until I know no more. With this ring, I swear to you on my most solemn oath, and by all that is magic, that I will be true to you and faithful, in heart and in body, that I will love you, care for you, abide by you, tend you, cherish you, and keep you, as long as there is breath in my body."

The two pairs of eyes flickered to the Muggle official, and he nodded. "Just what I told you, and it will be done."

Clutching her hand in both of his now, Ernie turned back to his bride. "I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Ernest Ian Macmillan, may not be joined in matrimony to Susan Circe Amelia Bones, and I do call upon these persons here present to witness that I do take thee to be my lawful wedded wife. May it thus be known, and thus be done."

"I do solemnly declare that I know not of any lawful impediment why I, Susan Circe Amelia Bones, may not be joined matrimony to Ernest Ian Macmillan, and I do call upon these persons here present to witness that I do take thee to be my lawful wedded husband. May it thus be known, and thus be done."

The official nodded again. "Then in the sight of all those here present, and under the law of the land and mercy of the Crown, I do declare you to be bound in the legal and civil state of matrimony." There was a long, breathless pause, and then the official laughed warmly, waving his hand at them. "Well go on, man, kiss her. She's your wife!"

Susan flung her arms around her new husband's neck with a breathless sob, and Ernie's embrace lifted her completely off her feet, turning slowly as they shared a deep, passionate kiss that seemed to go on forever, as though they knew the world was waiting for them when it ended.

Hannah caught his eye as the new couple held one another, and he hesitated only a moment before reaching out quietly and lacing his fingers through hers. He squeezed them lightly, and was grateful when she seemed to understand the message in his eyes. *Someday, maybe. So much has changed...let's just take now for what it is.*

They had decided to go for a late lunch to celebrate after the wedding, as Susan had declared that she might throw up from nerves if she ate before, and they were discussing the various restaurants that had caught their eye as they emerged from the courthouse. Well, at least, Neville and Hannah were doing most of the discussion. Ernie genuinely didn't seem to care, and had not stopped grinning since the ring slid onto his new bride's finger, and Susan was still crying happily into her lace-edged handkerchief, but she had managed to lay down the decree that nothing Italian went with a white dress.

As they reached the sidewalk, something gleaming swooped down at them, and Neville had already closed his hand around the wand in the inside pocket of his jacket when he recognized the ghostly silver form of a colt which reared nervously, tossing its head before speaking with Colin's voice, more strained and frightened than any of them had ever heard from the ebullient young wizard. "I was right! Mum and Dad were killed weeks ago, and I've done the best I can, but Dennis isn't taking it well...I can't control him! They're gonna get us for underage magic, but I had no choice...he's just going off! Please help us!"

Its message delivered, the Patronus faded into a silver vapor that was gone on the winter wind in moments, leaving only a stunned silence behind. Four wands were out now, the girls snatching theirs from down the fronts of their dresses, and they had set themselves back to back on the pure instinct which had grown over the past months, their eyes snapping across the surrounding street for any further sign of something from their own world. Only Muggles looked back at them, confusion and bemusement on every face, and even a little fear on a few.

Neville was no longer Ernie's Best Man or Hannah's boyfriend. Such happy little roles had been laid aside in a flash of silver, and he was the Commander of Dumbledore's Army again as he thought of the panicked look on the face of the colt, the flared nostrils and white-rimmed eyes. It was a piece of magic that had taken them two months of practice to learn, and they had sworn to use it only in dire emergencies when the coins could not say enough and it was worth the risk of the Patronus being seen. That Colin would further that risk by performing the spell while he still had the Trace on him, and while he knew the recipients would be in the Muggle world...Neville made his decision instantly.

"Apparate to Colin!" he snapped. "Be ready for anything, the Death Eaters might have gotten there already. Now go, and I'll cover you!"

There was a swirl of satin skirts and black coattails, and three loud *cracks* from behind him as the others vanished into thin air. A Muggle woman screamed, and Neville concentrated all the power he could muster behind a single, five-minute Obliviate Charm, building it like a bubble inside him before throwing it down his arm and out the tip of his wand to burst across the entire watching street in a flash of light. When it faded, the sidewalk where the two young couples had stood was empty, and the only sign of anything unusual on the streets of Gretna Green was a barn owl that took off from the roof of the courthouse, soaring gracefully to the south through the clear blue December sky.



## Chapter Ten Blood Brothers

As the crushing sensation of Apparition eased, Neville dropped into a crouch, his wand ready and extended in his hand as his eyes swept keenly over his new surroundings. He was in a large, dim room with cement walls and floor, the ceiling a low maze of pipes and beams lit with a handful of bare, yellow Muggle light bulbs. Cardboard boxes piled high against one wall, and a table covered in all manner of unfamiliar wires and blocky machinery stood against the other, a small, wheeled chair in front of it. Hannah, Ernie, and Susan were only a few feet away, like himself coiled and ready to fight, and he exchanged a tense look. "Where's Colin?"

Hannah shook her head. "I don't know. We Apparated to him like you said, but we wound up here."

A thin, familiar voice, tight with pain and fear, sounded from the shadows in the far corner of the room. "Prove who you are."

Neville looked towards the voice, but he could barely make out a small figure standing in the deep shadow, what appeared to be a large bundle at its feet. "Neville Longbottom," he announced cautiously, "I tripped and fell coming through the Gryffindor portrait hole last week, and Colin Creevey laughed and told me that it wasn't very inspiring or noble to land on my face like that. I've been at Gretna Green with my friends; Hannah, Ernie, and Susan, who are also here, and we came because a colt Patronus sent us a message."

"Okay." There was a pause, and then the figure took a single step forward, still shadowed but visible now. It was Colin, his face ashen, still in his Hogwarts uniform and robes, his arms clutched tightly around himself as he gestured back towards the darkness with his head. "Dennis needs help, please...I...I had to hit him really hard."



"What happened?" Neville did not put down his wand, but crossed the room to where Colin had indicated, kneeling over what he now saw to be the prone form of the younger of the two Creevey brothers. Carefully, he gathered the boy up in his arms, surprised to find how light he was, and laid him down again in the brightest patch of light. Dennis was also still wearing his uniform, and blood gleamed wetly in his cornsilk hair from a large, nasty lump on his forehead.

Colin did not move, and his voice was hollow as he answered. "When we got home, I went inside on my own. The house stank of rotten food. There weren't any bodies, but there were scorches on the walls, a little bit of blood on the floor, and...and the Dark Mark on the bedroom wall. I took Dennis to a motel. Told him. He didn't seem to care, but the next day, he wanted to call home. I told him again, but he still called. There wasn't...there wasn't a Christmas message on the machine."

The words caught, nearly broke, but he managed to go on. "He just sat there, staring at the phone, but the room started shaking, and the telly blew out. I tried to stop him, but then he started screaming that they hadn't even done anything, they weren't even in the wizarding world, and the lamps started to go, and I begged him to stop, to calm down, but I had to...I had to hit him, and it was too late. The Trace...I could hear them coming down the hall, blasting in doors, people screaming, they were looking for us. I sent the message and came here. I didn't know what else to do."

He frowned at the pain in Colin's voice, unsure whether it was physical or just from his heart.  
"Are you okay?"

"I'd never Apparated before. Haven't even taken the classes yet, I've just heard the older guys talking about how to do it. Splinched myself a little, but I'm okay. It just stings." The blue eyes widened even in the meager light. "Just take care of Dennis, please."

Neville nodded, gently fingering the knot on the child's head. It didn't seem like the skull had cracked beneath, but it was unmistakably a pretty impressive concussion. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Ernie and the two girls had spread out across the room, sealing the door at the top of the staircase and searching for any other hidden entrances or concealed enemies. He felt a surge of pride and affection for all three of them, for how they knew what to do without

even needing to be asked, without a moment's resentment for what had been so cruelly interrupted.

He looked back to Colin. "Where *is* here?"

"My friend Brad's house. He's a Muggle, but he's been my best mate since I was like three. It's his basement. He knows I'm here. I had to kind of tell him I –"

A loud pounding at the door atop the stairs made all five of them jump, and every wand except Colin's was instantly leveled at it as a boy's voice sounded out in indignation from the other side. "Dammit, Colin, don't lock me out! I've got the stuff for D's head!"

Colin nodded recognition of the voice, and Neville flicked his wand up at the latch. "*Alohomora.*"

The door opened, and a tall, skinny boy appeared. He looked about fifteen, all arms, legs, and Adam's apple, with a vicious crop of acne beneath a shaggy mop of longish brown hair and a black t-shirt with a disembodied mouth on it worn over ragged blue jeans. As he saw the new arrivals in the basement, he stopped, jaw dropping as he held a bottle of iodine and a tuft of cotton wool awkwardly in his hands. He swore.

"They're with me," Colin explained hurriedly, but without moving. "Other Mages, like I told you I was. The tall one's Neville. The big bloke's Ernie. The girl in the wedding dress is Susan. The one in the blue dress is Hannah. They're all Lawful Good Fighters. They teleported here like I did."

This was clearly some kind of code between the boys, and the newcomer - whom Neville assumed to be Brad - nodded slowly, but with a look of skepticism. "You're...you can do magic, like Colin?"

Neville was considering how to answer this, but Ernie just flicked his wand, closing the door at the top of the stairs, and that seemed to be answer enough. Strangely, however, the boy did not seem at all surprised at having a total of six witches and wizards in his basement. If anything, he looked rather disappointed. "You're just...I mean, you're all wearing normal clothes, and...*Ernie? Hannah?* What are your *real* names?"

"Neville *Alastor Longbottom*, Susan *Circe Amelia Macmillan*, Ernest *Ian Macmillan*, and Hannah *Grace Abbott* if it makes you feel any better." Hannah's tone was tight with annoyance, one hand on her hip, and the Muggle boy blushed.

"Sorry. I just thought...never mind." He shuffled his bare feet on the cement floor, then held out the supplies in his hand towards Neville, who was still bent over Dennis' motionless body. "Um, if you want to use this, you can, or you can just, you know, cast Healing or whatever."

Neville shook his head. "I'm not going to mess with a head injury like this. I don't know what I'm doing that well on Healing Spells. We can't take him to St. Mungo's, that'd be as good as gift-wrapping him for You-Know-Who, but we can't just leave him here, and that's not just that he's hurt. It might take them a little while, but if this kid's been Colin's best mate that long, the Death Eaters will track him here sooner or later if we stick around."

"What about the Burrow?" Colin's voice had taken on a strange, dreamy edge, and Susan frowned, crossing to the shadowy corner.

He pulled back away from her, but she reached out a hand, laying it on his arm with an expression of almost maternal concern. "Are you sure you're all right, love?" Then she froze, pulling back her hand and staring at her palm in shock. It gleamed wetly scarlet in the sallow light. "You're...Ernie, he's *soaked* in blood!"



"*What?*" Neville jumped to his feet, but Colin was already backing away as tightly into the corner as he could, shaking his head vigorously, his arms still clutched to his chest.

"No, no! Take care of Dennis! I'm fine, I've taken care of it! I just got a little Spuh..." Shaking his head seemed to have been too much for what had apparently been already-fragile equilibrium. He swayed, eyes unfocused and dizzy, then the blue rolled to white, and his knees buckled, pitching him forward.

Neville lunged, and as he caught the younger boy barely a moment before he would have hit the concrete, he felt to his horror that Susan had been right. The black robes and shadows had hidden it, but the slender little body was sodden with warm, sticky crimson. Colin's arms unlaced limply from across his chest in unconsciousness, and he heard Hannah let out a little scream as they fell under the unflinching light. His right hand was gone at the wrist. Something that shone dull silver under the slick of red circled his wrist above the raw stump, but it was far from tight, and blood still oozed relentlessly, dripping now in thick rivulets that were no longer concealed against cloth.

Behind him, the Muggle boy let out an impressive string of expletives. "Someone goes friggin' *Star Wars* on him, and he tries to *duct tape* it?"

Not sparing any time to wonder what any of that meant, Neville yanked the bow tie from around his neck, looping it over the severed wrist and pulling it tight in a desperate effort to stop the bleeding. He dropped his wand, his other hand feeling at Colin's throat for a pulse. It took too long to find it, weak and thready, and he felt a cold chill run up his spine. "Damn you, Colin," he whispered hoarsely, "don't you *dare*...."

Someone had knelt at his side, and he looked up pleadingly into Ernie's warm hazel eyes. "We need Blood Replenishing Potion right away...you're in N.E.W.T. levels –"

Ernie shook his head. "Takes an hour and a half, even if I had all the ingredients on me. We don't have that kind of time. I didn't think there could *be* that much blood in a kid his size."

"What if we *do* take him to the Burrow? Ginny's said her Mother—" Hannah began, but Neville cut her off.

"He'd never survive the Apparition, not like this. We've got to do something first...." He paused, biting his lip as his mind raced through their meager options. "Susan, you take Dennis to the Burrow. Get him under care while we try to help his brother. It's no good losing both of them, and that blow to the head scares me...his color's all wrong, and he hasn't even twitched since we got here. The rest of us will try to do something for Colin, and we'll join you as soon as we can."

She nodded, "All right. But take care of yourselves. If they find you here...."

"We'll chance moving him anyway and run," Ernie assured her. He lifted Dennis and carried him over to her, leaning across the boy's body to give a quick, gentle kiss to his new wife before helping her cradle him in her own arms and stepping back. "I'll see you soon, love." Susan offered them a quick, tight smile, then turned on the spot and with a loud *crack*, she and Dennis vanished into thin air.

"Holy..." Brad shook his head, dumbfounded. "This is unreal."

"No, it's very real, and your friend is dying if we don't do something," Neville said sharply. "What first-aid potions do your family have?"

"Can't you just heal him with magic? Or even, you know, cast Resurrection if he does...."

"Dead is dead! Even in the wizarding world! Now, we need some Blood Potion before you get to learn that first-hand!" Colin's lips had faded to an alarming shade of blue, and although the makeshift tourniquet had stopped the worst of the bleeding, he had lost far too much already, and when he tried to find the boy's pulse again, it was scarcely a flutter beneath his fingertips.

Real panic had come across the Muggle boy's face now, and he darted across the room to kneel beside his friend, his eyes taut with despair as he looked from the mangled arm up to the older wizard. "We don't have anything like that!" He swallowed hard, fighting back tears as he saw the reality of the damage up close now, the amount of blood that soaked the dark robes. "I'll get an ambulance, we'll get him to hospital!"

"No!" Ernie grabbed his arm as he leapt to his feet and started for the door. "You can't!"

"Why not?" Despite the wand in Ernie's hand and the vast difference in their sizes, Brad's face blazed with flushed defiance. "He's my friend, and if you say he's *dying* there, and you can't do *crap*—"

Neville took a deep breath, forcing himself to retain enough composure to explain. "Colin's hurt because we're at war in our world – the wizard world – and there are bad wizards after us because we're fighting back. If we take him to one of your hospitals, they'll find him there, and they won't care who else they have to hurt or kill to get to him. And that's not even counting that if the Healers there don't know what they're doing with a wizard kid, anything could happen. We can't always control our magic when we're really hurt or sick."

Hannah's face was pale, but as she looked up from Colin's limp body, an idea had sparked hope into her eyes. "Brad – that's your name, right?" The boy nodded. "Brad, what do you do if you don't have Blood Replenishing Potions? In *your* hospitals?"

There was only a moment's hesitation before the answer came. "We give them a transfusion. Other people give blood, and they kind of hook up tubes to put it into whoever needs it."

"Neville, could we...?" She trailed off, not needing to finish as their eyes met and she nodded.

Hannah settled herself more solidly on the floor, not even noticing the bloodstains that now covered her satin gown, and opened her arms as Neville carefully placed Colin's body across her lap, trying not to move the injured limb any more than absolutely possible. As soon as she had him, he stood, stripping off his jacket, and it took only a glance at Ernie before both young men were down to shirtsleeves, unclasping their cuffs and rolling them up to bare their forearms.

Taking a deep breath and clenching his teeth, Neville lay the tip of his wand against the most clearly marked vein he could find. "*Espadius*." The blunt cherry wood shimmered to a razor-sharp point, and he hesitated only a moment before sliding it into his flesh, feeling the resistance of his skin before it found the channel of the vein and he stopped, not wanting to penetrate too far. His eyes flicked up, and he saw that Ernie had done the same. He nodded. "*Desanguinum*."

It was one of the strangest sensations he had ever felt as the wand began to suck greedily, and it almost seemed as though he could feel every blood vessel in his body become taut. He had bled fairly severely before, knew the light-headedness, the dull, hollow ache that seemed to come from the very center of your bones, but he had never felt the precious fluid actually pulled out of him, and he wondered if this was what the victims of vampires experienced in their last minutes. Neville let it go on as long as he could, but when he felt himself beginning to grow dizzy, he knew that it would have to be enough. They still didn't even know if it would work, and he could not afford to deplete his and Ernie's strength too far. "*Finite Incantatem*."

The wound closed as he withdrew the wand, leaving only a single red droplet on the surface of his skin, but the wood felt oddly hot and heavy now, and it seemed to throb in his hand, as though the living pulse continued within it. He knelt, lifting Colin's uninjured arm gently and pulling back the sleeve, but the skin was as smooth and white as eggshell, the surface veins wilted down invisibly from the loss of blood and not yet drawn clearly against cords of muscle like on the older youths.

He swore, but Ernie was across from him now, his own oak wand looking strangely flushed as he hesitated, the still-sharp tip poised at Colin's throat. "If I get it wrong...."

Hannah chuckled bitterly, but there were tears on her cheeks. "Yeah, you might kill him."

With a deep, careful breath, Ernie slid the wand into Colin's neck, his pleasant face drawn tight in concentration. Neville knew that his friend had been raised a businessman, not a Healer, yet he had heard enough stories about emergency rescues of sheep trapped in Snargaluff thickets and Demiguise breech births that of the three of them, he was still the closest thing they had to someone who could be expected to find a major artery on anything that didn't have leaves. The little body twitched, and Ernie froze, looking to him for help, and Neville licked his lips over a mouth and throat gone completely dry. "Do it."

Another moment of intense concentration, and the wand began to pulse, the surface of the polished wood rippling in Ernie's hand as the older boy's blood was pumped into the depleted veins. Neville handed him his own wand, knowing the switch would have to be made quickly when it was time, but no sooner had his fingers left the weapon than the lightning *cracks* of Apparition sounded through the house above them. The sounds came one after the other, first two, then four, and finally six all together. Six Death Eaters to take down a pair of practically Muggle-Born children? He shivered, wondering what exactly Dennis had done to that hotel room in his grief and anger.

"Get out of here!" Brad's voice cracked with fear. "I know what that sound means now!"

"If we leave now," Neville whispered, "we'll make that same noise, and the people up there will hear it, no matter whether Colin survives it or not!"

"So...you'll be gone!"

"You won't be, and they don't have any problems with going after innocent bystanders if they think you helped us!" Hannah retorted fiercely.

Panic stretched the boy's pale eyes, and they darted around the basement before falling on the strange assortment of wires and boxes on the far table. Slams and crashes were coming from above now as the Death Eaters began to search the house, but Brad didn't say a word as he scrambled to his feet, diving under the table as Ernie carefully switched the wands, now pumping Neville's blood into their wounded Secret-Keeper.

The Muggle boy made a small sound of triumph, grabbing the end of a wire with three silver prongs protruding from it and shoving it into the wall. Tiny specks of red and green began to glow all over the front of one of the box-like contraptions, and Brad stood hurredly, punching buttons and sliding toggles. A little door popped open, and he grabbed a thin, rectangular object that looked like a miniature book with two holes in the front from a dust-covered stack, dropping it into the open door and closing it again before striking another button with a gleam of victory flushing his cheeks.

The noise was unbelievable. Every one of the tall black boxes burst into pounding life, and the ear-splitting wail of a guitar and rhythmic crash of drums blistered the walls of the basement. A man's voice, hugely magnified and distorted, began to scream out words that seemed an incantation of haughty rage, but Brad was grinning at them. Neville could not hear a word, could scarcely hear himself think, but the boy's mouth was moving unmistakably. "Go! Go!"

Nodding at his two companions, Neville gripped Ernie's wand tight in his hand and forced himself to blot out the cacophony as he focused all his determination on Ginny's bright smile

and the warm safety of the Burrow. He turned on the spot, and everything was crushing darkness.

OOO

The moment they arrived in the Burrow, they were descended upon. A tall, dark-skinned wizard with a gleaming bald head swept Colin out of Neville's arms and lay him out across the kitchen table, where a young witch with shocking bubble-gum pink hair was already bending over Dennis. A middle-aged couple with brilliant red hair - whom he could only assume were Ginny's parents - were busy at the stove, she working intently over a rapidly bubbling cauldron while he orchestrated a dozen knives and scales in preparing and measuring ingredients for the potion they were creating, and Susan spared scarcely a glance at her husband as she began helping the pink-haired witch strip away Colin's blood-drenched shirt.

Before Neville had time to gather himself enough to say anything, Ginny had appeared, her face pale below two bright pink spots that had flushed high on her cheeks from fear as her eyes scanned over their bloody clothing. "Are you -?"

"We're fine, it's all Colin's," Neville said quickly.

She nodded, turning back to the group. "They're okay!" she announced, relief making her voice tremble a little at the edges.

Mrs. Weasley glanced back over her shoulder and nodded, flashing them a tight but warmly welcoming smile. "Then get them out of here, Ginny, dear, we're running out of room...Remus and Lee will be back any moment once they see if they can find the poor thing's hand." She started to turn back to the cauldron, then paused, her eyes widening. "Merlin's beard! Is that the little Abbott girl?"

Hannah nodded. "Yes, ma'am. My Mum said she used to know you, but she lost touch after you both got married."

"I haven't seen Peggy in years...you must have been four or five...goodness...." She shook her head, dismissing the moment of nostalgia. "Did your mother ever teach you that little charm she had for skinning Parching Peas?"

The young witch was already weaving her way across the crowded kitchen to Mrs. Weasley's side, raising her wand to summon an apron from the hooks on the far wall. "Everything she knew."

"Good. Arthur -" Mrs. Weasley waved her husband back from the counter as Hannah joined her at the stove, "—you go with the other boys, get them cleaned up. Miss Abbott will help me finish the potions. Ginny, on second thought, get your cloak on and see if you can wrestle some Hawthorne berries away from the Bowtruckles. Go on, scoot!"

Neville shook his head, trying to push his way closer to the table. "But Colin -"

The tall, dark wizard turned, blocking him completely. His voice was slow and deep, soothing without being patronizing at all, and there was something about it that instinctively inspired confidence in what he had to say. "No, son. You've already saved his life by tying that off and getting him here with enough blood in his veins to survive the Apparition. There are more than

enough wands in the cauldron to do the rest. We will tell you if anything happens, that's a promise. Now go with Mr. Weasley."

Feeling dazed and almost grateful to have someone else taking charge of the situation for once, he allowed himself to be led away up the stairs. Ernie cleaned up the bloodstains on his hands and clothing with a simple Scourgifying Spell, then headed off back to Gretna Green to settle things at the hotel and collect their trunks, but Neville decided to take Mr. Weasley up on his offer of a proper bath. He didn't know why, but going back into the Muggle world seemed entirely too much to face, and the sound of the crack was like a slap in the face calling him coward as Ernie Apparated away alone.

The mirror in the bathroom was annoyingly talkative, trying to interrogate him about the whereabouts of all six of the Weasley brothers, as well as wanting extensive information about who's blood was all over him and how, but it shut up thankfully when he hung a towel over it. It took him a few minutes to fiddle with the taps until the water would go as hot as he wanted it, and he gasped as he slipped beneath the surface, feeling his skin tighten in protest against the scalding bath. It hurt. Every instinct tensed his muscles to leap out again howling, but he remained motionless as he watched the water turn scarlet with the tendrils of blood that were lifting away from his body like the steam on the surface above.

It hurt, but it was right. He picked up the soap that he had found in the laundry room where Mr. Weasley had sent him for towels and a washcloth. It wasn't meant to be bath soap, but he had wanted something stronger, and the *Cadwalliger's Cauldron Cleansing Bar* scraped and stung almost enough as he scoured it over his reddened skin. It was almost enough to make him feel clean again. Neville scrubbed at himself with the cloth until his own blood had begun to join Colin's in the water, running in thin trickles down over his chest and arms and down his back where the fragile tissue of the scars had split under his assault.

Only then did he stop. The frantic desire to sear and scour himself clean faded not in a scream, but with a sigh of hopelessness, and he sank back into the still-steaming water, closing his eyes as he felt the heat first sting, then soothe the re-opened wounds. It didn't help. Nothing could help, really.

No sobs rocked the calm surface of the bath water, there was no sound in the bathroom but steady breathing and the irate muttering of the mirror, but tears began to run thickly down Neville's cheeks from beneath the closed eyelids. Even if he were to peel his skin off entirely, it wouldn't help, because there were stains that didn't wash away, scars that hurt so much worse than the ones people could see when you took off your shirt.

For the rest of his life, he knew that he would see Susan in her blood-stained wedding dress with Dennis' body in her arms, Colin's arm falling limp across the concrete to reveal his ghoulish secret, the face of the Muggle boy, Brad - almost certainly dead now - as he covered their escape...and that these were not the first and would not be the last. They were only the most recent additions to a photo album of horrors that his memory was building over this year.

He envied Harry. Oh, how he envied him. For all the burden of being The Chosen One, of knowing that the entire wizarding world was depending on him, he didn't have to *see* any of it. Wherever he was, he wasn't holding second-years after they had been subjected to the Cruciatius Curse, he wasn't taking the last request of a fourteen year-old whose death warrant he had personally signed, he wasn't asking blushing, giggling fifth-year girls to stop looking at the boys and pay attention to how to kill someone.

They didn't bleed on him, they didn't cry on him, they didn't sweat and vomit and tremble against him, and oh, they didn't *look* at him. Their eyes weren't on him from morning to night, always expecting him to look back with strength, defiance, and certainty, to always have a plan, to always find a way, to always make it all right, no matter how very, very, very wrong it really was.

No, Harry had been given a plan by Dumbledore, but however difficult and terrible it was, he had the mercy of privacy in which to do it. Only his two best friends would be there to see if he was afraid, and they would forgive him for it, because they had a closeness that Neville envied even more.

Oddly, he had always been popular, even when he was considered an outright loser by everyone, because he knew *he* was a good friend. He always listened, he was nice, considerate, and funny without being over the top about anything, and he genuinely liked being around people. As a result, he had never lacked for buddies to make up a game of Exploding Snap or skive off History of Magic to go swim in the lake on a warm afternoon in late May, but he had also never had anyone he had been truly intimate with on a personal level the way he could see between Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

Now, his friendships were deeper, forged in blood and tears, and a little knot of the D.A.'s older members – himself, Ginny, Luna, Ernie, Seamus, and Hannah – had formed a bond that would give their lives for each other without a moment of hesitation. And yet, he realized, he could let himself cry in front of none of them. He could *fear* in front of none of them, because no matter how close they were as young witches and wizards, no matter how much he loved them all in their own ways, he was still their commanding officer.

That was perhaps the biggest difference which he envied Harry. Harry was tapped, destined, fated, responsible on a grand and cosmic sense, but he didn't have to make all the little daily choices of command. *Is this worded a bit too strongly or not enough? Who takes the point position? Do you pair siblings together because they will fight harder, or keep them apart because they will be devastated too much to fight if they lose each other? How much pain is too much pain for an eleven-year-old to bear before you mount a rescue? If so, who are they worth risking?* Those choices needed detachment, and they also needed trust, and for both reasons, he could never show weakness. He had to be ready to send any of them to die, and they had to believe that it was never second-guessed.

It wasn't fair. Now the sobs were beginning to come, silent and shallow, making the bath water ripple against his chest. It wasn't fair. All he'd wanted was a break, a relief from it all, a chance to go on a harmless adventure to celebrate his friends' love, spend some time with Hannah, and go home, home to his Gran and Mimsy and his own bedroom and just relax. Instead it was blood in the bath and two children on the kitchen table below with a dozen people trying to save their lives.

And really, it was his fault. Hadn't he known deep down that Colin was right the first time he had suggested what might have happened to his parents? Hadn't he known that the Creevey brothers would be fending for themselves more likely than not? But he had chickened out. He hadn't *wanted* to deal with it, so he had just handed over his address and gone off with his friends to leave their Secret-Keeper and his high-strung fourteen year-old brother to handle things alone. It was unacceptable.

Constant vigilance. That was what Mad-Eye Moody had taught them, and hadn't he seemed to be the only one who had ever seen this coming? True enough, it had been a Death Eater

impersonating the old Auror, but that had only worked because Mad-Eye himself espoused the same philosophy. Moody was the wizard who had trained his parents, and Gran had always spoken of him as the revered, ever-attentive antithesis of her forgetful grandson. War meant constant vigilance, never letting your guard down, because that was when your enemy would strike.

He couldn't do it. The bath had grown cool now, and Neville pulled the drain with his foot, opening his eyes to watch the scarlet water swirl away, before standing to rinse himself under a freezing cold blast from the shower. It shocked the sobs to a halt, stripped the tears from his cheeks, and he shook his head, shivering as he climbed out of the tub and reached for the towel over the mirror.

"...and I really –"

"Shut it, or I'll smash you." The words held just enough of a hollow matter-of-factness that the mirror stopped abruptly, meekly reflecting his own image back at him without any further commentary.

He couldn't do it. He couldn't keep up that level of vigilance for another six months, and Merlin help them all if it went on longer than that. It was really a wonder, he mused, that his grandmother had recognized him at all when he had stepped off the train. His hair was long enough that it had begun to wave, low across his eyes and curling at the collar-line, and a few gray hairs, strangely not unexpected at the age of only seventeen, had begun to scatter through the rich brown at the temples. His features were sharper, harsher than he had ever seen them before, his jawline hard, his cheekbones pronounced and his eyes sunken over dark circles from weeks of little or no sleep, and nightmares when it did come.

Neville opened the medicine cabinet. With six boys in the house, he knew that there would be enough shaving accidents that the Weasleys must have a container of styptic powder that he could sprinkle on his trickling shoulders before he put on the old robes of Bill's Mr. Weasley had loaned him, but as he searched the little shelves, his fingers paused on a dusty bottle to the far back. The lable announced the contents to be a Settling Solution prescribed some five years ago, and bore the crossed wand and bone of St. Mungo's dispensary. *For the use of Mr. Percival Weasley as needed for nerves during his N.E.W.T. examinations, not to exceed a half-ounce daily.*

He lifted out the bottle, turning it over in his hands thoughtfully. If it had been prescribed for N.E.W.T. exams, it wouldn't dull his wits, but it might calm his nerves enough that he wouldn't feel all of this so keenly, that it wouldn't *hurt* so much. Maybe it would even help him sleep. He knew that his Gran would have a fit if she knew he were considering taking prescription potions without a Healer's advice, but he couldn't exactly go to St. Mungo's with his problems, and it *was* his N.E.W.T. year quite legitimately, something that was not exactly easing his stress levels with the amount of homework he had to juggle with the D.A.

There was barely enough left at the bottom of the bottle to coat it, and he reached for where he had set his wand on the side of the tub and tapped the glass. "Resiatiate." The liquid expanded, filling the bottle to the base of the cork, and he opened it, sniffing the contents cautiously. A wonderfully calming scent, like tea and lavender and the smoky glow of a warm fire filled his nostrils, and he closed his eyes as he tipped the bottle against his lips.

The potion was old, so he allowed himself a single deep swallow, guessing that a half-ounce would probably not be enough after the passage of years, and what he was facing was a lot more

than the question of whether he'd be able to get the job he really wanted. It tasted sweet and a little spicy, and his mouth and throat tingled for a moment as he put the cork back in and tucked the bottle out of sight in the pocket of the robes. It wouldn't be missed, not with that much dust on it and Percy long gone.

Everything seemed a lot more bearable now. The sense of crushing responsibility had eased, and instead, he felt quite perfectly up to the task. The memories of Colin's bloodied robes were just images now, and he could assess the mistakes he had made, consider his actions with a cool detachment that was wonderfully freeing.

He picked up Bill's old robes, pulling them on without really feeling the sting of the scalds the bath had left. Colin was in expert hands, and if he died, Hannah would be an excellent substitute as Secret-Keeper, both because of her feelings for him and the Hufflepuff loyalty he had discovered was so underestimated. The D.A. would go on, he would go on, and there was no need for anyone to share the burden, because really, it wasn't very heavy at all if you didn't have to carry the pain that came with it.

OOO

By the time he had fully dressed and had run a comb through his hair, Neville had realized that he was actually quite hungry now that the demands of his stomach were no longer drowned out by the pain of the day's events. He started downstairs for the kitchen, hoping that the Creevey brothers would have been settled enough for someone to dig him up a bowl of soup or a piece of bread, but Ginny met him halfway down, grabbing his sleeve and pulling him towards the sitting room with an eager look on her face. "I was going to get you," she said, "Colin's awake! We've got him in here."

The sitting room was small and a little shabby, but there was a friendly, cozy feel to it that was aided by the soft glow of the oil lamps on the walls and the warm crackle of the fire that cast a golden light over the surprising number of people who had managed to cram themselves in. Neville recognized Remus Lupin, scarred and haggard-looking, but smiling as he sat on the floor with the pink-haired witch curled in his lap, as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley shared the couch with the Macmillans; Susan perched on Ernie's knee, stroking his hair idly, while Hannah had taken a spot on the floor next to Lee Jordan.

It was an old, sagging chintz armchair, however, that captured his attention. Colin was nestled there, wrapped in so many blankets that his slim body had disappeared into a rather shapeless lump, but his blue eyes were gleaming bright and alive from the still-pale face, and he was smiling. Neville felt an odd sensation deep in his stomach, as if somewhere, someone else had experienced a vast surge of joy and relief, but only the barest of smiles touched his mouth. "Colin..." he hesitated, "...are you...did they find your hand?"

The boy extracted his right arm from the blankets, holding it up with an almost sheepish look on his face. The hand was there, no sign of a scar circling the once-severed wrist, but it looked wrong somehow, almost as if it had been expertly sculpted from wax rather than flesh and blood. "No, but I'm feeling a lot better, really. You guys saved my life."

Neville tilted his head curiously. "But if they didn't find it -?"

"We just did our best to regrow it," the pink-haired witch gave a little shrug, "trouble is, we're Aurors, not Healers, and I guess I'm only much good at making one set of hands at a time." She

patted her belly, and for the first time, Neville noticed that her robes were stretched over a distinct roundness there.

Colin tucked his hand back under the blankets. "It's okay, Mrs. Lupin," he said quickly, "I'm not —"

"Oi! Don't call me that!" she protested. "Makes me feel ancient as well as huge! Tonks'll still do me fine, I told you."

Mrs. Weasley laughed, wagging a finger with a teasing glitter in her eyes. "Now, Dora, you're not huge, you're not even six months. You should have seen me with the twins...I told Arthur if I got any bigger, my belly would need its own owl address."

Ginny smirked, flopping down onto her stomach on the braided rug next to the Lupins. "Point is," she motioned up at Colin, "they regrew it fine, but they can't get it to work, and they don't know why, so right now, it's just sort of a decorative end bit on his arm."

"I'm left-handed anyway, I can still do magic fine," Colin said defiantly. "And they said the proper Healers should be able to figure it out as soon as it's okay to go back to St. Mungo's, or if Madam Pomfrey can get a look at it once we go back to school."

"Well that's good to hear," Neville said coolly, "but it's *not* all okay, Colin. You nearly died, and there was no good reason. What you did was incredibly stupid, and you're sitting there grinning like it was all just a lark. Your best friend has probably been killed by Death Eaters, Dennis – well, I don't know where he is – and you came *this* close to breaking the Fidelius Charm right when we're all scattered across the countryside and most vulnerable."

Colin looked as if he had been slapped, a faint pink flush rising on his cheeks as his mouth fell open with dismay. "I...I...I'm sorry," he stammered weakly. "D-D-Dennis is sleeping upstairs with S-S-Sturgis watching him. 'Nother Order bloke. They fixed his head."

"What did you want him to do, Neville?" Ginny sat up, her brown eyes flashing fiercely. "Sit around and let the Death Eaters take them because he hadn't passed his Apparition test yet?"

"No, but that nonsense about trying to hide how badly he was Splinched was inexcusable." Despite Ginny's anger and the hurt and shock on Colin's face, Neville was amazed at how calm he felt, how easily he was able to explain the simple logic of the situation. "You're the Secret-Keeper. When I explained that to you, I told you it might mean sacrifice, including your brother. You said you understood, but when it came down do it, you stood in the shadows and nearly bled to – no, scratch that, you *did* bleed to death, and you're only sitting there now because Ernie and I pushed a couple of pints of our own blood into you to replace what you let soak a dozen yards of fabric and half that basement. I want to know why I shouldn't lift the Fidelius now and put it on someone else."

Colin's expression was utterly devastated. He shrunk down into the blankets and ducked his head, only a fluff of fine golden hair still showing as his reply came muffled through the layers. "I didn't mean to let everyone down. I just...I wasn't thinking...my Mum and Dad...and my brother...and I just...I guess I didn't want to believe I was bleeding *that* much...."

"You'd lost a hand!" Neville snorted. "It should have been a clue when your uniform was wet to the knees."

The blankets began to shake, and his voice seemed very tiny. "I won't do it again."

"You bloody well won't. You only have one left...and I mean hand, life, and chance."

Ernie motioned Susan off his knee, scowling as he stood and took a step towards Neville, "Wait a moment there, old chum...you're being really hard on the poor kid. He just lost –"

"We're all going to lose, Ernie, and some of us already have." He motioned matter-of-factly towards where Hannah was sitting, noticing only vaguely that she seemed for some reason upset with him as well. "It wouldn't do any good to say Hannah was excused because she lost her mother if *s/he* failed in her duties, or because I lost my parents, or Harry lost his, or anyone else, for that matter. Colin failed, and he's going to have to make up for it and win my trust back, and it's really that simple."

Satisfied that he had explained things quite thoroughly, Neville turned to Mrs. Weasley. "Now, I don't mean to bother you, but I haven't eaten in almost twelve hours. Would you mind if I grabbed a spot of leftovers or something from the kitchen?"

A strange silence had fallen over the little sitting room, and Mrs. Weasley exchanged a long and seemingly very meaningful look with her husband before she nodded. "Of course, dear. Arthur will get something. Just give him a moment."

Mr. Weasley got up and swept past him without a word into the kitchen. He waited patiently, aware of the awkwardness that hung over the group, the only sounds the crackling of the fire and Colin sniffling beneath the blankets, trying and failing to hide that he had started to cry. Hannah got to her feet, draping herself over the side of the armchair and rubbing her hand over the little back in gentle circles. She murmured something at the boy that was soothing and meaningless and maternal, but her eyes were on Neville, blazing like the emerald flames of Floo Powder.

Finally, the kitchen door opened, and Mr. Weasley stuck his head back into the sitting room. "If you'll come in here, son...?"

Neville followed him into the kitchen, but no sooner had the door closed behind him, than someone had grabbed him, and he found a thick hand over his mouth as impossibly strong arms yanked him back, twisting his arm up behind his back until it screamed in pain. His wand was trapped in his pocket, he was helpless, but oddly, he felt no panic, his mind simply running over the options and deciding that it was best not to struggle until he had a better understanding of his situation.

Mr. Weasley was standing only inches in front of him, his own wand out and pointed unwaveringly at Neville's throat, his kindly eyes now narrowed in the same blazing, flinty look that was familiar from Ginny's bursts of temper. "Who are you?" he whispered harshly.

"Nnnnull Lubumm," he mumbled behind the crushing hand, but his only answer was a sharp nod, and he was twisted around, now slammed face-first against the kitchen wall as someone yanked up his sleeve behind him, and he felt the wand snatched from his pocket.

"Cherry and unicorn, eleven and three-quarters...it's his." Mr. Weasley announced, then there was the tap of a wand against his left forearm. "*Morsmordre Revelio!*" Neville let out a cry of pain

and shock as his arm stung viciously, the skin seeming to ripple and bubble for several long seconds before settling again, leaving him sweating and gasping from the horrific sensation.

Another voice sounded behind him from the one holding him, and he recognized it as belonging to the tall, dark-skinned wizard who had been in the kitchen before, although there was nothing soothing about it now; instead it seemed intimidating, even seplechurial. "He's not a Death Eater, then...but there are plenty of wizards without the Mark who are still no friends of ours." Neville felt warm breath against the back of his neck as the wizard leaned in close, twisting his arm until he was gritting his teeth against the searing pain in his protesting shoulder. "You'd best tell us something to convince us who you are, lad, or I might have to rip this off, and it would still be gone when the Polyjuice wore off."

Grateful that his mind was still clear of fear, he sucked a deep breath past the shooting ache in his arm. "There's a scar..." he hissed, "...on my arm – a fresh one, 'bout five inches long. Remus Lupin put it there last month. He had to have blood to fool the other werewolves when he saved me and Ginny and Luna in the Forbidden Forest." The pressure eased slightly, and he continued. "And Ginny...she wears Ron's old pajamas, the blue and white ones...and she had a diary in second – I mean, *her* first year – that used to belong to You-Know-Who...and Ron used to sleepwalk sometimes, but he hasn't in a couple years, and...."

"That's plenty. Thank you, Kingsley, you can let him go...he is who he says he is," Mr. Weasley said calmly.

The hands released him, and Neville stepped away from the wall, smoothing his rumpled robes as he looked at the wizard who had been restraining him curiously. "Kingsley...Shacklebolt?" The dark, smooth head nodded. "Blimey," Neville's eyes widened mildly, "you're famous. I guess I shouldn't be embarrassed about *you* getting the jump on me. We put it out all over school when you took out those Death Eaters...three of them, and they say four had you cornered."

"Five," Shacklebolt corrected him. "I've become rather unpopular with the Ministry because of that, which is part of why we are not too keen on having people here we can't trust." He exchanged a look with Mr. Weasley, then tilted his head back to the door. "Call if you need me, Arthur."

"Of course." Mr. Weasley waited patiently until Shacklebolt had left, then crossed his arms, staring intently at Neville.

A small spark of indignation at the treatment he had received had flared through the stoicism, and he frowned. "I hope you had some reason for all that, considering I've been putting my neck on the line all year to help *fight* You-Know-Who and his lot?"

"To put it bluntly, Mr. Longbottom," Mr. Weasley replied snappishly, "we didn't think you were capable of that little display you just put on out there with Colin."

Neville shrugged. "He made a serious error in judgement and deserved to be reprimanded."

"Maybe he did, but the young man Harry and the kids have told me about – not to mention the young man who arrived in my kitchen earlier this afternoon – would never have handled things so...well, so *cruelly*." He paused thoughtfully. "And I can't think of anyone who would have taken it so calmly being nearly dismembered by eighteen stone of the most intimidating Auror since old Mad-Eye."

Mr. Weasley took a step forward, leaning in close to Neville's face as he sniffed, his long nose flaring. "Well, it's not alcohol, but there's something." He crossed his arms. "Now, will you just tell me what you've taken, or should I bring Kingsley back, and we can do it the very undignified way involving taking some of your saliva and testing it for potions whether you like it or not?"

"You wouldn't!"

"If you're messing yourself up on who-knows-what and making decisions that could mean my daughter's life, you had better believe I would," he answered firmly.

Neville laced his own arms across his chest defiantly and took a step back. "Nothing."

There was a moment's pause, then Mr. Weasley actually laughed. "You know, I don't know what your grandmother lets you get away with, but I've raised seven children, and I think just about all of them were better liars than you...goodness, I think Fred and George had you beat by the time they were old enough to get their own names straight."

Aware that the matter had been lost, Neville sighed and reached into the pocket of his robes, withdrawing the little bottle and holding it out on the palm of his hand. "Just this," he said, "and that's the truth."

Taking it, Mr. Weasley studied the label for a long time, his expression unreadable. Finally, he nodded, then drew out a chair from the kitchen table and motioned towards it. "Take a seat, and I'll get you something...you said you were hungry?"

"Yes...." he sat, looking up at the older wizard in confusion. "You're not angry?"

"It's my experience," came the reply, as Mr. Weasley pulled out a loaf of bread and began to cut thick slices onto a small plate, "that when someone tries to hide something, they already know it's wrong, so lecturing you on that would really just be a waste of breath, and I'm not your father, so I can't punish you for what you did even if I wanted to. But I don't want to, not really." He turned back, putting the bread and a pot of marmalade on the table before going back to the pantry. "If you took that tonight, I'm assuming you had a pretty good reason, or at least it felt like it."

Neville nodded slowly. "I didn't think I could...I mean, it's just, I know it's my fault what happened to the Creeveys. Colin told me he thought his parents might have been killed, and I let him go back there on his own, just because I didn't want to deal with it. I wanted to go with Ernie and Susan, then back to Gran's for Christmas and just pretend the war wasn't happening for a while, but they both almost died because of that."

"It must be hard on you, feeling like you have so much responsibility for so many people." Mr. Weasley sat down, pushing a steaming bowl of stew and a spoon across the table to him. "Ginny has told me what you've done with the D.A, and it sounds like an astonishing thing you've undertaken. Not just what you've done against Snape and the Carrows to keep everyone's hopes up, but that you've created your own Auror division in that school."

His mouth full of the savory stew, Neville shrugged, then swallowed. "Harry started it. I've just kept it up, and Ginny's helped a lot. I couldn't have done it without her and Luna and Ernie."

"According to what I've been told, Harry started a little substitute class to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts while Umbridge was mangling the subject. You've trained soldiers, and you're preparing to lead them in battle at the end of the year. The last time we heard about the D.A., it wasn't because our daughter wanted to make sure she had said her goodbyes if things happened sooner than you had planned." His voice was steady, but there was a deep sadness in the blue eyes.

"Do you think we shouldn't?" Neville asked.

"I think you shouldn't have to." Mr. Weasley sighed deeply, "Unfortunately, when she told us why you had decided to make your stand, Molly and I couldn't find any real way to argue it." He was silent for a while, watching Neville eat, then he stood up and pulled a bottle of firewhisky from the cupboard and poured two small glasses, sliding one across the table as he took the other. "You're taking a man's burdens, I can offer you a man's drink for this discussion. Goodness knows I'm going to need it."

He took a slow sip of the amber liquid, then began again, his tone solemn. "I'm not going to pretend I know what you're going through, that's the kind of patronizing nonsense that makes teenagers perform *Silencio* on anything else that comes out of an adult's mouth, because they know perfectly well that no one can really understand anyone else's heart. But I can understand what would make numbing it all out seem like a good idea. The last time You-Know-Who was in power, Molly and I lost nearly all of our friends, not to mention both of her brothers, my father, and both of my brothers.

"This time, we have even more to lose...beyond each other, of course. Bill has already been mutilated, and he's still in the Order. Charlie's still working with dragons in Romania, which is dangerous enough, but he's also using the fact that he speaks a half-dozen languages to spy for us out there and let us know if Durmstrang is coming in on their side. Percy hasn't spoken to us in almost two years, but he's working in the Ministry and from a known family of Blood-Traitors. We hear from the twins maybe once a month to tell us they still haven't been caught by the dozen Death Eaters who have been assigned personally to kill them. Ron is somewhere with the biggest walking target in the wizarding world, and Ginny is with you, getting ready to make a do-or-die stand at the end of the year. Molly and I know we're not going to see the summer with all of our children alive, and that's the bald truth of it.

"We know it has to be done, and we've given them all our blessing and our help whenever we can, but every day when the owls come, Molly and I still cry." His blue eyes were more open than anything Neville had ever seen from an adult, and he felt rather humbled.

"How do you handle it?" he asked quietly. "I mean, I've got Gran, and I've got friends I love, and I think I'm really *in* love with Hannah, but it's got to be worse if it's your kids."

There was a low chuckle at this. "I hope you find out some day. Oh, not having your kids in danger, just having them." Mr. Weasley took another sip of the firewhisky. "We handle it because we have someone to share it with. That's the amazing thing about love and pain, and it's something my father taught me. Love just keeps growing the more you divide it, but pain is cut in half each time you share it."

"Yeah," Neville reached for his own glass, bracing himself for the first burn of the spirit as he took a cautious drink, "but you have Mrs. Weasley. Hannah and I aren't that far yet."

"What about your grandmother?"

"Gran?" He paused, considering it, then shook his head. "Gran and I...it's kind of complicated. We love each other a lot, but she's never really been like a parent to me, and I don't think I've ever really been like a kid for her. I used to think it was because I wasn't good enough, but that's not it. It's..." he hesitated, searching for words. "We're like really good friends and teacher and student and almost husband and wife in some ways, because we're all each other has, but we're not really *close* when it comes down to it. There's this distance between us that makes everything *almost*, and I think it's my Dad."

"Your Dad?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I don't think she can look at me without thinking of him, and I think that hurts too much for her to get really close, but I'm still all she has left of him. Kind of like a fireplace...you need it to stay warm, but if you get too near, you're burned." He took another drink, then spread his hands, trying to explain what he had never put into words before.

Thankfully, Mr. Weasley seemed to understand, and he nodded. "And you don't have anyone at school who's close to you the way Ron and Harry are?"

"Not really. I'd say Ernie and Seamus are closest among the guys, but they're my officers, so I can't let them know if I'm panicking about command, and..." he blushed, "...well, it's not the sort of thing you feel right burdening a girl with if she's not your wife, especially if it's memories of awful stuff, and all of them are D.A. too. And I'm the youngest one in my family by about ten years, so I barely know my cousins."

"I see why you took the potion, then. It's way too much to ask anyone to deal with." There was no hint of sarcasm in the words, and Neville raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Harry deals with a lot more."

"Harry has Ron and Hermione, he had Dumbledore, Sirius, and he still has myself and Molly as well. So even if he had twice the burden to begin with, he has a third of what you do after it's split six ways." He spoke as if he were listing them as Harry's own family, and the look of confusion on Neville's face did not escape the shrewd gaze behind the little spectacles.

"You know, when we first started having kids, Molly and I decided to keep going until we ran out of room in our hearts for more. It was a lovely idea, but I don't really recommend it, because we ran out of room in our house and my paycheck a lot faster." He chuckled, and Neville found himself smiling back. "But the funny thing is," Mr. Weasley mused, turning the glass in his hand to watch the whisky coat the sides in thin, golden sheets, "fate's still given us three more – Harry's another son to us, Hermione and Fleur as good as two more daughters – and we're still not out of room." He looked up, meeting Neville's eyes pointedly.

"If you ever feel like things are getting to be too much again, Neville, you can always send a letter. Use one of the Coding Quills, give it to Ginny, she knows how to get them through to us. And if you absolutely feel there is no other way, you are an adult." He pulled the bottle of Percy's medicine from his pocket and set it on the table between them. "But I would beg you to be extraordinarily cautious."

Neville blinked, shocked. "You're letting me have that back?"

"I would rather you feel nothing than be so overwhelmed that you did something truly reckless. However," he raised a finger sternly, "once this dose wears off and you can feel again, I want you to really think about what you did to Colin in there. You hurt that boy badly. Your heart is just as important a command tool as your head...sometimes, I think that Dumbledore needed to remember that when he dealt with Harry a little more often, because there has been a lot of unneeded pain for him, but that's beside the point."

He thought of Colin's heartbroken look, and beneath the comforting blankness, something cold and shameful seemed to slither through the pit of his stomach. Neville looked down at the worn surface of the table, fidgeting with the nearly-empty glass. "I understand. I won't do it unless it's...you know. Unless I'm really losing it."

"I think," Mr. Weasley said quietly, "that might not happen so much if you have options."

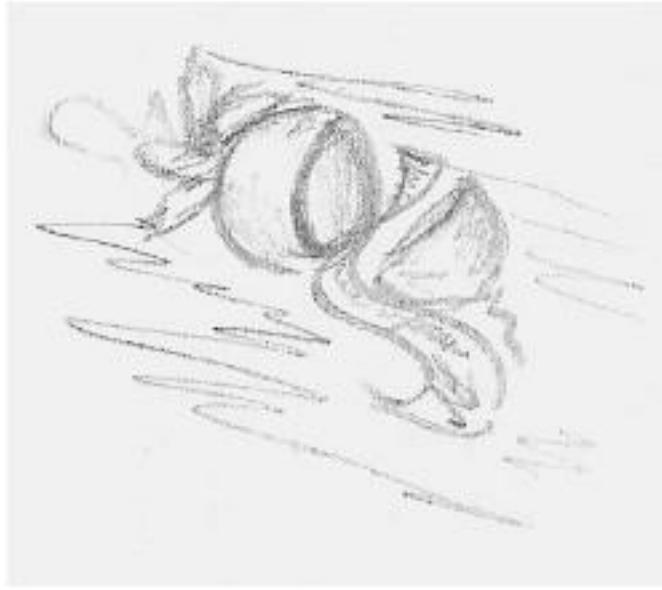
"Yeah." He stood up, leaving the last of the whisky beside his now-empty bowl, but pocketing the bottle of potion as he turned to the door. "Thanks for the food, Mr. Weasley."

A warm smile came in return. "Call me Arthur, please."

"Arthur." The name felt a little odd on his lips, he was not accustomed to using the first name of people so much older, but it also felt somehow far more appropriate than the cool formality. He put a hand on the knob, then turned back with a faint, wry smile. "I hope you won't be offended if I have one more thing I want to eat tonight."

The ginger brows raised curiously. "Do you want some cake?"

"No," Neville sighed, "There's nine people out there I was a real skrewt to, and I think I need to save room for crow."



## Chapter Eleven

### The Room of Hidden Things

To Neville's great relief, the rest of the Christmas holiday passed far less eventfully than the first few days. The Weasleys allowed the Creevey brothers to move into the twins' old room, while Ernie and Susan spent the holiday with her family, and Hannah, to his delight, asked if she could stay at Willow Creek with Neville and his Gran. Permission was given gladly, as the Abbotts were an old and popular wizarding family, and she and Gran spent a great deal of time discussing mutual acquaintances, but there were still blissfully endless hours for the two of them alone.

He showed her the hothouse his grandfather had built and he had restored, and she showed not a moment's hesitation in turning up her sleeves and digging into the rich soil of the pots and seedling beds. With her help, he was able to completely transplant all of the Cringing Chrysanthemums without losing a single one to nerves, and when they finally finished, it was four in the morning, and they were both exhausted and smeared with mud, but they were also both laughing, and she was more beautiful then - with bits of compost in her hair and mulch on her robes - than he had ever seen her before. What they shared in the early hours of that morning, Neville knew, would be something that would stay with him through whatever darkness lay ahead.

When he finally kissed her good-bye at King's Cross Station before they crossed onto Platform 9 ¾, he found that he was looking forward to returning to Hogwarts and his friends in the D.A. The few weeks break had made the whole thing seem far less intimidating, and he had discovered himself actually planning out missions and meetings in his head when his mind was not occupied with thoughts of Hannah's sweet smile and the feel of her soft lips on his.

The magical platform was strangely solemn, the usual excited chaos subdued into hushed good-byes under the silent gaze of the Death Eaters. Students were staring at the cars in pale-faced apprehension as they were shepherded into four straight lines, but here and there he caught the

eye of D.A. members among the crowd, and the defiant smiles that passed between them were like sparks of light in the gathering gloom.

Ahead of him in the Gryffindor queue, Ginny's bright red hair was impossible to miss as she stood behind Colin, whose right hand still hung unnaturally stiffly at his side, his left laced protectively through his younger brother's. Dennis seemed oddly detached from it all, staring blankly into space, and Neville frowned, making a mental note to take a moment after they had reached the school to talk privately with the young wizard.

Then a murmur rippled through the crowd, hushed and fearful, and he turned, feeling every pair of eyes following his to where a tall, slender figure in lavish robes of ebony silk had strode onto the platform, flanked by a veritable entourage of four shiningly masked Death Eaters. The hooded head turned as he passed, and Neville gasped as he recognized the pale, pointed features of Draco Malfoy. Gray eyes locked with brown for a split second, and the flare of hate there took his breath away.

With regal disdain, Draco glided the length of the train, passing coolly by his fellow Slytherins to watch as his trunk was loaded for him onto the Staff Car. He shook hands with the Carrows with stiff formality, then leaned in, and Neville felt a swift chill run up his spine as he saw the other youth nod directly towards him, and Alecto's pallid face twisted in distaste as she vigorously nodded her reply to whatever he had said to her.

Ginny turned, her brow creased with worry as she gave a tiny nod of her head towards the newcomer. *I know*, he mouthed back silently. *Do you think* – he stopped. Her eyes had widened in alarm, and her vivid hair whipped sharply as she turned quickly to face the front of the queue again. Looking in the direction her eyes had flicked, he froze. Malfoy had peeled away from his escort, and was crossing the platform directly towards him, his thin lips twisted in a familiar sneer.

"Longbottom...." The slow drawl was deeper than he remembered, and he realized that he and Malfoy had not spoken to one another since Umbridge's office almost two years previously. They had both grown into young men since, and he drew back his shoulders, meeting the cold eyes without flinching.

"I'm surprised you're willing to talk to me without your bodyguard." Neville's own mouth quirked into a mocking smile. "Where've you been? Hiding out with Mummy and Daddy because you let murderers into the school?"

"Where I've been is none of your business. I'm doing more important things than writing stupid essays for Binns now." He held out his left arm, pushing back the dark sleeve, and Lavender let out a stifled little scream behind them as she saw the snake and skull branded harshly into the creamy skin. "The Dark Lord wants me to finish the last of my education, however," Malfoy sneered, "so I'm back for the time being."

"What does that have to do with me?" Neville asked, "Or were you just hoping I'd be impressed by that thing?" He nodded his head dismissively towards Malfoy's arm. "Because I have news for you, I'm no longer the kid you liked to show off by tormenting in first year."

Malfoy gave a hollow little laugh. "No, I guess not. The Carrows and Snape have been having a lot of trouble from you. But you might want to reconsider that now." He reached into his pocket, withdrawing a small object, which he dropped into Neville's hand with a triumphant look. "Causing more trouble might be as stupid as trying to teach Trolls how to do ballet."

With another dark sneer, Malfoy was gone in a swirl of black robes, and Neville was left staring into his open hand. It was an earring. A single earring shaped like an orange radish. Yet it was Malfoy's final words, not the token from his kidnapped Lieutenant that made his blood run cold as his hand began to tremble.

He knew about the room.

OOO

"We hex him! I'll do it myself. Catch the little bugger in the corridors between classes and turn him into a Flobberworm!" Seamus slapped his wand loudly into the palm of his hand, his freckled face flushed with rage as he leaned forward over the back of the overstuffed armchair in the Gryffindor common room.

Lavender shook her head with a tight smile. "Seamus, you're failing Transfiguration. I don't think you could turn him into a Flobberworm...or much of anything else."

"I know!" His grin was vicious. "So wouldn't it be a fine bit of a surprise to see what kind of wiggly little mess he turned out as?"

"I'm with him." Ginny waved her hand at the lone earring sitting on the table between them all. "We shut him up about the Room of Requirement, and we make him pay for whatever they've done to Luna."

Neville shook his head. "I'm the last person who would usually be in favor of going easy on Malfoy – I was one of his favorite targets for years – but Luna's exactly why we *can't* afford to lay a wand on him. This is a message. We do anything to him, she's the one to pay for it."

Parvati had picked up the earring, and her dark eyes widened as she turned it over carefully between her fingers. "Look—" She leaned in, tilting it to the firelight as she pointed to an almost invisible line running around the center of the little orange fruit. "Do her earrings usually open?"

"No!" He hopped off the couch eagerly, joining her on his knees next to the low table as he studied the piece of jewelry more closely. "She usually wears real Petrified Dirigible Plums mounted on little hooks. Someone's hollowed that out and put it back together."

Holding her breath, Parvati set it back on the table, then tapped it carefully with her wand. "*Diffendo!*"

With a faint snapping sound, the earring split neatly in two, and a thin strip of parchment uncoiled onto the polished wood. Seamus snatched it up, tipping it to the light, and his mouth dropped open in shock as he read. "It's from Malfoy!"

"What?" Neville grabbed the slip away and stared at it in disbelief. The parchment was thick and expensive, the handwriting delicate and precise in deep emerald ink, but the hand was a boy's, not at all like Luna's casual, looping script.

*N.L. meet me in the Room at midnight. Come alone. D.M.*

He swore loudly, dropping the parchment on the table, where it was immediately descended upon by the others. Ginny was the first to look up, her eyes blazing. "You can't go, Neville! It's a trap!"

"I know it's a trap, I'm not stupid!" He ran his hands through his hair, staring at the little slip as though it might suddenly manifest more information for them. "But I don't see I have much choice. He knows about the room, and whatever he wants from me to keep his mouth shut, I'm going to have to at least hear him out."

"What if it's not a bribe he wants?" Lavender frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. "What if it's *you*? Maybe he thinks he'll win points with You-Know-Who if he can turn in the leader of the D.A., and he doesn't want to have to fight all of us?"

"Well, he'll get more than he's bargaining for fighting just me, if that's what his idea is." Neville was careful to keep his tone almost casual, trying not to let them suspect the cold knot that had formed in the pit of his stomach since he had first read the simple, awful summons. "I've got a few more tricks up my sleeve these days."

"He's got a little more up *his* sleeve too, or did you miss that?" Ginny was still unconvinced, and she stood, planting her hands on her hips as she tossed her hair. "He's a Death Eater now, whether or not Harry was right or wrong about him being one last year."

"Good, then," Neville retorted, "It'll be practice. I'll get to start out with a junior one before we go on to the real thing at the end of the year."

"Seriously, though..." Parvati frowned, "what *will* you do if he tries to pull something like that? Like you said, we can't hurt him, or they'll go after Luna."

He considered it a moment, then took a deep breath. "Well, if he's slipping me notes because he hasn't told Snape and the Carrows yet and he's trying to get something for himself – either a bribe or the 'glory' of nabbing me – then if it all goes bad, they won't know where he is if he never comes out of there." He hesitated, fingering his wand nervously, then continued. "If he *has* told them, and they're waiting for me...well, I guess you guys will have to find somewhere else to meet, unless by some miracle, I can take all four of them. I think my odds on that are somewhere around less than nil, but if I do, or if I even just take a few and the others get away, you might have that fight on your hands tonight rather than this June."

The prospect hung in the air like a physical thing, until finally Lavender spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. "You mean you'd kill him and hide his body in the room?"

"No." Neville sighed. "I don't think I could kill Malfoy, not even if he was trying to turn me in. He's...well, I mean, I hate him, but he's kind of pathetic, you know? All his money and his father and his bragging and...I've just always gotten the feeling that he's trying so hard to be so big when he's really just another dumb kid like the rest of us, and I don't think I could manage the kind of *loathing* that you need for a Killing Curse. But if it's what we needed, the room could make us a jail cell he couldn't get out of."

"I just wish Mad-Eye were here," Seamus muttered, "he made such a darlin' ferret, and we could buy him a nice little cage with some wee tunnels to run about in and everythin'. Solve all our problems, and give us a pet besides...though I fancy he'd bite."

Parvati giggled. "Maybe when Hermione comes back, she could knit him some fetching little sweaters? With the puff balls she used to put on those silly S.P.E.W. hats...."

The delightful image of Draco Malfoy as a ferret clad in Hermione Granger's knitted atrocities was interrupted as the portrait hole opened. Colin climbed through first – a bit awkwardly with one hand still useless – and his brother followed a moment later. Dennis made his way silently to the window seat, where he began staring over the grounds expressionlessly, but Colin was shaking with anger, his cheeks burning scarlet as he stalked over to the little group by the fireplace.

His wand whipped out, and he summoned a footstool over to himself so harshly that the legs scraped over the floor with a hideous noise that made the girls clap their hands over their ears as Neville and Seamus winced. Not seeming to care, Colin flopped down on the seat, jabbing the end of the wand ferociously against the back of his unfeeling hand as he began to give them all quite the lesson in Muggle swearing.

Parvati was the first to recover enough to speak. "*Colin...?*"

"Went to Hospital Wing to get my hand looked at." The boy's voice was an almost unrecognizable growl. "Had to leave Dennis out in the hall because you can't go in any more unless you're being seen."

Lavender looked at him with cautious sympathy, "She can't help, then?"

"Nah, she gave me some potion, said to take it twice a day. I'll have use of it again in a few weeks, even though I might never get feeling back." He shrugged dismissively, still stabbing his wand against the stiff, pale flesh, then he looked up, and the usually gentle blue eyes were like twin chips of ice. "But when I came out, someone had attacked Dennis...blacked his eye real good. Madam Pomfrey fixed it right up, but *he won't bloody say WHO!*"

Ginny looked down at her feet, her voice quiet. "I was hoping he'd start talking once we were back at school."

"What's this?" Neville frowned.

"He hasn't said an effing word since we left the hotel," Colin explained caustically. "I've got my guesses – starts with Crabbe, ends with Goyle – but I want to *know* who I'm going to hex into the middle of next week for going after my baby brother!"

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence, then Seamus stood, shrugging off his outer robe and draping it over the back of the couch as he crossed the common room and crouched by the window seat. "Hey, lad...." He spoke gently, but Dennis made no sign of having heard anything. "We'd be real grateful if you'd tell us who hit you out there."

The boy did not so much as blink, and Seamus climbed onto the window seat beside him, leaning one long arm against the frosted panes. "Okay, then, no need to be tattlin', if you don't want to. But anythin', really. Say's you please. Go on...you can say Lynch couldn't catch the Snitch if it flew two feet up his arse, tell me to get my freckled, interferin' nose out of your business...you've just got your brother all kinds of worked up there, and it's scarin' the hell out of us, because we're used to him bein' sort of a human Pygmy Puff."

Colin shot a dirty look across the room at this, but Seamus just tossed him a friendly wink, then leaned in close to Dennis with a conspiratorial smile. "Tell you what. You say one word, and I'll make it worth your while. I've smuggled in a bit of the real good stuff – Muggle-made Irish pure – and I'll slip you a tot. Or if you'd rather, I'll work my charms and score you a kiss from that lovely Miss MacDonald you've been castin' eyes at all year. What say you?"

Ginny shook her head. "It's no use, Finnigan. Lee tried for three hours before we left...offered to bribe him with half the shop, practically, not to mention trying to get him to crack a smile with every joke he knew – even the ones that made Mum have palpitations when she heard him telling them to a fourteen year-old."

"Just let him be." The worst of the anger seemed to have faded, and Colin's fair head had sagged forward in resignation. "He'll talk when he's ready, I guess...or not...."

Neville reached out a comforting hand and placed it on the Secret-Keeper's shoulder. "It's not your fault, Colin. Dennis has every reason to be upset, and there's nothing you could have done differently as far as your parents go. I'm just proud and amazed *you're* handling it so well."

"Yeah, well..." he knocked his hand against the table with an eerily wooden clunk, "I guess I just got the whole grief-based thing over with in one really spectacularly dumb-ass choice." There was a bitter chuckle, then Colin's gaze fell on the two halves of the earring and the curled scrap of parchment, and he frowned. "What's that?"

"A love note from Malfoy," Seamus answered, leaving Dennis to his wordless regard of the snow-covered grounds as he returned to the group. "He wants Fearless Leader to meet him alone for a midnight snog in the Room of Requirement."

Colin's eyes widened. "He *knows?*"

"He knows," Neville confirmed darkly.

"Well, you're definitely not...." Colin trailed off as he saw the looks on the faces around him, and the flush faded abruptly from his cheeks. "...oh, no...you are?"

"There's no choice," Ginny said resignedly. "He's got us wandless, and he knows it. Neville has to at least find out what he wants."

The blonde head shook fiercely in growing alarm. "But what if *he's* not alone? What if Snape and the Carrows and half of You-Know-Who's Death Eaters are in there waiting for him?"

"Then the battle is tonight." Neville pulled the Galleon from his pocket along with his watch, consulting the time before he tapped the charmed coin with his wand. "I'm calling an officer's meeting, Lieutenants and Seconds, but we can't use the Room of Requirement, so we're going to have to do this the really dangerous way. The Divination classroom is way away from everything else, but we all take it – everyone knows it's an easy N.E.W.T. – so if one or two of us get caught, there's always an excuse, as long as we don't get caught *in* there together. It's half seven now. Meeting starts at eight, then..." he sighed, feeling once again the weight of their situation settling low over his shoulders. "...then we have about a half hour to plan how the hell we're going to make our stand."

To his surprise, Parvati laughed, and a half-dozen faces turned to her bemusedly. "Well," she shrugged, "I guess if I'm going to die tonight, I won't have to tell Padma I borrowed the new shoes she got for Christmas."

OOO

*I need to meet Draco Malfoy. I need to meet Draco Malfoy. I need to meet Draco Malfoy.* Wrapped tightly in the tattered folds of Susan's old Invisibility Cloak, Neville's heart was tight in his throat as he paced back and forth in front of the hidden door in the seventh-floor corridor.

It was midnight any minute now, and Snape had stalked by only moments before, coming within inches of where he had pressed himself into the shadow of a large vase. The Cloak had belonged to Susan's Aunt – a much smaller person – and he had been certain the Headmaster would see his feet protruding from beneath it, or shine the light of his wand too directly for the threadbare Demiguise to conceal, but he had continued on, and now all that remained was the unknown danger facing him in the room that had been their safe haven all year.

On the third pass, the door appeared, and Neville took a deep breath as he took hold of the handle and pulled, slipping it open just enough to squeeze through before shutting it tightly behind him again. *Don't let anyone else through until I leave*, he begged silently, then turned to face the room as he unclasped the cloak and bundled it tightly into one pocket.

Neville's mouth dropped open in shock. The Room of Requirement was like nothing he had ever seen it transform into before. The ceiling had raised so high that it vanished into darkness, and ahead of him, long corridors stretched on to more nothingness. On all sides, towering buildings surrounded him, but as his eyes adjusted to the dim, flickering glow of the torches mounted on iron brackets at intervals along the endless alleyways, he saw that the buildings were actually teetering heaps of junk. It was like a city made entirely of detritus – broken furniture,

out-of-date broomsticks, rusted armor, burnt cauldrons, discarded books, and every other type of wizarding rubbish he could possibly imagine. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason to the battered collection, and he was so busy staring that he did not even notice a figure step out of the shadows of one of the nearby alleys.

"Impressive, isn't it?" His head snapped around at the sound of Malfoy's sneering voice, and he reached for his wand, leveling it at the young Death Eater, who only smiled. "Put it away, Longbottom. I'm here to talk, not duel."

Slowly, Neville lowered the wand, though his fingers did not loosen in the slightest around the smoothly polished handle. "This is where you were all last year?"

"Down that way, actually." He nodded his sleek, white-blonde head towards the alley where he had emerged. "Room of Hidden Things. Room of Requirement. Room where nasty little Blood-Traitors like to sneak around. Whatever you want to call it, it's useful." Malfoy reached into his pocket, producing a shining yellow Galleon. "Much like these." Malfoy flipped the coin into the air, catching it effortlessly on the back of his hand. "Clever...I'm guessing they were Granger's idea. Real pity the Mudblood was the only one you had with half a brain."

The superior smile took on a cruel edge. "Aunt Bella told me what happened to your parents, you know. It's always confused me, though...I thought you couldn't inherit brain damage unless it happened *before* you were born?"

Feeling his face heat scarlet, Neville let out a sound of inarticulate rage, raising his wand again to fire a jinx into the pale, smirking face, but Malfoy held out his arm as if to block the spell, poising his own slender wand above the Dark Mark branded there. "I wouldn't...."

"What?" Neville snapped, "You think that scares me?"

"It should." Malfoy's tone was cool. "You don't want me to touch it."

"Why? Does it change colors? Sing *I'm A Little Death Eater?*" His wand had not lowered a fraction from where he was aiming it directly between the gray eyes.

"No, but it summons the Dark Lord, and I imagine he'd love to have proof of who was causing all the trouble at his school." There was a matter-of-fact confidence in his voice that indicated beyond question that the statement was no hollow threat, and slowly, reluctantly, Neville lowered the wand, his teeth still clenched in anger.

"Cut the games, Malfoy. Why did you want me to come here?" Neville demanded.

"I want to make a deal." Malfoy flicked his wand, bringing an armchair forward from the edge of one of the heaps. A large, charred hole had been blasted into the upholstery of the back, but he assumed the damaged seat like a throne, spreading his robes around him. "I keep my mouth shut about where you're meeting and how you're communicating, and I get a little bit of something in return."

Now it was Neville's turn to sneer. "I didn't think I'd ever hear of you being hard-up for gold, Malfoy."

"Not gold. I want protection, and I want Potter."

Neville's brow creased in genuine confusion. "You think we're hiding Harry?"

"No, you imbecile, I know you're not hiding Harry. He was seen at that idiot Lovegood's house just after Christmas by two of ours." It took all Neville's willpower not to show any sign of the delight that surged through him at Malfoy's words. Ginny had told them all that the Lovegood's home had been destroyed by an explosion, but everyone had for once believed the official story, which was that Xenophilius had done it himself in an ill-advised attempt to assassinate two Death Eaters who had come to refuse his latest demand for Luna's return. To find out that it had actually been Harry's doing was at once confusing and wonderful. He was alive! Alive and still fighting!

Carefully, he managed to keep his voice neutral, even a bit disdainful. "So what do you mean you want Potter...and why would one of You-Know-Who's high and mighty Death Eaters need protection?"

A faint uneasiness came over Malfoy's pointed features. "The Dark Lord has become obsessed with Potter and his wand. He's seeing traitors everywhere. Even in his most faithful."

"Is that your nice way of saying he's had your family locked up in that fancy house of yours? Because we already knew your Daddy was out of favor...something to do with six kids in the Department of Mysteries if I remember right..." He tilted his head as if trying to recall some insignificant detail, and was rewarded with a flush of pink across the pale, high cheekbones.

"I want your word, Longbottom, that whatever you're planning, you people will leave me and my parents alone, and if it becomes necessary, I'm going to be using this place as *my* hideout, and I expect you to secure it." He spoke the words with as much commanding arrogance as he could muster, but Neville only looked at him incredulously.

"You expect to use us as your own personal mercenaries?"

"And I will be told the moment any of you hear anything about Potter...especially if he tries to contact his little Blood-Traitor girlfriend." Malfoy drawled acidly.

Neville looked at him for a long moment, then folded his arms. "No."

"*No?*" The gray eyes blinked in confusion, then he raised the Galleon again. "I don't think you understand...."

"Oh, I understand perfectly." Neville's voice was completely calm. "The answer is no. Absolutely not. You and your family brewed your own potion, you can drink it. And if you think I'm going to even consider turning in Harry, you had better think again."

The flush deepened, and Malfoy pushed up his sleeve again to expose the Mark as he stood.  
"You don't dare...."

"I dare. Go ahead, touch it. I've got a lot I'd like to say to You-Know-Who, when it comes to it. But first..." Neville paused, fishing a piece of parchment out of the pocket of his robes almost as an afterthought and holding it out. "Colin wanted me to give you this. He seems to be under the delusion you have some kind of conscience."

With a curious frown, Malfoy took the parchment, but as he read it, the sneer returned to his lips, and he repeated the words aloud in a high, mocking voice. *"Please don't turn in Neville. My brother and I lost our parents to the Death Eaters already, and I don't want to lose my friends too if you tell the Carrows that the D.A. is meeting in the Room of Requirement. I know you don't like us, but Ginny says that according to Harry, you can show mercy sometimes. Sincerely: Colin Creevey, D.A."* He wadded the parchment into a ball and threw it to the floor, jabbing at it with his wand. "*Incendio!*"

It burst into flame, and he gave Neville a look of disgust. "If you think that some weepy little note from that stupid Mudblood brat is going to...why are you smiling?"

Neville's grin widened triumphantly. "Because that little Mudblood brat happens to be the Secret-Keeper for the D.A...and he just brought you in under the Fidelius Charm when you read that. Just try to touch your little snake-thing now. I don't have to meet your terms, Malfoy, because not only can you not betray us, you couldn't turn in Harry Potter now if he showed up wandless in the middle of the Slytherin common room, because as far as we're concerned, he's still Commander-in-Chief."

His eyes burning with livid rage, Malfoy jabbed at the Dark Mark, first with his hand, then his wand, but nothing happened, and the sickening revelation of the truth in Neville's words was etched across his face as he looked up again. For a moment, his gaze flickered to the little pile of ash that was all that remained of Colin's letter, then a nasty smile quirked his lips. "A Fidelius Charm only holds as long as the Secret-Keeper does...you should never have told me who it was."

Neville took a slow step forward, flexing his fists as he leaned towards Malfoy. He was only an inch or two taller, but he was substantially broader than the other young wizard, and he was pleased to see the intimidated look Malfoy was unable to entirely hide. "If either one of the Creeveys so much as suffers a hangnail, I am going to hold you personally responsible," he said slowly, "and you aren't just going to have to answer to me for it, but to the rest of Gryffindor, the entire D.A., and the Order of the Phoenix. So unless you think you've got a big enough wand that you want to cross it with Kingsley Shacklebolt, I recommend that you don't just leave them alone, but tell your out of control thug squad to do the same."

A stifled little squeak emerged from the back of Malfoy's throat, and Neville smiled sweetly. "So, I think that settles that. Thanks for the chat, Malfoy. I'm certainly going to sleep a lot better now that we've sorted things out. Oh, and one more thing...this is from Finnigan."

In a lightning motion, he reached out, grabbing the reddened face between both hands and planting a firm, deep kiss on the shocked, open mouth. Malfoy froze, his eyes flying wide in

complete incomprehension, and Neville released him, allowing him no time to recover himself before Neville's knee came up hard, doubling the Death Eater over with a howl of agony. "And that," he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, "was from Ginny, for letting Fenrir Greyback into the school."

Leaving Malfoy curled in a whimpering ball of black and green robes on the floor, he turned to the wall where the door had been. *Gryffindor common room, please, and don't let him follow me when he can stand up again*, he thought. The door appeared, and he stepped neatly through into the familiar, firelit warmth of his own house.

A dozen students were clustered around the low table by the fire. Broad grins beamed from every face, but Seamus was on the floor, clutching his sides as he gasped for air through tears of laughter. "Holy Queen Mab, Neville!" he choked, "When I...when I told you to give him...a kiss for me...I never thought...I never thought you'd go and *do it!*"

Neville gave a lopsided smile of his own in return. "Yeah, well, I wasn't planning on it, but I thought I smelled something, and I wanted to be sure."

"What could you have smelled over that stupid French cologne of his?" Lavender asked.

"Cognac." Neville licked his lips. "A lot of it. Not the cheap stuff, either, the really pricy kind...it was good. I nearly kissed him again." There were a few chuckles at this, and he took a seat on the couch next to Ginny. "Tells us something important, though. If Malfoy needed the better part of a bottle of courage to come and see me tonight, he's really scared, and that means You-Know-Who is really coming down hard on his own."

"He can't be happy that Harry got away again," Ginny noted, her own brown eyes sparkling with happiness, and, Neville saw, a faint glimmer of unshed tears.

"Yeah!" Seamus had managed to swallow most of the laughter, and he hauled himself up to his knees, his freckled face still ruddy. "We heard that! What do you suppose he was doin' at the Lovegoods', anyway?"

"Looking for Luna, probably," Romilda suggested. "I feel sorry for her Dad." She made a face, "Did you see him on the platform when they took her...poor guy was a mess."

"He most likely would have ended up in Azkaban anyway, though," Parvati pointed out, "even if they hadn't taken Luna...the *Quibbler* was printing a lot of stuff that You-Know-Who didn't want out there even before we had his help with the last batch about Runcorn."

Neville nodded. "At least we don't have to worry about Malfoy any more, though. That was mad brilliant, Colin. So were these –" he reached into the collar of his robes and withdrew a heavy silver medallion on a long chain, setting it next to an exact duplicate that already lay coiled on the table, "- what did you call them again?"

"A wire. It's something Muggle police use...well, not charmed pendants, but same idea." Colin smiled happily, soaking up the praise like a plant brought into the first rays of spring sunshine.

"So..." Ginny leaned forward, "if You-Know-Who is going off on his own people that badly, how can we use that to our advantage? I don't think we're going to get a lot more turncoats after what happened to Renny and his father, and even though we have a way of handling blackmailers if there are more, that's not so much an asset as it is damage control."

"No, but if they're staying with him more from fear than loyalty now, that means their hearts will be in it less when they fight." Parvati bit her lip, turning her wand slowly in her hands as she thought. "Which means we might be able to take more of them."

"I'd like to wipe out the whole bunch!" Ritchie Coote jumped up, swinging his wand like a Beater's bat at an invisible enemy. "Leave You-Know-Who for Harry, but there's what...maybe a hundred Death Eaters? And there's forty of us? I could take three!" He stuck out his chin defiantly, and Neville could not entirely suppress a chuckle.

"Sit down, Rich, they're not here now." He shook his head only half seriously. "They're not going to send everything after us anyway. There *are* only forty of us."

"But there could be more...." Lavender's pretty face had taken on a surprising intensity, and she sat up very straight in the overstuffed armchair, pushing her hair back from her eyes. "What if Ritchie's got something there?"

"Like what?" Ginny asked. "We can't take out three each, that's too much to ask even if everything goes great."

"What if..." Lavender spoke slowly, but with building excitement. "What if we start actively recruiting? Get the D.A. as big as we can...sixty, eighty, a hundred of us, even. This latest news about Harry, and Luna being taken should give us something really good to recruit with. People will be excited to hear that there's proof he's still alive, and what they did to us on the train was nightmare stuff, and poor Mr. Lovegood – the anger's really fresh."

Neville frowned cautiously. "I don't know...."

"No, listen!" Her blue eyes were sparkling now, and her hands fluttered eagerly as she outlined her idea. "We get enough of a force to make it something where he *has* to send in everything he's got when we go on the attack, and then, not only will it be even *more* impossible to cover up, but we could conceivably make a big enough dent in *his* numbers that it would really matter. Maybe even knock them down enough for the Order to handle the rest,*especially* when you add in the public outrage over a really massive slaughter of kids...and no matter what happens with Harry, You-Know-Who can't stay in power alone."

Parvati gasped as she realized what her friend was getting at. "Lav, you're talking about *winning!*"

"And if something bad *does* happen to Harry, you can kill You-Know-Who too, right, Neville?" Colin's enthusiastic outburst dropped like a bomb into the middle of the little group, and they all fell silent, staring at their leader expectantly.

Neville felt like everything had suddenly started moving extremely fast, and he shook his head, raising both hands as if trying to ward it all off. "Wait...wait just a second...."

"He can." Ginny nodded firmly. "It's not just a rumor. Dumbledore's portrait told me himself...that Prophecy about Harry was about both of them. You-Know-Who selected Harry, and there's a bunch of other complicated stuff that he said he didn't have time to explain because of that, so he *is* the Chosen One, and it *is* his task...but it is *possible* if Neville had to."

Seamus was looking at his friend as if he had never seen him before, and his voice was hushed. "How would you do it?"

Neville shrugged helplessly. "Avada Kedavra? I have no effing clue, really. It doesn't seem like a Killing Curse would be enough...I mean, if it was that simple, Dumbledore would have done it...or had Harry do it one of the half-dozen times he's faced the bastard. There's got to be more to it."

Ginny's eyes had taken on a distant look as she stared into the fireplace. "The locket. It's got something to do with the Sword and the locket. Luna said it definitely belonged to Slytherin, and that it was last known to have been reported in the *Prophet* as having gone missing when some old witch was accidentally poisoned by her house-elf. It was a big deal, because it had belonged to one of the Founders, and it was gone along with Hufflepuff's cup, which was the only known relic of *hers*."

"Gryffindor's sword, Hufflepuff's cup, Slytherin's locket...the Sorting Hat said all the houses had to be united to defeat our enemy. I always thought it meant that we couldn't be trying to fight each other all the time, or even the way we wound up having Renny in the D.A. and have sort of had to bring Malfoy in too in a way...but what if...." Neville trailed off, not wanting to finish his own thought.

"What if Harry – or you, Neville – uniting four Founder's objects completes some kind of amazingly powerful spell that would be enough to finish off even You-Know-Who?" Ginny finished solemnly.

"One problem with that...there's nothing of Ravenclaw's that still exists." Parvati sighed. "Padma was talking about it when you were going to get the Sword. She's jealous that we have a relic and they don't."

"Then maybe that's a red herring." Colin shrugged, and Neville was not the only one to stare at him bemusedly. He laughed. "It means a distracting detail. Maybe the cup has nothing to do with anything, and it's just what we thought before...the locket being possessed, and the Sword of Gryffindor to kill the Heir of Slytherin."

"Unfortunately," Neville pointed out, "the Sword of Gryffindor is in the Vault of LeStrange in the Bank of Gringotts, and that's a dead end...very literally, if we were idiots enough to try it."

Romilda twisted a lock of her thick, dark hair around her finger, an evil glint in her eyes. "So, if Bellatrix LeStrange and her husband were to die, who would inherit their vault?"

Ginny paused a moment, thinking. "I'm trying to remember the tapestry of the Black family tree...her husband's the last of his line, except his sister's kids...who I guess are Colin and Dennis, actually, even though they weren't listed. And on her side, I think it would be her sisters...one's Draco's mother, and the other's the mother of Tonks, Professor Lupin's wife."

"So you're telling me," Romilda went on, "that if we took out the LeStranges, then either the Creevey boys would own the Sword, or if they're out because she was a Squib, there would be a good chance Mrs. Lupin's mother could sign over her inheritance early, and a member of the Order could walk in there and pick it up for us, easy as you please?"

"Bellatrix is his right hand," Neville said cautiously, "and she's mad. He doesn't use her lightly."

"Then Lavender's got to be right!" Seamus jumped to his feet, slapping his wand against his hand so hard that sparks flew out of the end. "We build up numbers, make this a real one for the history books, *make him* bring everythin' he's got to the field, and make damned sure we take out both LeStranges so that whoever's left standin' – you, Harry, whoever – can use Colin or Tonks to get the Sword and finish off ol' Snake-Face...and then by Merlin, we'll have *done* it!"

Ginny seemed as stunned as Neville felt. "We can win."

Slowly, like warmth seeping back into frozen fingers before the glow of a fireplace, the amazing, impossible, wonderfully plausible hope of it all began to spread a smile over Neville's face. The thought of himself as the one to kill You-Know-Who was still so daunting as to not even bear consideration, but he had complete faith in Harry's ability to do it, and if they were all going to give their lives anyway, how much better to do it not in a grand gesture, but a triumphant mortal blow to their enemies?

But it was not the thought of victory that finally resolved him, that pushed him to his feet as he reached out a hand to shake Seamus' with a nod of agreement. It was another drive, something deeper and older than the war, something that he had nursed quietly in the darkest places of his heart even when he had thought there was nothing else there at all. When he had believed himself to be a Squib, it had survived on the edge of a knife or the rim of a poisoned cup, but now he knew it would come in a blaze of power that his parents had given him and that he would use in their name. "We do it," he said firmly, "on one condition."

"What's that?" Seamus asked.

"Bellatrix is mine."

OOO

The next day, their campaign began. Neville had consulted with Terry about how to modify the Fidelius Charm without endangering their current protection, and although the exact membership, activities, and meeting places remained under the magical confidentiality, the existence of the D.A. itself was now free to disclose. And disclose it they did.

Sally-Ann Perks, a Hufflepuff seventh-year, had a mother who had worked for Fudge's election campaign for Minister of Magic, and she helped them to create a veritable snowstorm of propaganda that blanketed the school within two days. Graffiti lined the walls – *Dumbledore's Army: Still Recruiting!* – and everywhere students went, they were besieged with the atrocities that had been committed by You-Know-Who's followers over the past weeks.

Bathroom taps announced the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Creevey as the water flowed, while the showers babbled happily about Harry being sighted. Blackboards bore the unerasable question: *Are you the next to disappear if he has a Quibble with your family?* Suits of armor recited the names of witches and wizards murdered and gone missing: *Abbott, Anderson, Bones, Burbage, Cattermole, Chang, Corner, Creevey, Cresswell, Crouch, Diggory, Dobbs, Dumbledore, Entwhistle....* Rubbish bins implored people not to throw their freedoms away when scraps of parchment or broken quills were tossed in. Library books all opened to the *Quibbler* article about the Runcorns on the first page. Mirrors asked what side the user saw themselves on, and tiny iron shackles were left on pillows, each doll-sized cuff inscribed "Souvenir of the Hogwarts Express."

Snape and the Carrows were in spasms of fury, but the most deranged of all was Filch. Even Mrs. Norris was shying away from him as he patrolled the corridors and burst in on classes, turning out pockets and bags, the still-bloodstained whip coiled tightly in his skeletal hands. In an attempt to blackmail the perpetrators to a halt, Snape had two first-year students Cruciated in the Great Hall during dinner, but their screams sounded from the hinges of doors the next day, and he was rewarded not with fear, but with even more eyes turning to him in bitter defiance as he looked over the tables.

The Headmaster then declared that *all* offenses previously punishable by detention - with particular emphasis on defacement of school property – would now see the offender used as practice for the Cruciatus Curse in Dark Arts, but he had underestimated the sometimes terrible adaptability of the young. In his fervor, he soon made the curse that struck terror into the hearts of adult wizards into a badge of honor among the students. As more and more were subjected to it, word quickly spread that it could not only be endured, but that the pain faded the moment it was lifted, and that even the worst agony was survivable. Within a week, the teenagers bragged about having received it, trading tales about who had cast it on them like chocolate frog cards, and the bruises and bandages were worn not in defeat, but with pride.

Although the exact membership of the D.A. remained a mystery to all but those who were in it, the identities of the ringleaders had circulated through the rumor mill to the point of common knowledge. Neville could scarcely turn around without someone trying to catch his eye, nodding their head at the graffiti, brushing against him to pass a note that said simply "I'm in." Ginny laughingly reported that a Ravenclaw seventh-year had kissed her outside the girl's bathroom, only to destroy her sense of flattery by slipping her an enlistment note in his mouth, and Susan had two fall out of her hair when she undid her braid at night. The greatest challenge proved not to be persuading new recruits, but getting Colin to meet with half the school in ones and twos, inaugurating their growing ranks.

By popular demand, a junior division – the D.C. or *Dumbledore's Cadets* - had to be formed, accommodating those who had been refused at the ironclad fourth-year age minimum but were

determined to find a way to rebel. Fourth-year Caroline Johnson, Angelina's sister, became their leader, teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts from textbooks the older students had kept before the subject was changed. Edmund Vance, meanwhile - a third-year who's Aunt was in the Order - took on the role of their Secret-Keeper with the utmost resolve.

The D.C. was strictly forbidden from engaging in any active attacks or participating in combat, but the excitement of learning fourth and fifth-year DADA spells was more than enough, and the officers of the D.A. proper had to admit that it was a relief to know that their most vulnerable classmates would at least be better able to protect themselves from crossfire. The last traces of doubt about forming the secondary chapter faded to nothing when Neville saw a tiny first-year girl produce a confident, glimmering *Protego* Charm that bounced Filch's intended whip-strike for 'looking cheeky' back into his face as though it had struck a stone wall.

With all of this extra activity and the scramble to determine the exact breadth of their newly-swelled ranks, the first fully proper and official meeting of the D.A. did not actually take place until Monday, the 13th of January, almost two weeks into the new term. As the familiar heavy door appeared over the portrait hole in the Gryffindor common room, Neville found himself hesitating, his collar feeling suddenly tight around his throat with a sense of stage fright that he hadn't experienced in months. They would *all* be in there, he knew, veterans of the original D.A., comrades from the past term, and new recruits alike, and he had a feeling that the little stolen meetings with Colin had probably added up.

He allowed his fellow Gryffindors to go through first, staring out the window fixedly at the leafless branches of the Whomping Willow as they pummeled one of Hagrid's unfortunately trespassing escaped skrewts into a blotchy stain on the snow. Finally, however, the last of the D.A. had entered the Room of Requirement, and he felt someone pluck at his sleeve. Turning, he saw it was Ginny, and she gave him an understanding smile as she took in the pale face and wide eyes he had seen reflected in the window pane. "It's okay," she said, "they're not even going to notice you."

Neville raised a deeply skeptical eyebrow. "Ginny, I know I'm no Harry Potter, but...."

Her smile widened, and a mischievous sparkle appeared in the brown eyes. "Trust me, Neville. No one's paying attention to the D.A....but you're definitely going to want to see what's in there."

She was right. Neville had entirely forgotten the request he had made of Dobby before Christmas break, but it was clear the little elf had not.

The Room of Requirement was indeed packed with people, but it had also been transformed into a giant ballroom, decorated everywhere with yellow and blue tartan and white crepe, enormous silver wedding bells hanging in a cluster from the chandelier at the center. A vast banner hung at one end proclaiming "Congratulations Ernie and Susan" and twenty tables surrounded the shining dance floor, the largest of them crowned with a cake easily as tall as Neville himself that was incongruously topped with small sugar figures of the bride and groom

shooting hexes at a cringing black-robed heap that bore an uncanny resemblance to their Headmaster.

Dobby himself was standing proudly in the middle of the room, a wooly tam perched between the bat-like ears, and at least a dozen yards of vibrant plaid cloth enrobing his tiny body and trailing the ground behind him. At Neville's appearance, he raised his arms. With a sudden *crack*, a pair of bagpipes appeared there, and he began to blow into them with an enthusiasm that was only matched by his profound lack of skill. The noise was appalling – a sound like a Kneazle being fed backwards through a laundry mangle – and Neville could not help clapping his hands over his ears as it wailed with magical amplification through the room.

Seamus had appeared at his side, and although he likewise had his hands pressed against his ears, there was a wide grin on his face as he leaned in a few inches away from the side of his friend's head and yelled, "AMAZING, ISN'T IT?"

"THE MUSIC?" he shouted back.

"I WAS THINKING THE REST OF IT...LOOKS LIKE A BRIDAL BOUTIQUE THREW UP IN HERE AFTER GORGING ITSELF ON HAGGIS!"

Neville couldn't help laughing, although he was grateful that Dobby did not appear to have been able to hear over his own attack on the poor bagpipes. Looking around the cringing faces, he finally spotted Ernie and Susan at the far end of the room, their faces twin shades of crimson as they stared at the house-elf. Careful not to allow his hands to slip from their protective position over his ears, he made his way around to the two of them, smiling sheepishly. "I didn't know he'd take it this far!"

Ernie frowned. "*WHAT?*"

"I SAID, I DIDN'T KNOW HE'D TAKE IT THIS FAR! I JUST ASKED HIM TO GET YOU A CAKE OR SOMETHING!"

Susan laughed soundlessly, shaking her head in disbelief, then brought her mouth in close enough to be heard. "JUST GET HIM TO STOP THAT RACKET, AND I'LL FORGIVE YOU FOR THE REST!"

Neville nodded, braving deafness as he stepped into the middle of the dance floor and approached the well-meaning piper. Kneeling, he tapped Dobby on the shoulder, and the elf opened his eyes, his cheeks still distended as he blew into the mouthpiece with even greater gusto. Shaking his head, Neville made a slicing motion across his throat, and blissful silence descended immediately, though an odd ringing noise persisted in his ears for several seconds.

"THANK YOU DO—" he caught himself, bringing his voice back down to a normal level as he blushed in momentary embarrassment, "Thanks, Dobby, that's enough...you're...uh..." he hesitated, looking into the huge, earnest eyes, then decided on something that was technically very much the truth "...you play so unbelievably, you're going to make people cry."

Seamus let out a brief snort of laughter, and Neville shot him a dirty look as he put one hand on the elf's shoulder. "This is really incredible. I'm sure Ernie and Susan are going to remember it for the rest of their lives."

Ernie nodded, stepping forward onto the dance floor. "Oh, definitely. So...." He turned slowly, his fair cheeks reddening even further as he took in the full number of eyes staring back at him. "I...well, I fancy the secret's rather a moot point, then."

Holding out one hand, he motioned Susan to join him, and he slipped one arm around her waist, drawing her close to kiss her cheek before he continued. "As you might have guessed by now, Susan and I were married over the Christmas holiday. We're trying to keep it hidden from the Carrows, so I'd beg you all to keep your congratulations and anything else to this room...we're wearing our rings on chains under our shirts, and she's still Miss Bones when we're in public, even if she's been Mrs. Macmillan for almost a month."

A burst of applause broke out, most enthusiastically peppered with whistles and cheers from their fellow Hufflepuffs, and Bagman's voice carried over the din almost as loudly as Dobby's bagpipes had. "Hey, Ernie...we're all invited to the real wedding, right?"

The groom chuckled, drawing himself up in a stiff parody of his own formality. "Survivors shall be cordially invited to attend wizarding services upon the attainment of a state of rigor mortis by You-Know-Who...provided, of course, that the couple in question are also among the living and able to attend."

Laughter swept the crowd, and Dobby began to hop up and down on the tips of his toes, yanking eagerly at Susan's sleeve. When the last of the giggles had faded, she looked down with a smile that was kind, but also a little bit nervous. "Yes, Dobby?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Macmillan must dance! It is tradition! They must dance, and then Dobby will serve cake and champagne and butterbeers for everyone!" Clutching a handful of robes in each spindly hand, he dragged them into the middle of the shining floor and then clapped his hands, oblivious to the looks of trepidation that had spread at the thought of more bagpipes.

To everyone's relief, however, at a snap of the thin fingers, the bagpipes did not make a return appearance. Instead, music began to float from the bells above. The voice was the familiar sweet alto of Artemis Apperworth, and although he hadn't listened to the WWN in months, Neville recognized the tune as one that he had heard Susan humming while they had stood in the endless queues of the Muggle offices. He had never heard the words before, but as Susan and Ernie wrapped their arms around each other and began to dance – stiffly at first, then more gracefully as they seemed to forget their audience entirely – he understood why the song had been on her mind, and why Dobby had chosen it now.

*If I only had today*

*I would hold you in my arms*

*Cast a thousand spells*

*And speak ten thousand charms*

*To just slow down the time*

*And linger in your kiss*

*If I only had today*

*I'd want it to be this*

A soft, warm hand slid into his, and Neville turned, smiling as he saw Hannah's pretty green eyes looking up at him. More couples were joining the Macmillans now, and he said a silent prayer begging Harry's forgiveness for every time he had cursed him over getting fourth-years invited to the Yule Ball as he led her out onto the floor.

She drew in close to him as they danced, laying her head against his chest, and he soon stopped worrying entirely about steps and footwork, just holding her as they swayed in slow, rhythmic circles to the music. Her shoulders had begun to tremble under his hands, but he didn't need to ask why. There was something so bittersweet about all of it.

As much as it was a celebration of love, it was also an acknowledgement that their time was running out, and he suddenly almost wished that he had asked Hannah to marry him as well. He loved her, and did it really matter that he wasn't sure yet if he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her if that time was measured in months? It had oddly never bothered him before that he was planning to die at the age of seventeen, but now every breath, every beat of his heart seemed to be slipping away from him all too quickly, and he would have given anything for a spell that could freeze time, give him another ten, twenty, fifty years with Hannah in his arms and his wand tucked harmlessly in his pocket.

Her hands slid up his shoulders, clasping behind his neck, and their faces drew together almost to a kiss, but they stopped with barely an inch between their lips. Hannah's eyes were open, and he felt like he could see down to the center of her heart through them. "One hundred and sixty-seven days," she whispered.

He nodded. "It feels like it's slipping away so fast. I swear it was yesterday Seamus was mouthing off to Alecto in Muggle Studies."

"I don't want to die, Neville." There were no tears in her eyes, and the words seemed to almost come as a surprise to her as she spoke them.

Neville tightened his hands at her waist, barely even pretending to dance any more as they pressed in as closely together as was possible with the thick layers of robes and uniforms still between them. He could feel her breathing, each precious rise and fall of her chest against his. "Neither do I. But we have to...and I guess, you know, everyone does, sooner or later." The forced courage rang hollow, and she knew it.

A darkly ironic smile played over her full mouth, not quite touching her eyes. "Most people think that not even coming close to your twenties is a bit much for 'sooner.'"

"Yeah, I guess it is." The final inch between them vanished now, and he kissed her, drawing it out long and deeply until he felt the moisture of tears on his cheeks that were not his. He pulled back just enough to lift a hand from her waist, drawing it up along one shining line to catch another as it dropped from her thick lashes. "I'm sorry...."

She shook her head faintly. "It's not you. It's...oh, it's such a stupid witch thing." Hannah flushed, trying to turn away, but he held her firmly.

"What? You can tell me."

"My Mum." Her voice was trembling now, and she didn't look up. "She...I remember, when Cedric died, she said that parents should see their children married, never buried...and I was just...she's not going to see either, and we'd talked about it – me getting married someday, I mean. She wanted me to do it in the garden...and that's where we...and I guess they'll probably put me there too...." The words faded into faint, soundless sobs, and he stroked her hair gently.

"Oh, Hannah...."

*Baby, is it Amortentia?*

*Or is it only you?*

*You're the one that I desire,*

*You put the fire in my Floo!*

*Like the flick of a wand my heart was gone*

*And the rest just happened naturally!*

*No, you didn't need to cast a spell*

*To work your charms on me!*

The sudden change in the music from Artemis Apperworth to the fast-paced guitar and drums of *Reducto!* caught them both off guard, and Hannah let out a little yelp, then laughed nervously at her own reaction. "I didn't even notice the other song was over!"



All around them, the party had begun in earnest, house-elves appearing among the D.A. with trays of food and drinks while the dancing spilled off of the floor in swirls of black robes. Seamus and Ginny were showing off shamelessly, her red hair flying under the lights that had begun to flash and pulse colorfully in time with the beat, and Romilda and Ritchie had climbed up on one of the tables, swinging perilously close to the edge as he twirled her in and out again. Not to be shown up by Gryffindor, Michael and Li Su claimed another table, proving quickly that you could learn quite a lot from books, and Fritz and Rowan took a third, her shoes brushing the crepe streamers as he flipped her into the air as though the sturdy young witch weighed nothing at all.

Neville unwrapped himself from Hannah but kept her hand in his, leading her through the revelers towards the small section of wall that had not been hidden under copious decorations. "Come on," he urged, "no one's going to miss us in all this." He paused only long enough to catch Ernie's eye, tipping his head towards Hannah and the exit, and after a moment's confusion, his friend cast him a cheery wink and nod before turning back to the party.

Trying to focus past the clamor of the music and the laughter behind him, Neville concentrated as he approached the blank stone. *Let us out into somewhere safe where we can be alone...and give us a way back when we're ready.* The door appeared after a second's pause, and as he opened it, Hannah gasped.

They were outside, on the Astronomy Tower. Above them, the clear winter's night sky stretched a perfect, velvety black, studded with gem-like stars and a moon just far enough from full that it cast a bright, silvery light without bringing any worrisome howls from the forest below. The wind plucked at their robes lightly, but despite the delicate snowflakes swirling in patterns through the air, neither shivered. The same charm that kept the fragile lenses of the telescopes mounted at intervals along the stone parapet from cracking or icing over also cast a bubble of warmth over the tower's open platform, and Neville smiled as the door vanished behind them.

"Well," he said, "Snape and the Carrows sure wouldn't look for us up here. There are two locked doors between us and the castle."

"It's beautiful up here...so peaceful." Hannah stepped away from him, gliding almost dreamily to the edge and propping her elbows against the wall as she stared down across the snowy grounds and the forest beyond. When she looked back, there was an odd little smile on her face. "And yet there's a part of me that's saying this would be a great vantage point, and wondering if I could aim well enough to hit a moving target that far below." She sighed. "It just won't go away."

"I know what you mean." He joined her at the wall, almost laughing bitterly as he noticed that his own mind was likewise split between the beauty of the view and a cold assessment of defensive positions and tactical weaknesses. "I keep hoping every morning I'm going to wake up and the *Prophet* will say that Harry's done it...that You-Know-Who's finally been defeated and we can all just go back to our lives. I'd give a lot if the worst thing I had to worry about this year was my N.E.W.T. levels."

"I'm barely bothering," she shrugged. "It's not as if we're going to be graded fairly on half the classes anyway, and I don't really care if my headstone says 'she got three Outstanding'!"  
Hannah paused a moment, then turned around, facing the castle again as she slipped down the wall to sit on the warm stone floor. "Do you think if Harry does set it all right, they'll let us re-take the year?"

"Probably. Look how many people have missed entirely, and how mangled the classes have been. It's worse than what Umbridge did to our O.W.L. curriculum. But I doubt it's going to happen that way. The Sword's in the vault. We're going to have to make our stand before Harry can make his." Neville joined her on the floor, and as he wrapped an arm around her, she cuddled against him to lay her head on his shoulder.

"Whatever the N.E.W.T. test is for Dark Arts, I'm not doing it. I'm skiving out that day, I don't care. So far I've managed not to get tapped to Cruciate anyone, but I'm not going to do that, either. Honestly, they've been avoiding most of my house and sticking with Ravenclaws and Slytherins to do it. I think they know Gryffindor and Hufflepuff couldn't hit their own with much more than a toothache if they tried...but it's the principle of the thing."

Neville nodded. "I won't do it either. Poor Anthony had to the other day...he was a mess after. They've got that streak of detachment that makes it *possible*, but it's not enough to spare their conscience."

"Do you really think we'll be able to do the Killing Curse? I mean *really*, between you and me, not as leader of the D.A." Her voice was quiet, nervous, and if her head had not been only inches from his, he would not have heard her at all.

He was silent for a long time, allowing himself to really consider it before he answered. "Yes." He took a deep breath, feeling a surprising twinge of shame, as though he had already become a killer with the single word. "At least, for some of them. I could definitely do it to Bellatrix. The others...if they were masked, or if I knew they had done something really sick like her, maybe."

But I could hit them all with a pretty solid Cruciatus after what's been happening here, and I've learned a lot of other jinxes and hexes that could certainly ruin their day."

"Sometimes I envy you knowing who it was, Neville." She snuggled in closer now, almost climbing onto his lap, and he rested his cheek against the top of her soft, golden head. "I think that's why it still keeps surprising me – the pain, I mean. It wasn't like you, or like Mike knowing it was Dolohov and that his father fought well and everything. Professor Sprout just took me aside and gave me that letter from the Ministry saying she'd been found dead and they suspected the Killing Curse." Hannah twisted to look up at him, and there was a bitter flare in her green eyes that appeared almost offended. "They didn't even bother to put the Dark Mark up! It had been three days before she was found out in the orchard, and all I got to see was a sealed casket that everyone said had my mother in it. There's no...."

She trailed off, but Neville nodded in so much more understanding than she knew. "Closure. It can never really heal, because it's never really over when it's just an idea." Biting his lip, he forced himself to meet her eyes unflinchingly. "Sometimes, I hope my parents will just die...that I can just bury them and move on. You saw what they were like at Christmas."

"You were testing me, weren't you?" Hannah smiled faintly, raising a hand to draw her finger along the line of his jaw. "You wanted to see what I'd do if I knew it wasn't something grand and tragic and noble, but that they were just *mental*, and that it's *sad* and pathetic and a little sick to see two grown people drooling on themselves and not knowing their own names for more than a minute and crying when there's no more pudding."

No one had ever been so blunt about it before – even his Gran referred to it as 'their condition' – but there was nothing insulting in her tone, and he wasn't quite sure how he felt to hear someone neither glossing it over nor trying to hurt him with it. He blushed, unsure how to answer, but now she had climbed onto his lap entirely, and both arms were around his neck as she lay her forehead against his. "Maybe you were testing me, but I was testing you, too. That's why I asked if I could go with you in the first place. And do you know what I saw?"

"What?" He had closed his eyes, unable to take the intensity of her look, but he could hear the smile in her voice.

"I saw someone who could have milked the image of two wounded warriors for all the Gryffindor glory in the wizarding world, but who was endlessly patient, who took the same sweet wrapper six times from his mother, who held his father for almost an hour to talk him down after the changes in you scared him, who loved people who couldn't love him back because he knew they would if they could, and that they once had enough to become that for him. I saw someone with six months to live who promised to come back again for Easter. That's my kind of hero, Neville. And you were that person long before the D.A."

Neville opened his eyes now, seeing to his amazement that she had meant every word of it. He blinked, astonished, and she giggled, tapping him teasingly on the nose. "That's what you get dating outside your own house, Longbottom. Surprises."

With a laugh of his own, he surged to his knees under her, and she let out a little scream as he flipped her over, pinning her firmly to the stone floor beneath him, her arms over her head. He straddled her knees, and she wiggled to get away, but they were both laughing, and a butterfly could have landed between his grip and her skin without fear of being crushed. He raised an eyebrow archly. "Surprises, hmm? Do you think that only goes one way?"

Neville leaned down, trailing kisses down her cheek, over her mouth, and down the line of her throat. "Because what I saw was someone who held perfectly still without flinching until the orderlies could get my father away when he tried to choke you during his tantrum. I saw someone who let my mother play with her hair, even when she pulled. And I know that you, Miss Abbott, were the ringleader of that attempt to get the two-way mirrors into the Prefect's bathroom during the year of Cedric madness, because I have friends in Hufflepuff other than you."

The bright flush that had already begun on her rosy cheeks deepened dramatically, and she squirmed in embarrassment. "Why didn't you tell me you knew?"

"Because it was cheeky, and I liked it, and I didn't have the guts to say that, because I was still trying to be good all the time because I knew I could never be like Harry."

"I'm glad you're not like Harry. He never had much of a sense of humor. Even when he was having fun, like on the Quidditch Pitch, he always seemed to take everything so deathly seriously." She made a face. "A lot of the girls liked that, thought it was all intense, but I don't think Ginny's going to ever have him make her stop crying by putting a dead Snargaluff on his head to impersonate Snape."

Now it was Neville's turn to cringe. "I didn't know your mother had died, Hannah! I thought Sprout had wanted to talk to you about puncturing those unripe pods."

"No." Hannah turned her head, kissing the thin flesh on the inside of his wrist where his hands gripped hers. "I love that you did that. And I love that you could laugh when Ginny blew up the clock. And I love what happened between us over the break, and that we were laughing then. And I love that we came up here to talk about dying and wound up like this."

A shiver went through him at the feel of her mouth, and he bit back a tiny moan as he lowered himself as closely over her as he could without settling his weight onto her, his lips brushing hers as he spoke. "We aren't dead yet."

Her hands slipped out of his loose grasp now, wrapping around his shoulders and pulling him down as she whispered through the kiss. "We have one hundred and sixty-seven days."





## Chapter Twelve

### Stricken

Their ranks had swelled to seventy-eight members by the third week in January. Neville was forced to divide the meetings, leaving the Lieutenants – Ginny, Ernie, and Terry, who had taken Luna's place for Ravenclaw – to deal with the majority of the training, while he took the most senior members for smaller meetings.

They had by necessity become more and more of a real army now. A chain of command spread from Lieutnants to their Seconds, and from there to Sergeants, each of whom was responsible their own year within their house. The officer's responsibilities also became more rigorous. From Neville on down, they began to drill themselves on the layout of the castle, memorizing trick steps and secret passages, closets and portraits, hidden doors and moving stairways until they could walk the halls blindfolded. Strengths and weaknesses, fears and grudges all had to be learned, and they began to pay attention in History of Magic for the first time in their academic careers, taking out library books and working by wandlight late into the night to study famous wizarding battles for tactics and strategies. Non-verbal spells were mandatory now, and Anthony Goldstein and Li Su began to give the officers lessons in Occlumency as well.

Two more full battle drills were conducted, the numbers each time coming a little more evenly than the first, and Neville announced that they would soon be forming the line-up for the actual battle in June. Students had a little less than six weeks to prepare for the tests that would be coming immediately after Easter break, and then they would be sorted by spellwork, physical fitness, and versility into teams of ten. The most elite would be dueling Death Eaters in single combat, while others would be fighting in pairs, holding defensive positions, or acting in reserve. Neville took great care to make it clear that these divisions would make no discernment by age or rank, and that Dennis Creevey – who still, to everyone's growing concern, had not spoken – had the same chance of making the upper echelons as he himself did.

Then, only a few days before the end of the month, calamity struck. It was an enemy neither the D.A. nor the Death Eaters had foreseen, and it swept through the school without regard for age, skill, or loyalty. Those who were from large Pureblood families or had gone to wizarding Primary schools were more likely to be spared, but almost all the Half-Bloods - as well as nearly everyone who had been homeschooled or a particularly isolated child - were struck down without mercy. The Hospital Wing was almost instantly filled with the most seriously afflicted, but everywhere people were sweating, gasping bursts of flame, writhing under the unbearable itching of hundreds of livid green pustules.

Dragon Pox.

Neville called an immediate stop to the D.A. meetings in a desperate attempt to slow the spread of the rampaging virus, but it was too late. Of the eight most senior officers, Seamus, Ernie, Parvati, and Michael were already stricken, and it was with a sickening sense of forboding that he woke up himself on the third day of the outbreak to find his bedsheets soaked with sweat and his head pounding, tiny green trails lacing his arms with the unmistakable announcement that he had not been spared.

He moaned, sinking back down into his sodden pillow as he felt nausea begin to clutch at his throat. For a few minutes, he tried to fight it, then he was forced to leap to his feet and make a mad dash for the bathroom, barely making it before he was violently sick into the sink, fire scorching the porcelain black as his stomach heaved. It wasn't fair. Shaking, he leaned his head against the cool glass of the mirror, refusing to give in to the overwhelming urge to tear at his itching skin. It just wasn't fair.

Footsteps sounded unsteadily behind him, and he saw Seamus' reflection approach in the mirror. His friend's face was puffy and distended in huge, lime-colored blisters, and his eyes were bloodshot, his lips reddened and burned as he smiled weakly. "Fearless Leader too, then?"

The answer came in a single foul word and a burst of coughing that smoked the mirror. Seamus sat down on the floor next to him, clamping his hands beneath his legs in an attempt to resist the desire to scratch. "I thought you were Pureblood, mate?"

Neville nodded miserably. "Yeah, six generations. What of it?"

"Well, word's had it Purebloods are immune." He paused, his face twisting up bizarrely for a moment before he sneezed, setting the knee of his pajama bottoms on fire. With a resigned sigh, he shot a jet of water at it from the end of his wand and went on. "Ginny's been takin' care of half of Gryffindor without so much as a puff of smoke or a nasty pimple."

"We're not immune." Neville sank down to the floor beside his friend, wiping his cuff across his sweating forehead. "We're just more likely to have had it as kids. Family like the Weasleys, there's no way she'd have missed it. But I was kept pretty much on my own – they thought I was a Squib for a while – so I never got it at five or six like most. It's worse the older you are." His shirt itched like mad, and he peeled it off, groaning as he saw that the green streaks that foretold the pustules had already appeared across his chest and stomach as well.

"Then haven't I got a blessed ray of sunshine to make your mornin'!"

He shot Seamus as filthy a look as he could manage through the growing headache. "Tell me You-Know-Who has it, please."

Seamus looked positively beatific despite the grotesque effects of the virus. "Nearly as good. Snape."

Neville's eyes widened, and for a moment, he felt better than he had in months. "You're putting me on!"

He held up his wand with a solemn nod. "On my mother's honor. Ginny told me when she brought breakfast and my mornin' dose...we thought you'd gone to shower, then I heard you in here refinishin' the sink."

Jumping to his feet a little too quickly, Neville grabbed the sink again as his head reeled, and he barely managed to avoid throwing up again despite the violent surge that blistered the roof of his mouth painfully. He shook his head, forgetting entirely that he was wearing nothing but sweat-soaked pajama bottoms as he left the bathroom and crossed the tower to the door of the staircase that led to the common room. "I've got to see this."

His hand touched the knob, but he let out a yelp, jerking back again as he was met with a nasty, nettle-like sting as it refused to turn. "It won't – "

"No leavin' the dormitories if you're showin' symptoms, remember?" Seamus smirked at him from the bathroom door as he poked at one of the larger pustules on the back of his hand with the tip of his wand. "I've not been up here for two days because I'm so fond of the ambiance, you know."

"So I'm stuck here with you until it clears up."

Putting one hand dramatically to his heart, Seamus gave him a wounded look. "Now a body would think you weren't overjoyed to be in my company with you sayin' things like that...hey now, don't itch it! Hannah won't want your pretty face all covered in pox scars."

Smiling, Neville gave his friend a rude gesture, then sighed. "So what do you want to do for a week?"

The other wizard shrugged. "Homework? Exploding Snap?"

"I'm for Snap," Neville said after a moments thought. "It'll be even more interesting, because if either of us sneezes, the cards'll catch fire."

Exploding Snap, however, quickly became old, even with the extra interest of the cards going up in flames three times in two hours. They managed to pass a little more time talking about what they wanted to do with their Easter holiday. Neville was going back to his Gran's with Hannah, but Seamus had far more ambitious plans. He was of the opinion that being roommates with

Harry Potter for six years and dropping hints that he was likely to die doing something valiant at the beginning of summer would be worth a lot to most of the pubkeepers in Ireland, and more importantly, to most of the witches.

"I'm goin' to get myself snogged half dead twice over and back to life again," he declared firmly. "If I'm goin' to die, I might as well get somethin' out of it, you know...besides a lot of free drinks."

Neville laughed. "Just be sure you're sober in time to find your way back to King's Cross. I'm not going up there to fetch you out of the back of some godforsaken pub."

"Nah, I wouldn't miss comin' back here for anythin.' It's the most fun I've ever had." He seemed completely sincere, and Neville stared at him in astonishment.

"You think this year's been *fun*? You've been Cruciated three times, and you started it out getting beaten to a bloody pulp by Carrow!"

Seamus nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, but look at it this way...six years I sat back and watched Ron and Harry get all the interestin' stories. Now I'm not just one of the other lads in Potter's year, I'm a fighter, an officer of the D.A., a war hero...and a fairly popular fellow to boot. Lavender thinks I'm all that and a bag of chips, and she's not exactly painful on the eyes. If I *do* survive, think what kinds of things I'll be able to tell the grandkids, and if I don't, what a ride it's been!"

"Seamus Cornelius Patrick Finnigan, you are out of your mind," Neville said, shaking his head in slow incredulity.

"Can't be out of – " he was cut off by a fit of coughing, then extinguished his bed hangings. "Can't be out of what I don't think I was ever truly in."

"True enough." Neville sat back against the side of his bed, massaging his aching temples with the palms of his hand. He felt terribly weak and hollow inside, almost like he had when Parvati had used the Featherlight Charm on him. Something burst wetly under the pressure, and he made a little noise of disgust, then frowned as he felt the heat rising off his own clammy skin. "Why isn't the potion helping me as much as it is you? You're still covered in those things and setting fire to half the dorm, but you don't seem nearly as miserable."

"I don't rightly know, mate." Seamus frowned in genuine concern. "I'm right at the worst of it, too. You're just gettin' goin'. Maybe Fearless Leader just had to get himself a bigger, meaner bug to show us all up?"

"Maybe," Neville chuckled, "or maybe I'm just already kind of worn down from the stress. Still, I swear it's gotten a lot worse since I took the medicine. I think I'll try really resting for a little while, see if that...." He had stood to climb up on the bed, but the crimson sheets seemed to blur and double in front of him, and the solid mattress fell away from his hands down a long, spinning tunnel as his legs abruptly stopped being a part of his body. Everything tilted harshly to one side, and he felt like he was falling, but it didn't bother him at all.

"NEVILLE!" From a long way away, someone was shouting, and then everything stopped moving, and he was lying on something warm and firm, looking up at the ceiling and a pair of bright blue eyes in a green-splotched face. The lips moved, and from the same distance, a voice seemed to echo, "Sweet mother's tears, you're burnin' up!"

He tried to protest that he was fine, that it was just Dragon Pox, nothing more than what they all had, but his lips didn't seem to want to cooperate, and all he heard was an unintelligible moan. Arms that were much stronger than he had expected flexed beneath him, and he felt himself being lifted off the floor and hoisted onto the bed he was almost certain he had been getting into only seconds – or was that hours – ago.

The motion brought another surge of sick into the back of his throat, but as he choked it back, a taste lingered that nudged something in the increasingly disconnected shards of his mind and memory. Burnt feathers. But no, the taste wasn't burnt feathers, but it had something to do with them. It was sharper, more like...*member of the mustard family*. Pepper-Up Potion. The kindly face swimming over him in panicked concern fragmented, distorted, the cheeks falling sallow, the eyes darkening to a soulless black, sandy waves turning to greasy curtains. *Tried to slip a potion to the Potions Master of fourteen years....*

Neville reached out, his fingers stabbing the air uselessly before they finally closed over fabric that was over something warm and solid and let it be Finnigan because he was losing it, he was coming apart, and he had to tell someone before it didn't make sense any more. His enemy had the same illness, and that had given him insight, and the medicine Ginny had innocently brought hadn't been medicine at all. He could smell something burning, his skin was tearing itself apart, and the heat, the heat, the heat alone could drive a person insane.

He could no longer feel his own mouth at all, but he put the last remains of his will behind forming the word, and oh, please, please, somehow, he hoped that Seamus would understand....  
"Snape!"

OOO

*Everything was spinning. The walls and floor were glossy black, blue streaks of candlelight, now green, now red, now blue again flying around him too fast to see. Department of Mysteries. Shelves and shelves of glowing orbs reaching to a ceiling too high to make out, spinning with the candle-streaks, then gone again like the ghosts of the seers. They floated mournfully around him, their voices mingling into a nothing babble of future possibilities, but they didn't fade.*

*They solidified, thickened, and wisps of silver turned to folds of black and gleams of brighter silver. Death Eaters. Surrounding him, surrounding his friends, Ginny and Luna and Harry and Ron and Hermione, but Seamus too, and Ernie and Susan and Terry and Michael and both Creevey brothers, and they were back to back, wands reaching out as the Death Eaters closed in. He could hear their voices, a chanting chorus of demand. Tell us what to do. Tell us what to do. Tell us what to do. Tell us what to do....*

He tried but he couldn't. His head was throbbing, his mouth and nose too painful to speak, and it was broken, and his wand was broken, and there was nothing he could do, no spell he could form. The words wouldn't come, and the voices of his friends became more and more insistant,

rising to a single, unified scream. Not unified. One voice. One shrill, cruel, mocking voice that he knew too well. Iddle baby Longbottom thinks he can pway? Wants to be a big tough sowjur wif all his iddle fwends? Let's pway, iddle sowjur...CRUCIO! CRUCIO! And CRUCIO again and again! I can do this all night!

*Pain seized him, and it wasn't anything Crabbe or Goyle could ever imagine. This was pain at the hands of a master sadist, an artist in the cruellest medium, and his skin was ripping from his flesh, burning, burning, burning along every vein and sinew and he just wanted to die or go mad and he'd do anything but he couldn't, not through the burning.*

*He was on his knees, and the room had steadied to an ebony mirror, no candles at all, but he could still see. The Death Eaters were gone now, there was only silence, but his friends were still there. Not standing anymore. Now they were crumpled in heaps, motionless, and he jumped to his feet, running from one to the other, but as he turned them over, the faces that looked back at him were lifeless, rotting, skin gray and loose, eyes milky as hair crumbled like ash under his hands. He tried to shake them, scream their names, but the words still burned, and his fingers sank deep into the soft decay without rousing them.*

*The floor opened, and they fell away, down along the line of an endless wall to where hands waited for them below, thousands of stone hands that ripped them apart like dolls, and he was cold now. The cold was as unbearable as the heat, and he huddled in on himself, looking away, but Harry was there right behind him, his face still slack with death, his green eyes clouded behind the twisted frames of his glasses, one lens cobwebbed with cracks. Your turn now. I failed, and so will you.*

*The Sword was in his hand now, and Harry thrust it forward, but Neville's fingers slipped from the hilt, and it plunged into his stomach, tearing him apart like the Cruciatus Curse, and Harry was laughing, mocking him, bursting into flames like the Phoenix and soaring away as he called back in Snape's voice. Longbottom, is it? I think I've had the pleasure of meeting your parents....*

*His hands grabbed the blade of the sword, trying to pull it away, to ease the pain, but it sliced into his palms, and as he looked up, pleading for someone to help him, to save him, he was no longer in the black mirrored room, no longer above the pit of hands, but in a hospital ward, long and sterile and falsely homey, and his parents were sitting there, staring blankly at him, his mother clutching a rag doll that looked like Hannah as she rocked back and forth.*

Help me! I'm your son! Help me!

*The blank eyes showed no emotion, and his father shook his head in rhythm to his steady back and forth swaying. No son of mine. We were Aurors. We don't even know you. We don't want you. We should have handed you over...look what you did...you killed all your friends because we let you live....*

*In a desperate motion, he yanked the sword from himself and flung it at the empty, emotionless face, but it passed through harmlessly, and he sank to the cold, frozen tile floor of the ward, feeling himself bleed, feeling himself fall, feeling himself drift away into nothing, nothing at all....*

But he wasn't there. He was in bed, blankets soft against his skin and tucked snugly around him, and he was shaking, but he could hear a voice that seemed to come from outside rather than

within his own head. It was hoarse and exhausted, but the accent was unmistakable, and there was something soothing about the lilting rhythm of it, the sing-song patterns that were so real, so familiar, so safe.

"...and then up the hill she came, and would you believe, I swear on my fair Nana's good name, that she had a Pookah on the end of that rope. Well, we were well clear on what that meant, though she was daft as a dartboard, and they scooted all us wee ones into the house quick as a cauldron roll to boil. Not that stopped us, not a moment, of course, and we were at the windows, lyin' on the floor to catch a peep under the door, and Brian even fancied he was tall enough to try through the owl slot o'er top the door, though he wound up troddin' Rory's fingers and makin' him howl somethin'...." Neville turned his head ever so slightly towards the sound, and the words caught, and when Seamus spoke again, he seemed almost on the edge of tears.  
"Oh, Merlin's mercy...Neville, can you hear me?"

He tried to answer, but his throat was too raw. The pain had followed him out of the dream, but it wasn't the Cruciatus Curse, it was the pain of burns that had seared his mouth and throat, swelling them with soft, liquid blisters that burst in a briny sting as he moved his thickened tongue against the scalded tissues. Neville felt his lips split and something begin to trickle down his chin, then shaking fingers were wiping it away, and something else was falling like raindrops against his skin.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, and Seamus was leaning over him with a look of joy so deep it bordered on agony, tears rolling unashamedly down the freckled cheeks that were still scattered with the dried remains of a few green blisters. "And your eyes are open..." he murmured, "miracles be true. Oh, you're lucky it was me, you should know. Luck of the Irish. That's all it could have been if you're lookin' at me with your eyes clear as spring. Ginny...." He raised his head, bellowing across the room. "GINNY! Wake yourself, you stupid witch, and get over here! Fearless Leader's done scarin' us six times to death!"

The familiar pretty face with its mane of red hair appeared within moments, no trace of sleep lingering in the large brown eyes that shined with relief. "Neville? Are you...can you...." He felt a small hand slip into his. "Squeeze my hand if you can understand what I'm saying, if you know who we are!"

Carefully, prepared for the motion to bring more pain but relieved to find only a slight stiffness to his fingers, he squeezed, and she gave a little scream, yanking her hand away to press it tightly against her mouth. "He's – !"

"Course he is!" Seamus let out a laugh that was almost a sob. "Takes more than boilin' his brains to stop Fearless Leader, now."

Neville tried to speak again, and this time his mouth seemed to take more readily to the demands of his mind, though several more blisters burst painfully. "Wha...where...?"

"Seamus saved your life," Ginny informed him gently. "You had Dragon Pox, Neville. Half the school did."

Carefully, not trusting his body to not surprise him with fresh pain, he nodded. "Yeah."

"But you had it worst, mate. No one else got hit so bad...not even Snape, and he's twice your age." Seamus was pale, his eyes sunken and darkly shadowed, but his grin was stretched so broadly it seemed a wonder his face did not split in two. "You were okay at first, and then you spiked a hell of a fever...set your sheets on fire, tears boilin' comin' out your eyes, and flat delirious. Babblin' about Snape and ol' Bella and Harry and your Mum and Dad...I tried to go for help, but the fool door wouldn't let me out, so I hauled you into the tub...you're bloody heavy, did you know?"

"He froze the bath water, even though you kept melting it...nearly boiling it sometimes. Kept it iced around you while he got word to me. Couldn't take his wand off the water, but he found a way." Ginny shook her head, as if berating herself for not having personally stayed with them.

His head still felt thick, his thoughts slower than he had a feeling they should have been, but there was something wrong with what his friend had said. He had been delerious for a while, that much was certain, but there had been something before it all slipped away...he had known something, and a niggling sensation of urgency told him that it had been important. Neville shook his head, wanting to protest what he wasn't quite sure of yet.

Ginny nodded, misunderstanding the shake of his head for a rebuttal of what she had said. "Really, he did. He sent Moaning Myrtle...don't know how he managed to persuade her, but —"

"I bribed the perverted little shade." Seamus shrugged. "Hollered my head off down the drain, threatened never to let her peep on me in the shower again, and to tell all the other lads she'd been doin' it and see that we all covered the taps before we stripped off for the rest of the year."

"You *what?*" Ginny was clearly shocked, but the young wizard just laughed.

"Oh, I didn't know for certain she was, but we've all suspected that she's been doin' it for years, and what with so many of us havin' gotten into the shape of our lives this year, I guessed. And now I 'spose we *do* know, but I don't mind lettin' her have a look, when it comes to it." He flexed one wiry arm with a look of teasingly exaggerated pride. "Nothin' to be ashamed of, and the poor girl does have to spend eternity in the plumbin'!"

Shooting an exasperated look at Seamus, Ginny turned back to Neville. "Doesn't matter what dead people he's giving an eyeful, really. Point is, he kept your temperature down enough for me to get Madam Pomfrey. She wanted to take you to Hospital Wing, but Snape refused. He insisted that you must have contracted a different strain if it was that bad, and that we couldn't risk exposing the other students, so she had to just keep running between here and there, using Seamus and me to look after you when she couldn't. It was really touch and go for a while...you were having seizures and everything, and she said...she said to keep talking to you, but we wouldn't know if there had been brain damage until you woke up...." Her voice trailed off with a little shudder. "Well, actually, she said *if* you woke up, we'd see."

Seamus' face had managed to resolve itself into an expression of somber concern, but the blue eyes still glittered. "How do you feel about throwin' yourself suicidally at a hundred or so of the worst Dark Wizards You-Know-Who has to offer?"

Neville felt his raw lips bend into a thin smile. "Sounds...good," he managed.

"Hah!" Seamus clapped Ginny on the back so hard the little witch was knocked forward onto the bed, and she retaliated by whirling and trying to punch him, but he dodged lightly out of the way. "Aw, don't do that, love! I was just makin' sure he wasn't any more addled than he had been when we started this mess!"

An attempt at a laugh emerged as a thick, rasping bark, and Neville shook his head again in amazement at how lucky he was to have two such friends. "How...long...?"

"Four days," Ginny replied, leaning over him to brush away the hair that had clung to his forehead. "Four very scary days for the rest of us, if you don't mind me admitting it. We'd never seen anyone run that kind of fever."

More was starting to come back to him now, and he frowned, struggling to sit up, but Seamus put a hand firmly on his chest. "Not yet, mate. Not until Madam Pomfrey's checked you out and you've had a bit to eat at least. She said you might not feel it when the fever first broke, but I don't want you thinkin' you're back in the battle just 'cause you're out of the woods."

"No..." He shook his head more firmly now, reaching up to grab Seamus' wrist in a grip that seemed to shock the other young man with its desperate strength. He had remembered, and he couldn't lose it again. "Snape!"

"Yeah, Snape was a real arse, but we've come to expect that, now. And I don't think he'd have been sheddin' any tears if you *had* cooked yourself."

"Not...myself. Snape...cooked me." The other two exchanged a deeply worried look.

"Neville, maybe you should just rest...I'll get Madam Pomfrey, and we'll make sure that fever's not going to come back..." Ginny said carefully.

"No!" Neville surprised himself with the amount of force he was able to put into his voice. "I recognized it...the taste, I mean...it was in the medicine...Chinese...Chinese Chomping Cabbage, and maybe...maybe something else. It was *Snape*, you've got...you've got to believe me...it's because I tried to drug him...."

"You slip him a Sleeping Draught, so he tries to kill you...that's a little much even for him, Neville. I think you were just falling under the fever and you *thought* you tasted something." Ginny gave him a gentle, yet skeptical smile.

"Seamus, *please* believe me!" He tightened his hand further on his friend's risk, his eyes pleading. "I wasn't crazy yet. I tried to tell you...I had started to throw up when you...when you lifted me...do you remember?"

"He did," Seamus seemed surprised to find himself nodding.

"And I tasted it...Chomping...Chomping Cabbage. Heating properties...make the fever worse." He took a deep breath, hating the uncertainty being passed over his head, knowing he was sane now, and had been sane then, and if they didn't believe him, then Snape might do it again, not to him, but to anyone, and it would be his fault when they were dead, dead with those sick, milky.... Neville stopped, closing his eyes and forcing the panic down, reminding himself that it had been nothing but a fever dream, that his only hope lay in being perfectly strong now.

Gathering all his will, he opened his eyes again and forced his ravaged mouth and throat to obey, his scorched lungs to put power behind the words. "*I KNOW MY BLOODY PLANTS!*"

"All right...Neville, we believe you!" Ginny pried his fingers away from Seamus' arm, her face having faded several shades rather alarmingly at his shout. He could only hope that she was telling the truth, that she wasn't just humoring him, because he had used the last of his strength, and he could feel consciousness ebbing away from him again, teasing him with a black blur at the edge of his vision.

He fought it, reaching out again, and Seamus pushed past Ginny's attempt to wave him back, kneeling at the side of the bed so that his eyes were level with Neville's as he wrapped both his hands around the one that now lay on the sweat-soaked sheets. For all his joking, devil-may-care manner, there was a darker core to him that showed only rarely, but it was those eyes that looked back now; the side of his heritage that was rooted in Celtic warrior-heroes and blood rites of passage, not drinking songs and pots of leprechaun gold. "Swear to me." The words were a whisper as intense as any shout, and he knew that it was an oath Seamus was making, not asking for. "Swear to me you know you were poisoned."

The exhaustion was thicker now, too much to fight, but before it claimed him and his eyes sagged closed again, he squeezed the hand back, and he heard the words escape his lips only seconds before the darkness came. "I swear."

OOO

Snape allowed him only the weekend to recover, and by Monday, February 2nd, Neville was expected to return to classes. Ginny begged him to simply skive off, but he refused. He knew that the Headmaster was looking for an excuse to call him in open defiance, and he was not going to give him that chance, nor the satisfaction of knowing just how close he had come to death.

At the same time, he was not willing to be a fool about it, no matter what some people insisted. His bookbag was charmed to weigh practically nothing, he allowed Seamus to walk with him everywhere in case he were to collapse, and he took the free periods his seventh-year schedule allotted him to rest. It was perhaps even harder on his pride than on his body, but he knew it was ridiculous to feel ashamed of still being weak when every face – friend and enemy alike – showed astonishment at seeing him alive, much less walking, however shakily.

For the most part, he managed things well enough, at least until Muggle Studies. After the classes had been divided into separate houses, both N.E.W.T. years had been combined to make up the smaller numbers, and he tried to avoid Ginny's eyes as he made his way carefully to his seat. She had expressed her disapproval yet again over lunch, and he didn't want her to see how much the climb to the fifth-floor classroom had exhausted him.

Carrow was stunned almost speechless when he walked in, but she soon recovered herself, and it was with a malicious smile halfway through the lecture that she called on him, demanding that he come to the front of the class and demonstrate for them some of the ways that Muggles wasted vast amounts of labor on tasks easily performed by magic. He had moved only the first of the pile of boxes that she conjured before he fell to his knees, clutching the side of her desk as the room spun wildly.

He tried to stand, to continue as though nothing had happened, but when his legs gave way again moments later, he did not even have a chance to try and rise again before Colin and Seamus were at his side, pulling his arms across their shoulders and lifting him to his feet. Carrow was livid as they helped him back to his desk, but Colin turned to her the moment Neville was seated, the gentle face raw with cold anger, and his voice was a man's as he strode forward to meet her nose to nose. "That's how Muggles help a sick friend," he informed her bluntly. "If you have a problem with that, I suggest you count wands and take a long look into the eyes of the people in this room before you decide what you want to do about it."

For nearly a minute, Neville was sure that his young friend was about to be Cruciated within an inch of his life, but then, to his amazement, every single student in the class got to their feet. There was no threat in the movement, there didn't need to be. They simply stood quietly, wands held calmly at their sides, and the bullish Death Eater paused, her own wand only inches from Colin's face. Her beady eyes swept the room, her scowl darkening, then with a sound of frustration that was more animal than human, she turned on her heel and stalked back to her desk, continuing with the lesson as though nothing had happened.

By the time his last class was behind him, Neville could barely walk. Seamus and Ritchie had to half-carry him up the steps to Gryffindor tower and help him through the portrait hole, but he was smiling. They had beaten Snape and the Carrows at their own game, and the attempt to either force him into outright defiance or shame him in front of his troops had backfired into triumph. It had turned out better than he had expected, but he was nonetheless deeply relieved that it was over and he could just go to bed. Within moments of his head touching the pillow, wonderful, peaceful sleep pulled him down into comforting darkness.

The next thing he knew, a frigid blast of icy wind shocked him awake again, and he sat bolt upright, adrenaline roaring past illness as he snatched his wand off the nightstand. The tower window was open, revealing a sky just beginning to shade light with dawn, and a figure shrouded in a heavy, hooded traveling cloak stood in the little drift of snow that had followed him inside, a broomstick in one gloved hand.

Neville knew he was in no condition to duel an intruder alone, but the curtains on the other bed were drawn tight, and his roommate showed no signs of stirring within. He raised his wand to

shoot a spell that would prod Seamus awake, but then the figure dropped its hood. His mouth dropped open in shock at the sight of the familiar sandy head and freckled, windburned cheeks. "Seamus?"

There was no sign of the usual smile, and his voice was grim as he shut the window, then turned back to undo the clasp at his throat. "Didn't mean to wake you."

As the heavy woolen cloak fell away, Neville gasped. Seamus was naked to the waist beneath, his bare torso daubed with strange symbols in blue and white paint, and his right shoulder was smeared with blood and swollen over what appeared to be a fresh tattoo. This symbol was far more complicated than the others, an intricate network of finely interwoven lines and spirals formed into a shape like a distorted triangle of the same brilliant blue as the paint. More blood was crusted on his hands as he removed the gloves, and Neville knew he was staring openly.

"Where have you *been*?"

"Home," was the only response.

"Home as in *Ireland*?"

One fair eyebrow raised as if the other young man were the one acting strangely. "Where do you think I meant, Hampton Court?"

Neville shook his head, beginning to wonder if the fever had returned. "But...but *how*—"

"As for how: Room of Requirement put me on the roof just before nine. Flew from there. You can make the coast easy on a fast broom. Dobby left the window open to let me back in. As for why: some things need the land. As for what I did: don't ask. I can't and won't be tellin' you if we see a hundred. As for what I've done...." He took a deep breath, and the blue eyes held a glee that was terrible to witness. "Severus Snape will not be seein' the summer end, and that's on magic deep as the green in the hills under winter snow."

"Seamus, you haven't cast some kind of...like Avada Kedavra, have you?" He felt horrified at the thought that his friend would commit murder on his behalf, because that's what it would be, he knew. It was one thing to kill someone in open combat, but this, whatever magic he'd used to do it....

"No. I've just seen to it that he gets what's comin' to him. He'll die in pain equal to what he's caused, and at the hands of those he's betrayed, but the whys and wherefores...that's not in my hands or on my conscience." He crossed the room, grabbing Neville's legs before he had a chance to protest and swinging them back up onto the mattress, then pulling up the covers and taking the bed hangings in both hands to yank them closed. "Now get some sleep."

More out of shock than obedience, Neville lay back and settled himself onto the pillow, listening to the sounds of movement, then of water running in the shower before he heard the metallic slides of the curtain rings and creak of springs as Seamus got into his own four-poster. Despite still being worn from the day's exertions and far from fully recovered from the virus, it took a

long time for sleep to finally come, and when it did, his dreams would not release the image of elaborate blue lines forming a shape like a triangle with the sides caved in.

OOO

"He tried to kill me, definitely – and this is the second time now, maybe the third if you consider Madam Pomfrey intervening on the whole business this fall – but calling it an 'assassination attempt' is a little much, Ernie." Neville crossed his arms stubbornly, looking across the conference table at his officers.

"Assassinate. A verb meaning to kill an individual for political or social reasons, typically a person of prominence." Terry replied coolly.

Neville sighed. "Okay, so he tried to *assassinate* me. The point is, I'm fine. A little shaky, sure, but it's only Wednesday. I'll be back up to fighting form in a week...I'm already a hell of a lot better than I was."

"We need to *do* something," Ginny leaned forward onto the table, stabbing her wand against the polished surface. "A bodyguard for you, set a watch...whatever. But we can't just let him keep going after you like this!"

"A bodyguard's not an option. We're still trying to keep this at least kind of a secret, people. We can't have me surrounded like the Minister of Magic. It's a risk we're going to have to take...and it's a good thing, really." Neville paused, taking in the looks on the faces surrounding him that ranged from uncertain to downright defiant. "Listen, please...Snape's got it out for me. But only me. The only times he's tried to kill anyone else have been collateral damage. Luna's still alive - she's heating up that Galleon once a day like clockwork - so as long as we don't do anything to re-direct his focus, we know what he's going to do. And I'd much rather have an enemy that's predictable."

Parvati shook her head, frowning deeply. "You're too valuable to use for bait, Neville."

"He's got a point." Terry leaned back in his chair, lacing his hands behind his head. "He didn't ask Snape to do this, but we can't exactly change his mind on the subject, so let's make it a tactical advantage. We know where he's aiming, so we know what he'll do. When the fight comes, we use that to make him hit us exactly where we want him to."

"Where?" Ginny challenged, "Between the eyes with a pretty green flash?"

"No, where our strongest fighters are ready for him." Ernie nodded slowly. "I see what you mean, Terry. But what if he tries again between now and then? That's the real problem. The first two...those were our mistakes. This one, though...."

"Was also our mistake." Neville said firmly. "He was the Potions Master, and he's threatened to slip things to students before, he even tried to poison Trevor as a *lesson*, and that was under Dumbledore! We should have seen poison coming, but Ginny had an idea...." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a shriveled black lump the size of a small walnut. "A bezoar. It saved

her brother last year, and I'm keeping it on me at all times now. I can't just not eat or drink anything for the rest of the term, but at least I'll have an antidote at hand if he tries it again."

"And if he tries something else?" Hannah asked.

"Then we'll just have to adapt again," he shrugged. "It's a dangerous game, but we've been one step ahead most of the time so far, and we've managed to stay on our feet every time we've been outmaneuvered. The good news is, he thinks he just has to stay afloat until we graduate, and then he'll be rid of us. As long as he doesn't know that we're coming after him at the end of the year, he has no reason to try too hard. So far, he's just used the opportunities that have been given him."

Ginny shook her head. "I still don't like it."

"Like it or not, I'm closing the subject. We've missed too much to that damned Dragon Pox, and we've got catching up to do. Sergeants reports?" Ginny continued to grumble under her breath for several minutes, but the others seemed more willing to drop the subject of his latest brush with the hated teacher, and the rest of the meeting progressed without incident.

All those who had been stricken with the virus had recovered enough to resume training, and Neville was pleased to find that they were not nearly as far behind schedule as they had feared. Terry and the Ravenclaws had made particular progress on the subject of Wizarding Law pertaining to the inheritance of the LeStrange vault, and although it had been found that the LeStrange family required magic to inherit – thus eliminating Mrs. Creevey as an heir – it seemed from all of their research that the disownment of Andromeda Tonks had never been legally formalized. The final will of her parents was public record now, and she still could claim ownership of half the vault's contents should her older sister die. Neville still cherished the determination to take on Bellatrix himself, but he was not ignorant of her skill, and he allowed himself to be talked into a team of three to take on the psychotic witch. He would be one of them, of course, but her death was too vital to the overall mission to leave the vendetta entirely personal.

It was further agreed upon that they would give everyone Valentine's Day off of the D.A., as so many students had other plans, but they also decided on double meetings to take place the fifteenth and sixteenth. Time was a commodity they did not have nearly enough of to waste.

In all, the meeting lasted just over an hour, and Neville knew he was beginning to fade towards the end, though he was determined not to show it. It was still a relief, however, to see the last thing on the agenda crossed off with a flourish of Parvati's quill, and he sighed, nodding at his officers. "Okay, then. Everyone can head back to their common rooms and update their people, and the next one is on Friday, full muster. We'll start with Patronuses for standard defensive use – a lot of people are still a bit wispy on their Corporeals – and then move on to communication and offensive use, and try to hit jinx anticipation for non-verbal combat if we have the time. Everyone bring a change of robes if you're not really confident in your cleaning charms; some of those jinxes can get messy. Dismissed."

He stood, starting around the table towards where the little cluster of Hufflepuffs were gathering up their notes and bags. It had been over a week since he'd seen Hannah in anything more than fleeting glimpses in the corridors or stolen looks across the Great Hall, but before he could reach her, Ernie had grabbed his arm in an unshakable grip. "A moment alone, old chum?" The Lieutenant had seemed slightly off through the whole meeting, but Neville had put that down to the last lingering effects of the Dragon Pox. Now, however, seeing the strained look in the hazel eyes, he was not so sure.

Neville nodded, "Sure." They stepped off into a corner, and he cast Hannah a regretful smile over the other wizard's shoulder, hoping that she would wait for him. Her response, however, was not annoyance, but an almost too understanding smile that seemed directed more at Ernie than him, and his concern over his friend deepened. He frowned, "Is everything okay, Ernie?"

"Well..." Ernie chuckled nervously, tugging at his already-loosened tie. "I was hoping I could talk to you about...sort of taking a bit of executive privilege on the battlefield assignments."

"Sorry," he shook his head firmly, "you'll have to earn top tier like everyone else." There was a flash of confusion on his friend's face, and he chuckled, punching Ernie lightly on one shoulder. "Come on, that's not a big deal. You're not half bad in your spells, you think fast, and the only person in the school who comes close to you in strength is Hagrid. You'll be fine."

"Not for me! I want to be on the front lines, and I'll work for it, absolutely...." He hesitated, then tapped the front of his shirt where the wedding band rested out of sight on its thin gold chain. "It's Susan. I want to keep it between us, but as a favor, could you promise me to keep her off the front lines...maybe even out of the school entirely if there's any way at all?"

Neville's face softened, and he sighed sadly, glancing at Hannah again with an all too clear understanding. He felt like an ogre for doing it, but he shook his head, unable to quite meet the hopeful gaze. "I can't. You know that, Ernie. I can't even do it for my own girl."

"*Please!* You've got to!" The grip on his arm tightened painfully, and he gasped, the extent of the desperation taking him by surprise. He had expected this request from the moment the ring had been placed on the table in the Three Broomsticks, but he had also expected that Ernie would understand fairly easily why it couldn't be done.

"Ernie, just tell him." Hannah's voice came from just behind the Lieutenant, and they both jumped, not having seen her cross the room. She stepped around to stand almost between them, and her smile was gentle as her small hands carefully pried the thick fingers away from Neville's upper arm.

"Tell hi – but how do *you* know?" Ernie demanded bemusedly.

"Because I happen to live in the same dorm." Hannah's smile widened slightly, almost patronizingly as she put one hand on her hip.

He shook his head, narrowing his eyes at her in suspicion. "But she's not even –"

"No," she pointed out calmly, "But she's been spending a lot of time in the bathroom without any scorch marks or little green spots."

"Did she tell you she –" Ernie caught himself, shooting a panicked look at Neville, who scowled at his two friends.

"What are you guys hiding from me?"

Hannah raised an eyebrow at her housemate, the expression a clear message of *I'll-tell-if-you-won't*, and Ernie sighed, running his fingers nervously through his straw-colored mass of curls. "Well...the thing is..." he hesitated, blushing more fiercely than Neville had ever seen before, then clearing his throat. "...the thing is, I don't want her on the field, because...because as nearly as we can figure, somewhere around the end of August, there's going to be a little one."

All the worry that had been forming that Susan had contracted some terrible illness or received tragic news vanished, and Neville grinned broadly. "Ernie, that's fantastic! Congratulations!"

The hazel eyes widened. "You're not angry?"

"Not at all!" The initial burst of relief was settling now, leaving behind a sense of how truly tired out he was, and he motioned with his wand, pulling over chairs for all three of them so that he could sit down and give his full attention to the news. "I think you'll be a great father, and Susan's already like a mother to half the younger kids in your House...she's a natural."

Hannah put her hand on his knee, but when he looked over, the grin faded from his face as he saw the deep regret in her eyes. "Neville," she said quietly, "August comes after June."

Neville swore, and Ernie nodded darkly. "Thus, we have the crux of my request. Susan and I were both willing to die for this, and I still am, but I don't want her risking the baby."

"How are you planning on keeping *this* from the Carrows?" Neville asked. "She'll be..." he did the math quickly on his fingers, "...May, June...seven months by end of term. That's a lot harder to hide than a pair of rings."

"The robes are loose, we figure we can get away with it for quite a while if she doesn't draw attention to herself, but she's a tiny thing, and if she starts getting really big, or if heaven forbid it's twins, or something else happens to get her condition noticed...." Ernie spread his hands, "I suppose we hide her in here, or find a way to get her out entirely. If we can get her up to Inverness, my family has a place in the mountains where no one gets found if they don't want to be."

"There's ways." Neville nodded, then looked to Hannah. "You're a girl –"

"You noticed?" she smirked.

"Took me a while, but yeah." He returned the smile, then grew serious again. "But the point is, the guys probably wouldn't notice unless she had the baby in the middle of the Great Hall, but

girls tend to pick up on those things, and there *are* girls in Slytherin – and I guess technically Alecto is one – who wouldn't feel at all bad about turning her in. I want you to keep an eye on things and let us know if we need to do something sooner than *we* think, but otherwise, Ernie, I can definitely promise you we can get her somewhere safe...and I'm not letting her anywhere near the battlefield."

Ernie let out a sigh of relief that was almost a sob, and Neville smiled. "That's not just for you, mate. That's the fact I don't think most of us could concentrate because we'd be watching out for her out of the corners of our eyes."

The blonde head shook firmly. "I don't want to tell the D.A."

"That's up to you," Neville allowed, "but I'm also not going to want her taking part in things where people are throwing live jinxes and hexes if she's expecting, and whether it's that or just nature taking its course – it'd look really funny if she was always in buttoned-up robes while everyone else was stripped down – people are going to know sooner or later."

"Later, then. It's just that the fewer people know for the less time..."

"The less chance for a stupid slip of the tongue," he said sympathetically. "But I'll be able to tell you by Friday more about the exact plans for how we'll handle it, and in the mean time, you've got to congratulate your wife for me. A new life is still a wonderful thing."

"That it is," Ernie smiled, and for the first time since the secret had come out, it was the warm, joyful, glowing smile of a new father. "That it most certainly is."



## Chapter Thirteen

### Snakebite

"Concentrate! It's the single most important thing in magic!" Neville rolled up his cuffs and leaned over Geoff Hooper, a Gryffindor fourth-year, adjusting the boy's grip so that the wand sat more firmly in his hand. "Trust your instincts, let yourself feel what's coming through the wand...especially with non-verbal combat. The moment they choose their spell, the magic is there, before it even leaves their wand, and if you're paying attention, you can feel it...it's like a song in the back of your head or just a gut *knowing*, and it gives you the chance to counter."

"There's no way!" Orla threw her wand to the floor in disgust, stamping her foot. "How am I supposed to pay attention to some 'gut feeling' *and* remember spells *and* concentrate on casting them non-verbally *and* watch my back *and* everything else you want us to do?"

"You have to practice until you can stop thinking." He smiled gently, picking up the girl's wand and handing it back to her.

Anthony shook his head bemusedly, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "That makes no sense. You just said concentrate."

"Actually, it does." Neville waved his wand, and a blackboard appeared on the wall. He picked up the chalk from the little groove at the base and held it out. "Anthony, take this and sign your name."

Frowning in confusion, the Ravenclaw took the chalk and stepped up to the board, signing his name across it quickly before turning back to the group, hands on his hips. "So?"

"Do you have any idea how complicated that was?" Neville asked.

Parvati laughed derisively. "He *signed his name*."

"Sure," Neville shrugged, "but you have to hold the chalk just so – which is totally different from how you hold a quill. You have to use enough pressure to make a good mark, but not enough that you snap it, even though it's fragile. You have to remember the shape of each letter, upper and lowercase, put them in the right order, connect them in the right places, go back and dot the 'i' and cross both 't's, keep it in an even line, size it so you don't go off the board...do you see what I mean?"

Several heads nodded, then Romilda raised her hand. "What about the concentration?"

He smiled. "Okay, let's see about that. Anthony, start signing again...just keep going this time, over and over...go ahead and fill the board."

The look of skepticism in the dark eyes had been replaced by one of curiosity, and the other young man nodded before turning to obey. "Now," Neville instructed as the signatures followed one another in a long, flowing line across the dark surface, "keep signing, but at the same time, I want you to tell me everything you've eaten today."

Anthony blinked, surprised. "Uh...I had eggs for breakfast...."

"How many? How were they cooked? Did you put anything on them?"

"Two, I think...no, three. Scrambled, with...a little bit of salt and pepper maybe?"

"Great. You can stop now." Neville tapped the blackboard with his hand. "Still just signing his name, but when I messed with his concentration, he slowed down, he forgot to dot the 'i' on this one, that one there he went straight into 'Goldstein' without putting the 'y' on 'Anthony'." Another wave of his wand, and the blackboard vanished again. "If you're thinking about other things, you might as well just go out there wandless. It's just you, the person you're dueling, and the magic. You're all witches and wizards, it's a part of you, so go ahead and trust what it tells you. Form up, and lets go again."

They faced off into two lines, Neville taking his own position opposite Ginny after setting the signal that would start them. He took a deep breath, remembering to take his own advice and clearing his mind, allowing himself to see nothing but the blazing look in the brown eyes across from him. The timer ticked down like a mechanical heartbeat: five, four, three, two...then the buzzer sounded.

Like the memory of hearing her voice speak the word, *Furnunculus!* came to his mind, and the counter-jinx flew from his wand to catch her jet of light with his own before it could reach him. She was fast, lightning fast, and he had no time to catch the next, barely managing to spin to the side and feeling the spell pass so close to the side of his face that it ruffled his hair.

The miss gave him a moment's opening, and he took it, lashing his wand back across his body and dropping to one knee to fire under her guard. She caught it, but just barely, and he sent the same spell again so quickly that it seemed a single flash, catching her on the shoulder this time.

Ginny shrieked, dropping her wand as her arm began to droop like melting wax, but before he could even register the victory, she had caught the falling wand in her other hand, and he wasn't ready for the change in angle. The jinx hit him directly in the face with a sharp stinging sensation, and his eyes puffed shut instantly, blinding him.

With a sigh of resignation, he raised his wand straight up into the air and released a burst of blue sparks, then sat down on the floor. He could hear other duelers continuing, but slowly, the snaps and whooshes were replaced by gasps and cries, then the popping of sparks being released as more and more pairs dropped out. Neville and Ginny exchanged counter-jinxes, and he got to his feet again as the swelling faded and he could see once more.

The only pair left dueling were Michael and Terry, and Neville shot off another, louder set of sparks to catch their attention. "Okay, guys, that's enough...you two can read each other's minds anyway, and you know all the same spells, so I can't let you go on all night." Terry grinned and shrugged, but Michael just laughed, and they both tucked their wands back into their belts, neither of them having been so much as grazed.

Putting his own wand away, he nodded to the group. "Take five, clean yourselves up, and we'll do it again. This time, I want everyone to mix it up a little...no one partnered with Housemates or really good friends, just try to keep within a year of your own level. Let's get a real blend of styles."

A dozen "yes sir"s came in reply, and he smiled, turning back to Ginny. "You've been practicing with your left, you cheat."

She grinned shamelessly. "You wanted unpredictable."

"I guess I did," he laughed. "Your arm okay?"

"A little wobbly, should be fine in a minute or two." Ginny had gathered up her long hair in one fist, and was now crouched, rummaging through the pockets of the robe she had dropped in a heap on the floor. "I've got a band in here somewhere..." she muttered, then paused, her eyes widening. "Hello...?"

She stood, holding out a thick envelope with his name scrawled in vaguely familiar handwriting across the front. "Neville, it's for you...I swear it wasn't in my pocket this morning...don't know where it came from."

Deeply suspicious, he motioned for her to set it on the floor, then took several steps back and nodded his head towards her. "Give us a Shield Charm, Ginny."

The silvery, transparent shimmer appeared between themselves and the envelope, and Neville extended his wand cautiously around the edge of the barrier only long enough to cast a Diffendo Curse before yanking his arm back around the shield. For a moment, the envelope just sat there, then it bulged and seemed to struggle, and finally, something impossibly huge came flapping out of the tiny slit and leapt into the air as Neville and Ginny both yelled in alarm.

The flapping thing had reached the ceiling, jerking and twisting like a hideously malformed bird, then it began to expand, and within seconds had unrolled itself into an immense banner, easily twenty feet long and as tall as a grown man. It hung suspended in the air in the center of the room, bright lights in a dozen colors appeared around the edges, twinkling and flashing, and a shower of sparks traced words along the center of the huge parchment. *SUPPORT HARRY POTTER!*

Neville gaped, but before he could make his mouth work enough to ask who had sent such an...*unusual* message of solidarity, Dobby's eager, high-pitched squeak issued out of the magical banner. "Neville Longbottom, Ginny Weasley, and all of Harry Potter's friends in the D.A. are invited to a party! Hagrid shall be having a Support Harry Potter party in his hut on the twelfth at seven, and Dobby and H.E.L.P. have made sure there are going to be most wonderful drinks and food for everyone! Harry Potter is a very heroic wizard, and Hagrid knows there will be many, many friends who come!"

The banner burst apart like a firework, forming the shape of a vivid, glittering lightning bolt and then sputtering out as the voice faded, leaving a long, dumbfounded silence in its wake. Finally, Padma spoke, shaking her head slowly. "Bad idea. Very, very bad idea."

"I know," Neville moaned, burying his face in his hands. "Oh, Hagrid...."

Ernie crossed his arms. "Well, we can't go. That's all there is to it. Snape and the Carrows are going to have themselves a grand time with this."

"We have to," Ginny sighed, "at least, some of us do. Hagrid would never understand if no one showed up. He'd think we'd all abandoned Harry."

"But we're planning to *die* for Harry!" Hannah protested. "Isn't that better support than showing up to some really stupid idea of a party?"

Ginny shook her head. "You don't know Hagrid. Ron talked about him a lot – he and Harry and Hermione were best friends with Hagrid since first year. He's really...well, we all know how he is about seeing the danger in things."

Seamus snorted, holding up his arm and pushing back the sleeve to show a pale scar that ran along the outer edge of his wrist. "Don't remind me. Only time you'll ever hear me say Malfoy was right about anythin', but those skrewts needed a good stompin' the minute they hatched."

"Ginny, you and I have to go," Neville said defeatedly, then looked to the others. "Beyond that, I'd really appreciate about a dozen volunteers. We can get away with just that by saying that he's got a really small house – which he does, for as big as he is – and we'll get in and out as quick as we can. We'll put protective charms on the place as soon as we get there, and that should be at least enough to buy us time for an escape if...oh, heck, *when* they come to break it up."

Michael and Terry exchanged a look, then raised their hands at the same time. "Might as well," Michael grinned. "I mean, you don't get to see someone really spectacularly hex themselves in the foot that often."

Rolling his eyes at the ceiling, Ernie's hand was the next in the air. "Just don't ask me why I'm doing this. I don't know."

"Because where we have the tendency to be brave to the point of stupidity, your idiocy lies in your eternal loyalty that will follow that fool off any cliff he so fancies, my fine badger-bannered friend," Seamus grinned. "And don't you know the former counts me in as well."

"Well *I'm* not going because I'm a Hufflepuff, *I'm* going because I happen to be in love with that fool." Hannah stepped forward with a self-effacing smile. "Though what that makes me...."

"I'll use the chance to pick up the snakes he said he'd get for me. If this goes the way I think it will, I don't think he'll have another opportunity to hand them over." Padma sighed, then looked at her sister, "Parvati, I don't like to speak for you, but...."

"Oh, go ahead," Parvati shrugged. "I'll do it."

Colin, Fritz, Li, Romilda, and Natalie volunteered as well, and Neville nodded in satisfaction. "Okay, then, that settles that. Everyone meet up in here at quarter to seven on Wednesday, and we'll take the door straight down to his hut if it'll let us, and if not, we'll just open it to the grounds and cross under Disillusionment Charms." He paused, casting a stern look at Ginny. "But once it's over, we're making it *very* clear to him no matter what that he is *never* going to pull a stunt like this again, and if he does, he'll just have to pull the crackers himself."

"Definitely," she nodded fiercely, then drew her wand with a vicious grin. "Now, let's get back to business. Who wants me?"

"If you're gettin' that desperate with Harry gone, beautiful, I'll be happy to – mmmph!" Seamus' leer turned into a look of shock as Ginny flicked her wand, and he found his lips suddenly sealed shut.

"Don't get cocky, Weasley." Wayne Hopkins, a Hufflepuff seventh-year with hair every bit as flamingly red as her own, took a step forward. "I'm the one put the twins in Hospital Wing with those tails, you know...I don't like being molested by my own Quidditch uniform."

Her smile widened, and she laughed. "You're on!"

OOO



"And just when I thought I'd seen all this sweet world had to offer...." Seamus trailed off, shaking his head in speechless amazement.

Neville could barely find words himself, but it was because he was laughing to the point where a part of his mind was becoming increasingly concerned with the possibility of choking to death. "Ginny...." he gasped, "are you...are you sure...you know...where the twins are?"

She shook her head, her own cheeks streaked with tears of mirth, "Not anymore!"

"Such a reaction...*really*, Mike...." Terry gave his friend a look of utterly wide-eyed innocence.

Michael nodded. "And all we did was dress for the occasion. Do you think maybe the new colors aren't flattering?"

Terry frowned, cupping his chin in his hand in exaggerated contemplation. "Well, I wouldn't say red's exactly your color, but it's more a political statement anyway, and you've got the looks to pull off just about anything."

Neville braced one hand against Ernie's shoulder as he managed to uncurl himself, wiping the tears from his face. The atmosphere had been tense with apprehension as they waited for

everyone to arrive for Hagrid's party, but the arrival of Michael and Terry with less than a minute to spare had certainly changed that.

The two Ravenclaws had transfigured their uniforms from the usual bronze and blue to the crimson and gold of Gryffindor, but they had also each donned a pair of remarkably familiar-looking round glasses, and whatever they had done to their hair, it stuck up in as many directions as Harry's did after a game of Quidditch in a particularly nasty wind. As an added touch, red ink traced a zig-zag line down the center of both foreheads, and Michael was holding his broom in one hand, a piece of parchment with "Firebolt" written on it roughly spellotaped over the *Cleansweep 7*.

Ginny stepped between them, holding out her arms primly. "So, which of you gentlemen will be escorting your girlfriend to the festivities?"

They looked at each other a moment, then both of them slipped their arms through hers. "There's something you should know about Mike and I...." Terry began, but she cut him off.

"You prefer to share everything whenever possible?"

Michael raised an eyebrow. "How did you know?"

"Clearly," she replied archly, "you have never seen my brothers pick up witches."

The interior of Hagrid's hut bore Dobby's unmistakable decorating touch. More wanted posters than Neville even knew the Ministry of Magic had ever printed stared at them from every available surface, and a banner like the one that had appeared in the Room of Requirement stretched the entire length of the hut, fighting for ceiling space with several hundred balloons in Gryffindor colors. A number of other golden balloons with silver, Snitch-like wings zoomed perilously around the room, careening off anyone not quick enough to duck them, and a large cake shaped like a lightning bolt sat in the middle of the heavy table amid enough food and drinks to serve the entire D.A. for at least a week.

Hagrid himself was wearing a dinner plate-sized button that alternately flashed "Support Harry Potter!" and "You-Know-Who Stinks!"

He roared with delight when he saw Michael and Terry's costumes, declaring them to be brilliant, and he was moved nearly to tears when Terry offered to duplicate a pair of the glasses for him as well. The sight of the spectacles perched precariously on the giant gamekeeper's nose, the earpieces bent out horizontally and just managing to lodge themselves in the sideburns of the bushy black beard was also something that had Neville fighting back tears, but not at all of the same kind.

The excuse for their meager numbers was wholeheartedly accepted, and Neville did not feel at all guilty, all things considered, about assuring him that the other members of the D.A. were missing out on a lot more than they had realized. Hagrid had taken the precaution of closing the windows and double-bolting the door at least, but they added *Muffliato* to it, as well as a

Proximity Charm, a few layers of *Protego Totalus*, and Michael's best *Savio Hexia*, and the protective spells allowed them all to relax quite a bit.

No one had been entirely sure what a Support Harry Potter party would entail, but the appearance of the two Ravenclaws had broken the initial awkwardness. It soon became a free-for-all opportunity to gleefully bash the current regime that was only sporadically peppered with mentions of the theoretical subject of the event, usually in connection with a exceptionally nasty fate wished on You-Know-Who. Although there was no love lost for their adversaries at the D.A. meetings, those were still primarily serious affairs, and there was something delightfully forbidden about getting to openly fling insults and nasty jokes, and to one-up each other in trying to find the best way to deride Snape's distaste for shampoo or the remarkable resemblance of the Carrow siblings to ill-tempered wombats.

Firewhisky was available for the older students, but Neville had declined it on all of their behalf, not wanting anyone to be off their game if they were discovered, and Hagrid did not seem to mind taking care of it entirely himself. As the level in the bottles dropped, he became distinctly nostalgic, and began to regale them with tales of his long friendship with Harry and the others.

"...an' he's holdin' the bucket, an' I can tell he's tryin' not to puke up himself, but he's a good friend, he is. Jus' kept it nice and steady every time one o' them big ol' slugs came spewin' out, an' never a twitch or a whinge about it. Didn't even laugh none. Good friend he is. Ruddy good friend." Hagrid sniffed, then blew his nose deafeningly into his enormous handkerchief. "Knew that he had a heart 'o gold from the first time I saw him with those 'orrible Muggles he had to live with all them years. Treated him like dirt, they did, but you could look in his eyes and see he hadn't got spoilt. There were plenty o' resentment there, sure enough, but not a moment o' hate. An' hate's the thing'll ruin a person."

He shook his huge, shaggy head, gesturing with the bottle towards them. "You know I knew You-Know-Who back when too, don't you?"

Neville had been lounging with Hannah on one of Hagrid's couch-sized footstools, but now he sat up straight. "You *what*?"

"Went to Hogwarts with him." Hagrid nodded solemnly, then shivered. "Blimey, scares me to think on it now. But I did. An' that's what I mean about when I first met Harry. You-Know-Who were called Riddle then, Tom Riddle, some folks even called him Tommy, if you'll believe it. He could be nice an' sweet an' charmin' as yeh please, but if you mentioned anything about Muggles..." He paused, and his face twisted beneath the beard and glasses, "There'd be the hate. Right there in the back o' his eyes under the nicest sugar smile, an' look what it's come ter. Nothin' good ever comes o' hate, my Dad taught me that, an' he was a good man. Right good man. Why - "

A series of loud *cracks* sounded outside the hut, cutting Hagrid off mid-sentence, and everyone froze. Terror passed through the cozy room like an icy wind, and Li's almond eyes widened hugely, one hand coming to her mouth to stifle a scream. "The *name*," she moaned quietly, "oh, they've done it to *all* his names!"

Neville jumped to his feet, drawing his wand. "I thought you couldn't Apparate into the Hogwarts grounds!" he whispered.

Terry was deathly white as he drew his own wand. "*They can.*"

A loud, booming knock sounded through the room, and Neville jerked his head towards Hagrid. "Stall them!" he whispered urgently.

His ruddy cheeks ashen, Hagrid got to his feet and answered the door, "Evening, there," he said stiffly, "ain't this a surprise." Neville was relieved to see that his massive framed filled the opening almost completely, effectively blocking them from the view of anyone outside.

Only half listening to Hagrid's pitifully transparent attempts to explain to the Death Eater that he had only used You-Know-Who's name in reminiscing aloud to himself about his Hogwarts years, that the glasses were his own for reading, and the button a harmless joke from a friend, Neville silently motioned the others in closely.

"Padma," he said quietly, "I want you to do what you can with the snakes...they'll be coming in any minute now; attack them, keep them busy. Terry, you smash the window, Ginny and Mike out first, do whatever you have to in order to clear a path to the school. Through the window and run like hell...the room was supposed to let us back in, but if it doesn't, make a break for the kitchen doors. Ernie and Fritz at the rear, if Nat or Millie can't keep up, hoist them over a shoulder and keep going. Li, you've got the strongest Memory Charm, so you and I are going to cover them...now *move*, and don't leave anything behind!"

There was a mad scramble for robes and scarves as Padma dropped to the floor in front of a heavy wicker basket that sat by the corner of the fireplace. Her legs were twined together in an impossible-looking knot and she raised her arms, her fingertips barely touching as she began to chant, the exotic, lilting syllables echoing eerily. "*Sarpa sarpa dAsatva karanA kobarA karait sunanA adhIna bonA....*"

"What's that?" Neville recognized the gruff voice of Walden MacNair, and he motioned to Li as he crossed to the doorway beside Hagrid, pressing his back to the wall. She took up her own position opposite him, and he swore silently as Hagrid glanced at them obviously before looking back to MacNair.

"Nothin...jes'...the wireless," he fumbled.

"Out of the way, you damned oaf!" MacNair growled, and there was a bang, a flash, and Hagrid staggered slightly, as if the Death Eater had punched him in the stomach. He recovered almost instantly, surging forward, and there was a terrible crunching noise as the huge fist swung. More bangs and flashes were tearing the winter night now, the giant's roars of outrage sounding over them easily, but he no longer blocked the doorway, and a half-dozen more robed and masked figures rushed into the opening.

"NOW!" Neville yelled, and he and Li jabbed their wands towards the intruders. *OBLIVIATE!* They staggered, dazed, and before they had the first chance to recover

their bearings, there was a low, terrible hissing noise, and the floor seemed to have come alive. Dozens of snakes – cobras, mambas, vipers, kraits, corals, and adders – were slithering across the room like a river of smooth, living venom. They poured from the basket one after another, sliding harmlessly over Padma's woven legs as they made their way towards their victims.

There was a crash as the window broke, and out of the corner of his eye, he could see his friends scrambling out of the shattered panes, Ernie nearly flinging Natalie and Romilda up over the sill, then the sounds of a new battle breaking out outside. His heart was hammering wildly, but his mind seemed terribly sharp, and he forced himself to trust that his officers would take care of themselves. He yanked his attention back to the Death Eaters still coming, striking each one with the Memory Charm in a double-punch with Li the moment the hooded heads came into view.

A king cobra rose, his hood flaring ominously, and Neville had only a moment's glance of pink mouth and gleaming fangs before it struck, sinking its teeth deeply into the ankle of the first Death Eater, who screamed horribly and began to fire hexes into the advancing reptiles. Two others fled, and the remainder were either battling Hagrid and the D.A. outside or fighting desperately to keep the snakes at bay. He took his chance.

Grabbing Li's wrist, they dashed through the maddened creatures, and he grabbed Padma by one arm, but her dark eyes were vacant, distant, and she did not seem to see him as she continued to chant. "...naShTa karanA shatru shatru..."

He pointed Li towards the window. "Get out of here, I'll get her!" Nodding frantically, the pale-faced Ravenclaw dashed away, and he turned back to Padma, taking her by both shoulders and shaking her harshly. "Come on!"

Her eyes blinked twice, and then focused again, but within an instant of regaining herself, a look of horror crossed her face. "Neville," she gasped, "you broke it! I'm not controlling them any more!"

The snakes were frenzied. Struck by dozens of hexes, stomped at by the Death Eaters and stirred further by the flashes and screams, they had become a mass of wildly writhing tails and bodies, striking out at anything, even the legs of furniture or their own fellows. The first Death Eater was on the floor now, seizing horribly as he let out sick, rattling gurgles that Neville knew instinctively were the sounds of death. Another was on his knees, a third clinging to the table as his limbs began to twitch uncontrollably, and now the snakes were turning, seeking new victims.

Li screamed, and Neville looked up, his heart chilling as he saw her. She was stuck, her robes caught on a jagged edge of the shattered windowframe, and a huge black mamba was poised on the window sill in front of her, reared and gaping. He started to turn, to go to her, then stopped, helpless as a vibrantly banded coral snake shot like a multicolored arrow from beneath the armchair and began to make its way, hissing fiercely, up his leg.

A hand seized his arm, and Padma's eyes burned into his. "Leave me!"

Then her eyes had glazed again, and she raised her arms, her body bending back, swaying, writhing as though she herself had become a serpent, and the chant began anew. "*Sarpa sarpa dAsatva....*"

The snakes that had been threatening Li and Neville backed away, harmless as kittens, and he felt a horrible pang of guilt and regret as he dashed to the window. It was the work of less than a second to free Li, and then they were both through. He could see the crumpled bodies of four black-robed figures, make out his friends fleeing headlong across the grounds, and at the front of the hut...he stopped, staring in shock as Li ran on ahead.

Something huge had come through the trees, easily half again as tall as Hagrid himself, and it was joining him, picking up Death Eaters like toys and throwing them against the wall of the hut, spells and hexes bouncing harmlessly off his rhinoceros-like skin. It was Grawp, it had to be, the full-giant brother Hagrid had talked about, and suddenly, it almost seemed like the fight was unfair for the Death Eaters instead. One who had been thrown to the ground began to scream, and as Grawp pointed, bellowing at the stream of light coming through the door, Neville saw that the snakes had begun to pour outside.

Their numbers diminished, their easy arrest turned into a nightmare of serpents and giants and well-trained fighters who leapt from windows, cracks began to sound through the night again as those Death Eaters who still could Disapparated in an attempt to save their own skins. Grawp managed to grab one more, crushing him head-first into a nearby tree with a sound like a shattering pumpkin that sank itself sickly into Neville's memory forever, and then they were gone.

Hagrid said something to Grawp, and he sat down in the snow, picking up the body of the man he had just struck against the tree and beginning to poke idly at the crushed skull. Neville looked away, horrified, but he almost laughed despite it all when he heard Hagrid's gruff, scolding admonishment. "No, Grawpy! Bad boy! You wipe them brains off right now!"

A shaft of light spilled yellow across the grounds, and his attention was jerked from the momentary relief up to the castle entrance. The huge double doors had opened, and an unmistakable bat-like figure was coming at a run now, two others, squat and round-shouldered flanking him. They were headed straight for the hut, wands outstretched. Straight for Hagrid and Grawp...and Padma.

Neville had only a split second to decide, and he took the risk. The taboo destroyed all protective charms except the Fidelius. That would mean Snape would have to re-establish them, and if the Death Eaters could get in through the broken security....

Concentrating on the corner by the fireplace, he turned swiftly on the spot, and was rewarded with a crushing, squeezing darkness. Hagrid's hut resolved around him, and there was Padma, and he grabbed her, deliberately not even looking to see where the snakes were, knowing it didn't matter because either he'd be struck or not. He could do nothing to prevent it, but it could do everything to break his concentration. Another turn, and they were gone.

The Room of Requirement had indeed done as they had asked and given them a way back into the castle when they were ready, and the others were waiting for them when they appeared. Ginny screamed at the *crack*, and he barely managed to duck her hex and two others before they realized that it was him. Terry swore, then brandished his wand at them. "You scared the –"

"YOU'RE ALIVE!" Parvati ran at her sister, her arms outstretched to snatch her up in an embrace so tight it seemed impossible that either girl's slight form could withstand it without shattering. They were both crying tears of relief, clutching at each other's hair, stroking each other's faces with the joy of the near miss of a loss he knew he could never comprehend. He hated to tear them apart again so soon, but he knew there was no choice, and he was glad when Li stepped in before he had to, taking Padma gently by the arm.

"Parvati, you've got to go," she said. We'll take care of her, we promise."

"She doesn't need potions or spells!" Parvati snapped fiercely, "She wasn't using the magic you know! She needs –"

"Tea, quiet, some plain rice or bread, and a place to meditate to recover her energies," said the other girl , and Parvati stopped, disconcerted.

"Well, yeah."

Li laughed. "The mountains might be very tall in between, but it's not so far between India and China."

Padma smiled, taking her twin's hand and lifting it to her mouth to kiss it gently. "It's okay...I'll be fine. Now hurry and go before they come looking for us!"

Parvati nodded reluctantly, but there were still tears in her eyes as she backed away to follow Neville and the others through the door that had appeared for them into the Gryffindor common room, keeping her eyes on her sister until the very last moment. Then the door had closed and vanished, and she sank to her knees on the carpet, shivering with her face in her hands.

Neville exchanged a look with Seamus, and he quickly shuttled Colin, Romilda, and Natalie to their respective dormitories before heading up the stairs to his own, leaving his friend alone with Parvati, who had begun to cry in earnest now. "Hey, there...." He put one hand on her shoulder gently as he knelt beside her, his brow creased in concern. "Parvati...."

The glossy black head shook furiously, the heavy braid whipping. "Just leave me alone!" She was crying harder now, but she didn't push him away, and he sat there silently, just letting the tears come. He had already decided that if Snape or the Carrows were to barge in on them, he would tell them that she had seen the ruckus at Hagrid's hut through the window, and that Gryffindors were not the kind to hear a girl crying in the common room without coming downstairs to check, so he felt no need to rush her further.

He shifted to a more comfortable sitting position on the carpet, and something crinkled in his pocket. He pulled it out, and it was a chocolate frog he had picked up at Hagrid's. Smiling sheepishly, he opened the wrapper and held it out to her. "I think I've heard somewhere that crying girls like chocolate."

For the first time, the sobs broke, and she raised her head, wiping her swollen eyes on the back of her hand with a hiccup, even as the tears continued to fall and her voice still shook.

"Chocolate is *always* good." She sniffed, breaking the head of the frog into almost invisibly minute pieces which she laid out on the wrapper and began to eat one by one with rapid, picking little motions that were rather bird-like. "I've never – and I know it's stupid – but I never even considered losing *Addy* before."

"Addy?" he asked.

She giggled slightly, breaking a foot off the frog. "Addy and Vata. They're not nicknames, really, they're just what we've called each other between the two of us since we were tiny. Padma and Parvati are kind of a mouthful for toddlers." She blushed, looking down at her lap and shuffling the little bits of chocolate fretfully. "I mean, it's been lonely enough. Fiona's family moved to Canada between third and fourth year, Hermione's on the run, Louisa fled this summer, so it's just been me and Lavender, and ever since *she* started getting all weird –"

Neville frowned. "What do you mean, 'getting all weird?' What's wrong with Lavender?"

Parvati shook her head a little too quickly. "Nothing. I just meant that I wasn't –"

"Parvati." His voice was firm. "If there's something going on with Lavender, you need to tell me. You're Second Lieutenant for Gryffindor house, and she's one of our precious few seventh-years."

There was a long pause, then she spoke, her tone falsely light, her dark eyes unable to meet his as they flicked from the candy to the carpet and back. "I think...oh, nevermind, it's none of my business. I'm probably wrong anyway. It's probably just the stress. We're all stressed right now. After all, we've got what, three and a half months to live?"

"Parvati, if I have to go get her now...."

"Fine!" She looked up, biting her lip as her cheeks flushed darkly, then it all came out in a tumbling rush. "She's gotten all secretive! She never changes in front of me any more, she never takes her robe off until it's time for bed, and then she sleeps in her dressing gown, which is *mental*, because she's got a body I'd give my wand for and she's *always* worn those tiny little nighties that drive all the boys up the wall...and she's always in the bathroom, and I think she's crying, 'cause when she comes out, her face is all red and she won't tell me why, but sometimes I hear her throwing up, and she's been making all kinds of excuses to Seamus, even though she was all over him for the first two weeks, and *I* think –" Parvati stopped suddenly, but she didn't need to go on.

Neville's head sank forward, and he gripped the bridge of his nose tightly, trying to push back the headache that was abruptly forming. He had known Seamus and Lavender had been messing around for a while, but he'd never imagined his friend would be so stupid. At this rate, he was going to be out half the seventh year by June. "I really, really, *really* do not need this."

"I don't know for *sure*," Parvati offered lamely.

"I'm going to kill him," Neville's head shook slowly, his voice low and matter-of-fact. "If he's gotten her in trouble, I am going to simply have to kill him."

He stood up, drawing his wand as he began to move towards the door to the tower dormitory, but Parvati jumped to her feet behind him, quickly bundling the remains of the frog in its wrapper. "Wait! You should probably at least talk to Lavender first!"

Neville nodded reluctantly. "You can get her, then...it's up to you if you tell her why I want to see her. I'll wait."

She nodded, then vanished towards the door to the girls dormitory. As he waited for her to return, Neville sat on the couch, staring blankly into the fireplace. First Susan, now Lavender. He laughed darkly. If they were all in such a hurry, couldn't they have gotten started a little sooner? It *was* a nine-month school term.... And Merlin help him if there were any more! He wondered how exactly he would phrase such a ban to the D.A., or if there was any humanly possible way to enforce it.

His musings were broken as the door opened again and Lavender stepped out, clutching the remnants of Parvati's chocolate frog as if it were a protective talisman. Her face was pale, and now that he looked, he noticed that her robes were buttoned all the way to the neck, and she seemed to be wearing not just her shirt, but her sweater underneath as well, which was definitely unusual. His eyes flicked to her waistline, but it was impossible to tell anything under the loose black folds.

He smiled in a way that he hoped was soothing and compassionate. "Sorry to bother you, Lav, I just wanted to talk to you a second, if you don't mind...."

She nodded, sitting at the farthest end of the couch. "Is it about the D.A.? Did I do something wrong?"

"No! Not at all!" He hesitated, wondering how to broach the subject. "I was just...is, uh, everything okay between you and Seamus?"

Lavender looked away into the fire, a slight flush appearing across her white cheeks. "We're just friends. I like him a lot, he's got a really sexy accent, and we kind of...you know, it went a little further for a while, but we're just friends." She glanced over at him, and there was a surprisingly pained look on her face. "Did he ask you to talk to me? Did I hurt him? I didn't think he was in love with me...."

"Not as far as I know." Neville sighed, realizing he'd need to take a more direct approach. "Lav, I was talking to Parvati because she had a pretty good scare with Padma tonight. She didn't mean to, but it kind of came out that she's been really worried about you. She says you haven't been yourself."

The lovely purple eyes that had given his friend her name widened, and she dropped the chocolate in her lap, crossing her arms defensively. "How so?" she demanded.

"Wearing your robe all the time. Refusing to change in front of her. Sleeping in your dressing gown. Hiding in the bathroom to cry. Hiding that you've been throwing up. Dumping Seamus when *she* thinks you still like him." He looked pointedly at the cuff of the sweater that protruded from the loose sleeve of the robe. "Wearing all kinds of layers."

She shrugged. "One of the other girls called me something pretty nasty. I've decided to be a little more modest."

Neville barely managed to keep from laughing at that. Instead, he crossed his own arms, giving her a long, hard look. "Lavender, you've been getting called those names since second year, and you've never cared! Everyone knows you're just a flirt. You won't really let a boy get anywhere unless you actually like him, and even then you're no worse than any of the other girls...they're just jealous. We all know that, *you* know that, and I'm not going to believe someone figured out a new way to say it that would hurt you...and if they did, that I wouldn't know about it because you'd torn their eyes out!"

"Well maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do!" She retorted.

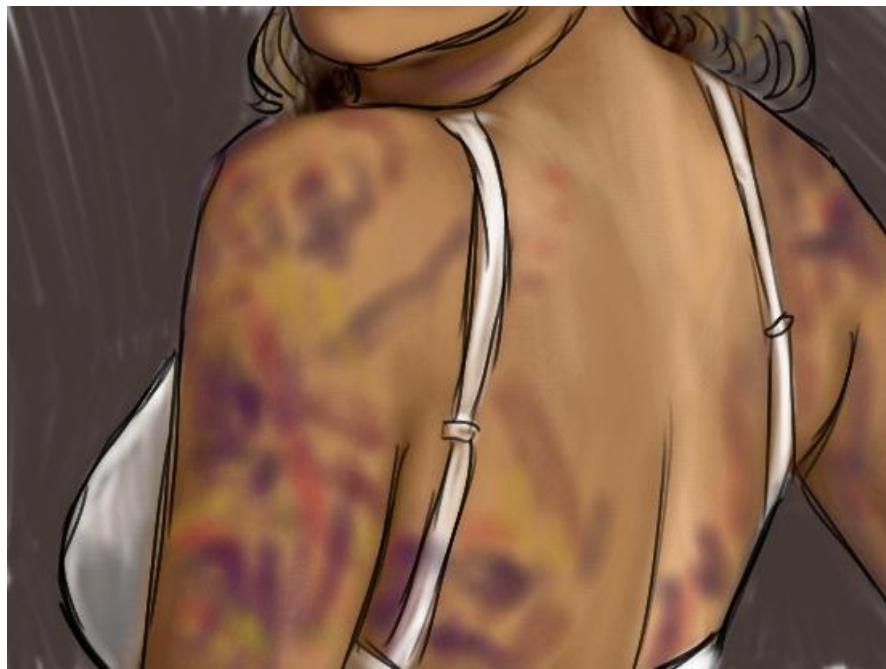
"Or maybe you've gotten knocked up and are trying to hide it?"

Lavender looked utterly stunned. Her mouth opened, then shut again. It wasn't the expression of someone who had been caught, it was as if he had just suggested that she had been sneaking out to have a torrid affair with the giant squid, or was attempting to hide an elaborate tattoo in tribute of You-Know-Who. "You think I'm *pregnant?*"

Suddenly feeling completely unmoored, Neville spread his hands. "You've been...."

"I know what I've been doing!" she snapped. "Fine. If you think I'm going to have a baby, go ahead, knit me some booties, throw me a shower, whatever. Just drop it and I'd thank you to leave me and whatever I'm supposedly expecting alone, thank you very much." With an indignant huff, she popped the frog into her mouth and stood up, stalking back to the door of the girls dormitory.

Neville scrambled after her. "Lavender, *wait...*" He reached out, grabbing her arm, and she gasped, cringing. A sudden new, horrible suspicion shivered through him. The gasp had been one of unmistakable pain, but he knew he hadn't gripped her hard. Their eyes met, and he knew.



Taking her wrist in his other hand so that she couldn't get away, he let go of her arm and pushed up the three layers of sleeves. She was too shocked to protest, but her head fell, and she began to tremble as he stared at the exposed skin.

Her entire arm was covered in bruises. Every color and stage of healing from nearly black to the faintest yellow, they overlapped one another, new atop old, but the pattern was clear. Four fingers and a thumb in each set. A man's hand. A man's hand that had seized, hurt, held, restrained. Neville let go, drawing back in horror. "*Who...? What...?*"

Lavender had begun to cry, but the tears were silent, and she was no longer trembling. Her face had fallen to the palest gray, but there was an odd expression of distant resignation as her hands went to the collar of her robes and she peeled them away, letting them fall in a heap at her feet. The sweater came next, then the tie, and finally, her fingers went to the buttons of her shirt, and then she was standing there in only her skirt and bra, her arms limp at her sides, her head down, tears falling from beneath the veil of her dark brown hair.

Most of the young men of Gryffindor, and indeed, the majority of the school would have been beside themselves with delight to have Lavender Brown strip off for them, but Neville felt only a sick, hideous rage. There were more bruises on the other arm, across her shoulders, at her waist and ribs. Most of them were shaped like fingers, but others were longer, thinner, the marks of being struck hard with a wand being used as a simple bludgeon rather than a tool of magic. Most terribly, at the base of her neck where it joined her shoulder, across the top of her chest, and on the delicate skin inside her wrists were crescents of bruises so deep that they had nearly broken the skin. Human bite marks. No. Sub-human. "Oh, *Lavender....*"

She did not look up, but she wrapped her arms around herself tightly, her shoulders shaking hard. He took a step forward and lifted the robe from the floor to drape it over her, wanting to close her in his arms, hold her, protect her, but afraid of how she would react.

"I can't say who." She murmured, "He'll have his father kill my whole family. Says he'll turn them in as Blood-Traitors, and that all that needs is say-so. He can do it, too. I *know* his Dad's a real Death Eater, and if he's half as sick as his son, he'd probably give a present to thank him for giving him the idea to do it."

Neville couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You don't mean *Malfoy* did this to you? I *never* thought he'd actually – "

"No, not him, not at all." The dark head shook quickly, but her tone was sincere. Then she looked up, and there was such disgust and self-hatred on her face that it physically hurt to see. "But *some* people have found out that they like having power over other people a lot more than having Malfoy tell them what to do all the time, and *some* people have found out that they really, really like to...like to cause pain, and they don't want to wait for anyone to tell them when they can. And what could be better, really, than the power of causing pain to the high and mighty Gryffindor girl that most of the boys would love to even get to touch?"

"Crabbe –" Neville growled, and she nodded. "And Goyle?"

She nodded her head again, then raised her chin defiantly. "I didn't say anything!"

"Lavender, I'm so sorry, I never should have...damn it, I should have...how could I have missed it?" He tore at his hair in frustration and rage, then swore loudly.

"The hell is goin' on down here, a body'd think...." They turned, and Seamus was standing at the bottom of the steps to the tower dorm, his hand still on the doorknob as he stared in shock and confusion at the scene before him. The blue eyes swept over the clothing on the floor, the robe clutched oddly around Lavender's shoulders, Neville's mussed hair, the tears on Lavender's cheeks, and a dark flush came over the freckled face.

"I truly hope," he said quietly, "that Fearless Leader has an explanation damned fast, or I'm expectin' I'll be needin' to break his face...and poor Miss Hannah's heart in the bargain."

"He didn't do anything, Seamus, honest!" Lavender's eyes were pleading, but the young wizard was staring stonily at Neville.

"I'd never'd guessed –"

"I *didn't!*" Neville yelled vehemently. "I'll swear on whatever you want me to, Seamus, but this is no time for jealousy!"

The fair brows drew together darkly. "Then what's goin' on?"

"What's going on," Neville drew the charmed Galleon from the pocket of his robes and tapped it with his wand, "is that you and I are going to meet Ernie, Fritz, Mike, and Terry in the Room of Requirement, and then we've got a party to finish...in Slytherin."

OOO

The ceiling was lower, there were no windows, the bed hangings were green, and the hooks on the walls where no one ever hung up their robes were shaped like serpents, but otherwise, the Slytherin dormitory was almost identical to the one Neville had lived in for the past six and a half years. He didn't know why that surprised him. He had seen the ones in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw before, knew that there had been very little difference in either of those, but some part of his mind had still childishly expected Malfoy and his friends to either live in hideously lavish excess or some form of animalistic lair.

His eyes scanned the beds, passing over the sleeping figures of Malfoy, Nott, and Zabini before he spotted the two hulking young men they had come for. He motioned to the others, and they fanned out, Terry sealing the door as Seamus, Ernie, and Fritz pointed their wands at the Slytherins, casting Crabbe and Goyle's roommates into a far deeper, dreamless sleep.

Neville directed his own wand at the two thugs. *Muffliato...Levicorpus!* Instantly, Crabbe and Goyle were yanked into the air, their sheets and blankets thrown back as they yelled out in alarm, dangling awkwardly as if hoisted by invisible ropes at their ankles. Two pairs of small, piggy eyes blinked in shock, trying and failing to take in the presence of the intruders and their own abrupt awakening, and Neville smiled. "Good evening, gentlemen."

Crabbe was the first to recover, scowling from a face that was increasingly flushed as the blood began to rush to his head. "Longbottom?"

"Very good. And may I introduce my friends," he gestured at the fellow D.A. members who had returned to stand in a loose semi-circle around him. "Seamus Finnigan, Terry Boot, Fritz Bagman, Ernie Macmillan, and Mike Corner. We've come to have a little chat with you boys that we didn't think could wait until morning."

The cool threat in his tone registered clearly even to the notoriously dim-witted pair, and Crabbe's eyes widened, his barrel-like chest inflating as he began to bellow at the top of his lungs, "PROFESSOR SLUGHORN! DRACO! PROFESSOR SLUGHORN! THERE'S GRYFFINDORS IN THE DORM!"

Ernie raised an eyebrow, stepping forward to poke the dangling Slytherin in the chest with his wand. "Oh, be accurate, my dear chap," he raised his own voice in a shout as loud as Crabbe's. "AND HUFFLEPUFFS AND RAVENCLAWS!"

The others continued to sleep undisturbed, and Seamus smiled, cocking his head. "Did we forget to tell you? No one can hear a blessed thing you lads are going to say...or scream, for that matter. We didn't want anything to interrupt us."

Crabbe continued to bellow in now-wordless rage and alarm, flailing out at them with his fists, but they simply stepped back out of range. Goyle, however, seemed more frightened than outraged, and he frowned deeply, his oddly soft voice tight. "Whatcha gonna do t'us?"

"Now there's the real brains of the operation," Michael noted, "Mr. Goyle has ascertained that this is not, in fact, a social call...although, why don't you let them down, Neville. They're turning purple, and it's no good to us if they pass out."

Nodding, Neville flicked his wand, and they dropped to their beds with a crash that rattled the floorboards, and he distinctly heard a slat snap on Goyle's four-poster. Before either could recover themselves, however, Seamus had shot a Body-Bind at them, and they lay frozen ridiculously in the tangled postures in which they had fallen, unable to so much as twitch a finger.

The men of the D.A. moved in closer now, stepping between the beds. "Let's go alphabetically," Neville suggested, "Mr. Crabbe...."

For the first time, the narrow, muddy-brown eyes registered genuine fear, but Neville felt less than no pity, remembering the awful bruises that had swollen and marred Lavender's slender arms. "We've been talking to a young lady in my house. You might remember her: Lavender Brown?" Recognition dawned in the eyes, but it was quickly replaced by a smugness that made his fingers itch to change their plans, perhaps even try a Cruciatus Curse on the animal.

Instead, he forced his voice to remain calm, even pleasant. "She says you've been threatening her family, and she showed me some very upsetting marks you'd left on her. The guys and I don't take kindly to people who hurt and terrorize girls, but we've decided not to do anything rash. See, we believe in helping and teaching one another, and so we've come here to give you some free lessons about what you seem to like the most: power, brute force, and nasty little spells."

Crabbe's face went pale under the Body-Bind, and Neville stepped back, allowing Seamus to come forward. "Lesson one: Power." He sat down on the side of the bed, lounging next to the crumpled giant with one elbow propped casually on the pillow, his voice taking on the sing-song cadence that he usually used to relate a particularly amusing story. "Now, don't you know there's many different kinds of power. For example, there's the fine kind of power that Neville has, there. Fearless Leader can call up his friends in the middle of the night, and we'll drop whatever we're doin' – and I happen to know Ernie there was doin' somethin' lovely as a summer's day, when it comes to it – because we respect him, we trust him, and we rather fancy him as a person of fine upstandin' character."

Seamus reached out, tweaking Crabbe's pug nose. "Ah, but that's not the power that's to your likin', now, is it? You like the kind that comes outa fear. But we shan't be leavin' you out in the rain, just because you're more than twice a fool."

"You want fear, Vinny my darlin'?" The change was shocking. The same voice that had seemed to chatter from across a barstool had now turned into sounds that were foreign, even primal, and a cold shiver went up Neville's spine as it always did when he was faced with the darkest parts of his friend. The blue eyes were like an ocean storm, and Seamus grabbed the shoulder of his shirt, ripping the sleeve away in a harsh rasp of shredding cloth to expose the half-healed tattoo.

"This is power. This is fear. This can strike down lads twice as big as your sorry self, and this is somethin' that you've come very, very close to bringin' on, and you really, really don't want to. But I apologize, truly I do." He let go of the sleeve. "You wouldn't understand what it meant if I told you. So I'll let you guess, and let us try again...you're never safe. No matter where you go, no matter who you're with. We can come to you in your own sweet bed, when you've your pants

at your ankles in the bathroom, when you're stuffin' your face...and we can do whatever we blessed well want to you. Any time. Anywhere. Anythin'.

"As for what you did to that dear lass, do you recall the power I told you Neville had? Well as we're chattin' here, he's called a few others, and her whole family's bein' shepherded away where your lot'll never find them in ten thousand years of searchin'. That's Fearless Leader's power...and oh, Vinny, my lamb, I do hope I've impressed upon you that we can also happily provide your kind if you do insist."

The sweetness returned to the freckled face with an abruptness that was as frightening as the darkness in itself, and he chuckled Crabbe jovially under the chin. "Try to remember that, shall you? That's a grand boy."

Seamus stood again, stepping back to join his friends, and Ernie took his place at the bedside by Crabbe's head. The Lieutenant was wearing only his black and yellow pajamas, and he unbuttoned the top wordlessly, peeling it off his shoulders and dropping it to the floor. The heavy muscles rippled beneath his skin as he laced his fingers together, cracking the knuckles with a sound like gunshots.

"Lesson two: Brute force." He reached out and grabbed Crabbe's own emerald-green pajama top, and the buttons burst off wildly as he yanked it open. The flesh beneath was pale. "You're a big boy, Vincent, but so am I, and there are different kinds of big. You, for example, attained your size by virtue of the fact that your mother clearly experienced some understandable confusion between her husband and an ox. You're strong enough to terrify the children, to manhandle a woman, but you're not really that strong. You're soft. You've just coasted along on what nature gave you."

Ernie poked one thick finger into Crabbe's doughy midsection, then pulled back to run the same finger over the outline of his own taut biceps. "These, on the other hand, are a different kind of strength. They come from working thousands of hours on my family's farm, and on the Quidditch pitch, and in my room. And I promise you, Vincent, whether or not we wear the same size robes and tip the scales near each other, there's a world of difference in what we can do."

Sweat had broken out across Crabbe's forehead, and though his eyes had seemed intimidated by Seamus, there was downright panic in them now. This was something he understood far more easily. Ernie saw the fear, and he smiled. "Oh, I'm not going to beat you. That would be unnecessarily messy, and wouldn't make nearly as much of an impression in the end. I'm only going to touch one finger. That's a promise."

Rather than alleviating Crabbe's panic, Ernie's words only increased it, and white showed all the way around the dark irises as the young Hufflepuff took the tip of Crabbe's pinky finger between his own forefinger and thumb. The thick arm flexed, muscles and tendons cording hard along his forearm, veins standing out on the back of his hand as he began to squeeze, exerting the pressure that Neville had seen crack walnuts with the ease other men shelled peanuts.

Fear vanished into pain in the Slytherin's eyes as the fingertip was slowly crushed, and tears began to leak down the immobilized cheeks. There was a soft, gruesome popping noise, and

Ernie drew back his hand. The tip of Crabbe's finger was livid purple, the fingernail split deeply, and blood rained onto the sheets in wide, scarlet circles as it began to swell instantly to the size of a large grape.

"Now," Ernie said quietly, bending down to pick up his top, "that was Lesson One. It is up to you if you choose to need a second lesson. But that one doesn't involve your finger." He turned to the others. "Tiresius, you are taking the last, I do believe? It is your particular forte."

Terry bowed elaborately. "Of course, Mr. Macmillan, I'd be delighted..." he winked as they passed each other, then added in an undertone that was still clearly audible to everyone, "and remind me never to piss you off, will you?"

The Ravenclaw picked Crabbe's wand up off the nightstand, turning it over curiously in his hands as if he'd never seen such an object before. He bounced it experimentally a few times on his palm, then lashed out in a lightning-fast motion, whipping it across Crabbe's side with a loud slap. It left a long, red welt that Neville knew would soon turn into the same kind of bruise he had seen drawn cruelly across Lavender's fair skin, but the look of detached, scientific interest never left Terry's face. "Efficient," he said calmly, "but a poor use of the tool. This is...ash, I believe? With...." He ran his own wand over it, "Dragon core. Eight and a half inches, rather thick, no give. Not the best tool for finesse, but still a wand. You should be ashamed."

He sat on the edge of the mattress, returning Crabbe's wand to the nightstand and holding up his own. "Willow and unicorn, thirteen inches precisely, extremely flexible. Very, very versatile. Honestly, because I've given so much attention to the root construction of magical incantation, I can really do almost anything I want with this. For example, it's going to be very useful tonight for the purpose of some very delicate memory work on you. We can't stay here with our silencing spells all night, but it would be annoying if you told anyone, yet defeat the purpose if you didn't remember our talk. So you'll be remembering everything, but you will be utterly unable to recall who we were. Very tricky, but I certainly can do it."

Terry ran the tip of his wand along Crabbe's hairline. "The human brain is a fascinating thing, especially the magical brain, but magic can also do so much *to* it. How would you like to have an insatiable appetite for that dragon dung Sprout likes to use for fertilizer? Or perhaps an irresistible attraction to Muggle women? Or Muggle men? Or housecats, for that matter? Maybe a tendency to spout off in praise of Potter every time you're near your little Death Eater friends? What do you think would be most interesting?"

Crabbe's eyes were pleading, desperate, but he was unable to make a single sound. Terry shrugged. "Well, if you have no answer, we might just stick to memory charms for now. *Obliviate culintibus!*" The eyes squeezed shut, then opened again warily when nothing seemed to have happened. "Oh, it doesn't matter *now*," Terry giggled, "but it'll be a lot of fun watching you tomorrow at meals now that you've lost all recollection of how to use eating utensils!"

There was a moment's consideration in the eyes, then they widened in horror at the realization that Terry was right, and the Ravenclaw took a modest little bow. "I'm glad you like it. Of course, I'm not as brave as some of the other men, nor able to arm-wrestle a Mountain Troll like

Ernie and Fritz, but I don't really need to be. I can do this from anywhere I have line of sight...not that *you* need to see *me*. I know about a half-dozen things to prevent *that*. But I do feel threatened easily, and if I did, or if any of my friends did, it would only take a flick of this," he ran the wand between his hands, "to send you back to nappies and make me feel much better."

Michael laughed, "Terry, you should go into teaching!"

"I've thought about it," Terry shrugged, "but I'd rather go into Charm Development, though Merlin knows I'll probably end up an accountant at a desk somewhere. Anyway," he turned back to Crabbe. "That's all I have to say for now, though I will be back to tidy up your brain at the end of the night. Shouldn't take long, it's not very big."

Terry went back to the group, and Neville stepped forward again, nodding his head to indicate his comrades. "Believe it or not, Vince, you're getting off incredibly easily tonight. These gentlemen were extremely, extremely angry when they found out what you and your little friend had done. So was I. The only reason you are getting this warning, rather than simply having your roommates wake up to find you two disappeared forever, is because Ginny and Parvati convinced me that it was better for Lavender in the long run if we didn't do anything really horrific to you. They say a girl would rather have protectors than uncontrollable vigilantes."

He leaned down until his nose was only inches from Crabbe's. "But we will be watching, and if you ever lay a finger on *any* girl in this school again – even your own house, and I *do* have ways of knowing – we won't be talked down, and you won't be found. If you understand that, blink twice."

One blink. Two blinks.

Michael let out a low whistle of astonishment. "Hell, Terry, I owe you five Sickles. He *can* be taught."

"I'm glad to see that," Neville smiled, then he stood, brushing off his robes as he looked at Goyle, who appeared on the verge of open hysteria beneath the enforced immobility. "Now, for Mr. Goyle...."

OOO

It was nearly dawn when Neville finally returned to his own bed. The anger and hurt over what had been done to Lavender still burned deeply, but there was a definite layer of satisfaction as well. He was proud of his men. As angry as they all had been, no one had lost control, and the results, he felt, had been excellent.

Best of all, they were safe. Crabbe and Goyle would have a hard time convincing anyone – even Snape and the Carrows – that six people (though they couldn't remember who) had broken into their room (though they couldn't remember how) awoken no one, and threatened them terribly (though not hurt them, except for where Crabbe seemed to have shut his finger in a door, and Goyle's nastily stubbed toe) for no reason that they could admit. He could practically see Malfoy's contemptuous sneer telling them it had clearly all been a dream.

He rolled over, adjusting the pillow, but his musings were interrupted as his hand brushed something underneath. Pulling it out, he saw it was an envelope, carefully addressed to him in Dobby's familiar blocky hand. Neville opened it, lighting his wand to make out the words, and his face fell.

*Dear Mister Longbottom:*

*Dobby was going to tell you in person, but you and Mr. Finnigan had gone out, and Miss Weasley said you would not wish to be bothered, so Dobby is leaving a letter instead. Professor Snape was very angry about Hagrid's party, and that Hagrid and all his guests had got away and killed three Death Eaters (Dobby wishes to offer his very deepest congratulations on this!).*

*Professor Snape knew that the food had come from Hogwarts, and he ordered Dobby to tell him everything, but Dobby would not, and he would not punish himself for such a bad Master, but Dobby is a Free Elf thanks to the wonderful Harry Potter, and so he quit instead!*

*Professor Dumbledore told him that his brother owns a pub in Hogsmeade, so Dobby will go there and look for work. H.E.L.P. is scared to keep going now, so Neville Longbottom will have to go to the kitchens himself for food for his meetings, but Dobby has kept his Galleon if Harry Potter's friends ever need anything. Dobby is most sorry for leaving, but he had no choice.*

*Sincerely -*

*DOBBY*

*A Free Elf*

Neville sighed, closing the letter and tapping it with his wand. *Evanesco!* It disappeared, and he shook his head. He would miss the little elf, but he knew that it had taken a great act of bravery for even a freed elf to defy his Master so boldly. Dobby could certainly be annoying at times, but he had always been brave and loyal, and he decided to make special mention of the elf's final act to protect them at the next meeting.

He parted the bed hangings, intending to tell Seamus about the letter, but stopped. The other wizard's curtains were also drawn, but from within, he could clearly make out muffled sobs. Dobby's letter could wait. Frowning, he climbed out of bed, crossing the room and then knocking gently on the wooden corner post. "Seamus?"

"Neville?" There was a rustle of sheets, then the hangings opened, and his friend's face appeared, the eyes swollen and red-rimmed. He made no attempt to hide that he had been crying, and the tears were still wet on his cheeks. "I didn't mean to bother –"

"You didn't," Neville assured him quickly. "I was just worried about you."

Seamus sniffed, then smiled darkly. "'Tis a raw world when the good have to hold themselves back while the bad do as they please."

"I know what you mean." He sat on the edge of the bed. "I wanted to...well, a lot of things, actually. I'm glad we did *something*, and I think it worked, but there's a part of me that still wants to –" Neville didn't understand a word of the muttered stream of Gaelic that interrupted him, but the gist was more than clear. "Yeah."

Flopping back down against his pillow again, Seamus laced his long arms behind his head. "It's whistlin' in the wind, you know? We fight, we try, we're ready to bleedin' *die* for this, but even if we win, what's the *use*?"

His face was flushed, and his chest began to tremble as the tears rose anew in the blue eyes, brightening them in the faint moonlight. "Gryffindor stopped Slytherin. Merlin stopped Morgana. Fortadicci stopped Borgia. Prevanov stopped Rasputin. Dumbledore stopped Grindelwald. And now You-Know-Who...and then there'll just be another, and another, and oh, Neville, when is it blood *enough*? And it's never anythin' *new*, it's just the same old hates, and they get worse and worse, because they feed each other, and they use the blood from last time to justify more. And stoppin' Crabbe and Goyle won't stop a dozen more girls tonight that we don't know about from hidin' their bruises all over Britain, and a thousand more girls the next time it all comes again...and stoppin' them don't mean it weren't *done*! They still did it! *Right under our stupid, ignorant, fool noses they did it to her!*"

Seamus' eyes were squeezed shut now, and no more words could come through the tears, but Neville did not feel ashamed to see them. They weren't tears of weakness, they were tears of pain and rage and the unfairness of it all, of a strong youth who knew that strength was not enough in the face of things past that could not be undone and things yet to come that could not be prevented. He let them go, wracking and aching and hurting and burning until they spent themselves in a last few long, shuddering breaths, the pillow stained dark with moisture at either side of the hands still tightly woven beneath the sandy head.

Only then did Neville reach out and squeeze Seamus' shoulder firmly. "Lavender's strong, a lot stronger than she comes off because I swear she'd flirt with Death himself. She'll be all right."

"She thinks its her fault." The eyes did not open, but Seamus' mouth twisted in a horrible smirk. "Pushed me away when I tried to hold her, make it better. Said she didn't want my pity...but it ain't. Ain't love, either, though, it's...." he sighed.

"She's your good friend, and she's hotter than dragon fire, and you're not blind or dead or in love with anyone else. And even if you don't love her, once you've messed around to a certain degree, there *is* something beyond friendship, and that matters," Neville said understandingly.

"I can't reckon it." Seamus shook his head, and now his eyes did come open with a look of surprisingly innocent bemusement. "How could anyone lay their hands on that girl and want to *hurt* her? I'd swear when she let me snog her I thought there were angels in my fingertips."

"I don't know either," Neville admitted, "but there are sick, sick people in this world."

"You-Know-Who's got a proper knack for findin' them!" Seamus spat.

"But that's good for us, you know?" Neville let out a thin, cynical chuckle. "I mean, we'll be taking out all of the sickest witches and wizards in the U.K. in one fell swoop – and half their kids in the bargain, if Slytherin fights on their side – so maybe that next one will skip a generation?"

There was a long pause, then Seamus shrugged noncommittally. "I'll not say to that, 'cause I know I'm in a mood, mate. I'd like as say somethin' I'd regret later." He looked up. "You'd ought to get some sleep, though...there ain't much more point fussin' with me."

Neville recognized the thinly veiled request for him to leave, and nodded. "You're probably right." He gave his friend's shoulder a final pat. "You too, though."

"Course."

He got up and returned to his own bed, hearing the hangings slide shut behind him, but the sobs did not start again, and he knew he had been asked to ignore them if they did. He had done what he could for his friend, but the truth of it was that Seamus was too right about too much of it for the pain to ease that simply, and really, he supposed it would be worse if it could be. In the end, wasn't the difference between themselves and people like Crabbe and Goyle that they *could* weep for victims they didn't even know as easily as for their own friends?

His thoughts were dark as he drifted off to sleep, and his dreams were troubled, but when his wand began to buzz loudly on the nightstand, waking him again a few hours later, he smiled as he looked across the room.

The curtains of the other bed were open, and in the golden morning light Lavender's hair gleamed warmly across the pillow. She was wrapped tightly in a sheltering cocoon of every sheet and blanket from the bed, and her own battered arm barely peeped from between them to rest against the smooth, freckled skin of the arms that held her in safe, peaceful sleep.



## Chapter Fourteen

### Sins of the Father

It was six thirty-eight on Saturday, February 14, and less than ten minutes after dinner had ended, the Gryffindor boys bathroom had become a free-for-all nightmare. There had already been two fights, one throat almost sliced in a grossly unwise attempt to charm a razor, and Euan Abercrombie had nearly drowned in the sink after a sixth-year climbed over him to get to the mirror.

Neville and Seamus exchanged a look, and the young Irishman shook his head ruefully. "I don't recall it's ever been this mad before, do you?"

"There've been Prefects, we weren't going to die, and there wasn't a nine o'clock curfew." Neville pointed out.

"True enough." Seamus shrugged. "However, we *are* seventh-years who have dates with grown witches, and I think that probably gives us some level of priority, don't you?"

After another long look and a few mental calculations of what exact time he was supposed to meet Hannah, what exact time it was now, and the melee at the sinks, Neville nodded and stepped forward, raising his voice to echo loudly off the tiled walls. "THAT'S IT, I'm pulling rank! Jack, hand over the cologne before you poison us all. Ritchie, if you put any more Setting Potion on your hair, your head will deflect the Killing Curse. Leslie, get your wand away from your face, Ginny has Spot Remover. Geoff, give that back to whoever you borrowed it from. Colin, I am not donating more blood if you slice your face open with that thing, and it's all blonde anyway."

The bright blue eyes turned to him with a surprisingly dirty glare. "It's a Muggle razor, I'm more comfortable with it, and I've been using it for a year and a half now...it's not about how it looks, it's about how it feels when you kiss."

Jack Sloper laughed. "Who's complained about how it feels, Creevey? Your Granny?"

"For your information, Sloper," Colin said calmly, tilting his head to run the oddly-shaped blade along the underside of his jaw, "I've actually done pretty well with girls."

"Demelza's the first date you've had!" Ritchie scoffed, attempting to coerce his hair into a part.

"*At Hogwarts*," Colin corrected him. "Fourth year, they all either hated me for supporting Harry, or had crushes on him. Fifth year, they all had crushes on him...however, *both* those years, I did just fine with the Muggle girls on holidays, thank you very much, because they think I'm cute and mysterious and know I go to some kind of exclusive and super-secret private boarding school."

"Look out, boys!" Andrew Kirke flicked a handful of soap suds at Colin, landing them squarely on the back of his head and ignoring the murderous look in return. "We've got a proper Gilderoy Lockhart here! Just call me if you need any help, Gil...you've just got the one really good hand, and Demelza's –"

"ANDREW!" Neville put down the soap he was lathering up and turned to catch the other boy with a sternly disapproving glare. "That's enough. We've got kids in here."

Kirke blushed, "Sorry, Sir."

"I'm not a kid!" As the youngest one in fourth year, Geoff Hooper looked highly offended, planting both hands on his hips as he faced Neville sternly. "I'm in the D.A., aren't I?"

"Using one of these seriously yet?" Neville gestured towards the boy with his razor.

"Not exactly."

"Do you honestly know how Andy was going to finish that sentence?"

Geoff looked down, his hands falling to his sides. "No," he admitted.

Neville nodded as he finished touching up the last bit on his chin and rinsed his face in the basin. "Then you're a kid."

"Don't listen to Fearless Leader," Seamus smirked. "He just got his first kiss this fall."

Jimmy Peakes looked stunned. "Is that *true*?"

"Yeah," Neville could feel himself blushing, "It was Parvati."

"Do witches really like the scars?" Jack asked, gesturing at the older boy's back. "I mean, should I tell her this one on my lip came from the Cruciatus Curse?"

"Hannah likes them, but that's different...I got them for her. As for that one – can I use a little of that Setting Potion, Rich? – is it true?"

Jack hesitated. "Well, I did bust my lip when I got Cruciated, but Ginny healed it all up clean. It's technically from a Bludger."

"That's still perfectly manly, mate," Seamus offered, "I'd stick with the truth."

"Truth's always best." Neville gave his appearance one final once-over in the mirror, brushing back a stray curl that had slipped forward over one ear, then nodded in satisfaction and turned to Seamus. "Monkey house is yours, Finnigan. If my Galleon goes off in the next two hours, either Harry's back or You-Know-Who is putting on a dance number in the Great Hall."

"Fair enough," the other wizard laughed, then flicked his wand, and Neville caught the rose he had conjured from mid-air as it sailed towards him. "And take that, you always want to bring flowers on Valentine's Day."

"Thanks, you're a true friend," Neville grinned.

"I try, Fearless Leader, I do try."

OOO

"Hannah's still fussing with herself, if you don't mind waiting, old chum," Ernie gestured towards one of the comfortable couches that surrounded the fireplace in the Hufflepuff common room. "And thanks again."

"Don't mention it, it's the least I could do for you two," Neville smiled. He had promised the Macmillans that they could have the Room of Requirement after he and Hannah were finished with it, knowing that they hadn't been able to spend a night together as husband and wife since the term had begun. "How's Susan?"

Ernie looked around cautiously, then sat down on the arm of the couch, dropping his voice and leaning in close. "I think she's starting to show, but not in any way you could tell unless she was wearing something really tight...honestly, it's only if you feel her stomach and know how it was before. Still...." He grinned, "It's exciting. She's convinced I'm going to think she's ugly when she gets bigger, but I'm looking forward to it. Right now, it's almost not quite real that she's got a *person* in there, you know?"

Neville nodded. "I've checked again with Gran. If we can use the room to get her to the roof and a broom, we can use the same trick we did with Lee once she's off the grounds, and from there Gran's promised to get her safely to your family if anything happens."

"It's a load off my mind, I'll tell you that," Ernie sighed, shaking his head. "Maybe I'm an awful person for it, but it makes it easier that I might die."

"Why's that?"

"Before, there were four possibilities," he explained. "I die, she dies, we both die, we both live. Three of those I could handle, but the idea that I could lose her and would have to just go on alone was pretty hard. Now I know that no matter what, she'll be all right, and if something happens to me, she'll have the baby to go on for...and I have a son or daughter I want to live to see that really makes the idea of ridding the world of You-Know-Who into something worth fighting that much harder for."

Ernie looked down at his hand, where he was wearing his ring for the evening, twisting the thick gold band pensively. "Strange, though, sometimes...when I think what a *kid* I still was at the end of last year. Worst thing I worried about was my Apparition Test. Now I'm married, a father-to-be, a soldier planning to maybe die. Seems like years have passed, not months."

"Oh, Merlin's wand, Ernie, do I know what you mean!" Neville laughed humorlessly. "Look at me – school joke, Snape's whipping boy, one of Harry Potter's little tag-alongs right there with Creevey – now I'm, as my Gran called me, the General of some kind of army. Did you know I'm going *gray*?" He motioned to the sides of his head, and his friend chuckled.

"Wasn't going to point it out to you, but yeah, I noticed. It's hardly anything, though, really. And actually, if it makes you feel better, we're both still Snape's whipping boys." He patted his shoulder, grinning darkly.

"But this time at least he had to use an actual whip," noted Neville.

"Leave you boys alone for five minutes, and such delightful topics you find to discuss."

Neville turned at the sound of Hannah's voice, and his heart gave an odd little jump in his chest. She smiled, twirling around so that the skirt of her lilac sundress flared up to show her long legs. "You like it? I don't know why you asked me to wear something summer, though."

"You look fantastic." He stood, holding out the rose Seamus had conjured and tapping it with his wand so that the deep red faded to the same shade of pale purple as her dress. "Here...I brought this for you. Happy Valentine's Day."

"It's lovely," she tucked it into her hair, then slid her arm through his. "So, where are we going?"

"I'll show you," he said. Neville led her to the wall beside the fireplace, then stopped, letting go of her arm and pacing back and forth three times. "I'm ready to go back," he announced.

The door re-appeared just as he had requested it to before leaving, and he bowed, motioning her towards it. "Ladies first."

"Have a good time, you two," Ernie smiled, waving them off, "and remember, we expect you kids back by nine!"

Neville rolled his eyes, then opened the door, allowing Hannah to enter before he himself passed through and closed it behind him.

They were outdoors. The sky above was a brilliant blue, thickly dusted with puffy white clouds, and a warm breeze stirred their hair and the gauzy fabric of Hannah's skirt, bringing with it the rich scent of flowers, fresh water, and new-cut grass. The faint rustle of the leaves in the old oaks mixed with the hum of insects and the faint trill of faraway birdsong, and the babble of a crystal-clear stream over smooth pebbles added to the peaceful mood.

Hannah turned slowly, her mouth falling open in astonishment as she took in the seemingly endless landscape with its distant green hills and long stretches of flower beds and manicured lawns. "Where are we?"

"Room of Requirement," Neville smiled. "It's like the 'sky' in the Great Hall...just an illusion. But I think it's my favorite one. I told it that I needed somewhere that would be just right to take you, and this is what it became."

"It's *home*," she laughed, but there were tears in her eyes, "oh, Neville, it's *Kent* in the best part of the summertime! And that..." Hannah clapped one hand to her mouth as she pointed towards a cozy-looking little cottage nestled into a hedgerow down the lane. "...that's my secret house, but it's fixed!"

"Your secret house?" he asked bemusedly.

She blushed. "There's a little cottage at the end of our lane that's been abandoned since – oh, the late seventies, I guess – and I've always wanted to fix it up when I grew up, use it as a country cottage even though I'd properly live over the *Cauldron*."

"Then let's go see it!" He took her hand again, and they started down the lane, Hannah still marveling at the detail around them: perfect down to the weeds that forced their way through the well-kept surface of the lane and the clusters of Sweet William that nodded fragrantly from the cracks in the stone walls that bordered it. She looked radiant, utterly in her element, and Neville marveled at the way she came so vibrantly to life when they were away from the castle, even if it was just as far as the greenhouses or the Room of Requirement.

He laughed, and she looked up curiously, twirling a little stem of Bachelor's Buttons between her fingers. "You're just not a shade plant, are you, Hannah?" She raised an eyebrow, and he waved his hand at the landscape around them. "Bring you here, to the greenhouse, into the Muggle world, down to Hogsmeade, and you just shine...inside the castle, you pretty much disappear unless we're in the D.A." He tapped her teasingly on the nose.

"Family *Magus* Genus *Abbott* Species *Hannahenamorata* does not bloom without full daylight."

"Careful, now...that's an assumption, Professor," she teased back archly. "Correlation is not causation. This is similar to the long-held belief that *Magus Longbottom Nevillevalorum* was a blighted seedling, when it actually just had an unusually extended dormancy period followed by rapid maturation."

"And *your* assessment of the blooming habits of *Hannahenamorata*?"

"Blooming is suppressed by the presence of any species of *Magus Mortevorum*." She replied.

"Ah...an extremely serious pest. I think we're going to have to do some weeding." Neville said with mock gravity.

"Well, it's not native here." They had reached the cottage, and she trailed her hand over the wisteria-covered gate that led to the front garden. "It's exactly like I always imagined it...."

"I like your imagination." He pushed open the gate, but as he started up the cobblestoned walk to the front door, she stopped him. "What?" he asked quizzically.

"Don't go in." A deep blush had appeared on her cheeks, and she looked down at the sprig of flowers in her hand, her sandaled feet shuffling awkwardly. "It's...you're going to think I'm mental if you see the inside if it's really been pulled from my imagination."

"Why would I think it's mental?" He gestured around the garden. "Everything out here is wonderful...the Flutterby bushes, the Dragonfire lilies, the climbing roses...all of it."

Her reply was an inaudible mumble at first, then she sighed and repeated herself, louder this time. "It's *our* house, Neville. You're going to think I've gotten all carried away."

"Or," he retorted, "that you've been imagining a beautiful, pastoral future to get yourself through the darkness now, and that I'm honored and flattered to be a part of those fantasies, whether or not they ever come true." Neville smiled sheepishly. "Not that I'd mind so much if they did."

Hannah let out a little gasp. "You mean it?"

"I always liked you. We've been friends for ages, but now that I've gotten to know you so much more closely this year, there's a lot more to you than I thought...and I don't mean just that I've finally seen past the Disillusionment Charm of the robes and the pigtails to how gorgeous you are, either." He reached out, brushing his fingertips along the edge of her cheek as he met her beautiful green eyes directly. "There's a lot of pretty girls in the school. But you've got a kinder sense of humor than Ginny, you're not as shameless as Lavender, you're more down-to-earth than Parvati, you're more social than Hermione, you're from this *planet*, unlike Luna...you're amazing, Hannah, and I've been in love with you since some time this fall, but now I'm almost as far gone as Ernie."

She seemed to have been struck speechless, her own hand tracing where his had touched, her eyes wide, and he swallowed hard, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a tiny velvet bag. "If you're afraid I'm going to think what's in there is mental, then I might as well give you this first and let you think the same thing about me."

He opened the bag and reached in, drawing out a long, thin golden chain. On the end, a pendant the size of a Sickle dangled, flashing prettily in the sunlight. At first glance, it appeared to be a crystal of some kind, but on further inspection, it was simply the glitter of light off of the surface of a charmed bubble that didn't exist at all in point of fact. Inside, hanging suspended in mid-air just below the chain, was a tiny, living, delicate orchid of the palest blue.

"They only bloom for six hours," he explained quietly, "but it's been Charmed. It should last forever." Neville unclasped the chain and reached out, fastening it around her slender neck. "It was my mother's. I want you to have it."

"Neville..." Hannah touched the pendant carefully, her voice hushed, almost awed as she turned it in the light. "It's so beautiful...."



"It's not free," he smiled. She looked up uncertainly, and he went on. "I want to ask you something in return."

He knelt, taking both of her hands in his, and she gave a soft little cry, her cheeks falling abruptly pale as she shook her head. "Don't ask that, Neville...please...I'd say yes, I would, and I'm not really ready...."

"It's okay," he assured her, "I'm not going to. I've had to talk myself out of it a lot in the past few weeks, but I'm not going to ask you to marry me yet." Neville took a deep breath, pressing her hands to his lips and looking up into her eyes. "Hannah Grace Abbott, will you live for me?"

"What?" The green eyes blinked in confusion, and she shook her head faintly. "I don't..."

He stood again, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her in close, one hand flat against her chest over the pendant as he bowed his head to hers, near enough that his hair brushed her forehead. "Live for me. Do whatever you have to, fight harder than you ever knew you could, but *live* for me. Whether I survive and go on to ask you what I shouldn't ask you today and we have everything inside that house, or whether I fall and you have the rest of your life ahead of you, I want to know it will be good. Ernie told me you don't give your hearts away lightly, and my worst fear has been that you'll *survive* and I won't and you'll stop *living*. And I know better than almost anyone that's a lot worse than dying."

She kissed him, one hand at the back of his neck as the other joined his at her chest to wrap around the tiny, fragile flower that lay cool against their skin. He could feel her heartbeat speed up, and wondered if she could feel his, and that simple, steady, gloriously alive rhythm had become the most comforting thing in the world these past few months. *We're here, we're here, we're here*, it pulsed, and he was there, and so was she, in a moment that no Death Eater could take, no spell could disrupt, no hex or battle destroy.

Hannah pulled back only enough to speak, her lips moving warm and moist against his own. "Yes, Neville...I would be happy to live for you."

### OOO

February truly was the shortest month. Neville knew that his perception of time had been altered by the days lost to the fever, but it seemed as though Valentine's Day had barely passed before it was the 26th, and March was only two days away.

He was finding it harder and harder to pay even cursory attention to his studies, even in Herbology. Between the D.A. and attempting to squeeze as much time with friends and Hannah as he could into the few remaining months he had to live, there simply wasn't time. The Carrows took great glee in marking him down at every opportunity, but to his surprise, his grades remained stronger than they had any right to be in Charms, Herbology, and Divination, even with falling asleep in classes and a dozen homework assignments that had never been turned in at all.

Indeed, the teachers seemed to be taking every opportunity to show their own support for the officers of the D.A., even Professor Trelawney, who's predictions had taken what they all considered a disturbingly accurate turn as she mistily foretold their upcoming violent yet valiant deaths. This night, however, despite the three essays he needed to write and the tea service he was supposed to charm to be self-pouring, he was sitting in the Gryffindor common room, working on a letter to his grandmother.

...should say good-bye to them at Easter or not. I feel like I need to, but I don't want to upset them unfairly, or confuse them about what good-bye means. I worry that if I say that and then never come back, they'll start panicking about their nurses and orderlies. On the other hand, I can't just leave as though it were just another visit, and I'm not even sure if I should try and give them something to remember me by in their own way. What do you think, Gran?

*Hannah wants to come again too, if it's okay with you. She'll be spending the first two days of the holiday with her Dad, but then she wants to spend the rest of it with us. She doesn't talk about it, but I've seen pictures; she looks just like her Mom, and she's dropped hints that her father's gotten pretty cold towards her since she died. I just hope that they manage to work things out enough that he won't have all kinds of awful regrets. Part of me is almost hoping she doesn't come stay with us if it means sorting it all out with him.*

*Is there anything special that you would like to do during the holiday? It's only two weeks away now, and I've been thinking about it all the time. I think I'd like to go up to Blackpool with you and Mimsy, at least for a weekend. We had such fun there, even if great-uncle Algie was a little bit mental when I was little, but we can visit him and the rest of the family too. I'm definitely not a Squib now, and I've learned how to swim!*

He paused, putting down the Coding Quill and watching in fascination as the words changed neatly into harmless comments about the weather and the current Quidditch standings, the true contents of the letter now only visible to the intended recipient.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his watch, then glanced across the room to where Seamus was barely visible behind the couch as he struggled to pull a snuff box off his robes. It seemed to have grown very large teeth and clamped down tightly. A fairly large hole had already

been ripped in the black fabric, and his friend's face was flushed with effort as he wrestled the aggressive knick-knack. "Ten minutes to dinner..." Neville pointed out, "why don't you just stun that and lets go?"

"Because," Seamus growled, "I've nearly got the blasted thing...once it's started to transfigure, you're halfway there!"

Neville gave the violent snuff box a long, skeptical look. "Isn't it supposed to be a squirrel? I didn't think they had fangs."

"Irish squirrel."

"That's funny," he crossed his arms, regarding his friend with a look of deep innocence, "because I *know* I don't always have the best memory, but my Gran and I went to Dublin for a weekend to visit a friend of hers when I was nine, and I think ravenous, rampaging, carnivorous squirrels would have made a bit of an impression. Especially when I spent so much time outside in the back garden."

Seamus gave a hopeful, sheepish little smile. "*Northern* Irish squirrel?"

"Why don't you just give up Transfiguration?" Neville sighed, shaking his head with a fond chuckle. "You'll never get the N.E.W.T., even *if* you survive...and at this rate, I don't mean the battle, I mean your homework!"

"Well, it's like this..." he gave up on trying to pry the snuff box off his robes and slammed the handle of his wand into the lid instead, knocking it unconscious and allowing him to pull it off easily and buckle it tightly into his bag. "I figure I'm about to start gettin' fantastic marks."

Neville was not convinced. He gave a long, hard look at the bag. It had begun to growl faintly.  
"Really?"

"Really." Seamus kicked the bag beneath the couch and repaired the hole in his robes with a tap of his wand. "Process of elimination...I've learned just about every possible way to *not* transfigure something, so by the time we get back from holiday, I'll have no *choice* but to get it right every time."

Laughing, the two young men climbed out of the portrait hole and began to make their way down to the Great Hall. Colin met up with them on the staircase, his angelic face beaming with an ear-to-ear grin despite a nasty gash that was barely scabbed over across one rosy cheek.

"Neville! Did you hear? Amycus tried to make me Cruciate Jack!"

Neville did not return the younger boy's smile, staring at the wound in concern. "What happened to your face?"

"I wouldn't do it! Stood right up to him and told him he was out of his mind if he thought I would, and he could go ahead and Imperius me if he wanted to, but it wouldn't make the curse any stronger! He called me a filthy Mudblood and a whole bunch of other names, then he

slashed me with his wand, but he knew he couldn't make me." Colin winced slightly as he touched the cut, then grinned again, splitting the scab to send a thin trickle of blood down his chin to the collar of his already-stained shirt. "Demelza thought it was wicked brave." He blushed, looking down at his feet. "I think she's got kind of a crush on me...I'm spending the holiday with her."

"You've grown up a lot, Colin, she very well might," Neville agreed. "But you'll want to have Ginny fix that up for you as best she can after dinner. We don't want it getting infected or anything. Still, good for you. I'd have done the same thing."

Colin looked as though that were the best compliment anyone had ever given him. "You *would*?"

"Absolutely. Fearless Leader is easily as stupid as you are, Creevey," Seamus assured him.

"And *who*," Neville raised an eyebrow, "got us into this entire mess by mouthing off to Alecto in the first place, Mr. When-Will-You-And-Amicus-Be-Expecting?"

"Didn't say I was any brighter!"

The conversation came to an abrupt halt as they reached the Great Hall. Silence was strictly enforced at meals, and even *Muffliato* was of no use, as the three Death Eaters watched just as closely as they listened. Neville took his customary seat next to Ginny, giving her hand a quick squeeze beneath the table as his eyes flicked to Colin. He knew she had witnessed the attack, and she confirmed the boy's tale of bravery with a tiny nod and the faintest smile of almost maternal pride.

The plates and goblets were still empty, and every student in the room knew what that meant. More than two hundred pairs of eyes turned to the Staff Table before Snape had even stood, and Neville braced himself as he always did for the latest announcement. They were never good news.

"Attendance at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a privilege, not an entitlement," Snape intoned, his black eyes scanning back and forth over all four tables without pause or hesitation, his intended victim impossible to determine. Every breath was held, every pair of shoulders taut, every heart racing and face pale, and Neville knew that beneath the tables, at least seventy-seven other wands were being gripped as tightly as his own.

"That privilege relies not only upon your own magical ability and Blood Status, but also upon behavior. I understand that this is a time of great change for all of you, and that children often do not handle change well, nor exhibit particularly good self-control. Those of you who are older, the Dark Lord is still showing great mercy and tolerance, as he knows that you were brainwashed by years of study under and unwitting friendship with some very sadly deluded individuals, and it may take some time to correct your way of thinking." Snape paused a moment, and now his eyes did stop, but it was not a student who held their gaze, it was the doors of the Hall itself. "However, those who are truly adults are expected to be responsible for their own actions."

A flick of Snape's wand, and the two tall, heavy doors creaked open. Six robed and masked Death Eaters stepped into the Hall in neat, military lines of three, taking several precise paces into the room and then stopping, the heels of their shoes echoing on the stone floor.

Neville almost smiled. *SIX?* They actually expected to take all the seventh-years with *six*? Unless they only meant to take those who were *eighteen*, but that would still leave them outnumbered, if barely.

Then an icy chill filled the room, as though the storm-tossed sky above them had suddenly become real. Neville's heart was struck with a clutching, overwhelming dread, and all of the anguish and fear that he had held back came to the surface in a gasp that was more truly a sob. Only the knowledge of what it actually was, the sight of the same horror painted onto every other face surrounding him kept him together, kept him from breaking down in tears of despair.

Dementors. They glided into the room between the Death Eaters, their sick, rattling breaths raling from beneath the heavy hoods, their scabbed, rotted hands outstretched towards the feast of fear that awaited them. Snape motioned with his wand, and a silver doe appeared to stand calmly and regally before the Staff Table. Now his eyes were on Neville, and a smile touched his lips as the Dementors continued to slip in like a windborne plague. It was an endless river of black hopelessness as more and more of them appeared, until finally, thirty in all stood in a rasping cluster of unnatural terror.

There were a series of soft thuds as a dozen students hit the floor, unconscious, and several of the younger ones began to shriek inconsolably. The Dementors were moving again, spreading out, and they began to surround the Hufflepuff table, ignoring the other three Houses as though they didn't exist. More children went down, one second-year boy was sobbing so hard he threw up, and still they closed in until they were standing between each pair of students, the remaining four hanging back by the doorway as if to destroy any hope for a desperate escape.

Ernie's face was stark white, but he stood, turning to be almost toe-to-toe with the Dementor between himself and Susan, and to a collective gasp of astonishment that overwhelmed even the induced despair, he coiled himself and unleashed a staggering, powerhouse punch directly into the hooded face. The figure shuddered, and for a split second, Neville wondered if he had managed to do it. Ernie had always had trouble with his Patronus if he wasn't given a chance to collect his thoughts, but could it be as simple as the raw courage to *hit* them?

But the massive fist sank into the robes as though they were empty, and Ernie stiffened, his back arching, his eyes rolling white as he collapsed, striking his head on the side of his empty chair to leave a large gash at his hairline that trickled blood into a scarlet pool on the stones. Neville moaned softly, then his breath caught as he saw that his friend's attack had been no ill-considered burst of protectiveness.

Susan was on her feet, sparing no glance at her fallen husband as she leapt lightly onto the table, her wand already outstretched, and he knew now that Ernie had been only a distraction, a way to prevent the Dementor from grabbing her before she could act. "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" she shouted, and a silver flash erupted from the tip of her wand, coalescing instantly into the figure

of an animal that ran the length of the Hufflepuff table, driving back the hideous apparitions like vampires fleeing the dawn.

Her Patronus had been a lamb before, but now it took the form of a young ewe, and Neville hoped that Snape's sharp eyes would not notice or recognize the meaning behind the swollen sides of the wooly figure as it returned to her, standing guard firmly over her husband's body. Her eyes were on the Staff Table, blazing a challenge, but Snape appeared to have expected it, and he smiled coldly, "Miss Bones..."

Before he could continue, Professor Sprout had stood, her gray head raised defiantly. "Yes, *thank you*, Miss Bones, I was about to do the same myself!" she snapped. "And I'm *sure* Professor Snape has an explanation for why those...those *creatures* are in this school."

"As I said, Professor Sprout," he went on coolly, "adults must answer for their behavior. Mr. Whitby's father has been acting in defiance of the Dark Lord. He is known to have been concealing the whereabouts of the traitorous Aurors Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt, and as he has now fled, it is the belief of the Ministry that he might re-consider his loyalties if he were reminded of priority. Mrs. Whitby and her two younger daughters have been taken to Azkaban this morning, and her son will be joining her there until his father remembers how to behave himself."

"Thirty Dementors and six Death Eaters to kidnap one child?" Sprout fumed. "Headmaster!"

"A preventative measure only. No one wants any unnecessarily rash bloodshed to save a single boy from a few days in Azkaban, now do they?" The black eyes were fixed directly on Neville, and he knew he was beaten. A Patronus would fade instantly if the owner was stunned or incapacitated, and the only choices before them now were to make an all-out fight of it immediately, or to allow them to take their victim.

His shoulders slumped, and he gave a tiny shake of his head that was more than the simple resignation it appeared. Two motions to the right, one to the left, a signal to the other members of the D.A. that they must not act, that Snape had won this round.

"You can't have Kevin!" Susan's voice was fiercely defiant, her Patronus still vivid at her side, but Professor Sprout knew the truth as well as Neville did, and she motioned, red-faced and shaking with frustrated rage, for the young witch to back down.

"You may protect the others, Miss Bones – and if your Patronus cannot hold, I will join you with mine – " her green eyes flashed angrily at Snape, "but Mr. Whitby..."

"I'm not being kidnapped." Kevin Whitby was on his feet now, a mousy-haired fourth-year who had grown several inches in the course of the year so far, leaving him with a slightly pinched, stretched-out look and twice as much elbow as he knew what to do with. There was no sign of awkwardness now, however, and his gangly figure seemed almost graceful as he stepped out into the aisle as Ernie and Neville himself once had. His head was held high, his wand in his hand as he thrust it out towards the Death Eaters.



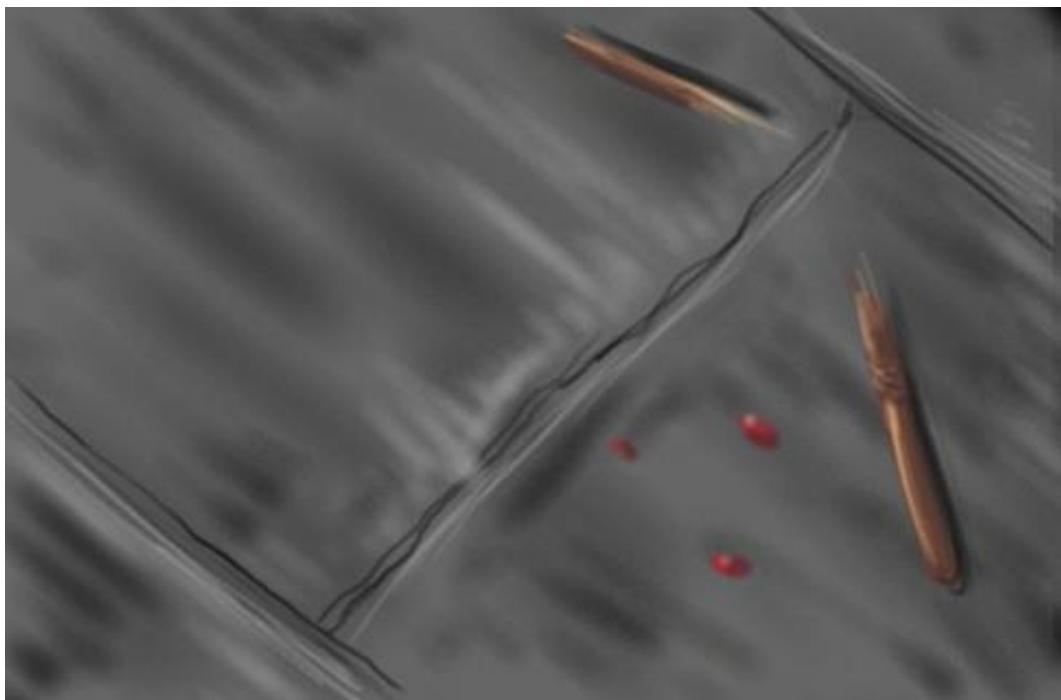
Sprout froze, Snape smirked, then Kevin flipped the wand in his hand so that the handle was outwards and knelt, laying it on the stones. He stood again, his chin high as he extended his hands together, palms-down, ready to be shackled; and his still-child's voice held a man's strength as it echoed through the Hall. "I'll go willingly so you won't hurt my friends."

Dark as night falling, the Dementors closed in until Kevin's slight body had vanished utterly in a mass of dark cloaks, and a thin, terrible scream rose from the center of them, followed by a loud snap. A rattle of chains and a rattle of breath, and they were gone, and Kevin was gone, and the Death Eaters had saluted Snape and turned behind them.

The doors closed, and Susan's Patronus vanished as she climbed quickly off the table, ignoring everything else as she knelt to pull Ernie's head into her lap. Murmurs of wordless affection and worry tumbled over each other, and she brushed back the straw-colored curls that had stuck to the bloody gash, tears streaking her cheeks from the eyes that blazed hate up at the Headmaster.

The open display of love did not worry Neville. Any attempt to hide Ernie and Susan's feelings for each other from being public knowledge had long been abandoned as impossible, only the depth of their commitment to one another remaining secret, and his concern for his friend's injury could wait. Instead, his eyes were fixed on the floor in the spot where Kevin had been taken, and he felt himself begin to tremble with anger and the gnawing pain of helpless defeat as he looked at all that was left of the young soldier.

Three drops of blood and a broken wand.





## Chapter Fifteen From The Ashes

Bagman and the other young men were long gone, but Neville remained. Every muscle ached and trembled with exhaustion, his t-shirt was soaked dark with the same sweat that dripped off of the ends of his hair, and his breath was coming in harsh rasps over his hammering heart, but it wasn't enough. He would push himself until he collapsed, and then he knew he would push himself further still the moment he could get to his feet again...or sooner.

He grabbed the rope in both hands, forcing his howling, cramping arms and shoulders to drive him up, his sweat-slick palms to grab the coarse sisal and pull until he had reached the little platform near the ceiling. Not allowing himself a moment's rest, he crouched and pointed his wand towards the stack of saucers that sat on the table far below. *Wingardium Leviosa...En vigorate!*

The saucers flew into the air, careening in wildly unpredictable patterns, and he swung himself down onto the rope again, using his feet and his right hand to hold himself in mid-air as his left jabbed his wand towards the swirling china discs, blasting them one by one into clouds of tiny, jagged shards. One of the shards caught him on the cheek, stinging violently, but he didn't flinch. Again and again the light shot from his wand, until there was nothing but floating puffs of ceramic dust and the confetti of pieces on the floor.

Neville slid down the rope, feeling it burn his hands before he landed lightly, taking barely a moment to pick a few of the nastier splinters from his raw, reddened fingers. He waved his wand at the shattered bits, and they sprang together again, ready to be destroyed anew. Another flick, and they were weaving through the air, and this time he dropped to the ground, cementing his feet to the floor with a Sticking Charm and locking his right arm tight across his chest.

The muscles of his stomach already burned from the workout with Bagman, but he forced the sit-ups to come at a steady, merciless rhythm, lashing out with his wand at the height of each one

to blast another saucer from the air. He knew there were fifty of them, but sometimes he missed because he was working off-handed and shaking so much, and for each of those, he punished himself with five more repetitions before he could strike again.

His head was spinning, he felt nauseous with exertion, but it felt good, and each drop of sweat, each throb of pain, each shuddering gasp of air was *doingsomething*. Making him stronger, making him faster, harder, tougher, more able to strike back when they would finally, finally be allowed their revenge.

Once he had hated the speed with which June was approaching, but now it was the months in between that he hated. Each day was no longer one more to live, it was one more where Snape and the Carrows could hurt them, one more chance to lose their own, one more where they had to sit on their wands and wait while those black eyes smirked down at them from the usurped throne. June could not come fast enough, because when it did, that sallow face would no longer be projected by his mind's eye onto harmless pieces of china...it would be real, the fight would be real, and the wand in his hand would be real and damned if it would waver in the face of those he had come to hate so violently.

Whitby's abduction had hit them all hard, but Neville had taken it the hardest. He had become practically inhuman in the five days since it had happened, sleeping less than four hours a night, going over the events a thousand times for ways he might have acted, might have prevented it. Tiny, charmed objects like hairpins and the lids of ink bottles now littered the grounds surrounding the castle, ready to alert them again if the Dementors returned, and he had devised plans to snatch intended victims from any point in the castle at a moment's notice. The other officers had tried to talk him down, tell him that the plans endangered more than they protected, but he was deaf to their protests.

Never, never again would he sit helplessly by while a friend, a comrade was hurt or snatched from under his very nose. Never again would they coldly slice away at his loved ones and then sit back and laugh about it. Every sit-up, every push-up, every lap and spell came with a name, a rhythm of self-retribution that repeated like a prayer for the damned.

*Frank. Alice. Lavender. Dennis. Ernie. Colin. Parvati. Seamus. Luna. Renny. Kevin. Luna. Renny. Kevin. Luna. Renny. Kevin. Luna. Renny. Kevin.*

Three times they had taken someone now, but not a fourth. Not unless they had to step over his cold, dead body to do it, and he was going to make that a very, very difficult thing to accomplish.

The last of the saucers was lying in shards again, and he unstuck his feet, rising slightly unsteadily and grabbing a drink of water from the bottle that lay on the floor. Then he crouched, bracing himself to begin running windsprints of the length of the room when something stopped him.

"You really have lost your mind along with your waistline, haven't you, Longbottom?" The cold, drawling sneer came with the shock of a slap, and Neville whirled, wand outstretched. He hadn't heard the door open, and his eyes narrowed as he saw Draco Malfoy leaning casually against the wall, arms crossed.

"What...are *you*...doing here?" he panted angrily.

"If you don't want to hear what I have to say, that's fine." Malfoy shrugged and turned, placing one pale hand on the doorknob. "It'll probably be more fun to see the look on your face tomorrow when you find out anyway."

Neville's eyes narrowed, and he cuffed away the sweat that had begun to drip stinging salt into them. "What do you mean...when I find out *what*?"

Malfoy turned back, eyebrows raised in mock surprise. "Oh, so you *do* want to know?"

He jerked the wand, shooting a hex into the wall beside the white-blonde head, and was rewarded with a distinct flinch. "Out with it, Malfoy. I'm in no mood for games."

"All right, all right..." Malfoy raised both hands placatingly, then smiled again. "You don't need to start throwing spells at me." The young Slytherin strode calmly into the room, waving his own wand to conjure a chair out of thin air and settling himself into it as casually as if he were in his own sitting room. "Pansy left her book in the Divination classroom, and I had told her I'd get it for her since I was heading that way for my own reasons – which are none of your business – and I happened to get walked in on by a very unique group of people. They didn't see me, I've got a fairly good Disillusionment Charm, but I should thank you for your little trick earlier, because it let me overhear something very, *very* interesting."

"You were *spying* on the D.A.?" The words came in an angry hiss, but even as he said it, he felt a sick betrayal that his officers had been meeting behind his back.

"Spare me." Malfoy rolled his eyes. "And here I am, trying to do something *nice* for you."

"I'll believe it when that thing's off your arm," Neville said icily.

"All right, so I'm here because the only thing worse than your little Harry Potter Vigilante Fan Club is the idea of *Weasley* in charge of it." Malfoy sneered, letting the statement dangle a moment before announcing nastily, "They're going to relieve you of command."

The news hit him like a physical blow, and he actually staggered back a step. "They can't."

"Oh, they certainly can! It was unanimous, actually," Malfoy was reveling in every syllable. "Even your little friend Abbott. Apparently, they've finally seen that you're a head case, though *I* could have told them that *years* ago. You're being dumped tomorrow at the next one of your little meetings and that ginger-headed Blood-Traitor thinks she's taking over...just because she was snogging the great Chosen One, I suppose."

Neville swore, pushing past Malfoy to the door. The sarcastic drawl followed him. "Don't I get a thank you?"

His reply was short, direct, and not even physically possible with magic.

### OOO

"What the HELL is this about you trying to kick me out of the D.A.?" The shout of furious accusation erupted even before the portrait hole had fully swung shut behind him. Neville stalked across the common room to where Ginny was sitting with her homework by the fire, not caring as he shoved two younger students roughly out of the way.

She looked up, her brown eyes huge with shock as he swatted one of the armchairs away with a crash and then kicked the low table aside, bracing one hand on the arm of her chair to lean over her menacingly. "Neville...." she started nervously.

"Yes, I know," he spat. "*Malfoy* told me. You were overheard. So I'll ask you again...." he brought himself down until his face was only inches from hers, his wand pointed squarely at her chest, and the look of fear in her eyes did not make him feel guilty in the least. "What do you mean by trying to relieve me of command?"

Ginny's eyes flicked not to his, but to a point just off his shoulder, and at the same moment, he felt the hard tip of a wand against the side of his head in the soft, vulnerable flesh just behind his ear. Parvati's voice was unwavering. "Because you're not yourself. Case in point: you just came barging through the common room like a rampaging Shortsnout and are threatening Ginny. So why don't you hand over that wand and we'll see if you are still capable of having a conversation."

He started to protest, but the tip pressed in harder, and he released his grip on the handle of the cherry wand, allowing Ginny to take it from him, but his eyes still burned, the sense of betrayal only intensified by the sight of his own wand being used with those of the two girls to back him away and lower him to the couch like a dragon being handled with wrangler's prods. They exchanged a look over his head, then Ginny sighed, brushing back her hair before turning back to him.

"Neville, you've lost sight of why we're doing this. We don't think you have the best interest of the D.A. at heart any more. You're making stupid choices, putting us all at risk needlessly, and we can't let that keep happening just because we like you as a person." She took a deep breath, meeting his eyes with a look of saddened honesty.

"You think I don't care about the D.A." His voice was incredulous, and he reached down, grabbing the hem of his t-shirt and yanking it up over his head and off. He twisted at the waist, showing his back to the girls with deliberate bluntness. They had never actually seen more of the scars than the few bits that showed at the neck and from the short sleeves of an undershirt, and he felt a little surge of satisfaction as they both flinched. "*This* was for the D.A. And this...." The scar on his forearm from Lupin. "...And these...." The scars on his palms. "And every damned drop of this." Neville twisted the shirt tightly in his hands, wringing the sweat to fall like tears onto the stones at their feet.

"No." Parvati shook her head, then reached out to trace her fingers over the jagged lines that networked his back with such gentleness that it felt almost obscenely wrong at a time like this. "These, yes. And the others. We all know that, and we're grateful, Neville, we'll always be

grateful. But that's not for us." She pointed down at the spots on the floor, then smiled faintly as her fingertips outlined the muscles of his shoulder. "And it's not for Hannah either, though I'm jealous of what she gets and I didn't."

"Just answer me something honestly, and if I'm wrong about the answer, I'll call the officers first thing tomorrow and set it all right," Ginny promised, "if you could wave your wand and send You-Know-Who and all his followers somewhere they could never come back and never hurt anyone again without another drop of blood, another moment's suffering *for them either*, would you do it?"

"Of course!" he answered instantly.

"And if you had the choice between that and sacrificing your own life to see them hurt, to see them suffer terribly before they left...?"

He hesitated at this, and she pressed on. "Or what about if it was sacrificing yourself and one of us as well?"

"But we've all —" Neville began, and she cut him off with a raised hand.

"Would you take me from my family? Parvati from her twin? Ernie from his wife and child?" Neville startled at this, and she chuckled. "She's got that secretive little smile all the time, and she's suddenly started wearing looser workout clothes three months after marrying Ernie. There's not a girl in the D.A. who hasn't guessed." There was a pause, and her voice became serious again. "Would you take Colin from his brother? Who would you throw on the altar of your revenge, Neville?"

"Except there *isn't* some spell that will just banish them," Neville pointed out fiercely. "We're all going to have to sacrifice *ourselves*, and if you suddenly have gotten scared about that, fine! *You* drop out!"

Parvati sighed. "You're missing the point entirely. Of course we're ready to die if we have to do it to stop them, but you're not out to stop them any more. You're not content with that, and you're not focused on that. You're out to hurt them, to make them pay for what they've done to you, and *vengeance* isn't something we're ready to die for...and we can't trust your choices any more because of it."

"IT'S NOT ABOUT ME!" He jumped to his feet as he shouted, waving his hand around the common room. "It's about everything! What they've done to my parents, what they've done to all of you, what they've done to this school! I'm not going to let them get away with that! I'm going to make them pay for Renny, for Luna, for Kevin, for every time I've had to sit back and watch them Cruciate and terrify and —"

"Make them suffer as much as they've made you suffer. Make them lose as many friends and loved ones as you have." Ginny's words were terribly calm, and he stopped, unable to rebut her honestly.

His shoulders slumped, but there was still defiance in his tone, almost a plea. "And what's so wrong with that?"

"Nothing on its own, Neville," Parvati agreed, "Merlin knows we all have scores to settle. But if you want to command, you can't put your own scores above the lives of others. And that's what you've been doing, not just with stupid plans and crazy, reckless orders, but the way you've been treating yourself. You were in there more than an hour after Bagman let the others go, and you were in there for hours yesterday, and every day since they took Kevin. We've seen you come in at night, you can barely walk."

He laced his arms tightly across his chest, his chin raised. "What I do to myself is my business. And it's for the *good* of the D.A. I'm not exactly trying to look great with my shirt off for Hannah. I'm trying to be a better soldier."

"Fine, what you do to yourself is your business," Ginny nodded. "But the commander of the D.A. pushing himself until he's always exhausted and just begging for some serious injury is all of our business. And like Parvati said, the kind of orders you've been giving since Thursday are *definitely* our business. *That's* why we're relieving you of command...." A sudden softness came over her pretty face, and she stood, reaching out to lay one hand on his arm. "And because we're your friends, not just your soldiers."

"If you were my friends," Neville said bitterly, "you wouldn't do this to me."

"We've seen what *the D.A.* is doing to you," she retorted stubbornly. "All of us. It's tearing you to pieces, Neville. You look like you've aged ten years since September. You don't sleep. Seamus says you have nightmares all the time when you do. You take everything that happens to all of us so *personally*, even when it's something like Kevin's Dad that you have less than no control over. You still laugh and joke, but we can all see what's happening in your eyes, and it hurts that you won't let anyone in to it, not even Hannah, and she's tried to help you carry it."

"It's not hers to carry." He shook off the small, white hand, turning away from both of them to stare into the fire. His voice was hollow, haunted. "It's mine. I'm the one who did this to all of you with my stupid little 'let's play soldier' speech at the start of the year. Everything that's happened to all of you is because of me. I've tried as hard as I can, oh *god*, Ginny, I've tried...." His voice broke, and he buried his face in his hands.

"You're right to kick me out. I'm not a soldier, I'm not a General, I'm not a leader. I've tried so hard to be what I'm not, but I keep effing up this whole thing. I've nearly gotten people killed a dozen times. I *know* people are going to die because I'm going to make some stupid decision, some stupid order, you don't have to tell me that! Don't you understand...." He looked up, and his eyes were naked. "...wanting to hurt them isn't about making what *I've* been through worth it, it's making what *I've put you through* worth it! I don't care what they've done to me!" Neville knew that tears had begun to flow down his cheeks, but they were tears of sheer agonized desperation, and he didn't care if they knew it or not.

"You're so *much* a leader that we're all afraid because we know we'd follow you into hell whether we needed to or not." Ginny crossed to him, stepping over the upended table to take both of his

hands in hers. For a long time, she just looked up into his eyes, then a terribly sad smile touched her mouth. "You're worse than Harry, you know?"

"About what?"

"Blaming yourself for things. Torturing yourself for things. Maybe it's Gryffindor men. Maybe it's what makes you such heroes. But you've taken it to a level that's going to destroy you before the Death Eaters ever can, and you're going to take us all with you just because we won't let you go." She lowered her mouth to kiss his hands gently. "Take some time, Neville. Get your head on straight. The D.A. will be there for you after the break."

"*Please,*" he whispered. "Don't take this from me. It's all I have. I will...there are ways I can stop —"

"I know about that, my father warned me to keep an eye on you about it." Ginny cut him off, and Parvati looked confused, but to his relief she did not explain further about Percy's Settling Solution. The refusal to give him an out from the awful fate of being shut out of what he himself had started was bad enough without adding humiliation atop it. "That wouldn't solve anything, it would just bury it and create more problems on its own. Like I said, Neville, you need to take some time...and the D.A. is *not* all you have."

"You have Hannah. You have your Gran. You have *friends*, not just officers." Parvati's face was kind, but her words hit him like hexes. "We're relieving you of command through the end of the break, then we'll see. And I for one want to see you back to lead the fight." She nodded her head towards the other girl. "All due respect to Ginny, but she's not half the soldier you've become."

"No offense taken...I'm the first to say I want you back too, Neville." Ginny nodded, but the infamous stubbornness had come into her eyes now, and he knew he had lost. "But not like this."

She stepped back from him, drawing herself to her full height, her shoulders pulled back at attention as she lifted her wand. "Commander Longbottom, as First Lieutenant of Dumbledore's Army and by the authority of the combined officers of the same, I hereby relieve you of command until such time as the officer corps feels you are fit to resume. It is the hope of all of us that our commander will be with us again shortly."

Her stiff posture relaxed, and she smiled gently, pressing his wand back into his hand with a comforting squeeze. "And that our friend will take care of himself."

It had happened. She had actually done it. He had felt the Galleon in his pocket give a little jerk, and he knew that it was real. The wand clattered from the limp fingers of his hand to the stone floor, and he made no move to pick it up. He couldn't breathe.

Unable to speak, he shook off Parvati's comforting hand and shoved past both girls to the entrance to the tower dormitory. Neville took the steps three at a time, not even feeling the exhaustion, not feeling anything but a horrible emptiness and pain, as if his two friends had gutted him with a knife and left him to bleed to death.

Seamus attempted to say something to him as the door flew open and Neville threw himself down on his bed, but he heard nothing. His arms were folded beneath his face, the taste of salt sweat mingling with salt tears as he wept more deeply, more bitterly than he ever had before. They were the sobs of everything that had ever been taken from him in the past and every pain he had ever endured, and the agony of knowing that they would never be eased because he hadn't been good enough, he hadn't been strong enough, he hadn't been able to do it in the end.

It was over. He had failed.

Dumbledore's Army marched on, but he had been cast aside.

OOO

For the next ten days leading up to the Easter break, Neville barely spoke to anyone. The devastating news that he was relieved of command hung over him like a far darker sentence than his own planned death at the end of the year ever had, and he withdrew almost completely into himself. There were three more D.A. meetings, but he refused to attend, taking no notice of his friends' attempts to catch his attention in the halls and shunning the common room in favor of his own quiet dormitory, where Seamus had long since given up trying to speak to him.

He still went to the Room of Requirement to work out as strenuously as he had before, but it was only late at night, when he was certain to be alone. Even if the D.A. no longer wanted him, he was more determined than ever to fight in the final battle. It would be his only chance to make any of this worth it.

Hannah began to send him letters, passing them through Ginny, Colin, and Seamus, but he left them unopened. He didn't want to hear her reasons, her excuses for turning on him like everyone else that he had once considered friends. Neville had thought they understood. Their eyes had seemed to burn with the same fire, the same passion that he saw in his own when he looked in the mirror, but he had been wrong. So terribly, terribly wrong.

The holiday was something to look forward to still, but not for the reasons it had been before. Now it would be a chance to get away not from the stress of leadership, but from the reminders of his own failure that existed inescapably in nearly eighty faces he could not avoid seeing every day. He would say good-bye to his parents, to his family, to his Gran and Mimsy, but then the rest of the time he had decided to spend in the hothouse, moving as many plants as he could to permanent homes in the garden outside and giving the rest away to neighbors. It would be wrong to leave his grandmother with a building full of dead and overgrown plants when he fell.

On the last day before break, he spent the evening going through his trunk. He had packed and unpacked it over a dozen times in the last seven years, but he had never really taken a strict inventory, and he wanted to make sure that when it was sent back to Gran, she wouldn't find anything there that would upset her or give her the wrong idea about what kind of man she had raised. Neville threw away all the detritus of broken quills, half-finished essays, sweet wrappers, and empty ink bottles that had collected over the years, as well as a shirt that the bloodstains hadn't come fully out of, and the now-clean but ravaged sweater he had worn the night in the Forbidden Forest. She didn't need to see that.

He paused briefly over the magazines Seamus had given him, frowning in contemplation. On the one hand, the thought of Gran finding *Wild Witches* or *Babes with Broomsticks* was deeply upsetting, but on the other, what healthy seventeen-year-old wizard *didn't* have things like this buried in his trunk somewhere? After a long moments thought, he decided that his relationship with Hannah was certainly more than enough to comfort her about his fondness for witches, and the two magazines were consigned to the bottom of the growing discard pile.

The pieces of his father's broken wand he kept, as well as the old Remembrall, still blinking feebly in a vain effort to remind him of something forgotten years ago. That he kept not for his Gran, but for Harry, though he knew his old friend would probably never see it. Forgotten, dried-up cuttings wrapped in handkerchiefs stained beyond hope went into the pile, as did the photograph of himself and Dean with their faces painted in stripes and tentacles coming out their noses – really, she'd have had to have been there – but this....

Neville stopped, his hand hesitating over what seemed to be nothing more than a page of class notes from History of Magic. As he finally touched it, it recognized his hand and transformed itself into what it truly was, and he swallowed hard past the large, heavy lump that had suddenly choked his throat.

It was a picture Colin had taken of the D.A.'s senior officers. They had meant to have it done the night after stealing the Sword of Gryffindor, but after that had gone so disastrously wrong, the young Secret-Keeper had insisted that they still needed to celebrate the victory of the three captured officers' return from the Forest.

They were in the Room of Requirement, all four House banners bright on the walls behind them, and his own face grinned up at him from the center of the photo, leaning awkwardly a little to one side so as to wrap one arm around Ginny's slender shoulders and the other over Ernie's taller and much broader ones. Luna knelt in front of them, her hair twisted up on her head with the spoon Ginny had insisted she sport for the photo, and Seamus was there, and Colin himself and Parvati and Terry and Hannah, back when she still wore her hair in two long pigtails. They were all smiling and laughing and jostling for position, and oh, Merlin, how *young* they all looked!

Every face was shining with the innocence they all had still kept so much of then, the thought that the worst was over, that they were still facing something great and glorious, not really understanding yet what death really meant, despite the brushes with it they had already had. His eyes passed over them one at a time, marveling at how much they had changed in the past four months. They seemed softer, rosier, sweeter somehow, cheeks rounder, eyes brighter. Parvati didn't have the scar by her temple yet. Colin still looked like a child, both hands fidgeting and lively. Terry still wore his hair nearly to his shoulders, not buzzed short. Seamus was in his undershirt, but his arm was marked with nothing darker than a thousand freckles, and no tiny lines touched the edges of Ernie's hazel eyes. And Luna...well, she was *there*.

Part of him wanted to destroy it, to whip out his wand and blast it away into a puff of ash and a scorch mark on the bottom of the cedar-lined trunk, but he couldn't. Instead he just sat there,

holding it in one hand, scarcely feeling that his knees had begun to ache from the awkward way he was kneeling over the trunk, staring at it. Had that really been *him*?

It was easier, somehow, to reconcile the far greater stranger of the older pictures as being himself. The chubby, bumbling, bashful, blushing child was easily recognizable as Before, but this...this was a grown man, with strong arms and hardened eyes, someone who had already been tortured and nearly died twice in two months, someone who already had to lead, already bore the burden of it all, and yet....

And yet there was no gray in his hair. His cheekbones were visible, not jutting. His jawline was firm, not carved. His eyes were tired, but not sunken, and the dark circles beneath them were the pale smudges of a night without sleep, not the deep purple semicircles of weeks. His lips were fuller, redder, and there was a dimple in his cheek when he grinned. He looked like the kind of man you would want to follow, want to be friends with, not a tortured, driven lost soul that you would follow because he had clearly been in and out of hell several times already and was familiar with the terrain.

Dazedly, he got to his feet, still holding the picture as he crossed the room to where his roommate was packing his own trunk by his usual method of piling everything in and then sitting on it until it fit. "Seamus...?"

The other young wizard nearly fell off the lid in shock. "Neville! Cuchulainn's Ghost, but I thought you'd lost the power of speech!"

Ignoring his friend's surprise, he held out the picture. "Have I really changed as much as I think I have?"

Seamus studied the picture for a moment, then looked up at him with a wry, lopsided smile. "If you mean that you used to be nearly as handsome as the blonde devil in the corner there, and these days you could pass for Death's cold breakfast, then yes."

"What's happened to me?" His voice seemed strangely childish to his own ears, and he frowned curiously at the picture, as if his former self would offer the answers.

"Well, it's like we've been tryin' to tell you, mate." Seamus stood, wrapping an arm around Neville's shoulders warmly. "You've been drivin' yourself too hard. This is serious business, sure enough, we all know that, but you've taken on the entire wizarding world when the D.A. is more than enough for any man. Even Harry only really has to worry about You-Know-Who himself. You take it to heart every time you hear about a Death Eater attack somewhere down in the south counties on *Potterwatch*."

"But there's nothing I can *do* about that," Neville protested. "It's just how I am."

"The thing is, Fearless Leader," Seamus' voice was firm, yet gentle. "You've been ignorin' what nature gave you."

"What's that?" Neville asked bemusedly.

"There's a hole in your face right between your nose and your chin, and another two on either side of that thick head. One's for tellin' folk you're close to what's troublin' you, the other two are for listenin' when folk try to help. You ain't been usin' any of them."

Neville shook his head. "I can't. I can't ask anyone to take on that kind of load."

There was a long pause as his friend looked at him strangely, then frowned. "Has anyone in your entire life taken care of you, Neville?"

"My Gran!" He answered instantly, rather offended by the question. "She's taken care of me since I was a baby!"

"I don't mean put a roof over your head and robes on your back." Seamus hesitated, clearly trying to put something difficult into words. "I mean the way my Ma has done me, bein' someone you can take the troubles to. Because every time I've heard you talk on your Gran, it seems more like you've been livin' together and tryin' not to trouble her too much, though sure enough it seems she loves you plenty."

He wanted to say that it wasn't true, that of course Gran had always taken care of him like any parent, but the memory of another conversation came back to him, of words spoken under the uninhibited safety of a potion in a warm, cozy kitchen a lifetime ago. *She's never really been like a parent to me, and I don't think I've ever really been like a kid to her....* Neville looked down at his feet. "I guess not. But I don't see –"

"That's what you need, mate. You take care of us, but no one does you the same turn, and it's backin' up and killin' you. That's why I voted you out." The bluntness of the statement stung, reminding him harshly of the reason he had not spoken to Seamus in so long, and he pulled away, his defenses rising again.

His tone was cold as he turned back towards his own side of the dorm. "Thanks for the advice. I'll go –"

"No you don't!" Seamus grabbed him by the arm, moving quickly around to block his path, toe-to-toe with the taller youth. "I wasn't half done!"

The blue eyes blazed with a passionate intensity that Neville had only rarely seen, and he knew he would have to make a fight of it if he wanted to get away. It wasn't worth it. He sighed, resigning himself to wait it out as Seamus continued. "You're the best damned commander we could hope for. There's not a man on this green earth I'd rather have leadin' me in a fight. But at the rate you're doin' yourself, you'll be burnt flat out long before June. I voted you out because we've tried talkin', we've tried beggin', and we hoped against all bloody hope that this'd be slap in the face enough for you to *listen*, but all you've done is shut us out all the harder, and I've had it!"

His cheeks flushed scarlet, he reached into the pocket of his robes and pulled out a letter, shoving it practically up Neville's nose. "There's a witch downstairs, you fool, who is fallin' all over herself beggin' to be exactly what you need so desperate bad, and you're lucky as all hell that she's idiot enough to be so in love with you, given the way you've pushed her away!"

Neville crossed his arms stubbornly. "She doesn't know what she's asking."

"Have you ever considered, Fearless Moron, that she may know better than you?"

He gave Seamus a deeply skeptical look. "How so?"

"We're not meant to be loners, humans aren't. Give us half a chance, and we'll form families, tribes, clans, cities, whatever we can, but we're not meant to go it alone, and I fancy there's a reason for that, sure as there's a reason I was driven to try things that shoulda been impossible when I was a child, because some deep part of me knew I was a wizard." Seamus grabbed his hand, forcing the envelope into it. "She just wants to take care of you."

Neville took the letter, but he pushed it deep into the pockets of his own robes and stepped away, kneeling by his trunk again to dig in the few remaining items. "She can't," he said firmly. "So drop it."

Seamus just stood there, neither coming closer nor returning to what he had been doing himself, then the sandy head tilted mildly. "Can you grow leaves?" he asked finally.

*"What?"*

"I said, can you grow leaves? Or thorns or flowers for that matter?" The question was repeated in the same casual tone as before.

"No." Neville replied simply, refusing to look up. Whatever Seamus was getting at, he was not about to be baited so easily.

"Then how do you do it? You're so good with plants, but you can't do the growin' for them, so what do you do?"

"You make sure they're in the right light. You water them. Weed them sometimes. Prune them when they need it." His voice was flat as he pulled out two socks from the trunk, holding them against each other to see if they matched. They didn't, and he threw them both on the discard pile.

"And if you don't?" Seamus pressed.

"They die, or they run wild if they're strong enough. But usually they just die." An old poster Dean had drawn of the Gryffindor lion stomping on the Slytherin serpent from some long-ago Quidditch match was rumpled almost beyond recognition, and it joined the socks.

"Hannah's not half bad with plants either. Maybe you should let yourself be watered if you don't think she can grow the leaves for you." His voice was quiet, with a deep sadness that Neville had never heard before, and it made him pause, though he still did not look up. When Seamus spoke again, it was barely a whisper. "Because, mate, you're dyin'."

When Neville did look up, his friend had already turned away again, but his words lingered long after him.

OOO

It was after two in the morning, but Neville had been unable to sleep. After five hours of lying awake in his bed, he had finally made up his mind, but he had to take a deep breath to prevent himself from turning back and running up to Gryffindor tower again as the door to the Room of Requirement appeared in front of him.

Reaching out one invisible, Disillusioned hand, he took hold of the knob and opened it. It was oddly blank inside, a featureless space no larger than a broom closet with another door immediately opposite, because it knew that was all he needed. Just a way through, whether or not he was sure if he really wanted what would be on the other side.

As if prodding him forward, the door behind him disappeared, and he knew instinctively that the only way out again until he returned was the one that lay in front of him now. Shaking, he opened it and stepped through, hearing the faint whispering sound like a passing breeze as the door ceased to exist in the wall behind him.

The Hufflepuff common room had a cozy look to it even in the near total darkness. The yellow tapestries and cheerful paintings on the walls had a brightness that made up for the lack of windows, puffy, overstuffed couches and armchairs were everywhere, and there was something charming about the dozen or so round doors that opened into the dormitories. A few books lay here and there on the tables, but for the most part, like the one in Gryffindor tower above, the room had the slightly stripped-down feel that always came just before a break or the end of a term, all the little stray personal belongings picked up and packed away.

He closed his eyes, trying to remember which of the identical doors Hannah had come out of on Valentine's Day. They had been sitting on the couch *there*, but his back had been to the door and....

"Drop your wand." Ernie's voice was a cold command, and he was suddenly caught in the bright blue glare of wandlight. Instinctively, his hand tightened on the weapon instead as the other came up to shield his face, but before he could say anything, the light had dropped from his eyes. "Neville? What in heaven's name are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to Hannah," he replied, "How did you –"

"Basic Screening Charm," Ernie said bemusedly, "Lets me know if anyone but one of ours comes in or out after the door's locked for the night. Not that I expected *you* breaking in. Or talking to me, quite frankly." His voice was cold on the last.

Neville took a step forward, putting his wand away and spreading his hands imploringly. "Please, Ernie, I know I've been an ass about things, but I really need to talk to Hannah...can you just show me which door is hers?"

The Lieutenant was silent for a while, then the curly head nodded curtly. "I'll get her." He crossed to one of the round doors, then stopped, looking back over his shoulder to fix Neville with a warning glare. "But if you do anything to hurt her...."

"I won't," he promised, then added in confusion, "but I didn't think guys could go into the witch's rooms."

"Only that one," Ernie replied. "Sprout's made an exception for me because my wife lives in there."

"How, uh...are you two doing okay?" Neville asked awkwardly.

"We're fine. We'll be going to her parents first, then up to my family to break the news to them over the holiday." The almost-normal conversation seemed as strange to the other man as it did to Neville after almost two week's silence between them.

"I hope they take it okay," he offered.

Ernie shrugged. "Like it or not, they'll have to adjust to it. And we *are* married, so they can't get too angry." There was a pause, then his face softened, and the hazel eyes held almost the familiar warmth he remembered. "Thanks for asking, though." He nodded again to Neville, then opened the door and vanished into the darkened room.

It was several minutes before the light of his wand appeared at the door again, and he emerged back into the common room, Susan at his side. She was still blinking with sleep, and she yawned, one hand rubbing at her eyes while the other rested unconsciously on her stomach, the slight swelling there just noticeable where her hand brought the loose fabric of her nightgown close against her body. When she saw Neville, however, she snapped fully awake, her dark eyes blazing angrily as her hand dropped. "It *is* you!"

"Hey, Susan..." he smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry I –"

"Don't." She strode forward away from Ernie to stand directly in front of him, surprisingly intimidating for a witch half his size and unarmed as she stabbed her finger into his chest. "Do you know how many nights I've had to try and comfort her while she cried about you? Do you know how much you've *hurt* her with this cruel silent treatment? Ignoring her letters! Not even *looking* at her! Do you think she *liked* voting against you? Or maybe you think she was just trying to stop you from getting to play the hero, from getting your precious *glory*, you foul, heartless Gryffindor *pig*!" Her voice had risen to a shrill cry of anger, and he stepped back, raising his hands defensively.

"I'm sorry! I never meant to hurt her! I didn't! I was just...."

"You just had your wand stuck so far up your own –" Susan's tirade was cut off by another voice, no less cold, but far more controlled.

"It's okay, Sue. I think I can take it from here." Hannah had pulled a dressing gown over her own nightdress, and she was fully awake as she entered the common room and put a hand on her friend's shoulder. "But thank you. I think he deserved to know that he's not Mr. Popularity down here lately."

Susan turned to the other young woman, taking her hand as dark eyes met green fervently. "If you need anything, Hannah, or if he says something –"

"I promise." She smiled, but there was no warmth in it at all. "You can have whatever's left of him, and then you can give Ernie a go when you're done, if you want."

"Just get us when you're done, no matter what." Susan insisted, casting a nasty look back at Neville as she returned to her husband and they both stepped away through another door that he assumed led to Ernie's room.

Hannah had her arms crossed, staring at him, her bare foot tapping the floor steadily as her green eyes seemed to glow with anger, but she said nothing. He fumbled, at a loss for words, then smiled hopefully. "I'm really sorry, Hannah. I didn't know –"

"Can you not read?" she asked icily.

"I didn't look at the letters until tonight, until just before I came here, honestly," he admitted.

"Why not? Do I only get the privilege of communicating with you if I am willing to agree with you on everything, is that it?"

His head sagged. "I didn't know you were trying to help."

She threw her hands into the air in a motion of exasperated disbelief and snorted. "In heaven's name, Neville, what did you *think* I was trying to do? Gloat? Rub it in?"

"Explain exactly why you'd thought I wasn't good enough to lead the D.A. That you still loved me even though I couldn't handle it, even though I wasn't as strong as you thought I was." There was no self-pity in his tone, just a matter-of-fact resignation that seemed to stop her in her tracks.

"I thought the same as everyone else...that you were pushing yourself too hard and needed to be stopped one way or another before you killed yourself. You're not weak at all, you're too strong for your own good. After everything you've done for us, why would I ever think you weren't *good enough* to lead?" All the anger had faded now, and she seemed only confused and a little bit hurt.

"*Poor Neville. Always so very close, but always some simple, fatal flaw. Counter-clockwise instead of clockwise. Ten scoops of beetle eyes instead of a tenth of a scoop.*" He repeated Snape's words in the same quiet monotone, then shrugged. "I always mess it up in the end. Most people are nice about it, but I guess I didn't want to hear that after I'd put so much into this."

"Well if you hadn't decided what the letters said before you read them, you wouldn't have had to hear it from me *or* yourself, or whoever said that nasty, vicious thing you just quoted to me."

Hannah took a step closer to him, reaching out to put one hand on his shoulder.

"It was Snape," he said.

"You'll listen to *Snape* over your friends?" Her green eyes widened in shock. "Neville!"

"I'm sorry," he shrugged, "It's just...it...." Neville took a deep breath, then decided not to hide it, to take a chance and just admit the truth. "It *hurt*, Hannah. When you all took the command away from me, it hurt worse than anything in my whole life ever has. It felt like nothing I've done, nothing I thought I've accomplished, thought I've become mattered at all, and all the worst things I've ever thought about myself or have ever been told about myself were true. You all say you did it to help me, but you damned near destroyed me completely when you did that...maybe if you'd warned me, maybe if you'd said it was coming to that, but just to *do* it...." His voice broke on the memory, and he shook his head, unable to go on.

"I'm so sorry." Both her hands were on his shoulders now, and genuine regret was clear on her pretty face. "We never meant it that way. We had no idea – *I* had no idea. It was just supposed to be a really serious wake-up-call."

"It's no big deal. Just a misunderstanding, I guess." He smiled weakly at her. "If you didn't mean to, it doesn't matter."

"No, it does," she insisted. "It matters when people hurt you, and when someone you love hurts you, they need to make it right."

He frowned, not understanding. "But you've already apologized."

"I didn't say apologize, I said make it right." Her hands moved up his shoulders to slide around his neck, and she came forward into his arms, standing up on the tips of her toes to kiss him, then pulling back with a smile. "And I don't just mean a good snogging to make it up to you, either."

Neville chuckled, surprised by the sound that he had not heard from himself since Kevin had been taken. "I wouldn't mind that, you know."

"Well, then I guess I could throw it in." She kissed him again lightly, but her voice was serious as her eyes locked with his. "Let me come home with you, Neville. I'll see my Dad at the end of the holiday instead. He won't care either way, really."

Her fingers brushed the hair from his eyes, then returned to his neck, and he gasped as they began to knead gently but firmly, pressing into the sore, knotted muscles in a way that almost hurt but felt wonderfully good at the same time. His eyes closed, and he leaned his head back into it involuntarily, fighting to keep from moaning aloud as her soft voice came in rhythm with the motions of her fingers. "Let me help you. Let me love you. Let me be there for you. Let me take care of you. Let me make it right. Let me give you back to us."

Hannah's hands drew back, and he opened his eyes. "Don't stop!" he blurted, then blushed, embarrassed. "I mean...."

"I won't." Her smile was deep, barely touching her mouth but extending down her eyes all the way to her soul as she took his hand in hers and placed it over her heart. To his surprise, he felt the tiny, cool bulge of the pendant he had given her beneath the cotton cloth of her nightdress, and he knew from the sparkle in her look that she had meant for him to feel it as she whispered, "I promised not to stop living. Now all I have to do is bring you back to life."

OOO

Neville was not surprised at his grandmother's reaction to his appearance when he stepped off the Hogwarts Express. She was horrified, demanding to know what Snape and the Carrows had been doing to him, but he had been ready for her concerns, and he managed to brush it off fairly easily by admitting that he had severely downplayed the severity of the bout with Dragon Pox that he had already written her about. It wasn't a lie – he *had* nearly died, and he *hadn't* told her at the time how bad it had been – but he was still relieved when she accepted the explanation without further prying. The entire subject of the D.A. was still just too raw.

Gran and Hannah chatted almost the entire way back to Willow Creek, but Neville sat silently in his jostling, rattling seat on the Knight Bus across the aisle from the two witches, watching the window fog lightly around the warmth of his hand as he pressed it against the glass. The anger had been simple. Anger at Snape and the Carrows and Bellatrix and You-Know-Who. Anger at the rest of the D.A. Anger at himself. There was something wonderfully clean and easy about anger. You didn't have to think to be angry.

Now things were more complicated. There was still anger there, all he had to do was think about the sneer on Malfoy's pale, pointed face, the set of Ginny's shoulders as she took the D.A. from him, the cold satisfaction in Snape's eyes at the Staff Table. But now there was so much more. Regret, determination, fear, resolve, uncertainty, defiance, pain, gratitude, betrayal, love, despair, hope...the feelings jostled against each other in his heart and mind, canceling each other out like vivid colors combining to a muddy brown and leaving him strangely numb.

He knew Hannah had something in mind when they got home, but he didn't have any idea what that would be. She was going to take care of him, she said, but what did that even mean? Was she going to try and confine him to bed like an invalid and bring him soup and weak tea? No. No matter what anyone said, he would not allow that. Or did she want to talk, did she think it would somehow make things better to drag up all the horrors of the past months and make him re-live them to her? He wouldn't do that either.

Neville sighed, letting his forehead fall against the cool glass and closing his eyes. If he had any say in things, she would just let him sort it all out. Let him work the soil without worrying about grades and snog her without worrying about being caught by Carrow and sit in the grass in the warm sunshine and chill winds of early spring without worrying that he was supposed to be preparing for the next meeting. But he didn't have say, he knew it, and he didn't feel like fighting her about it any more. He didn't really feel like anything at all.

Willow Creek was a long way down on the alphabetical list of destinations for the magical bus, and it was late in the afternoon when Hannah shook his shoulder, startling him out of a doze he hadn't even realized he had drifted into. She pointed out the window at the old-fashioned little two-story house, and he saw that Gran was already outside, tapping her fingers impatiently against the handle of her handbag. "We're —"

"I see that!" he cut her off, unbuckling his trunk from where it had been strapped into place above his seat and hoisting it down, easing it over the head of the middle-aged witch in the seat in front of him with a Hover Charm. He glanced back over his shoulder. "Got yours?"

Hannah tilted her head at her own trunk floating lazily in the aisle behind her, and they hurried off the bus, the last brass handle barely clearing the door before the bus lurched ahead in a scream of brakes and a puff of foul exhaust, leaving them coughing and their ears ringing as it disappeared a second later with a loud BANG! Hannah grimaced, waving her hand in front of her face. "I hate that thing."

Gran nodded. "There are certainly more pleasant means of transportation, dear. Unfortunately, the Floo Network is not to be trusted right now."

Neville made a noise of lackluster agreement as he began to make his way towards the house, but Hannah quickly caught up with him, her own trunk bobbing along behind her like an extremely oddly-shaped dog. She didn't seem at all surprised that he had tried to go on ahead alone, and her voice dropped to keep the conversation between the two of them as she drew alongside, half-jogging to keep pace with his far longer strides. "I didn't tell your grandmother you were removed from the D.A., you know."

"Thanks," he said flatly.

"And I'm not going to, either," she continued, "that's up to you. I'm not going to try and interfere in your family. But I *do* have a couple of rules I want to set if you're really going to let me help you."

"Oh?" He tried to keep the resignation out of his voice, but was not entirely sure if he succeeded.

"Number one. You're going to rest." Neville gave a low snort of distaste at this, but she tossed her head, her chin thrusting out stubbornly. "You can still work out if you must, but only a half hour, and only every other day. Ernie says you're burning through muscle as fast as you're building it the way you've been pushing yourself anyway, and I personally would think he knows what he's talking about."

Grudgingly forced to cede that particular point, he nodded, and she smiled in satisfaction. "Number two. You're not going to hide things from me. I can't try to do anything nice for you if I have to worry that it's backfiring and I don't even know it."

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Like I want to give you a good, proper back-rub," she explained. "But I can't if you aren't willing to tell me if it's hurting you because of the scars."

It seemed too easy so far, but he nodded again reluctantly. "I...I kind of liked what you started to do to my neck last night."

"Good, because there's a lot more where that came from. And last but not least, I want you to promise to try and have a little fun."

Neville stopped, turning to look at her as though she had just spoken Mermish. "*Fun?*"

"You remember, Neville, that thing that we used to have together even when things were really bad?" Her smile was tinged with sadness at the edges, but there was hope there too. "I know we're going to be saying our good-byes and settling our affairs, but if this is going to be our last chance to be really free before we go back to die, I'd like to try and enjoy ourselves a little too. Maybe go on a bit of a spree in Diagon Alley, have a picnic just the two of us when we visit Blackpool, go to a spring carnival. Doesn't really matter what. Just, you know, at least one afternoon where we try to just go on a date without it being a grand gesture of anything except that we're teenagers in love."

Something in his chest seemed to leap at this, to reach towards the idea almost desperately, but the larger part of him remained wary, waiting for the catch, afraid to let his guard down enough to admit that it sounded like a wonderful idea. "Just...a date?"

She laughed gently. "A date. Haven't you heard of one before? It's something young witches and wizards do when they like each other and aren't busy mounting a revolution."

To his surprise, Neville felt a slight smile come over his own face. "Yeah. I think that would be great."

"Neville!" Hannah gave an exaggerated little gasp. "I think I almost saw *you* for a moment under there!"

He chuckled. He couldn't help it, even though it was strangely frightening in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on, as if something were waiting to punish him for the audacity of being in any way happy after failing so badly. "What, you think I'm Polyjuiced to look like myself?"

"Absolutely not." She grinned wickedly at him, leaning in close. "I mean, I don't think even Polyjuice could fool someone who *really* knows you...." He hadn't noticed her hand slip under the loose folds of his open robes until she pinched him suddenly, and he yelped, dropping his trunk. By the time he even realized what she'd done, she had broken into a sprint, leaving her own luggage far behind as she dashed down the remainder of the long garden path toward the house, her golden hair flying behind her in the sunlight as brightly as the sound of her laughter.

And he was following, and his longer legs were eating up her lead, and he had tackled her, rolling her over in the chamomile-scattered grass, tickling her mercilessly. She was screaming and writhing and laughing, her cheeks bright pink and her hair strewn with white petals as she

squirmed beneath him. He twisted, trying to keep his own vulnerably ticklish sides away from her, and he could hardly believe that he could hear himself laughing so hard and so freely.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Gran pass them on the way to the house, their trunks now trailing meekly behind her. He paused a split second, unsure what she would do, but when her eyes flicked towards them, he could have sworn there was a smile there that was very much like relief.

The lapse cost him as Hannah's fingers found his ribs, and then his grandmother's odd little look was the furthest thing from his mind. This, after all, was war.

OOO

It didn't heal overnight. Neville felt deeply betrayed and all the worse at first when the swirl of hard, painful feelings returned within less than an hour of the blissful moment on the front lawn when they had seemed to lift for good, but Hannah assured him that this was normal. To his surprise, he found out that his friend had struggled with much the same thing the previous year.

To all but Susan, she had held up an almost normal appearance after her mother had been killed, but privately, she admitted, it had been very, very bad. The murder of Peggy Abbott had been senseless, needless – the Aurors suspected the sweet, popular witch had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time – but Hannah had been certain her own involvement in the D.A. was to blame, and the guilt of it, coupled with her father's grief-fueled rejection, had nearly destroyed her.

He knew now that the events of the year would leave scars, not just on his body but on his heart, but as each day passed, he began to feel slightly more his old self, and slowly, he came to forgive his friends for their unwilling betrayal. As the dark cloud withdrew, Neville could see more and more clearly the reasons for their action, and though it had been wrong, he understood that he was not the only one capable of misjudging a situation, and the hope of reassuming his position upon their return to Hogwarts began to grow stronger.

Five days into the two-week holiday, they took the Knight Bus again, this time to Blackpool, the coastal resort where his maternal grandparents, the Gamps, lived with the rest of his extended family, and where he had spent so many summers as a child. It was already crowded, both with Muggle and wizarding tourists, but he and Hannah got permission to slip off alone for the first afternoon while the adults were catching up with each other in mind-numbingly boring small talk, and he had taken her to a relatively secluded spot on the long promenade. It was the very place, actually, where his great-uncle Algie had tried to force him into showing magic as a little boy, and he explained this laughingly as they sat on the edge of the pier, the cool, dark waters of the Irish Sea lapping at the pilings below.

"...so we're having a grand time, then all of a sudden I'm flying through the air, and the next thing I knew, I was underwater. I wasn't scared, if you'll believe it. I was just too *baffled*. I think now that's why it didn't get any magic out of me. I didn't realize I'd nearly drowned until they'd fished me out and all the grown-ups were so upset, and honestly, then I just started crying." Neville shrugged sheepishly. "Gran wouldn't talk to him for *months* after."

Hannah giggled, looking down into the deep blue of the water. "I can see why! It's a long way down!"

"Yeah, well, it was actually one of his safer ideas." He shook his head in amusement at the memories. "You'll meet him, though. He's a little like Luna, now that I look back. Nice person, but not really brewing the same potion as the rest of the world."

She nodded knowingly. "I think there's one in every family."

"Who's yours?" Neville scooted down the rough planks of the old pier to sit closer to her, his feet dangling over the edge idly.

"Aunt Winnie." Her face screwed up in a mocking imitation of an old witch's disapproving scowl. "Don't touch, Hannah, they're *priceless!*" She's got this enormous collection of those wretched little Sweetiepie Sorceress figurines. Every single one they've ever made, I think. Anyway, there's hundreds of them all over her house, all in these little charmed bubbles so the cats don't knock them over, and she'd go *mad* any time you were within fifty feet of them, like you were going to steal them or something."

"You don't mean those little china witches with the big eyes and the simpery faces, do you?" he asked.

"The ones that are so cutesy Umbridge didn't even have any? Because yes, that's exactly what I mean," she nodded gravely. "Going into that house is like trying to eat half of Honeydukes in one sitting. You can feel your teeth start to rot the second you cross the front door." She gave an exaggerated little shudder, then laughed.

"I think that You-Know-Who's got exactly the wrong idea, really." Neville mused, taking another bite of the giant ice-cream sundae they'd gotten to share. "Have you ever heard Ginny talk about *her* great-uncle Bilius? The old wizarding families are starting to get pretty weird. We probably could really use some new blood."

"I don't know...." Hannah reached over and wiped a smudge of chocolate sauce off his nose. "Colin's got some good ones about his cousin who thought he'd discovered messages from aliens in the noise you get when you can't find the band on the wireless. Maybe it's just *people*."

"My second cousin almost married a guy who – Hannah?" He stopped mid-sentence, looking at her in concern. She had frozen in place with her spoon halfway to her mouth, and her cheeks had fallen abruptly pale.

"Didn't you feel it?" she whispered.

"Feel what?"

"My *Galleon!*" The spoon clattered down onto the pier as she dropped it uncaringly, ignoring the spatters of strawberry ice cream and chocolate sauce that had flown everywhere. For a few seconds, she fished awkwardly in the back pocket of her jeans, then pulled out the charmed coin.

Neville's own was locked in his trunk back at home, left behind as a too-bitter reminder of what he had lost, but his forfeited command never even occurred to him as he leaned over to see the writing around the edge, instantly alert.

"Come DgnAly. Big HP news. C.P." he read aloud, then looked up, a thrill running through him so intensely that he shivered. "Hannah! It's about Harry!" Neville paused, running through the names of the recently-expanded D.A. in his head. "CP...that's either Camellia Parkinson or Christopher Parnett."

"It's Parkinson," she announced firmly. "Call it witch's instinct, but she's Ravenclaw. That message is capitalized and punctuated. Parnett doesn't do that for essays, much less something on the edge of a Galleon."

"Still, news about Harry!" he gripped her arm eagerly. "Let's just Apparate and find out, please! They'll never even know we were gone."

The same eagerness he felt was dancing in her green eyes, but she hesitated as she scanned the pier around them. "There's an awful lot of people, Neville."

"There's a souvenir shop we passed on the way here, not a hundred paces back down the promenade. It's still closed, and there's a space between the sign and the stand where no one could see us!"

She startled, looking at him oddly. "How do you know that?"

He blushed deeply. "I...um...I kind of spotted it as somewhere we might snog some...if, uh...you know, you wanted to later," he confessed.

Hannah giggled. "The big hedge in front of your Auntie's house. That's the one I saw." She got to her feet, her own cheeks scarlet. "Okay, then. Let's go...not snog, I mean, but I want to know what's going on with Harry, as long as we come straight back."

"Promise," he nodded. They hurried quickly to the empty souvenir shop, tucking themselves into the shadowed gap between the tall signboard and the slatboard sides of the little building. Neville's heart was beating fast with excitement. It had been since December since they had any indication their friend was even alive, and if it was something that would have gotten Parkinson's attention, it had to be big. The young Ravenclaw had never been one of the D.A.'s more avid members, and she was definitely not the type to pass along rumor.

He closed his eyes, concentrating on the black-haired, pug-nosed witch as he turned on the spot, and there was the brief, uncomfortable press of Apparition, the bizarre sense of being forced through a narrow, invisible tube, and then they were there. Neville blinked, orienting himself again, and he saw Hannah smoothing one hand over her slightly mussed hair, looking around as he was in half-expectation of seeing Harry himself standing there. Instead, there was only what seemed to be a small sitting room, dimly lit but comfortably, if rather impersonally furnished.

Hannah was the first to recognize their surroundings, her eyes widening. "We're in the *Cauldron*!"

"Keep your voices down, Pansy's in the other room." They turned at the sound of Camellia's harsh whisper, and they saw her standing almost directly behind them, hands on her hips and an odd look on her face as if she had no idea how she felt about anything other than the profound importance of not alerting her sister. "She's been howling for the past hour, but Milicent's got her settled down now. I think she may have given her something."

Neville frowned in concern. "But we just Apparated in, won't she -"

"People Apparate in and out of the *Cauldron* all the time," Hannah said knowingly. "If you want somewhere private, Cammy, there's a supply closet three doors down the hall on your left where we keep linens and things. This is suite 6, right?"

The young Ravenclaw's jaw dropped. "How did you -?"

"My grandfather owns the place," she explained. "Come on...."

She led the three of them to the little closet, and they barely managed to squeeze in, Camellia perching herself on one of the shelves as Neville, by far the largest of the three, was forced to crouch awkwardly, taking a seat on an upended mop bucket. As soon as the door was closed behind them, he looked up at Camellia intently. "So...what's this big news?"

One dark eyebrow raised uncertainly, and she looked at Hannah. "Can I tell him, do you think? Is he stable?"

The question hit Neville with the force of a punch, and he felt the color raise in his cheeks. "I'm perfectly fine, Miss Parkinson," he assured her icily.

Hannah nodded. "Commander Longbottom took a *temporary leave of absence*, if you remember." He looked at her in surprise as she said this. He had never known before exactly how his departure had been explained to the rest of the D.A., and he found himself more than a little touched to learn that he wasn't going to have to face everyone knowing the hard truth when he got back.

"Rumor said you kicked him out because he'd gone mental," Camellia retorted bluntly.

"Well, rumor's just that, rumor. And rumor is not always to be trusted." Hannah's green eyes narrowed at the other witch. "I certainly hope you've brought us here on more than that."

"Straight from the Dark Lord's mouth," she assured them, nodding. A look of great importance had come over her now, driving away the previous uncertainty. "Pansy's been hanging out in Knockturn Alley all the time since we got here," she explained with a slightly long-suffering expression. "She's always hoping she'll hear something about *Draco* or maybe even, Merlin help us, just *happen* to run into him. She's always been bad, you know, but ever since he got made a real Death Eater, she's *impossible*."

"Has anyone had the guts to tell her he's been snogging Greengrass?" Hannah giggled nastily.

Camellia looked down archly from her perch on the shelf. "Do *you* want to be the bearer of that news, Abbott? How's your Shield Charm these days?"

"Yes, yes—" Neville interrupted impatiently, "—but what does this have to do with *Harry*?"

"Potter, Granger, and Weasley – Ron, that is – were captured by Snatchers, including your old pal Fenrir, Neville, and taken to Malfoy Manor just yesterday to be given over to the Dark Lord."

Neville's heart seemed to stop, and he felt his face drain to a sickly white. "No...." his voice was a thin rasp, a whisper of despair and shattering hope, and Hannah looked as though she were barely fighting back tears.

"Oh, they got away," Camellia smiled, clearly having enjoyed the moment. "That's why Pansy's in such a state. They got away along with some other prisoners, though we don't know who *they* were, and managed to steal Draco and his Aunt Bellatrix's wands and stun a dozen people. The Dark Lord was *beside himself*. No one's ever seen anything like it. He called every single Death Eater together and made them watch while he tortured the whole Malfoy family – even Bellatrix, and she's his very top one. Everyone's talking about it."

"Is this in the *Prophet*?" demanded Neville. "Who else knows?"

"It's a failure, so the Dark Lord won't want it published...really, just the Death Eaters and anyone close to them," Camellia replied.

He nodded quickly, his mind racing as he turned to Hannah. "If they know Ron's with Harry now –"

"Someone's got to warn Ginny," she agreed fervently, then bit her lip. "If it's not already too late."

Neville reached out as he stood, patting Camellia firmly on the shoulder. "Great job, Parkinson. If you hear anything else...."

"I will..." the girl hesitated, her deep blue eyes looking keenly into his, assessing the strength and sanity there, and finally, she gave a little, satisfied nod. "I mean; yes, *Sir*."

He drew his wand, watching as Hannah did the same, and they stepped out into the hallway to give themselves room to turn. "Be ready," he warned her. "We could find anything there." She nodded, her face set, her hand tensed on the thin piece of applewood and phoenix, and he took a deep breath. "To the Burrow, then."

The comfortable, snug little home he remembered was unrecognizable when they re-appeared. Windows were shattered, furniture upended, cushions torn, and knick-knacks scattered and smashed. The wallpaper hung in wide, limp swaths, and holes had been punched in the walls to search for anyone hiding within. The kitchen door hung drunkenly off one twisted hinge, and all the cupboards had been ripped open, plates and cups lying in a mass of multicolored shards.

across the floor, and across the wall of the sitting room, above the fireplace where a large photograph of the Weasley family had once hung were scorched the words *BLOOD TRAITORS!* in heavy, crude writing.

Neville gasped, his heart clenching in pain at the sight of his friend's devastated home. His hand began to shake, but he clenched his fist tightly, forcing the wand to hold steady. There was no sound of movement, no sign of life at all, and he nodded towards Hannah, who flicked her own wand into the dark hallway beyond the sitting room door. "*Hominum Revelio!*"

A silver jet of light shot from the end of her wand and sped out the door, but it vanished without returning, and she turned to him, her face pale. "They're all gone, Neville."

"Let's go outside," he said, "see if there's a Dark Mark. The Weasleys were prominent. If they killed them, they'll have made sure everyone knows."

Trying not to look at the destruction around him, the photographs still smiling and waving in torn pieces from broken frames, the gouges and scorches on the floors, the oil lamps twisted from their brass brackets, he picked his way through the debris to the front door. It had been blown away entirely, the bolt still oddly snug in its hasp on the side of the gaping hole, and he stepped through, holding his breath as he turned to look into the sky above the tall, canted structure.

Only clouds looked down at him.

He let out a deep sigh of relief, turning to Hannah, who was just emerging behind him, carrying something in her hands that looked like a carriage clock. "No Mark!" he said, grinning with relief. "And the spell would have shown us bodies, so that means at least they all got away!"

There was no answering relief on Hannah's pretty face. "I don't think so, Neville," she said quietly. "I think they've been captured."

He frowned. "Why?"

She held out the clock, and he saw now that there were no numbers on the face. Instead, it sported ten hands, each marked with the name of one of the Weasley family – including one that said *Mrs. F. Weasley* whom he assumed was Bill's new wife – and several possible locations around the edge, including *Work*, *School*, *Traveling*, and *Home*. The glass was cracked, the pendulum slightly bent, and the steady tick-tock had a bit of a hiccup to it, but it was still running, and all ten hands were pointed straight up, to the space that read *Mortal Peril*.

Hannah pointed to the clock face. "I asked about it when we were here over Christmas. It shows where the whole family is at any time. If they were on the run, I think it would say they were *Traveling* or maybe *Away*."

"Are you sure it's working properly?" he asked. "It's taken some damage, you know."

"I think it's working fine," she said sadly. "Besides, if they'd gotten away, wouldn't You-Know-Who be trying to put together an all-out manhunt if he was as angry as Camellia said? Why would there *be* any Death Eaters in Knockturn Alley to be gossiping? I mean, if Harry's gotten away and the Weasleys have all vanished at the same time, he'd probably assume they were together. It would make sense."

Neville nodded in agreement. "You're right." He began to pace the path through the strangely undisturbed garden, tapping his wand and ignoring the gnomes that gamboled through the slightly overgrown hedges. "We can't lose Ginny too. We're already out Luna, and Terry's brave enough, but he's a little more of the theoretical type. I'm not sure how he's going to hold when the *real* hexes start flying. Ernie's solid, but he's not a leader at all, Seamus is too hot-tempered, and Parvati's completely untested as far as serious authority. We *need* Ginny, even after I'm back, because I'm still Snape's biggest target, and I might be going down early when the fight starts."

"But they've had Luna for months, and we've never found her," Hannah protested.

"We never really looked," he pointed out. "Trying for a jailbreak just wasn't worth it, in all honesty. But this time's different. We've got to find out where she's being held, and we've got to find a way to go in and get her out at least long enough to Apparate away." He continued pacing, chewing the inside of his cheek as he mulled over the difficult – in fact, almost impossible – task.

She let out a bitter, sarcastic little laugh. "Well, if that's all! Why don't we just go back to Knockturn Alley, chat up a few Death Eaters, ask *them* where the Weasleys are, then walk in and open the door for her? Should be back by tea-time, don't you think?"

He stopped in his tracks, a wide grin slowly appearing on his lips, then he gave a shout of triumph and reached out, grabbing her face between both hands and kissing her hard. Her eyes flew wide, and she shoved him away. "Neville?"

"You. Are. Brilliant!" He kissed her again. "That's exactly what we're going to do!"

She gave him a long, hard look, clearly making a complete re-evaluation of his mental status.  
"Are you..."

"Evil never pays in the end, Hannah." He grabbed her hand, preparing to Apparate again. "We need to go back to Blackpool, I've got to get something out of my trunk." He smiled again, and there was a dark edge to it. "The Runcorns are about to cost You-Know-Who the Weasleys."



## Chapter Sixteen Behind The Mask

"Just be careful not to touch your mouth afterwards if you touch it," Hannah cautioned. "We don't need you throwing up in the middle of Knockturn Alley."

Neville nodded, shivering a little as he looked down at his left arm. The snake and skull that stared up at him was nothing more than a novelty, he knew, one of the Edible Dark Marks from the twins' shop, but it still looked obscene against his skin. His hair had been slicked back, and he was wearing the Death Eater's robes from Renny's father over his normal clothing. They were a little loose in the shoulders and chest – Albert Runcorn had clearly been built more like Ernie than Neville himself – but the appearance that he had lost weight since wearing them last would suit their cover story, and he was tall enough to carry off the length, the thick black fabric barely brushing the floor if he stood up straight.

Hannah cast a Drying Charm on the Mark, then turned to the mirror, tapping her wand against her chin thoughtfully as she looked at herself. "I've got the green eyes and the fair skin," she mused. "Do you think I should go ginger?"

"No, let's stay away from anything that could imply you were related to the Weasleys," Neville said firmly. "Besides, you're supposed to be my sister. Go brown, and your eyes, too." He leaned forward to nuzzle the back of her neck. "Even though it's a shame to mess with them."

She tapped the wand against her head, and as if she had poured ink over her hair, it began to darken, spreading out from the scalp to the very tips of her curls with a deep, rich brown that precisely matched his own. Another tap, and her eyes faded to a frighteningly inhuman white before coloring again to chocolate brown. The change was dramatic, and she made a face.  
"Remind me never to go brunette for real. It suits you, but it's definitely not me."

"I agree," he said, then tilted his head in consideration. "You should probably do more than mess with your coloring. We still don't really look like brother and sister. Maybe if you did something to your nose?"

"But I *like* my nose," she protested.

"So do I. It's an adorable nose," Neville agreed. "But it's all cute and tiny, and my father gave me this," he tapped his own nose with a self-deprecating little smile.

"It's handsome enough on you, but I don't think it would look natural on my face. I'm too round."

"Then lengthen your whole face a little. That would honestly probably do more for a likeness anyway," he suggested.

Sighing, she ran the wand along the line of her jaw, and her face distorted bizarrely for a moment, wavering like melting wax before settling again. It had taken on more of an oval than a heart-shape now, the jawline longer and more tapered, the cheekbones more pronounced, and her hairline had lost its little widow's peak, now straight across her newly-higher forehead. He looked at her a long moment, then smiled. "Yeah, that's more like it. We really do look like siblings now. You know, I've never seen it before, but we have kind of the same mouth."

She shrugged. "Probably some cousin in common if you go back a few generations. But I don't think anyone will recognize me now, and that's the really important part." Taking a deep breath, she turned to her trunk. "What do you think I should wear? I don't really own anything morbid enough, I don't think."

"All of You-Know-Who's sympathizers don't dress like Bellatrix, Hannah!" he laughed. "Besides, there's only the one female Death Eater anyway."

"Yeah, but somehow it doesn't seem right to go in wearing something all cheerful, either," she countered. After a pause, she lifted out a set of robes in vivid blue, long-sleeved and cut low at the neck. "Maybe if I went for another color with these...how about a dark red? A couple shades deeper than Gryffindor?"

"That'd be good." Neville turned his back as she changed, fighting the impulse to try and catch a glance over his shoulder. Instead, he focused his attention on the silver mask that sat ominously on the dressing table. It stared back at him like a Death's Head, and he felt a sick, queasy sensation slither through his stomach at the thought of wearing it.

"Do you think we should tell anyone what we're doing?" Hannah asked behind him.

He shook his head. "No. That way, if we get caught and they try to question people, the shock will be more genuine, protect them more. Besides, we don't have the time, and I don't want to risk any more lives than we have to on something like this. You know perfectly well that if we got in trouble, the rest of the D.A. would come charging in after us whether it was a good idea or not."

"You mean," she said wryly, "the way we're going charging after Ginny whether it's a good idea or not?"

"Exactly."

She stepped back into his line of sight, twirling the skirts of her robes in her hands as she turned in front of him. "How do I look?"

"Not a thing like yourself," he smiled. "It's perfect."

Hannah smiled back at him, then paused, her eyes narrowing. "Are you sure we have to wreck your face all up? What if it doesn't undo?"

"It will. It's not like we're really going to burn me, and I'm just too recognizable after all the trouble I've caused this year. But the *shape* of my face is staying the same, so it's still good we matched you up before." He turned back to the mirror and tapped his own face with his wand. There was the same look of melting wax, but this time, instead of resolving again smoothly, it seemed to intensify, twisting and pitting, and when he drew back his wand and the flesh settled, his entire face was marred hideously with what looked like the aftermath of a terrible burn. With his skin devastated and the dusting of gray at his temples, he no longer looked anything close to seventeen, and he realized with a start that a stranger would probably guess his age to be easily twice the truth.

Neville had always considered himself anything but vain, an average-looking young man on his best days, but he discovered that there must have been some deeply-buried sense of his own looks as he regarded the distorted results of the transfiguration. He found himself reluctant to turn back to Hannah, suddenly self-conscious, but he forced himself to do it and tried to hide the twinge of shame he felt as she recoiled. "Oh, Neville, that's just awful. It's fantastic!"

"Uh...thanks?" He chuckled nervously, reaching for the mask. The silver felt strangely warm against his skin as the charm on it acted automatically, sealing it tightly but with a magical flexibility against his face. He could still move his mouth perfectly well beneath, still see clearly, but the reflection that regarded him now was the implacable, motionless anonymity of a Death Eater.

Neville brought up the thick hood over his hair, then reached out to take Hannah's hand. "Okay," he said, trying to sound a lot more confident than he felt. "Are you sure you want to do this?" He paused, looking her directly in the eyes. "I want you to be honest, Hannah. I won't be angry if you don't want to go, and, well...it hasn't been that long since you all...."

"I love you, I trust you, I believe in you, and I'm ready to follow you to Knockturn Alley or anywhere else we need to go to find Ginny and her family," she said firmly. "Now, Trevor," she smiled, using the name he had chosen that had once been his grandfather's and, more recently, his pet toad's, "I believe we have somewhere to go?"

"Certainly, Grace." Squeezing her hand in his, they turned on the spot, and the brightly lit guestroom vanished into swirling, crushing darkness.

### OOO

It was well after dark, but Knockturn Alley was still bustling when they Apparated into the middle of the narrow street. A dozen new shops had sprung up to turn a brisk trade in items related to the Dark Arts, and several pubs and café's were flourishing in brightly lit, noisy pools of activity. They both hesitated, as if expecting someone to point at them and cry out with their true identities, but no one seemed to pay the new arrivals any mind, continuing about their business with only the occasional respectful nod demanded by Neville's imposing attire.

He looked around cautiously, then pointed towards a pub halfway down the block where most of the figures outlined in the light spilling from the doorway appeared to be clad in robes similar to his own. "That one," he said, indicating the sign that bore the image of a bleeding, open-mouthed skull. "The *Shrieking Skull*. It looks like we could get some news in there."

Hannah nodded her agreement, and they set off as confidently as they could, trying to look as though they had been down this way a thousand times. Neville had to force himself not to stare at the shops as they passed, trying to ignore the disturbing assortment of torture devices, sinister-looking books, and body parts – mostly animal, but some unsettlingly quite like human – displayed in the windows. His hand was clenched on the wand in his pocket, his pulse pounding so loudly in his ears that he was surprised people weren't turning to find the source of the noise, but he could see his reflection in the plate glass shopfronts, and he knew that outwardly, he was managing to remain calm.

A huge wizard, easily a half a head taller than Neville himself and almost twice as broad, barred the entrance to the *Shrieking Skull*. His face was weather-worn and grizzled, split almost perfectly down the middle by a long, gnarled scar, and when he grinned at them, his teeth were darkly stained and chipped. Every instinct wanted to turn and run, but Neville strode forward with what he hoped was authoritative disdain, pushing up his sleeve to bare the Mark on his arm.

For a breathless moment, the security guard stared at it, but just when he had decided to grab Hannah and get out of there, he nodded, stepping away from the door and leering at the young witch. "Who's the lady?"

"That would be my sister," Neville sneered, trying his best to imitate Malfoy's most dismissive attitude. "And if you touch her, you'll regret it. She's seeing Marcus Flint, and he's at least as much part-Troll as you are." The security guard appeared completely accustomed to such threats, and he laughed, waving them through with another grin that flashed his disgusting teeth.

The first hurdle had been passed with surprising ease, but he felt no sense of relief as he looked around the interior of the pub. A roaring fire burned in a large stone fireplace at one side of the room, the mantelpiece carved to resemble a stack of human bones, and above it, a huge stone skull was locked in an agonized scream. The pictures on the walls were medieval etchings dating back to the Muggle-Wizard wars, graphically displaying some of the more creative methods Muggles had used to try and root out their magical counterparts, and the bar itself appeared to be made from stacked coffins, the barstools skeletal wrought-iron hands that reached menacingly from the floor.

At least thirty black-robed Death Eaters were scattered throughout the pub, making up the vast majority of the clientele, and Neville knew they had come to the right place, like it or not. The remaining patrons seemed likewise unsavory, and he suspected that most of them were informants or sympathizers who worked closely with You-Know-Who's inner circle. There were also around a dozen witches there, but they were all clad in robes so tight and revealingly cut and hung so closely on the arms of the wizards that he had a strong idea that they were not there for strictly social reasons.

He began to feel bad for bringing Hannah into such a place, but she was looking at the other women with open revulsion, not any sense of intimidation, and the guilt faded quickly into something very much like pride. Waving away one of the witches who had begun to sashay towards him, he stepped up to the bar and slapped it with his open palm loudly to get the barkeep's attention. "Firewhisky," he snapped. "Neat."

Hannah tugged on his sleeve with an expression of concern. "Trevor," she warned, "maybe it's not the best idea to —"

"I've been on tea and potions long enough," he growled at her fiercely, allowing his voice to carry loudly. "If I want a drink, I'm bloody well going to have myself a real drink, so shut your face!"

She winced, and he fought back the urge to apologize. If he was going to pass himself successfully as one of You-Know-Who's handpicked killers, he was pretty sure they didn't bother themselves about being rude. The barkeep was an ancient wizard whose face was so thickly networked with wrinkles and scars that it scarcely seemed to have any actual skin, one eye socket gaping emptily at them in an eerie likeness to the toothless mouth below as he placed the drink on the bar in front of Neville. "And the witch'll be having?" he inquired.

Hannah hesitated, and Neville abruptly remembered her mentioning that she had been looking forward to champagne at Ernie and Susan's proper wedding as her first taste of anything stronger than a butterbeer. He took his own glass, nodding his head towards her before the barkeep could notice the uncertainty. "Just a glass of wine for her," he said. "An elf white, if you have it, or something else light...she's just a girl."

The barkeep nodded and turned back to his shelves, and she clutched his arm with an urgent whisper. "I've never —"

"I know. Just hold it and pretend to sip at it a little and try to look casual, okay?" he hissed back under his breath.

As they waited for Hannah's drink, he turned, leaning back on his elbows against the bar to survey the room as he brought the whisky to the opening of the mask. He knew he needed to keep his wits flawlessly about him, so he barely allowed the liquid to touch his lips, using it only as an excuse to search for the most likely candidate for their purpose.

He found it at the table just to the left of the fireplace. A short, barrel-chested Death Eater with forearms as thick and hairy as a gorilla's and a long, scraggly beard, he was holding court over

five or six other wizards in civilian robes. Most importantly, the number of empty glasses on the table in front of him and the deep flush in his heavily veined cheeks and nose suggested that he had been at it for more than long enough to become usefully loose-lipped. Nudging Hannah gently, he gestured with his head towards the wizard, and she nodded minutely, following him over to the table the moment she took the glass of pale golden wine from the barkeep's knotted hand.

The burly Death Eater stood as he saw Neville approaching, waving a hand invitingly. "Come join us, m'friend! These lads're buyin' drinks for anyone who'll give 'em the dirt on yeserday's feshtiv'tys!"

"Actually," Neville replied, taking the offered seat, "I'll buy a drink for *you* for the same. I didn't have the privilege, Mr....?"

"Mulc'ber! Nero Mulc'ber!" he announced in a jovial slur, then his face twisted in a quizzical frown. "But how by t' Harpies doncha know that...uh, whashyer name?"

"Trevor Benedict." he supplied.

"Dunno t' name," Mulciber said with increasing suspicion, "...an' I thought t' Dark Lord had called t' lot of us?"

Neville reached up, hoping that they wouldn't see how taut his hand was as he fought to keep it from shaking while he pulled the mask away and laid it on the pipe-burned surface of the table. A ripple of gasps and cries of surprise and disgust went around the table, and Mulciber's drink-flushed cheeks paled a little. "Sweet Samhain!" he exclaimed. "What happened t' you?"

"I was working on the continent when the Dark Lord returned," Neville said, drawing on memories of Snape's dark smile to infuse his voice with loathing and resentment. "I joined the moment I heard, but I had a very nasty encounter with a Blood-Traitor named Charlie Weasley and his little pet dragons less than a week later. Nearly killed me, and took me down a long time." He motioned towards Hannah. "Don't think I'd have made it without my sister's care, tell you true enough. I've just now gotten back on my feet again proper and returned to Britain."

Mulciber swore foully. "Waste'a good pure blood, t' whole fam'ly!" He turned his head, unleashing a thick gob of spit into the fire before clapping one hand on Neville's shoulder in firm sympathy. "Doncha worry, Trev, yain't mished t' best yet. Dark Lord's still on t' rise, an' there's plenty Mudbloods and Blood Traitors still to go 'round."

"I want a particular one," Neville insisted darkly. "Thought I heard that name over here, in fact. It's why I came. To hell with buying you a drink, I'll buy you a *bottle* if you can tell me how to get my hands on any one of those treasonous, over-breeding bastards." He pulled two Galleons from his pocket and slapped them onto the table to prove his intent, and Mulciber's pale blue eyes widened greedily. He allowed the promise to linger tantalizingly a moment, then placed his hand over the coins again and began to draw them back. "But maybe I was wrong...the pub's noisy, maybe I didn't hear you say anything about Weasleys after all..."

The heavy, hairy-knuckled hand came down hard on his, pinning it to the table to stop the ominous sliding away of the free alcohol. "No! Y'did, I promish y'did!"

Hannah leaned forward, almost accidentally allowing Mulciber the slightest glance down the front of her robes as she pulled at Neville's sleeve with a solicitous look. "Trevor, dear, you're throwing away gold on a drunk. He's probably never even heard of the Weasleys. Why don't you ask Malfoy? He knows everyone, and you two got on so well back at the Ministry before you were hurt...."

The thin, gray-haired wizard to Mulciber's right – whom Neville now saw to be wearing robes with the insignia of the Ministry of Magic over the breast – laughed shrilly. "Little darling's got you pegged for a sot, Nero!" The laugh faded quickly to a shrewdly narrow-eyed look. "But you really have been out of the loop, haven't you? Malfoy's been out of favor for near on two years now, and after yesterday, he's lucky to still be alive."

Neville feigned profound skepticism at this. "*Lucius* Malfoy?"

"I know! Never thought I'd see the day myself! Rain wouldn't get him wet, that one. But the Dark Lord had the whole family tortured...Lucius, his Missus, even that pretty little snot-nosed kid of theirs." The Ministry wizard nodded in the satisfaction of someone seeing a long-envied rival cut down to size.

Eager to re-claim his authority – and his promised reward – Mulciber leaned forward so far over the table that he seemed about to climb across into Neville's lap. "Malfoy had *Potter* right in his own *boush!* *Wandlesh!* An' he let him get 'way!"

"No!"

"An' who'dya think wash with him?" Mulciber said enticingly.

"No idea."

"WEASHLY!" Both heavy palms crashed down onto the table as he shouted triumphantly, making the empty glasses jump several inches into the air. Every head in the pub jerked around, and for a moment, Neville felt heart-stoppingly spotlit, then the crowd seemed to collectively realize that it was just Mulciber grandstanding with what was apparently not the first re-telling of this news, and the normal low murmur of conversations quickly resumed.

Neville leaned forward until his own forehead nearly touched Mulciber's, his eyes blazing. "You're lying!"

"Swear on m'Mark! Not yer Weashly, but one of 'em. Youngesht one, I b'veve. An' a Mudblood girl, an' ol' Xeno's little freak, an' a Mudblood boy, and s'm othersh, too." He nodded solemnly, and Neville grabbed his wrists with completely real excitement, unable to believe his luck. *Luna!* Harry had managed to rescue *Luna*, too!

"Where are they now?" he demanded.

"Dunno. No'un knows." Mulciber admitted sadly. "S'why Dark Lord's so angry."

"What about the other Weasleys," he pressed, "surely you've had them interrogated, tortured, used Veritaserum...?"

"Got 'way."

"I know *that* Weasley got away, you stupid lush!" Neville snapped. "But the *rest* of them!"

"Got 'way." Mulciber repeated. "All gone when they went t' housh. Tore t' place up lookin' for 'em, but too late. Yakshly's still not told t' Dark Lord." He motioned towards a large black lump in the corner. "Think he's hopin' they'll come get him while he's still passhed out too drunk t'care. Not so's blame him. S'gonna be real bad when Dark Lord finds out he losht all t' Weashlys."

"*EXPELLARMUS!*"

Neville's wand suddenly shot from his pocket backwards, and he grabbed at it futilely, hearing Hannah's shriek beside him as her own wand was likewise snatched away. He spun, reaching after it, and his heart plummeted as he saw the familiar slope-shouldered figure of Amycus Carrow grinning at him only a few feet away, all three wands clutched tight in one pale, stubby-fingered hand.

"I dunno, Nero," Carrow sneered. "I think the Dark Lord might be in a much better mood if we can hand over another Blood-Traitor ta make up for it."

Mulciber frowned in alcohol-muddled confusion. "T'hell you playin' at, Am'cush? Trev's on our shide!"

"Oh, no he ain't! I recognize that voice, no matter what he's done ta his face. That's the one what's been causin' so much trouble at Hogwarts all year, and I'd bet my wand the girl's Weasley, Abbott, or Patil." He jabbed all three wands at them with a harsh, vindictive leer. "*Veritas Personae!*"

Neville felt his face begin to ripple and twist again, and he could see out of the corner of his eye as Hannah's hair returned to its natural gold, her eyes whitening again before the vivid green restored itself, her face withdrawing to its own proportions. All around him, Death Eaters were jumping to their feet, and ten, twenty, at least forty wands were now pointed at the two unarmed teenagers.

The crawling sensation stopped, and Neville knew that his own identity was now laid as bare as Hannah's, and that certainty was reflected in Amycus' shout of triumph better than it ever could have been in any mirror. He flicked the wands at them, sending silver ropes to lash out and bind his two prisoners helplessly from shoulders to ankles in a matter of seconds, then turned to the others, his doughy face beaming hideously.

"Meet Neville Longbottom, suspected leader o' a very nasty and annoyin' little group what call themselves *Dumbledore's Army*, and my personal present ta the Dark Lord tonight."

OOO

Neville had only been this deeply into the Ministry of Magic once before, but he had a strong feeling that this time was going to be, if anything, far more unpleasant than the last.

The courtroom was huge and circular, dozens of rows of narrow benches soaring up from the pit-like space in the center almost to the ceiling dizzyingly high above. He had been stripped of the Death Eater's robes, and he and Hannah were now chained tightly to two high-backed chairs that sat ominously in the center of the room. In the uppermost levels, he could see clusters of figures looming menacingly, all clad in deep purple robes with an ornate silver W on the chest, and in the center, the familiar face of the Minister of Magic himself, Pius Thicknesse, glared down at the prisoners.

"The accused," he intoned, "have been brought before us, and I do hereby declare the Wizengamot to be in session."

He turned to his right, and as a small worklight appeared in the shadows at the end of the long bench, Neville gasped. Percy Weasley was sitting there, a quill in his hand and a second propped behind his ear as he waited, poised, over a long scroll of parchment. His face was pale and gaunt, but the hornrimmed glasses and freckles beneath the familiar shock of red hair were unmistakable. The young wizard nodded officially to the Minister. "Commencing the record now, Minister."

"Criminal trial for the twentieth of March, nineteen hundred and ninety-eight," said Thicknesse coolly, "The accused, Neville Alastor Longbottom and Hannah Grace Abbot, being of age and of sound mind and body do sit before the Wizengamot accused of crimes of capital severity. The identity of the accused has been confirmed by the strictest magical means. Do they hereby affirm their identity and full awareness of the nature of the proceedings which they have now incurred?"

Neville raised his head, his back straightening as much as the bonds would allow. "Yes."

All eyes now turned to Hannah, who looked not at all of sound mind at the moment, her face beet red and wildly distorted with fury as she strained forward against the chains and swore more extensively than Neville had ever imagined of her. One of the Ministry guards at the rear of the courtroom flicked his wand at her, and her tirade became soundless, though her mouth continued to move.

"Miss Abbott also affirms, Mr. Weasley." Thicknesse pushed his spectacles further up his nose as he looked down at them. "Interrogators: Pius Leo Thicknesse, Minister of Magic; Rudolphus Sisyphus LeStrange, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Dolores Jane Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister. Court Scribe, Perceval Ignatius Weasley. Are there any witnesses for the defense?" He paused, allowing the silence to fall over the court for a few moments before continuing with a nasty little edge of satisfaction to his tone. "The defense

shall be acting on their own behalf, then. Witnesses for the prosecution: Amycus Darius Carrow and Nero Cassius Mulciber, Death Eaters in Honored Standing."

Percy leaned down, his bright hair disappearing behind the edge of the benches for a moment before he straightened again, waving his wand to send a piece of parchment floating smoothly over to the Minister. Thicknesse took it and began to read aloud. "The charges against the accused are as follows: that they were caught in the act of willful and knowing treason by the Death Eaters Amycus Darius Carrow and Nero Cassius Mulciber. They stand here named as traitors to the Ministry of Magic, and to the rightful and natural peace and order of wizarding kind. Further, they are accused as having acted in assistance of Undesirable Number One, and of attempting to incite riot and rebellion at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Under wizarding law and the law of the realm, treason is a crime punishable by death, or by nothing less than a term of life imprisonment. How do the accused plead?"

Neville took a deep breath, glancing at Hannah as his hands clenched into fists on the arms of the chair. "If you mean that I've been doing everything I can to help Harry, that You-Know-Who is the biggest shame on the wizarding world in the last thousand years, and that I'd give my life to see him go down for good, then hell yes! But I'm no traitor!" His raised voice echoed loudly through the room, but Thicknesse only nodded placidly.

"And Ms. Abbott?"

The security guard flicked his wand again, and the charm lifted. Hannah's words were as fervent as his own. "Everything he said, and I'm just sorry I didn't have a chance to get my wand on the sick sons-of-hags that murdered my mother first!" Her pretty face was twisted with hate as she spat towards the benches.

Thicknesse merely nodded, indicating the security guard to gag her again before she could speak further, then he waved a hand towards the bench above him and to his left. "The prosecution may present their case and interrogate the accused."

Umbridge got to her feet and made her way to the aisle that split the benches, tip-toeing primly down the steps all the way to the floor where the prisoners sat, her hands laced neatly together in front of her squat, round body. Her flabby, wide-mouthed face was as toad-like as Neville remembered, her eyes bulging at them with a gleeful twinkle from beneath her bizarrely out-of-place pink hairbow. She shook her head at them and clicked her tongue in reproach. "Oh, Mr. Longbottom, I had such hopes that you would turn out better than this if we got you away from Mr. Potter," she simpered, the undercurrent of vindictive pleasure in her sugar-sweet tone chilling.

She turned to face the Wizengamot. "I had the pleasure of being Mr. Longbottom's teacher and Headmistress two years ago," she informed them. "He was for the most part an unremarkable student and a nice, well-behaved, well-liked boy, but he had the misfortune to be in the same year and House as Undesirable Number One, and I fear it left a tragically indelible impression on him. He has always been quite weak-willed, you see. And Miss Abbott...oh, but those sweet little

Hufflepuffs, you know how very easily they're led. Now, now, dear, don't think I can't read lips. But it's not your fault, is it? Blind, stupid loyalty is in your nature."

Umbridge wagged a finger at him with a little titter. "But what is understandable in a little boy is not as acceptable when we come of age, now! I did so *try*to advise you *all* about Potter's lies and instability when I was your teacher, and look where it's gotten you! Tsk tsk." She shook her head again and then gave a little shrug. "I must testify before the Wizengamot that as a former Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, I know these students personally and well, and believe them to be fully capable and culpable for the crimes of which they were accused, based on previous experience with their association with Undesirable Number One and his followers."

She turned and began to mince her way back towards her seat, exchanging a sappy smile with the Minister as she passed. "Thank you, Dolores," he said, then motioned to Percy. "Please note that the defense had no counter-argument to the Undersecretary's testimony."

*No counter-argument! But you never gave us a chance to –* Neville tried to shout back, but he found his words just as soundless as Hannah's oaths had been, and he shut his mouth, sitting back in the chair again. He felt sick. It had never been a question of receiving any kind of fair trial, he knew, but this was worse than a sham. He would almost rather have been simply put to death.

"Mr. Carrow?"

"Yessir." Amcyus took a step forward, but unlike Umbridge, he did not descend to join the prisoners. Instead, he planted both hands on the railing and simply leaned down over them with a self-satisfied smirk. "I've been tryin' ta catch this bloke – "

"Please refer to the prisoners by name for the record," Percy interrupted curtly.

"Been tryin' ta catch *Longbottom* all bloody year – "

"Please refrain from profanity for the record." Percy said again.

"All *year*, then, ya speccy little twerp." Amcyus glared at him, but the blue eyes behind the hornrimmed glasses never left the parchment as the quill moved busily, and the Death Eater continued. "Point bein' that he's been makin' it near impossible to fulfill the Dark Lord's desire for a proper school environment. Vandalism, insubordination, attempted theft...all manner o' nasty business. I've got a letter here," he pulled an envelope bearing the heavy purple wax seal of Hogwarts from the inside pocket of his robes, "From Headmaster Severus Snape that details all his goin's on, 'swell as sayin' we've had an eye on Abbott as one o' his tops."

Percy flicked his wand, summoning the letter, then paused with his hand poised over the seal. "Should I read the letter for the record, Minister, or simply enter it at a later time?"

Thicknesse took off his glasses, polishing them on a handful of his robes before replacing them with a deep sigh. "Later, Mr. Weasley. This whole thing is really a formality...the prisoners have

admitted their guilt and were caught in the act. We are just seeing that due process is observed. There is no need to take undue time about it all."

The open admission was shocking, even after all that had already happened, and Neville exchanged an appalled look with Hannah through the enforced silence, then turned back to the bench and twisted his hand in the cuff, managing to produce a gesture that expressed his opinion of the proceedings without need for words. Either the Minister did not notice, or at least, he pretended not to as he studied the parchment again. "Let's move on quickly now. Mr. Carrow, I think we've well established Mr. Longbottom and Miss Abbott's more than reasonable guilt regarding incitement of riot and rebellion, but those *are* the lesser charges. The court wishes to know about your capture of the prisoners last night."

"Well, Minister," Amicus grinned eagerly, "I was at the *Shriekin' Skull* havin' myself a pint. Hogwarts is on break, see, and we teachers don't get often enough a chance ta jes' unwind. So I'm catchin' up with some mates, and I hear this voice, and it's nigglin' at me. I know I've heard it before, but I don' see no one I know that matches up with it when I looks around." He pointed down at Neville with one short-fingered hand. "Then *he* starts gettin' all snippy with Mulciber, and *that* puts it to! Know him better when he's mouthin' off, and what does *that* tell ya, Minister?"

Thicknesse raised an eyebrow at Amicus's almost disrespectfully familiar tone. "Go on."

"So to make it quick, I disarmed 'em, used a Revealing Charm to show their true ugly little faces, an' bound 'em up neat an' tidy to be fetched here." He drew back his shoulders proudly and winked. "Din't even muss my robes."

"Very well. Is that your full testimony regarding the apprehension of the prisoners?"

"Aye."

"Then you may resume your seat, Mr. Carrow. Mr. Weasley...." Neville rolled his eyes, mouthing silently along as Thicknesse continued, "Please note that the defense had no counter-argument to Mr. Carrow's testimony." He gestured to the bench a third time. "Mr. Mulciber?"

Mulciber stood, but there was a distinctly sheepish look on his face, and he hesitated awkwardly. "Er...I should inform the court that I was very slightly intoxicated during the incident in question, and, well...uh, I don't know if my –"

"I'm sure that your memory on the incident is just lovely, Nero, dear." Umbridge cooed. "Just go on as best you can, you only had the teensiest little drop to drink, isn't that right?"

"Er...yeah, that's absolutely correct, Undersecretary," Mulciber nodded. "I just wanted the court to be aware, of course."

"Such model citizenship. But we're all grown-ups here, aren't we?" Umbridge giggled girlishly. "Really, there's no need to get fussy about one little bitty drink, is there, Minister?"

"Not at all, Undersecretary." Thicknesse agreed. "Mr. Weasley, please note that Mr. Mulciber has admitted to having consumed alcohol on the night in question, however it is by his own judgement as well as that of the Minister of Magic and other appropriate officials that his memory regarding the incident is completely unimpaired and admissible."

*I bet you don't remember a blessed thing!* Neville thought furiously. *You were so far gone, you probably had no idea what the Ministry was even talking about until they told you that you'd been there!* He poured all of his accusatory anger into the stare he locked onto Mulciber's pale blue eyes, but not only did the Death Eater not flinch, but a slow smile spread over the thin mouth before he looked back to the rest of the Wizengamot with an expression of angelic innocence.

"Witches and Wizards of the Wizengamot," he said, and Neville almost did not recognize the deep, confident tones as belonging to the same man who had been slurring all over him the night before. "I was in the *Shrieking Skull* on the night of March 19 with several associates of mine. We were discussing the recent distressing failure of Mr. Lucius Malfoy to retain Undesirable Number One in his custody, and we were approached by the accused. Miss Abbott, at the time, had transfigured herself, and Mr. Longbottom was wearing stolen Death Eater's robes and a mask."

"If I may, Minister –" LeStrange interrupted silkily. "We have established them to be the same robes that were found missing from the home of the traitor Runcorn this past December."

"Very good, Mr. LeStrange. It will be noted. Continue, Mr. Mulciber?"

"Mr. Longbottom attempted to feed us false information about the whereabouts of Potter and his associates, but when I questioned his pitifully transparent efforts at misdirection, he changed tactics, first trying to threaten me, and then bribe me with the girl."

Umbridge gasped. "Shameful!"

"Indeed, Undersecretary," Mulciber nodded. "I refused, of course, and that's when he told me that Potter is planning to try and overthrow the Ministry itself, and that when he did, Longbottom would have a position of power, and I needed to choose my loyalties carefully. Now, my loyalty has never been in question, the court knows, and I told him that Potter's attempt would certainly fail. Well, he didn't like that at all, but he had barely reached for his wand when Carrow stepped in, and you have his testimony from there." Mulciber took a bow towards the other Death Eater, and Thicknesse stood, brushing invisible dust from his robes.

"Thank you as well, Mr. Mulciber. Mr. Weasley...."

"Yes, sir," Percy said, "no counter-argument."

"Indeed." The Minister faced the assembled Wizengamot with a benevolent smile, gesturing down at where Neville and Hannah sat, quivering in anger. "You have heard more than enough, I think, to establish the guilt of the accused beyond all possible reasonable doubt. Those in favor of acquittal?"

Not a single hand appeared, and Neville felt himself go pale. Despite everything that had happened, despite the obvious nature of what he knew the verdict would be from the first moment, seeing it happen was something else entirely.

"Those in favor of conviction." Like the shimmer of a curse on the air, hands appeared across the sea of purple robes, and Neville closed his eyes in a silent prayer of regret and apology to his Gran, his parents, the D.A., and most of all to Harry himself as the Minister's words rang out through the courtroom.

"Then as Minister of Magic, I do hereby declare the accused guilty of all charges brought before the Wizengamot. The sentence for such egregious crimes is death. The manner in which sentence will be carried out shall be determined in closed session, but the Ministry believes in swift justice, and it will be concluded tomorrow, the twenty-first of March, at twelve noon." There was only a heartbeat of pause, then he spoke again, and there was an awful pity to his tone.

"May you come to understand the fallacy of your actions so that your souls may rest in peace."

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He had read about formal executions in his History of Magic textbooks, but there had not been one in over a hundred years, and he had never imagined that he would actually see one outside of the old sepia-toned photographs and stiffly-moving paintings. The idea that he would be the *subject* of one had never even crossed his mind.

Neville's clothes had been taken that morning, and he had been given a simple set of plain black robes instead, the neck cut oddly wide and low despite their clearly being tailored for a wizard's wear. When he put them on, they just barely hung off the edges of his shoulders, leaving his collarbones bare and not touching the hair that now curled near the bottom edge of a normal collar. He knew that it was a precise style that had been honed over hundreds of years to fall exactly right so as to completely bare the neck on a kneeling man, and at least it would help prevent such messy accidents as Nearly-Headless Nick.

Yet it wasn't the idea of being beheaded that was the most distressing. Morbidly, it was even more comfortable to him than if they had been planning to use the Killing Curse. No one knew how that felt – not even Harry remembered, really – but it had been a favorite gruesome thrill of the Gryffindor boys to ask the house ghost in lurid detail about exactly what beheading was like. Done with a blunt axe and a drunken executioner, it was apparently very painful for the first dozen or strokes, but the point where his spine had been severed, he swore, hadn't hurt at all.

No, the most worrisome part of a formal execution was the tradition wherein the condemned were given a single sentence in which to express their last words.

Oddly, as much as he had contemplated and prepared for his own death in the past several months, Neville had never given a single moment's thought to the idea of his last words. They simply hadn't been something that he had foreseen being able to choose. Planning to die in battle meant the assumption that his last words would be a spell that missed, a Shield Charm that

didn't hold, perhaps a shouted order or the cry of a friend's name that distracted him for a fatal moment. But now he was going to be executed, and suddenly, they mattered.

He felt envious of wizards throughout history who had found witty, inspiring, or particularly heroic things to say in their final moments. Everything that he could come up with seemed trite at best, cliched and hollow, and he wondered if he should just say nothing at all. Silence had been the best choice on the wall, perhaps it would do again. There would be no mis-speaking himself, no eternally engraved "um" or stutter, no last-instant guilt that he had said the wrong thing. Yes. He would be silent.

Perhaps, if he had time before they were taken to die, he would tell Hannah that he loved her, that he was sorry it had come to this, that he was so proud of her strength, that he wished they could have had more together. But for the very end, he would say nothing at all.

Usually, he did not take well to being confined, but this time, Neville felt oddly at peace, and he lay down on the narrow cot in his cell, folding his arms under his head as the last few hours of his life ticked by. There was nothing to do about it. He felt no urge to pace, to rage, to scream or cry or make futile demands, because there was no one to hear him, no one who mattered who knew where he was, and not even the thinnest hope of an escape.

Instead, he allowed his mind to wander over his life, and was surprised to find that he was actually rather pleased with it, all things considered. His childhood had been happy enough, slightly shadowed by the worrisome factor of thinking he might be a Squib, but no one's life was perfect, and his grandmother had been kind and attentive, yet strict enough that he had never been spoiled. Most of the pressure he had felt during his first years at Hogwarts, really, he had placed on himself. He knew how highly his father had been regarded, but Gran had never tried to make him *be* Frank, only admonished him sometimes when he was being lazy or forgetful that his father had never taken the easy way out, had never slacked off, never given anything less than his best.

Somehow, early on at the wizarding school, he had wound up envisioning Harry as everything Frank must have been like, and that was more than anything what had made it so hard. Harry was an impossible standard to live up to, and when his mind substituted *that* for his Gran's expectations, they had suddenly become insurmountable, and it had snowballed on itself, the greater pressure feeding greater failure, lower confidence, and still greater pressure because she *knew*, and fairly, that he could do better. Yet even then, he had never lacked for friends, the greenhouses had always been a haven of good marks and wonderful things to learn, and there always seemed to be something terribly exciting going on – even if it was usually something to do with Harry.

It was the first D.A. that had changed things most dramatically. Seeing Harry hesitate, stumble, struggle for words, mess up when he tried to demonstrate spells and blush and swear that really, he could do them, he'd done them in far worse situations, after all. If the Great And Mighty Boy Who Lived could nearly hex a hole in his own foot because Cho Chang happened to look in his direction, maybe he was human after all. Neville could handle a human being to look up to far better than an ideal.

And then the Department of Mysteries, where he had faced down all of his worst nightmares – Harry failing them, Bellatrix herself, being hurt in battle, seeing friends go down, losing his wand, even the Cruciatus Curse – in a single hour of absolute hell. Life had been different after that. He had been different. He wasn't ready to lead yet, not by a long shot, but he believed he could fight, believed he could follow. Believed he could maybe, just possibly, if the circumstances were right, be a hero.

What was he now? A hero? A martyr? An idiot? A futile gesture? Neville laughed quietly in the empty cell. All of the above, really. He still wasn't his father, but he actually rather liked the man he had begun to know in the last six months, whether or not he had over-developed that tendency to be brave to the point of stupidity, whether or not it had all hurt sometimes past the point of endurance. It was almost a shame he couldn't find out more about who that man could be without the weight of an army on his shoulders. It was definitely a shame he couldn't find out who that man could be with Hannah by his side.

The sound of boot-heels on stone came to his attention, faintly at first, then growing louder. Neville sat up and ran his hands through his hair, trying to settle it as neatly in place as he could before standing and brushing off his prisoner's robes, re-adjusting them to hang smoothly from his shoulders. He did not want to look as if he had been upset, but rather calmly waiting for their arrival, as surprisingly was the truth.

His cell door opened, and Thicknesse entered, flanked by two imposing and unmasked Death Eaters, whom Neville recognized from their wanted posters as being Dolohov and Avery. He ignored them, giving instead a polite little bow towards the Minister. "I assume we're going the old-fashioned route, then?" he asked innocently.

Thicknesse blinked, looking startled and a little uncomfortable with how calm Neville seemed about the whole thing, despite clearly knowing what was going on. "You are to be beheaded, yes."

"Privately, of course. I know they used to be public, but I doubt you'd want to do that knowing the kind of crowd I run with and the kind of trouble we've caused in the past...not to mention it would be a lot harder to put a spin on my last words if there are too many witnesses." Neville spoke as matter-of-factly as though he were discussing in which subjects he could hope to earn N.E.W.T. levels, then held out his arms. "Shackles, right?"

Still rather disconcerted, the Minister nodded his head towards Dolohov, and the giant Death Eater flicked his wand towards Neville's outstretched wrists. Manacles appeared out of thin air, the cuffs as thick as the ones that had bound Hagrid as they clamped themselves down, a heavy iron chain forming instantly between them. Neville's arms sagged under the weight, and he rattled the chain experimentally, his eyebrows raising. "Blimey, sir, I'm a seventeen year-old unarmed kid, not a Hungarian Horntail!"

"According to Professor Snape," Thicknesse replied coldly, "you are an extremely dangerous young man, Mr. Longbottom. I feel safer not underestimating you."

Neville shrugged. "If it makes you feel better."

The Minister did not reply, turning to exit the cell with Avery, Dolohov falling in behind his prisoner to escort Neville at wand-point after them. They walked along in silence down the long, dark hallway, then Neville called out ahead, "So who's going to be there, anyway?"

To his surprise, it was Avery who answered him. "The Minister, myself and Dolohov, Abbott's guards – Rookwood and Dawlish – and the executioner, so that's six of us to two of you, if you're getting any funny ideas." He paused a moment, then looked back over his shoulder in an afterthought. "And the Weasley kid'll be taking the record, so don't bother if you're planning on trying to get a last message out to Potter. *He's* loyal."

Neville chuckled thinly. "One in every family, I guess. If I were him, though, I'd hope I never met my sister in a dark alley."

There was no answering laugh, and the remainder of the short journey to the execution chamber was in silence. A part of Neville's mind was still scanning around for possibilities of escape, not wanting to bypass some opportunity, no matter how fleeting, just because it seemed impossible. Yet impossible it was. The guard, the chains, and his own lack of a wand aside, there was also the fact that they were deep on the lowest levels of the Ministry, a hundred locked doors and who even knew how many people between him and the outside, with no way to Apparate in or out and the Floo Network locked down to only those with proper Ministry identification and passwords. He knew from Luna that the guard had been tripled after Harry's infiltration, and every entrance and exit would be barred completely, much less to someone dressed as a criminal awaiting execution.

The execution chamber itself was surprisingly simple. He didn't know what he had expected – something grandiose and morbid, perhaps, but this looked almost utilitarian. Like the courtroom, it was circular, wizarding tradition dictating that places of justice have no corners for secrets and shadows to lurk. The floor was smooth stone, the high ceiling lit with the Ministry's usual hovering globes of light, the walls simply decorated with the crest of the Ministry of Magic above the door they had just entered and otherwise merely wood-paneled. In the center of the room, a low dais stood, and on it, a stone block, magically unchipped or gouged despite the number of times it had been struck throughout history.

At the moment, two small, carved stone cradles sat on the block, and Neville recognized his and Hannah's wands there. Of course! He had entirely forgotten. Their wands would be chopped in half first, and then the pieces would be put under the block when they were beheaded. It was an old superstition that doing this would prevent a witch or wizard from hexing anyone with their final breath.

Then the door opened again, and Hannah entered, Rookwood and Dawlish each tightly gripping an elbow. Like him, she was clad in the black robes that bared her neck, and chains almost as large and heavy as his weighed down her delicate wrists. She could barely lift her arms, but she had clearly put up a fight every step of the way, still twisting and writhing and swearing in their grip, trying to kick and bite despite their size and Shield Charms. The two Death Eaters were not in any danger, but they were still rather red-faced and looking as though they would very much like to simply cast a curse and be done with the young witch entirely. And quickly.

She looked up as they entered the room, and her eyes widened hugely as she saw him. "Neville! They're going to —"

"I know," he nodded, "I knew the second I saw the robes! It's okay, Hannah! It doesn't hurt half as much as stuff we've already done!"

"OKAY?" she shrieked, "OKAY? NEVILLE, THEY'RE GOING TO CUT OUR HEADS OFF! WE NEED THOSE!"

Beside him, Thicknesse sighed. "Could you please calm down your little friend before I simply have her stunned, Mr. Longbottom? This is an extremely serious proceeding, and hysterics are not called for, nor seemly."

Neville gave the Minister a skeptical glance. "You're actually going to let me talk to my supposed partner in treason? What if I —"

"And what could you do?" Thicknesse shrugged. "You have both been thoroughly searched and are concealing nothing, any message you passed to one another would be a moot point as you are both about to die, and there is no possibility of an escape plan. So really, the most you could do is rile one another up, in which case a Silencing or a Stunning Spell would handle things neatly."

Nodding quickly, not wanting Thicknesse to be given time to reconsider, he rushed forward across the room, grabbing Hannah firmly and pulling her away from Dawlish and Rookwood. He had to loop the chain awkwardly up and over her head to hold her, but embrace her he did, wrapping her tightly in his arms. The Minister had wanted him to talk to her, but it accomplished shutting her up just as much to kiss her too, and he had always been able to say more eloquently with his body than with his words how much he loved her, how beautiful she was, how strong and good and kind and loyal. And this time, there was more. The lost cottage was in that kiss as well.

Then rough hands had his shoulders, and he barely managed to keep the chain from striking her in the head as they were pulled apart. She gave a little cry, and he locked his eyes on hers, silently begging her not to make a scene again, to face the end with dignity, like the adults they scarcely were. Thankfully, she seemed to understand, replying with the tiniest nod and taking a deep breath, her head held high as she regarded their captors with silent scorn.

The executioner was there now, a tall, barrel-chested wizard with arms thicker even than Ernie's, a heavy, double-bladed axe held in his ham-like hands. To Neville's relief, the blade looked extremely sharp.

Percy was there too, his robes neatly pressed as ever, his customary quill in hand, though the one behind his ear seemed to have been abandoned for the occasion. He was standing so close to Thicknesse that their shadows blended into a single two-headed shape on the stone floor, and he passed a piece of parchment to the Minister, who adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. "By the authority of the Ministry of Magic and the ruling found by the Wizengamot, upon this day, the twenty-first of March, nineteen hundred and ninety—"

"Anyvun moves, he dies." The Minister's words were cut off in a choke of shock as Percy moved with a speed that Neville never would have imagined. One moment, he had been standing in meek readiness by Thicknesse's side, but now the quill was on the floor, a wand – a heavy black wand that Neville had never seen before and which came to a vicious-looking point – in his hand and held tightly to the Minister's throat, Percy's other arm locked tight around the taller wizard's chest.

"Percy –" Neville said, but the red head gave a terse shake.

"Your vands. Get them. Now." There was something wrong. It was the same voice, but the accent was all wrong, Percy's customary over-enunciated and perfectly cultured diction changed to something coarse, deeply foreign, yet oddly familiar somehow. Neville hesitated, but the Death Eaters had started to move, and the wand tightened at the Minister's throat, a tiny drop of blood appearing there. The blue eyes blazed at them. "NOW!"

Questions could wait. Both prisoners lunged for the dais, and Neville felt a surge of power and relief as his hand closed over the cherry handle, the chains suddenly light as he spun.

*"Stupefy!"* Hannah's spell came almost at the same instant, then they both fired again before the first scarlet flashes had even reached their victims, speed honed by months of practice and boosted further still by what was at least for Neville a ridiculous amount of raw adrenaline.

The Death Eaters were down, but the executioner had decided to call Percy's bluff. The huge axe came up in a swing that could have cut a man in half easily, but the young clerk's reflexes were inhuman. He dodged the blow like a mongoose evading a cobra's strike, and he was on Thicknesse's other side now, the wand lashing down to hit the executioner in the chest with a blast of red and turning back to his hostage in the space of less than a breath.

"Cover him," Percy ordered, and after a second's exchanged look, both rescued wands were brought to bare squarely on the middle of the Minister's heavily bearded face.

For a moment, Percy fumbled in the pockets of his robes, and now that he had a chance to really look, more than the accent was wrong. His shoulders were oddly tucked forward, not plumbline straight as they always had been, and there was something about his movements that reminded Neville of a bird of prey. Then he said something, a shout of triumph that wasn't in English at all, and pulled what appeared to be a tiny model of a broomstick from his pocket. A tap of his wand, and it expanded instantly to full size.

Neville gaped. "A *Firebolt Pro Edition?* Percy, where in *Merlin's* – Ron said you could barely – how could you – ?"

"Mr. Veasley," Percy replied in the same heavily foreign voice, "is in his flat, tied up and heffily drugged. You vill find him there, Minister, ven you vake up. Goot night." A jerk of the wand, a flare of scarlet, and Thicknesse joined the others on the floor.

"Who *are* you?" Hannah demanded.

"I am getting you out of here." He threw one leg over the broomstick and took the handle firmly, nodding his head at the two of them as they used their wands to cut the chains away from their wrists. "Get on."

Despite all their rescuer had done so far, Neville wavered. "There's no way we can fly out of here!"

"If it can be done, I can. If not, you die. You vud die anyvay, no?" The words came with an oddly casual shrug, and Hannah gasped in abrupt recognition.

"Krum!"

"Ja." Confident now that at least he wasn't about to be dashed to pieces on the back of a broomstick way out of the league of Percy's ability to handle, Neville climbed on quickly, locking his hands tightly around Percy – no, Krum's – waist and feeling as Hannah did the same. Her fingers dug in so hard it hurt, but he would bless the deepest bruises if it meant getting out of this alive somehow.

Krum kicked off, and the broom shot towards the ceiling faster than anything Neville had ever comprehended as possible from any broom, much less one laden with three people. For a heart-stopping instant, they seemed about to crash into the ceiling, then it whipped into a razor-sharp turn, and they were diving again, soaring towards the door. Krum turned his head just enough to shout back over his shoulder. "I fly. You blast."

"Blast?"

"Doors." The meaning became extremely clear as Neville saw that they were flying directly at the tall, heavy double doors, and he barely got the curse out in time, the wood still shattering around them as they hit it, the last of the destruction completed by brute force. Sharp fragments grazed his bared shoulders, and he heard Hannah suck in a pained breath behind him, but there was no time.

They were through, shooting down the hall so fast that the speed made his eyes water, and Harry was out of his *mind* more completely than Neville had ever guessed if he did this for fun! This was *suicide*, but Krum seemed completely calm, snapping them around corners and whipping past Ministry employees and through clouds of memos before anyone could register more than a blur.

Doors were slamming shut everywhere, and Neville's spells began to bounce off of them as security measures fell into place. Then a jet of light just missed his shoulder, but Krum seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, and he dodged the next neatly. "We're being chased!" Hannah warned them.

"Ja." Krum said calmly. "I expect that. And they lock the doors, so now ve go another vay."

Neville's eyes widened even against the biting wind as he saw where they were headed. "NO!"

"*Blast.*"

It was obey or be crushed against the closed doors, and Neville closed his eyes, bracing himself as he fired the Reducto Curse ahead into the doors of the lift. Hannah was sobbing behind him now, her fingers digging in so hard he knew they would have to be removed by magic. And then they were in the shaft, the lift cars moving in a dozen directions through the maze of tunnels, missing them by inches as they dodged, accelerated, ducked, twisted, dove, and soared.

To his utter shock, Krum laughed. It was a more boyish sound than he would have imagined of the famously grim-looking Seeker, but it was a sound of genuine enjoyment. "Sometimes, ven ve practice," Krum said, "they let out fifty Bludger at once and I get the Snitch in this. These are bigger, do you think?"

"A bit!" Neville said, bringing his head forward a few inches to shout over the whipping wind and clanking and whirring of the lifts. "How -?"

"Percy vas at your trial. He said it vas no goot."

Neville snorted. "To say the least!"

"He talked to Ludo Bagman. Ask him to call me. I flew all night from Bulgaria, but I get there in time for the Polyjuice."

"But *why?*" Hannah shouted, "Why risk your life for *us*?"

"You are Hufflepuff, yes? Like Cedric?"

"Yes."

Krum nodded. "Then you know vy."

They were rocketing straight up now, and above them, sunlight gleamed faintly through an iron grid at the top of the shaft. Neville pointed his wand at it, "*Reducto!*"

The grate blew apart, and they were through, and they were out, the sleeve of his robes skimming the side of a double-decker bus as they flew between the traffic of the London street and up, up into the brilliant blue of the spring sky, the buildings and streets dwindling instantly to the size of toys below. And yet they still were not free. Someone had figured out that there was only one possible escape from the maze of the lift shafts, and a dozen black-robed figures on brooms were waiting for them.

Krum swore, and the sentiment was clear even through the foreign tongue. "She is too heavy," he snapped.

"*What?*" Hannah was clearly offended, but Krum shook his head.

"No, not the girl. The broom. She is not meant for so much, I cannot get the speed." He swore again, rolling them over in mid-air to duck a hex so quickly that Neville's stomach gave a warning lurch, and although he was about to protest that *this* was anything but slow, he could see that their pursuers were gaining.

"What do we do?" he asked.

"You jump." Krum threw them into another series of wild maneuvers, almost unseating his two passengers, then glanced over his shoulder for a split second, and Neville saw that the Polyjuice was beginning to wear off, his eyes now dark behind the hornrimmed glasses, his brow heavier, and his nose beginning to change from Percy's thin, straight one to Krum's own pronounced hook. "Vanish yourselves, then Apparate before you hit the ground."

"There wouldn't be much point in Apparating after!" Neville retorted. "But what about you?"

Krum laughed again, and there was a wild exhilaration to it. "I am the best Seeker in the world...now ve see how good I am at being Snitch."





## Chapter Seventeen Loch Cibeirdraoid

"Gran

"Gran!" Neville stumbled a little as he Apparated inside the front door of the Blackpool house, but he quickly recovered his footing, wand held ready as he looked around. He had to warn her, had to get his family out of there before the Death Eaters came looking for him, and oh, please, let it not be too late already....

"Neville?" Granny Helen's face appeared at the door of the sitting room, and her eyes flew wide, her hand going to her mouth with a little scream of shock. "AUGUSTA!" She spun to the room behind her, "IT'S NEVILLE! HE'S ALIVE!"

He rushed towards the sitting room, nearly running into Gran. Her face was pale, and he was stunned to see that she looked as though she had been crying, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen, tear-tracks still streaking her cheeks. In his entire life, Neville had never seen his grandmother cry. She grabbed his shoulders hard, holding him at arm's length a moment before clutching him in a desperate hug. "Oh, Neville! Thank heavens!"

"You scared us all to death, boy!" Great-Uncle Algie got to his feet from one of the large wingback chairs that faced the garden windows. "Disappeared without a word two nights ago, you and your little friend, and then we got an owl yesterday saying you'd been taken before the —"

"It must have been a mistake, Algie," Granny Helen was sobbing openly into her handkerchief, but they were tears of joy, and she was laughing weakly. "Just a mistake, he's fine. Neville, baby, where have you *been?*"

Neville was only half-listening. His eyes were on Gran, who had stepped back again after hugging him harder than he had ever thought the elderly witch capable of. Her shrewd eyes were taking in the robes, the cuts on his shoulders from breaking through the door, the old scars below that he suddenly realized she had never seen before. "No, Helen." Gran's voice was hushed, with the kind of simple calm that he knew came just before she got an orderly fired for an unattended bedsore on his father or forgetting how upset his mother became if things were late. "It's not a mistake."

She reached out, and Neville winced as she plucked a shard of wood from his shoulder, studying it in the bright spring sunlight that poured in from the windows. "He escaped."

"Yes, Gran, it was —"

She slapped him.

It was a sharp blow, snapping his head all the way to the side, his cheek burning hotly, but it was not the pain that made his mouth drop open with shock, that brought his hand up to finger the reddened skin in abject disbelief. When he had been a small child, Gramps had sometimes taken a paddle to him when he deserved it like any rambunctious boy, but in more than sixteen years, Gran had never, ever struck him. He shook his head, as if he could dismiss it like a dream, but his face still throbbed. "Gran..."

"I swore I would never hit a child." Her voice was stern, but her eyes were unreadable, swirling with more emotions than he could begin to understand or separate. "But you are not a child any more, Neville, and by Merlin I *will* hit a man when he deserves it!"

"Augusta...." Great-Uncle Algie had come forward to take her arm, his tone soothing as he tried to lead her away, "I know you're upset...."

She shook him off, her eyes never leaving Neville's own. "Not now, Algernon. You don't know the half of what's going on here. I will tell you as much as you need to know later, but right now, Neville is going to take his trunks and be gone from this house immediately."

Granny Helen let out a little scream. "You can't!" She whirled towards Neville, reaching past Gran to take his arm as she brushed fussily at his hair with her other hand, "Whatever's going on, Neville, love, you're always welcome in *our* home."

"Neville...." He had never heard that tone to Gran's voice before. She didn't just sound imperious or forbidding. Instead, her voice was cool, firm, utterly composed, and he almost gasped as he recognized his own tone of absolute *this-is-life-or-death* command from his grandmother's lips. "Go. I'll Obliviate them. They'll never remember you came, but as long as you're here, we're all in danger. We can't run with you. You're better off with free contacts than old people slowing you down. I'm still furious you came here with who knows how many of them on your tail...I understand why, but so help me, if you stay a moment longer, I'll strike you again! This is a known location for you, and that was a serious tactical error."

Nodding back crisply, part of him not quite believing he was talking to *Gran* like a fellow *soldier*, he glanced up the stairs. "It won't happen again. Send the trunks to Inverness if you can. I don't trust myself Apparating with luggage yet. I'll be hiding there, or near enough there. I can't tell you more."

"Do you need gold?"

"No. I have sources."

Neville reached out, then hesitated, realizing he had been about to shake her hand like a wizard. To his surprise, she smiled as she took it with her own firm grip. "Good luck, Commander."

"Thank you." And he meant it, for more reasons than he could express if they had hours, if they had weeks. But they didn't. There was no time at all, and he turned on the spot, gone in a *crack* and a swirl of condemned man's robes.

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The second he reappeared, an icy blast of wind hit him with the force of a second slap, driving the breath from him in a puff of fog that was ripped away the instant it appeared on his lips. He clutched his arms around himself, shivering violently and immediately. The difference between London and the interior of a Blackpool home had been nothing, but the difference between that and the north Highlands of Scotland was something else.

Spring had scarcely begun to consider arriving, the palest new grass just beginning to appear here and there among the rocky landscape, snow and ice still thick in any little hollow or shadow. He looked around, confused – he was certain he had concentrated on *Ernie*, not just the area he lived in – but there was no sign of his friend, no sign, in fact, of any living thing, nor could he hear anything but the shriek and howl of the wind among the crags.

Neville took a step forward, forcing his hands to peel from his shoulders and cup his mouth to try and project his voice above the wind, but his legs struck something soft, and he tripped. The something made an odd little bleating cry, and he felt it brush against him, then all around him were noises of movement, and the pebbles began to skitter and jump as if disturbed by invisible feet.

Out of thin air, Ernie's disembodied head and shoulders appeared, seeming to float in nothingness just below waist level about twenty feet away. His eyes widened as he saw Neville. "Galloping Gargoyles, what are you—what's—but you're hurt!"

He stood – or seemed to, as he was still invisible from the knees down – and as his hands and forearms appeared, Neville recoiled. Despite the chill, Ernie was in rolled-up shirtsleeves, and the lower part of his arms and the front of his shirt were slick with some kind of horrible bloody slime. The Lieutenant followed his friend's eyes and shrugged. "Sorry, I was behind the dam. Pupping season. Twins...they're all tangled. I'll get it sorted, done it before. But you –"

"I'm fine, they're just scratches, really. It's a long story, but Hannah will be here any second. Remember when you said you knew places people could hide and never be found...we need one of those." He took the heavy cloak Ernie had picked up from behind a rock and wrapped it gratefully around his shoulders. "Aren't you freezing?"

"Used to it," Ernie shrugged, then bent down again. The powerful arms flexed, and his torso vanished, his head and shoulders floating above the muddy-kneed trousers and heavy boots. "She's not too far along yet. I can still move her. Follow me to the barn...we'll get you out of the cold and you can tell me why you're on the run."

Neville had only taken two steps when he ran into another of the invisible creatures, and Ernie laughed. "Just stay close behind me."

He looked around, but the landscape still appeared completely barren, and he shook his head bemusedly. "How do you know -?"

"The way the wind blows, little dents in the ground – we call them *rivens* – a sort of sense of movement...it's a thousand tiny things, really. If you grow up in the Demiguise business, you rather develop a *knowing* where they are, and if they know you, they're more willing to be visible than around strangers. They're from the foothills of the Himalayas, properly, but my grandfather was the first to get the idea that the Highlands aren't that far off in habitat and to rear a domestic herd." He shifted the one in his arms, talking softly to it as it let out a low, pained noise. "There now...I'll take care of your little family, I promise."

Neville was accustomed to taking the lead with Ernie, and it was humbling to see the other wizard so completely confident when he himself was so wildly out of his element. He followed closely, careful to step exactly behind, and as they came up over the crest of the hill, he was able to see the farm itself. A broad lake stretched across the valley, the fields surrounding it divided neatly with low walls of mossy stone. Flocks of sheep filled about half of them, looking like wooly clouds that had come to earth, and the barn and house seemed part of the landscape, their walls made of the same gray stone as the hills, their roofs almost sodded with thick green moss.

The blond head nodded towards the view proudly, "Loch Cibeirdraoid. Lovely, isn't it? It actually means *Lake of the Shepherd Wizards*, if you want to Anglicanize it, but there's no cause to. And you can see our sheep, too. They're just like the Muggle ones, but a lot of places like to be able to get quality wool without having to deal with exchange rates and all the headaches of buying from a Muggle supplier."

As he looked, Neville could suddenly not imagine Ernie having come from anywhere else. Like the young wizard who would inherit it, this was a strong, sturdy place, so *right* with itself and wholesomely rugged that you had to look hard to notice that it wasn't conventionally beautiful at all, and by the time you did, it had a beauty all its own. He nodded, following Ernie down the slope to the barn. "It's amazing. And it's really...you."

Ernie chuckled, picking his way over the loose gravel without even needing to look. "My Clan's been here for more than eight hundred years, and that's just what we have record of. I suppose the land and the Macmillans have had to settle with one another by now."

"What does Susan think of it?"

"Oh, she found it a bit barren at the first, but then Mum set her bottle-feeding one of the new pups that was turned away by his mother, and —"

He was cut off by a loud *crack*, and Hannah appeared, her arms flailing wildly as she shrieked, the slope and loose footing completely unexpected beneath her feet. Neville lunged forward, barely catching her before she would have tumbled down the hill. She was shaking hard, and he wrapped her in the cloak, ignoring the chill that bit anew as he raised his wand towards the sky.

"*Prote*—"

"NO!" Ernie's shout cut him off mid-spell, and he turned, clutching Hannah tighter to him as she continued to tremble even under the warm folds of the cloak.

"Now that she's here, Ernie, we've *got* to —"

"This place has magic enough, I don't know what would happen if you tried to throw your spells on top of it!" He inclined his head towards the valley floor. "Unless you're welcome by the Clan — blood, trust, or marriage — there's only one day in each hundred years you'll find anything in this glen but the Highland mist."

Neville's eyes widened. "You mean, there's a Fidelius Charm on the whole valley?"

Ernie snorted derisively. "Deeper than that. But in a way, I suppose. There's a hundred places like it throughout Scotland. You're safer with us than the Room of Requirement, unless they have eighty-one years they'd care to wait to find you."

Hannah had wrapped her arms around Neville, her face buried against his chest, and now that he was no longer preoccupied with making sure Death Eaters would not follow her to them, he realized that the shaking wasn't cold at all, but sobs. Ernie seemed to notice at the same time, and his brow creased in concern. "Is she...?"

"Are you hurt, love?" Neville asked gently, lifting her face carefully with the tips of his fingers beneath her chin. Her green eyes were over-bright with tears, and her cheeks were flushed.

"No...I'm...it's...." She ducked her head again, clinging tighter now, and the sobs began to come in earnest, deep and choking, but when he started to ask again what had happened, she shook her head fiercely. "I can't...don't make me...." There was another harsh sob, then her voice was as faintly vulnerable as a small child's. "Just hold me right now, please. Don't make me say yet. I want to be safe."

Exchanging a look with Ernie, Neville bent just enough to scoop one hand under Hannah's knees and lift her into his arms. She made no protest, which worried him more than anything yet. Usually, she would have swatted him on the chest, fussed at him for 'stupid Gryffindor chivalry' and assured him that she could walk just fine, but instead she only clung to his neck, her tears wet against the skin laid bare by the execution robes he still wore.

Each with their own precious burden, the two young wizards quickly made it the rest of the way down the hill and across the valley floor to the barn. The doors recognized Ernie's approach and swung open, letting out the warm glow of lantern-light and the sweet, slightly musty smell of hay and forage and clean animals. They stepped inside, and the door swung shut again behind them. Quickly, his friend lay the Demiguise down in a pile of straw, leaving a moving, bleating dent in the bedding, then rushed to their side. "Do you want me to get Susan?"

Hannah did not look up, but shook her head again. "No. Just leave me alone, please. I'll tell you later, I promise...I just can't. I'm sorry. I promise it's not anything...anything that'll hurt anyone else."

Neville stroked her hair gently, but his throat felt tight with fear. "Hannah, if there's something hurting *you*, we want to stop it too."

"There's nothing to stop. It's all over." Now she did look up, and there was anger behind the pain flaring in her eyes. "You stupid *boys*!" she snapped. "Can't you just leave someone alone? Do you *have* to know everything?"

"We just – " he started to explain, but she shoved herself out of his arms and stalked across the barn, dropping into another pile of straw and curling herself into a tight ball, the cloak drawn around her like a protective shell.

"They sent my Dad a letter. Told him I had been tried and was being executed."

"I know," Neville nodded, "my family got one too."

"Well he went *mental*!" Her voice was shockingly bitter. "Not that he gave a Doxie's dozen *before* he thought that. But the Ackerleys say he was waving the letter. Went down into the village and just started hexing anyone he had ever even thought was a Ministry sympathizer. They took him to Azkaban last night."

"Oh, Hannah...." He started to move towards her, but she gave him such a look that he stopped where he was.

"All our things! He left the house open, and I don't know if they were Snatchers or Death Eaters or just nasty awful thugs and thieves, but everything was...and they'd even...it's not *right*!" Her words had risen to a wail of pain that came from somewhere utterly raw that he had never heard from her before and wished he never had.

"You don't just...even...not someone's *grave*!" She curled up tight again, and they weren't a woman's tears, they were a little girl's anguished howls. "They tore up all the flowers and they wrote all kinds of names and...and...and *other* stuff, too...and *that's my MUMMY!* They can't DO that to my Mummy! They already *KILLED* her, isn't that *enough*?"

Neville couldn't bear it any more. He ran to her, dropping to his knees in the straw beside her to wrap his body around her as if he could shield her from what had already been done. She did not

push him away again, just continued to weep, and he rocked her slowly back and forth, his eyes closed as he smoothed her hair and murmured nonsense sounds of sympathy.

There was a rustle of straw, and he looked up to see Ernie kneeling beside them, and he touched one filthy hand hesitantly against her shoulder. "Hannah?" She gave no indication of having heard him, but he took a deep breath, glancing up at Neville before he went on. "If I could – if either of us could do anything, you know we would, but there's another mother over there who's trying to bring two little pups into the world, and I think she would appreciate your dainty hands a lot more than these great mitts of mine if you'd be willing to help a bit."

Neville shot Ernie a fierce scowl, unable to believe that he would invade on her grief to try and get her to help with farm work, but to his surprise, she sucked in a deep, shuddering breath and pulled her head away from her knees with an expression as if he had offered to undo it all. "But I don't know anything about..."

"I'll talk you through it," Ernie promised. "Come on...I've got everything we need in here, and it's really not that complicated. Nature knows what she's doing, we just need to work out the kinks. It'll be bloody and messy and smelly and hard, but if you're up to it...."

Hannah nodded quickly, uncurling herself and pushing up the sleeves of her robes. "Where is she?"

"Over here." He motioned her towards the squirming dent in the straw, and she knelt, still shuddering, the tears still flowing down her face, but her jaw was set, and her eyes were no longer anguished, but soft and caring. Ernie guided her hand to the animal's invisible back, and she stroked it tenderly.

"You poor thing," she murmured, "it'll be okay, he's going to show me how to help you."

For over an hour, Neville sat in bemused silence, watching his two friends work over the laboring animal. He knew they had been close friends since their first year, Prefects together, but for the first time, he found himself jealous. At the end of the day, Ernie still understood her in ways he couldn't, still shared something in his basic nature that had seen them sorted into the same house while Neville went to Gryffindor.

He wondered if, given time, he could ever really know what would make sweating and covering yourself with slime and lying on your stomach with your arm buried to the elbow in an animal you couldn't even see into something that would make such pain better. But then, would she ever really know why he had taken the loss of the D.A.'s command so hard? She seemed to think it was just that they had turned on him, but it wasn't.

There was a part of him that wanted to *lead*, not just fight, that, if he was willing to admit it to himself, reveled in *power*, hungered to see them look up to him, to know that if he could pull this off, his name would go down in history, that there might even be a monument to mark where he had fallen. It was a hard thing to face, and it seemed so strange when he had so long shunned the spotlight, but he knew if he was honest that he hadn't been afraid of the attention, he had been afraid of not being worth it – or worse, of people deciding he hadn't been worth it after the fact.

And yet they balanced each other. In the past week especially, he had discovered that beyond their love for one another and the physical attraction, he and Hannah made a wonderful team. His own impulsiveness was checked by her tendency to be more down-to-earth. Her stubbornness could be prodded into action or brought to heel by his drive. His ambition, her common sense. Her willingness to work, his willingness to sacrifice. He had once overheard Gran say that when Gramps died, she lost her other half, and even though it had been a family puzzle for decades before he was born, he knew now why the formidable Augusta Dorsett had married a Hufflepuff.

There was a cry of triumph from Ernie, and to Neville's amazement, Hannah's bright laughter filled the cozy little barn. She had tumbled back into the straw, sticky and filthy, her hair dark with all manner of things besides sweat and plastered in tendrils to her face, but she was beaming as she turned to him. A tiny gray creature, soaking wet and covered in fragments of cloudy membrane was squirming in her arms making snuffling, mewling noises as she held it out to him. "Neville! Look! We did it!"

Ernie had the other one cradled against his own broad chest, and there was the same look of radiant joy on his face as he lay it against the dent in the straw, where it began to root and nuzzle immediately against its unseen mother. "She was brilliant, wasn't she?" he said. "Tougher than I thought for a while there, but they're just as healthy as you could want – two fine bucks – and they'd have both died and probably the dam besides if we hadn't done something."

Neville crossed the barn to sit beside Hannah, reaching out to carefully stroke the pup's tiny head. It nuzzled at his finger, then latched on with surprising force, and she giggled at his look of shock. "He's hungry," she informed him, as though she, not Ernie, had been doing this for years. "Isn't he *adorable*?" Her eyes were bright with tears again, but although the grief was still there in part, it was only a shadow of what it had been. "I did it, Neville," she whispered, "isn't it wonderful?"

He nodded, though he knew that she meant more than just the birth of the two Demiguise pups. "Yeah...and he is pretty cute."

"All the bad..." she murmured, fingering one miniature paw gently, "It's not really that deep, is it? I mean, they can lock people up and wreck houses and write on graves and make a sham out of their own laws, but all their power and all their cruelty can't stop two tiny, helpless little lives as long as there are people willing to *do* something."

"They can't stop Victor from being willing to fly all night to risk his life for us, or Percy from having a conscience under there," Neville agreed, "or Colin's friend from being willing to face things he didn't even know existed, or Renny from sending us those robes even as they came to kill him." He smiled at Ernie. "Or you and Susan from falling in love and giving yourselves to each other. I think I remember some rich boy who was a lot cleaner than you making a toast about fifty years ago to that effect."

Ernie laughed, taking the pup gently from Hannah's hands and raising it into the air. "To hope and love, and damned if You-Know-Who can stop us in either!"

OOO

**"UNDESIRABLE #1 BEHIND INTERNATIONAL CONSPIRACY AGAINST MINISTRY!"**

The headline of that evening's edition of the *Daily Prophet* blared up at Neville from where Ernie's father had thrown it onto the kitchen table. "Ye've made the paper, laddie," he said gruffly, "but I dinnae see no keepin' with the tale ye told us."

Neville picked it up, his breath catching as he saw the photograph on the front page. Viktor Krum was being held down by no less than five burly Ministry guards, his hooked nose badly broken, blood running down his face from one eye that was swollen completely shut as they wrestled him to the floor of the Ministry's vast entry hall. "Hannah," he cried, "they got Krum!"

"No!" She leaned across the table, her eyes scanning the article along with his. Mr. Macmillan was right. The Ministry version of events bore less than no resemblance to what had actually happened.

According to this, two young students from Hogwarts had been "detained for questioning" after "behaving oddly" in Diagon Alley on the evening of the 19th. Investigation had found them to be under the Imperius Curse, attempting to gather information to help Potter and his "dangerous accomplices," and they were to have been released the afternoon of the 21st, but Krum had broken into the Ministry after "brutally assaulting" a young clerk, Percy Weasley, and helped them escape, causing "serious property damage and callously endangering the lives of hundreds of innocent employees" in the process.

The two unnamed students, according to the article, had been in no danger, but Mr. LeStrange of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement gave his opinion that Potter's people had been so worried about what might be revealed of their "nefarious plots against the wizarding world" that they had risked the "wholly unnecessary" breakout, thus proving how badly frightened they truly were of the "Ministry's true might." It was claimed that the identities of the students were being withheld to protect their families from embarrassment or being "unfairly connected" with Potter, but the *Prophet* assured its readers that they were not going to be punished in any way for being "victims twice over: first of the Imperious Curse, and then of Krum's reckless scheme."

Under international law, the Ministry was forbidden to try or execute foreign nationals, but the Minister of Magic had found a loophole under the clause of espionage or acts of war, and Neville let out a low moan as he read further. "They..."

"At least we got something that pretended to be a trial." Her voice was a shaky whisper, and she trailed her fingers over the picture with a sadly ironic chuckle. "I think more people are going to mourn him than even Dumbledore. My Dad always said he was incredible, but now that I've seen him fly, I can't imagine what he must have been like on the Pitch."

"The Bulgarian Bombshell," Ernie nodded, raising his glass respectfully. "Once he goes off, the game is finished. Only professional Quidditch player I've never heard anyone question the salary for."

"We had lousy seats for the Cup," Neville said, "but I'll still never forget it." He raised his own glass to join Ernie's, and around the table, the rest of the Macmillan family and Hannah all did the same. "To Viktor Krum," he announced, "and the hope that You-Know-Who remembers that even if you catch the Snitch, the other team still sometimes wins."

A half-dozen voices chorused their agreement, "To Viktor Krum."

They drank, and Hannah smiled softly. "Best Seeker in the world."

OOO

Despite the tragic news of Krum's brutal execution, the *Prophet's* article had contained something wonderful as well. Neville had thought that he and Hannah would be unable to return to the wizarding world at large, and had been trying to find a way that they could possibly try to contact Harry and Ginny and join them on the run, but now that the Ministry had been forced to exonerate them to cover its own failures, they were free to return to Hogwarts.

Still, however, he was not willing to press his luck. Walking around openly would just be begging to be re-arrested on any possible trumped-up excuse or even just murdered outright, so they decided to remain at Loch Cibeirdraoid for the rest of the holiday. Once they were back at Hogwarts, they would be in no more danger than they ever had been from Snape and the Carrows, and Neville was quietly hoping that he would be allowed to re-take his command, though he did not dare express that openly to his friends.

The life there was like nothing he had ever experienced before. The senior Mr. and Mrs. Macmillan – who insisted almost immediately on being called Duncan and Fiona – were more than willing to let them stay, but no one took a bed or a meal at the farm without working for it.

Every morning, Neville awoke with Ernie and the other men – Duncan and eight farmhands whom he had been told were fellow Clansmen come to help with the spring lambing and pupping – long before the sun hit the edge of the mountains. Fiona, Hannah and Susan had strong coffee, bread, eggs, porridge and sausages on the table, and then they would head to the fields, where the tasks never seemed to end, no matter how long or hard they worked. Walls to mend, animals to move here, there, and back again. Births to assist, newborns to count and tag, water to haul, forage to carry and spread, holes to fill with rocks so that animals did not disappear into the ever-shifting landscape.

He had been confused at first as to why they were struggling like Muggles with such simple jobs, but Ernie had laughed and suggested that perhaps he would like to try using his wand to lift the stones into place on a section of collapsed wall. Neville had done so, but the amount of effort saved by the Levitation Charm had been nothing compared to the amount of effort it was to retrieve the fifty sheep that had panicked and stampeded. Neither sheep nor Demiguise, Ernie explained, were the bravest or brightest animals nature had ever produced, and although the latter simply vanished when startled by magic, the former reacted in far more time-consuming and occasionally self-injurious ways.

At noon, they would all come in for lunch, and then it was out again, working until there was barely enough light left to get back to the house. All three witches were excellent cooks – as well as overseeing the business side of the operation and tending to the sick, injured, and orphaned animals while the wizards were doing the more physical labor – and Neville's body abruptly seemed to remember that he had barely eaten during the last month. The appetite that had vanished when Whitby was taken returned with a vengeance, and he was putting away second and third helpings of everything at each meal, something he noticed was not at all unusual among the workmen, among whom Ernie's strapping build was the rule, not the exception.

It was hard, exhausting work, but it was completely different from the way he had been pushing himself in the Room of Requirement. It was slower, steadier, no one task overly tiresome in itself, and he was rarely out of breath or struggling with the effort, but at the end of each night, he did not so much fall asleep as his bed hit him with a powerful Stunning Spell, knocking him into eight solid hours of restful oblivion.

By the time they were ready to return to Kings Cross, Neville had changed. The eyes that looked back at him from the mirror were no longer sunken and darkly shadowed, but bright and clear. The hollows of his cheeks had filled in somewhat, his ribs were no longer so harshly outlined on his sides, but most importantly, he *felt* completely different. Instead of feeling stretched, drained, desperately driven, he felt energized and strong, ready to take on whatever Snape, the Carrows, and even You-Know-Who himself were going to throw at them in the final three months of the term.

He thanked the Macmillans deeply for their hospitality, promising Fiona that he would not let himself stop eating and sleeping again and re-affirming the plan with Duncan – who had come around to his daughter-in-law quite abruptly after hearing the magical incantation *Grandchild* – to get Susan out of the line of fire when the battle began. Then they had Apparated into Inverness itself, where they met the Knight Bus for King's Cross, and Loch Cibeirdraoid was left behind them to vanish like a myth into the Highland mist.

When they reached Platform 9 ¾, Neville looked around eagerly for the other members of the D.A., and he let out a shout of welcome as he spotted Seamus, uncharacteristically sitting away from the bustling crowd on his trunk against the far wall. The other young wizard was slumped forward with his elbows on his knees and his head cradled almost gingerly in his hands, and Neville felt a surge of worry for his friend. Breaking away from Ernie, Hannah, and Susan, he shouldered his way quickly through the crowd, dropping to his knees at Seamus' side. "Are you –"

"Do not speak ta me. Do not look at me. For the love of friendship, Fearless Leader, do not make any noises in my direction, and if you'd care to be a true darlin', see if you can kill the bloody lights." The freckled face was a sickly ashen green between Seamus' fingers, one eye badly swollen and blackened, and Neville's frown of concern deepened.

He waved his wand, casting *Muffliato* around them, as well as a Shadowing Spell that dimmed the light over where they were sitting. The magic was greeted with a sigh of profound relief, and Neville dropped his voice to a whisper. "What *happened* to you?"

"Six counties." His voice was a low monotone as he recited the litany, the words still slightly slurred and the accent thicker than Neville was accustomed to. "Eight fights. Two jus' plain Muggle-style brawls without spot o' magic. Kicked out o' eleven pubs. Don't know how many pubs *went* to. Don't know how many drinks. Don't know how many witches, but me back's killin' me and I don't know who *Shannon* is, 'cept her name's tattooed on me right hip now." He looked up, and to Neville's shock, he was grinning broadly. "Don't remember much at all really, but oh, Fearless Leader, did I have a lovely time o' it."

Neville laughed, shaking his head in amazement. "Seamus, have I told you you're insane?"

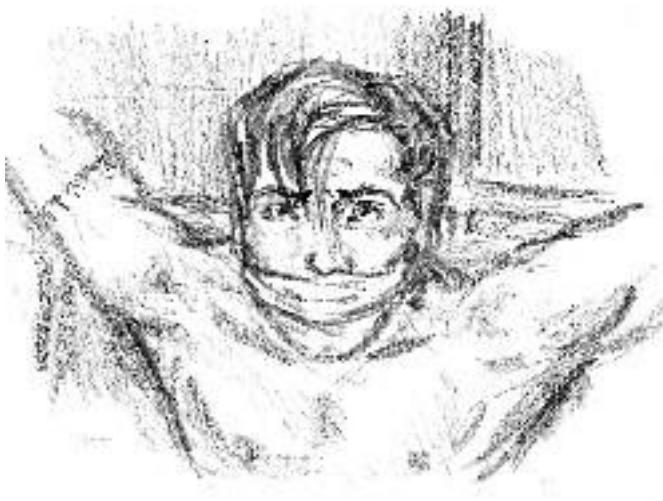
"Aye, and I've told you the same, so we're both mad and both even, and I fancy that's why we're mates." He lowered his head into his hands again, massaging the temples with the utmost care. "What about you?"

"Oh, went home for a few days, then up to Blackpool to visit my family, go to the pier with Hannah, have some ice cream, you know," Neville shrugged casually. "Then we found out that Harry'd been captured by the Malfoys and gotten away, rescuing Luna in the process. Got a message from her on the Galleon, says she's fine. Ginny's had to go on the run, but we didn't know that so we tried to disguise ourselves as Death Eaters and go to Knockturn Alley to find her. Captured by Amycus, sentenced to death, rescued by Viktor Krum, who was executed in our place, spent the last week learning how to work on a Demiguise farm. Pretty boring, really. I mean, I don't have *any* new things I can't explain."

Seamus blinked slowly. "That's it, Finnigan, m' darlin'," he said, "you're goin' ta wake up t'morrow on the floor o' the gents in a pub in Kenmare, and this be jus' your mind's way o' tellin' you Fearless Leader won't be none too pleased you missed the train."

"No, it's Fearless Leader's way of telling you that he fully intends to be Fearless Leader again, and that the first D.A. meeting's going to be pretty interesting...oh, and that you're now the Gryffindor Lieutenant and overall Second-in-Command, as soon as I've decided you're completely sober."

The train's whistle blew, and Seamus winced painfully, slapping his hands to the side of his head, then looking like he regretted that even more than the sound itself. He reeled, and Neville wrapped one arm under his friend's shoulders, hauling him to his feet and grabbing the handle of the battered trunk with his other hand. "Come on...we've got a lot ahead of us, and the first thing is going to be putting your head in a bucket of ice water and getting Terry on a Troll-strength hangover cure."



## Chapter Eighteen

### Suffer The Little Children

"You were all told I took a temporary leave of absence." Neville looked out over the faces of the D.A., taking a deep breath. There was no turning back now. "It's not true."

Jimmy Peakes looked as if he had been punched. "You're not leaving us, are you?"

"No. But I'm not coming back as your leader without telling you the whole truth. I was relieved of command by the officer corps. They thought I had become dangerous, obsessed with vengeance, that I was driving myself to death, that I was going to collapse or have a nervous breakdown at any second, and that I was giving orders that put people in needless danger. And they were right." He let the words hang in the air, watching the looks exchanged, the nervous shifting in seats, hearing the whispers of those who had never guessed and those who had known all along.

Camellia smirked, folding her arms. "So you *did* go mental and get kicked out."

"Yes," he admitted bluntly. He drew back his shoulders, meeting her eyes with clear, calm focus. "But I've done exactly what they wanted me to. I've taken some time, I've gotten my head together. Coming within about five minutes of your own execution really helps with that, actually." Neville smiled darkly, glancing at Hannah.

"No matter what," he continued, "I am going to stay with the D.A. I am in this fight to the end. But beyond that, I'm going to leave it up to all of you. This is it, guys." He spread his hands in a gesture of openness, "Most of us are never going to leave this school alive again. It's March 29th, and in exactly three months and one day, we're going to be in battle, and I don't want anyone wondering if they can trust their leader. Ginny's gone, but I'm not going to make you take Seamus just because he's my choice. I'll leave the room at the end of the meeting, and you can all vote for whoever you want. Fair?"

Heads nodded all around, and there was a ripple of assent, then Stewart Ackerley raised his hand. "And if we vote for someone else?"

"Then," Neville smiled wryly, "I guess I'd better get used to saying 'yes, sir.'"

"Or yes *ma'am*," Sally-Anne called out, and several people laughed.

Neville took a little bow. "Sally, I would certainly follow a witch into battle...but after six years of knowing Ginny, I'd probably call her 'sir' too."

Fritz stood, looking uncertain as he raised his hand. "Um, if we don't know who's going to be leader yet, can I still tell everybody something, or do I need to wait to find out who's in charge? I mean, I'm voting for Neville, 'cause I still think he's brilliant, but that's just one vote."

"Go ahead," Seamus offered, "tell everyone what you've got to say, then we'll wait on it if there's a decision to be made...Ernie, Parvati, Terry, you agree?"

"Seems reasonable," Terry nodded, motioning at Fritz. "I'm guessing it has something to do with the envelope you've been guarding like Galleons. What's in it that's so important but that the Carrows wouldn't have taken from you?"

"Autographs," he grinned, stepping to the front of the room and opening the heavy envelope. As he turned it upside down, several Quidditch cards spilled into his hands, along with an 8x10 glossy photograph showing a Keeper in bright blue robes making a spectacular save at the center hoop. "From Puddlemere United. I got them through Dad."

Neville felt himself blush. "Fritz, you didn't have to –"

"Wait a moment...." Terry took one of the cards, turning it over with a deeply suspicious look. "This wasn't signed with a normal quill. The line's a little too blocky...it's not an Auto-Graph quill either, so it's not just that they're stock signatures...."

"I don't know," Fritz shrugged. "Wood passed them to Dad, said they were a present for his old friends on the Gryffindor Quidditch team."

"Coding Quills!" Michael snatched the card away from his friend. "Terry, 'duce it out, mate. Oliver Wood was Harry's old Captain. His team was Bell, Spinnet, Weasley, Weasley, Potter, and Johnson. *None* of those are still here, we don't even have Quidditch any more, so it's a reference to someone else. And the only common factor with the students we *did* have this year is Weasley, and the Coding Quills were from her brothers, who *were* on his team and *were* in the original D.A. Which means..." Michael swore, slapping his hand against his forehead. "Which means that they'll only show their real message if Ginny touches them, and she's gone, so we're hung."

"And you were doing so well," Terry shook his head, cuffing Michael teasingly on the shoulder. "Sometimes I don't know why I hang out with a moron like you. Don't tell me that there's nothing of hers left in this entire school. A hair, a drop of sweat, a sliver of fingernail, a pair of

her knickers you saved when you were dating her – " this earned him an unspeakably filthy glare "—*anything*...we don't need much to Polyjuice and fool the cards."

"The dungeons!" Neville punched one hand into the cup of the other. "Could we do it off of four month-old spit?"

Michael made a face. "Not the best, but we could," he considered for a moment, "but in that case, it would be easier if there wasn't so big a difference. We would want to start with a girl about the same size and build, as much of a resemblance as we can manage. Ernie, for example, would be absolutely out of the question."

Jack slid off his chair onto the floor in mock-despair, his eyes rolling to the ceiling. "Alas," he moaned, "there goes my last possible chance of getting into Miss Weasley's trousers."

"I don't see why, Jack," Colin said innocently, "Corner didn't say anything at all that rules you out."

Jack spun, flinging a book at his roommate's head with the accuracy of a former Beater, but Colin just swatted it away, his insensate hand making an oddly wooden thud. "Well, if we ever need to Polyjuice *Demelza*," Jack retorted, "I'll tell everyone where to find some –"

His words were cut off as a scarlet jet of light hit him squarely in the face, and Demelza sat back down, smoothing her robes primly. She looked around, raising one eyebrow in mild interest at the number of faces that stared back. "Now then, I believe we were trying to decode secret messages from former Quidditch Captains?"

"It's not just Wood," Seamus had taken the rest of the cards and was sorting through them, "we've got a dozen different top-level players here. Heth, Armistead, Pender, Mosby, Jackson – oh, bless me, *Lynch* – Stuart, Forrest, Jones –"

Rowan let out a shriek, knocking Arthur Chambers completely out of his chair as she barreled to the front of the room, grabbing the card and clutching it to her chest like a priceless relic.

"*Gwenog Jones touched this*," she said in a worshipful whisper. "She *knows about us!* Oh, blimey, I can die happy now." She stared at the card in awe, then pressed it gently to her lips. "I've been in love with her since I was like six."

"This isn't a coincidence, not after Krum," Neville said firmly. "Terry, you and Mike go down to the dungeons and get that potion fixed...I asked you to make us a stock of it on our third meeting, so you've had more than enough time to have it brewed. Eighth cell on the left, she hawked a good one on the floor right in the middle of it. We'll use Lavender. I want to know what those cards *really* say." The two Ravenclaws nodded and hurried to the back of the room, summoning the door, and Neville turned his attention back to the rest of the D.A.

"You already know about Harry and Luna and Ginny. Does anyone else have any big news?"

Tentatively, looking around as though he expected to be attacked, Zacharias Smith raised his hand. "I do."

Ernie tilted his head curiously at his fellow Hufflepuff seventh-year. "I don't like the look on your face, Smith. It's making me nervous."

"You don't need to be nervous," Zacharias took a deep breath, getting to his feet and turning to face the others. "I'm leaving the D.A."

The words struck the room with the force of an explosion. Several people gasped, and three of his Housemates actually drew wands on the young wizard. Ernie waved them back, but his own jaw was clenched in anger. "That's not funny."

"It's not a joke, either, Macmillan." His tone was stony.

"But you were there for Cedric!" Sally-Anne cried, "You were part of the first D.A. with Harry! You saw what they did to Ernie! How *could* you?"

"I'm not joining the Death Eaters, Perks!" he snapped. "And if staying with the D.A. will bring Cedric back or take the scars off Macmillan or bring Harry here, then fine. Show me how it will do any of that, and I'll stay. But otherwise..." Zacharias' shoulders slumped, and he shook his head slowly. "I can't. I just can't. I'm sorry."

"*Why*, Zach?" Hannah stood, placing her hand gently on his shoulder. "What *happened*?"

"I had a talk with my father." He looked up as he shook her off, his chin thrust out defiantly. "Parents aren't stupid, you know, and they do talk to each other. Damn near every kid from fourth year up comes home with hard eyes and hard bodies unwilling to talk about what they've been doing at school, *some*people will put it together that we're planning to fight."

"But doesn't your father want you to oppose You-Know-Who?" Anthony asked.

"Of course he does." Zacharias looked offended at the mere suggestion. "And I will fight. I'm planning on joining the Order after school, if it still matters. But I'm sorry...I had my reservations about learning dangerous spells from a fellow fifth-year, but taking orders from someone ten months younger than I am in *battle* when I'm just eighteen myself...it's not making a stand, it's committing suicide. My blood can be spilled better than that."

He turned to Neville with a beseeching look. "It's not about your breakdown, mate. Hell, I'd have cracked months sooner, I'll admit it. But that *does* matter. It proves what's been scaring me all along, and everything my father said. You're not old enough for this. None of us are. We aren't soldiers. We're not even qualified witches and wizards yet. This isn't about putting up graffiti and tossing off the Carrows any more. We're talking *death*, and I don't know about all of you, but I hadn't really thought about what that seriously meant before my father talked to me. It's permanent. It's forever. You can do it once, and I don't want to do it for someone who's figuring this whole thing out as he goes along. I don't want to be a 'whoops, well, at least I've learned better for next time!'"

There was a long, horrible silence, then Susan stood, not even looking at Zacharias as she stepped quietly to the front of the room to join her husband. They exchanged a long look, then

Ernie nodded, and she turned to face the rest of the D.A. and closed her eyes. Her hand went to her neck, and she drew out the ring on its chain, then unbuttoned her robes. With a shrug of her shoulders, they fell to the floor.

Every wizard in the room with the exception of Ernie and Neville looked dumbstruck, and every witch gasped as their suspicions were confirmed. The loose robes had still concealed Susan's condition completely, but the snug-fitting gray sweater with its black and gold trim hid nothing. She wasn't at all big yet, but in the two weeks since Neville had last caught a glimpse in the Hufflepuff common room, she had grown noticeably. The slim waist was gone, the faint curve of her belly unmistakable, and she lay her hand against it as she opened her eyes again to look directly at Zacharias, her voice calm. "Cecily Harriet if it's a girl. Cedric Harry if it's a boy."

"Susan...you're...you and Ernie...?" Zacharias shook his head, clearly trying to process what his eyes were telling him.

"No, Zach, me and Neville." She snorted disdainfully. "Of course Ernie."

Her husband stood, coming up behind her to wrap his own hands over hers against her stomach. "The thing is, Smith, we're letting you see this because we want you to know that people with stakes higher than yours are not abandoning this cause. We *have* considered it. I've started a journal, writing a letter every day, because I want this little one to know his or her father, and I know I'm never going to see my child's face. Because it's permanent. It's forever. It's something you only do once."

"For heaven's sake, Macmillan!" Zacharias' voice had taken on a pleading tone, "Use your head! You don't have to do this! See your baby, *wait*, fight later! This isn't our task, it's Harry's! He's the Chosen One, he's the only one who even has a chance! We're throwing our lives away here for no reason!"

"I have reasons." Colin spoke quietly, but his voice carried clearly. He waved his wand, and it transformed into a gleaming silver stiletto, the point razor-sharp. His blue eyes did not leave the older wizard's as he raised his right hand and placed the point against the palm, then began to push. Several people turned away, and Natalie made a gagging noise, clapping her hand over her mouth as he slowly drove the wand through his flesh, then turned his hand calmly, displaying the wand that now protruded bloodlessly from each side.

"They took my parents. My brother hasn't said a word or smiled in months. Part of my own body isn't mine any more." The fingers wiggled eerily above the gross protrusion. "I can move it, but I feel nothing. It doesn't bleed. I've lost my home. I've lost everything I ever owned. All the pictures, everything. I can never go back again to the only world I really know. And they took something else that I'd managed to guard through some damned dark times. They took my belief that this will all be okay in the end. Honestly, I don't even know if Harry's coming back any more, but I don't care. I'm not depending on him. I'm doing something about it myself."

He took hold of the wand, pulling it out and tapping the hole in his palm to vanish as the spike transformed back into nothing more sinister than eleven inches of birch and phoenix, then he

whirled on the others. "I'll stand alone with Neville and Ernie if I have to, but if anyone else is going to go coward, you can back out with Smith now."

"Colin..." Neville reached out towards the younger boy, shaking his head, "He doesn't have to -"

"No, I'll answer him. I'm not afraid of his great heroic Gryffindor speeches or that disgusting trick with his hand," Zacharias had grown defensive now, and his own eyes were flashing in anger, his shoulders taut. "If you think this is something glorious, if you think you're bound by loyalty, if you think it's such a smart idea," his eyes snapped to Neville, Ernie, and Anthony in turn, "fine, I'm not going to try and make you save yourselves anymore if you think I'm such a terrible person for attempting it!"

He pulled the Galleon from his pocket and threw it down. It clattered on the stone floor with an echo that seemed unnaturally loud. "I won't turn you in. That's on my word. But I'm not going to fight for someone who doesn't know what he's doing in a battle that doesn't need to happen. I'm saving my life for a real war with a real commander where I can die a real adult and a real soldier. This game's gone far enough."

A dark smile played over his mouth as he turned to Colin. "Call me a coward when you're ready to say it in the grown-up world...if you live to see it."

And he left.

No one moved again until the door had slammed shut behind him. Then Colin dove with lightning speed, grabbing up the Galleon from the floor. His angelic face contorted in hate, and he spit on the yellow coin, then flung it at the door, pointing his wand after it. It burst into flame in mid-air. "THERE!" he yelled, "You're BANNED, Smith! I'm the bloody SECRET-KEEPER, it's *my* decision who's one of us, not Neville's, not *anyone* else's, and I'm never letting you back, even if you *CRAWL!*"

"Clearly, we missed something."

Michael and Terry were standing at the back of the room, a flask of glittering ruby-colored potion in Terry's hand, and their faces were twin images of confusion as they looked at where Colin was standing, chest heaving, cheeks flushed with rage.

"Zacharias Smith has decided to change his mind about being a member of Dumbledore's Army," Neville said quietly, then shot a warning look at Colin, whose mouth had opened to say something that was not likely to be kind. "And some people tried to talk him out of it. That's all."

Terry let out a low whistle, then held up the potion. "Well, uh, if it's not too much of a change of subject, we've got it. Lavender? You up for going ginger?"

Lavender nodded, crossing to take the little flask. She gave it a nervous glance, then looked around. "Anyone here done this before?" No one answered, and she took a deep breath. "Okay, then...bottoms up, I guess."

She downed the potion in a single gulp, then made a face. "Oh, I hate spicy thi – ahh....!" The words cut off as her face began to melt and twist, the features rippling, her brown hair lightening as pale as Luna's before brilliant red poured from the scalp like blood to turn it Ginny's familiar copper, freckles breaking out in a cinnamon-dusting across her nose, her eyes darkening from purple to brown, her body shivering as she shrank down a few inches. Then it was over, and Ginny Weasley stood before them again.

Lavender gasped, shaking her head, then ran her hands experimentally over her new body. Her cheeks flushed with the deep magenta they all knew so well from Ginny and her brothers. "I guess I owe her an apology," she murmured, "no socks involved." She tossed the new red mane back over her shoulders and turned to extend a hand towards the officers. "Well...let's have the cards, then."

Seamus gave them to her, first having to take a moment to pry Jones' away from where Rowan still clutched it fiercely, and she took them in both hands, closing her eyes. There was a breathless pause, then the cards shimmered, and they all saw the ink flare brightly before shifting and settling into new lines across the colorful images of swirling robes and flying Quaffles. She opened her eyes and looked down, reading the words on the larger picture first.

*"Dear Ginny - Between Bagman and the twins, we know what you're up to. You-Know-Who hasn't dared the public outcry of messing with the Pro Leagues, so we still have a lot of freedom. If you want some old friends back in your ranks when the time comes, as well as a few people who have a bit of skill on a broomstick and are mad as hell about Krum, just send me word disguised as a fan letter.*

*"The cards will tell you who I can get in touch with and who wants to join. If you address it from 'A Fan of Your Gryffindor Days', I'll know who it's from and make sure it gets straight to the top of the pile.*

*"Sincerely, Oliver Wood: Keeper, Puddlemere United.*

*"P.S. I hear you're better than Charlie on a broom. If you survive, come to me before the Harpies and I'll get you on a real team.*

*"P.P.S. See if you can talk Potter into going pro if You-Know-Who leaves enough pieces left to fly. He's a great Seeker, but the merchandise sales alone would do wonders for the club."*

Lavender thumbed through the cards now, her eyes widening. "All the names we thought they were are still there...and both the twins...and Bill Weasley, Charlie Weasley, Fleur Weasley, Alicia Spinnet, Cho Chang, Dean Thomas –"

"Mercy, he's alive..." Seamus sank down in his chair, weak-kneed and white-faced at the sudden discovery that his best friend had managed to survive.

" – Angelina, Katie, Lee, Roger...he's got everyone from the first D.A. here, Neville!"

"Not to mention all the best in the League!" Fritz said, awestruck. "I mean..." he swore, at a loss for words, and Neville nodded.

"I know I'm not officially in charge, but I think we need to get that letter written, and fast. The more help we have, the better, especially if we can get a dozen athletes, the twins, a Gringotts curse-breaker, and a Triwizard Champion on our —"

"SOMEBODY COME QUICK!" The door flew open, and Caroline Johnson was standing there, her dark cheeks flushed burgundy, her eyes huge as she collapsed against the inside wall, panting for breath. "It's Elliot!"

The officers exchanged a horrified look, then Neville ran to the young Captain of the D.C., grabbing her arm and pulling her to her feet urgently. "Elliot Milton? The first-year? Ravenclaw?"

"He...his older sister...and her husband," she gasped, "they were killed in Suffolk. He just found out. Went...went mental." Caroline took a deep breath, then clutched Neville's wrists in both hands, and there was an ashen tinge to her skin below the flush from running seven floors worth of stairs. "Neville, he...he stabbed Snape!"

OOO

Neville had barely followed Caroline out of the Room of Requirement when Snape's familiar, snide voice echoed through the hall. For a terrifying moment, he thought the Headmaster was somehow waiting for them, that it had been some form of trick, but the voice was coming from the walls and ceiling, an announcement rather than an accusation. "All students to assemble at once in the Great Hall. There shall be no exceptions."

Caroline glowered. "Oh, and I'd still hoped he'd die!"

"How bad was it?" Neville asked, following her at a run down the stairs. Behind him, he could hear other members of the D.A. following, and he knew the rest would be going through common rooms, closets, bathrooms, and a dozen other places where their numbers would be dispersed and hidden. There was no question of not answering the summons, not out of obedience, but because they wanted – no, *needed* to know.

"Jumped at him with a knife...got him right in the chest, too!" Her black braids swung as she shook her head. "But the blade kind of bounced off. I don't think it was a Shield Charm, I think he just missed and hit the bone. Carrow was right there, and he downed Elliot with a wicked Cruciatus before Snape even hit the floor. I saw the whole thing, but I hope you won't be angry that I just ran for you guys instead of—"

"You did the right thing, Johnson," Neville assured her. "The D.C. isn't supposed to be combatant, and I know you're old enough to be D.A., but those kids need you a lot more than they need someone else making a rash mistake."

"What's he...going to *do*?" Her voice shook even through the increasingly heavy gasps as she ran the entire length and height of the school for the second time in less than five minutes.

"I don't know," he admitted, not hiding his own increasing fear, "but it's not going to be good. They've run themselves into a problem using the Cruciatu... so freely. It'll have to be something else."

"That's...what I was...afraid you'd say," she panted.

They had reached the entry hall now, and he slowed to a jog, taking in the mass of students gathered before the doors. All four Houses were there, oddly clumped apart in uncertain, murmuring groups of fear and whispered speculation. He slipped into the crimson-edged mass of Gryffindors, looking around until he saw Seamus' sandy head ducked in low next to Parvati.

The Lieutenant saw him at almost the same moment and signaled him over. "We had to leave Lavender upstairs," he said, "there's no way we can explain Ginny being suddenly back, but I've got no idea what we'll do if Snape notices she's missing. He said no exceptions."

"We'll cross that bridge when we –" Neville pointed towards the doors as a hush suddenly fell across the assembly. "They're letting us in!"

The Ravenclaws, desperately worried for one of their own youngest members, had been the closest to the entrance, and the doors had barely cracked an inch apart when they surged forward. Li Su was the first to squeeze through the opening, but she backed out again immediately with a choked scream, stumbling over those behind her as she scrambled away. The doors were open fully now, but Neville could get no closer, as the entire entrance was blocked by students in robes trimmed with sapphire, and their reaction terrified him. The other younger ones were sobbing, wailing, trying to hide between their older classmates or bolting back towards the entry hall, and even the upper years were a mass of screams, gasps, and pale, trembling faces.

Pressure from the Hufflepuffs and Slytherins behind them broke the jam within seconds, pouring the Ravenclaws inside, but those seconds had been like hours for Neville, implying all too eloquently what he would find inside. His mind played wildly over every sick possibility that he had ever read about, ever heard rumored, ever imagined or inferred, but the truth he found when he was finally close enough to the door to crane his neck over the shorter students was much simpler and more awful.

Elliot looked like a doll at the far end of the cavernous hall. He was tiny for his age, with the tendency found among many of the Ravenclaw boys to be rather scrawny, and Neville could have touched his fingertips easily over the outside of the thick iron cuffs that circled his thin wrists. He had been stripped to the waist and spread-eagled against the wall, the deep walnut brown of his skin like a little shadow on the stones above black trousers, but even this far away, he was trembling visibly, and he knew, oh, he wished he didn't know that it would be from the chill of the stone against his skin as much as from fear.

Snape was nowhere to be seen, but the Carrows were there, looking as though Christmas had come for the second time in three months, and Filch stood so close to the boy that he could

have kissed the round cheek, the whip caressed in his skeletal hands. Sick rose sharply in Neville's throat, and he whirled, trying to catch Ernie's eye as the only other person who truly *knew* what they were about to be forced to witness, but as his gaze went back to the doorway, he stopped.

Students were still pouring through, a thousand different shades of shock and horror and fear and disgust and anguish painted across every face, but the river of young witches and wizards was split. In the center of them, planted immovably between the double doors, stood Michael Corner. He had always been one of the most handsome boys in the school, but in the past year, he had grown into his looks thoroughly, and now – jaw clenched, eyes blazing, spine drawn taut and face faded to a bloodless white – he looked not human at all; rather a marble statue, an artist's interpretation of hatred itself.

The thoughts were so strong that he did not know if they were genuine memories of something he had once heard Michael say, or if the accomplished young Legilimens was projecting them somehow, but they cut into Neville's mind as keenly as the whip-slashes his body still remembered. *We may not be as brave as Gryffindor, as willing to get our hands dirty as Hufflepuff, or as devious as Slytherin, but there is nothing, nothing more dangerous than a little too much knowledge and a conscience that is open to debate....*

OOO

Neville did not sleep that night, but it was not a return of what had happened after Whitby. In point of fact, no one slept, at least, not in Gryffindor. He wasn't sure about the other Houses, but he had a deep suspicion that the only sheets being occupied in the entire castle were emerald green.

McGonagall had insisted they all go to their dormitories strictly at nine, but she had left the fire burning in the common room and the doors unlocked, and she had not as was her usual custom come back ten minutes later to assure that they had actually gone to their beds. They took this for the tacit permission it was, and by ten o'clock, the entire House was assembled around the flickering fireplace, half of them having never even bothered to change into pajamas.

Plans of rescue were batted around and abandoned a dozen times, but they knew Elliot was under guard. The one thin mercy was that Amycus had declared that the child would only be left to hang for thirty-six hours after his beating, but Neville knew that this was nothing more than a protection against death. The first two days were the ones he remembered, the time when his body had not yet surrendered completely to the agony and thirst and still allowed him to suffer. He could only hope that the same torment inflicted on someone so much smaller would mean that he would be released to unconsciousness sooner.

Several people asked him to show his own scars, to tell them what it was like first-hand to endure what they had just watched, but he hesitated at first, and it had nothing to do with shame or modesty. It seemed morbid, even salacious, but slowly he came to realize that they were just trying to put it into perspective as something that could be lived through and moved beyond. He

honestly didn't know if he was offering false hope – he and Ernie had been grown men, after all, not pre-pubescent boys of eleven – but he finally agreed.

The youngest ones were the most curious. He found out now that most of the first and second-years hadn't actually seen what had happened back in September. Their eyes had been covered by older students, they had looked away after the first few blows, and many had simply shut their eyes, but even those who had watched seemed to have pushed it from their memories like a dream. The scars themselves did not have the same quality of sensation as the rest of his skin, and it tickled as the dozens of little fingers traced them in fascination, though he bit his lip to keep from laughing. It would give entirely the wrong impression.

They wanted to know exactly how much it had hurt. How long before he had gotten hungry. If he had needed to use the bathroom. What bleeding that much felt like. If it had itched. Even the older Gryffindors, feeling for the first time like they were allowed to really talk about it, had things they wanted to know, though their questions had a darker undertone. It wasn't curiosity, it was strategy. How had he kept silent? What did he do to shut out the pain so that he didn't cry? Had he been afraid, or only angry? Did he count the strikes, and did that help after he knew how many times they had beaten Ernie? How long before he really and truly felt recovered?

Dawn had already started to lighten the windows of Gryffindor tower when the subject of his and Elliot's floggings was finally exhausted, but still they did not return to their beds. All of the first and second-years were lying in little heaps over the chairs, couches, and laps of older students, but most of the D.A. and a few of the older third-years were still wide awake, and the conversation turned to what it would mean on a larger level.

The possibility of trying to assassinate Snape or the Carrows had been considered several times throughout the year, but each time it had been rejected as likely to lead to terrible and impossible to foresee consequences. As Colin had said the first time it was brought up, "better the Devil you know." Now, however, the issue had been taken out of their hands.

"It was pretty obviously a personal thing, though," Parvati argued. "The kid's age aside, there's no way he can think that was one of our plans."

"I don't think that matters," Seamus shook his head. "He's lookin' for excuses, has been all year. He'll try to find a way to lay it on us, mark my words."

"And even if he does? He's already had that poor baby beaten half to death, and they ran out of things they could do to the rest of us about two months ago." Lavender shrugged. "Unless he's going to just chain the lot of us down in the dungeons, and he'd have a hard time explaining why he was teaching an empty school if he did that."

"I don't know, Lav...." Neville stroked Dennis' head gently where the boy had fallen asleep against his knees. "We've not had good results with underestimating Snape in the past. He's got all of You-Know-Who's people behind him, in addition to his own sick imagination. I think they'll find more things to do."

"Still," Colin yawned, "there's nothing he can do preemptively. We just have to be even more careful about being caught."

"No. It's more than that. We're in countdown mode now, and we –" Neville cut himself off, and Seamus frowned.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I forgot. Nevermind." He shook his head, feeling himself blush as he ran his fingers through the boy's fine, pale blond hair. "We never got around to voting. I've got no right to say what we *will* or *won't* do."

Parvati snorted. "Oh, for goodness sake, Neville! It was a formality anyway, and we all know it! You're our leader, you have been since day one, and if the people who decided you were cracking up don't have a problem with you coming back, no one else is going to either. I mean, really, we don't have to take your word for it that you've gotten your act together, we can just look at you."

"She's right." Lavender nodded firmly. "Tonight aside, you look like you've been getting real sleep, you're shaving every day, your robes aren't all wrinkled all the time, and you're even putting some weight back on, which is a relief. I mean, yeah, okay, so you used to be a bit of a pudge, but you were starting to go pretty scarily in the other direction for a while there. It's obvious you've fixed whatever your problem was."

Neville looked down at his lap, unable to meet their eyes. "I should really thank you guys. I was so angry at you; I thought you'd completely betrayed me, but I guess now that I look back, I really was coming apart. What you did hurt like hell, I'm not going to lie, but I suppose I needed that."

"Hurtin' you was never the idea, Fearless Leader." Seamus stood and joined him on the couch, carefully carrying the limp body of Doreen Fenton so as not to wake her as he moved. "But we weren't lyin' when we said we were scared witless for you. We were your friends a long time before we were your officers, you know."

"I don't ever want to forget that again." He met the blue eyes with complete openness in his own. "You've all been incredible this year. I'm so lucky."

"So are we, Neville." Parvati leaned over the back of the couch to kiss his cheek, then lowered her head to place a second gentle, sisterly kiss on the pale lines that curved over his shoulder. "So are we."

OOO



Deep down, he had expected it. He had known it from the moment he had seen the other wizard standing in the doorway, known there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Yet it was still a wrenching, heart-sinking shock when he went down for breakfast and saw that it had actually happened.

Elliot was gone. The chains that had held him were still there – too low on the wall, their cuffs too tiny for the size of the bloodstain on the floor below – but they were empty. Instead, a few feet to the side of where they hung, Michael Corner was shackled tightly against the stones. His smooth, pale torso gleamed an unmarred gold in the early morning sunlight of the enchanted ceiling, but unlike the others, he was facing forward, and a gag stretched tight across his mouth, his head hanging loosely so that it was impossible to tell if he were even conscious.

The Carrows were in their customary places, but Filch and his whip were absent, and Snape was sitting in the Headmaster's high-backed chair as though nothing at all out of the ordinary had occurred. His black eyes watched like them like the beady, ravenous gaze of a vulture from over the hooked nose as the students filed in silently, all too aware that they mustn't react to the latest victim of the hated regime.

Finally, once everyone had been seated, he stood, though he still did not look at Michael as he spoke. "Last night, one of you decided that they apparently disagreed with the disciplinary choices that have been made at this school. That attempted murder was an excusable offence. Mr. Corner," and now he did give the slightest nod of his greasy head towards the still-motionless Ravenclaw, "broke into the Great Hall at approximately one-thirty in the morning and released Mr. Milton before his punishment was over, undid the minor injuries that were meant to have taught him a lesson, and removed him from school grounds. This is obviously unacceptable."

A slow smile spread across Snape's sallow face, and he walked around the Staff Table to stand directly beside Michael, lifting his head with the tip of his wand. Neville could see now that Michael's eyes were in fact open, and they burned with equal parts hatred and fear. "However," Snape went on smoothly, and there was something dreadfully pleasant about his voice, almost reasonable. "This is first and foremost a learning institution for the magical arts, and scholarship is promoted and rewarded here. I was actually aware of Mr. Corner's actions within minutes of his entry into the hall, but I allowed it to occur because the display of spellwork was truly remarkable."

Neville's hands clenched on the edge of the table. *You let it occur so Mike could dig himself in deeper, you liar! I know he's brilliant, but you don't give a damn about that, do you?*

"Professor Flitwick in particular should be extremely proud of his pupil." Snape nodded his head towards the diminutive Charms teacher and head of Ravenclaw House, but was met with a poisonous glare in return. "His Disillusionment and Silencing Charms were flawless, the concept of vaporizing a Sleeping Draught and manipulating the mist to be inhaled by the guard was *inspired*, the Severing Spell used to cut the manacles very deftly handled, his Healing Spells beautifully executed. I doubt Mr. Milton will even bear any lingering reminders of his rash and foolish attack. However, the coup de grace was unquestionably the means by which he got Mr. Milton out of the school."

He gave Michael a low, mocking bow. "Casting a corporeal Patronus of such strength is not unimpressive itself, but I have never seen one used for side-along Apparition, much less to circumvent the barriers against *people* doing so on the school grounds. That little loophole has been closed, of course, but I do not think it has ever even been attempted before. You must have devised the incantation yourself?"

Michael did not respond, did not even make the smallest nod or shake of his head, just continued to stare at the loathed Headmaster, and Snape shrugged. "Astonishing, nonetheless. And as I said, scholarship is rewarded here. Nothing so crude as a whipping or unimaginative as the Cruciatus Curse. Genius deserves genius."

He motioned with his wand towards the doors, and they opened smoothly, revealing the short, stooped figure of an old wizard in a heavy traveling cloak. The prisoner's eyes followed Snape's motion towards the newcomer, and the reaction was startling. Immediately, Michael's cheeks flushed, and he began to thrash wildly against the bonds, his eyes huge as increasingly hysterical cries of pure, unrestrained terror issued from beneath the muffling of the gag.

The wizard began to walk up the center aisle towards the Staff Table with a slow, shuffling gait that bore a distinct limp, and he leaned heavily on a cane, a small, battered briefcase tight in the other arthritically knotted hand. He looked at least as old as Dumbledore, but his beard, although snowy white, came to a sharp point a few inches below his chin, and a monocle was clamped firmly in place below one bushy brow, magnifying the eye beneath in an eerie resemblance to Moody's magical one. Something about him seemed vaguely familiar to Neville, but he couldn't place where he had seen the wizard before, although Michael clearly knew...and it was clearly not from *Witch Weekly's* Most Charming Smile Awards.

He made his way to the front of the Hall, and Snape met him with a surprisingly genuine bow of deep respect, then took the wizard's arm to help him up onto the little platform and across to where Michael was chained. The thin fingers adjusted the monocle, and he peered closely into the younger man's face. Michael had lost all trace of color in his skin, and he was sweating heavily, shaking so hard that the chains rattled like chimes hung in a crypt. Neville could not remember ever having seen anyone so frightened in his life.

"Our guest," Snape said with another bow, "has been living in Egypt in most unfortunate exile for the past fifty years, but recent enlightenments in the political climate have allowed him to return to Europe, though he is still not welcome in his home country as yet. He was most interested to hear about the Dark Lord's efforts to help rid the wizarding world of damaging Muggle influences, and has agreed to assist the Ministry with some new programs in the coming months. It is as a personal favor to me that he has come here to meet Mr. Corner, although I am sure you will all be delighted to know that he has also agreed to teach some very special lessons in Dark Arts and Muggle Studies today and tomorrow. Students and Staff of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, it is my deepest privilege to introduce Professor Hans Belsen."

*Belsen*. The name struck the room like a curse, and Neville saw that he was not the only one to abruptly realize why the old wizard seemed so familiar, and exactly why Michael was so afraid.

They had called him *The Boggart of Nurmengard*. He had been a controversial figure all his life, banned from teaching at Durmstrang, kicked out of every scholarly association in Europe, banned from submitting papers to any of the serious publications because of the hideous ways his data was collected. Under Grindelwald, he had found a supporter and patron for his twisted views, and he had quickly risen in power to become one of the dark wizard's wand-hand advisors.

His theories on Pureblood superiority and the sub-sentient nature of Muggles were on their own bad enough, but it was his experiments in trying to 'purify' Muggle-borns and Half-Bloods that had made him infamous. The history books just called them "supremely unethical" and "thinly veiled torture," but Neville remembered an elderly witch his grandmother had once introduced him to as a survivor of Grindelwald's cleansing, and he still remembered the woman's oddly haunted dignity, as well as the terrible scars that had pitted her arms, the way her fingers were missing all their tips.

"Herr Corner, I am wery pleest to meet you." His voice was cold and raspy, but still surprisingly strong for a man of his age, and he gave a crisp, Teutonic little bow, clicking the heels of his shoes together neatly. His accent reminded Neville almost of Krum, but there were subtle differences too, and though he could not remember what country exactly Belsen was from, he knew that it was likewise somewhere in the Eastern part of Europe. "Professor Snape tells me you haff been doing some most vunderfool spells, ja?"

Michael's eyes closed, and a low moan was the only response from beneath the gag. He seemed about to pass out.

Belsen turned to face the rest of the Hall. "I am here to teach all uff you about ze Pureblood and ze Mudblood and how zey can be dealt vit by an enlightened vizarding vurld. Zis I vill be most happy to do. But also, Professor Snape has invited me to demonstrate somesing zat is a hobby uff mine."

Behind him, Michael's head twisted so sharply that it looked as though he were trying to break his own neck, but as he scraped his face against the wall, bloodying one high cheekbone, he managed to push the gag away. His voice was higher, thinner than Neville had ever heard it, the panic trembling sharply on the edges of open, unashamed, naked desperation.

"NO...Oh, *PLEASE*, no...I'm *SORRY*...I'll do *ANYTHING*, *ANYTHING*...just don't...I don't do pain, I'm not a hero, I never tried to be a hero, just  
*PLEASE, CRUCLATE ME, KILL ME, ANYTHING...PLEASE!*"

The chuckle was as dry as ash as Belsen turned back to tweak his captive jovially on the nose. "But Herr Corner reads his books, I see! He knows my hobby is pain." He addressed the students again. "My first lesson I vill teach here for all uff you. Pain is a fascinating thing, no? Wery complex. Ze Crucio, for exwample, is very effectif in small amount, but zen ze subject looses zeir mind, and it is no goot. Ozer kinds uff torture make too much damage. Ze subject vill die, and zat is no goot eizer. So I bring my own little invention to demonstrate for you vit Herr Corner's help how I solve zis problem."

He opened the briefcase, kneeling stiffly to withdraw what looked at first like nothing more than a gleaming silver dinner plate. As he lifted it, however, it began to unfold like some form of demonic flower, long, shining tentacles with viciously sharp ends extending from the center as little spikes appeared at the edges and something else – something whirring too fast to quite make out – rose up amid the writhing cords. Belsen smiled proudly, and Michael began to scream.

His screams went on for an hour before Terry stood, tears streaming down his face, and raised his wand to direct a flash of green light directly into his best friend's chest.

Then there was only silence.



OOO

"So what exactly happened? Don't move your face!" Li Su rapped Neville sharply on the shoulder, glaring in disapproval.

"I can't answer if —"

The young witch aimed her wand directly between his eyes with a warning look. "So help me, I *will* use a Body-Bind...and that's why I asked *Finnigan*. His head is in one piece." Neville had his doubts as to whether his roommate's head had ever been in one piece, but he kept silent and obediently still as she went back to the deep cuts that gauged his cheeks, squinting in concentration.

"Fearless Leader," Seamus explained, leaning casually against the wall of the Room of Requirement with his arms folded across his chest, "decided he wasn't in the mood for *Cruciatus*' Terry, and ol' Carrow thought that weren't too much of a good impression in front of our dear celebrity guest. So he hauls out for the *Cruciatus* himself, but Belsen fancied he'd show off somethin' a little different."

"Well it's not *Sectumsempra*," Li frowned. "Or *Diffendo*, *Relashio*, or *Incisus*. I've *barely* been able to stop the bleeding, and I can't get it to heal at all. It would really help if I knew what it was."

Seamus shrugged. "Beats me. Never seen the like before. It didn't cut him at all...his face just pulled at itself until the skin ripped apart," he shuddered, "horrid to see, truly."

"Not so fun to be on this end of, either," Neville said through clenched teeth, careful to let his lips move only the barest fraction.

"I still don't understand." Jennifer Lindsey, a Ravenclaw sixth-year who was as tall as Neville himself, drew her long legs up to her chest, curling into a tight ball on one of the couches as she shuddered. "Why punish Terry for using the Killing Curse at all? *They* don't consider them Unforgivables, and it didn't even work."

"Do you think he was too upset to cast it right?" asked Romilda. "I mean, he was crying pretty hard."

"No. His method was flawless, but the stronger the curse, the more vitally important the union of *intent* and procedure." Anthony's voice was oddly hollow. Like most of the Ravenclaws, the double impact of Elliot and Michael's tortures had shaken him deeply. "He didn't truly want to see Mike dead. He wanted to put him out of his misery. So it just knocked him out...not that I think it's going to be any easier for Terry. He still knows that he tried to kill his best mate."

"He was punished because he interfered, Jenny." Colin looked over from where he had been sitting on the edge of one of the tables to watch Li's attempts at repairing Neville's face. "The entire point of these public displays is to make us feel helpless, and if someone takes control of

the situation, that renders it moot. So we've got to be made to feel – or they have to *try, anyway* – like there's no use in fighting back."

"Well, I've gotten it to scab, and that's all I can do," Li said with a sigh. "Let me have a go at the other one, okay? Scoot 'round." Neville did as he was told, allowing her to be her prodding and muttering on the other side.

Seamus pointed to the second deep gash. "Now you know he didn't get them in one go of it, don't you?"

Li looked up sharply, startled. "You refused *twice*?"

"No, just the once needed with Terry in Dark Arts," Seamus said airily. "Ripped his cheek apart, had Zabini do the Crucio, that was that. The other one was Muggle Studies." He tapped the thin scar on his own lip where he had nearly bitten through it at the beginning of the long year.  
"Favorite class for mouthin' off in, I suppose. But then, there's so much cause for it."

Jennifer exchanged a look with Anthony and rolled her eyes. "Do we want to know?"

"Belsen was going on and on about what exactly constituted a Pureblood," Parvati made a disgusted face. "He actually compared it to neutralizing poison. All this horrible nonsense about some Mudblood strains being worse than others, strength of various wizarding families, how many generations were needed to 'nullify a contamination'...it would have been kind of funny if it wasn't so awful. But Alecto was listening to him like he were just the best thing since self-inking quills."

"And then Fearless Leader pops off that if someone can call themselves Pureblood off this little equation of neutralizin', he'd like to know how much Muggle blood she and Amycus have," Seamus finished.

"Iz zis Herr Longbottom alvays zis difficult?" Jack imitated Belsen's monoptic glare, then waved his hand like the flick of an imaginary wand. "BAM! Other side of his face goes, and Alecto was so furious, she kicked him out of the class. Said he had lost the *privilege* of learning from Belsen. So that's when I raised my hand and asked if I could lose the privilege too, and Belsen just gave the whole class this long look, looked back at Alecto, and told her that he had been under the impression the teachers controlled Hogwarts, not the students, and he left. Got Cruciated, but...." Jack shrugged.

Li gave his face a final tap with her wand and stepped away, shaking her head in frustration.  
"That's it, I'm afraid. Maybe when the Hufflepuffs get here, someone will know something."

"I doubt it, Li, you guys tend to be the spellwork specialists," Neville stood up, fingering the newly scabbed cuts gingerly. They had been very deep, almost tearing completely through the sides of his face, and it still hurt quite a bit, as well as feeling rather stiff from the thick scabs. He turned to Anthony. "How's Terry?"

"Banged up pretty bad, but he won't leave Mike. He's nailed a Protego around that bed that I don't think You-Know-Who could blast through, so it's no use trying to force him, either." The other Ravenclaw shook his head in astonishment. "Those guys *love* each other. I've barely known any brothers who are that close. Snape has no idea how lucky he is that Terry didn't get a chance to fire off another shot. I think he would have found perfect unity of intent and procedure."

"Do you think he'd be okay if I went to check on them?" Neville asked. "I don't want to invade, but I've been worried sick all day about both of them...and we've got about twenty minutes before the Hufflepuffs get here and the meeting starts proper."

Jennifer waved her wand, and the door appeared. "Go ahead, I'm sure they wouldn't mind."

"I'll be back for the meeting, promise." Neville nodded to Seamus, indicating that the Lieutenant had command until he returned, then opened the door into the Ravenclaw dormitory.

Tall, airy windows stretched nearly from the floor to the high, vaulted ceiling above, the precise opposite of the Slytherin rooms seven floors below them. The floor was polished stone, and the buttresses joined the walls with cornices shaped like eagles with outstretched wings who held bronze lamps in their talons to light the room at night. All the fittings, such as doorknobs and hooks, were likewise bronze, groaningly overloaded bookcases stood between each of the sapphire-hung beds, and he noticed that each nightstand, unlike his own, was fitted with a tiny fold-out desk with a little dip for an ink bottle to rest.

The desk by one bed had been pulled out, and a few small flasks and bowls were sitting on it, along with a damp, blood-stained cloth. Terry was sitting at the head of the bed, but the hangings had been closed all the way up to his back, and Neville could not see Michael beyond his friend. The other young man did not seem to have noticed his entrance, and he knocked loudly on the stone wall beside where the door had vanished. "Uh...Terry?"



Terry looked up, startled, his wand instantly leveled at Neville's chest and his expression furious. Neville raised both hands, taking a step backwards, but his Lieutenant had already recognized the newcomer, and the anger had faded from his face abruptly, leaving something much worse. He looked shattered.

It wasn't just the bruises that swelled and darkened his features where Zabini had cruelly puppeteered him to strike against as many things as possible in his agony, nor the blood still crusted on his chin from his bitten tongue that he had not yet bothered to wipe away. It was his eyes. Rarely had Neville seen so much agony in another human being's gaze, a raw, animal pain as if the young wizard had ripped his chest apart in shreds of flesh and shards of bone to expose his own heart.

Neville actually gasped, reaching out a hand in an instinctive desire to offer some thin comfort. "Terry...I'm so sorry...is he...?"

"He's alive."

"Can I...?"

Terry nodded, and he crossed to the bed, parting the hangings carefully with one hand. Without the assurance that Michael was still alive and the faint rise and fall of his chest beneath the covers, he would not have known. There wasn't any sign of the brutal torture beyond three tiny, clean holes in the skin of his shoulder where Belsen's device had burrowed into the flesh to begin its work, but he was starkly pale, his color having faded beyond white to a corpse-like gray that had taken on a further tint of blue from the surrounding fabric. His full lips were purplish blue, and his eyelids had a bruised look to them.

Neville shivered. "Has he...?"

"Yes, but he was in so much pain, I...." Terry shook his head, unable to go on. "I couldn't watch it. I'm sorry."

"What about you?" He gestured towards the dried blood. "I'll watch him, you clean yourself up."

"No. I deserved it."

"Terry, you look like hell," Neville protested gently, "you'll just upset him if he sees you like that. At least wash your face."

Nodding reluctantly, Terry ran his wand lackadaisically across his face, and the blood vanished, though the bruises remained. He reached out, laying his hand carefully on the pierced shoulder. When he looked up, there were tears in the cobalt blue eyes. "I should have gone with him, Neville. It should have been both of us. I *knew*, part of me at least knew what he was going to do, but I just told him not to and went to bed. I was such an idiot."

"That wouldn't have helped, Snape was clearly expecting something. Besides," Neville smiled thinly, "I knew too. I think anyone who saw the look on his face when he caught sight of Elliot knew. But we can't always keep bad things from happening to our friends. Mike knew the risks."

"He knew about the Cruciatus, maybe getting beaten, maybe even Azkaban, but not *that*," Terry's voice choked. "That was *inhuman*."

"I know." Neville nodded grimly. "I'm putting a ban on further D.A. missions until the final battle. If they're taking it this far, we can't afford to risk losing our numbers before we really need them. We're not going to knuckle under and just toe their line, but no more flyers, no more graffiti, no more recruiting or raids. We lie low. Wait it out. Let them think they beat us." He stroked the dark hair back from Michael's sweat-soaked forehead. It was cold. "He'll have done us a favor, really. They'll have their guard down when we strike."

"You didn't lie low." Terry pointed to the thick gashes on Neville's cheeks. "Looks like you did it a second time, too. Who else did they want you to Cruciate?"

"No one," he laughed darkly. "The other one was a smart-ass remark in Muggle Studies." He shrugged. "I'm not always the best at taking my own advice, but honestly, I hadn't really decided until I saw him here...do you think he's going to be okay?"

"Define 'okay.'"

The words were scarcely a whisper, the voice gone entirely, but both heads snapped around to the figure on the bed in shock. Terry turned almost as white as his friend. "MIKE!"

Michael's dark eyes had opened, bloodshot and vague with pain, but wonderfully aware. Terry seized his hand, but the movement made him stiffen, moaning in agony, and the other youth released it again, shaking so hard that the bottles on the little desk were rattling. "Oh...Mike, you're awake! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...I tried to *kill* you...I'm so...." Sobs of relief and anguished guilt cut him off, but Michael shook his head faintly.

"No." His still-handsome face contorted at the pain it cost him, but he took Terry's hand in his own and raised it shakily to his mouth, kissing the clenched fingers gently. "Most beautiful thing...anyone's ever done...for me. Thank you."

"I couldn't let it go on. I thought *I* was losing my mind." He touched the marks on Michael's shoulder gingerly with his other hand. "The way you were screaming...what was that *thing* doing to you?"

"Don't know. Hurt." Something in his eyes suggested that the incomprehension of the method of his torment had been almost as excruciating as the torture itself.

"Are you..." Terry hesitated. "Do you think you'll be all right?"

Michael glanced up, seeming to notice Neville for the first time, and to his amazement, the ghost of his old cheeky smile passed through the dark eyes. "It's really just...that I'm stiff, sore...and weak as a Pygmy Puff right now."

"If you think you're going to the meeting tonight, Corner, then you did crack up there." Neville tried to make his tone firm, but he could not hide the relief and emotion that made his own words tremble.

"You...owe me. Calling it in."

"Neville had time to recover!" Terry shook his head fiercely. "I can't let you do that!"

"*Please,*" Michael's eyes were locked on Neville in an urgent plea. "I was...a coward...up there. I don't want...people to think...of me that way."

"You were no coward, Mike." Neville knelt down so that he was level with the bedside. "That was nightmare stuff. I think anyone in the school – hell, I think Harry himself, and he's faced down You-Know-Who a half-dozen times – would have been just as scared. And I won't do it if it's going to hurt you. *Swear* to me that if *anything* makes it worse...."

He nodded weakly. "I swear."

Terry remained at his friend's side, staring wordlessly as if he could drive away the last hours with the simple reality that Michael was conscious and sane and alive, but Neville went to the foot of the bed and opened the heavy brass-banded trunk. "Does he still have his uniform trousers?"

"Yes," Terry replied without looking up, "and unlike you, he didn't bleed all over them, so we should be okay there. Socks and shoes, too." He chuckled, and there was a slightly manic quality to it. "I'm not going to subject you to Mike's feet. We don't need any more torture today."

"Thanks." He pulled out a shirt and tie, then hesitated over the vest before choosing the cardigan sweater instead. It would be easier to get on than something that needed to be pulled over the head. There was no need for the outer robe, and he left it in the trunk. The clothing bundled neatly in his arms, he returned to the beside, then paused. "Are you *sure* about this?"

"Completely." His throat was still jagged from screaming, but there was more strength to the reply now, and Neville exchanged a long look with Terry, who closed his eyes and nodded.

"Okay...Terry, give me a hand. I don't want him trying to sit up." He slid one arm carefully beneath Michael's back, frowning in worry as he felt how clammy the skin still was. "Mike...."

"*Please.*"

There was a wordless count of three, then they lifted, and Michael gasped in pain as his badly abused body was lifted to a sitting position. Terry yanked back, and Neville barely compensated in time to keep the other wizard from falling. "Damn it, Terry!"

"I'm sorry!" Quickly, he resumed his place on his friend's other side, but his arms were trembling in a way that had nothing to do with physical effort as he looked hard into Michael's eyes. "You swore...."

"It's fine...really. Go on." Fresh sweat had broken out across his forehead, but his jaw was set in determination, and he gave a little nod.

Carefully, silently, not meeting one another's eyes, Neville and Terry helped him into his uniform, then lowered him down again. Michael was shaking so hard now that it almost seemed as though he were slipping into a mild seizure, and his lips had turned the same gray as his skin, but his expression was one of gratitude through the pain that made it too much to speak.

The door had appeared while Neville was buttoning the final buttons of the sweater, and he nodded towards it. "Meeting's started. Terry, you get one side, and I'll —"

"I'm carrying him. Alone." There was no argument to be had in his tone, but Neville frowned.

"Terry, he's not a little guy...."

"I've not been slaving away with Bagman for six months to attract the ladies," a pale attempt at his old wry humor quirked his mouth, and he jerked his head towards where Michael lay, eyes closed, trying to hide how he was gasping for breath. "No point as long as I hang out around pretty boy Mikey...most I can do is hope they have friends or sisters who feel sorry for me and appreciate a rapier wit more than dashing good looks."

Neville gave a faint smile of his own in return. "I thought you two shared everything."

"A shameless lie, I fear. Didn't even let me get in a peck on the cheek with Weasley, the selfish goblin." He drew back the covers fully, folding them over the end of the bed, then braced himself, sliding one hand under Michael's knees and the other beneath his chest. "Just spot me, please. Don't let him fall if I'm not strong enough."

Michael was barely conscious, but he shook his head feebly. "Terry...you don't have to...."

"Yes I do." Taking a deep breath, his shoulders tightened, and he lifted his friend into his arms in a single movement that was more fluid and gentle than Neville would have thought possible given that Michael was an inch taller and about fifteen pounds heavier than Terry himself. Yet there was something deeper than physical effort at play, and though he followed closely and carefully, wand at the ready and arms poised to act if Terry were to suddenly slip, the other young man showed no more strain than if he were carrying a child of ten.

Silence fell over the Room of Requirement as the door opened to reveal the three of them, then Anthony rushed forward, motioning with his wand to summon one of the largest couches. "Here! Set him down...Mike...are you okay?"

There was no answer. Michael had passed out from the shock and the effort, but Terry answered for him as he lay his friend carefully across the thick, soft cushions and pushed the hair back

from his closed eyes. "He'll be all right." He looked up, and his dark blue eyes were blazing. "He wanted everyone to see that he's not a coward, that they didn't break him...that I didn't...that he's still...." His voice broke, and he knelt, pressing the limp hand between his own. "He's still with us."

"Next time I call them Library Lilies," Seamus' tone was only half-joking, colored with a deep and genuine respect, "hex me in the face, will you, Fearless Leader?"

"I'll make personally sure of –" Neville was cut off as a silver flash suddenly appeared at the ceiling. In a motion so swift and unified that they appeared to have Apparated en masse, the Ravenclaws formed a solid wall around the couch where Michael lay, wands out and aimed before the bright streak had even reached the center of the room.

It resolved quickly, forming into the shape of a glowing, ghostly she-bear, and Neville gasped, recognizing the Patronus before it even began to speak with Gran's familiar brusque tones. "I am hoping that this message finds you still at liberty, Commander."

The bear tossed her shaggy head, turning to where he stood among the crowd, almost hidden behind the still-poised barrier of blue-trimmed robes. "The Death Eater Dawlish was sent to arrest me and take me to Azkaban this evening on charges of aiding and abetting treason and revolt. I am assuming that this means you have been continuing to be a 'Serious Discipline Problem,' though we are not as yet a week into the final term. My congratulations."

"Are you –" Neville started to speak, then stopped himself, remembering that a Patronus could only deliver a message, not respond, but his grandmother was ahead of him.

"I have taken care of my own situation. If they find Dawlish, I believe he will require the attentions of a very skilled Healer before he is capable of normal speech or spellwork again, but I am unharmed and exercising my own resources to hide. Your parents knew a great many people who are useful at times like these. Do not concern yourself with me, but know that they may be after you next. I do not believe your status as a student will protect you much longer. Your friends and your wits will have to suffice. Good luck, Commander."

With a final shake of its head, the bear vanished into a faint silvery mist, and silence fell across the room. Then a voice, weak and raw, came from the low couch. "Neville...."

The wall of Ravenclaws parted instantly for him as he whirled, falling to his knees to take Michael's hand. "Yes?"

"I think...Snape...may be...reconsidering...your friendship."



## Chapter Nineteen Run To Ground

For over a week, it was stalemate. Neville was on his guard, but Snape and the Carrows made no move, and he began to think that a dangerous equilibrium had been set. The scaling-down of the D.A.'s activities since Michael's torture appeared to have lulled the Death Eaters into the belief that his Gran's attempted abduction – which Alecto had sneeringly informed him of the next day, though she implied that the effort to send Gran to Azkaban had been far more successful than her Patronus would have indicated - had frightened him into submission.

Then, on the eighth of April, he and Seamus were on their way to Charms when Crabbe and Goyle met them in the hallway, their massive forms blocking the door to the classroom belligerently, arms crossed. Neville exchanged a look with his friend and sighed, rolling his eyes at the two giant Slytherins. "If we say pretty please, will you get out of our way?"

Goyle seemed to think a very long time about this, then shook his head firmly. "No."

"*No?*" Seamus was aghast.

"No," repeated Goyle, more certainly this time.

"Just no. And you had him set up with so many possible lovely, witty comebacks," the young wizard sighed, his blue eyes glittering with the anticipation of a fight as he drew his wand, bouncing it lightly in his palm. "Of course, wit isn't your greatest talent, is it, Gregory darlin'?"

"Don't call me darling, I ain't yer darling nothin'!" Goyle frowned deeply, his shoulders bunching as he clenched his fist around his own wand.

"It's nothing personal, Goyle, it's just how Finnigan talks..." Neville said soothingly. Though he had drawn his wand as well, he kept it low at his side, raising his other hand in a placating gesture. "Just let us pass. We don't want a fight."

"Well we do," Crabbe snarled, and before Neville knew what had hit him, he was down. He had been ready to block a curse, a jinx, even an attack from a third party using the two thugs as a distraction, but he had not anticipated simply being punched. The blow had come like a battering ram, and his head was spinning, spots dancing in front of his eyes as he rolled over onto all fours, shaking his head as he fought to keep the powerful strike from being a knock-out.

"*Tintreach!*" From what seemed like very far away, he heard Seamus' shouted spell, a crack that sounded almost like Apparition, then there was the smell of ozone and burning hair, and Crabbe screamed. Neville forced himself up to his feet, still slightly unsteady, and Seamus was dueling both Slytherins.

Crabbe's hair was scorched and smoldering, but they had taken to their Dark Arts lessons better than their legendary stupidity would ever have suggested possible, and although one-on-one it would have been no contest; doubled up, the young Gryffindor was pressed to hold them at bay, his wand flashing. "*Ar ais! Protego! Diffendo! Buailim! Impedimenta! Sgaith!*"

Neville surged forward, ready to join the fight, ignoring the eye that had already swollen nearly shut and the throbbing pain in his head. His wand snapped down, taking advantage of the distraction to lash out with two rapid Stunners that downed both Slytherins like falling oaks, but the instant the light left his wand, the reason for provoking the fight became hideously clear.

Like figures appearing through a heavy mist, eight black-robed Death Eaters appeared from the walls of the hallway as their Disillusionment Charms faded. Neville felt the coin in his pocket burn, and he knew Seamus had called for help, but before he could argue the Lieutenant's action, he was dueling for his life harder than he ever had before.

The door of the Charms classroom flew open behind them, and an enormous Patronus burst through in a flash of silver. It was a bull, lowering its horns and flinging aside two of the Death Eaters who had cornered Seamus like rag dolls. A swarm of pencils flew out of the room like bees, jabbing and attacking the cloaked figures, and Neville allowed himself only a second's glance to see who had come to their aid. To his shock, it was Professor Flitwick, the diminutive teacher barreling across his classroom at a run, shoving up the sleeves of his robes as he aimed his wand.

"Run, Neville!" His voice was a high squeak of urgency, almost comical even in the dire situation, but there were still five Death Eaters to the three of them, and he could see Amycus and Alecto rounding the corner at a run to join the battle.

Neville shook his head, wheeling to the side, then snapping his wand up to strike one of them with a Conjunctivus Curse in the face. The man let out a scream, tearing the mask away to clutch at his burning eyes, but it wasn't anyone he knew, and he didn't care. Six to three were still not good odds. "I'm not going to leave you two alone!"

A jet of red light passed so close to Seamus' sandy head that for a moment his hair seemed as vividly copper as Ginny's, and he spun, firing back at Alecto, but the spell missed, and he barely managed to catch the next one from the Death Eater he had been dueling originally. Flitwick was throwing spells faster than Neville had ever seen anyone fight before, but it was only managing to hold two of them and give the younger wizards each two themselves. There had been no repeat of the mistake they had made with Dawlish. These were skilled, toughened fighters, and he knew that it was only six months of merciless training that kept himself and Seamus on their feet at all, though they were increasingly outmatched.

"Sorry we're late, Professor!" Lavender's voice caught him by surprise, and he saw her coming around the corner where the Carrows had appeared only seconds before, Parvati and Colin close on her heels. All three had their wands drawn and their robes off, and he felt a combined thrill and terror at seeing them ready for open combat. It was too soon! Everything was out of control!

A jinx hit Seamus in the knee, and he screamed as the joint folded the wrong way beneath him, tumbling him to the floor, but his eyes flared in pain and rage in equal measure, and his wand practically erupted as his scream turned into the harsh yell of a curse. "*Tine Ardballa!*"

Both sides recoiled as a wall of blistering white-hot flame sprang from the stones, dividing the hallway from floor to ceiling. The lull was only a second, but Flitwick turned to Neville, jabbing his wand towards where the circle of fire divided them from the corridor that lead towards the stairs. "Run! Now! It's you they want!"

"What about the rest of you?" Neville shook his head, glancing around at his friends, his look lingering on Seamus, who was gripping his knee and swearing viciously. "I can't just – "

"We'll take care of ourselves, and my Memory Charms are perfectly good, young man...now I said, GO!" Flitwick jerked his wand, and Neville felt a shocking cold grip him as he was thrust bodily through the flames, the Freezing Charm passing them harmlessly over skin and robes.

There was no going back. He would just have to trust. Ignoring the sounds of the battle resuming fiercely behind him, Neville ran.

He had barely reached the bend in the hallway before he became aware he was being chased. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw Amycus pounding down the hallway after him. The squat, flabby man was far faster than Neville had expected, but if he could get a clear shot, it wouldn't matter, because there was no possibility of turning and aiming without being caught. He veered around suits of armor and statues, sacrificing speed for an erratic course, drawing on the maps and diagrams he had memorized months prior to take advantage of every twist and turn the castle had to offer.

Once, he knew he would have been panting for breath by now, on his knees with the effort of fleeing so hard up and down flights of stairs and around corners, but his heart was thundering from adrenaline far more than exertion, his legs showing no sign of exhaustion as they propelled him on, and already Amycus was flagging badly. The Death Eater stumbled slightly, his breath coming in gasps, his face crimson, and Neville took his chance. Abandoning his winding course,

he hunched his shoulders forward and broke into a flat sprint directly up the narrow maintenance staircase he had lead them to.

Even after all the training, an all-out dash up four floors of stairs that rose nearly vertically was a heavy effort, and his lungs were burning, his legs screaming as he reached the top. But there was no pause. He could not hear Amicus behind him any more, yet that only made him more nervous as he hurtled down the seventh-floor hall.

Was there another way? A secret passage he didn't know about? A shortcut? He couldn't assume that he had just left the Death Eater behind, and he couldn't afford to lead him to their hideout. If Amicus or any of the others found him before he could get inside, he knew he would have to lead them on another wild goose chase, hoping, praying that he could ditch them for a second chance, or else...

But there it was. The portrait of Barnabus the Barmy being merrily, eternally clubbed. The giant oriental vase that bizarrely kept filling with empty bottles of cooking sherry. The flat wall that concealed the door to his only chance. Once, twice, three times he sprinted past it, his shoes skidding on the floor as he wheeled, nearly falling. *I need to hide somewhere my enemies can't get me! I need to hide somewhere my enemies can't get me! I need to hide somewhere my enemies can't get me!*

The door appeared, and he yanked it open. As he turned to close it behind him, he saw Amicus appearing through what had always appeared to be and what had been listed on every map of the castle as a dead-end closet. The Death Eater gave a roar of rage and frustration as Neville threw him a cheery little wave, then slammed the door. It shimmered and vanished, and he got only the briefest fleeting impression of fists pounding uselessly and foul swearing before the wall had thickened, and he was safe.



### OOO

They were going to starve him out or drive him mad.

The Room of Requirement had provided him a cozy little room, wood-paneled and comfortable, with the crimson and gold lion banner of Gryffindor hanging from one wall and a brightly colored hammock strung from the ceiling at just the right height, even a hook to hang his robes and a bookshelf full of texts on combat spells and battle tactics. But what it didn't provide were the two things that by nine o'clock the next night, he would have sold his wand for: news about his friends and something to eat.

He had kept thirst at bay by using *Aguamenti* to produce cool water from the tip of his wand, but if there were spells that could generate food, he did not know them, and he cursed himself for not having achieved N.E.W.T. levels in Transfiguration. Surely there would be a way to turn one of these books into a roast beef sandwich, but he had no idea what that would be, and pointing his wand and guessing had met with no results whatsoever.

Neville had tried sending messages on the Galleon, but there had been no answer, and he was increasingly terrified that the entire D.A. had been captured. Was he the only survivor? Was there any way to tell without being captured? Was he their last hope? Was *this* what the prophecy had been intended to come down to? Him hiding out until everyone else had fallen, then being left to find a way to carry on and avenge them? How would he know?

He paced the little room in growing agitation, his empty stomach gnawing painfully at him and only increasing the feeling of helplessness. Several times, he had tried to call the house-elves to bring him something, but either Dobby's absence had left none of them brave enough to come help, or more likely, the loophole Snape had closed when he banned non-human Apparition after Michael's stunt prevented them from using their own brand of magic to reach him. Desperately, he had even summoned Mimsy, knowing she was bound to come to him if there was any possible way and that Gran would never have ordered her to abandon him, but she did not answer either.

Neville did not even consider trying to open a door to the kitchens. It was too basic, to elementary to think that they would not have set up spells to alert them if he reappeared in the castle. No, he was stuck. Stuck until someone came for him or he gave up and came out again, but what would he find if he did that? Could he dare? Certainly not this soon. Maybe in a few more days, if there was no word, but in a few more days, if he still had not found food, his strength would be ebbing, his reflexes slowed....

With a low moan of frustration and defeat, he sank to the floor, sliding down the smooth wall beside the bookcase as he closed his eyes. Everything. Months and months of work and trying and risks and pushing himself and nearly dying a half-dozen times, and it all came to this. Trapped in the room that was supposed to be their salvation, cut off from his friends and comrades, and forced to choose between starvation and surrender. It wasn't right.

His head dropped forward into his hands, and he sighed deeply. There was no urge for tears. There was no *point* to tears. They wouldn't turn into a sandwich either. *I'm just so hungry*, he

thought despairingly, *I just really, really need something to eat. Then at least I could think straight. It's making me too edgy. All I need is a way to get to some food without the Death Eaters getting me or finding out. That's what I need.*

There was a faint sound like a stone being dropped into a pool of water, and Neville's head shot up in alarm, his nerves stretched tight after the silence of his own solitude for almost two days. He looked around, and for a moment, nothing seemed different. Then he saw it.

Across from the hammock, in the place where the door had once been, there was a painting. Neville got to his feet, frowning, and crossed to examine it.

The frame was simple, gilded wood, and inside, an old-fashioned oil painting showed a pretty young girl in a white dress that dated back to the beginning of the century. She had a sweet, innocent look about her, with long blonde hair in sausage curls over her shoulders, but her eyes were oddly distant, almost vacant, like Luna's when she was at her most dreamy, but different in that they lacked his friend's spark of lively brilliance. At first, she was almost as motionless as a Muggle photograph, then her eyes slowly turned to his, and she smiled vaguely.

"Hello," Neville said cautiously. "Who are you?"

The girl did not answer, but she continued to stare at him, then her hand floated to her mouth as if by accident, and she raised her eyebrows questioningly. Neville pressed forward, fighting the urge to seize the frame in eagerness as he nodded. "Yes! Yes! Hungry. I'm very hungry! Do you know where I can get food?"

His shout seemed to startle her, and she cringed back, hiding her face in her arms like a toddler, and he forced himself to back down, offering her his gentlest smile. Now he understood. There was something wrong with her mind. Some trauma had destroyed her, driven her deep inside herself and left her a high-strung, cracked-crystal version of herself. He smiled. This he knew how to deal with.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, speaking carefully as he would to a particularly hysterical Fainting Fichus, "I'm not mad at you, pretty. I just haven't had anything to eat in a couple days, and I got excited. It made me dumb. I bet you feel kind of upset sometimes and do dumb things too. I didn't mean to scare you. I don't like to scare people. I try to be nice to everybody. Can you forgive me and let me be your friend?"

Gradually, one bright blue eye peeped out from behind her arms, and she studied him warily. Neville spread his hands wide, tucking his wand into his back pocket out of sight, and smiled again. "See? I don't want to hurt you."

Her gaze was focused uncertainly on his palms, and he glanced down, realizing that she was looking at the round scars from the thorns. "These?" He pointed to the scars, and she nodded gingerly. "I got them because I was with two of my friends – pretty girls like you – and some bad monsters tried to hurt us. I stopped them, and it kind of hurt me, but that was okay, because I didn't let them hurt my friends."

She had uncurled now, and was staring at him with that same open, sweetly bland look, as if they were starting from scratch. Neville took a deep breath. "Love, can you show me where I can get some food?"

The girl nodded, then turned away, but instead of stepping out of her portrait and coming back with something to eat, or even pointing him in a particular direction, she just seemed to walk further into the background. Now that he looked, he saw that unlike most paintings where the backdrop was a garden, a sitting room, or somewhere else that would be appropriate surroundings for the subject, the girl had been painted in front of a long, dark, ominous-looking tunnel that seemed to lead away to forever.

There was no point, however, in wondering at the artist's reason for this choice, because she was quickly fading into the shadows, and he reached after her instinctively. "Wait...."

His voice cut off in a gasp of shock. Instead of butting against the canvas, his hand had passed through as if it didn't even exist, and he felt the cool dampness of the tunnel air beyond. As if she had heard him, the girl paused and turned back, regarding him placidly for a moment, then raising one dainty hand in a beckoning motion.

*Oh, Merlin, I hope I'm doing the right thing....*

Closing his eyes, Neville took a deep breath and climbed into the painting to follow this strange, shattered flower towards the unknown.

Behind the painting, he was surprised to find a set of smooth stone stairs that led neatly down into the tunnel itself. Far from being a crude burrow, it looked long-established, even ancient, with smooth, hard-packed earthen walls and floor, unmarred by roots or stones. The walls were studded at intervals with little brass lamps that cast an eerie, flickering light that was just enough for him to see the little white-clad figure that continued to float gracefully ahead.

Now that he was inside the portrait world, he could see that there was something unnatural about her that went beyond her vacant eyes and frail-minded manner. No matter how she turned or moved, she was never actually three-dimensional, and she cast no shadow in the lamplight. He shivered, wondering what he had gotten himself into, following the brush-stroke image of a mad young girl along a tunnel so long and deep that he knew he had to be crossing far beyond the castle grounds by now. But the Room of Requirement had never lead him astray before, so he crossed his fingers, trying to fight the increasing worry as the passage continued to stretch on and on before them.

Finally, they reached a second set of stone stairs that went up to a little door, and the girl walked up them smoothly...and then *into* the door, which, as Neville looked at it, he now saw to be the canvas and wood-slatted back of a second frame. Taking a deep breath, he climbed the stairs and placed his palm against the back of the painting, pushing carefully. It swung outward a few inches, and he peered through the opening, not having the slightest idea what he expected to see beyond.

It was a little sitting room, shabbily furnished with a threadbare rug and a rickety table flanked by mis-matched, wobble-legged chairs, and an old man was sitting alone, a plate scattered with crumbs at his elbow and a candle dripping messily onto the pockmarked wood as he peered over a roll of parchment that seemed to be full of lines and figures. His hair and beard were wire gray, long and stringy, and a pair of dirty spectacles were perched on the end of his straight, narrow nose. At the faint creak of the portrait's hinges, he looked up, and his eyes were a vivid, piercing blue that seemed oddly familiar, though Neville couldn't quite place them.

"Ariana?" The wizard stood, adjusting his glasses as he crossed to peer more closely at the portrait. "What have you...hello, there!"

The portrait was thrown open, and abruptly, Neville found himself staring at the end of a wand that was being held only inches from his nose. "And who are you?" the wizard demanded harshly. "What are you doing spying on me?"

Neville raised both hands, taking a step back on the stone stairs. "I didn't mean to cause trouble! If you don't want me here, I'll go. I never saw you, I don't know where this place is, I'll not say anything to anyone!"

"Well and good, but you didn't answer either one of my questions, boy." The blue eyes narrowed suspiciously as they took in his appearance more thoroughly. "Why...you're a Hogwarts kid, aren't you? What in the name of Cleopatra's asp happened to your face?"

Startled, Neville touched his cheek. He had almost forgotten in the hunger and isolation about the deep gouges that slashed across both sides of his face, and he had a strong feeling that the eye he still hadn't been able to open since Crabbe hit him probably didn't look too pretty either, despite undoubtedly being very colorful by now. "I, uh...." he hesitated, unsure what side this stranger was on or what was safe to say. "I had an accident. Got in the way of a spell, you know...er...a couple times."

"Hmph." The wizard snorted in obvious disbelief, then gestured him through into the little sitting room. "So what's the clearly most accident-prone boy in Hogwarts doing in my pub, and are you going to give me a name before I have to check and see if your mother writes it in your shirt collar?"

Neville hesitated, then replied with the name of Lavender's older brother who had graduated Hogwarts during their second year. "Robert Brown, sir. I'm Gryffindor...but...your pub?"

"I'm not blind, I know you're Gryffindor...unless you're wearing that sweater and tie because you think red and gold look good with a beating." He waved a hand at the door that lead out of the sitting room. "My pub. The Hogshead. And if you don't start answering questions, you're going to see the front door of it quick enough. What are you doing here, and what happened to your face? And don't give me that load of dragon dung about an accident."

"I followed the girl," he admitted. "I was...trapped in a room in the castle, and I was really hungry, and she kind of – well, she didn't *say* anything, but she seemed to act like if I followed her into her picture, I could find something to eat."

"People who trapped you in that room wouldn't be the same people who tried to re-arrange your head, now would they? And they wouldn't happen to be a pair of the ugliest trolls who ever wore the Dark Mark, just maybe?" He raised his bushy eyebrows in mock innocence, and Neville decided to tell the truth. There didn't seem much point in lying, and the barkeep of the Hogshead seemed like a man who was accustomed to dealing with people who were much better at it.

"Yes, sir. It was the Carrows. We're – *I'm* not really popular with them right now. But if this is a pub, sir...." He fished in his pocket, pulling out a small handful of Sickles and Knuts, but leaving the charmed Galleon hidden safely. "I'd like to buy some food, please. It doesn't have to be anything fancy. I'll really take whatever you've got."

Nodding with a grunt of satisfaction, the wizard waved away the money as he crossed to the door. "You stay here, I'll get you something. And keep your coins, Brown – or whatever your name is – I don't take money from one of my brother's old students what's in need because he crossed those two."

"Your brother!" Neville exclaimed. Suddenly, he remembered where he had seen eyes like that before, and a fragment of Dobby's letter flitted through his memory. Dumbledore had told the elf his brother owned a pub in Hogsmeade.... "Then you're –"

"Aberforth Dumbledore," he spoke almost as if it was a confession, rather than a point of pride to be related to the greatest wizard in modern history. "Go ahead and call me Ab like everyone else. You look close enough to grown to stop worrying about 'sir' for everyone. Least you're tall enough to pass for it."

"I'm of age," Neville confirmed, and Aberforth gave a dry chuckle.

"Well, that much is clear enough. Nothing's quicker to say it than a seventeen year-old. Think they're all of a sudden grown bloody adults because the calendar's flipped one little page and they've got their own watch. But you sit down, *Mister* Brown, and I'll get you something to eat if you were keen enough for it to follow Ariana all this way."

"Thanks, Ab."

Aberforth left, and within a few minutes, he had returned carrying a plate on which sat a half-loaf of bread and some cold chicken, a flagon of mead in his other hand. He sat them down on the table, and Neville tore into it with such gusto that the barkeep laughed. "Watch it, there, Neville...you're eating like –"

"A seventeen year-old who's had nothing in two –" he stopped, blinking, his mouth still full of the heavy wheat bread. "Wait a sec, what'd you call me?"

"Neville Longbottom. That's the same's your mother calls you, am I right?"

"But how did you – ?"

"Got a notice downstairs." The gray head nodded back towards the door. "Says I'm not supposed to serve alcohol to Mssrs. Neville Longbottom and Ernest Macmillan. I was getting the food, and I saw that and said to myself 'Ab, if you took about fifteen pounds off that boy and dragged him through hell tied to the back of a thestrel, I figure it'd be the same kid you've got upstairs.'"

"But you...?" Neville motioned towards the mead.

"Well, I don't get most of my clientele because I give a flying shrivelfig about rules. Never have." He reached into his robes and pulled out a long pipe, clenching it between his teeth as he lit it with a tap of his wand. Sweet, fragrant smoke began to rise immediately, and he blew a series of smoke rings lazily, studying Neville as he ate. "I guess you're the one what's been driving the Death Eaters up the wall and down again up there."

He replied with the proudest smile he could manage around a mouthful of chicken leg. "Mmm-hmm."

The satisfied look on the wrinkled face turned immediately stony. "So my brother had himself an army of kids he's set up to fight his battles, did he?" He gave a snort of disgust. "Typical."

Neville frowned, feeling himself grow defensive on his old Headmaster's behalf. He swallowed, gesturing firmly with the stripped bone of the chicken. "Professor Dumbledore didn't set us up for anything! We formed ourselves with Harry about two years ago and –"

Aberforth's bright blue eyes widened in sudden realization. "I'll be a Grindylow's underpants! That's right, you lot did it right here in the Hogshead, didn't you? 'Bout twenty-odd of you, including both those Weasley boys who've kept me so nicely in Galleons for my help with import regulations."

He nodded. "Yeah, well, it was just a class then. But we've kept it going, and we're a real army now!"

This pronouncement was met with a low, humorless chuckle. "Oh, are you?"

"You've heard how much trouble we've given them!" He thrust his chin out proudly. "They want me dead, you know...tried a couple times."

"Congratulations." Aberforth replied sarcastically. "You've made enough schoolboy mischief that some of the foulest wizards on this earth want you dead." He wagged one long finger at the younger wizard. "First, that's not saying so much, boy. Those lot don't have the greatest respect for anyone's life but their own. And second, that's damned foolish of you, much less that you're proud of yourself for it. You're seventeen. You don't have the first idea what you're doing."

"I have a perfectly good idea what I'm doing!" Neville felt himself begin to flush, and he knew it was more than the half-flagon of mead he had drank. "I can't tell you much more than I have, because we've been smart enough to use some pretty strong protective magic, but we've got

some things planned that are going to do a lot more for getting rid of You-Know-Who than just 'schoolboy mischief.'"

"And these plans...." Aberforth crossed his arms, taking another deep drag of the pipe as his bushy eyebrows raised. "They wouldn't just so possibly happen to be some of my brother's brilliant schemes, now would they, hmm?"

"Actually, no." Neville wiped the last wad of bread across the plate to catch the dribbles of juice that had fallen from the roast chicken. "They're ours, and honestly, I don't think I ever got a chance to actually even talk to your brother one-on-one. We're doing this all ourselves, and because we want to – no, because we *need to*. Risking our lives or not, it's the right thing to do, and we're not about to knuckle under just because we're young. That's how people like that get a real foothold, you know? If they can get you to grow up going along with things, then it's a lot harder to make yourself fight later, not to mention *they'll* be dug in deeper. I mean –" Neville shrugged, "sure, we all know Dumbledore had something planned with Harry, but we don't know what, and we're not waiting to find out. If Harry can stop You-Know-Who first, that's brilliant. But these are our freedoms too, and we're not sitting back and waiting on someone else's plan."

He stopped, surprised at himself for the little speech, but Aberforth seemed rather impressed. The barkeep was looking at him as though seeing him for the first time, and a small, grim smile appeared around the stem of the long pipe. "Well, aren't you something."

Neville laughed. "My Gramps used to say that, and my great-uncle Algie would always give him this look and say 'Certainly, Trev, but let's not say what, shall we?'"

Aberforth gave a surprisingly boyish laugh. "Let's not!" He reached into the pocket of his robes and added another pinch to the pipe, then nodded to the empty plate. "You want seconds? For half a chicken and half a loaf of bread, that didn't last two minutes."

He *did* want more, actually, but Neville shook his head, not wanting to either come off as greedy or make himself sick before his body had the chance to realize he had finally put food in it. He took another sip of the mead – it was almost gone now, but to his surprise, he didn't really feel anything more than a faint warmth from it – and regarded the barkeep with an appraising look of his own. "You don't like your brother, do you, Ab?"

"I think that he was certainly one of the most respected wizards of our time, and I'm proud enough to be kin to that." There was a flat, rote quality to the statement, and Neville chuckled darkly.

"Okay, I won't push. I think that it's probably not really likely you're going to turn me in, and beyond that, I'm not exactly trying to recruit you, so it's not my business."

A smile quirked one side of the barkeep's thin mouth. "You're definitely not one of Albus' little toadies, then. Letting a body think for themselves...." He shook his head in mock astonishment. "Who'd have dreamed of such a thing." Aberforth paused, then the smile widened slightly. "I've decided I like you, boy. You've got the kind of spunk Albus always thought he did. But you're

not afraid to take on your own dirty work and put your wand where your mouth is...everything I've heard about you has been what you've been *doing*, what you've been *leading*, not *saying* or *scheming*, and I figure it's true, or your face would be a lot less heavily decorated."

Neville was not sure how to respond to this, but Aberforth didn't seem to need a response. He flicked his wand casually to clear the empty plate and the naked bones of the chicken. "You need more to eat, you can come back...just do it after nine or ten, unless you want to take chances at having company that wouldn't be too happy to see you, most likely."

He nodded gratefully. "I'll probably be back tomorrow, then, Ab. Thanks!"

"I'll get you something to take with you. Boy your age needs more than one meal a day. I don't remember that far back easily, but I do remember that I could once take down a roast the size of my own head without looking twice, and I think that was somewhere around where you are now." Aberforth crossed back to the door, then paused, casting a stern look back over his shoulder. "But I don't want you thinking I'm joining your little rebellion just because I'm not going to let someone starve right at my own doorstep."

"Ab, if you're willing to keep me in something to eat, and maybe let me use this as an emergency way out of the castle if it comes flat down to it –" he hesitated, and the gray head nodded brusquely, so he smiled as he went on "- then you're the best help I could have ever wanted."

"Leftovers and a door." Aberforth snorted, but there was something much deeper in the brilliant blue eyes behind the smeared spectacles. "If that was all most 'Great Leaders' wanted, we'd all be a lot better off."

OOO

When Neville pushed open the portrait that lead back into the Room of Requirement, he found it changed. It had expanded to almost the size of the tower dormitory in Gryffindor, and two more hammocks were strung from the ceiling, one of them occupied, while a second figure in black and crimson robes bent over it attentively, a broomstick at his feet.

At the sound of the portrait swinging opened, the figure whirled, wand raised, and Neville saw that it was Jack Sloper, one side of his face sheeted in fresh, shining blood from a deep cut on his scalp. "Neville!"

"Jack...what happened? What's going on?" He dropped the satchel containing the food Aberforth had given him, rushing across the room to grab the other young wizard in a hard embrace. "I thought you'd all been –"

"Damn close, mate." Jack was shaking. "But where were you? The room was empty when we –"

"Secret passage. Went for food. But you're hurt!" Neville scowled in worry at the injury.  
"Jack...."

"It's nothing. Just a nick, but scalp wounds bleed like mad. Really, I'm fine. It's Seamus I'm worried about." He nodded towards the bulging hammock. "He's in bad shape."

Neville crossed to the hammock, and his breath caught as he looked inside. If not for the freckles still visible on the badly discolored and blood-smeared features of his friend, he never would have recognized the young man he had shared a room with for nearly seven years. Seamus was unconscious, and he looked even worse than he had when Carrow had worked him over at the beginning of the year. His face was swollen hugely, nearly black with bruises, his nose clearly broken, his lips deeply split, and his sandy hair was heavily matted with blood. "What...?" his voice broke, and he reached out to gently touch the pale, limp hand that lay across Seamus' chest. "Is this because he fought to get me out?"

"Not really," Jack said. "It's the decree." He caught Neville's look of surprise and laughed darkly. "You don't know about that, though. I'd better start from scratch...although *you'd* better be ready for a lot more roommates in here."

Jack flicked his wand, summoning a chair and spinning it around to sit backwards on it, his chin resting on his folded arms across the back. "They were furious you got away, of course, but they couldn't really do anything about it, or about the fight in the hall, because Professor Flitwick made sure that none of them – the Carrows included – remembered a thing. But they still knew something had happened and that Hogwarts' own 'Undesirable #1' had vanished into thin air. So yesterday, we got Educational Decree I-Can't-Bloody-Well-Keep-Track."

"Authorizing knocking the hell out of students?" Neville asked dryly, using his wand to clean the blood from Seamus' face and hair.

"Actually, saying that status as a student at Hogwarts did not protect anyone of-age who was engaging in 'subversive or criminal activity' from being arrested, questioned, or prosecuted. They're provoking more problems, going after pretty much the whole seventh year and everybody like me who's old enough in six. I think they hope that's going to cut the head off the D.A." Jack's gray eyes burned defiantly. "Parvati and Colin have Gryffindor now, and Ernie and Terry have command overall, but we've already talked about it. Even if everyone over seventeen has to run in here eventually, we're still going to stick this out."

"So they tried to bring him in?" Neville motioned towards the hammock.

"Provoking Finnigan's not the hardest thing in the world," Jack acknowledged. "Alecto caught him on the way back from Herbology. Don't know what she said, but the next thing I knew, they were flat-out dueling right there on the grounds! Not the greatest filter between his brain and his mouth, maybe, but no one's ever said he doesn't have guts."

"More than are good for him most of the time."

"Definitely this time. Well, they were going at it pretty impressively, and then she just stops and grins, and it didn't make sense for a second, but then I think we all realized about the same time he did that she'd backed him under the Whomping Willow. First swipe knocked him clean off

his feet, and then it just kept beating the living crap out of him." Jack shuddered. "I remembered what the twins had done, and I summoned my broom straight through the dorm window."

"You flew into the *Willow* for him?" Neville asked incredulously.

Jack blushed, looking down at his feet. "I'm a lot better at flying when I'm not surrounded by gorgeous witches in tight Quidditch uniforms. And about eight gallons of adrenaline doesn't hurt either. It still kind of grazed me, but I got him out and flew straight up here again through the broken window, then just down the hall as fast as I could before Alecto could get here or call anyone...never even got off the broom." He hesitated, biting his lip as he looked across at the badly beaten wizard. "I just hope I was fast enough."

"I'm not the best at Healing Spells," Neville admitted, "but I'll do what I can, and he's alive, which is the important thing. You saved his life, Jack. You have no idea how grateful I am."

"It's not like I gave it a lot of thought," he shrugged, embarrassed at the open gratitude. "I mean, I couldn't just watch him pounded into a –"

His words were cut off as the door appeared again, and both of them turned quickly, wands drawn as it opened. Ernie Macmillan and Wayne Hopkins came barreling through at a sprint, Wayne's face tightly crunched up in pain as he clutched a still-smoldering wand scorch on his right arm. They stopped short, looking at the two Gryffindors in surprise, clearly not having expected to find Jack already there with Neville.

With a faint popping noise, the room expanded still further, and the yellow and black badger banner of Hufflepuff unfurled next to the other one on the wall as two more hammocks appeared. Ernie shook his head, laughing as he panted for breath. "I guess...that means...we're welcome."

OOO

Seamus' injuries were horrifying to look at, but on further examination, they did not prove to be anything more life-threatening than massive bruises and a lot of broken bones, and the other four men agreed to simply keep him under until someone came along with a better grasp on how to help him without causing more damage. It did not take long.

Andrew Kirke showed up the next morning, and by lunch time, the blue and bronze eagle of Ravenclaw had rounded out their collection of banners as Stewart Acklerly arrived. Both Michael and Terry followed the next day, and Ryan Vance and Derek Adams from Hufflepuff the day after that. Anthony was behind them only hours later, and by the morning of the thirteenth, every wizard over the age of seventeen in the D.A. was living in the Room of Requirement.

Each new arrival brought another expansion to the room, more hammocks as needed, as well as other, subtler changes as it became more and more a barracks and less a hideout. Now there were long tables where they could eat. Chess sets, packs of Exploding Snap, backgammon, a wider selection of books, a large wooden-cased wireless, and even a guitar that Stewart all but wept over when he realized he could never actually take it outside the confines of their sanctuary.

They had brought no trunks or luggage on their headlong flights into the room, but it was comfortably warm, so they mostly hung around in undershirts and trousers anyway, leaving the rest of their scorched, blood-spattered, and sweaty clothing in a vast communal pile of multi-colored cloth debris that had formed without any magical help in one corner.

Food was no longer a problem, thanks to Aberforth. Although his generosity of spirit did not extend to feeding three meals a day to over a dozen teenaged wizards for three months, Ernie's line of credit was something he could much more easily extend, especially after an owl to Gringotts revealed exactly how much the Macmillans had available. The meals were simple, but tasty and filling, and now and then, a bottle would find its way into the satchel as well to be shared around.

To Neville's surprise, their enforced retreat proved to actually be one of the most enjoyable experiences he had ever had. They had found a way around the Carrows strict watch and could use the Galleons again to assure themselves of the welfare of their friends outside, and the Room of Requirement was now firmly a boy's club. Rank and house meant nothing anymore, and they quickly fell into a routine, starting each day with physical training, practicing spells in the afternoon, and taking the evenings to just relax, sharing their own catalogues of off-color jokes and amusing stories, challenging each other to duels for fun, or simply hanging out.

It wasn't until the twentieth – twelve days after Neville himself had fled and a little less than a week after Seamus had finally gotten back on his feet again with some help from the Ravenclaws – that anything really changed. Witches arrived.

Like most of the other witches, Lavender and Parvati had not been nearly as easy as the men to provoke, so the Death Eaters had resorted to other means. They had been framed, copies of pamphlets supporting Harry planted in their pockets, but they were no longer the gossipy little butterflies they once had been, and the two young women had proved more than Amicus had been ready to handle.

They were not, however, as delighted with the atmosphere in the Room of Requirement as its previous occupants. As a matter of fact, 'hovel' and 'Neanderthal cave' were the nicest things by far they had to say about it. To their shock, the men found themselves stripped to shorts and lined up in front of a bathroom that had suddenly enlarged far beyond the simple commode it had been up until that point, with Parvati enforcing immediate and thorough showers at wand-point, while Lavender, her pretty face distorted oddly by a Bubble-Head charm, began attacking the clothes, bedding, and odd stacks of dirty dishes and discarded chicken bones.

Only Ernie put up a serious fight. The news that witches were being specifically attacked and framed had sent him into a panic, and he demanded to be allowed to go immediately and fetch his wife. Parvati had prevailed, however, insisting that his current aroma would be dangerous to Susan in her condition, and marching him back in queue for the showers. Although he finally complied, Neville was sure that some kind of new record had been set for speed in washing, and he vanished out the door with Wayne and Derek with his shirt still clinging to him wetly.

He returned with her only minutes later, but he was white-faced and shaking, and the three wizards had also been joined by Hannah, Sally-Anne, and Morag. Ernie confessed that it had been a brief but unexpected battle – the door had let him into the Hufflepuff common room easily enough, but it had also dropped them practically into the lap of the Carrows, who were conducting a surprise inspection. After leaving the two Death Eaters unconscious on the floor, the remaining older Hufflepuffs had concluded that discretion was the better part of valor and followed, but the near-miss was worrisome to Neville.

For a few days now, he had been considering increasing security on the room, but now there was no arguing that it needed to be done. Neville carefully discussed every possible loophole with Ernie and Terry, concentrating on closing them one by one. If something happened to Colin, or if one of their own was turned, the room would no longer admit anyone who was trying to help the Carrows or Snape. The door would only open out into somewhere safe, though that meant sacrificing the ability to specifically direct it. No noises could be heard from outside, no matter what spell was used. The walls were rendered immune to Portable Portals, Blasting Charms, Trans-Visibility Spells, or any other means of seeing or getting inside without the door. Even the possibility of poison was eliminated: the room would now refresh its own air, and any tainted food or water would vanish instantly.

The witches slept in hammocks strung from a high, shuttered balcony that had appeared around the upper edge of the room, this new second floor allowing them privacy, as well as providing a separate, curtained room with a proper bed which everyone insisted the Macmillans take. Ernie was not the only one who was intensely protective of Susan and her baby, and all the young men in particular were glad to know that she wouldn't be taking a hammock like the rest of them. Truthfully, very few of them had much idea at all what exactly she needed or didn't need, but the general agreement seemed to be that treating her like gold would cover all the hoops well enough.

By the twenty-fifth, Li Su joined them as the last of the older D.A, and they began to settle in properly. Everyone knew without needing to say that this was going to be their final home for the next two months, and the room seemed to know this. Things took on a greater sense of permanence, and they found small trunks beneath their hammocks that contained duplicates of their uniforms, even little things like razors, toothbrushes, and combs that they had been using magic to make do without.

Stewart had run through most of his inventory of popular songs within the first few days, but he had written several more himself, and his clear, gentle tenor slid smoothly over the soft notes of the guitar as he sat cross-legged on the floor in the corner, a small circle of friends gathered around him as had become their custom for these impromptu concerts. Most of his songs were good-natured attacks on Snape and the Carrows – he was remarkably good at finding insults that rhymed – but this one was different, and unusually, no one was laughing as he sang. He had first introduced this song the day before, but they all knew it already.

*"Seventeen is the start of it all,  
The beginning of our days.  
Yet here we are, ready to fall,*

*Ready to give it all away.  
What's the use of a thousand years,  
If the sun will never rise?  
We're ready to take on all of our fears,  
To see hope shining in a new life's eyes..."*

Hannah was nestled in Neville's lap, and she turned, nuzzling her face against his neck as Stewart continued. "Tomorrow's the first of May," she whispered. "Two months."

"I know," he nodded. "It's strange to just sit here and wait like this."

"Do you really think we'll last out the term?" she asked. "Colin, Jennifer, and Rowan say things are pretty quiet out there, but that worries me. What if they come down on the sixteen year-olds next? How far do we let it go?"

Neville sighed deeply, stroking his hand along her back. "I've thought about that a lot. We can't just let the younger ones fend for themselves. I think Colin and the rest *could*, but if they had to run, that would mean fifth-years protecting everyone else, and that's really starting to push it. They start this up again, we'll have to make our stand of it. But I think we're ready, I do."

Hannah was quiet for a moment, then her eyes closed, and she sang softly along with Stewart on the chorus, several other voices having also joined on what had become their own little anthem.

*"For we are Dumbledore's Army,  
Nothing but children who've grown up too fast.  
We are Dumbledore's Army,  
This battle is ours, and we'll stand to the last..."*

The words drifted away into the guitar alone, but her eyes remained closed. "He's right, you know."

"Hmm?" Neville kissed her throat where the smooth, pale skin was invitingly exposed as she rested her head against him.

"There are no children here any more, Neville, and that's not just that we're all of-age in this room. Colin's not going to be seventeen until the third of July, and he's no more a kid than you or I. Neither are any of us, really." Hannah's eyes opened, and there was something not quite like bitterness there. "I've stopped believing childhood has anything to do with numbers. It's the time of your life where you can trust that older people will take care of things for you."

"Then you're right," he agreed solemnly. "By that definition, there are no kids left at Hogwarts."

"The D.C.," she pointed out. "The really young ones...they've still got that, except *we're* the adults they're trusting."

"Now that's a terrifying thought," he chuckled. "You know, Gran said a lot the same thing, though...she said that when things get really hard, we should remember that the ones people can look up to every day often matter more than icons."

Neville patted his shirt pocket, where he had carried his grandmother's letter ever since Aberforth had passed it on to him. In barely a week, the parchment already looked worn and deeply creased, but he tried not to let anyone know that the single sheet was his most treasured possession. It wasn't very long, less than half a page, but it contained one portion that had brought him nearly to tears, and that he had read so many times that he could close his eyes and see every swirl of ink perfectly.

*It was not easy to lose your father so young, but I am ready to lose you even younger, because you have already accomplished so much more, and I am as proud of you as I ever was of him. Fight hard, Commander. You have no one's respect left to earn but your own, and that is a standard worthy of a hero.*

Hannah was the only one he had allowed to see the letter, and she smiled, running a finger along the pocket's upper edge. "I agree with all of what your Gran said, actually."

He blushed, looking away, and was grateful for the distraction as Morag shouted out a request, and Stewart complied with the rollicking tune that had long been one of his most popular.

*"Hey, there, Severus, what will you do?  
You're facing a rebellion that's sending you shampoo.  
Graffiti in the hallways, the revolution grows,  
But how could we expect you to see it past your nose?"*

Neville laughed, but before he could begin to clap along with the chorus with everyone else, he felt a hand on his shoulder and turned. Ernie was grinning broadly, but the look in his eyes was more like shock, and he didn't seem able to find words, just beckoning his two friends away from the circle eagerly. "I want you to...we just...come on!"

Hannah stood, exchanging a bemused look with Neville, then her eyes widened, and her head snapped around back to Ernie. "Oh, Merlin, if you've managed to get her with *twins...*"

"Twins?" He seemed alarmed, even terrified by the prospect, but then the curly head shook quickly. "No, no...not twins. At least, Romilda didn't say anything about twins, and I think she would have." Ernie bit his lip, a tiny, worried frown creasing his brow. "I mean, she knew it was a girl, she was completely sure of that, said it was old Gypsy magic that had never failed, but she didn't specifically say it *wasn't* twins. Still, that's something you would want to prepare someone for, I would think. I would certainly need to be –"

"Ernie." Neville put both hands on his friend's shoulders, looking him squarely in the eyes. "Take a breath. Not twins. And she's only half-way, so she's *not* having the baby, and if there was something wrong, it would be a whole different kind of panic. So what's going on, mate? You only get that stupid grin when it's Susan."

Absolute wonder filled the hazel eyes, and he grabbed Neville's wrists rather harder than the other young man suspected was his intention. "She moved."

"What?" Neville frowned in absolute confusion. "I don't –"

"Oh, that's so exciting!" Hannah clapped her hands and broke into a little sprint up to the Macmillan's room. He still had no idea what was going on – there was no reason, as far as he knew, why Susan moving should be anything of note, and she seemed to have been doing it as long as he'd known her – but he followed along behind Ernie, hoping it would all make sense when everyone had calmed down a little.

Susan was sitting on the edge of the bed, the lower buttons of her shirt undone, and she smiled up at the two wizards as they entered. Hannah was already on her knees, making funny little cooing noises as she touched her friend's belly, but Neville looked down at his feet awkwardly.

At first, the impending baby had been no big deal. He offered congratulations, took care of the tactical issues, and listened indulgently as Ernie went on about being a father the same way as when he was talking about Quidditch or Clans or anything else that mattered deeply but that Neville didn't really get. Since they had moved into the room full-time, however, she had dropped all pretense of hiding. It had become impossible to ignore, not just because she was starting to grow at what he considered a rather alarming rate, but because everyone else was so excited about it.

Cecily Macmillan had taken on a powerful symbolism for a large number of them. She was what they were fighting for in the end, the children who would hopefully never know You-Know-Who's reign, even in nightmares or memories, and she was one of *theirs*, a life that was being created right in front of them in the midst of the very worst of it. Ernie was no longer the only one who wrote letters to the baby, and the couple were being deluged with all manner of hand-made gifts. Everyone wanted to touch Susan's stomach, to talk to the baby, to fuss over her and offer their regrets that they would never see her along with hopes that she would grow up to be beautiful, kind, smart, brave, and most importantly, *free*.

Amid it all, Neville smiled and nodded and agreed that she would probably be very beautiful as long as she took after her mother, but he tried to keep away from the subject as much as friendship would allow. It was just too strange. Mothers were *old*. Even in the pictures from his own babyhood, his mother was in her early twenties. Susan was only a month older than he was, Ernie less than a year. His mind simply refused to accept them as someone's parents, because they hadn't *changed*.

Ernie still told that really amazingly filthy joke about the blind wizard and the three sheep. Susan still liked to sit with the Patil twins and braid each other's hair with ribbons and little paper flowers. They listened to *Reducto!*, *The Unforgivables*, and *Passing for Muggles*, and they still snogged each other as if they were dating. They had matured and darkened as much as everyone else over the course of the year, but he just couldn't imagine Susan ordering someone sternly to eat their vegetables, and it was getting harder to resolve the girl he had known for the last seven years with the idea of her having an actual baby.

Neville was startled out of his hesitation as Ernie grabbed his hand. "Here," he tapped it with his wand, "*Ultratactile*. If you use a Sensitivity Charm, you can feel it too...it's amazing." Before Neville could protest, Ernie had laid his hand against Susan's stomach, and he gasped. The enhanced sensation was almost overwhelming. He could feel every tiny texture of her skin, the steady rhythms of her pulse and breathing, and her belly was harder than he had imagined, as if she really had swallowed a Quaffle the way Lavender teasingly suggested, but there was also....

His eyes widened as a tiny, faint flutter of motion passed beneath his fingertips. "Is that...?"

Susan nodded happily. "I just started being able to feel her today. She's a busy little girl, isn't she?"

"But..." he protested, "I mean, Susan, are you *sure*?"

She laughed. "Of course I'm sure. I mean, she's probably been doing it for a while, but I just couldn't feel it until she got big enough. Li's got a pile of nieces and nephews, and she says it's about the right time anyway."

Neville frowned at his hand, trying to feel the little movement again. "But she's not done. How can she be moving?"

"Don't you know anything about babies?" Hannah asked bemusedly, tilting her head at him.

"No," he confessed. "To be honest, I've never actually known anyone personally who was going to have one before. I was the youngest in my family, and, well...."

"You were kind of raised by old people?" she offered gently.

"Yeah."

"She's already a little person in there," Ernie explained, kneeling down beside his friend. "She's got wee fingers, toes, the whole lot. But she's only about this big –" he indicated the width of his palm, "—so there's a fair bit to go before she's ready to come out into the world. Still, she's moving and sucking her thumb and everything...she can even hear you, you know. By the time we're ready to fight, she'll even be big enough that you can play with her a bit; touch her from the outside and make her kick and wiggle back."

"How do you know all this?" Neville asked.

"Raising animals, mostly. But it's not all that different with people, and I have plenty of cousins." He shrugged. "Susan's the youngest of three girls, too. So both her older sisters have already done this."

He pulled his hand back, shaking his head. "She's got to go now. If there's a real baby –"

"There's been a real baby all along, Neville, whether you've really *gotten* that before or not," Susan said firmly. "And I'm not leaving until we're actually ready to fight. I've only got two months left

with Ernie, and I'm not going to miss a single day of it. Ernie and I know what we're doing, we've been ready for this possibility since he asked me to marry him, and being able to actually feel our child is something wonderful, not a reason to panic."

Neville was only the youngest of them by a matter of weeks, but he felt suddenly like a stupid little boy as he looked around at the three faces. They really did know, all of them. And there was something else in Ernie's hazel eyes that he had never seen before, a deep, flickering shadow of grief and resignation beneath the joy and pride and love.

He looked again at his hand, then placed it deliberately against Susan's warm stomach as he met the young wizard's gaze. "We're going to win this, Ernie. Tomorrow, we start doubling up the training schedule and setting our final tactical arrangements. We don't have to take it slow for the younger kids any more. Let's take these two months and really be ready to hit them harder than they can ever be ready for...because if she's already a person, I want her to meet the father that's been telling her how much he loves her."



## Chapter Twenty

### The Boy Who Lived

The next morning, the D.A. rose early. Neville's orders for the doubled training schedule had been received with surprising eagerness, and he had been proud to see how hard they were willing to work. The young witches and wizards who had whinged and moaned their way through the mere suggestion of such effort at the beginning of the year had become hardened soldiers, and without any need to hold back for the fourth and fifth-years, he was astonished at how much stamina they had now, how strong and fast they had really become.

At seventeen and eighteen, their bodies had the strength of adults but still held on to the flexibility of children, and it showed to encouraging effect as Ernie and Morag put them through their paces with sprints and push-ups, speed-targeting drills and obstacles. If nothing else, Anthony pointed out at the end of it, gasping and drenched in sweat but grinning with pride, they would certainly be able to out-run the Death Eaters, most of whom were in their forties and none of whom had put themselves through anything close to what the D.A. had become accustomed to.

Lunch allowed them a chance to rest. Michael and Padma took their meal to a corner of the room to prepare the spellwork that they would undertake that afternoon, and Seamus had turned on the wireless to make up for the lack of conversation as they all attacked the food with the violent enthusiasm of the teenaged athletes and soldiers they were. The DJ was playing the latest hit single from the *Manticores*, and Neville wondered if there was any way he could ever talk Gran into allowing him to get it if he survived.

She had never liked the harder sort of music that had become popular, but he was developing quite a taste for it himself. It was angry and pounding and harsh, and yes, there was something to her argument that it was little more than noise and yelling, but it *fit* with the aggression that he

had learned to channel now rather than bury, the sense of raw power that he had discovered in a real duel where you let the magic explode out of you with all the astonishing force that being a wizard really meant. The *Manticores* were followed by *FiendFyre*, but the first song had barely passed its intro when it cut off in a sharp rasp of static that brought every head snapping up with cries of annoyance and frustration.

Jack drew his wand at the tall wooden cabinet, but before he could even properly threaten it, a familiar voice broke in, breathless with excitement. "- got it, Fred! We've broken through, I'm sure of it!"

"*Code names*, code names, you idiot! How long can you hold the signal, River?"

"A couple minutes at most, but I think I've got us on everything! Hurry...it won't take them long to trace one this strong, and I don't think I can get it back!" Lee Jordan's voice was muffled and strained, but there was the same elated tone to it as to the twins'.

There was a pause, another burst of static, and a massive shuffling of chairs as the D.A. scrambled to gather as close to the wireless as they could. Plates and goblets were abandoned, some people climbing straight up and over the table itself, and Andrew tapped the top of the cabinet with his wand, "*Sonorous!*"

The next words boomed through the Room of Requirement at a volume that left those closest to the set clutching the sides of their heads, but no one even suggested turning it down. If it was important enough to forgo passwords and secrecy and break into the WWN, they wanted to catch every breath. " – from *Potterwatch* with a special news bulletin! Harry Potter has been sighted!"

"And what a sighting it was, Rapier! No one yet knows how the Boy Who Lived and his associates managed to break into Gringotts bank – yes, you heard me, witches and wizards, he *broke into Gringotts* – but his exit has put to shame even the supremely legendary departure of those dashingly handsome rogues from Hogwarts, the Weasley brothers. After taking an unknown object – "

"Or objects!"

"Could be, Rascal, we really don't know what he was after. But it's definite that he got it, and the goblins are in an absolute uproar! There has never been a successful raid of this size on the high-security vaults at Gringotts before, and he escaped, I swear on my wand, *on a DRAGON!* Despite the early hour, over fifty people saw it break through the front doors of the bank and take off, and the Obliviators are going to have their hands full with the number of Muggles who've been ringing their police like mad about the sight of a real, full-grown Swedish Shortsnout soaring over the English countryside."

"Wherever you are, Harry, that was bloody brilliant! And to all our listeners, Harry Potter has proven yet again he can accomplish the impossible, so don't lose faith! Whatever he took from that vault, I doubt it's something that'll make the Chief Death Eater sleep better at – "

"FRED, GEORGE...RUN! They're - " The rest of Lee's shout was lost in three loud, rapid *cracks*, then there was the muffled sound of angry voices, a sharp *bang*, and static filled the air once more.

Neville tapped the wireless with his wand, turning it off as the music resumed, and there were a few seconds stunned silence before the room erupted. Shouts and exclamations tumbled over one another, and he was forced to stand on his chair, waving his hands as he yelled, "QUIET!"

The outburst subsided, and he pointed to his Lieutenants. "Seamus, Terry, Ernie, this is huge. We need to talk about it *now*. Come with me."

The four young wizards hurried to the farthest corner of the room, and Neville glanced around the shining, excited faces – Seamus' beaming even through the still-impressive remains of the terrible bruising – with a broad smile of his own before he began. "So, I think we all know what he was doing in there, even if I can't for the life of me figure out how he could have possibly managed it."

Ernie slammed his fist into the palm of his other hand as he nodded. "The Sword of Gryffindor! He's finally going to kill You-Know-Who!"

"And it means we've got to scrap the training this afternoon and get ready to fight now," Neville added. His statement was met with looks of shock, and he frowned. "Isn't it obvious?"

"The last time you said that, Fearless Leader," a dark smile came across Seamus' mouth, "we wound up with the D.A. So what mad idea are you going to drag us into this time?"

"It's not a mad idea," Neville said defensively, "it's just logic. Terry, I'm sure you'll agree...Harry has the Sword, so he's going to make his move, and if he did something as huge and open as a bloody *dragon*, he'll have to make it quick. He might be able to kill You-Know-Who, but I was there in the Department of Mysteries...he doesn't have *any* special protection against the Death Eaters. So he'll need help in getting close enough to strike. And that's us."

"With you so far," Terry agreed, "but we haven't been exactly advertising our intentions in the *Prophet*. What makes you think he'll come back to Hogwarts?"

"Luna," Neville pointed out. "We know he rescued her, and she would have told him he has an army if he comes here. Meaning we're going to have a fight brought to our doorstep within the week at most."

"I can't back you on this one, Fearless Leader," Seamus shook his head, folding his arms across his chest determinedly.

"Why not?" Ernie challenged. "He's making good enough sense to me."

"Because this isn't *Harry's* plan, it's *Dumbledore's*, and no offense to a truly enough great wizard, but we were never piss-all in that plan. Which means Harry's got another way to get near You-

Know-Who. Which means he's not comin', and we're likely enough to have done all this for no fine reason."

"I *know* he's coming," Neville protested. "I've known it since the moment the twins said what he'd done over the wireless. It's...." he hesitated, frowning as he tried to explain, "...I mean, it makes plenty of logical sense, but it's more than that. Call it gut instinct, if you will, but I've hardly ever been so sure of anything."

Ernie looked at him curiously. "Is there any Seer in your line, Neville?"

"Not as far as I know," he admitted, "but when I *let* them happen, my instincts tend to be pretty spot-on."

"Almost all magical individuals have a certain degree of precognition," Terry said knowingly. "We're tied into something that's really quite huge, and if we pay attention, we can usually subconsciously sense where that's going on a large scale, even if you need Seer blood to predict specifics. Compare it to an avalanche," he offered, "it would take something really amazing to predict where a single snowflake would wind up or what instant it would happen, but as soon as you have a heavy snowfall and a steep hill, you can know there'll be one."

"Oh, my gut's tellin' me there'll be an avalanche too," Seamus nodded. "That snow fell years ago, if you care to put it that way. I just don't think it'll be down our side of the hill."

"What's wrong with being prepared?" Neville retorted.

"Not a blessed thing, I just don't want to get everyone roared up that he's comin' back this week or go line ourselves up in front of the castle to roll the carpet out for him."

"Fair enough," Ernie said. "Actually, I think I agree with both of you. Neville, I think you're right about Harry coming back soon, because I can't imagine where else he'd get the numbers, but Seamus has a good point about Dumbledore's plan being made before he had anything here except a bunch of kids who'd have been happy to be hex fodder, but couldn't do much serious fighting. So my vote is that we move like he's going to come...but keep it in here."

"Well, except for the news," Terry interjected.

"The news?" Neville raised one eyebrow questioningly.

"Someone's got to tell the rest of the D.A. about what we just heard." Terry gestured towards the door, "It's got to be hard on them out there with the entire seventh year run to ground. They need to know, both for morale's sake, and because they're a more than smart enough bunch to know what it means and that they'll need to make their own last arrangements."

"Okay, how do you want to phrase it on the Galleon?" Ernie asked, pulling his own from his pocket and poising his wand over it in preparation.

"Can't. Too much information, and it's just too unbelievable." Terry shook his head. "We send a message like that, they'll think we've been getting a lot more than just the occasional drink from the Hogshead. Really, Ernie, what would you think if yours went off saying that Harry had raided Gringotts, escaped on a dragon, and had the Sword?"

"That the twins were sending April Fool's a month late," Ernie agreed with a chuckle. "And it wouldn't make me feel much better if you told me the source *was* the twins."

"And we can't cast a Patronus through our own security," Neville mused. "But you're right, Terry, we do need to let people know. Especially since I still believe this means a fight really soon."

"I'll go down at dinner and make an announcement in the Great Hall."

All three turned sharply to the Ravenclaw Lieutenant with matching expressions of open shock.  
"That's insane!" Neville blurted.

"If you're tryin' to prove somethin'," Seamus said bemusedly, "there's no need, mate. I ain't called you a Library Lily in weeks, and I never meant it but affectionately in the first place."

"Oh, I have absolutely no heroic impulses," Terry admitted freely. "Personally, I'd be very happy if I had graduated a year earlier so that I could sit back and write a book about this when it was all over, but there's no one else for it. It has to be one of the four of us, or it won't carry the authority. The Commander there just has too much of a price on his head. Wouldn't get a word out before he'd be fighting for his life. Seamus, I actually really like you, but you're too well known for your mouth."

The swollen face flushed through the bruises. "I'm no liar!"

"I never said that," Terry amended quickly. "You just have a reputation for shooting off a bit, and it's so incredible as it is, people might think you were just trying to provoke the Carrows. Look me in the eye and tell me you'd never even consider exaggerating something to make them angry."

There was a long pause, then the sandy head nodded reluctantly, and he shrugged. "Got me there, you do. But why not Ernie? Hufflepuff's got a reputation too, and it's for being honest as the day is long."

"He's got a wife and a kid, and Terry's talking about something that could very easily be a suicide mission," Neville said, then turned towards the Ravenclaw. "For someone with no heroic impulses, that's a really brave thing you've volunteered to do."

"Stupid, illogical heroics seem to be the most logical thing to do rather frequently lately," he chuckled. "Really shows you how much You-Know-Who has messed up this world."

"Still," Neville said slowly, "I don't want you to just throw yourself on their mercy, Terry, because you're the closest thing to a walking library we have, and their mercy isn't their strongest feature. We're taking precautions. I want you to take Padma with you."

"Why Padma?" Seamus asked curiously, "He and Mike are...."

"Expected and come with a lot of baggage. No offense, but we know that even though you two work amazingly together when things are going right, you're also really prone to coming unglued if something goes wrong...and there's a lot of potential for that in what you're wanting to do." Neville smiled apologetically at Terry. "You're so used to leading with your heads, you're not prepared when your hearts get involved in things."

"Fair enough," Terry nodded. "But still, why Padma?"

"She's a tiny little thing," Neville explained, "She'll fit completely under Susan's cloak, plus she's got a good Disillusionment Charm on top of it, and she's really level-headed, so she's not going to act unless she needs to. She'll be your backup, and she'll have your wand."

Terry gasped, horrified. "I'm supposed to go *wandless*?"

The other two looked equally aghast. "Do you *want* it to be suicide?" Seamus blurted.

"What's the first thing you do to an enemy, guys?" Neville sighed. "I have a lot of faith in Terry's Protego, but not against three Death Eaters trying simultaneously to disarm him, plus half of Slytherin, most likely. We can duplicate the wand, and it won't be any good for magic, but it'll look right and give him something to hold. Padma will have the real thing once they think they've got him helpless."

Terry sucked in a deep, shuddering breath. He looked rather sickly all of a sudden, but there was a determination in the dark blue eyes. "Alright. That makes sense enough. I'll start figuring out exactly how I want to phrase things and setting up with Padma. It won't be a good time to be rambling or fishing for words. I'll want to have a speech memorized."

"You do that," Neville nodded. "Ernie, I want you and Hannah to do a complete check of everyone. Use that good common sense, and be thorough. A pair of trousers that were bought long to grow into —"

"—Or a loose heel on a shoe, a minor sprain that someone was hiding...they could get people killed," Ernie finished. "Not a problem, old chap. I'll see to it."

"Seamus..." He took a deep breath, looking at his friend almost pleadingly. "I know you don't think Harry is really coming, but I need you."

"Hell, Fearless Leader, I'd rather not be caught with our trousers down if I'm wrong...I'm just not goin' to lie if anyone asks me whether I true believe it."

"I would never ask you to," Neville said solemnly. "But would you be willing to send word to our allies outside? Use the Galleons, make sure they know what was on *Potterwatch* – it'll be easier for them to confirm it with others out there, and a lot of them probably heard it themselves – and tell them to be on alert in case we need to call them in."

"As long as you promise me we don't give the word until we're lookin' direct in the face of someone with green eyes, glasses, a hero complex bigger than yours, and the worst news any lad's ever had scarred into the middle of his head."

"And checked him for Polyjuice on top of it," Neville grinned. "It's a deal."

Seamus nodded. "Then I'll be on it straight away."

"All right...." A shiver ran through him, and Neville's heart was pounding as though the battle was moments from beginning, not maybe hours, maybe days, or maybe not coming at all. Every instinct said that the twins' news had changed things, and he fought to keep his hand from shaking – he didn't even know if it was fear or excitement or adrenaline or something else or all of it together – as he thrust it into the center of the little group. The other men clasped theirs atop his, and his eyes scanned over cobalt, azure, and hazel as he nodded. "Harry's got the Sword. We have an army. Let's make this happen."

OOO

"Oh, Merlin, I *hate* pain," Terry moaned, leaning heavily against Padma's shoulder, one arm clenched tightly at his side and his jaw darkly swollen as the much smaller witch helped him through the door.

"TERRY!" Michael was at his friend's side in an instant, frowning deeply. "What – are you...?"

"Couple ribs," he muttered thickly, then spat, unleashing a gob of bright red blood and a few small, white fragments that clattered faintly on the stone floor. "Couple teeth. Think maybe my collarbone. Hurts."

"What *happened?*" Neville shouldered his way through the gathering crowd around the two Ravenclaws. "Did you manage to –"

"He got the whole thing out," Padma nodded, letting Michael take her place at Terry's side as the young wizard was helped over to lie down on one of the cushions they used to practice Stunning Spells. "Everyone was so shocked to see him and what he had to say that it gave him enough time. Then the Carrows got up, and we were ready for that, but they didn't fire at him. They charmed a couple of those heavy cast-iron pans and cauldrons, and by the time we'd stopped them and gotten away, they'd really managed to work him over pretty good."

"But there's nothing here we can't fix, and you *did* it, Terry. That was incredible of you." Michael glanced up from where he was kneeling beside the cushion, looking gratefully at Padma. "Thanks for getting him out of there. I've been – "

"A nervous wreck is the nicest way to put it," Jack laughed, nodding his head towards Terry. "You should know, that bloke's been pacing a rut in the floor in here. If you'd been another five minutes, we were going to have to tie him to something to keep him going after you, and none of us were looking forward to trying to find a spell to do it that he couldn't bounce right back at us."

"What was the reaction?" Neville asked. "Did they believe it, do you think?"

Padma nodded quickly. "Oh, definitely. Even Snape and the Carrows believed it. They probably had already heard, I'm guessing, but Snape turned the loveliest shade of green when he realized we knew. And the D.A. definitely believed, because they know we wouldn't have risked coming out again if it wasn't real."

"How are they?" Andrew's brow was creased intently. The sixth-years and those with younger siblings had been by far the most concerned about their comrades that remained outside the room, and he pressed forward to the front of the crowd. "Did you get a chance to really look at them? Does it look like they're getting –"

"They all seemed fine," Padma said, gesturing soothingly at him. "Colin looked like he was ready to start the battle right then and there, and he's got a bit of a shiner on him, but no one seemed like there had been any more torture recently."

Andrew and Jack exchanged a look of relief, then Andrew grinned, shaking his head. "I'd never have thought Creevey could turn into such a tough little son of a Bludger, did you?"

"Harry! Harry! Can I have your *picture*, Harry! Can I have a bit of your pocket lint to build a shrine by my bed, Harry? Oh, *please*, Harry, look at me so I can talk about it for the next week and a half!" Jack's voice was high and mocking in a rather viciously accurate imitation of his young friend, but there was no malice to it, and several people laughed.

"Yeah, well, let's not count on anything until Harry actually shows up again, then we'll find out if this whole grown-up bit is really just a phase," Anthony smirked. "Neville just doesn't seem to have the same awe-inspiring quality to him."

"Downside of everyone watching you trip over your own feet for the first couple years, Fearless Leader," Seamus slung an arm affectionately over Neville's shoulders with a lopsided grin. "We'll love you, we'll follow you, but I'm afraid you'll never quite get us to worship you."

"I like it better that way," Neville laughed, "I honestly don't know how Harry puts up with it, and I'm the first one to admit that I'm not worshiping material. I screw up way too often, even now."

"For example, it is generally inadvisable for a leader to confess his own tendency for error immediately prior to instigating combat," Ernie teased. "This is where you are supposed to make bold and inspiring speeches telling us that Terry's brave sacrifice shall not be the last, and that we have yet only to wait for our turn at glory, making it sound as though getting beaten by serving dishes is something we should all aspire towards."

Neville shrugged, spreading his hands self-deprecatingly. "I don't do speeches. How about I just say that Terry did a really good job, that I'm glad to see they've already gotten him all his teeth back and it looks like they're making headway on the broken bones, that I'm really proud of all of you, and I think whenever this thing goes down, you're all going to kick a lot of Death Eater butt?"

Wayne grinned. "That'll do for me."

"So what now?" Terry asked, rolling gingerly to one side to let Li get at his ribs more easily.

"I get us tomorrow's rations from Ab and tell him what's going on, we take a couple hours to unwind a little, then we turn in," Neville replied. "I don't think anything else is coming tonight."

"Your little friend's already here," Hannah pointed to the painting and smiled. "Careful, Neville. I think she likes you. I might have to get jealous."

Neville chuckled, leaning over to kiss her lightly on the cheek. "I prefer my women in three dimensions and older than thirteen, thanks."

"Then I won't be worried."

He crossed over to the painting of the young girl that he now knew to be Aberforth's long-dead sister, Ariana. She was waiting for him with her hands clasped calmly in front of her, her usual sweetly vague expression on her face. "It's a half-hour early, love," he said gently, "is there something you wanted?"

She nodded, then pointed to her forehead. Neville frowned. "Did Ab have an idea?"

Ariana shook her head, then crooked a finger in a beckoning motion and pointed down the tunnel behind her.

"You want me to come now?"

She nodded again, then pointed at her forehead, and her finger traced a meandering little path over the fair skin. Susan let out a little yelp behind him, and he turned. Her face had flushed, and her hand was pressed to her mouth in shock. "Harry!"

Neville's eyes widened, and he spun back to the painting, fighting to keep his voice quiet and soothing so as not to startle her. "Ariana, is there a boy there? About so tall—" he indicated with his hand at eye level, "—with black hair and glasses and a scar on his head that looks kind of like a lightning bolt?"

The girl nodded a third time, a happy little smile playing lightly at the corners of her mouth, then beckoned again. Neville whirled to the others, pointing at each in turn as he barked out orders quickly. "Seamus, send word. Reenforcements, *now*. Michael, get Terry back on his feet as fast as you can. Susan, go pack your things, you're leaving. I'm going with Ariana."

He took a deep breath, and he was astonished to realize that he felt no fear, only a deep thrill at the realization that what they had been waiting for all year was finally upon them. "It's tonight, people. Harry's back. We're going to set things right."

OOO

Neville scrambled through the portrait so quickly that he tripped on the stone step, biting back the urge to swear as his ankle turned under him. It wasn't anything serious, just a little bit sore, but he was almost grateful, because it kept him from sprinting down the long passage, and he knew that sudden movements startled Ariana. He couldn't afford that now – he had no idea if he could pass through the second portrait into the Hogshead without her – so he would just have to be patient a few more agonizing minutes.

The tunnel had never seemed this long before, but the door finally came into view around the last bend, and he broke into a slight jog, limping a bit, but feeling nothing except his own pulse pounding tightly in his throat. Then they were there, and Ariana had slipped back into her canvas, and he held his breath as he pushed open the door. If it was a hoax, a trick, a cruel joke, a mistake....

But it wasn't. They were there.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were there, and they were alive, and they were looking up at him as he threw the door all the way open and nearly flung himself into the little sitting room, coming within inches of falling as he scrambled over the mantelpiece. He wanted to laugh, to cry, to yell out in triumph, and the sound that came out of him was really a mixture of all three as he dropped to the floor, grabbing Harry in an enormous hug. "I knew you'd come! *I knew it, Harry!*"

The other young wizard pulled back, adjusting his skewed glasses as he sputtered in shock, "Neville – what the – how – ?"

He barely heard the half-formed questions. Neville was hugging Ron now, then Hermione, lifting the witch off her feet entirely, and he spun her in a full circle before setting her down again, taking a step back to just drink in the sight of his friends that he had for so long worried about, hoped for, and too often feared dead. "I knew you'd come!" he repeated, grinning stupidly at them. "Kept telling Seamus it was a matter of time!"

Surprisingly, Harry didn't seem to share his excitement, but he supposed that it was fair enough. The Chosen One, the Boy Who Lived had certainly had much more on his plate the past year than worrying about his old roommate, while every day for Neville had been focused on what he could do to help the man standing before him. Harry was looking at him very oddly, and he frowned. "Neville, what's happened to you?"

He paused a moment, wondering how to answer that, then realized that all three of them were merely staring at the curse slashes on his cheeks that had still refused to even begin healing, and at the faded remains of the black eye Crabbe had given him. Neville gestured at his face, "What? This?" Their looks and Hermione's tiny nod were answer enough, and he dismissed it casually.

"This is nothing. Seamus is worse. You'll see." He nodded his head towards the portrait. "Shall we be going?"

Neville started to turn back to the mantle, then stopped, facing to Aberforth instead. In his excitement at seeing the others, he had forgotten to alert the barkeep that they had already called for help. Permission to use the Hogshead as a means of entrance and exit for their allies had been given weeks ago, but it was still a matter of common courtesy to warn him. "Oh, Ab, there might be a couple more people on the way."

Aberforth frowned, his normally somewhat grouchy manner seeming even more crotchety than usual. "Couple more? What d'you mean a couple more, Longbottom? There's a curfew and a Caterwauling Charm on the whole village."

He nodded, "I know, that's why they'll be Apparating directly into the bar. Just send them down the passage when they get here, will you? Thanks a lot."

There was no time to worry about the old wizard's annoyed mutterings. If Harry was moving this quickly, he wasn't going to slow things up. He was a leader himself now, and he understood the necessity for haste. Neville climbed back up onto the mantle and twisted at the waist, grabbing Hermione's hand and pulling her up after him, then Ron scrambled through, and Neville himself.

He stopped, looking back after Harry, and saw that he had lingered a moment to talk to Aberforth. "I don't know how to thank you," he said, "You've saved our lives twice."

"Look after 'em, then," Aberforth grumbled, "I might not be able to save them a third time."

Then Harry had followed them though, and Neville lead the way back down the passage as briskly as he dared without putting any more strain on his still-throbbing ankle before someone could take a look at it properly. Ron was looking around in fascination, taking in the smooth earthen walls that surrounded them. "How long's this been here?" he asked. "It isn't on the Marauder's Map, is it, Harry? I thought there were only seven passages in and out of school?"

"They sealed off all those before the start of the year," Neville informed them, frowning slightly. Hadn't Luna told them anything? "There's no chance of getting through any of them now, not with curses over the entrances and Death Eaters and Dementors waiting at the exits."

He turned and began walking backwards so that he could look at them as he spoke, smiling confidently now so that they wouldn't mistake his moment's concern for fear. "Never mind that stuff...Is it true? Did you break into Gringotts? Did you escape on a dragon? It's everywhere, everyone's talking about it, Terry Boot got beaten up by Carrow for yelling about it in the Great Hall at dinner!"

Even in the dimly flickering light, he could see Harry blush. "Yeah, it's true."

Neville laughed, aware that the sound was a little manic, but not caring. Oh, but if they only knew how much everyone had been hoping for and dreading this.... "What did you do with the dragon?"

"Released it into the wild," Ron replied with a lopsided grin, "Hermione was all for keeping it as a pet –"

She snorted derisively, and it was just like old times watching the two of them bicker, something he had never imagined he would be so happy to see. "Don't exaggerate, Ron –"

"But what have you been doing?" He couldn't keep the questions in any longer. "People have been saying you've just been on the run, Harry, but I don't think so. I think you've been up to something."

"You're right," Harry nodded, "but tell us about Hogwarts, Neville, we haven't heard anything."

Of course. Whatever Harry had been doing was not the issue, he needed information about the next step, and Neville changed gears quickly, the ebullience snapping out of his voice as he dropped to a far more business-like tone. "It's been..." he hesitated, wondering suddenly how exactly to break it to them, then finally deciding just to go for it. "Well, it's not really like Hogwarts anymore. Do you know about the Carrows?"

"Those two Death Eaters who teach here?"

"They do more than teach." He almost chuckled, but held it back. "They're in charge of all discipline. They like punishment, the Carrows."

"Like Umbridge?" Ron queried.

"Nah, they make her look tame...." He continued to explain as they followed the passage towards the school, but to his own surprise, Neville found himself increasingly skating over the worst of it, never quite lying, but giving no details and glossing over exactly how bad things had been with a light, nonchalant tone. It wasn't that he was trying to make it seem as though they hadn't been fighting or trying to hide his comrades' heroism, but he couldn't keep himself from...well, *protecting* the three of them.

Harry seemed so much smaller than he remembered, so much *younger* – though they were the same age to the day – but he forced himself to dismiss that. After all, Ginny had said he was about two inches taller now that he stood up straight, Harry had always been a bit on the skinny side, and his memory had probably played tricks on him in the nearly a year apart, creating an idealized hero where there was just another youth.



But it wasn't so easy to dismiss the look in the green eyes behind the familiar round glasses. It was the same look he had seen in Colin's those first few days at the Burrow; after the blood-spattered horror of the basement, but before he had fully understood how deeply his brother had retreated. Innocence terribly and recently cracked, but not quite shattered yet.

Somehow, he had not expected Harry to have any innocence left. The rest of them didn't. They had changed too much, seen too much. Yet Harry, Ron, and Hermione barely seemed altered at all. They looked tired, certainly, they were a little thinner now that he looked at them, and their skin bore the pink patches of newly-healed injuries here and there, but overall, they looked...like Harry, Ron, and Hermione. No new scars that he could see. No lines at their eyes. No gray in their hair. No bitterness in their gazes.

They were nearing the school now, and Neville shook his head slightly, cutting off the worry that had begun to build. If the three of them had survived an entire year with every Dark Wizard in Britain hunting them, if they had escaped certain death at least four times that he knew of, broken into and out of the Ministry of Magic and Gringotts itself, then they – and certainly Harry – were more than capable of having and leading a battle plan.

Ron was asking now if they were, in fact, heading back to Hogwarts, and Neville could not help throwing him a rather exasperated glance. "Course. You'll see." He motioned ahead to where the other door had just appeared around the final bend. "We're here."

Neville climbed through first, greeting the D.A. with a broad grin that showed no trace of uncertainty. "Look who it is!" he cried. "Didn't I tell you?"

Harry was right behind him, and the room seemed to explode the moment his face appeared. A solid wall of young witches and wizards surged towards him, burying him and moments later Ron and Hermione as well in sobbing hugs and back-pounding embraces, ruffling their hair and kissing them and shaking their hands in an outpouring of giddy emotion. The shouts and cries

were deafening, wonderful, the sounds of pure joy and hope fulfilled, but Neville knew that this could go on all night, and there was no time.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted above the din. "OKAY, okay, calm down!"

Dutifully, the D.A. backed off, still grinning and laughing and in some cases weeping openly, and Harry adjusted the glasses that had almost been knocked off his face again, staring around the room in open astonishment. "Where are we?"

"Room of Requirement, of course!" Neville replied. "Surpassed itself, hasn't it?" He realized abruptly that he hadn't actually told them about their enforced retreat, merely implied it, and he explained quickly. "The Carrows were chasing me, and I knew I had just one chance for a hideout: I managed to get through the door and this is what I found!" He paused a moment, then shrugged slightly. "Well, it wasn't exactly like this when I arrived, it was a load smaller, there was only one hammock and just Gryffindor hangings. But it's expanded as more and more of the D.A. have arrived."

Harry turned slowly in a circle, clearly looking for something. "And the Carrows can't get in?"

"No." Seamus stepped forward, waving his hand to indicate their surroundings. "It's a proper hideout, as long as one of us stays in here, they can't get at us, the door won't open. It's all down to Neville." The Lieutenant nodded towards him, and he smiled faintly in embarrassment at the tone of open praise. "He really *gets* this room. You've got to ask it for *exactly* what you need – like, 'I don't want any Carrow supporters to be able to get in – and it'll do it for you! You've just got to make sure you close the loopholes! Neville's the man!'"

"It's quite straightforward, really," Neville said with deliberate casualness. "I'd been in here about a day and a half, and getting really hungry, and wishing I could get something to eat, and that's when the passage to the Hogshead opened up. I went through it and met Aberforth. He's been providing us with food, because for some reason, that's the one thing the room doesn't really do."

Ron nodded with a look of great authority, brushing his red hair back from his eyes in a motion that made Neville suddenly and desperately miss Ginny. "Yeah, well, food's one of the five exceptions to Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration." A look of open astonishment passed amid the Ravenclaws, among whom it had long been commonly accepted that Hermione was wholly and completely the brains of the famous trio, and Ron blushed, shrugging.

"So we've been hidin' out here for nearly two weeks," Seamus continued, and Neville didn't bother to correct him that it was actually more like three, given that the Lieutenant had been unconscious for most of the first. "And it just makes more hammocks every time we need them, and it even sprouted a pretty good bathroom once girls started turnin' up –"

" – and thought they'd quite like to wash, yes," said Lavender with a significant look towards Hermione that Neville had come to recognize as the internationally accepted female signal for *boys will be boys*.

Ernie had just appeared at the foot of the staircase that went to the upper level, and Neville noticed that his shirt was wrinkled with a small wet patch on one shoulder, and he knew with a pang of regret that the good-bye between he and his wife must have been tearful. For both of them, given the redness that still lingered in the hazel eyes. "Tell us what you've been up to, though," Ernie said, a little too breezily. "There've been so many rumors, we've been trying to keep up with you on *Potterwatch*. You didn't break into Gringotts?"

"They did!" Neville nodded quickly, "And the dragon's true too!"

Applause rippled over the D.A., along with a few whoops, and Parvati put two fingers in her mouth for an ear-splitting whistle as Ron took a bow. Seamus leaned in close, his tone one of gleeful conspiracy. "What were you after?"

But Harry didn't answer. His face turned suddenly, terribly pale, and the green eyes rolled to white before squeezing shut in obvious agony as he tried to turn away from them, then collapsed as his knees buckled beneath him. Sally-Anne screamed, but Ron seemed almost to have expected it, and he moved like lightning, catching his best friend and holding him up as Harry's face began to bead with cold sweat, his lips parted slightly and trembling as he clutched desperately at the scar.

Neville and Ernie exchanged a horrified look, and he knew that the other man was thinking, as he was, of Ginny's words at their very first officer's meeting. *I think Harry's trying to get himself possessed.* Had she been right? Had they inadvertently invited their worst enemy into their midst in the guise of their greatest hope? A silent agreement passed between them, and Ernie circled around behind Ron, leaning forward as if in concern, but the massive hands that rested so lightly on the back of Harry's shoulders could snap his neck between heartbeats.

Allowing nothing but attentiveness to show on his face but drawing his wand unnoticed at his side, Neville put his own hand on Ron's arm, ready to yank him out of the way or strike him down as needed. "Are you all right, Harry?" he asked solicitously. "Want to sit down? I expect you're tired, aren't –"

There was a shake of the tousled black head, then the green eyes opened again, and they were *his*, a little vague, a little rattled, but very much Harry's. "No," he said shakily, "we need to get going." He looked hard at Ron and Hermione, as if trying to will them to understand some unspoken message. They seemed to, and Neville saw them both return almost imperceptible nods before glancing to each other.

Now that Harry was unquestionably back, Seamus had abandoned all his previous misgivings, and he had his wand in hand, bouncing it lightly against his palm with the familiar hunger for a good fight glittering in the blue eyes. "What are we goin' to do, then, Harry? What's the plan?"

"Plan?" Harry echoed the word as if he had never heard it before, and his eyes had grown distant again as he touched the scar without seeming to realize he was doing it. The color still had not returned to his face, and Ron was clearly braced to catch him again. "Well," he said vaguely, "there's something we – Ron, Hermione, and I – need to do, and then we'll get out of here."

A cold silence descended over the D.A. Neville took a deep breath, reminding himself that Harry was in a lot of pain and had just come within moments of passing out completely. "What do you mean, 'get out of here'?" he asked cautiously.

"We haven't come back to stay," Harry explained, rubbing at the scar harder now, as if he were trying to scrub it off his skin. "There's something important we need to do –"

"What is it?" Neville pressed.

"I – I can't tell you."

Neville frowned deeply. Surely, glossed-over briefing or not, in pain or not, Harry could see that they weren't a bunch of kids any more. Still, he decided to give the other wizard the benefit of the doubt. He didn't, after all, have any idea what exactly happened mentally or how bad the pain was when a curse scar from You-Know-Who himself went off. "Why can't you tell us? It's something to do with fighting You-Know-Who, right?"

"Well, yeah –" Harry's voice seemed to come from somewhere very far away.

"Then we'll help you," Neville replied firmly, realizing that he was going to have to take the lead after all. Harry was back, but he was also sick or hurt or...*something* a lot worse than it had first seemed. All around them, the D.A. was on their feet, poised for orders, and he felt a surge of pride at their willingness to fight so much sooner than they had all expected.

Harry shook his head slowly and very carefully. "You don't understand. We – we can't tell you. We've got to do it – alone."

"Why?" Neville asked gently.

"Because...." Harry hesitated, then took a deep breath, and his words were thick and slow with pain when he spoke. "Dumbledore left the three of us a job, and we weren't supposed to tell – I mean, he wanted us to do it, just the three of us."

"We're his army," Neville pointed out, speaking deliberately and a little slowly, but careful not to sound patronizing. "*Dumbledore's Army*. We were all in it together, we've been keeping it going while you three have been off on your own – "

Ron seemed to have recognized much more what was going on around him, and he flashed Neville a look of defensiveness that bordered on fury. "It hasn't exactly been a picnic, mate."

"I never said it had," he agreed. "But I don't see why you can't trust us. Everyone in this room's been fighting and they've been driven in here because the Carrows were hunting them down. Everyone in here's proven they're loyal to Dumbledore." He placed one hand firmly on Harry's shoulder, locking the green eyes with his own. "Loyal to you."

"Look...." Harry started to reply, but just then, the portrait opened behind them, and every head snapped around in unison, wands appearing from belts and sleeves; poised but not yet aimed in readiness for friend or foe to emerge.

"We got your message, Neville! Hello, you three, I thought you must be here!" The soft, dreamy voice was unmistakable, even before Luna's pale face and long blonde hair appeared through the opening, and Neville felt his heart catch in his throat. He had known she was alive, known she was all right for over a month, sent for her with all the others, but *seeing* her again...it was everything he could do not to sprint to the portrait hole and sweep her up in a completely un-leaderlike embrace.

Then another face appeared, handsome and dark-skinned, with a familiar bright grin, and Seamus had no such compunctions about propriety as he caught sight of his best friend. With a cry of unashamed joy, he bolted forward, grabbing Dean Thomas in a hug that yanked him the rest of the way out of the portrait hole and tumbled both young wizards laughing to the floor.

Luna was being helped down by Michael and Terry – who's face was still discolored, but who had otherwise been fully restored by the attentions of his Housemates – and she looked around the room as if she had simply been gone for the weekend. "Hi, everyone," she said lightly, "Oh, it's great to be back!"

"Luna," Harry said bemusedly, "what are you doing here? How did you –?"

"I sent for her," Neville explained, pulling the charmed Galleon out of his pocket. The message they had sent - *HP back. App to HgsHd. It's time.* - was still visible around the edge. "I promised her and Ginny that if you turned up I'd let them know. We all thought that if you came back, it would mean revolution," he allowed just the edges of the mounting frustration to taint his tone. "That we were going to overthrow Snape and the Carrows."

"Of course that's what it means," Luna said with a calm smile, "Isn't it, Harry? We're going to fight them out of Hogwarts?"

"Listen..." Harry said, and his voice was tight, even desperate. "I'm sorry, but that's not what we came back for. There's something we've got to do, and then –"

Michael glanced at the bruises on Terry's face, then his own face darkened with disbelief and betrayal as he whirled on Harry, his knuckles white on the handle of his wand. "You're going to *leave us* in this mess?"

"No!" Ron replied quickly. "What we're doing will benefit everyone in the end, it's all about trying to get rid of You-Know-Who –"

"Then let us help!" Neville snapped, increasingly angry at their inability to see what their old classmates had become. "We want to be a part of it!"

The portrait opened again, and the argument was interrupted anew as Ginny climbed out; the twins and Lee so close behind her that it seemed amazing that they could all fit. Another cheer

went up, and Ginny beamed at them as Fred nodded in greeting, then flashed a cheeky smile at Neville. "Aberforth's getting a bit annoyed. He wants a kip, and his bar's turned into a railway station."

Lee gave only a quick nod as he jumped lightly to the floor, then turned, reaching into the opening and lifting out Cho Chang with both hands around her waist. "I got the message," she said with a smile at Harry – though it no longer seemed to have quite the mind-numbing effect it once had – then hurried over to her old Housemates, hugging several of them before sitting down next to Michael. Her brows lifted in surprise and more than a little interest as her dark eyes scanned over him, but he was still glaring too furiously at Harry to notice, even when she scooted in closer to him and set one delicate hand lightly on his knee.

George dusted off his robes and turned, twirling his wand between his fingers. "So what's the plan, Harry?"

"There isn't one." His forehead was furrowed in pain, but there was such genuine bemusement to his voice that for the first time, Neville began to think that maybe Harry had no more idea what was going on than the rest of them – not just at Hogwarts, but overall. They had all put so much stock in the idea that Dumbledore had set them up with some incredibly brilliant, detailed master scheme that the concept of Harry in this by the seat of his pants was terrifying, and he shook his head, unwilling to believe it.

Fred did not seem the least perturbed, however. "Just going to make it up as we go along, are we?" he said cheerfully. "My favorite kind."

Harry whirled on Neville, and his eyes were wide and pleading, almost childlike in the vulnerability of the pain so clearly visible in them. "You've got to stop this! What did you call them all back for? This is insane –"

Dean still had one arm wrapped around Seamus' shoulders as he pulled the Galleon from his pocket with his free hand. "We're fighting, aren't we? The message said Harry was back, and we were going to fight!" He hesitated, biting his lip and frowning. "I'll have to get a wand, though –"

Seamus looked horrified. "You haven't got a *wand* – ?

Ron had been exchanging relieved, grateful hugs with the brothers and sister he hadn't seen in so many months, but he suddenly yanked away from the twins, spinning to face Harry with a fiery look of challenge in his eyes. "Why can't they help?" he demanded.

Harry blinked. Clearly, Ron not backing him one hundred percent was about the last thing he could cope with at that moment. "What?"

"They can help," Ron repeated simply. He leaned in and whispered something to his friend, and a look of hesitant acceptance slowly formed on Harry's strained features. Then it tightened to reluctance again, and Hermione was summoned over to the hushed little meeting. Quite the barrage of emotions played over the three faces as they whispered amongst each other, then finally, Harry turned to the rest of them. "Okay...."

Everything fell completely silent. Harry licked his lips nervously, then took a deep breath, "There's something we need to find. Something – something that'll help us overthrow You-Know-Who. It's here at Hogwarts, but we don't know where. It might have belonged to Ravenclaw. Has anyone heard of an object like that? Has anyone come across something with her eagle on it, for instance?"

Neville's heart sank. *This* was it? Dumbledore's great master plan was uniting Founder's objects after all – something that had been bandied around and discarded by teenagers months ago? He didn't even need to look to know what the answer would be before Luna spoke. "Well, there's her lost diadem. I told you about it, remember, Harry? The lost diadem of Ravenclaw? Daddy's been trying to duplicate it."

"Yeah, but the lost diadem," Michael's voice was heavy with sarcasm, "is *lost*, Luna. That's sort of the point."

"When was it lost?" Harry asked.

Cho shrugged. "Centuries ago, they say. Professor Flitwick says the diadem vanished with Ravenclaw herself. People have looked, but..." she looked around to the others, hoping to be corrected, "...no one's ever found a trace of it, have they?" Her face sank as all her Housemates shook their heads quietly.

Ron shuffled his feet awkwardly, his cheeks flushing. "Sorry, but...what *is* a diadem?"

Neville suddenly wanted to beat his head against something very hard. Ron did not know what they were even looking for. A year. Only the three of them. And he did not know what they were looking for. Had Dumbledore gone completely out of his mind in his old age?

Terry seemed to be thinking along much the same lines, and the hollow astonishment in his voice had nothing to do with Ron's vocabulary. "It's a kind of crown," he drew a little circle in the air with the tip of his finger, "Ravenclaw's was supposed to have magical properties, enhance the wisdom of the wearer."

Luna nodded eagerly. "Yes, Daddy's Wrackspurt siphons –"

"—And none of you have ever seen anything that looks like it?" Harry interrupted. Once again, the silent answer was no, but then Cho spoke up rather tentatively.

"If you'd like to see what the diadem's supposed to look like, I could take you up to our common room and show you, Harry? Ravenclaw's wearing it in her statue."

The answer did not come immediately, as Harry's eyes rolled again, almost as dramatically as they had the first time, and he swayed on his feet for a moment, his hand clutching to the scar so hard that his fingernails left little red crescents in the skin on either side. Ron and Hermione were at his side in an instant, and another brief, whispered conversation broke out as Harry collected himself.

Ron did not let go of his friend's arm, steadying him as Harry turned carefully towards Cho. "Listen," he said, "I know it's not much of a lead, but I'm going to go and look at this statue, at least find out what the diadem looks like. Wait for me here and keep, you know —" he gave Ron and Hermione a significant look " — the *other one* safe."

Cho stood, a look of tender sympathy on her face as she saw how much pain Harry truly was in, but Ginny's eyes snapped jealous fire as she hopped off the end of the table where she had been sitting. "No, Luna will take Harry," she grabbed the other girl's sleeve and practically shoved her towards him, "*won't you, Luna?*"

"Oooh, yes," Luna nodded happily, smiling at Ginny in what seemed to be complete ignorance of the look that had just been exchanged over her head. "I'd like to."

Harry seemed a little steadier on his feet now, and he pushed away Ron's hand as he scanned the room. "How do we get out?"

"Over here," Neville lead them towards the small cupboard where the door was hidden — a further precaution against anyone knowing where their exit was if they managed to get an image of the room through Legilimency — but hesitated before opening it to reveal a steep stone staircase. He recognized it as the exact same maintenance stairs he had used to reach the seventh floor almost a month earlier, and he motioned them at it. "It comes out somewhere different every day, so they've never been able to find it. Only trouble is, we never know exactly where we're going to end up when we go out. Be careful, Harry, they're always patrolling the corridors at night."

Harry nodded, and although every instinct told him that the other wizard was in no condition to be doing anything except lying flat on his back, he recognized beneath the pain and confusion a flicker of something else that he had seen in his own too many times that year. The look of someone who had to go on, whether they liked it or not, whether they could or not. The look of someone driven, bowed, and very nearly broken under a burden they had no way to share. His mouth bent up at the corners, but the green eyes showed no sign of humor. "No problem," he nodded, "see you in a bit."

Neville watched them go until they had vanished completely into the shadows and twists of the staircase, and even then he continued to stand there. His whole body felt suddenly almost unbearably heavy, and his ankle continuing to throb a steady reminder to have it seen to as he rested his forehead on his arm against the edge of the cupboard. This was not how he had imagined things, this was not how he had planned things, and he no longer even knew if he was still in charge or not. Was it Harry now? Was it *meant* to be Harry? Could it be Harry, whether it was supposed to be or not?

Silence lingered behind Harry's departure, the entire D.A., old and new, waiting like one great, held breath, and then Seamus' voice carried over the stillness with all the tact he had ever been known for. "So, Ron, we've a fair lot of catchin' up to do...but what I guess we'd all like to know is has Potter been hurt, has he gone mental, is he goin' that way, or has he just turned into a truly fantastic arse?"

Ron let out a roar of outrage and flung himself towards Seamus, but Hermione and Dean were both faster, and two rock-solid Shield Charms sprang up between the two wizards, shimmering as they slammed into the invisible barrier. Neville snapped out of his contemplation, his cheeks flushing as he ran over and grabbed his Lieutenant furiously by the arm. "FINNIGAN! Are you out of your –"

"He's right!" Michael stood, his own dark eyes fixed on Ron behind the shield as he took up a position by Seamus' side, his chin thrust out defiantly. "We've been –"

"Harry doesn't know what we've been doing, and we don't know what he's been doing, and *no one* –" Neville stared with all the authority he could muster at Ron, Michael, and Seamus in turn, " – has *any* right to say they've had a better or worse year than the other, or to pretend like we know what's going on yet."

He took a deep breath, looking squarely at Ron. "Look, mate, I don't mean to be rude here, or to minimize what you three have been doing, but we're not the D.A. you remember. We're soldiers now, *real* soldiers, and we're ready to fight if it would help Harry. Ready to fight, and ready to die, and there's a lot more of us than what you see here. Close to eighty, actually, and we've got allies on the outside too. We had planned to hold the Death Eaters for you while you got close enough to You-Know-Who to do...well, whatever it is you're clearly planning to do with him with whatever it is you're planning to do it with."

Ron was still glaring suspiciously at the others, but he gave a curt nod. "I'm not in charge here, but I think it'd be a lot easier if we had some help rather than just trying to...." He hesitated, then shrugged. "Actually, I don't know how Harry thought he'd get up on him. We hadn't really gotten that far."

"We have," Ernie said firmly. "We've got all kind of strategies, depending on how he deploys his forces. He's got around a hundred on his side, so –"

He was cut off by a deep, smooth voice as Kingsley Shacklebolt climbed out through the portrait. "His numbers have grown, Mr. Macmillan. There are nearly three hundred Death Eaters at his command now, and you can also expect *his* allies...he has joined forces with the werewolves and giants, and they are on their way."

Terry said something truly foul, and a dozen heads snapped in his direction in surprise. The Ravenclaw shrugged unashamedly. "Sometimes, those words *are* the most appropriate, and I personally can't think of a better way to express how unbelievably deep in it we appear to be."

Neville could not have agreed more, but he kept his voice steady as he turned to Shacklebolt. "We can find a way to deal with that, Kingsley, thanks for the warning. How many Order are coming with you?"

A look of deep grief passed over the darkly regal features. "The Weasleys – Arthur, Molly, Bill, Fleur, and Charlie when he can get here from the continent. The Lupins. Possibly Doge."

Ernie frowned, "The rest won't come? *Why?*"

"Apart from Diggle and Jones, who are guarding the Dursleys, there *is* no 'rest'. They've been hunting us all year after Snape passed on the list of who had been in the Order. They've taken us down one at a time, but the ten I just named to you and myself are all that remains," Shacklebolt confessed sadly.

Neville nodded, trying to look like this was no big deal, like he had included it in the contingency plans that seemed increasingly useless by the moment. "All right. But we still have Wood and his Quidditch people coming...and *actually*..." His eyes widened as a sudden, breathless hope struck him, and he spun to face Ginny. "You're into Quidditch, Ginny – how much will people listen to a pro player they really like?"

It was Ron who answered, laughing bemusedly. "Enough that they usually make more money on endorsements than actually sitting a broom."

"Then we use their speed and their names for some endorsements of our own. Sacrifice having a dozen wands in the short term to send them on an all-out recruitment drive for reinforcements. Charlie too, see if he can bring us anyone from Europe while he's on the way." Neville spoke quickly, letting the idea spill out even as it formed. "Tell people that it's *now*, that we're making our stand, that Harry's back, play the guilt card if we have to by telling them that it's happening at a school full of kids, whatever we need to do. Hit the big wizarding towns...Hogsmeade, London, Godric's Hollow, Mold-on-the-Wall, Ottery St. Catchpole. Even if we can't get trained soldiers, we can get *numbers*."

Ginny looked hesitant. "They wouldn't get here for hours, though."

"We don't know how long Harry will –" Neville began, but Ron shook his head.

"Not hours. We'll be damned lucky if we've got *one* hour before he's here. Harry knows, he can –"

"See into his mind, we know," Dean said, then glanced at Shacklebolt. "What do you think?"

"I agree with Neville that anything we can do for reinforcements is our best hope. If you do have the aide of professional Quidditch players –"

"Did someone say the lovely word Quidditch?" Oliver Wood emerged from the portrait, his hair ruffled and longer than Neville remembered, wearing jeans and Quidditch boots under the bright blue robes of Puddlemere United, a sleek broomstick exactly like the one Krum had used propped casually against his shoulder. He grinned as he saw them, though his eyes scanned across the athletes as though they were the only ones in the room. "Fred! George! Macmillan! Chang! Corner! You're all in this too, then? Any idea what's going on? What did Harry get from Gringotts, if it's true?"

"The Sword of Gryffindor," Michael announced. "And he's –"

Hermione cleared her throat loudly and raised her hand, the gesture so familiar that Neville almost laughed, and he wondered if she would ever break the habit when she wanted to say

something in a group setting. He pointed to her with a teasing smile. "Miss Granger wants to add something, I believe."

"We don't have the Sword," she informed them. "That's not what we were in there to get, anyway. I can't tell you what we *were* after, but we actually *lost* the Sword at Gringotts."

"Which," Ron pointed out to her, "is something we're going to need to replace."

"Oh, yes, Ronald," Hermione put one hand on her hip, tossing her hair, "What was it you suggested? Let's just get one of our other ancient, goblin-made swords that just happens to be impregnated with basilisk —?"

Ron made a terrible noise. Harsh and rasping, it sounded as though he were choking to death on an immense wad of phlegm, and everyone surrounding him drew back with abrupt expressions of shock and disgust on their faces. Yet he did not seem in distress at all. If anything, he looked almost radiant, his freckled face split in a broad grin as he grabbed Hermione by both shoulders. For a moment, everyone fully expected him to kiss her, but he only gave her a little shake and laughed.

She was looking at him very, very warily. "Ron...?"

"That's just what we need! Come on! We're going to the bathroom!" Before she could put up a proper resistance, Ron had Hermione hard by the wrist and was dragging her through the scattered members of the D.A. to the stairway where Harry and Luna had left.

Ginny tried to shout after them, but it was too late. Before anyone really had a chance to recognize what had happened, Harry's friends were gone, and several dozen people turned expectantly towards Fred and George, as though they could explain their brother's bizarre behavior, but Fred only shrugged, then nodded his head towards Seamus. "I'm starting to go with Finnigan on Harry being mental...and I think it's contagious."

OOO

The rest of Wood's old Quidditch team was already on their way in the passage behind him, but he had agreed quickly to send word to his fellow pros to change plans and begin recruiting reinforcements. As the remainder of the Order arrived, Neville showed Shacklebolt the preparations he had made, the truth of his claims underlined strongly by the D.A.'s own actions. They were checking wands, stretching, scrawling final entries into journals and postscripts onto last letters, stripping off outer robes and rolling up sleeves, belts cinched snugly and long hair braided back with a cool, professional efficiency that showed no signs of adolescent panic.

Ernie had already sent Susan on her way down the passage, a bundle of the D.A.'s gifts and letters clutched tightly in her hands, but the heart-stopping loss that had struck his expression when the door swung shut behind her was gone now. He seemed if anything more focused than the rest of them, and he had stripped away Sally-Anne's shoelaces, sealing the leather together with magic to eliminate the need for anything that could come undone. Neville crossed to his friend as he finished with Shacklebolt, laying one hand on the broad back. "Ernie...."

He looked up, one fair eyebrow lifting. "Do you need something, old chap?"

Neville shook his head. "I just wanted to thank you for staying. You didn't have to, you know."

"Yes, I did," the hazel eyes were as resolute as they were the first time he had truly realized his friend's deeper, non-physical strength on the wall so many months ago. "I thought about going with her, I'll be honest, especially after what Shacklebolt said about the odds, but I could never look my daughter in the eyes if I had to tell her I'd run out on you guys when you need every wand you can get."

Neville knelt down beside him, squeezing Ernie's shoulder firmly. "Just take care of yourself, okay? Watch your back, don't do anything stupid. And that's not just for Susan and the baby. I've gotten pretty fond of you too, Macmillan."

"I'd say the same, but you're Gryffindor, so I don't think it's going to happen," Ernie smiled, then quickly amended himself. "Oh, not that I'm not fond of you. Happen to have come to consider you one of my best friends this year, but I meant about not doing anything stupid."

"No," Neville admitted, "It's not likely I'll be able to keep away from that. But will you do me a favor?"

"Of course."

"If we wound up getting split by House for any reason, keep an eye on Hannah for me." Ernie nodded in solemn understanding, and they hugged quickly before splitting up again to finish their preparations, but at the last minute, Neville stopped and turned back. "Oh, and Ernie...."

"Yes?"

"Make sure she has something to throw." He chuckled softly, reaching into his pocket and fingering the single yellow hair-ribbon he had never confessed to having kept. "That girl doesn't miss."

Ernie laughed, but his reply was cut short as Harry's voice echoed through the room, and they all whirled immediately to see him standing by the door, his black hair even more disheveled than usual. "Voldemort's on his way, they're barricading the school – Snape's run for it –" He frowned, looking at Lupin in bemusement. "What are you doing here? How did you know?"

"We sent messages to the rest of Dumbledore's Army," Fred replied hastily. "You couldn't expect everyone to miss all the fun, Harry, and the D.A. let the Order of the Phoenix know, and it all kind of snowballed."

"What first, Harry?" George yelled over the crowd that had gathered around Harry, standing up on the tips of his toes and craning his neck to see the younger wizard. "What's going on?"

"They're evacuating the younger kids and everyone's meeting in the Great Hall to get organized." Harry took a deep breath, and he looked as though he could not believe his own words as he

smiled at them and said the words they had been waiting to hear come out of that mouth for nearly a year. "We're fighting."

Neville and Ernie exchanged a heartbeat's look of pure adrenaline, then they snatched their wands from their belts and charged forward, gathering their own fighters and surging out the narrow door and down the stairs as if You-Know-Who himself would be personally waiting at the foot of them. Terry was at their side the moment they erupted into the corridor, his dark blue eyes flashing. "Where do we deploy?"

"Great Hall for now. We get the rest of our forces, hook back up with Colin, Jennifer, and Rowan, check with the teachers to see what exactly they know of what we're facing, then set our final decisions with Kingsley and the other Order. You two stay ready, though...and find Seamus. I need my officers!"

"He thought Ginny –" Terry began, but Neville cut him off with a shake of his head as they continued to run down the stairs and hallways towards the heart of the school.

"No time to update Ginny. Seamus is current, Gryffindor's his. Let him know...COLIN!" Their path had taken them into the middle of a stream of students in pajamas and odd assortments of hastily-grabbed cloaks and robes who were being shepherded down the stairs as well, and Neville raised an arm, waving to catch the attention of the fair-haired young wizard he had spotted briefly.

There was a moment's more confusion, then Colin appeared, his face flushed, but his blue eyes shining with an excitement that bore little resemblance to the puppyish enthusiasm he had once been known for. "Commander!" He thrust out a hand, pulling the firm but still eerily cold handshake into a brief, back-clapping embrace, then nodded towards the other Gryffindors, who were offering their own shouts of greeting as they hurried past. "We're ready, sir. We may have been caught in pajamas, but we've been keeping up with training and spellwork in our rooms, and no one's lost faith. I've got Frobisher with an upset stomach and Coote's going to need some watching because he got Cruciated hard today, but everyone else is ready to report for duty."

"What about you?" Neville asked, glancing at the dark swelling that rimmed one bright eye.  
"What happened?"

"Honestly, sir?" Colin laughed. "I did it to myself. Got something in my eye and forgot I can't feel what I'm doing. Damned near blinded myself, but I'm fine now." He hesitated, blushing a little. "Don't tell Demelza, though. I haven't told her how it happened, and I'm just letting her assume it was brave."

"Ah, the little lies of love," Terry pointed ahead to where the entry way stretched at the end of the last staircase in front of them, already packed with students being hurried into the Great Hall. "See you again at the final planning session, victory party, or afterlife of your choice as the case may be. I'll be with Ravenclaw."

Ernie split off as well, and Neville stayed with Colin, casting around in increasing concern as he tried to catch sight of Ginny's bright red hair or Seamus' sandy waves as they made their way into the Hall and took their seats at the Gryffindor table. The older students who had been gone were still being greeted enthusiastically, and it took a few moments for Professor McGonagall, who was standing in front of the Staff Table in her own tartan dressing gown, to quiet them.

When finally the last of the whispers had died down, she looked over them sternly, but though her voice brooked no argument, he could see some of the excitement and joy that he felt himself at the thought of just *ending* it one way or another sparkling in her eyes. "Harry Potter has returned –"

She was cut off by a roar of cheers and whoops as everyone at the Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw tables – even those who had already seen, touched, and talked to him – leapt to their feet, stamping and clapping. McGonagall smiled briefly, nodding, then flicked her wand, silencing them. Within a moment of realizing that they were no longer making noise, the students all settled again, turning to face her attentively. The Professor cleared her throat, then began again.

"Harry Potter has returned, however, as delighted as we all may be by this news, it has put this school in grave danger. We are expecting an attack by You-Know-Who and his followers within the hour, and we do not believe that he will be particularly concerned with the welfare of the students. As teachers, your safety is our first priority, and so we will be evacuating the school through a route that will lead you into the village of Hogsmeade, where you will be taken in by some of the shopkeepers and homeowners who have volunteered to shelter you until more is known. You will behave as perfect young ladies and gentlemen in these people's homes and businesses, and I will hear of no foolish attempts to come and join the battle."

Neville and Colin stared at each other in disbelief. They couldn't be...she wasn't...after everything, they were supposed to just tuck their tails between their legs and leave just over two dozen teachers and Order members to take on the entirety of You-Know-Who's force? He shook his head, gesturing to keep Colin from leaping to his feet. "She's not done," he whispered under his breath. "She *must* just mean the younger ones. We were planning to get them out too, remember."

"The evacuation," Professor McGonagall continued, "will be overseen by Mr. Filch and Madam Pomfrey. Prefects, when I give the word, you will organize your House and take your charges, in an orderly fashion, to the evacuation point."

"And what if we want to stay and fight?" Ernie was on his feet, his wand drawn, and his voice rang strongly off the stone walls. It seemed ridiculous that anyone could oppose him, could attempt to call him a child or claim he needed to be protected, and Neville said a silent prayer of thanks that the burly Hufflepuff had been the one to challenge her, not someone like Colin or Padma whose strength was less obvious.

The D.A. applauded, and McGonagall hesitated a long moment before finally nodding. "If you are of age, you may stay."

Colin's shoulders tensed, he began to jump to his feet, but Neville grabbed a handful of the back of his pajamas and yanked him firmly back down again. "Not now," he hissed, then glanced along the length of the Gryffindor table at the shocked faces of the fourth, fifth, and sixth-years staring back at him. "First of all," he dropped his voice to a low whisper as one of the Ravenclaw girls asked about their belongings, "there are still Slytherins here. We don't know if she's trying to plant false information about our numbers...it's what I'd do. Second, if she's serious, I'll argue it for you, I swear. I know you can fight. I believe in you, and damned if we aren't going to need every wand we can get."

"Where's Professor Snape?" Daphne Greengrass' sharp, piercing voice sounded from the Slytherin table, and McGonagall smiled as broadly as Neville had ever seen her.

"He has, to use the common phrase, done a bunk."

A cheer louder than the first broke out through the hall, and in their delight at finally being rid of the loathed Headmaster – though Neville was quite certain they'd be facing him again soon enough with the rest of the Death Eaters – he almost didn't notice that Harry was walking up the length of their table, scanning the seats as if searching for something.

He wasn't the only one to have noticed. The cheers were subsiding quickly, replaced by whispers of astonishment from those who hadn't seen Harry in person yet, and Neville cast a nervous glance towards Colin as Harry passed directly behind him, the sleeve of his robe actually brushing the golden hair. To his relief, Colin was not suddenly struck down by mindless hero-worship, and his angelic face showed no more delight and excitement at seeing the Chosen One than anyone else around him.

Ignoring the small commotion Harry's arrival had caused, McGonagall continued tersely. "We have already placed protection around the castle, but it is unlikely to hold for very long unless we reinforce it. I must ask you, therefore, to move quickly and calmly, and do as your Prefects –"

She was cut off by another voice. High and cold, it echoed from every surface as though the castle itself was speaking, and though he had never heard it before, Neville knew instantly and terribly who it had to be. Voldemort. "I know that you are preparing to fight. Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me."

There were several gasps at the chilling, even pleasant confidence in the tone of the most feared dark wizard alive, and somewhere in the room, a witch screamed, but either their response could not be heard, or he did not care as the announcement went on. "I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood."

A long, breathless pause followed this obscenely ridiculous lie, and then the final ultimatum was released. "Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded. You have until midnight."



## Chapter Twenty-One The Battle of Hogwarts

"Twenty-nine of age students! Nine teachers! Eight Order! Eight from the first D.A.! That's *fifty-four!* Fifty-four against more than three hundred...fifty-seven if you want to throw in Harry, Ron, and Hermione. That's *suicide!*" Neville slammed his hand down hard on the table, his voice shaking with rage as he looked across into McGonagall's implacably stony face. He spun towards Shacklebolt, pleading now. "I could double that, sir! I can give you another fifty trained wands! We'd still be tight, but there'd be a chance at least! Let me call my soldiers back from Hogsmeade, *please!*"

"Mr. Longbottom, they are not *yours*, and they are not soldiers." McGonagall's voice was icy, and any other time, he would have heeded the note of warning there, but right now, Neville couldn't have cared less. "They are my students," she continued, "and while I am aware that you have taken your little rebellion very seriously this year, and I am not disrespectful of the effort and sacrifices – "

"We *are* soldiers! It's only been a little rebellion on the surface," his voice choked with bitter frustration, and to his own fury, he realized he was on the edge of tears. "We've trained so hard, they're ready, I swear to you...Romilda took *me* down in our last meeting before I had to run! Colin held his own with Terry for almost twenty minutes hard dueling! Orla...."

He trailed off as Mr. Weasley put one hand on his shoulder, his voice kind but his eyes hard. "We've listened to your arguments twice now, Neville. We've been more than fair, but the answer is *no*. We're allowing you and the other seventeen and eighteen year-olds to stay, but that is the final word, and if you continue wasting the very little time we have with these kinds of tantrums, we're going to have to reconsider whether the rest of you are level-headed enough to stay."

"I don't like the idea of any of the children staying," Mrs. Weasley shook her head, frowning deeply. "They're going to be dueling to kill."

"Those children," Professor Sprout shook her head, "have been through hell this year, Molly. You haven't seen what we've been forced to sit by and watch done to them. The Crucius Curse a dozen times a week, torture, *floggings* that peeled those boy's backs like daisy roots. I understand why they believe that they have the ability – even the right – to fight tonight, for revenge if nothing else, but if I'm correct, Minerva, you also feel that this is the one chance we have had all year to actually protect our charges. To *not* watch helplessly while the Death Eaters spill young blood all over this castle."

"Precisely, Pomona, I could not have put it better," McGonagall agreed, and there was an awful compassion in her eyes as she looked at Neville. "We have no doubts about your bravery or your toughness, Mr. Longbottom, nor that of your friends, but this is going to be a suicide stand, and basic ethical obligation means that we *must* demand that this be a choice made by adults, even if barely defined as such."

"I have seen what Neville has done with the older students," Shacklebolt said slowly, steepling his fingers under his chin as he leaned back in his chair at the Staff Table in the now-deserted Great Hall. "I am willing to agree that they are at least on the level of our younger Aurors such as Nymphadora. However, I also cannot accept the idea of children as young as fourteen in open combat the way he would propose. The decision stands. You may inform your officers, Mr. Longbottom."

The conciliatory use of the term 'officers' did not escape Neville, and he bit back the retort that had been on the tip of his tongue, recognizing at the last moment that it was not only useless, but that he was about to seriously jeopardize the rest of their ability to stay in it as well. His shoulders slumped, and he forced his tone to be one of respectful obedience as he nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Now," McGonagall tapped the tabletop with her wand, and thin strands of black ink began to spread from the spot, lacing like a spiderweb to form a diagram of the school. "With that little matter resolved, let us address the matter of distribution. "We will be splitting into eight divisions. Three to the towers, three on the grounds, one divided among the secret passages, and one at the front doors. Pomona, you will –"

"Ten." Neville interrupted, crossing his arms as he sat back down.

"Ten?" McGonagall's lips pressed together thinly, her voice tight.

"The big ground-floor windows in the Great Hall...those are serious weaknesses in our defenses. And we need another team as a swing division, put them on broomsticks for speed; they go wherever they're needed most desperately at the moment, wherever the attacks are coming hardest, and they act as runners for messages when needed." He nodded at the diagram, then raised his chin almost belligerently. "We've been preparing this for months."

There was an awkward silence, then McGonagall nodded calmly. "Nine, then, but we'll enlarge your swing division and meld it with the one for the passages so that we aren't wasting fighters on tunnels that aren't being used. Have we found Miss Granger and your son, Arthur?"

"Not yet," Mr. Weasley admitted with a worried glance at his wife. "Let's cut their numbers for now...we can take them from the tower positions, since those will be the easiest to hold with the least."

"Arthur, Remus, and I will need the strongest duelers you have, Neville," Shacklebolt said. There's the least cover on the grounds, and that's where they'll be breaking through first at the wall. We'll want to keep them back from the castle as long as we can, and also hold them where the teams on the tower can snipe spells at them from above."

"I'll go myself, then," he replied quickly, then counted off on his fingers. "You should take Parvati, Anthony, Stewart, Wayne, and Seamus for the grounds, too. Hannah, Michael, Lavender, and Terry for swing. Ernie's strength is defense – he won't budge from a post no matter what. Put him on the front doors, and he'll *hold* them shut if he has to. Perseus, Derek and Chris with him too. Li, Luna, Demelza, Gwen, Andrew, Padma, and Jack on towers...Lisa, Morag, Sally-Anne, Hal, Stephen, Mandy, Ryan, and Megan are versatile enough to go wherever you want. I don't really know with Dean, but don't put him with Seamus, it'll be too much distraction."

"All right." Mr. Weasley stood, pushing his spectacles back up on his nose as he nodded his head towards the doors. "We have twenty minutes to get into position. Remus, you take the edge by the forest...I hate to do it to you, but –"

"If he really does have the werewolves, they'll be coming that way, and I know more what we're up against with them, of course." There was no offense in his eyes, and he drew his wand, pulling out a small handkerchief and making absolutely sure that the smooth wood was clean and free from splinters or little snags that could throw a spell off-course. "Neville, of the ones you said –?"

"Seamus, Wayne, and Morag for raw guts. They won't blink at werewolves or anything else you throw at them." He stood, shaking Lupin's hand with a dark smile. "Before we die, though, I never really thanked you properly for saving my life. You make a good double-agent, Professor Lupin, I really thought you were going to eat us."

He laughed, and it was still a rather harsh, barking sound, but there was nothing frightening about it now. "Why, Neville, I told all of you the first day that I've never eaten a student!"

"Yeah," Neville nodded, "We just didn't know that was something that took deliberate action on your part...though if you've ever wanted to try it off-moon...."

Lupin's face darkened, and something of the wolf shimmered through the golden brown eyes. "I won't be watching the calendar if Greyback and I cross paths tonight, if that's what you mean." He nodded once more. "Good luck, Neville. I'll tell your people you've sent them with me."

Neville glanced at his watch as Lupin left, then turned back to the others, who were quickly going over details with one another, marking down names on scraps of parchment, and discussing means of protection that were really more intimidatingly complex spellwork than Neville had ever even heard of. Even Sprout, whom he had never thought of as a fighter, was planning to put a line of vicious plants at the western edge of the grounds to reduce the area they had to defend, and there was a vindictive hunger in her eyes as she explained exactly what a patch of East Indian Garroting Grass could do to a Death Eater.

He hung back a moment, uncertain, then Shacklebolt shook hands with McGonagall and stepped away from the table, jabbing one thick finger towards the younger wizard as he strode towards the doors with a long, surprisingly graceful stride reminiscent of a panther stalking its prey. "Longbottom...you wanted to come with me."

"But my –" he protested, and Shacklebolt shook his head.

"You gave us what we needed. We have minutes only. The others will take the students you assigned them, we will take ours, and our post will be the front gates," he glanced back over his shoulder with a smile that flashed brilliant white. "Which means we shall be seeing action first."

The others were waiting outside the double doors, and Neville called out to his remaining Lieutenants – Seamus had already gone with Lupin – while Shacklebolt separated Parvati, Ryan, and Stewart to go with them. "I couldn't win it," he said bitterly, "so we're on our own."

Terry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "So few...."

"More glory to go around, and our names can be in bigger letters on the monument." Neville smiled thinly. "Just last as long as you can, guys. We're not trying to win this any more, we're just buying Harry time, and he's got his own way to win it. Ernie, you hold those doors whatever comes...and I mean *whatever*, because they've got at least three giants. Terry, I'm going to be counting on that fast brain of yours to get your people where they're really needed, not just where it looks hot. This is it, ten minutes 'til. Any questions?"

Ernie shook his head, but Terry raised his hand with a look of great concern. "I have one."

"Yes?"

"What does it all mean?"

Neville frowned, baffled. "All what?"

Terry's face had taken on a beatific smile, and he waved a hand around the entry hall. "Oh, all of it. Life, the greater plan, the universe...what is the meaning of being? What is the purpose of existence?" The smile quirked deeper to a mischievous smirk that dimpled his cheeks. "You wanted a question...."

Shacklebolt was leaving now, and Neville ran after him, relieved to find that his ankle seemed to have settled on its own since he hadn't had time to have it tended. He shot a look back over his shoulder at Terry as he drew his wand. "I hate a smart-ass, Boot!"

The Ravenclaw Lieutenant snapped him a cheeky salute, "Good luck to you too, Commander!" Then the heavy double doors had closed behind them, and he followed Shacklebolt and the others as they ran across the grounds towards the tall iron gates with their winged guardians.

Already, he could see the black-robed and silver-masked figures massed on the other side, and his heart was racing, his breath tight in his throat as his fingers gripped the wand. There were so many of them! It seemed impossible that their little handful of defenders could have any chance at all, and he felt sick thinking about the number of friends and comrades he knew were less than a mile away. He nodded in response to Shacklebolt's silent gestures, pressing himself against the stone wall on the far side of the gate, his eyes closing as he waited for the last few minutes of You-Know-Who's ultimatum to tick by.

Why couldn't they understand? It was all well and good to want to protect the younger ones – if he had the option, he certainly wouldn't want to see kids who were barely past puberty dying either – but if they really wanted to buy Harry time, they *needed* to be willing to pay that price. And they were losing such strong fighters! Rowan, with her amazing reflexes and strength as great as most of the wizards. Colin, with the incredible bravery and surprising gift for leadership that had manifested over the year. Ginny, with her firebrand spirit and whip-sharp spellwork. Camellia's cool, almost heartless precision. Euan's speed. Fritz' toughness. What he wouldn't give....

"Commander!" The shout snapped his eyes open, and he sucked in a sharp breath as he saw Michael shooting across the grounds at breakneck speed directly towards him. The young wizard braked his broom harshly mere inches away, sweeping his dark hair out of his eyes with a wild look. "News from Wood! The reinforcements...he says if we can hold until four or five, he thinks he can gather over a thousand!"

Neville shook his head fiercely. "That's four hours, Mike! Have you looked out there? Tell him there's no way with the numbers we've got. He'll just have to get here fa –" He cut off as the watch in his pocket buzzed, and he saw Michael's eyes widen in simultaneous realization.

It was midnight.

There was a single breath of utter silence, then the night burst into a thousand bangs and flashes as the Death Eaters mounted their assault. Light was flaring through the bars of the gates, warping and melting them, and it was all Neville could do just to counter, blocking and deflecting the spells as fast as he could, feeling them singe his hair and skim past his face in tingling streaks of far-too-close.

A giant, at least twenty feet tall, slammed through the stones as easily as a stack of children's building blocks, and Neville barely dodged a chunk the size of an anvil that went flying past him to imbed itself several inches into the soft earth of the lawn. He hit his knees, rolling beneath a streak of livid green and coming up again to fire his own Killing Curse directly into the back of a

Death Eater that had Parvati pinned. The black-robed figure dropped, and she spun away, her wand a blur as she dueled three more who had just climbed over the breach in the wall.

"Mike! Get some of the swing down here! We need –" The words cut off in a harsh gasp as the corner of his eye found the blue satin trim on what he had thought was the body of a fallen Death Eater.

A jagged chunk of stone had caught the Ravenclaw on the side of the head, smashing it completely away, and the remaining side of his handsome face was frozen in a look of uncomprehending shock as white fragments of shattered skull and pearly pink brain gleamed unnaturally in the moonlight and the multicolored flicker of hexes and curses.

Neville felt nothing, and he spared not so much as a second for the soldier who was so obviously beyond help. His wand snapped towards the castle, and a silver bulldog exploded away to deliver the message Michael never could, and he was back to dueling the never-ending stream of faceless, remorseless silver masks and black hoods. Somewhere from among the Death Eaters, a witch's voice raised in a high, keening shriek of joy, and Neville felt a surge of power that blasted two more away as his own shout of rage joined the battle cry that he knew had to be, could only be Bellatrix LeStrange.

It was one minute past twelve. The Battle of Hogwarts had begun.

The gates were gone, and they had breached the wall in two more places now, the giants lumbering past the defenders towards the castle, all attempts to stop them bouncing uselessly off their thick, toughened skins. Death Eaters poured into the grounds like a black river, and Neville found himself back-to-back with Ryan Vance, no longer even consciously aware of the spells he cast, but dueling on pure instinct alone as his wand snapped and swung, switching from one hand to the other as they came at him relentlessly.

He felt the other young wizard stiffen behind him, and he knew instantly that Ryan had been hit. Before he could yell above the din of combat to ask how bad it was, he heard a hideous splattering sound, and the comforting pressure at his back fell away, leaving him open to attack from behind. Neville spun, then recoiled in horror.

Ryan was on the ground, twitching in a last, feeble spasm. The man had turned inside out. His jaw hung bizarrely, completely dislocated, and his mouth had torn open at the corners in a fatal parody of a grin as every organ in his body had vomited out to lie in a pile of dark, livid reds and pale, wet loops of intestine beneath him.

A curse brushed the edge of Neville's sleeve, setting it smoldering, and he forgot the carnage at his feet, spinning to deflect the next attack as he refused to look down again at whatever it was that squished beneath his shoes. His arm was starting to really hurt now, the cotton cloth of his sleeve charring as the skin beneath blistered, and he slashed at his shoulder with his wand as he brought it up into the face of the next Death-Eater, grabbing the slit fabric again on the downstroke and tearing it away.

"Neville!" It was Shacklebolt, and the imposing Auror was at his side, a deep gash dripping blood down the side of his neck from the smoothly shaven scalp. The heavy acacia wand never stopped moving as he cast the briefest of glances at the younger wizard. "There's no more use trying to hold the gate...too many of them are through already. We're pulling in closer to the castle...come on!"

He didn't bother to acknowledge the order with anything more than the briefest of nods, but backed slowly across the lawn, keeping his back to Shacklebolt as Parvati joined their tight knot. Then Stewart was with them, limping badly and white-faced from a curse that had left his right knee a shredded and swollen mass that no longer resembled any kind of functional joint, and they made their way slowly back towards the castle, every step a fight for their lives.

Parvati screamed as a hex set her long hair on fire, but the stench of burning had barely risen into the night air before Shacklebolt severed it with a flick of his wand, the glossy black strands falling forward around her face in a suddenly chin-length bob as the thick plait flared harmlessly on the grass. The scream had struck something in Neville, however, and he jerked his head towards Shacklebolt. "Tighten in!" he shouted, "I'm going to get us something that'll cut their numbers some!"

Pointing his wand at the pile of rubble where Michael had fallen, he summoned the broom, kicking off hard into the air the instant it was in his hand, still struggling to find his seat as it rocketed up over the battle below. He wavered, nearly falling before he had his balance properly, then turned, aiming straight towards the tallest tower of the castle where a steady strobe of flashes and bangs told him the snipers were taking full advantage of their lofty view.

He hovered an instant, searching for the flyaway gray hair and plump figure he needed, then dove sharply, "Professor Sprout!"

She looked up, stepping back from her position at the battlements to face him as he landed. "Neville? We saw them break through the gates, are you –"

"Mandrakes!" He reached out, grabbing her arm urgently. "Professor, are the Mandrakes full grown yet? There's still a lot of them clustered together out there; if we fling them over the walls, smash the pots –"

"Not fully mature yet, but old enough to kill, oh yes!" Her wand shot out, summoning her own broomstick from the corner by the door leading to the castle below. She mounted it, nodding at Luna, who had never left her own post, firing spells one after the other down into the knots of Death Eaters as if it were merely target practice. "Miss Lovegood, you hold the tower!"

"Yes, Professor," Luna replied calmly, not even looking up as the others took off and swept down towards the greenhouses on the other side of the school.

They passed Professor Hooch in mid-air, and Sprout wheeled as Neville continued, exchanging a brief word with her fellow teacher before joining him again. "Boot, Bell, and Summers will be joining us," she informed him. "We'll need more than four hands to carry enough of them, and

we won't be able to fly without risking dropping them where we don't want to. They hate heights, and they're too prone to squirm."

"We'll cut through the castle, then." The glass sides of the greenhouses had been shattered in a dozen places, and the plants within writhed and thrashed in ignorant outrage of the shards of glass, hexes, and chill night air that had violated their sanctuary. They abandoned their brooms, running inside and ducking the waving leaves and vines enroute to the long table that held the innocent-looking pots that he hoped would wreak such havoc among their enemies.

He grabbed up an armload, then hesitated. If he sacrificed his wand hand, he would be able to carry twice as many, but he would be helpless, having to rely on speed and agility alone in a mad dash through the battle. But if they didn't do something to drastically even the odds, they were all as good as dead anyway. His decision made, he scooped up as many as he could carry, then turned, only to have Sprout shove a pair of fuzzy earmuffs over his head with an admonishing glare. Neville nodded his thanks, grateful that she had thought of it, as he would have been an extremely embarrassed ex-star Herbology ghost in a few minutes had she not.

The other three had arrived now, taking piles of their own and being likewise quickly fitted with protective earmuffs, and Neville felt a moment's pang of guilt as his eyes met for an instant with Terry's. The terrified exhilaration of the smile said all too well that he didn't know about Michael, and he couldn't be told. Not now. There was no time for grief.

**"WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO RUN LIKE HELL,"** Neville shouted to make himself heard through the muffling shields, **"STRAIGHT THROUGH THE CASTLE AND JUST HOPE WE DON'T GET HIT, THEN WE THROW THESE OVER THE WALLS INTO THE DENSEST KNOTS OF DEATH EATERS WE CAN FIND!"**

There were nods all around, and they set off at a flat sprint, the broken glass of the greenhouse crunching underfoot before being replaced with an obstacle course of larger and more worrisome pieces of stone that had been blasted from the gargoyles, gutters, and window-ledges of the castle itself. For a moment, he wasn't sure how they were going to get past their own defenses, but the kitchen doors seemed to recognize Sprout's approach, and they flew open, slamming and bolting behind them again the moment the five of them had passed.

House-elves were cowering beneath the tables and counters, their hands clenched over their heads and their huge eyes bulging with terror at the sounds of the battle outside, but Neville paid them no mind as he shouldered through the door beside the entrance to the Hufflepuff common room and ran towards the stairs. He took them three at a time, skidding slightly and barely managing to cling to his volatile cargo as he turned a sharp corner towards the corridor that would lead him to the entry hall.

He nearly slammed headlong into Harry, twisting quickly to the side and just brushing the other wizard with his shoulder as he passed. Part of him wanted to stop, to get an update, to find out if Harry had the diadem or whatever else it was that he needed yet to stop the bloodshed before it could all get any worse, but there was no time. They just had to keep fighting.

Harry looked confused at the sight of a half-dozen earmuff-clad fighters who seemed to have decided to start transplanting things in the middle of a battle, and Neville shouted back a hasty explanation over his shoulder. "Mandrakes! Going to lob them over the walls – they won't like this!"

Then Harry had been left far behind, and the heavy double doors were ahead of them. They paused barely a moment, and Neville kicked the door twice, hesitated, and then twice more before yelling through to the Lieutenant guarding the entrance outside. "ERNIE, LET US OUT! IT'S NEVILLE!"

"Prove it!" came the voice from the other side, strained but thankfully not seeming to be injured or fading.

"CECILY!"

The doors opened just enough to let them pass, and Neville nodded hastily to Ernie as he sprinted by, Sprout and the others close on his heels. He was starting to breathe harder now, his side beginning to ache with the warning shots of a wicked stitch, but he did not allow his pace to slacken in the slightest. All around him, the grounds seemed to have come alive with their enemies, and he recognized Greyback's tribe scattered among the black robes of the death eaters, as savage in their human forms as the wolves they transformed into once a month, their hands crooked into claws and their teeth glistening as they slashed and tore at the defenders.

Katie Bell screamed beside him, and he ducked away from the blast of heat as she went up in a sudden bonfire. The plants in her arms were reduced to ash before they could issue their own cries, and he caught a moment's glance of the former Chaser's face contorted in indescribable pain as the blackening flesh bubbled and melted like wax under the cursed heat. Then she was down, her body blazing a flickering pattern of light and shadow across the grass, but the wall wasn't far now, and he lowered his head, pushing his legs to drive him all the faster before more of them could be struck.

The outer defenses had fallen, but the breaches were narrow, and the Death Eaters were still being met with resistance as they came through, and Neville was relieved to see that at least a hundred of them were still clustered tightly together outside, seeking their chance to break through. He skidded to a halt, lowering the plants to the ground with incongruous care, then grabbing the first and heaving it into the air. His wand was out before it had even hit the top of its arc, shooting a spell that flung it up and over the high stone wall to land among the waiting Death Eaters.

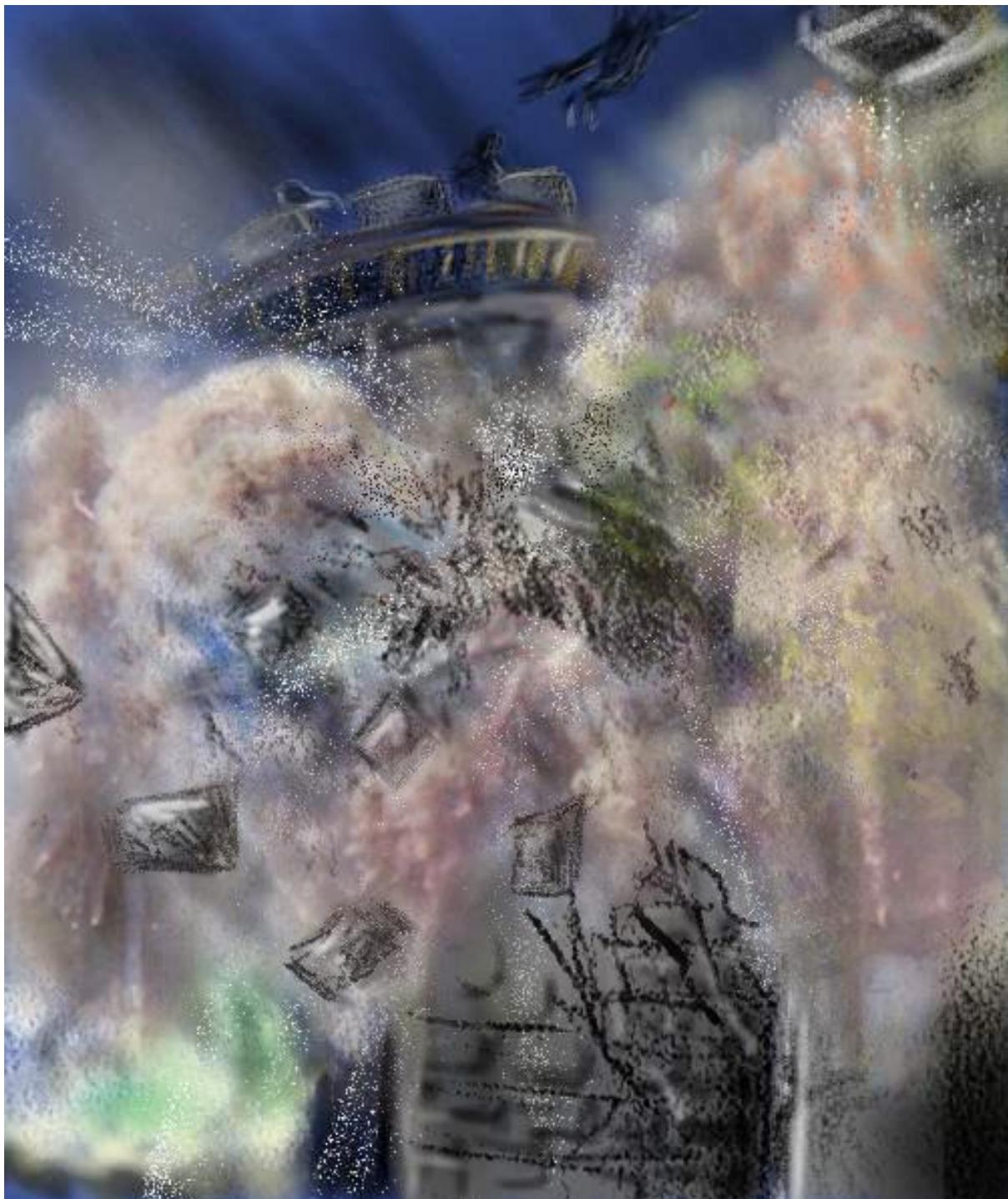
Even through the earmuffs, the howl of the Mandrake was terrible, and it was joined at once by more and more of the eerie shrieks as Terry, Hal, and Professor Sprout began to send their own unconventional missiles over the wall. He felt sick, dizzy, his head was pounding with a headache so strong that it threatened to fell him from the layered cries of the deadly plants, but he continued to heave them up and over until they were gone, only then allowing himself a moment to drop to his knees, clutching at his head as he fought to keep from vomiting from the pain.

Looking around, he saw that Terry and Professor Sprout were sagged against the wall, their own arsenals exhausted as they too struggled with the side-effects of their attack, but Hal was sprawled on the grass in a twisted rictus, the sides of his face still oozing blood where he had clawed at his own ears in agony. Neville felt a stab of anguish as he saw that one of the Hufflepuff's fluffy purple earmuffs had been grazed by a hex he must not have noticed, the protective padding stripped away, leaving him just as vulnerable as their intended targets.

Gathering a deep breath past the headache that still throbbed, but had abated at least to the point where he could move again, he turned and jumped, grateful for his height as his hands barely caught the upper edge of the wall. For a moment, his feet scrabbled against the stone, then he found a toe-hold, and he heaved, pulling himself up enough to see across. If they had been wrong, he knew, his head would make a lovely target, but the sight in front of him made him smile even through the horrors that had already mounted.

No less than eighty bodies lay across the ground, their limbs as grossly contorted as his comrade's, the leaves and shattered bits of pottery the only innocent-looking remains that spoke of the satisfyingly hideous way they had died. Neville turned back, dropping lightly to the ground as he grinned at the two other surviving members of his little mission. "We got —"

The rest of the sentence was drowned in a deafening crack, and everywhere, combatants froze, the battle poised in a single held breath as Ravenclaw tower shuddered. Dust puffed from the mortared stones as a trickling rain of glass sparkled down from the tall, airy windows that had once lit the intellectual haven of the common room and dormitories there, and he could just make out a mad scramble among the fighters atop the groaning tower.



Three figures took off at almost the exact moment the tower finally gave way. The massive stones split apart like eggshell, and the entire structure tipped, snapping away from the castle itself to tumble to earth with a staggering impact. As it canted, Neville saw a fourth body launched into the air, but this one had no benefit of broom. Whether she had been injured or stunned or simply unable to get to her escape in time, there was no mistaking the only witch on the battlefield who had been wearing scarlet robes as Cho Chang fell in a graceful flutter of red cloth and long black hair, finally disappearing into the dust cloud rising from the shattered tower.

"Back to the castle!" Sprout shouted, puffing for air, her round face beet red as she hurried back across the battlefield. He understood immediately. The tower's fall had given them a moment of distraction, and they would have a better chance to get to cover again before the fighting resumed properly.

The reason for the tower's collapse became apparent as they ran. Hagrid's brother Grawp came lumbering around the edge of the castle, bellowing in outrage as he swiped and stomped at the Death Eaters with a large one-winged gargoyle he had snapped from the rooftop, but behind him almost immediately were two other giants, no less than six feet taller than the massive Grawp, and they were crashing their fists into the sides of the stone walls as they approached him, leaving deep, spider-cracked dents in the masonry.

Grawp turned, brandishing the gargoyle at the nearer of the two giants, and there was a brief, guttural exchange that barely even resembled language before the two mammoths had barreled into one another, grappling and slamming into the building as they wrestled. The blows they shook off could have crushed a wizard into formless pulp, but they continued to pummel one another as if the impacts were nothing more than love-taps.

For a moment, it looked like the third was about to join in, but then a movement through one of the upper windows caught his eye, and he jammed his hand inside. When it emerged, it was to a gleeful roar of success, and he opened the vast palm, letting something that had once been someone fall to the ground as he licked his scarlet fingers happily, like a child finishing a jam sandwich.

Neville shook his head harshly. He had allowed himself to become distracted by the awesome brutality, and now he re-doubled his speed as he followed the others who had almost reached the extremely questionable safety of the school now turned fortress. A familiar voice cried out in pain, and he turned, his wand ready, and it was Ernie at the top of the entrance steps.

The werewolves had gone for the front door en masse. Chris and Perseus were down, their bodies mutilated almost beyond recognition as human by teeth and claws, washes of red coating the stairs all the way down to the path from where they had fallen, and Derek was on his knees, clutching uselessly at a torn throat that was spurting through his fingers in increasingly shallow arcs. A dozen primitively-clad bodies also littered the area, proof that they had gone down hard, but there were many more where Greyback's monsters came from.

Only Ernie and Dean remained standing, backs to the doors, and there were at least ten of the animals surrounding them. Dean had gotten a wand from somewhere, and his dark face was shining with sweat as it flashed and cracked, shooting jets of light in every direction as he fought desperately to keep them at bay. Ernie had not been so lucky. They had hold of him now, driving him to the ground with sheer force of numbers, and it was hand-to-hand, five of them piling onto the Lieutenant in their efforts to keep him from being able to aim his wand at any of them.

Another scream tore the air, and one of the werewolves lifted his head from where he had pinned Ernie's wrist under the full weight of his body, his long, shaggy beard dark with blood as he spat something over the edge of the stairs and howled in victory. Two more werewolves piled

on – women by the very vaguest definition – and Neville changed course, running as hadn't since the last time he was facing those creatures, but this time not away from them, but towards them to save his friend.

He was less than thirty feet from the bottom of the stairs when the mass of leather-clad backs gave a great heave, and Ernie pushed himself to his feet from under them, sending two of them flying backwards off the steps to land with the sick crack of shattering necks and skulls before rolling limply to the ground. The moment's freedom allowed him to aim his wand, and he dispatched three rapid green jets, his efforts united again with Dean's. The werewolves hesitated a moment, then in a single motion of frightening unison, they turned and retreated.

Ernie caught sight of Neville and laughed, pushing the blonde curls back from his forehead with the back of his wrist. As his hand raised, the wand still held firmly, Neville saw to his shock that three of the fingers were gone: two of them ripped away entirely while the third had been gnawed to bare, bloody bone. Yet impossibly, Ernie's voice was cheerful as he called out. "Persistent bastards! That's the fourth wave of them! I do imagine they're trying to crash our party, even though I've tried to tell them very firmly they're not invited!"

"Do you need – ?"

"Dean and I've got it, thanks! Just don't let those fellows over here... I'm a touch arachnophobic, to tell you the truth, dear chum!" Neville turned, looking where Ernie had pointed, and his blood chilled. The Forbidden Forest was disgorging all of its nightmares tonight.

Morag, Wayne and Lupin had come sprinting from the edge of the dark woods, and close behind them, their hundreds of tiny eyes shining with hunger, were fifty of the car-sized spiders. The trees bent and shivered beneath their weight as they crawled along trunks and branches as rapidly as they scampered through the heavy brush, and they were closing fast.

Wayne was staggering, falling behind, his left arm hanging uselessly from a shoulder that was visibly dislocated even from this distance. The spiders were mere feet away. Lupin fell back to help him, but a streak of green from one of the Death Eaters caught him in the neck, and the young Professor dropped, dead before he ever knew what struck him.

One of the spiders snatched up the body, the thick mandibles clattering, but Wayne dropped to the ground and rolled beneath the monster, shoving his wand up like a dagger directly into the soft underbelly. The creature's body lit from within, its hideous outline cast in brilliant blue for a split second, then the fat body bulged and burst, splattering ichor over twenty feet and drenching the young wizard beneath before it collapsed atop him.



Neville was there now, Morag holding the other spiders back with a barrage of curses as he grabbed the disgusting corpse and heaved, tossing it over in a crumple of hairy legs as he reached down to take Wayne's good arm and haul him to his feet again. He was gagging, spitting out mouthfuls of the thick, greenish-gray substance, wiping furiously at his eyes, but he was alive, and the three of them closed ranks, firing spells one after the other at spiders and Death Eaters alike as they began to cross the field of death once more.

The spiders scattered suddenly, and the three teenagers exchanged a look of trepidation before they felt it too. The ground was shaking, trembling with the force of an earthquake, and they were thrown to their knees along with every other fighter on the field as the scorched and bloodstained grass in front of the castle began to heave like a living thing. Then it exploded. Chunks of sod and a heavy rain of dirt spread widely, and Neville had to turn away, shielding his eyes from the flying grit as he spat out pieces of grass.

A deep pit, ten feet wide, had opened in the ground. The edges were still caving in, a fog of dust and dirt still lingering in the air, but there was motion from within. Neville jerked his head towards Wayne and Morag, and they followed him towards it, wands outstretched, waiting to see what You-Know-Who had in store for them now. Slowly, a figure began to emerge from the dust, shaking his head and coughing, and Neville's jaw dropped as he recognized the slightly-built silhouette. "COLIN!"

More heads and shoulders were emerging now, and as the dust settled, he could see that dozens of faces were looking up at him from the hole, some climbing out on their own as Jennifer Lindsey and Arthur Chambers took advantage of their height to boost the smaller ones up to the edge. Neville shook his head in disbelief at the young officer. "What – how – ?"

"We couldn't take it any more, Commander!" Colin's face was streaked with dirt and something that looked almost like soot, but he was beaming. "Reports have been saying you guys were getting slaughtered up here, and then we saw the tower go down, and...well...I'm not an Auror, but I can stun and bind a Squib and a Healer just fine!"

Neville crouched, reaching down to grab Orla's wrists and pull her up. The new arrivals were forming a loose perimeter around their dramatic entrance point, their wands out and ready, but as yet, none of the Death Eaters seemed to have been able to decide what was going on enough to leave the battles they already faced with the existing defenders. Morag was staring at Colin as if she had never seen him before, and she shook her dark auburn head in disbelief. "But ye didnae need ta tunnel in like Nifflers, Creevey! We'da let ye in t' front!"

"We tried to come back in the way we went out," Colin explained, pausing to shoot a hex over her head that dropped a Death Eater who had decided to become curious. "But when we got close, it was hotter than hell, and even with a Freezing Charm, we couldn't touch the door. It was *glowing*...so we decided to backtrack until we figured we weren't under the castle any more, then make our own door."

"CREEVEY!" Professor McGonagall's shout was so furious that even Neville cringed, turning to see her jogging towards them, her stern face set in an expression of astonished outrage to a degree he had never seen before. Her tartan dressing gown was torn, her hair had come loose, a few pins still sticking out oddly, and a painful-looking slice crossed one sharp cheekbone. "I *explicitly* forbid you, Longbottom! I can't *believe* that after I allowed you the privileges of a grown —"

"It wasn't Neville, Professor – look out!" Colin ducked around her, and McGonagall turned at the same time. The Professor's arrival had signaled the allegiance of the new fighters clearly enough, and the Death Eaters were attacking now. All around them, the younger members of the D.A. were clustering in pairs and trios as they had been taught, holding one another's backs as they faced the newest assault with an almost giddy exhilaration.

Neville found himself back to back with McGonagall and Colin, who was still trying to explain. "I came – *Stupify!* – completely on my – *Incendio! Impedimenta!* – own and – *Protego! Levicorpus!* – so did everyone I brought – *Petrificus Totalus! Reducto!* – with me!"

"And how many is that, Mr. Creevey?"

"Um... *Relashio!* All of them."

"All of whom, Mr. Creevey?"

"The D – *Expelliarmus!* – The D.A. Some of the D.C. tried, but it's okay, they're all tied to – *Diffendo! Desanguinum!* – things, so they're not going anywhere."

"You're going to have to leave. We cannot allow –" McGonagall's voice was firm, but Colin shook his head as calmly as if he were declining a second cup of tea.

"With all due respect, Professor – *Incarcerus!* – you're getting your butts handed to you, if you don't mind me using a Muggle term – *Confundus!* – and you don't have enough fighters to – *Tarantallegra!* – spare to force us out. Go ahead and expel me if we're all alive tomorrow."

There was a pause as they continued to duel, and then McGonagall sighed, and her voice had a tight air of what seemed almost like the faint edge of tears when she spoke again. "Just be *careful*, Creevey, we're losing too many tonight."

"WE'RE PUSHING THEM BACK, COMMANDER!" Natalie came running over, her hair singed and one side of her face blistered, but her eyes shining as she shouted the news. "Look!" She pointed enthusiastically behind them, and Neville glanced over, realizing to his amazement that the girl was right. Everywhere, Death Eaters were drawing back, still dueling, but only defensively, their lines vanishing back into the darkness as the flashes came further and further apart.

Neville grabbed the little witch by both shoulders and kissed her hard on the forehead. "You guys are brilliant! Let's get inside, regroup. Professor, we've got a lot more people to distribute. We'll see if we can get reports on who we've lost – Peakes, do you have a broom?"

The young Beater nodded enthusiastically as he shouted back. "Yes, sir! And it's a Nimbus 2003!"

"I want you to take reports from the two towers that are still standing, as well as Arthur's – Mr. Weasley's – group and anyone else you can find. See who we've lost, who needs the most help, and report back. I'm going to take Sinead, Camellia, and Fritz to the greenhouses, and we'll get a few more nasty surprises for them... I saw a lot of things in there that you don't want thrown at your head. Professor, where do you want to –"

Colin swore. It was a single word, emotionless and even rather gently spoken, but the blue eyes were suddenly wide, and he looked down at his chest as though inexplicably betrayed. Neville's own eyes followed, and he gasped.



"No..."

The boy reached to finger the charred hole that had appeared over his breast pocket, then looked up again, and his mouth opened, but all that emerged was a heavy gush of blood that soaked his shirt to the waist as his knees buckled beneath him. For a moment, he seemed to hang gracefully,

suspended in mid-air, then his back bowed loosely and he fell into the hole he still had barely taken a step away from.

"COLIN!" Dennis had not spoken since December, but the sound that tore from the young boy's throat now could barely be called speech. It was a howl, a keen, a shriek of raw agony and the pure, blind rage that only the very young are truly capable of. He shot forward, breaking ranks and driving towards the masked Death Eater who had struck down his older brother, closing the distance between them faster than seemed possible.

With another scream, Dennis had jumped him, tearing away the mask to reveal the bearded face of his own uncle, Rudolphus LeStrange. The Death Eater grinned, bringing up his wand to shove it against the child's throat, but Dennis moved inhumanly fast, grabbing the older wizard's wand with both hands and driving it down like a spike. It sunk directly into one dark eye, burying itself to the handle as he drove it through with all his strength and pain, but it was not enough. The cherub's face had become a demon's guise, and his voice was achingly high and clear, a yet-unbroken treble screaming a curse far beyond his own understanding or ability to control. "*AVADA KEDAVRA, YOU SON OF A BITCH!*"

The green flash blazed through the night, but it was no well-aimed jet, and the wand had cracked with the force Dennis had driven it into the Death Eater's skull. The curse exploded, catching both figures in a lurid outline before it faded, leaving the boy slumped limp and unseeing over his final revenge against the people who had destroyed his family.

Neville felt stunned, numb, staring incredulously at what had only seconds before seemed like the edge of hope, but McGonagall's voice came through sharply. "They've broken into the castle! I'll take the other children – you'll have your way after all, there's no turning back now with the passage caved in – and you get your plants. Now *hurry*, Longbottom!"

Nodding quickly, he forced what he had just seen out of his mind and turned to the cluster of young soldiers behind him. "Parkinson, Bagman, Whelan...you're with me. Let's go!"

They encountered only a handful of Death Eaters on their way to the greenhouses, and the scarcity worried him. It didn't seem possible that they had whittled them down that far, and that meant that the majority were inside the castle now, and that's where Harry – their one hope of true success – was trying to complete his mysterious mission. If he were killed.... No. He couldn't allow himself to think that way. He couldn't allow himself to think at all, really. Just act.

Act. Fight. Lead. Survive.

The greenhouses had taken several more hits since he had been there last, and large sections of the plants were lying in limp, withered piles, but there were still more than enough for his purposes. He passed out armfuls of Devil's Snare and Snargaluff pods, keeping several vicious specimens of Venomous Tentacula for himself, then they hurried to join the others in their retreat to the castle.

It was impossible not to see how they had gotten in. Several huge holes had been blasted in the stone walls, a dozen different points of possible entry, and he gripped his wand tightly as he lead

his little band towards the closest one. The room beyond seemed dark and forbidding, the shattered desks and cracked, hanging blackboard barely recognizable as having once been McGonagall's Transfiguration classroom.

Neville entered first, but it was deserted, and he nodded the others in after him. "Sinead, pass those around. Give some to Hannah if you see her, and Peeves if you can get him to cooperate. He's been throwing dung bombs so long, let's see what he can do that's useful. Camellia, you've got a free hand...cast a Patronus to Ernie, tell him to get the hell away from the doors if he's still alive, and Dean too. There's no point when they've got so many other ways in. Then come with Fritz and I. We're going to the entry hall, that's where most of the noise seems to be coming from."

The young witch nodded, adjusting her grip on the pot as she thrust her wand towards the door. A silver crow burst into the air and soared through the heavy oak as though it were nothing more than mist. Neville made a sound of approval as he braced his back against the door, then pushed, ready to fling the toxic stems at any enemy that presented itself.

But the hall seemed empty. He frowned, clearly able to hear the sounds of a violent battle somewhere very close by, and then there was another sound; a low, hollow moan of pain. Neville looked down, and Jack Sloper was sitting slumped against the wall in an immense pool of blood, his face ashen as he used his teeth to cinch his belt tightly around the jagged stump of his left thigh. There was no sign of the missing limb, but both hands were burned black, and he looked up with an expression of dazed shock in the gray eyes. "They took my wand, Commander, I'm...I'm sorry..."

"It's all right," he said automatically, though it was anything but all right, and he knew that it would be about four different kinds of miracle if he ever saw the young wizard alive again. But it didn't matter. Jack could still speak, and he still had enough consciousness to give information. "Where's the fight?"

"Down...down the hall, next left. They're in the castle, Commander...but the kids are back, too. Good thing. We've lost...a lot of people." His head nodded, his eyes losing focus. The belt hadn't been enough to do much through the heavy muscles of the young man's thigh, and he was bleeding out rapidly.

"Sinead, go right. Get those pods out. We'll take the left, hit the fight properly." They split up, and he broke into a jog as the shouts and bangs of dueling became louder.

When he finally emerged around the corner into the broad hallway that lead into the entry hall, it was like stepping into chaos itself. At least thirty pairs of duelers were spinning and ducking through the confined space, Death Eaters and defenders – both the motionless dead and the crawling, moaning, writhing wounded – scattered across the floor everywhere, and the thick dust raised by all the careening spells that had struck the already-shaken stones choked the air with a dense fog that rendered the scene all the more impossible.

Lowering his head and roaring out a challenge towards the first unmasked Death Eater he saw, Neville charged into the middle of the fray. A scarlet Stunner shot by his head so close he felt

the warmth of it against his ear, striking the wall just beside another Death Eater who had kept his gleaming anonymity. He ignored it, flinging the Venomous Tentacula into the lumpish, heavy-browed face of Crabbe's father.

There was no time to watch the hungry plant reel in its victim. His wand was already in his hand, and he turned, dueling the second Death Eater who had been intended for the Stunner that had come so close to him. A huge crash of shattering glass filled the air as the fight spilled into the entry hall properly, and the floor was suddenly a treachery of emeralds as the last of the giant hourglasses burst. Another crack, a splintering of wood, and Neville barely dodged the two bodies that fell from above as the railing shattered in a cloud of flying, razor-sharp splinters.

One figure was small, a boy who could be no older than fourth year, but the other was a woman's body, and despite the shroud of chalky dust that covered everyone in a uniform pallor, there was no mistaking those purple eyes. Lavender moaned, struggling to rise again with an ominous grating of broken bones that refused to obey her will.

There was a blur of movement, too low for a human being, and then someone – *something* – else was on her. He could not abandon his own opponent, but Neville saw out of the corner of his eye that it was Greyback, and the werewolf cast a brief, mocking glance up at him as he licked his lips. "Dessert delivered again, I see...."

The grotesque face ducked, and Neville screamed in hate and fury and horror as Lavender stiffened, her back arching as her fingers scrabbled the floor weakly. The Stunner burst from his wand with such power that it plowed through the Death Eater's protections as though they didn't exist, and he wheeled, wand whipping back to strike out with a Killing Curse, but just then, something else flashed through the air, striking the werewolf with a *crack* and flinging him hard across the melee to smash against the carved marble banister. Greyback began to rise, but something else large and heavy flew down at him, striking precisely between the narrow eyes and knocking him out cold.

Above them, Professor Trelawney crowed in triumph. "I have more! More for any who want them! Here –" She flung another of the heavy crystal orbs, but Neville did not look to see nor did he care who her victim was this time. He dropped to his knees, grabbing Lavender's shoulder and rolling her towards him.

"Lavender! Lave –" But it was too late. His words choked away as he looked down into the mangled crush of her once-creamy throat and the eyes she had been named for that now turned cloudy with falling dust as they stared unseeing at the broken balcony above.

A loud, splintering crash echoed through the air, yanking his attention away from his friend's body, and he jumped to his feet, wand poised as the doors Ernie had so bravely defended for so long were torn off their hinges. Screams rang out, high and thin with panic, and duels were forgotten as the fighters on both sides fled a new and greater fear. The spiders had returned.

Five of the monstrous arachnids were crowded into the doorway in a tangle of crawling limbs and clicking mandibles, and Neville was among the handful who stayed, who tried to return the attack, to hold them off, keep them out...but nothing worked. Even the Killing Curse bounced

off their thick carapaces, doing nothing more than enraging them to rear up on their hind legs, showing off their size to its truest and most terrifying extent. Neville did not run, but it was not lack of fear. His legs simply would not move, rooted to the spot as he continued to fire at them, too panicked to panic properly.

"Don't hurt 'em, don't hurt 'em!" Hagrid had appeared at the top of the stairs, brandishing the frilly pink umbrella that he must have rescued from Snape's confiscation as he charged directly at the monsters, admonishing them like disobedient dogs.

"HAGRID, NO!"

Harry's shout came from nowhere, and then Harry himself quite literally, manifesting from thin air in a way that could only mean he had been there all along beneath his Invisibility Cloak. Hagrid had been pulled in among the spiders now, vanishing in a tangle of writhing, hairy legs as thick as saplings, but whether they considered themselves cowed by a master or satisfied with prey, they retreated, pulling the half-giant with them back towards the forest.

Harry followed at a run, still screaming Hagrid's name, and the sight of their last chance throwing himself away like that snapped Neville out of it. He began to charge forward, but his attempt at calling after Harry was struck short by a groaning, creaking rumble.

There was less than a second for him to even guess what it was or where it was coming from, and then he was knocked to the floor, the remainder of the balcony above smashing down around him as a high, shrill, horrible laugh filled the air. Neville tried to get to his feet again, sweat breaking out cold across his face as he recognized it, oh, he recognized it, and he knew the collapse had been no accident.

He was pinned, his wand hand trapped beneath him uselessly, held under a hundred times more weight than the strongest of them could hope to budge. He struggled, but the beams only held him tighter, yet they did not fall in on themselves, never crushing, just *holding*, confirming his darkest suspicions that they had been cursed. Then the laugh again, and the woman who stepped out of the cloud of dust was the woman who had set him on this path all those years ago, and he screamed her name in raw, throat-grating hate. "BELLATRIX!"

She was there clearly now, her heavy-lidded eyes glittering with the bloodlust that the night's carnage hadn't even begun to sate, and he thrashed even harder, no longer caring if it was futile. "Let me up! Or are you afraid to fight me now that I'm older and have a wand?"

"Oooh..." she leaned in closely, staring at him like a fascinating, exotic insect she was about to step on. "Iddle Longbottom's aw gwown up, id he? Thinks he can pway now?" She giggled, and it was the sickest sound he had ever heard, then she tapped him lightly on the nose with her wand. "Crucio."

It had been spoken almost off-handedly, but the skill and practice and profound sadistic love behind it were more than enough to elevate the curse to its highest art form. As the blinding, obliterating, all-consuming agony swept him, his last coherent thought was that really, none of them had been Cruciated at all this year. Because *this* wasn't something you could *ever* brag about.

This was an *Unforgivable*, and it was worse than it had been in the Department of Mysteries, because that time she had been holding back, it *had* been 'just a taster' to frighten Harry, because this time he couldn't scream, he couldn't writhe, he could do nothing but exist in a state of purest torment and feel his mind slowly begin to come apart at the seams, because she wasn't lifting it, she wasn't *going* to lift it and oh god oh god oh god this was helloohgodohgod.....

"GET AWAY FROM HIM!"

Like the rope snapping on a hangman's noose, the curse lifted. His body begged to release him into unconsciousness, blackness closing on the edges of his vision as he saw, through eyes that suddenly only offered the world in black and white and a very small tunnel, Romilda Vane holding Bellatrix at wandpoint, her chin thrust out, her own black curls tossed back, and something about that seemed wrong for a reason he couldn't quite put his finger on.

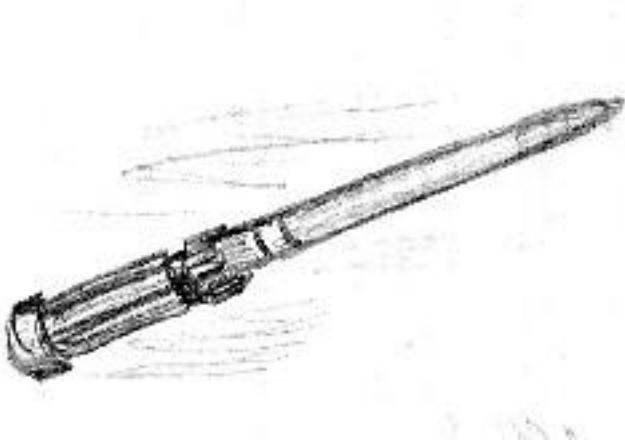
Then Bellatrix laughed again, and Romilda was thrown back against the remains of the broken doors, deliberately impaled like a pinned butterfly on a splinter as thick as the young witch's arm that protruded horribly from her stomach. She looked down, both hands gripping it in shock as her wand clattered to the floor, then Bellatrix's own wand came down in a vicious, swiping backhand stroke. "*Sectumsempra!*"

Romilda screamed as a deep slash appeared across her face, opening her cheek to bone and slicing off the end of her nose. Again and again the wand came down, slashing his would-be rescuer to unrecognizable shreds, pausing only to strike down Ritchie Coote in an almost unthinking flick and flash when he tried to stop her, tried to save the girl who's screams had now become gurgles, sobs, and finally a thin, bubbling rattle.

Neville could do nothing. His body was still reeling, he was still pinned, his mind refusing to accept what his eyes were telling him was happening, and before the darkness finally closed over him in blessed release, the last thing he saw was Bellatrix LeStrange blowing him a kiss.

Yet strangely, his last thought was not of her. Instead, it was of the young wizard he had last seen running after Hagrid towards a tangle of monsters.

*Please, Harry...make this all worth it.*



## Chapter Twenty-Two Darkest Before Dawn

"Commander

"Commander! Commander Longbottom!"

His mind had broken under the Cruciatus. It had to have. Because that was *Gran's* voice, and it couldn't be...but it came again, and this time, the tone was not at all brusque and firm as he was accustomed to, but gentle, tender, trembling. "Neville, can you hear me? I know you're still breathing. Open your eyes, baby...oh, *please*."

He was sore, terribly sore, every inch of him hurting and aching as badly as it had after the flogging, but he forced his eyes open, and his grandmother's face was looking down at him, the severe features swept with an instant and powerful relief. Neville wondered anew if it was a hallucination, but this was not how he would have imagined her coming to him – dust-covered, her hair bedraggled, one ear twisted into a dark char – and if he was utterly honest with himself, it wouldn't have been her that his mind would have summoned to come to him in his final moments. It would have been Hannah. He licked his lips, and his voice was a rough whisper of confusion. "Gran? What – ?"

She didn't answer immediately, but took a step back, waving her wand, and he felt some of the pain and pressure ease as the rubble of the balcony lifted away. Not waiting to ask questions, he rolled out from under the beams and stones, forcing himself to his knees before he had to stop. Swaying and gasping, he clutched at his badly-bruised ribs, shaking as he fought to get to his feet again.

He could still hear the battle going on, still hear cracks and curses, bangs and screams, and his first instinct was to simply run out and join it again instantly, but he held himself back. His army needed him, but they did not need him to be foolish...if he went out there like this, he'd be lucky to last five seconds. He needed to take a few moments to move around, test himself for deeper injuries so that he could compensate for them rather than be harshly surprised at the wrong moment, find out what had happened in however long he had been unconscious.

Gran's surprisingly strong hands were under his arms now, helping him stand, and he turned to her with baffled gratitude. "Thanks, Gran, I just –"

"No time. You're alive. That's what matters." Her voice was pure business once again, her sharp eyes scanning the wreckage of the entry hall around them. Bodies were everywhere, Death Eater and defender alike, but the heart of the fight had clearly moved elsewhere. "Rumors had been going around that Bellatrix crushed you to death under the staircase."

"Just trapped me. And did *that*." He nodded towards where the gory mass still hung limp on the door. "That used to be a fifteen year-old girl, Gran. Her name was Millie." A black-hooded figure, maskless but still a stranger to him, appeared at the top of the stairway, and his wand came up before he even realized he still had it clutched in his hand, striking him down to fall headlong down the cracked marble steps. "I'm going to find that bitch and kill her very slowly."

"Listen to me, Neville," he glanced at her as she grabbed his arm firmly, and though he could see that she was disgusted and horrified by what had been done to Romilda, her tone was calm and cold. "That woman is a monster."

He laughed darkly, shaking off her hand as he knelt to check Ritchie's neck for any chance of survival, grimly unsurprised to find no trace of a pulse or breath under his fingers. "I know that, Gran."

"You must not kill her."

It was an order, not a request or plea, and he looked up from where he had been closing the eyes on Padma's broken body, tucked beneath one of the shattered windows with a thick, platter-sized chunk of glass protruding from her chest, flickering almost prettily with the flashes of light from the duels outside. "But –"

"She would be *happy* to die for her Master. It would be what she *wants*. Don't kill her, Neville." There was an icy, vindictive smile on Gran's lips now, and her eyes blazed with the hate he had always suspected was there for her as well, but had never actually seen openly. "Make her watch you kill *him*."

The true impact of that statement took a moment to sink in, and when it did, he actually staggered slightly. "Then Harry –"

"No one's seen him since he went towards the Shrieking Shack after You-Know-Who, and they're still coming. We're all going to be gathering in the dungeons for a last stand. Barricade ourselves and try to hold them off as long as we can. If we can manage another hour and a half or so, we'll have help."

She sent a red jet through the shattered doors, taking down another, and he scanned the room one last time for survivors before he started towards the entrance himself, more than ready now to go back to the fight, welcoming it even as an avoidance of that *other* possibility. "If any of my officers are –"

There was a pop, faint but coming from all around them, something about it so ominous that it caught his attention even through the sounds of battle drawing nearer now as the fighters continued their retreat, then the cold, high voice that had rung through the Great Hall a thousand years ago came again, and Neville froze, holding his breath. "You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery. Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste."

Neville looked down at the darkening red splatters and blotches that covered the remains of his shirt, soaked the knees of his trousers, streaked the exposed and blistered skin of his right arm. He wanted to laugh, or maybe cry that You-Know-Who could say such a thing with any pretence of seriousness. But the announcement went on, and the voice had taken on what he assumed was supposed to be a regally gracious tone, but barely managed patronizing. "Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately. You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured."

There was a long pause, a drawn breath, and Neville ran to the doors, hardly daring to hope that it wasn't a trick. Yet it was true. Every black-cloaked figure he could see was backing away, lowering their wands, disappearing into the forest, through the breaches in the wall, or even turning on the spot to simply Disapparate. They would be back in an hour, but it was *time*, time for the reinforcements to come, time for them to breathe, to get water, to staunch wounds, regroup, reassess, prepare for the second wave.

You-Know-Who had not finished. "I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences." All traces of even a fallacious kindness vanished, and the final words came from the mouth of death. "This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."

The cruel warning faded, but before Neville had a chance to fully consider what it meant for all of them, whether Harry was alive or just missing to the enemy as well, another voice came, also magically magnified, but clearly from the grounds outside with the aid of a common Sonorous Spell. McGonagall. "Everyone who can hear me and is capable of doing so, gather in the Great Hall at once. Apparate if at all possible, time is of the essence. Bring any casualties you are capable of, and we shall retrieve the rest when we have a better idea of our numbers. If you are wounded and cannot walk or Apparate, someone will be there shortly to help you. We have only an hour, we must use it well."

Neville turned without hesitation, sprinting the few feet into the Great Hall, and already people were appearing, the cracks like a string of fireworks one after the other. Each new arrival was a thrill and a heartbreak, because it was someone alive, but they bore with them those who had not been so fortunate.



One of the Weasley twins was there – Fred or George, he could not tell – but in his arms he carried his own mirror image, limp and too obviously lost to them. Seamus, blood spattered among the freckles, sandy hair singed away, but weeping openly as he cradled Dean, his dark head lolling across his best friend's shoulder. Ernie, his massive strength having carried him through somehow, but now it allowed him two burdens: Orla and Natalie. McGonagall with Trelawney. Sprout with Morag. Ginny with Rowan. Tiny Flitwick grimly clutching Andrew Kirke by the collar.

For the first few moments, Neville's heart was a turbulent rush of pain and joy, and he ran to each of them with hugs and kisses, shouts and tears, but then there were just too many, and the emotionless, systemic numbness of the battlefield returned. He knew this well now, the price of command was sometimes your own heart and humanity, but he was grateful, because it made them just names for now. The pain would come later when there was time, *if* there was time, and a part of him almost hoped there never would be, because oh, there were so many names.

There were those he already knew had fallen – Dennis, Romilda, Jack, Lupin, Lavender, Hal, Padma, Katie, Ritchie – but laid out next to them were over a dozen more, the line of bodies stretching almost the entire length of the center aisle, despite how tiny too many of them were. People were walking in now, limping, in some cases even coming on hands and knees, dragging useless and twisted limbs, but those were lifted the moment they were seen, the survivors

refusing to allow their comrades to bear the indignity of having to crawl. The centaur, Firenze, barely managed to stagger in before he fell to his knees, blood pouring down one quivering flank, but even he was not left where he lay. Kingsley and Ernie exchanged a look, then their broad shoulders were against his sides, helping lift and support the part-human enough to get him across the hall.

Neville crossed to where McGonagall was helping Madam Pomfrey set up a makeshift hospital on the raised platform that had once held the Staff Table – gone with all the other furniture now – and she looked up at him with an exhausted smile. "A pleasure to see you're still with us, Commander."

She had never called him by his title before, never acknowledged it at all, in fact, and he startled slightly. The Professor noticed his reaction. "You've earned it well enough, Mr. Longbottom. Your people fought as bravely as I've ever seen."

Not knowing how to respond to a compliment that felt so wrong when so many had died for following him, he spoke quickly, trying to ignore it altogether. "We've got a lot missing...Terry, Parvati, Professor Vector, Professor Hooch, Wayne, Lisa, Stephen, Camellia, Tommy, Rachel, Vicky, Fritz, Anthony..." he took a deep breath, pushing on past the pain that stabbed even through the shield of practicality. "...and Hannah. That's proper missing, too. Not ones like Colin where we know where the bodies are."

"Very well," she said, and he recognized the same emotionless necessity in her eyes. "Take a few moments to get the wounded you do have up here where we can see to them, and then gather your able-bodied. You can have until ten minutes before the time limit to find as many as you can, then I'll need you back here. We must prepare what final defenses we can."

Neville nodded crisply and started to go, then turned back. "Professor, do you think Harry –"

"Of course he's not going to turn himself in. That's why we're going to keep fighting." Her tone was harshly reproachful, and he knew that she understood perfectly well that he was going to ask something else entirely. But she would not allow that prospect so much as broached, and he suddenly felt foolish for even trying. Harry *wouldn't* turn himself in, he'd fight to the last as surely as they would, so the question truly was moot.

Except that if Harry were dead, the task of making all this loss have meaning was his.

No. There were too many other things to worry about. He faced the hall again, and his heart clutched as he saw the two other figures that had appeared while he had been talking to McGonagall. Ron and Hermione, gathered with the rest of the Weasley family – even, to his surprise, Percy – around whichever of the twins had died. Hermione was holding Ginny, while Ron had his hand resting gently on his mother's where she was folded on her knees, sobbing in heartbreak over her child's body.

Neville leapt over the stairs off the platform in a single stride, running across the hall. Something felt regret for invading on the family's grief, but their pain was just too small against the stakes they were facing, and there wasn't nearly time enough to be sensitive. "RON!"

The red head snapped up, and he smiled weakly through the tears that streaked his face.  
"Neville...Merlin's pants, mate, you look a little more like crap every time I see you these days."

"Where's Harry?"

The other wizard glanced around, seeming to notice for the first time that his friend wasn't beside them. The blue eyes registered something that looked almost like betrayal at this, then his mouth opened into a little 'o' of realization, and his jaw set as he turned back to Neville. "He's got something to do, and –"

"He still hasn't found it?" Neville asked, aghast. With the castle in ruins, the chances of –

"No, it's okay, we got that. We're at the last of it, really, I swear." Ron's words were confident, but there was a hollow uncertainty beneath as he glanced down at his brother, and he chuckled darkly. "Well, one way or another, you know?"

"Yeah, I know." He looked from Ron to Hermione and back again, hesitating. It felt like something was different between them now, like they had gone their separate ways and were reuniting again after decades, not months, but there was still a thread of six year's friendship beneath, and he reached for that as he smiled at them. "You guys joining us for the rest of this party?"

"Might as well," Ron shrugged. "I get the feeling the last dance is Harry's alone anyway. How 'bout you, Hermione?"

She nodded, her hands still stroking Ginny's own flaming red mane as the other witch wept against her shoulder. "Of course." Ginny seemed not to have noticed Neville's presence at all as she mourned, not just for her brother, he knew, but for the too-long line of her friends on either side of him.

"Good. We're a little low on wands, we could use you two." He paused, aware that he had made it sound like he was settling for their help rather than grateful, and he amended himself. "I mean, after all, you guys have managed to get out of some pretty nasty spots from what we've heard. It'll be great to have two more really good fighters who are still fresh."

Hermione blushed, but Ron seemed genuinely touched by the respect that had been offered, and he held out his hand. "Dumbledore's Army, then."

Neville took it, shaking it tightly as something passed between blue eyes and brown that made real what had been previously just an attempt to stop an argument. They could never understand what the other had been through in their time apart, but there was no need. Hell was hell, and the trimmings didn't matter. "Dumbledore's Army."

OOO



"Oh, sweet Merlin's mercy...this can't be all of us." Seamus' voice was a low murmur of horror as he looked across the cluster of young soldiers that had assembled in the entry hall, and Neville took a deep breath, not wanting to admit that he had been thinking very much the same thing.

Ricky King. Ginny Weasley. Ron Weasley. Demelza Robins. Megan Jones. Felton Summerby. Bernard Dunstan. Luna Lovegood. Icarus Utterson. Hermione Granger. Rachel Winchcomb. Walter Bell. Twelve people. Fifteen counting Ernie, Seamus, and himself. Fifteen of the D.A. who had numbered seventy-six at only midnight were still able to fight, and a mere nine more were so badly injured that they couldn't even stand to be counted, their own lives a question as Pomfrey, McGonagall, and Sprout struggled with Mrs. Weasley to save who they could. And adding every Order member, every former student, every teacher who was also still standing brought their numbers to no more than thirty-four.

His eyes passed over the mangled remains of Ernie's hand, the deep burn seared across Seamus' back, the way Luna was favoring her left leg, the empty, raw socket where Demelza's eye had been. Only Ron and Hermione did not properly belong in hospital themselves, and he swallowed hard, fighting back the despair that had come surging up.

Neville forced a determined smile across his face. "There are more than a dozen missing out there, guys. They can't all be dead. Some will be trapped, just hurt in ways that mean they can't move really well, or even plain old stunned. We can't give up hope. You wouldn't want them to give up on you."

Luna raised one pale hand, and he winced as he saw that the fingernails had been ripped away past the quick. "What do we do with the Death Eaters?"

Neville exchanged a quick look with his officers before answering. "McGonagall says we don't kill anyone during a ceasefire, and I completely agree. However, we aren't wasting time with their dead. Leave them where they are. If they're wounded, disarm them, snap the wand, stun them, *then* leave them. It's their own people who left them behind to suffer, and we don't have enough time or manpower to worry about too much in the way of mercy."

Demelza was the next with a question. "How do we *find* them all in time? It's dark out there, and all the rubble...I'm afraid I'll walk right past someone."

He hesitated, not really knowing how to answer that, feeling stupid for not even having considered it. With the castle so badly shattered from its familiar layout, the need to move cautiously to avoid attacks from wounded enemies, parts of walls and ceilings teetering on the edge of further collapse, people who might be buried and need digging out...he rubbed at his forehead, suddenly feeling every moment of the exhaustion that had built in the almost twenty-four hours since he had last slept. Before he could make himself find a solution, however, Hermione had stepped forward, nearly glowing with pleasure at being able to do something to help. "You're still using my coins, aren't you?"

In answer, Ernie fished awkwardly in his pocket with his uninjured left hand, then flipped his own through the air to her. She caught it neatly, holding it up and tapping it with her wand. "*Homogenous Lumos!*"

Like a dozen captive stars, the coins burst into brilliant light in their pockets, flaring through the black cloth of trousers and robes, the thick flannel of pajamas as if the heavy fabric did not exist at all. The flash was brief, less than a second long, but Hermione smiled, her point made. "You should be able to home in on the light if you keep doing it. Finding the missing Professors is only a little bit trickier, but if you have a strong Patronus, you can send it to that person by name. If they're alive, you can follow your own animal to them, and if not..." she trailed off, and he was glad that she hadn't said the rest.

"You know, Hermione, I've missed that lovely brain," Seamus grinned, and she blushed in response, then tossed back her long, bushy hair.

"Be honest. You've just missed that Ron let you copy the essays he copied from me, Finnigan."

He laughed, not skipping a beat as he winked back. "Six of one..."

Ginny cleared her throat, raising her voice above the little ripple of exhausted laughter. "We've got a little less than forty minutes until our hour's up, guys. Let's find our friends."

"Right." Neville nodded, trying not to look at the thick, bloodstained splinter where Romilda had been murdered as he gestured out the doors. "Meet back here at ten to, and don't hesitate to call for help if you're worried about moving someone or if you think there's danger. Ernie, Felton,

Rachel, Ron, Hermione; you guys take the castle itself. The rest of us will be on the grounds. And hurry!"

The remains of the D.A. scattered quickly into the night, the moon having sunk below the trees now, leaving things darker than they had been at midnight. Neville was left alone in the entry hall, and he took a deep breath, trying to steel himself for what he knew he needed to do. Best get it over with early, give himself the most time to cope before he had to fight again. He drew his wand and pointed it out over the bloodied front steps, forcing up memories he never knew would hurt so much in their happiness.

For a moment, there was only a faint silver mist from the tip of his wand, then he pushed past the shadows the last hours had left on his memory, concentrating hard on the pure joy of the moments themselves, the laughter of friends, the thrill of winning the House Cup, the feel of Hannah's lips on his skin, warm sun on his back in the garden...the bulldog was there now, bright and gleaming, and he flicked his wand again, sending it flying eagerly into the night.

He almost tripped several times as he followed at a run, his heart thundering with hope and excitement even as his throat clenched in fear. It knew where she was, it had found her, but what would *he* find when he – Neville skidded to a halt, his shoes sliding a little on the grass that was just beginning to add morning dew to the blood that already made it slick beneath his feet.

There she was. Face-down on the ground, crumpled beside the wall of Hagrid's hut, and she looked so small, so *alone* that it hurt all the more, and the Patronus vanished in a shuddering sob as he knelt. Her wand lay loosely beneath her fingers, a dark scorch across the back of her knuckles, and there were little chips of stone and clots of dirt in the golden hair. Closing his eyes, his breath held, he reached out a hand, sliding it gingerly beneath the soft waves to the crook of her neck.

It was warm, and a pulse beat there, strong and steady against his fingertips.

"*Hannah....*" The name came in a breathless whisper, and he scooped her up into his arms, his eyes and fingers searching her body for some terrible secret that could break his heart right when it was daring to hope, but there was no blood that went deeper than clothing, no limbs that were bent unnaturally. Neville bent his head low over hers, surprised to see tears falling onto her cheeks when he hadn't even realized he was crying. His eyes closed, and he set the tip of his wand gently against her side. "*Ennervate.*"

The green eyes blinked several times, she shivered in his arms, then they opened and focused, and she gasped as she saw him. "Neville! Are – ?"

He kissed her.

For a moment, she was stiff, confused, then her body relaxed against him, and her arms came up around his neck, pulling them in closer together, and his own hold on her tightened, their bodies pressing so hard to each other that his bruised ribs groaned, but he didn't care. She was alive, oh, she had *survived*, and he had never loved her more, never needed her more, wanted her more than he did in this instant. His hands stroked through her hair, slid beneath her shirt to the soft,

smooth skin of her back, his mouth traced the beautiful living pulse at her throat, felt the cool line of the chain where she still wore his pendant with its promise to live, the promise she'd so wonderfully, thankfully kept.

All around them was the smell of blood and death and broken stone and crushed grass, and the bodies were scattered like fallen leaves across the grounds, but none of it mattered, and it was only finally the need to breathe that broke the kiss. He sucked in a great gasping breath, his forehead still against hers as he realized how hard he was shaking. "Oh, *Hannah*" he whispered, "I love you so much...."

"I love you too," she traced the line of his jaw with her lips, making him gasp, "I want to marry you, Neville."

He pulled back a few inches, blinking at her in astonishment. "You...."

"I swore I wouldn't say it until we'd both survived, until it was all over and I still felt that way and was sure it wasn't just being afraid of dying or wanting to feel like a real grown-up or being jealous of Susan...but I want to be your wife. Not tomorrow or anything, but we have time to wait now, don't we?" Her smile was radiant, she was so beautiful, and he wished he could just pretend she was right and say yes, of course yes, but he couldn't, and he closed his eyes as he shook his head. She let out a little cry of hurt, and he winced. "But I thought you – "

"I do, Hannah, I really do," he forced himself to open his eyes and meet hers again. "But it's not over. This is just a ceasefire. We have just barely more than half an hour before we'll be fighting again, and if Harry – " he hesitated a moment, " – if *someone* doesn't do something big, You-Know-Who isn't going to stop until everyone's dead."

To his surprise, there were no tears, there was no gasp of shock and fear, she just pulled away from him, brushing off her robes as she picked up her wand and got to her feet. Her voice was crisp and steady as she looked around the devastation of the battlefield. "How many do we have left?"

"A little less than forty still in fighting shape," he admitted.

Hannah blinked, shocked, then recovered herself quickly. "D.A.?"

"Total. And that's after *all* the D.A. came back, even the kids. I don't know how long you were down."

The enormity of their losses drained the color from her cheeks, but she tossed back her hair, drawing herself up defiantly. "Then you're lucky to have one more. Where is everyone?"

"Great Hall," he motioned up towards the castle, standing up again. "They're seeing to the wounded there...well, the worst ones anyway. Everyone's been hurt to some degree. But those of us who are still mostly in one piece are out here gathering up the bodies as best we can and looking for the ones we're missing."

She nodded, setting off at a run and calling back to him over her shoulder. "Then you do your job, and I'll go try to help with the wounded, and we'll just hope Harry gets it done so I can ask you again!"

He watched her go, his heart aching to see her leave but admiring her strength all the more, and though he knew she couldn't hear him, he smiled sadly with his reply. "The wizard is supposed to ask the witch, Hannah...but my answer is still yes."

Somewhere, someone let out a low moan of pain, and he shook his head quickly, yanking himself back on task. There was no time. No time for anything. He pulled out the Galleon and tapped it with his wand, using the spell Hermione had given them. The nearest flash was from the pit where the D.A. had returned, and he knew it would be Colin.

Neville hesitated, wondering if he should waste time on someone they knew to be beyond help, but he couldn't bear the idea of leaving their brave young Secret-Keeper discarded among their enemies, and he hurried towards the side of the pit, jumping down into the shadows. *Lumos!* The earthen sides reflected the light back eerily, and he could see Colin there, sprawled on his back, his eyes still open to emptily mirror the dark sky above.

"Do you need some help getting him up?"

He looked up, and Oliver Wood was leaning over the edge of the pit, his face ghostly in the blue glow. "What are you doing here?" Neville asked, "I thought you –"

Oliver raised his arm, rotating the shoulder deliberately to show that he had regained the use. "Madam Pomfrey put it right for me. Still hurts like hell, but I can move it again, and it doesn't matter if I can play Quidditch or not as long as I can wield a wand."

Neville fought the urge to make a comment about how he must have suffered a blow to the head along with nearly having his arm ripped off if he could say *anything* dismissive about Quidditch, but instead simply nodded his head towards Colin's body. "I'll steady him from down here, you can levitate him out, and we'll carry him back to the castle. He's the one that brought help, you know."

"I heard." They worked quickly but carefully, and as soon as Colin had been settled to the grass above, Oliver reached down and helped Neville climb out himself before they lifted the body together. The former Captain looked at the boy's face and frowned. "Isn't this Harry's little fan-club president?"

Neville chuckled, shaking his head. "He was a lot more than that in the end, Wood. I wish you'd gotten to know him."

"I wish I'd gotten to know any of these kids," Oliver admitted, "I wish they'd gotten to not *be* kids. They fought like heroes."

"They were heroes, Wood. Every one of them."

There was a long pause as they made their way across the lawn, then they stopped as they reached the edge of the stairs. Oliver glanced up at the faint light spilling from the castle, then across the grounds to the number of bodies still waiting. He shifted his grip, taking Colin's body completely as he hefted the boy over one shoulder far too easily. "You know what? I can manage him alone, Neville."

Oliver vanished into the Great Hall with his burden, and Neville started to turn back to the grounds, then stopped. They couldn't have more than thirty minutes left at most, and there were so many still out there, and he knew, he *knew* he'd been incredibly lucky so far to have found one alive and one he already knew to be dead. Whether he continued into the Hall or went back to the grounds, he would have to face the ugly truth of discovering more loss, and then still more after that when the battle resumed. He slumped against the doorframe for a moment, wiping the mixture of sweat and dirt and blood from his forehead as he bit back the urge to just let it all go, to sit down and just be *done*.

Still, it wasn't an option, not really, and he took a deep breath, walking down the steps as quickly as he could force himself to look for more bodies. His hand tightened on the coin, ready to cast the spell again to illuminate the next, when his eye caught something that made his heart plummet. In his mind's eye, he still saw Terry as he had known him for years, with the thin wire-framed glasses and the dark blonde, almost brown hair that just barely skimmed his shoulders when he bent his head to read.

But the glasses had been confessed and abandoned in January as an affectation that he thought made him look more scholarly, and he had cut his hair nearly to the scalp at the end of February, and that long, slender, perfectly symmetrical wand was unmistakable, even if something had crushed the face beyond all hope of recognition. Neville crossed to the body and bent over to look more closely. What had killed him in the first place was impossible to tell, but the body had been stepped on since by one of the giants, and a part of him still clung to hope that it wasn't his Lieutenant after all. He reached out, slitting the sleeve and pulling it open, praying he wouldn't find the elegant script that banded both Terry and Michael's upper arms ever since the Christmas Break.

The arm bent in all the wrong places, there was hardly any light, but oh *no*, it wasn't *fair*, because there it was...*L'amitie de la connaissance*.

"Neville."

Harry's voice was the last thing he had ever expected at that moment, and Neville jumped about a mile, dropping the sleeve as he whirled around with a gasp of shock. "Blimey, Harry, you nearly gave me heart failure!" His eyes scanned quickly over the other wizard, looking for a sword, a cup, a locket, a crown...but there was nothing. Harry's hands were empty. He hadn't even drawn his wand.

And he looked...except that wasn't possible. It couldn't be. But Harry was unquestionably heading towards the Forest, and he had to have been wearing the Invisibility Cloak, or his shadow would have fallen directly over Terry's arm. "Where are you going, alone?" he asked.

"It's all part of the plan," Harry assured him, "There's something I've got to do. Listen – Neville –"

The look in the green eyes was terrifying, and Neville abruptly felt like he wanted to shove his fingers in his ears like a child and just refuse to deal with what was next. "Harry, you're not thinking of handing yourself over!"

"No," Harry replied with a reassuring smile, "Course not...this is something else. But I might be out of sight for a while." Neville knew perfectly well that this did not mean the Invisibility Cloak. Harry was going to make his attempt to do *it*, and he didn't think he was going to survive. It almost made him want to laugh that after everything that had happened that night, Harry still wanted to protect him from the truth of something that had become so common as the death of a friend. But he simply nodded, allowing the other youth to go on. "You know Voldemort's snake, Neville? He's got a huge snake...Calls it Nagini..."

"I've heard, yeah...What about it?"

"It's got to be killed. Ron and Hermione know that, but just in case they –" Harry clearly could not bring himself to say 'die.' "Just in case they're – busy – and you get the chance –"

Neville tapped the handle of his wand. "Kill the snake?"

"Kill the snake," Harry confirmed.

"All right, Harry." It made sense. A lot of sense, actually, and he felt a great deal of the respect he had started to lose for Dumbledore's plan beginning to return. So *that* was where You-Know-Who had been all those years. With his body destroyed at Godric's Hollow, he had hidden for thirteen years in *snakes* before being brought back in the graveyard. He couldn't just talk to snakes, he could *possess* them, the way rumor had it he'd possessed Harry at the Ministry of Magic, and Dumbledore – and now Harry – had figured out that Nagini was more than an extremely intimidating pet, but a last-chance escape clause they could not allow to be used.

He looked at Harry again, noticing how pale he seemed, the odd way he was breathing as if trying to make each inhalation last just a fraction too long. His brow creased in concern, "You're okay, are you?"

"I'm fine," Harry lied, but Neville let it go. Getting ready to die wasn't an easy thing, after all. He knew this personally.

Harry turned to go, but at the last moment, Neville felt his own stab of fear. What if he was wrong? What if killing the snake wasn't something to ensure the task, but the final task itself? What if Harry *was* going to turn himself in with the foolish belief that this would *actually* lead to mercy for the rest of them? What if he thought they *wanted* him to? Ginny had always said he had a stupidly self-sacrificial streak...

Neville reached out, grabbing the thin wrist in a unshakable grip, his voice intent. "We're all going to keep fighting, Harry. You know that?" He tried to put everything in his eyes, warning and promise alike, and Harry seemed to understand the full weight of it, because his head sagged.

"Yeah, I...." His words trailed off, but he knew, and that was the important thing, and they couldn't have much time left now. Twenty minutes? *Maybe?*

Neville released the wrist, giving a quick squeeze on the shoulder to the young wizard who had been his hero for years and was now his hope. Only human, maybe, but weren't they all, and how much had he learned simple human love and courage could be worth in this year alone?

Leaving Harry to his fate, he returned to his own. Terry was near the front doors, there was no chance of not being able to find the body again, but he had spotted motion by the edge of the pile of rubble that marked where Ravenclaw tower had collapsed. Checking the coin brought no answering flash, but he still walked cautiously towards where he had seen the movement, calling out into the darkness. "Is someone there? I've come to help you! Help me find you!"

"Neville?" The voice was a girl's, weak and wavery and somehow terribly, terribly *wrong* in a way he couldn't quite define, but he broke into a sprint, casting a second Patronus and sending it after the witch who had just spoken his name.

It sped to a spot right where the huge chunks of stone began to impose on the path that lead to the front entrance, and as he grew nearer, he saw someone moving in the shadows there. Then a hand raised into the silver light cast by the sturdy animal, and he knew that warm bronze skin all too well. "PARVATI!"



Neville vaulted over the last stones in his way, reaching down to take her hand, but then he cried out, recoiling almost the moment his skin touched hers. It was soft, but not in the velvety

smoothness a young witch's skin always held, but soft as if there were no bones beneath, soft like an overripe piece of fruit or a molded jelly. Parvati moaned, calling his name again, weaker this time, and as his wand light fell over her, he felt something cold seem to crawl through his stomach. He knew the curse – *Solucorpus* – but he had never actually used it or seen it used, and he hoped he never would again.

The young woman was dissolving. Her body bent with a serpentine smoothness that was wholly unnatural as she pulled herself along the ground, and the tips of her fingers were too long, dripping, melting away from the palms. The beautiful, exotic face was still almost completely intact beneath the newly-short hair, but her eyes seemed a little too large, her nose a little too long as the curse continued to creep up her body. It had started low, that much was clear, because below where her hips had once been, she was gone entirely, and there was a glistening, snail-like trail that spread back towards the field where she had dragged herself, inch by inch as her legs melted away.

He knelt, fighting back the urge to cringe. "Oh, no..."

"*Addy*." Her eyes stretched even wider, and she grabbed at the front of his shirt urgently, her fingers bending back against his chest and leaving little streaks of flesh behind.  
"Please...Neville...let me say...get her...bring her...."

Neville shook his head, hating himself for not being able to grant the simple request of letting her say goodbye to her own twin sister. She read the look on his face all too clearly, and her eyes closed with a low groan. "Not both of us...."

He nodded, unable to make himself say it, and the will that had been literally holding her together was shattered. Parvati gave a little sob, her body shuddered, twisted, and then she was gone, leaving nothing but empty clothing and a pool of thick, viscous liquid that soaked slowly into the grass.

"Parvati..." He reached down, picking up a single golden bracelet that lay where her wrist had been, but before there was even a chance for tears to come, a scream sounded from the castle above. Over the course of that long night, Neville thought he had heard pain of every possible kind, but this was something worse than physical agony, a soul-deep outpouring that was if anything like the howl Dennis had issued in his last moments, but somehow worse, because it was wrenched from a man's throat, deeper and breaking through the years of maturity beyond that child's cry.

Without a second thought for the friend he had just lost, he jumped to his feet, turning on the spot to Apparate to whoever had made the awful noise. There was darkness, crushing, disorientation, and then he was there, in the familiar corridor outside the Room of Requirement.

The seventh-floor hall that had been first their meeting place and then their hideout was now broken and marred like the rest of the castle, the portraits abandoned, the large vase and the empty bottles within lying in shards on the stone floor. To his surprise, the door was visible, but it was charred black, the beams cracked and still smoking as if from a terrible fire, and he spun, wand out, not knowing yet what he was looking for.

It was Ernie. His friend was on his knees, the broad back shaking with sobs, and at the sound of the Apparition, he looked up and back over his shoulder to Neville. His face was a mask of uncomprehending agony, shockingly white, and his mouth moved silently before he could force the word to come, but even before he managed it, Neville saw what lay on the ground in front of him, and his own heart felt as though it had been plunged into free fall.

"*Susan....*"



Neville dropped to his knees, reaching past Ernie to take Susan's shoulder and roll her towards him. Her face was the palest gray, her lips blue, and there was no sign of response to his touch. Beside him, Ernie had crumpled into a tight ball of grief, his hands clutched over his face as he shook, the sobs too deep to be anything more than ragged gasps, a steady drip of blood raining to the floor in place of smothered tears from where he had split open the scabs on his missing fingers. For Neville himself, however, there was only numbness, disbelieving shock as his hands searched fruitlessly at the young woman's neck.

She was supposed to be gone. She was supposed to be safe. She was the one they knew would live. The one who would carry on, who would bring new life in their names, tell their stories, remember them. She couldn't be...

He grabbed her by both shoulders, shaking her hard. "Susan! *Dammit, Susan!* Come on!"

"She's not *dead*, is she?"

The voice startled him, and he gasped as he looked up. A young girl was standing there, had been for who knew how long, tucked into the shadows of the little alcove where the vase had once stood. She was maybe eleven or twelve, with long brown hair that was tied in two pigtails the same way Hannah had once worn hers, her pink nightgown ruffled at the cuffs and neck, but smeared with dark streaks of dust and ash. Neville shook his head, trying to make any of this make sense. "Who are you?"

"Becky, sir. Becky Shelton. Is she gonna be okay?" The girl's blue eyes were wide, but oddly distant, and he recognized the look of someone who could not cope with what they had seen, the look that he had seen too many times tonight in the eyes of the younger D.A. members who had managed to survive.

Neville stared at his friend's body, trying not to let himself see the awful broken promises in the curve of her stomach, the glittering bands on her left hand, and it was like choking to make himself say the words. "No, Becky, she's not."

The girl let out a long, wailing sob, fisting her hands against her eyes as she dropped to the floor. "Oh noooo! It's all my *fault!* I killed her!"

"You *what?*" His head jerked around, and he didn't mean to snap at the child, but he couldn't help it. "What *happened* here?"

"I...I got *stuck!*" Becky was crying hard now, but she managed to gasp out the words between sobs. "In...the stairs, and she came...back for me...'cause...there weren't...any other...grownups 'cept Filch and he wouldn't and Madam...Madam Pomfrey...but she said they had to keep...the Healer safe for everybody...and the door was locked in the pub, but she...she knew extra magic from...the D.A....and...we couldn't go back!" She looked up, her eyes huge, her round cheeks flushed. "We tried! I didn't want to fight! But we couldn't go back!"

He looked at the burnt door, and Colin's words came back to him. *Hotter than hell...it was glowing....* Obviously, there had been a fire of some kind, but he couldn't imagine what sort of blaze could have wreaked such terrible damage on the powerful magic of the Room of Requirement. Still, it didn't matter. Not any more.

Neville turned back to her, "So you had to fight?"

"We hid." She picked up something from the shadows, something that shimmered and rippled like the ghost of an object more than its reality, and he recognized the Invisibility Cloak. "Curled up in the corner under it and held really, really still. Shield Charms and Muffliato and everything. Harry Potter was there for a while, and that awful Malfoy boy and his friend, and we could hear a bunch of fighting – sounded like the whole castle was breaking apart – and then there were Death Eaters all over the place...." She bit her lip, looking down at her bare feet. "I was so scared I almost puked."

"Did they find you?"

"No. I don't know what happened exactly. She was all wrapped around me and my face was all smooshed on the floor, but then something hit the wall right above us, and things flashed green, and she jerked, and then she didn't move at all after that. I stayed still 'til I heard Mr. Macmillan calling." Becky gave another little hiccuping sob as she looked at Ernie. "Were they going to have a baby? I knew they got married, but I could feel her belly when she curled up around me. If she's dead, can you still help the baby?"

Neville had no idea. Could an unborn child survive her mother's death? Even for a little while? He knew nothing about babies, nothing about any of this, but if there were a hope, *any* hope to rescue some shred of this...Ernie had said Cecily was whole in there, just tiny. Maybe Madam Pomfrey could finish her growing the way she did bones and skin? Holding his breath, Neville tapped his palm with his wand. *Ultratactile*.

Part of him wanted ridiculously to apologize to Ernie, to ask his permission, but the wizard was so deeply lost in his own pain that there was no point, and any salacious intent could not have been the farthest thing from Neville's mind as he reached under Susan's robes and shirt, laying his sensitized hand against the too-cool skin of her stomach.

"*ERNIE!*" He yanked back, whirling in shock, and before his friend's head had even lifted, Neville had grabbed the uninjured hand, striking it quickly with his wand before shoving it under the folds of cloth. "Ernie, she has a *pulse*! Not much, but it's *there*! We've got to -"

There was no need to finish. Ernie was already standing, his wife's limp body cradled with impossible gentleness in the blood-streaked arms as he set off towards the stairs without another word. Neville paused only long enough to grab Becky and hoist her onto his back, ignoring her little yelp of surprise and protest and following at a run as the little fingers clung onto his shoulders.

Speed was usually not one of the heavily-built Lieutenant's greater assets, but he was being driven by a desperation the likes of which Neville could only begin to understand, and even with his longer legs and lighter load, it was difficult to keep up as they flew down the broken halls, dodging dangling beams, wheeling around gaping holes in the floor, and forced to double back a half-dozen times when they came to hallways that had collapsed completely into dead ends. Even at their breakneck pace, it seemed to take forever before Ernie finally kicked open the doors of the Great Hall with a splintering crash and they ran inside the warmly candlelit room that had become their refuge, hospital, and morgue.

Professor McGonagall looked up from where she had been sitting with Seamus and the surviving teachers and Order members in a circle on the floor, her lips pressed into a thin line of disapproval. "You are late, gentlemen, we have less than five—"

She was cut off as Professor Sprout let out a little scream, jumping to her feet as she recognized the body in Ernie's arms. "SUSAN! I thought she was —"

"She came back for one of the kids," Neville explained hastily, swinging Becky off his back and sending her off towards the other survivors with a little shove. "They tried to hide, but she got hit by a Killing Curse...must have been a ricochet, though, because she's still alive – barely."

"You've got to help us, Professor!" Ernie's voice was a naked plea, and he fell to his knees next to Madam Pomfrey, holding out Susan's body like a supplication. "*Please...oh, please....*"

The Healer's eyes were soft, her face lined with genuine sympathy for the young man's obvious heartbreak as she ran her wand over Susan's body, hovering it for several seconds above her stomach, but when she looked up again, her voice was kindly firm as she shook her head.

"Ernest, there's nothing I can do for her. She's dying. It's a miracle she's survived the Curse no matter how faintly or briefly, and that's only because it didn't hit her directly and because there are two lives involved." She patted his arm gently, "Maybe some part of her is holding on just long enough to let you say –"

"*DAMN you!*" He had shifted Susan in his hold, one hand shooting out to grab Pomfrey's wrist so hard that the witch let out an involuntary cry of pain, but he didn't care, the hazel eyes blazing gold as he yanked her in until their faces were inches apart. His face was flushed, twisted, and he looked more primally dangerous in that moment than any of the werewolves he had battled that night. "That's my *wife*, you bitch, my wife and my baby girl, and I don't care if I have to hold off You-Know-Who *myself all year...you are going to help them!*"

"Haven't you seen enough of the *Killing Curse* tonight, boy?" Aberforth's voice was gruff and harsh, but there was an undertone of something else to it, something that Neville had only seen before when he mentioned his long-lost sister. "If there was anything that anyone could do, it wouldn't take you screaming and threatening, and it doesn't change anything if you do. Now get to a window. You'll be back with her quick enough."

But Ernie refused to be budged. He had released the Healer, but his eyes swept the circle of older wizards, seeing the understanding, the sympathy, the shared grief, the anger, the acceptance, the numbness, but nowhere was there hope, and his voice broke in a bleeding sob. "But *Harry...*"

"Harry's a wizard, mate, not a miracle worker, same's the rest of us," Ron had stood now, and to Neville's surprise, he crossed the room and wrapped one long arm around the trembling shoulders, the gesture more brotherly than he would have expected from someone who barely knew Ernie as an acquaintance, but then he thought of Fred, and he understood. Ron may not have had a wife or a child, but the other man knew loss freshly enough. "If he could bring people back, he'd have done it a lot of times now."

"He survived! He survived it from You-Know-Who himself! There's got to be a way!"

The red head shook sadly. "No one really knows how –"

"It was love." Hermione had gotten to her feet, joining Ron at Ernie's side, and she brushed her hand over Susan's dark head. "His mother gave her life for him."

Sudden hope flared in the hazel eyes, and his chin jutted forward as his shoulders straightened, shaking off Ron's comforting arm. "Then I'll give mine."

"It's not that simple, Ernie." Hermione sighed deeply, and Neville could see tears glittering in her soft brown eyes. "It's not like you can just wave your wand and trade places with her. If you'd been there, you could have taken the curse instead, maybe, but it's too late now."

"It can't be. I won't let it be." The desperate determination had returned to his voice, and Ernie knelt, laying Susan carefully across the stones before he looked back up at the young witch.

"You're a genius, Hermione...isn't there anything you've ever heard, ever read...a rumor...a legend...*anything?*"

She shook her head, and there was a long moment as their eyes held one another, and then Ernie's head fell, and he began to cry again. Neville wanted to turn away, to not have to watch, but he couldn't leave now, not when his friend was hurting so badly. He had to stay, even though he knew there would be a fight again within moments, even though the others were already moving to the doors and the broken windows, leaving the four of them surrounding Susan's body in a knot of still/raw agony amid all the other losses of the night.

Ernie was holding her hand in both of his, scattering the delicate fingers with kisses and tears, then he stopped, and his eyes closed tightly, the hurt now physical as well as he had to use the stripped remains of his index finger along with the remaining thumb and pinky to pull the wedding ring from his left hand. Gasping, trembling, he raised his wand and slipped the golden circle over it, sliding it all the way down to the handle of the oak, then ever so gently added Susan's rings as well.

Neville exchanged a look with the other two, but Ron only shrugged, and Hermione gave a tiny shake of her head, as puzzled by Ernie's actions as Neville himself. The Lieutenant had both hands wrapped around the wand and the rings now, Susan's hand beneath his own, and his words were barely audible, the intimate whisper of a heart laid bare.

"My beautiful Susan, my little Cecily...I cannot know what lies ahead for you, but I know my own heart, and it belongs to you. With this ring, I swear to you on my most solemn oath and by all that is magic that I have been true to you and faithful, in heart and body, that I have loved you, cared for you, provided for you, protected you, cherished you, and kept you, as long as there has been breath in my body." He drew a deep breath, his hands tightening as he lay his lips to the white skin where Susan's fingertips were visible against the smoothly polished wood. "I surrender my life for yours, and for our child's, willingly and with all my love, with all that I am in man and magic...so let it be known...so let it be done."

Time seemed to stop between heartbeats, and the strong shoulders tensed as the wand began to glow, faintly at first, then flaring suddenly with a flash of light that forced them all to turn away from the blinding glare. When they were able to look back again, Neville gasped in shock.

Susan's dark eyes were open, blinking in confusion, but the color had flooded back to her cheeks, her lips were red again, and her chest was heaving in deep, strong breaths. She sat up sharply and looked around, trying to make sense of where she was, of the ruined castle, the corpses, the wounded fighters at the shattered windows. Then her eyes fell to her husband, and she let out a low, gentle moan...not of shock or horror, but of an expected pain, and Neville realized that she thought Ernie had been killed in the fight, not understanding yet how much more literally he had given himself for her.

He was bowed at her side as if in prayer, still on his knees, but the wand had rolled from his hands when she had pulled hers away. Her rings still circled it loosely, but Ernie's own thick band had become a part of the wood, inlaid more deeply and more perfectly into the oak than

even goblincraft could ever achieve. The expression on his face showed no trace of pain, but the hazel eyes were closed, and Neville knew that he would never see them open again.

Hermione had begun to sob quietly, and Neville reached out a hand, laying it gently on Susan's shoulder. "Susan, I'm so –"

But their time was up. The voice came again, ringing from the broken stones to announce that there was little point to their grief, because soon enough, there would be no one left to grieve. You-Know-Who had returned, and what he had to say was the worst, the last, the most terrible thing that Neville had never wanted to hear.

"Harry Potter is dead. He was killed as he ran away, trying to save himself while you lay down your lives for him. We bring you his body as proof that your hero is gone."

There was a pause, long and terrible, allowing them to bleed out their hope before he went on, but Neville's eyes had closed, and had already stood, taking a step back from his friend's body and turning away. His fingers tightened on the handle of his wand, and he ran his other hand along the length of the polished cherry as he swallowed hard.

Harry. Dead. While running. Neville didn't know him so well after all. The odd behavior, the passing on of the final task...none of it mattered, though, really. Hero or coward, whether he had failed or fled, The Chosen One, the Boy Who Lived was dead, and that meant...oh, but *how*, how could he *ever*....

To willingly give a life. The most powerful magic there was.

Even as the voice began again, Neville's eyes opened, and he drew himself to his full height, shoulders straightening, head high. It was time to make their final stand - *his* final stand.

It was time to end this.



## Chapter Twenty-Three The Last Enemy

"The battle is won. You have lost half your fighters. My Death Eaters outnumber you, and the Boy Who Lived is finished. There must be no more war. Anyone who continues to resist, man, woman, or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family. Come out of the castle now, kneel before me, and you shall be spared. Your parents and children, your brothers and sisters will live and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we shall build together."

"It's a trick! It's a stupid bloody trick!" The announcement had not even finished echoing off the stones before Ron's shout rang through the Great Hall. His freckled face was hotly flushed, his hands balled tightly into fists at his sides as he spun to glare at each of them in turn. "Don't you *dare* believe him! Harry's *not*—"

"Ron, if they really have a body...." Hermione's voice was soft, but it cut him off easily, and she shook her head slowly, the tears that had begun over Ernie's sacrifice falling thicker on her cheeks now.

"Polyjuice!" There was a desperate quality to his defiance, but his chin thrust out fiercely.  
"There's plenty of bodies lying around!"

"Polyjuice potion can only be used on a live full-human possessed of initial magical ability." Anthony had pushed himself up onto one elbow from the blanket where he lay in their makeshift ward. His face was still pale, his voice shaking around the pain from his crushed feet, but there was the surety of long study behind the words, and he shook his head slowly.  
"Hermione's right. If they're willing to show us a body, they're telling the truth."

"He'd *never* run away," Ginny had come to her brother's defense. "Try to turn himself in to save the rest of us, I could believe, but not just run away to save himself...and I don't think he'd even have turned himself in, because there was something he was doing to stop You-Know-Who." She paused, then her throat seemed to tighten, because the rest of it was a shaky whisper. "I guess it went wrong, though."

"Not necessarily," Hermione wiped the tears away with the back of her hand, gathering herself. "I think this *was* the plan."

"Dumbledore put a great deal of effort into protecting Harry, Miss Granger," McGonagall said sharply, "I do not believe he would have done so lightly."

"Harry...." She looked at Ron in a silent question, and he nodded. Hermione closed her eyes, letting out their secret in a tumbling rush. "Voldemort survived because he split his soul, hid it in a bunch of different places, and Harry had to find them and destroy them before we could kill him forever, and the only one left is the snake. He had to go kill the snake. But I don't think it was just that, because the Prophecy said that neither could live while the other survived, and I think that's why Harry didn't take Ron and I with him when he went, because he knew that he had to die too." Her eyes opened again, but they were bright not with tears this time, but defiance. "But if he got the snake, that means Voldemort's *mortal*. Anyone can kill him now."

Her gaze had been focused on Ron at the last, and he took a step back, holding up his hands defensively. "Don't look at me, Hermione! I'm no coward, but mortal or not, I'd be lucky to get my effing wand out of my pocket before he made me a nice little ginger stain all over the –"

"It's me."

Neville's statement stopped the other wizard cold. He had not shouted it, there was no bravado in the words, but it was the very matter-of-fact firmness to them that drew every eye to him now, and he took a deep breath. "That prophecy could have been about either of us. You-Know –" he stopped himself. If he was going to try and face him in a duel, he might as well at least have the guts to call him by name. "Voldemort chose Harry, but Dumbledore himself said I was the backup plan."

He shrugged, trying to force a wry smile that somehow wouldn't quite come. "Pretty smart, really. The whole world's been focused on Harry, even though whichever one of us Voldemort chose would have to die in the end. And meanwhile, he can just let me keep my head down and out of trouble, and it doesn't matter if I'm some great hero or not, since thanks to Harry, he's mortal now that it's my turn."

George let out a low whistle, then smiled in a hollowed-out echo of his usual cheeky grin. "If this is you keeping a low profile, Neville, I'd hate to see what would have happened if you had been up to something this year."

"You mean it, don't you?" Seamus left his window, and there was no trace of humor in the blue eyes. His shirt had been stripped away by Madam Pomfrey to bandage the burns on his back,

and Neville noticed almost idly that the tattoo on his arm was no longer blue, but black. He wasn't even tempted to ask why. They all had their own secrets in the end.

He nodded, meeting his last Lieutenant's eyes squarely. "I've got to be the one, Seamus. But that's still going to leave his people, and I don't think they'll be thrilled to see their precious Dark Lord taken down. I'm pretty sure I won't last much longer than he does. Will you...."

Seamus raised his wand in salute as he had all those months ago, back when the vast room had still resembled something from a school instead of a battlefield. "With honor, Neville."

"What?" Neville chuckled thinly, "No 'Fearless Leader'?"

"Nah, mate," and now the smile was there, but it was drawn painfully across his mouth. "You look scared witless."

For a moment, he thought of trying to protest, to insist that he wasn't frightened at all of facing the wizard whom his nightmares bowed to, but it would be a pale, foolish lie, and he swallowed hard. "I am."

Then his Gran was there, and she was holding out her hand to him. He took it, shaking it firmly, hoping she wouldn't notice it was trembling. He wanted her to remember him strong. Neville looked at her – at the woman who had raised him all those years, whom so many people considered cold, even heartless, but who had cried when she thought him dead, who had first showed him out to the garden and told him he could do magic if he just put the bean in the dirt and came back every day to water it. There were so many things he wanted to say, but he could find words for none of them, and he hoped she could see it in his eyes.

But she did, or she seemed to, and her smile was a razored balance of sorrow and pride. "I'll be leaving now, Neville."

He blinked, surprised. "You're not –"

"I'm taking Mrs. Macmillan and the little girl out of here. There's no reason for this to be more of a tragedy than it needs to be. I just want you to know that I don't *need* to see you face him. I know you will."

Neville opened his mouth to answer, to thank her, but he was interrupted by Shacklebolt's cry of warning. "They're here!"

Everyone who was capable ran to the windows that fronted the Forest, jostling for positions at the jagged openings, and the Auror had been telling the truth...but so had Voldemort.

There were still over a hundred of the Death Eaters, and a dozen of Greyback's werewolves besides. They stood in a long, menacing line across the edge of the forest, silver masks still gleaming inhumanly on half of them, the others with their faces bare, revealing cruel smiles of triumph that were somehow worse. The giants glowered in dumb brutality towards the middle of

the line, ready to tear at the crumbling stones again, but all eyes were on the two figures in the very center of the army that had come to destroy the last of their attempts to resist.

Hagrid was almost dwarfish compared to his full-blooded kin, but he still towered clearly above the black-robed killers, and his huge, shaggy head was bowed, his shoulders shaking with sobs even from this distance. And in his arms, looking so much suddenly younger than the seventeen years that were all he had been given, was unmistakably, unbearably, the limp, motionless body of Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived. Dead.

"NO!" McGonagall's cry was a jagged, aching wail, and Neville shivered. He had never imagined such a sound from the unshakably reserved Professor, but the look on her face told him that it was for more than just Harry. His loss was simply the final straw on too many of her students fallen that night, too many young lives she had been unable to protect, and a whole year of helplessly watching them suffer in the hope that the little broken-doll body would make it all worthwhile.

No one gave an order, no one really knew who moved first, but as one, they abandoned the room they had been planning to hold to the last, dashing out onto the steps to meet their fate head-on. As they came outside, Neville realized that it was almost dawn, and the slowly growing blue light made Voldemort's snakelike white face shine as he stood in front of his victim, the huge serpent draped loosely but still awfully alive around his shoulders as he caressed its head with one long, skeletal finger.

It was more real now. Even only a few feet closer, now that they were no longer looking out into darkness and their eyes had adjusted, he could see Harry's mouth hanging loosely open, the glasses askew on his face, his hands flaccidly draped over the rough moleskin overcoat. Shouts and cries went up around him from the others, Ron's and Hermione's and Ginny's carrying the loudest and deepest pain, but everyone yelling out with shock, with anguish, with battle-oaths, insults, vows to keep fighting, promises of loyalty even now.

"SILENCE!" Voldemort flicked his wand, and there was a bang and a burst of light, and their mouths moved soundlessly, the Silencing Charm rendering their outpouring useless. "It is over!" He smirked, "Set him down, Hagrid, at my feet, where he belongs!"

"You see?" Voldemort began to pace as Hagrid gently settled the body to the bloodstained grass. "Harry Potter is dead! Do you understand now, deluded ones? He was nothing, ever, but a boy who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for him!"

Ron lunged forward, the pure force of his loyalty and friendship and hate bursting through the gagging spell as if it had never been cast. "He beat you!"

He had shattered it for all of them, and the shouts rose anew, this time laced heavily with mocking reminders of all the times Harry had faced Voldemort in the past, of all the supposedly invincible wizard's failures, and it built higher and higher until another, louder bang and brighter flash hushed them again.

Voldemort smiled in cruel satisfaction to see them subdued, and something, some whisper of instinct, told Neville that now was the time to act. Now, while he was still gloating, showing off his prize, before he had a chance to properly deploy his people or set whatever the next hideous plan would be into action. He closed his eyes, taking a last, deep breath of the cool morning air.

*This is for all of you. This is so it wasn't in vain. Mother, father, give me your strength now. Just give me your protection long enough to do what I have to do....*

"He was killed," continued Voldemort, "while trying to sneak out of the castle grounds. Killed while trying to save himself —" But he did not continue. The high, cruel voice cut off mid-sentence, because Neville had made his move.

His eyes open now, fixed on the red, slit-pupiled gaze of his enemy, Neville charged down the steps at a run, hurling himself directly towards the dark wizard as his wand came up, the Killing Curse on the tip of his tongue, ready to fling it with all his love and hate directly at both snake and master. Voldemort did not even blink.

The long wand barely twitched, there was yet another bang, a flash, and Neville felt as though he had been struck by a freight train. He was knocked clear off his feet, flying through the air to land hard, the wind knocked out of him completely, the cherry wand that was supposed to have struck the death blow ripped from his hand and tossed away. At least two of the bruised ribs gave with an audible snap, but he didn't care, didn't even care that he had been disarmed. He had to do this, he was *fated* to do this, and wand or no wand, there had to be a way.

Voldemort laughed, then spoke mockingly, his voice an almost gentle hiss. "Who has volunteered to demonstrate what happens to those who continue to fight when the battle is lost?"

Bellatrix's high, insane shriek of laughter sounded from almost directly behind her master. "It is Neville Longbottom, my Lord! The boy who has been giving the Carrows so much trouble! The son of the Aurors, remember?"

"Ah, yes, I remember..."

Neville forced himself to his feet, ignoring the pain that scarcely even whimpered through the massive surge of adrenaline, his fists clenched at his sides. They were the same height, and oddly, that made it easier to face his enemy without any trace of fear. He had always imagined him as towering, demonic, but he was able to look directly into the inhuman eyes like any other wizard, and it proved that even Voldemort had once been merely human. And would be again, whether he knew it or not.

The red eyes narrowed curiously, considering him. "But you are a Pureblood, aren't you, my brave boy?"

He raised his head, pushing back the hair that had fallen over his eyes with a fierce glare. So, he'd gotten himself enough of a reputation that even Voldemort knew who he was. Rather than making him feel cowed, spotlit and watched as he knew it was meant to, the knowledge sent a

wave of pride through him, pushing his reply strong and clear past the broken ribs. "So what if I am?"

"You show spirit and bravery, and you come of noble stock. You will make a very valuable Death Eater. We need your kind, Neville Longbottom."

His reply came without a moment's hesitation. "I'll join you when hell freezes over!" He raised his voice, the rallying cry that had united their resistance all through that dark year carrying across the empty battlefield to the forces still gathered at the doors behind him. "Dumbledore's Army!"

An answering cheer rang out, the Silencing Charm holding no better now than it had before, and he nearly smiled. Voldemort's power had definitely weakened. Hermione was right. He had been wrong ever to doubt Harry's bravery, because whether or not he had failed at his final task, his sacrifice and the things he had destroyed had left an enemy that was nowhere near as terrible as he believed himself to be.

The cheer finally died away, and Voldemort nodded his head in mock graciousness, taking a little bow towards Neville. "Very well...if that is your choice, Longbottom, we revert to the original plan. On your head be it."

He made an elaborate gesture with the wand, and for a moment, there was nothing, then he heard an odd flapping, and he turned to see something large and shapeless flying towards them from the castle above. Voldemort caught it, and as he faced Neville again, the younger wizard could see that it was the old, patched, ragged Sorting Hat from the Headmaster's office.

It was a bizarre thing to have summoned, and Neville frowned. If Voldemort thought to embarrass him, to try and humble him by revealing that the hat had considered him even briefly for Hufflepuff, than he had made a serious mistake. The heroism shown by Cedric, Ernie, Fritz, Rowan, Hannah, and all their housemates had left no one among the survivors who would consider the news anything but a compliment.

"There will be no more Sorting at Hogwarts School," Voldemort said calmly. "There will be no more Houses. The emblem, shield, and colors of my noble ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, will suffice for everyone. Won't they, Neville Longbottom?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but at that moment, Voldemort gave another flick of his wand, and Neville felt his body go helplessly rigid with the locking futility of a Body-Bind Jinx. There was nothing he could do, nothing he could say as Voldemort jammed the hat down onto his head, forcing it so low that it covered his face and left him in a mildew-smelling darkness. From the castle behind him, he could hear sounds of protest, but there was a ripple of movement from the Death Eaters to either side, and it faded quickly.

"Neville here is now going to demonstrate what happens to anyone foolish enough to continue to oppose me."

A split-second pause, and he was ablaze. He wanted to scream, to thrash, to tear the now-burning hat from his head, a Shield Charm, a Freezing Charm...oh, *anything!* But he was wandless and immobilized, and all he could do was stand there as his hair caught, as his face blistered, scorched, as the terrible searing heat swept over him a thousand times worse than the fever that had nearly killed him. He was going to burn to death, as surely as Katie had, and he knew now what had put that horrible look on her face in those last moments. Only the Cruciatus in the hands of a master was as painful as a death by fire.

But then the pain stopped. Neville wondered at first if the nerves had simply burned away, granting him some small reprieve before he died, but no, he could still feel. A sensation like cool water poured over the tortured skin of his face and shoulders, a shivering tickle, and he could still see the vivid red and orange flashes of the flames in front of him, all around him, but they hurt him no more.

And there were faces in the flames. Familiar faces, beloved faces, but not as he had seen them last, battered and exhausted, torn and broken. They looked as they should have, clean and whole, bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked with health and youth, and they were smiling at him in pride and loyalty and love. Ernie. Terry. Michael. Parvati. Colin. Padma. Romilda. Jack. Dean. Dennis. And more...there was Renny, unashamed in his robes of Slytherin green, there was Professor Lupin, looking younger and stronger than he had ever seen him in life, Cedric beside him in the yellow and black of the Triwizard Tournament robes, and all the others who had fallen that night and all through the long hell of Voldemort's rise and reign.

They said nothing, but they seemed to have formed a protective shield that held back the flames, and he could feel the tingle and ripple as his burned flesh healed itself, the soft brush of his hair against the back of his neck, and the strength and power were returning to his limbs. He flexed his arms, scarcely surprised to feel them respond easily, the curse holding him shattered under the weight of such love and sacrifice as stood by his side.

He did not know if they were ghosts, if they were hallucinations, avenging spirits who had sworn not to rest until the reason they had died was fulfilled, but he didn't care. They parted now, and he gave a little gasp as he saw the tall, gray-haired figure of Professor Dumbledore step through their midst, something gleaming and silver held out in his hands. The old wizard smiled gently, his bright blue eyes beaming with pride behind the half-moon spectacles. "Only a true Gryffindor may wield the Sword."

Neville's hands clasped around the rubied handle, and the figures vanished, but it didn't matter. In a single powerful arc, he brought the heavy sword flashing up, the charred remains of the hat raining down harmlessly from his head and shoulders.

The blade glinted in the early morning light that was almost dawn now, and he didn't even have to pause, because he knew his aim would be true, trusting in his own heart and instincts to guide him. It struck. The handle gave the briefest shudder in his grip, but the blade was razor sharp.



Nagini's head was severed. It spun wildly through the air, the fanged mouth lolling open like a last scream, but the scream was Voldemort's as the heavy body fell from his shoulders to hit the ground with a dull, impotent thud.

And now the monster was mortal.

Neville reversed the sword, bringing it back again in a devastating blow directly towards Voldemort's white, serpentine neck, but the blade was stopped, deflected harmlessly against the glittering wall of a Shield Charm, and there was no chance to recover, because the death of Nagini had unleashed a hurricane.

The night had gone wild with noise. Somewhere far behind him, he could hear a roar, fifty voices raised in triumph as the defenders of Hogwarts screamed out their own cheers of encouragement and victory, but they were only a fraction of it. A thousand more throats had joined in battle-cries of fury, the long-awaited reinforcements that they had despaired would ever come were there. Their numbers were everything Michael's last message had ever promised, and they were surging over the broken walls, their pounding feet rumbling like thunder beneath their cries and the lightning cracks of spells already being fired towards the line of Death Eaters.

And there was more. Grawp had appeared, bellowing for his brother and enraging Voldemort's giants, who flung themselves forward, their massive charge shaking the earth beneath his feet as they slammed together in their own cataclysmic battle. They would have been too much for even Grawp's preternatural strength, but they were under attack from others as well; skeletal, bat-winged thestrals who whirled through the air, perfectly visible now to a crowd where no eye had been left innocent of death. A hippogriff ducked and soared amongst their ranks, his eagle-scream piercing the night as his sharp talons ripped at the eyes of the giants, and they began to howl and stamp, batting at their faces while Grawp pummeled them with the fists that could shatter stone.

Arrows flew through the air, a deadly hailstorm that peppered shrieks through the black-robed lines, the edge of the forest ripping apart as the centaurs joined the battle. Hooves lashed out to cave masks into twisted silver wreckage, human arms drawing and firing the thick yew bows so fast that the twang of the bowstrings was its own eerie chant of destruction.

Neville and Voldemort stood in the center of the maelstrom, neither able to act past the shock of the moment, warm brown locked on soulless red in a moment of impossible, uncomprehending unity. Then Hagrid's voice roared above the cacophony, "HARRY – WHERE'S HARRY?"

A hundred heads snapped around, but Harry's body had vanished. Where it had lay at their feet, there was only a patch where the dew was gone from the grass, and Neville sucked in a gasp of shock. Had he – who had – but he – nothing made sense any more!

It didn't matter. Voldemort recovered faster, and in a flash of white skin and a swirl of black robes, he was gone. Neville whirled, trying to make out any single figure among the sudden re-eruption of combat, but it wasn't Voldemort he finally spotted. It was Greyback.

With a high, eager howl, the werewolf had raised his face to the night and let out a cry of unholy hunger and opportunity. The pack ran forward, but not to join the battle. The monsters were streaking through the battling giants and centaurs, the Death Eaters and the leading edge of the reinforcements who were just now reaching them, led by the unmistakable red-haired figure of a wizard who had to be Charlie Weasley. They were heading for the castle, and in a single chilling flash of insight, Neville knew their target. Greyback was going after the wounded.

Neville hesitated only a moment, looking around desperately for his wand, but there was no hope of finding it, not in this insanity, not a single thin piece of wood among the shafts of a hundred arrows and the whirl of combat. But he still had the Sword, and his grip on the thick hilt tightened as he chased after them.

Was Harry alive? Was he dead? Where was Voldemort? Where had the centaurs and thestrals come from? What was going on? All the questions had ceased to matter. It was the one great relief he had discovered in battle. You couldn't afford to think about the larger issues, the bigger picture, even why you were fighting or how many fell around you.

Death had to be taken one step at a time, and right now, death was howling towards friends who were broken and helpless, and it wouldn't have mattered if Harry and Voldemort themselves had been engaged in a duel on the front steps. Neville only had eyes for the filthy gray dreadlocks above the ill-fitting robes as he closed the gap between them, each breath searing his anger all the higher for the painful stab of the broken ribs.

The battle followed him up the steps and through the broken doors into the entry hall, both sides driven into the battered shelter of the castle by the crashing feet of the giants and swirling attack of the thestrals, and he had to shoulder his way through ally and enemy alike to keep the werewolf in sight. His pack were being taken down on all sides, falling under hexes and curses, even torn off their feet with brutality equal to their own by sheer weight of numbers, but Greyback himself seemed almost charmed as he broke into the Great Hall, and now he was running, low and crouched, speeding along the edge of the room beneath the broken windows towards the low platform where the wounded lay.

Li saw him coming and began to scream, her hands scrabbling the floor as she tried to drag herself away, but the curse that had turned her lower body to stone now weighted her, anchored her helplessly in place. Neville was too far behind, he knew he could never make it in time, but his arm cocked back, and he flung the blade like a spear, sending it streaking forward with strength he never imagined he could still have. It did not strike home in the center of the broad back as he had hoped, but it caught Greyback nonetheless, slashing a deep furrow across his side before sliding away on the stone floor.

Greyback crumpled, clutching his bleeding ribs as the howl turned from hunger to the harsher notes of pain, but he recovered almost instantly, lunging for the sword. His clawlike hands were only inches from closing on the hilt, but Fritz rolled over, unable to stop but unable to be stopped by the scream of agony that tore from him as he clenched his burned hands into fists, smashing them down hard on the werewolf's fingers. It was enough. It bought him time.



Neville dropped to the floor, sliding the last few feet to grab the Sword and roll to his knees again. He was panting for air, shaking his hair back where it had fallen into his eyes, but he was armed, and now he was on his feet again; but so was Greyback.

The fight had reached the Hall. He could hear the clatter of hooves on stone, see the swirl of robes and hear the screams of battle and flashes of spells as the huge room filled with duelers, the centaurs towering above the witches and wizards as a third tier of combat came at knee-level where the house-elves of Hogwarts seemed to have gotten over their terror and joined the fight, stabbing and slashing at shins and ankles with cleavers and carving knives. Dozens of their allies had swarmed the platform, shielding the wounded from further attack, but it was all just so much background noise.

His world was the silver gleam of the blade in his hand and the golden gleam of his enemy's eyes.

They circled each other slowly, shoulders tense, breath coming in twin rasps of pain, and then Greyback lunged. Neville was ready, the Sword yanked back for a quick thrust, but it hadn't been an attack. Instead, the werewolf had gone for the pile of rubble at the edge of the platform, and now he was armed as well, a long, twisted piece of iron that had once been part of the tall windows clenched in his hands, viciously jagged at the ends and spiked with the remains of the broken glass that still clung to the grooved sides.

Neville had never been trained to use a sword. It was a heavy weapon, long and unwieldy, nothing at all like fighting with a wand or with your own fists, and he was in Greyback's world now, a world where spells and hexes gave way to sheer bare-knuckle violence. He parried the blows as fast as he could, ignoring the shards of glass that flew at each strike, feeling them skim

his hands and forearms like beestings, but it was only months of hard, brutal physical training that kept him afloat at all, and his body was reaching its limits.

Twenty-four hours of adrenaline, five hours of hard fighting, the Cruciatus, the exhausting anguish of losing so many friends, his own wounds...each swing was fractionally slower than the last, his arms were trembling, the Sword was beginning to sag in his grip, he was gasping for air that tasted sharply of salt-sweet copper, and Greyback wasn't flagging at all. If anything, he was pressing harder, scenting triumph, and there was a hideous, rasping bark of laughter as the iron bar slammed past Neville's guard and caught him across the thigh, opening a gash across the muscle and dropping him to one knee.

The yellow teeth gleamed, the shoulders tensed as he prepared to spring – but then a jet of purple fire slashed across the cruel face, and he reared back, roaring in sudden pain and shock.

"Mind if I join you?"

It was Ron. The other young wizard's wand was outstretched, holding the werewolf at bay as he reached back and grabbed Neville's free hand, pulling him to his feet with surprising strength. "I still owe this bastard for Bill!"

Greyback chuckled, settling his grip on the bar as he began to circle again, his narrow eyes shining at this new challenger. "Three of you, are there?" he sneered. "I've met your sister now, you know."

"Seven, but I'm the last one you'll be dealing with," Ron retorted coldly.

With a feral growl, Greyback lunged, but Ron spun away from the blow that would have caved in his skull like an eggshell, bringing his wand up in a fierce, slashing strike that fired another jet of light directly into the thick chest. The monster shuddered, gasped, staggered back, and Neville took his opportunity, raising the sword for a final strike that buried the blade deeply in the neck beneath the filthy beard, sending a scarlet gush of Greyback's own blood to join that of his victims in the tangled gray hair.

There was a last, rattling growl, and the golden eyes glazed, the bar clattering to the stones. The beast was dead.

Ron turned to Neville, the blue eyes sparkling as he grinned with a wild exhilaration. "You throw a hell of a bash, mate."

"Seventh year..." he managed to gasp out, shrugging, "...you know...gotta go out with a bang."

"No effing kidding." The freckled brow creased as Ron glanced at his bleeding leg. "You still good?"

"Yeah, it's not deep," Neville nodded, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Where's Voldemort?"

"He's -" The answer cut off in a harsh oath, and Neville turned to where Ron had indicated, understanding instantly what had drained the color from his friend's cheeks.

The battle had all but ended. Under the onslaught of so many fresh allies, the Death Eaters had finally been driven to defeat, and only two remained fighting, the rest either dead or prisoner; bound, disarmed, and held at wandpoint at the feet of their vanquishers. Yet the two that still remained were dueling three each, and the battles were fiercer than any Neville had ever seen that night, a dizzying cavalcade of flashes and snaps as the two clusters of fighters spun and ducked in the center of the circle of onlookers that had formed around the edges of the Hall.

Voldemort, dueling Shacklebolt, McGonagall, and Slughorn.



Bellatrix against Hermione, Luna, and Ginny.

The three girls were witches of skill far beyond their years, and it seemed impossible to Neville that any one person could stand against the combined onslaught of encyclopedic knowledge and bravery they shared, but Bellatrix was more than their equal. She looked almost as if she were enjoying herself, toying with them rather than fighting for her life, and his breath caught as Ginny's red hair flared green with a Killing Curse that had passed less than an inch from the side of her head.

A moment's exchanged look with Ron, and both men started to run forward, but another voice, familiar and yet completely alien in its overwhelming fury, screamed out across the hall, stopping them cold.

**"NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!"**

Mrs. Weasley had charged out into the circle of onlookers, flinging her cloak to the floor as she ran towards the young duelers. **"OUT OF MY WAY!"** A swipe of her wand shoved them back

before they had a chance to protest, and the two women faced one another for less than a breath before the curses began to fly anew.

For the first few moments, Bellatrix was grinning, sneering at the prospect of an easy victim in this plump, middle-aged, matronly woman, but the smile soon faded from her face entirely, replaced by a fierce snarl of malicious concentration. Mrs. Weasley may have used her wand primarily for cooking and cleaning, but she was also the woman who had given Ginny her firebrand spirit, who had raised a Curse-Breaker and a dragon wrangler, and she was propelled now by the fierce inferno of parental love. The floor around them began to crack and smoke, it was a duel to the death, and as a jet of green missed Mrs. Weasley by only fractions more than it had her daughter, Neville was not the only one who could take it no longer.

He began to run forward, seeing Ron, Seamus, and a half-dozen others of the surviving D.A. doing the same, but Mrs. Weasley saw them too. "No!" she yelled, "Get back! *Get back!* She is mine!"

A thousand eyes watched breathlessly as the duel continued, Voldemort and his challengers all but forgotten in the intensity of the two witches' confrontation, and Bellatrix's dark eyes were glittering insanely as she taunted her opponent. "What will happen to your children when I've killed you? When Mummy's gone the same way as Freddie?"

The kindly face was contorted in unspeakable hate, the reply screamed harshly between the curses that never stopped. "You – will – never – touch – our – children – again!"

Bellatrix laughed, a shrill, exhilarated, mocking laugh, but it was the last sound the evil woman would ever make. Mrs. Weasley's final curse shot directly beneath her outstretched wand, hitting her perfectly in the chest. Her eyes widened, bulged, the laugh cut off in a split-second realization, but it was already done. She collapsed, and Neville's own roar of vindictive glee was drowned in a thousand others.

At the loss of his final ally, the most prized of his ruthless followers, Voldemort screamed, and his wand seemed to explode with power. McGonagall, Shacklebolt, and Slughorn were blasted fully off their feet, hurled across the hall to collapse motionless at the feet of the onlookers, and the snake's face was a rictus of fury as he spun towards Mrs. Weasley.

"*Protego!*"

The shout seemed to come from nowhere, the Shield Charm erupting powerfully between Voldemort and his would-be target, but almost at once, the source became apparent.

The Invisibility Cloak fell to the floor, and a young wizard was standing there, straight-backed and strong with his wand held unwaveringly to aim directly between the red eyes.

Harry Potter. Very, very much alive.

"Harry!" Neville couldn't hold back the cry of shock any more than the others around him, the whole crowd seemed to exclaim at once over the impossible sight. They had *seen* him,

they *knew* he had been dead...but it must have been a mistake. It had to have been an illusion, a trick, because there was no mistaking that unruly black hair, those glasses, those eyes, that *scar*.

No, it was definitely Harry, and Neville took a deep breath, unsure of what he should do next as the two wizards began to circle one another slowly, his friend's stance more coiled, even predatory than he had ever seen. Voldemort was human now, he knew, but that did not make him any less an astonishingly powerful wizard who had been able to throw off two teachers and an Auror as though they were first-years, and no matter what any prophecy said or how brave Harry might be....

His fingers tensed on the hilt of the sword. Neville was exhausted, wandless, but he actually felt more confident about the likelihood of being able to do something with the Sword of Gryffindor against the Heir of Slytherin than he ever had been about his own magic. His eyes skipped over Ron, Ginny, Seamus, McGonagall, Luna, Hermione, and as one, they began to take a step forward, but Harry's voice rang through the silence with no trace of the uncertainty and weariness it had held since his return in the Hogshead.

"I don't want anyone else to try to help. It's got to be like this. It's got to be me." It was the voice of a grown man, and more than that, of a leader, and Neville was as stunned as he had been the first time he had noticed the same change in himself.

Voldemort gave a low hissing sound that wasn't quite a laugh, but a serpent's sneer. "Potter doesn't mean that. That isn't how he works, is it?" He motioned expansively towards the fighters who had begun to move, "Who are you going to use as a shield today, Potter?"

"Nobody." It was a simple, matter-of-fact statement, but it was said with such conviction that Neville stepped back. "There are no more Horcruxes. It's just you and me. Neither can live while the other survives, and one of us is about to leave for good."

Beside him, Ron drew a thin, shuddering breath through clenched teeth, and Neville reached out with his free hand, taking the other youth's arm in a firm grip. It was as much comfort as restraint, and Ron made no move to throw him off as Voldemort grinned terribly, his body tense and poised, the cords of his neck standing out like the flare of a cobra's hood. "One of us? You think it will be you, do you, the boy who has survived by accident, and because Dumbledore was pulling the strings?"

"Accident, was it, when my mother died to save me? Accident, when I decided to fight in that graveyard? Accident, that I didn't defend myself tonight, and still survived, and returned to fight again?" The words came in a taunting rhythm as they continued to stalk one another, drawing a literal circle of death in the middle of the ravaged Hall as their footprints through the bloodstains lapped one another on the stone floor.

"*Accidents!*" Voldemort screamed the word with such sudden rage that Neville closed his eyes, certain that this was the final strike, but it didn't come. The dark wizard collected himself just enough to continue mockingly. "Accident and chance and the fact that you crouched and sniveled behind the skirts of greater men and women, and permitted me to kill them for you!"

Harry never flinched. "You won't be killing anyone else tonight. You won't be able to kill any of them ever again. Don't you get it? I was ready to die to stop you from hurting these people —"

"But you did not!"

"—I meant to, and that's what did it. I've done what my mother did. They're protected from you. Haven't you noticed how none of the spells you put on them are binding? You can't torture them. You can't touch them. You don't learn from your mistakes, Riddle, do you?"

Voldemort blinked, taken as off-guard by the use of his mortal name as the onlookers who had collectively gasped at Harry's audacity. "You dare —"

Incredibly, Harry smiled. "Yes, I dare. I know things you don't know, Tom Riddle. I know lots of important things that you don't. Want to hear some, before you make another big mistake?"

"Is it love again?" The distorted white visage twisted in a sneer. "Dumbledore's favorite solution, *love*, which he claimed conquered death, though love did not stop him falling from the tower and breaking like an old waxwork? *Love*, which did not prevent me stamping out your Mudblood mother like a cockroach, Potter — and nobody seems to love you enough to run forward this time and take my curse. So what will stop you dying now when I strike?"

He gave a tiny twitch of the long wand, and under his hand, Neville felt Ron tense, and he knew that at any moment he might have to bodily prevent Harry's best friend from doing exactly what Voldemort had claimed no one willing to. He was not unwilling himself, he knew he had already proven as much already, but there was more going on here, so much more that he could only grasp enough to be aware that he understood nothing at all. They couldn't afford to interfere now. Not now when everything was dangling in such a dangerous balance. And if Harry was wrong...well, they'd need every spark of passionate loyalty and every drop of blood to finish this.

For a moment, Harry seemed to consider Voldemort's challenge as though it were something new to him, then he spoke, his voice quiet but carrying easily to every ear. "Just one thing."

"If it is not love that will save you this time, you must believe that you have magic that I do not, or else a weapon more powerful than mine?"

"I believe both."

For a moment, Voldemort's lipless mouth dropped open in shock at the simple audacity of the statement, then slowly, his mouth twisted, the gleaming white skull fell back against the dark folds of his hood, and he began to laugh. It was a terrible sound. As high and shrill as Bellatrix's, it rang with the same black insanity, the same inherent love of cruelty, and Neville shivered.

The echo of the laugh died away, and Voldemort smiled at the younger wizard almost indulgently. "You think *you* know more magic than I do? Than *I*, than Lord Voldemort, who has performed magic that Dumbledore himself never dreamed of?"

"Oh, he dreamed of it, but he knew more than you, knew enough not to do what you've done."

"You mean he was weak!" spat the reply. "Too weak to dare, too weak to take what might have been his, what will be mine!"

"No, he was cleverer than you, a better wizard, a better man."

"I brought about the death of Albus Dumbledore!" Voldemort crowed, but Harry gave the tiniest shake of his head, a dark smile dancing in the green eyes.

"You thought you did, but you were wrong."

Dumbledore? *Alive?* The gasp came before Neville could stop it, and suddenly, his memory summoned the image of a tombstone in a graveyard a world away from where they now stood. His grandmother had taken him there, said it was every wizard's duty to pay their respects, but he had never given any thought to the seeming platitude carved on the gravestone of Lily and James Potter. *The last enemy that shall be conquered is death.*

His heart was hammering, he couldn't breathe, and the sudden, unbearable hope seized his throat painfully as for the first time, his attention was completely torn away from the standoff. Neville was staring at the line of bodies who bore silent witness to the reason for their sacrifice, and his eyes lingered on Ernie, still crumpled on his knees at the end of the row. Suddenly, he seemed not slumped but crouched, and the thought was so close, so incredible that he could almost see the muscles tense along his back, the powerful shoulders ready to flex and stand and turn, hazel eyes bright and alive and ready to fight again.

Oh, could it all be undone? Could he have them *back*: Ernie and Parvati and Terry and Michael and Colin and Lavender and....

Voldemort's shriek shattered the dream into the impossibility it was.

"*Dumbledore is dead!* His body decays in the marble tomb in the grounds of this castle, I have seen it, Potter, and he will not return!"

"Yes, Dumbledore's dead," Harry replied calmly, and Neville felt suddenly closer to tears than he had been through the whole night of loss as that last, fleeting possibility was yanked away. Yet the sensation lasted only a moment before he was drawn back to the two very living wizards in the center of their crimson circle. "But you didn't have him killed. He chose his own manner of dying, chose it months before he died, arranged the whole thing with the man you thought was your servant."

"What childish dream is this?"

"Severus Snape wasn't yours. Snape was Dumbledore's, Dumbledore's from the moment you started hunting down my mother. And you never realized it, because of the thing you can't understand. You never saw Snape cast a Patronus, did you, Riddle? Snape's Patronus was a doe, the same as my mother's, because he loved her for nearly all of his life, from the time when they were children. You should have realized, he asked you to spare her life, didn't he?"

"He desired her, that was all," Voldemort scoffed, "but when she had gone, he agreed that there were other women, and of purer blood, worthier of him –"

"Of course he told you that, but he was Dumbledore's spy from the moment you threatened her, and he's been working against you ever since! Dumbledore was already dying when Snape finished him!"

*Snape?* Dumbledore's *ally*? But how could Dumbledore ever trust, ever *allow* – The first trickles of a cold rage began to build in Neville's chest. This whole thing was so much more complicated than he had ever guessed, and he wasn't sure whether he was more abruptly angry with Dumbledore for ever joining forces with such a man or with Snape for using the trust he'd been given to terrorize and abuse.

"It matters not!" Voldemort railed, then laughed again. "It matters not whether Snape was mine or Dumbledore's, or what petty obstacles they tried to put in my path! I crushed them as I crushed your mother, Snape's supposed great *love*!"

The red eyes narrowed, and he leaned in slightly, smiling. "Oh, but it all makes sense, Potter, and in ways that you do not understand! Dumbledore was trying to keep the Elder Wand from me! He intended that Snape should be the true master of the wand! But I got there ahead of you, little boy – I reached the wand before you could get your hands on it, I understood the truth before you caught up. I killed Severus Snape three hours ago, and the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny is truly mine! Dumbledore's last plan went wrong, Harry Potter!"

The...but the Elder Wand was a fairy tale! A children's story! His eyes went to the wand clutched in Voldemort's long, thin fingers in disbelief. Could it actually be true? If it was, then according to the story, he couldn't be beaten, was just as invulnerable as the Horcruxes had ever rendered him, and his ability to hold off his three formidable attackers was no mystery, though how Harry ever thought he could survive was even less comprehensible. Neville shook his head, wondering if any of this was making sense to anyone else, but even Ron looked rather confused, and he began to think that it was possible Seamus had been right all along. Harry had clearly lost his mind.

"Yeah, it did." Harry shrugged. "You're right, but before you try to kill me, I'd advise you to think about what you've done....Think, and try for some remorse, Riddle...."

His suggestion came as a clear and genuine shock to Voldemort, and he drew back a few inches, his brow creasing. "What is this?"

"It's your one last chance, it's all you've got left....I've seen what you'll be otherwise....Be a man...try...Try for some remorse...."

"You dare –" Voldemort hissed.

"Yes, I dare." Harry said bluntly. "Because Dumbledore's last plan hasn't backfired on me at all. It's backfired on you, Riddle. That wand still isn't working properly for you because you

murdered the wrong person. Severus Snape was never the true master of the Elder Wand. He never defeated Dumbledore."

"He killed –"

"Aren't you listening? *Snape never beat Dumbledore!* Dumbledore's death was planned between them! Dumbledore intended to die undefeated, the wand's last true master! If all had gone as planned, the wand's power would have died with him, because it had never been won from him!"

"But then, Potter, Dumbledore as good as gave me the wand!" The high voice was raised in a cry of satisfaction. "I stole the wand from its last master's tomb! I removed it against its last master's wishes! Its power is mine!"

"You still don't get it, Riddle, do you?" Harry's words were almost a chuckle. "Posessing the wand isn't enough! Holding it, using is, doesn't make it really yours. Didn't you listen to Ollivander? *The wand chooses the wizard....*"

The young wizard paused, letting the words sink in, and Neville saw the green eyes flick towards the crowd for a moment, but not at himself, not at Ron or Ginny or Hermione as he had expected. Instead, they had found a figure that Neville had not even noticed previously, a young man with white-blonde hair, a pointed face that was dark with soot and a bloody lip, who was tucked into a corner of the Hall with his parents as if trying to disappear into the stones.

Before Neville could come up with any reason why Harry would have sought out his old schoolboy rival at such a time, Harry's eyes had locked back on Voldemort, and he continued smoothly. "The Elder wand recognized a new master before Dumbledore died, someone who never even laid a hand on it. The new master removed the wand from Dumbledore against his will, never realizing exactly what he had done, or that the world's most dangerous wand had given him its allegiance. The true master of the Elder Wand was Draco Malfoy."

Voldemort was breathing hard now, his chest rising and falling quickly beneath the dark robes, and for a moment, an expression of shock that was almost devastation passed over the reptilian visage, but it was gone so quickly it might not have been there at all, and he smiled again in cruel confidence. "But what does it matter? Even if you are right, Potter, it makes no difference to you and me. You no longer have the phoenix wand: We duel on skill alone...and after I have kiled you, I can attend to Draco Malfoy...."

"But you're too late. You've missed your chance. I got there first. I overpowered Draco weeks ago. I took this wand from him." He gave the wand in his hand a little flick, and Neville saw Malfoy's face fall even whiter beneath the soot, his mouth opening in a tiny, silent moan as the gray eyes closed. He could almost, almost feel sorry for him. Then he thought of the malicious smile as the earring had been dropped into his hand, the look of sadistic power as the wand Harry now held was poised over the Dark Mark. Almost.

"So it all comes down to this, doesn't it?" Harry's voice was a whisper, but it carried as easily as Voldemort's ranting screams. For the first time, he was showing the tension of his confrontation. His slender shoulders were bunched, the slow circling now poised on the balls of his feet, and

Neville could actually see the pulse pounding in his friend's neck, his fingers taut on the handle of Malfoy's wand. "Does the wand in your hand know its last master was Disarmed? Because if it does...I am the true master of the Elder Wand."

This last revelation, this final claim of power was too much. Voldemort struck.

The Great Hall was ablaze with light. As if on cue, the rising sun hit the edge of the magical ceiling, the sills of the shattered windows, and a livid, flaming glow struck both faces. It was pushed to a further, blinding intensity as both wizards shouted at the same moment, gold flames exploding as the spells collided with a blast so tremendous that it rattled dust from the cracked and weakened stones.

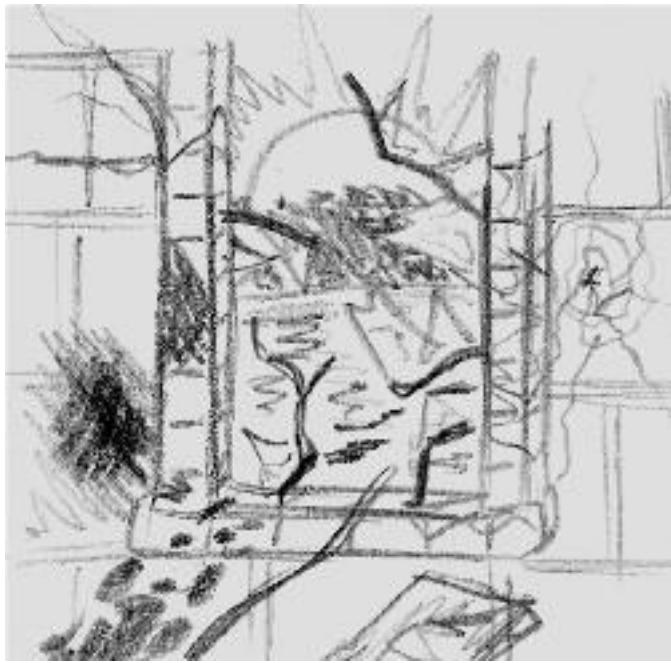
*"Avada Kedavra!"*

*"Expelliarmus!"*

The wand was ripped from Voldemort's hand. Slowly, silhouetted against the brilliant dawn, it spun, spiraled, turned end over end through the air, and Harry leapt up, catching it in his fist with the same neat precision that had made him the star of the Gryffindor Quidditch team since his first year. He clutched it, turning as he landed, his cheeks flushed and his lips parted in breathless anticipation, hope, terror, and Neville's eyes followed his friend's, hardly daring....

Voldemort lay motionless on the stones, arms and legs sprawled, his expression lax and empty, his eyes no longer scarlet but a sightless white. His pale hands were open and empty, his robes hanging around him in nothing more than limp folds of ordinary black cloth, and he was just another corpse; less imposing, less frightening even than the bodies of the children who lay around him, their own battered remains mute testimony that in the end, love fell far harder than hate.

It was over. Tom Riddle was dead.



## Chapter Twenty-Four By the Light of Day

Silence hung across the hall for what seemed like forever, then the truth of what had finally, wonderfully happened sank in. Giddy chaos broke out everywhere, and the crowd surged forward to touch, to hug, to kiss, grab, cheer for the Boy Who Lived, the boy who had ended the nightmare at last.

Ron and Hermione made it there first, but Neville was only a second behind them, grabbing Harry in a tight embrace, laughing as his head collided with Ron's, as they nearly ripped their friend and hero apart in their attempts to express the boundless triumph of the moment. Then he was shoved back, shouldered out of the way by Ginny, by Luna, by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Hagrid and a dozen, a hundred, a thousand others.

He reeled back, and his battered ribs were burning harshly, his leg throbbing where Greyback had slashed it, the burns on his arm stinging fiercely, his whole body trembling with exhaustion, but he couldn't have cared less. Neville wanted to leap into the air, to dance, to shout, to sing with joy. It was over! Over! Over at long, long last! He wheeled towards Riddle's empty corpse, raising the Sword to strike it again in victory, but no, that was a silly gesture, childish and futile.

Instead he smirked down at the body, gathering a thick gob of spit and unleashing it directly into the distorted face. It landed with a satisfying splatter, and he wasn't the only one to feel that way. Little Rose Zeller, a fourth-year Hufflepuff girl, came crawling through the chaos on her hands and knees, dragging her useless arm and leg behind her, but her round face was flushed with joy, and she thrust her wand at the fallen enemy. "*Flagrate!*"

Orange fire shot from the end of her wand, and her brown eyes were glittering as she carved the letters through the black robes, etching them deeply into the skin of the white chest in a glowing scorch. *D.A.*

Neville and several more of the survivors laughed in delight, but dark, strong arms reached down, lifting the girl away from her trophy with an admonishing shake of the bald head. "Leave him alone," Shacklebolt reprimanded firmly, "he doesn't deserve our attention any more. He's nothing now."

McGonagall was there as well, and she flicked her wand, casting a Shield Charm over the body as she turned to the Auror. "We see to our own first, but then I would appreciate it if you'd get *that* out of here, Kingsley. It's a defilement to have it laying here."

Neville had no time to either agree or to argue. More of the D.A. had peeled away from the crush surrounding Harry, and to his own surprise, he found himself bombarded by almost as much fierce affection. They were ruffling his hair, hugging him, jostling him from one set of arms to the next, cries of pain and cries of joy intermingling as their injuries protested their exuberance, he was being kissed by witch and wizard alike, and he was grateful when McGonagall reached through the ecstatic melee and gently took the Sword he had been trying to hold away from it all to avoid slicing open his own comrades.

And the other wounded were there now, carried on litters or supported against the strong shoulders of the red-robed Medi wizards that seemed to have appeared from nowhere, and even those who seemed barely clinging to life wanted a moment with him. He kissed their scorched cheeks, gently held blistered hands, thanked them for their bravery, for their heroism, made them promise to keep fighting, to heal, to come back whole and well. Fritz asked him if there would be a party, and he swore there would, the biggest party any of them had ever seen, and all they had to do was *be* there, give their word that they would face the painful recovery still ahead of them and not allow any more death to thin their ranks further.



He had begun to cry at some point, but they weren't proper tears, not yet. He could feel them on his cheeks, hear the tremor in his own words, see his hands shaking, but he actually felt very little. The incredible pain and the incredible elation had canceled each other out as purely as the spells that had brought it all to an end, and he didn't have the freedom yet to sort it all out. He was still their Commander, still their leader, and it was dizzying how when everyone else was still clustered around Harry, the few remains of his own little army didn't even seem to care that the other wizard was there.

The reinforcements had included the families of nearly all the students who had remained to fight in the first wave of the battle, summoned by the desperate hope that they could do something to help their children, their brothers and sisters, their nieces and nephews, even their grandchildren, and because of the Fidelius Charm, most of them had no idea that it hadn't been Harry who led the fight all along. At first, as each knot of relatives found their loved ones, it was Harry that was sought out, embraced in tearful thanks for those who had lived, begged for some closure, for words of praise and solace for those who had arrived too late, whose children were found dead or seriously wounded or not at all.

To his surprise, it was Ron and Hermione who re-directed them, taking shaking shoulders and murmuring softly through wails of anguish that it had been Neville after all. Neville who had taught them to fight hard enough to spare their lives, Neville that had been their leader whom they had followed proudly and gladly to the last.

It was easier for those he hadn't seen. He could praise their heroism, tell their families and friends what they had been like alive, how they had fought back all year, how they had grown and become so strong and so brave, and how he knew they had gone down hard, and yes, he was sure that they had thought of their families with love in the last moments.

But he also had to face Nick and Sarah Vance, find a way to explain why they weren't being allowed to see Ryan without forcing them to hear that he had been ripped inside out by an Entrail Expelling Curse, why their other son had been rushed away to St. Mungo's where they could only hope to undo the thirty layered hexes that had finally felled him. Romilda's entire caravan had come, beseeching him to help them find her, and he had to lead them to the shredded heap they had walked past six times, then admit the news that there *was* no one to curse, because the closest family of the witch who had done it were the two tow-headed boys a few places away in the line of heartbreak.

They didn't blame him, none of them blamed him, and that somehow hurt the worst. Instead they knelt at the bodies and thanked him for leading them, thanked him for training them, thanked him for fighting at their side, and for being willing to see them now. But what else could he do? It was impossible for Neville to turn his back on them when they had all become so much more than his soldiers; they were his friends, every one of them.

Some had been closer than others, of course – there were some losses that hurt so bad he couldn't even bear to look at them and was silently begging not to have to – but he had gotten to know all of them, and he made sure that every one of the bereaved knew that their beloved had never, never been empty numbers to him as he fulfilled last requests, passed on final wishes.



Euan Abercrombie had collected Chocolate Frog cards, and he had wanted his younger brother to have the whole set, even though he had never let him touch them in life. He held Pansy as she sobbed over her sister and swore to her that she had never betrayed her beliefs. He found Gwenog Jones in the crowd and lead her over to where Rowan lay, and the tough athlete wept as she placed a gentle kiss on the young witch's cold lips, then took off her own team robes and wrapped them around the strong, broken shoulders.

The sun was high in the windows now, unforgiving on their tears and the many others who hadn't lost anyone dear to them, who were still wholly right to just be celebrating, and it came as a shock to him when he felt a hand on his arm and turned not to find yet another mourner, but Hannah and Madam Pomfrey. She smiled gently at him, standing on tip-toe to place a soft kiss on his cheek. "Your turn, Commander."

"What?" He shook his head, dazed, not understanding, but her hands were at his chest now, pushing him back to sit bemusedly on the bench at one of the tables McGonagall had brought back.

"You're going to let me get that leg taken care of, and anything else that Madam Pomfrey finds, and you're going to have some breakfast before you fall over...and don't tell me you're not hungry, none of us have eaten since lunch yesterday."

Neville tried to protest, but he just didn't have the energy. He felt drained, exhausted, his head was spinning, and he scarcely noticed that someone had set the Sword of Gryffindor by his plate, that the survivors had gathered around him as the Healer mended the gash on his leg, poured Skele-Gro into his goblet for the broken ribs. They were sharing their own stories, enthusing over near-misses and the Death Eaters they had each killed and captured, and he just nodded, smiling and praising them without really hearing a word of it. Hannah actually had to feed him the first few bites of the meal that had been placed in front of him before he realized that he was, in fact, starving and tucked into it himself, but the food was tasteless in his mouth even as his body demanded it with frightening rapacity.

Slowly, he became aware of the people clustered around, and his brow furrowed as he noticed that one particular face was missing from the eager little gathering. He turned to Hannah, dropping his voice low to keep the question between the two of them. "Where's Seamus?"

Her eyes widened as she looked around, noticing for the first time that the young Irishman was nowhere to be found. "I don't know. He was here a little bit ago...over with Dean and his family." She stood, craning her neck to see through the crowd that had thinned a bit, but was still dense in the wrecked Hall. "They're still with the body, but I don't see him anywhere."

Neville stood, surprised to find that his strength had returned quite a bit with only the few minutes rest and the meal he had demolished. "Guys —"

The babble of voices stilled, and a dozen pairs of eyes looked up at him expectantly, as if waiting for his next order. "Hey..." he shook his head, "we're not an army any more...but does anyone know where Finnigan's gone?"

Eyebrows raised, there were several exclamations of surprise at the realization that their last Lieutenant was missing, but no one had seen him go. "Why don't you use your Patronus, Neville?" Demelza suggested. "We'll all be here when you get back."

"No you won't," he replied firmly. "You'll be in St. Mungo's, Demelza, getting something done about that eye, and so will the rest of you. This thing's over now, and you can consider it my final order to you as an army if you want, but I want everyone to get themselves taken care of. I've promised everybody a victory party once we're all back on our feet properly, so this isn't exactly the last time we'll all be together, but for right now..."

"Yes, sir," Felton Summerby nodded crisply, "but if we're all going to be gone when you get back...." The young Hufflepuff stood, then raised his wand in salute. "Dumbledore's Army!"

As one, they all stood, and Neville felt his cheeks flush even as his chest tightened in pride as too-few voices joined in what was at last, no matter how costly, a victory cry. "Dumbledore's Army!"



OOO

He found Seamus in the Room of Requirement.

It was unrecognizable as any of the forms it had ever taken. Instead, it was simply an empty room, no larger than one of the smaller classrooms, scorched completely black and smelling strongly of char as faint wisps of smoke continued to rise here and there where beams and braces continued to smolder. Seamus had found or conjured a small stool that seemed incongruous as the only thing unburned in their former hideout, and he was sitting with his back to the open door, his head bowed low, his elbows braced on his knees as he stared at something in his hands.

He didn't answer when Neville called his name, and as he walked into the room and came around to face his friend, he was not entirely surprised to see that it was a bottle, the amber liquid barely filling it halfway. The tracks of them were visible on the freckled cheeks when Seamus finally raised his head, but there was no trace of tears in the blue eyes. "Whatcha doin' comin' in here?"

Neville reached for his wand to conjure a seat of his own, then remembered that it was still out there on the battlefield somewhere. There would be time to find it later. Instead, he simply knelt, feeling the stone floor still warm through his trousers. "Looking for you. You'd disappeared, and I was worried about you."

"No need." He raised the bottle, showing the label, which was a Muggle brand of whisky Neville did not recognize. "Jus' havin' meself a bit o' a victory nip. You'll be welcome ta share'f ya like. Dean put me on to it, he did, y'know. Shocked as anythin' to find I'd never had non o' what me own country does grand enough without magic 'tall. Not s'much kick as firewhisky, but smooth's a kiss, an' lets ya tuck it by better for't."

"Seamus –" Neville frowned as he got a better look at the flushed cheeks, heard the thickness of the accent and the blur at the edges of the words. " – you're drunk."

"Fifty points ta Gryffindor for noticin' the bleedin' obvious." He took another long pull from the bottle, then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "An' I don't know when I intend ta be sober again, tell ya true that."

Neville reached out, putting a hand gently on the other man's back. "I don't think Dean would want –"

"T'hell with Dean!" He yanked away, his eyes blazing abruptly. "I thought it were Sally-Anne what'd lost t'use of her eyes...or can't ya hear, neither? Or can't ya see how many o' our friends were laid out down there? Din't ya hear Harry?"

"Of course I know how many we lost!" He pulled a piece of parchment from his pocket, letting Seamus see the long list of names written there, "I'm the one that's been having to deal with all their families. And it's not Harry's fault, Seamus. He didn't –"

"No, no he din't, an' that's the pain o' it. I had meself a chat with Ron. Harry were as blind lost as any o' us. D'you know ol' Dumbledore din't tell them *anythin'*? They were out there, tryin' not ta get killed, wanderin' around for better part o' a year on a little breadcrumb scavenger hunt, no bleedin' idea o' what they were doin', or what they'd do when they were done. Harry din't even know he had ta die until we were already under ceasefire." Seamus' voice broke, and his head tipped down into his hands as his shoulders began to shake. "They had the last one o' them Horbastards done by not fifteen minutes in. Coulda all ended there. Coulda been – "

Neville wanted to soothe him as he began to weep bitterly, to protest that he was drunk, that he must have misunderstood, that it couldn't be true, but he couldn't. He remembered how Ron and Hermione had been just as ignorant of what Harry was doing as the rest of them. How they had been guessing just as blindly. How lost, how *abandoned* Harry's eyes had seemed when he first showed up, and how he had confessed to all of them that he didn't even know what they were looking for.

The cold rage that had first begun to hint itself to him when he learned of Snape's supposed 'true loyalties' began to grow anew. His mind spun through the list, thinking of how very, very few had actually been lost in the initial onslaught. If what Ron had said was true, they would still have lost Michael, Ryan, a handful of others...but Parvati, Colin, Lavender, Terry...oh *damn him!* *Damn* Dumbledore if even half of them could have been spared! If even *one*!

"There has to be a reason, Seamus." He fought to keep his voice calm, reasonable, but he could hear the tremble of fury and newly-awakened pain at the edges. "I'm sure he had a reason."

"I'd take kindly if he'da told us what it was, but there ain't none o' that now, is there? He's gone long since, an' he weren't 'zactly the most forthcomin' sort in the first!" The words were choked on the sobs, the pain refusing to be numbed by mere alcohol, and Neville gave the tattooed shoulder a firm squeeze as he stood.

"I've got a few questions of my own, actually, now that it comes down to it," he said coldly.

"Go whistle ta the grave if ya will, but won't do no good."

Neville smiled darkly down at his friend, thinking of the night Ginny had been told about his own supposed role in the prophecy – something that now didn't seem to make any sense at all – and the only time he had ever spoken to the old Headmaster in any way directly. A portrait wasn't as good as a person, not by a long shot, but if there were any answers to be had there, he was bloody well going to get them. "I've got an idea," he said, "and I'd take you with me, except –"

"No," the singed head shook dully, "jus' lemme be, mate. I don't want naught t'do with folk right now."

"All right, but I'll be back to check on you, that's a promise." He reached down to his friend's belt and took the wand before the other wizard could protest, tapping the bottle. The liquid inside shimmered, rippled a moment, and Seamus sniffed it before looking up again, his eyes wide with incredulous indignation.

"Tea?"

"You're already blitzed, mate. Whatever it's gonna do for the pain, it's done. You don't need to hurt yourself on top of it." He smiled at the other man, allowing some of his own pain to show through the layer of anger that had built solidly atop it. "You're not just my last Lieutenant, Seamus...you're one of the dearest friends I have left. *Please....*"

There was a moment's more frustrated consternation, then the blue eyes softened, and he put the bottle on the floor at his feet, raising his hand to place it firmly over Neville's own. "Fair 'nuff, Fearless Leader."

"Thanks." He slipped his hand away, then started towards the door, but then he paused and turned back. "Here –" Neville tossed the wand, and both wizards seemed equally stunned when Seamus actually managed to catch it. "—I'll give you the benefit of the doubt...if you're able to transfigure it back, you're still okay to have more."

"Oh, Neville, m'darlin," Seamus rolled his eyes at the ceiling, then cast a mournful look at the bottle. "I couldna ever do that when I were stone sober."

OOO

"You don't need a password anymore, mate."

Neville looked up in surprise from where he had been contemplating the battered gargoyle that guarded the steps to the Headmaster's office. Ron was standing a few feet behind him, looking tired and a bit dusty, but also oddly guilty, and he frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Came up with Harry," Ron explained, "he's off to take himself a bit of a kip now – Merlin knows the bloke needs it bad enough – and...er...." he began to blush, the color starting in the center of his nose and spreading rapidly as though someone had hit him in the face with an overripe tomato. "...I...decided to...hang around."

Now that he looked more closely, Neville noticed that Ron's shirttails were half pulled-out, the red hair mussed, and there was a spot of darker color on his neck that looked very much like it would be purple within a few hours. His eyebrows raised skeptically. "Just...decided to hang around?"

"Yeah." Ron nodded. "You know, I mean, it's pretty crowded downstairs, and I was thinking I might like a little peace and quiet myself."

"And if I were to look behind that big plinth there," Neville motioned to the tall marble pedestal from which Ron seemed to have emerged. "I wouldn't happen to find that Hermione had also decided to just hang around, now would I?"

To his amazement, the blush actually managed to darken, bordering now on positively maroon at the height of Ron's cheekbones. "No...but that's 'cause I told her to split while I got rid of whoever it was. But you don't need to go running to the *Prophet* about it. Just because *you* haven't figured out what witches are all about –"

"Actually, that would fall under things we need to catch up on," Neville grinned.

The blue eyes widened in astonishment, and he felt rather annoyed to see that after everything that had happened to the two of them, the thought of him getting a girl could come as such a shock. "Blimey, Neville, you've –"

"Snogged? Changed? Grown up? All of the above, yeah. But I'm not gonna tell anyone, Ron, that's your business. Well, yours and Hermione's, I guess." He paused, and a sudden memory struck him with such force that he had to squeeze his eyes shut against the tears that abruptly threatened, and he heard himself gasp.

Almost instantly, he felt Ron's hand on his arm, and all the jovial embarrassment had vanished from the other young man's voice. "You all right? You're not trying to go for extra hero points and hiding injuries, are you?"

"I'm fine..." He took a deep breath, shaking his head as he forced back the unexpected surge of grief and made his mouth turn up into something like a sheepish smile. "...just...keeps hitting me out of the bloody weirdest places how many we've lost." Ron seemed sympathetic, yet a bit confused, and he went on. "There was a betting pool about you and Hermione, actually. Everyone knew you two were mad for each other, and most of Gryffindor put in...I had some

silver on Easter, to be honest. But Lavender would have won. She had it on being the same day You-Kno... *Voldemort* went down. Except...she's not going to be collecting, I suppose."

"It won't work." Ron's voice was quiet, gentle, and Neville looked up bemusedly.

"Won't work?"

"That's why you wanted to see Dumbledore, I'm guessing." Ron shook his head sadly. "I already asked him after Harry left...I thought maybe, if we used all the Hallows together...and after Harry had given himself for all of us, I thought it might work like Harry's mother, or like what Ernie did for his wife. But Dumbledore said that there's no way, not any way that's real or decent, at least. That kind of sacrifice only works to *prevent* someone from dying. Once they're gone, Neville, they're just gone."

Neville didn't know what Ron meant by 'the Hallows', and in fact, the thought of asking Dumbledore for a way to bring back their lost comrades hadn't even occurred to him, but the news hurt nonetheless. He shook his head, and his voice was rougher than he had expected as he pushed the words past the grief that was getting harder and harder to keep at bay as the day wore on. "No, I wasn't going to ask him about that. I know they're not coming back."

He took a deep breath, then nodded, accepting Ron's wordless invitation to sit down. The two wizards found a spot on the empty pedestal of the second gargoyle, and Neville gestured towards the door that led to the spiral staircase. "I want to ask about this whole mess – what was it, you know? Wands? Horcruxes? Prophecies? Was I ever *anything*, or was it all Harry all along? What kind of sick idea was it letting Snape have this school? Why didn't he *tell Harry* what was going on so we could have spared some lives? Why couldn't he ever just *tell* anyone what was going on? Why did it always have to be secrets and hidden meanings?"

A long silence hung after the questions, then Ron let out a low whistle. "That's a lot of stuff."

"I know." Neville admitted, "But I think I deserve some answers after everything that's happened. I think we all do. Seamus – " he jerked his head down the hall towards where a staircase had once stood, now nothing more than a pile of demolished stones and shattered railings. "—he's in the Room of Requirement right now, monged out of his mind, not just because he lost his best friend last night, but because he thinks it didn't have to happen."

Ron laughed blackly. "You should tell him to go to what's left of the Gryffindor common room. He could share his stash with George and Lee. They're up there not coping with Fred the same way. Mum just hasn't stopped crying."

"What about you?" Neville asked cautiously.

"Don't feel much of anything, really." Ron shrugged. "Was starting to for a while, so I snogged Hermione until I was this close to passing out from lack of oxygen. Probably do that again later, then...don't know. Guess we're all going to have to figure something out. Don't reckon I've got much right to judge how other people go about it, though, even if getting drunk seems pretty stupid to me. Makes me maudlin when I *don't* have a reason."

Now it was Neville's turn to be surprised. "When have you...?"

"At Bill's. I...." Ron paused, looking down at his hands as he twisted the long fingers awkwardly on the hem of his shirt. "Oh, hell. I had a lot of the same problems you did, mate. Why hadn't he told us more, how did he expect us to do whatever it was he expected us to do, how many people were going to die while we solved his little puzzle? All that. And I decided to stuff it. Just quit the whole thing."

"You *what*?"

"Not proud of it. Ran out on both of them right around the middle of November. We'd just found out about you guys trying to steal the Sword and getting caught, and I kind of snapped. Up and left. Tried to go back, but I ran into some trouble, and we'd put up a lot of protective charms, so I couldn't find them again for about a month. Stayed with Bill in the mean time, and his wife's French, so there was plenty of wine around for me to give it a go a couple times." He shook his head with a self-deprecating smile. "Not my thing. Makes me turn on sappy music and cry like a witch. Have you ever—?"

Neville smiled back. "Properly drunk? Just once...with the guys the first week we were hiding out in the Room of Requirement. We all did. I get really stupid and lose all sense of self-preservation. Thank goodness Ernie, Derek, and Wayne combined to outweigh me like five-to-one is all I'll say. Although if Terry were still around, I'd get him loaded just so you'd believe me. He *parses*."

"He *what*?"

"Spells. You know. The advanced stuff. Sits down and starts picking them apart really intently. *Incendio, Incendins, Incendior, Incendiate, Incendiavis...*"

"That. Is. Bizarre." Ron chuckled. "Between that and Luna, I think they need to re-build Ravenclaw tower with padded walls."

"I think we've all wound up a little mental," Neville pointed out. "It's been that kind of a – well, that kind of a several years, really." He paused, then his tone became serious again. "But what brought you back? Did you get your answers?"

"Some of them, and some just sort of figured themselves out as we went along." He hesitated, frowning. "You don't really know Harry all that well, do you, Neville?"

He spread his hands, shrugging slightly. "As well as anybody other than you and Hermione and maybe Professor Dumbledore. He's always kept to himself a lot. Never really blamed him, being a celebrity since he was a baby and all."

"He really, really got thrown into the deep end of this. You and I, we can't properly imagine. Not only did he find out from nowhere that he was a wizard and about the whole world that came with that, but that he was The Boy Who Lived, about Voldemort, his parents – did you know he actually grew up believing that scar came from a piece of jagged glass in a Muggle *car accident*?"

"But that's a *textbook* Curse scar!"

"Gotta come from a world that's got those textbooks," Ron pointed out. "Thing is, he really held on to Dumbledore a lot more than I think anyone except the old wizard himself understood. When he died, Harry just came apart...and did you see that book that came out last summer?"

Neville made a face. "Skeeter's piece of dung? *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore?*"

"That's the one."

"Didn't read it. Don't think anyone at the school did, actually. None of us got past the by-line...especially the Hufflepuffs. I remember when the article came out in the *Prophet* about it hitting its tenth week on Flourish and Blot's Best-Seller List. Sally-Anne made quite the show of tossing the paper across the table and saying that she wasn't going to spend two Knuts on the woman who had listed 'Cedric Diggerly' as 'the secondary Hogwarts Champion.' But what of it?"

"It messed with his head bad. It was already so much of a shock to him that Dumbledore had actually died, he was ready to believe anything. And I think Dumbledore knew that. He knew there'd be stupid trash books and people jumping up to blab to the papers, because there always are when someone famous dies, whether they deserve it or not. I think he knew how bad it would muck with Harry and gave us a good long run-around to give him a chance to get his head together. He needed it, too." Ron shuddered a little, there was a haunted look in his eyes, and Neville remembered his own near-breakdown that spring. He certainly had no right to hold it against Harry if he'd taken the strain badly himself. "On my wand, Neville, I think if it had been even a couple weeks less – hell, even a couple of *minutes* – he wouldn't have been able to do what he needed to in the end, because there would have been a part of him that *wanted* to die."

Neville thought about this a moment, then cocked his head curiously as another question came to him. "Why not warn Harry ahead of time if he knew he was going to die and knew it would hurt him?"

The blue eyes fixed him with a frank, open stare. "Do you think he'd have been able to concentrate on what Dumbledore was telling him all year, or do you think he'd have just started giving up and coming to pieces earlier?"

"Okay...." Neville had never considered Ron to be particularly philosophical before, and he was beginning to regard the other wizard with a new respect. "You've really thought this all out, haven't you?"

Ron laughed. "I know you guys were busy all year, but ours was basically I'm-Going-To-Die-Of-Boredom spiced up here and there with just plain I'm-Going-To-Die. Hide. Camp. Argue. Fight for our lives. Hide. Camp. Argue. Fight for our lives. Hide again, camp some more, argue just for a change of pace. Fight for our lives again. I've done more thinking in the past ten months than in the seventeen years before it, I swear."

"Still," Neville pressed, "maybe it's just the way Harry made it sound, but it all seems really...seat of your pants, you know? Like it worked out as much as from luck as anything else. You'd think

with all those years to work out that Voldemort was coming back, Dumbledore would have had a tighter plan."

"That's what I thought too, but Bill straightened me out on that one. He was privy to a lot more from the Order," Ron retorted. "No one expected Voldemort to come back as fast as he did. Dumbledore and everyone else thought they'd have a few more years at least, and *no one* thought Fudge would just shove his wand up his arse and ignore the whole thing. That's what really let him get hold. Once that happened, everyone – Dumbledore too – *was* scrambling by the seat of their pants to catch up and do something. If you're gonna blame someone for the body count downstairs, mate, I'd suggest you point your wand at Fudge."

"I don't think I know enough hexes," Neville said bitterly. "And half of them didn't need to die."

"According to Seamus, half of you shouldn't have *lived*," Ron snapped with surprising harshness. "He said you were planning a last-man-standing business at the end of the year *without* Harry or Dumbledore or anyone else."

"We didn't have a choice!" he shot back fiercely. "We thought we'd been abandoned! No one told us anything! How were we supposed to trust in any kind of greater plan with someone like *Snape* running the school! It's all the worse that he was Dumbledore's man in the end! To let that *bastard* have control of his –" Neville cut off, his face twisting in hate as he struggled to find words for what the ex-Potion Master's reign had been like, but Ron either had heard enough from others already, or he could guess.

"If he'd known you like you are now, Neville, I'm sure he would have told you something, but when he was alive to make the decisions, you *weren't* a leader, there *wasn't* a reason to tell the rest of Hogwarts anything." Ron couldn't keep an edge of sarcasm back as he continued. "And how was he supposed to have *let* Snape have the school when Snape took over after he'd *died*? No one ever said he *liked* Snape, just that he *used* him, and he'd have been an idiot not to."

"Fair enough," Neville conceded grudgingly, then sighed deeply, rubbing his temples with the tips of his fingers. "I hate you, Ron."

The other wizard blinked, stunned. "*What?*"

"This whole year," he said slowly, "it's been a living hell. And now we've lost just enough of our friends that it hurts almost too bad to go on, but there are still enough of us left that it's a victory, and Voldemort's dead, Snape's dead – and he helped *win* it in the end, even though he was a horrible person – and everything's still a mess, and Dumbledore screwed up, but thanks to you I guess I know he didn't screw up badly enough that I can hate him for it, and Fudge is too *pathetic* to hate...and it's just...Colin once said that he liked the wizarding world because it was straightforward. Good. Evil. End of story. But it's *not*."

Ron nodded, and there was absolute understanding and equal pain in his eyes. "Do you suppose this is what it means to be adults?"

A humorless smile came to Neville's mouth. "If it is, want to snap our wands and go be Muggles? I hear they don't have to do it until they're eighteen."

"Nah, I don't see why," Ron said dryly. "Too late for me, and you'd only get what, three more months?"

"I suppose. And I spent two days in their world over Christmas anyway." He shook his head. "You're right. More trouble than it's worth."

"So what're you gonna do now?" Ron asked after a long pause.

Neville took a deep breath, considering it carefully before he answered. "I still want to know if I ever was really fated for anything, or if it was just Dumbledore's way of trying to make sure that someone would be willing to make a go of it if Harry *had* died in a way that wasn't planned. It doesn't *really matter* now, I know, but I think I'll sleep better at night just having an answer. But otherwise...I guess...try to move on. Try to help my friends, put together the victory party I promised the survivors, see where things go with Hannah...basically do the best I can. How about you?"

"Find Hermione is number one. Re-commence the snogging until she slaps me, or until the last thirty hours or so finally catch up and I pass out. Then I guess the same as you...just...move on." Like Neville himself, he seemed hesitant to actually say it, as if acknowledging that they *could* continue with their lives was somehow disrespectful to those whose lives had ended. He ran his hands through the dust-dulled red hair, closing his eyes as he tipped his head back exhaustedly, and Neville noticed for the first time that there *were* new lines by Ron's eyes as well, and that his right arm didn't seem able to raise as high as his left.

It would never be the same. They were all scarred, all battered, they had all bled pieces of their hearts over every page of the calendar that year, and left still more lying on the battlefield below. But they would move on. What choice did they have now that they had survived?

He reached out to squeeze Ron's shoulder, but there was an odd dip in the skin there beneath his robes, as if the underlying muscle had been hollowed out. The other man's eyes opened at the touch, and he gave a lopsided smile. "Splinched. Little souvenir, just in case I might forget."

Neville tapped his own face, where the healing beneath the Sorting Hat's flames had finally closed the cursed wounds, but where two long scars now ran from ear to chin, unnaturally smooth and white across his cheeks. "That's one thing that *is* simple. We'll never forget."



## Epilogue

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2013 – FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

Someone was watching him, he could feel it.

Neville's fingers tightened on the handle of his wand as he scanned the thick foliage carefully, looking for the glint of an eye, the fold of a robe that would give it away. There. The edge of a shoe peeked from beneath the glossy dark green leaves of the Flutterby bush, and his wand flashed out with lightning speed. "*Levicorpus!*"

There was a shriek and a rustle of branches as his would-be attacker was hoisted swiftly into the air, dangling now at eye-level by one ankle. He was filthy, caked in mud, but he was giggling madly, the round cheeks brightly flushed, and Neville sighed deeply. "Hannah!" he called. "Do a head-count! You've lost one!"

A moment's pause, and his wife appeared at the kitchen door, hands on her hips as she regarded the dangling two year-old. Her lips were set in a long-suffering frown of exasperation, but her eyes were dancing as she exchanged a look with her husband, then turned stern again as she faced the child. "Tiresius Michael Longbottom, you are a *mudball!* And what have I told you about stalking Daddy?"

"Nuffuh!" The boy exclaimed joyfully, wrinkling his nose and letting out a series of snuffling noises, his chubby hands crooking into a paddling, digging motion.

"Ah," Neville nodded knowingly, "well, love, that explains it. I only *thought* I caught a little wizard. Apparently, we have been infested by baby Nifflers."

"Nuffuh! Nuffuh!" Terry nodded enthusiastically.

"I see...." The scowl cracked, and she could no longer hold back a smile of amusement as she extended her own wand, floating the toddler to suspend in front of her. "Well, we all know what happens to Nifflers, don't we, Terry? They get *baths*."

"NOOOOOOoooo! NO BAF!" His little face contorted in an anguished wail, and Neville nodded solemnly.

"Oh, absolutely. With soap."

"No bafl! No *bafl*!" The boy's brown ringlets scattered mud in all directions as he shook his head furiously, and Hannah reached out, flicking a spatter of it off Neville's robes.

"I blame you for this."

"What?" He gave her his best innocent look. "The kid or the mud?"

"Both." She shook her head, then kissed him on the cheek. "If I remember correctly, you were the one that started the whole idea of playing Niffler in the first place."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," he shrugged, "Ernie couldn't remember where he and Trev had buried Peggy's gobstones when they were playing goblins, so I thought I'd enlist a little help."

"Because *summoning* –"

"Did not occur to me." He slipped one arm around her waist, nuzzling her golden hair. Terry's sobbing protest had faded for the moment, as a beetle had landed on his arm, and he was poking at it in fascination, the prospect of the dreaded b-word forgotten in the simple distractibility of the very young. "I'm useless without you, Hannah, you know that. I don't know how you manage it – leave me alone for a weekend with five children, and – TERRY, *don't EAT that! Not food!* ACCIO BEETLE!"

The beetle, somewhat the worse for wear, shot from between the boy's lips, its demise completing as it impacted directly against the front of Neville's robes. Hannah was fighting back giggles, and she was losing badly. "Oh...dear...well, at least you don't work at the Ministry."

"These never stay clean long anyway," he gave a rueful smile, brushing only half-heartedly at the remains of the beetle. "We're doing Mimbulus Mimbletonia today."

She made a face. "You're leaving your robes at the door, then."

Neville raised one eyebrow, giving her a suggestive smile. "*Really?*"

For a moment, she looked as though she were about to scold him for his cheek, then her smile deepened, the emerald green of her eyes seemed to darken, and she leaned in closely, her breath warm against his ear as she flicked her tongue lightly against the side of his neck, making him shiver. "*Definitely.* But grade papers or something and get here after nine so all of the beasties are in bed."

"Yes, ma'am," he nodded, then checked his watch, "but I'm going to be late if I don't –"

"Go ahead." She gave him another quick kiss, then flicked her wand again, letting Terry drop but catching him expertly, wrapping him in a tight cocoon of her apron before he could get so much as a speck of mud anywhere else. "And don't forget, we've got dinner at the Potters' tomorrow,

and the *Prophet* sent an owl; they want to do a piece on the epidemic of hackleweed on the east coast, and they've asked for an expert opinion."

"I don't have time for an interview, but I'll drop them a line, thanks. See you tonight." He kissed her back, then turned on the spot, concentrating on his office. There was a moment's darkness and the squeezing, stretching sensation that never quite became routine, and then he was there. Quickly, he gathered up a few extra textbooks – someone *always* forgot theirs – protective goggles – someone *always* broke theirs – his notes, and the pile of cuttings for the first homework assignments he would be handing out, then hurried down towards the greenhouses at a jog.

The class was already waiting when he got there, and in the front row, a tall young wizard crossed his arms, his hair flashing red with annoyance before settling to this week's vibrant canary yellow. "Late again, Professor?"

"Less than a minute, Mr. Lupin," he replied evenly. "And your first assignment today is that the next time you write your families, I want you all to apologize for ever having been two years old. Especially if you ever had insectivore tendencies."

Several of the students exchanged looks of confusion, but he did not explain further, instead turning to the cactus-like plant on his desk and gently, carefully stroking the pustule-covered branches. It had been his for almost twenty years now, and it knew his touch, thrumming with what was very nearly a purr. "Now, does anyone know how I can do this, and what I'd get covered in if I didn't do it right?"

"Stinksap?" guessed a girl. "And you've earned its trust, right?"

"Exactly, and Stinksap is *very* aptly named. Actually, the first year I had this little fellow, I decided to poke it with my quill, and I managed to douse an entire train compartment really very impressively. Drenched a half-dozen people and couldn't get the smell out of my robes for days. But we're going to be covering that in a lot more detail this year, along with a lot of other plants that can be either incredibly interesting or really pretty dangerous if you don't watch what you're doing. You guys are fifth-years now, so you're old enough to play with the big kids."

"What are the big kids?" Lupin asked eagerly.

"Venomous Tentacula, Devil's Snare, Snargaluff..." he grinned, "...the good stuff."

Another girl in the back row stretched her hand high in the air, waving it to catch the Professor's attention. Neville nodded to her. "Miss Tenser?"

"Yes, sir...is it true that you used those to fight Death Eaters? I read in *Hogwarts: A History* that plants were used in the defense, and I know you were –"

"Nice try." Neville chuckled, then paused, coming around the desk to sit on the front edge, one leg crossed casually over the other as he looked across the bright young faces glowing in the golden September light that poured through the glass walls of the greenhouse.

"I've been your teacher since Sprout retired in your second year, and since...oh..." he paused in a moment of mock-contemplation, "...I guess about two minutes after I started, I've been getting questions about these—" Neville tapped a finger against the scars that ran diagonally across his cheeks, "—and about the war. And I've been telling you that you're too young, that I'll tell you later. Well, I'm being honest. I've been holding out to make you want it more, because I'm going to quite frankly bribe you."

There was a shuffling of benches as the students leaned forward, some eagerly, some with looks of suspicion. Neville's smile widened, and he reached into his pocket, pulling out a gleaming gold coin. "Does anyone know what this is?"

"Is that one of the *real* ones? From Dumbledore's Army?" Adrian Wood gasped, the young Seeker's eyes widening in awe.

"Yes, it is. Still works too...although these days, my wife usually just uses it to tell me I left something at home," he acknowledged. "But I made this deal with my last two O.W.L. classes...everyone who's been carrying marks enough that I think they'll pass, I'll tell them the whole story. Not what you get in *Hogwarts: A History*. Not what you'll find in old copies of the *Prophet*. The real thing. A lot of people would say you're too young to hear it, but the way I see it, if half the witches and wizards who *lived* it were your age, you're certainly old enough to *know* about it. It'll take all day, but one of the advantages of teaching Herbology is that we get to do field trips when I say, and it'll be the last day or two of school, so it won't be a problem clearing your schedule."

A murmur of excitement rippled through the class, and Teddy Lupin raised his hand again. "All we've got to do is pass?"

"I expect you to do your best, and I'll grade accordingly if I think you're not really trying, but yes, that's the deal," he nodded. "Acceptable or better, and you get the story of the whole year."

His eyes fell on a girl in the second row. She was sturdy yet slender, a rustic beauty with long, dark hair and her mother's sweet, pursed mouth, but she had her father's hazel eyes, and Neville's smile turned bittersweet. "And this time in particular, Miss Macmillan, I'm going to make sure to tell it right."

ooo THE END ooo

#### FINAL AUTHOR'S NOTES

The majority of the characters, situations, and elements of this story are the intellectual property of J.K. Rowling and are derived wholly or in part from the "Harry Potter" series of novels published in the United States by Scholastic Books. They are being used here without consent or permission by Ms. Rowling. No copyright infringement is intended, and the author has derived no profit or compensation from their use, which is intended for entertainment purposes only. All wholly original characters and elements are the property of the author.

"Dumbledore's Army and the Year of Darkness" has been a truly massive undertaking, far more than I ever imagined when it began. It has wound up at more than 247,000 words, which is far longer than the novel which originally inspired it, and I have my readers to thank for this. You have stuck by Neville and the D.A. for over two months, through all the ups and downs of this wild ride. I am aware that following such a story is an effort and a dedication just as much as writing it, and I want you to know that if you have gotten this far, I truly thank you, and would love to hear from you. This is the first thing I have ever written, and I am always delighted to know that others have read it, whether they loved or hated it.

It is my intention that you have laughed occasionally, maybe even cried, and I would hope that at least once or twice, it has made you think. The characters you have followed through this story were almost all originally background people in the Harry Potter books, but even the people in the background of our lives are still people, and everyone has a story to tell. The D.A. certainly grabbed me by the keyboard and demanded to tell theirs.

This story, however, is not dedicated to my readers, or to a group of fictional, if – at least to me – compelling teenagers. It is dedicated to the real-life soldiers who gave their time and effort to help me with the psychology of war. Many of these young men and women are as young as eighteen themselves, and they are not fighting with wands and hexes on the grounds of an imaginary wizarding school. They fire real bullets and shed real blood on the very non-fictional battlefields of the Muggle world even as you read this, and *their* courage, *their* sacrifice is too often ignored because they do so out of our daily sight.

If you have admired the bravery of the young witches and wizards in this story, know that I have based a great deal of it – especially what a young person goes through in battle, what it is like to watch a friend die, what it is like to prepare for your own death when you have barely begun to live – on these real heroes. Go ahead and drop me some feedback if you want, but I would also ask that the next time you spot a young man or woman in uniform, take a moment to shake their hand. Their truth is much greater than fiction.

- Andrew a.k.a. Thanfiction

*Fool in Charge*

Author: Dumbledore's Army and the Year of Darkness

# The Dumbledore's Army Portrait Gallery

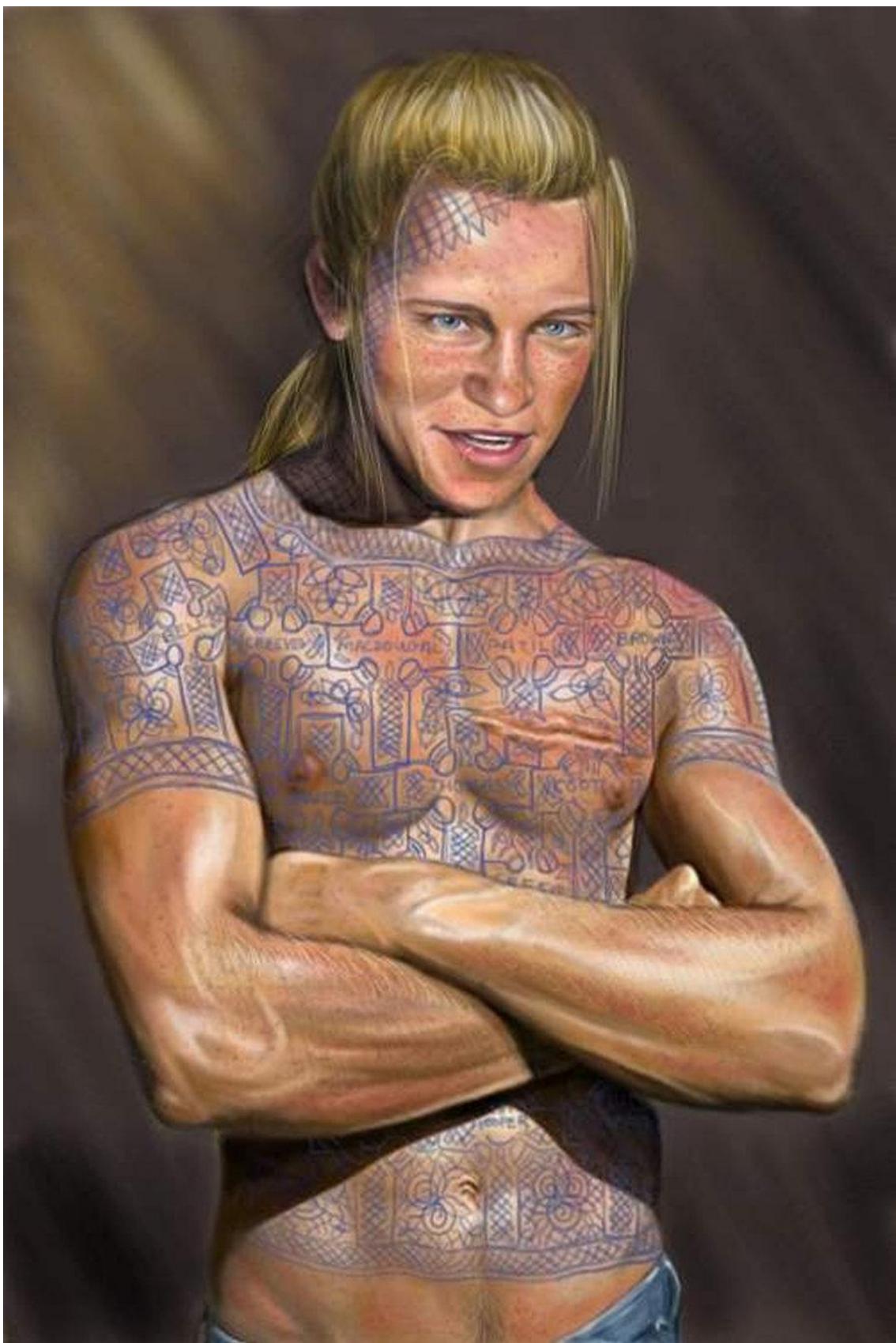
Please note, not all portraits are from the time of the 1997  
Rebellion.



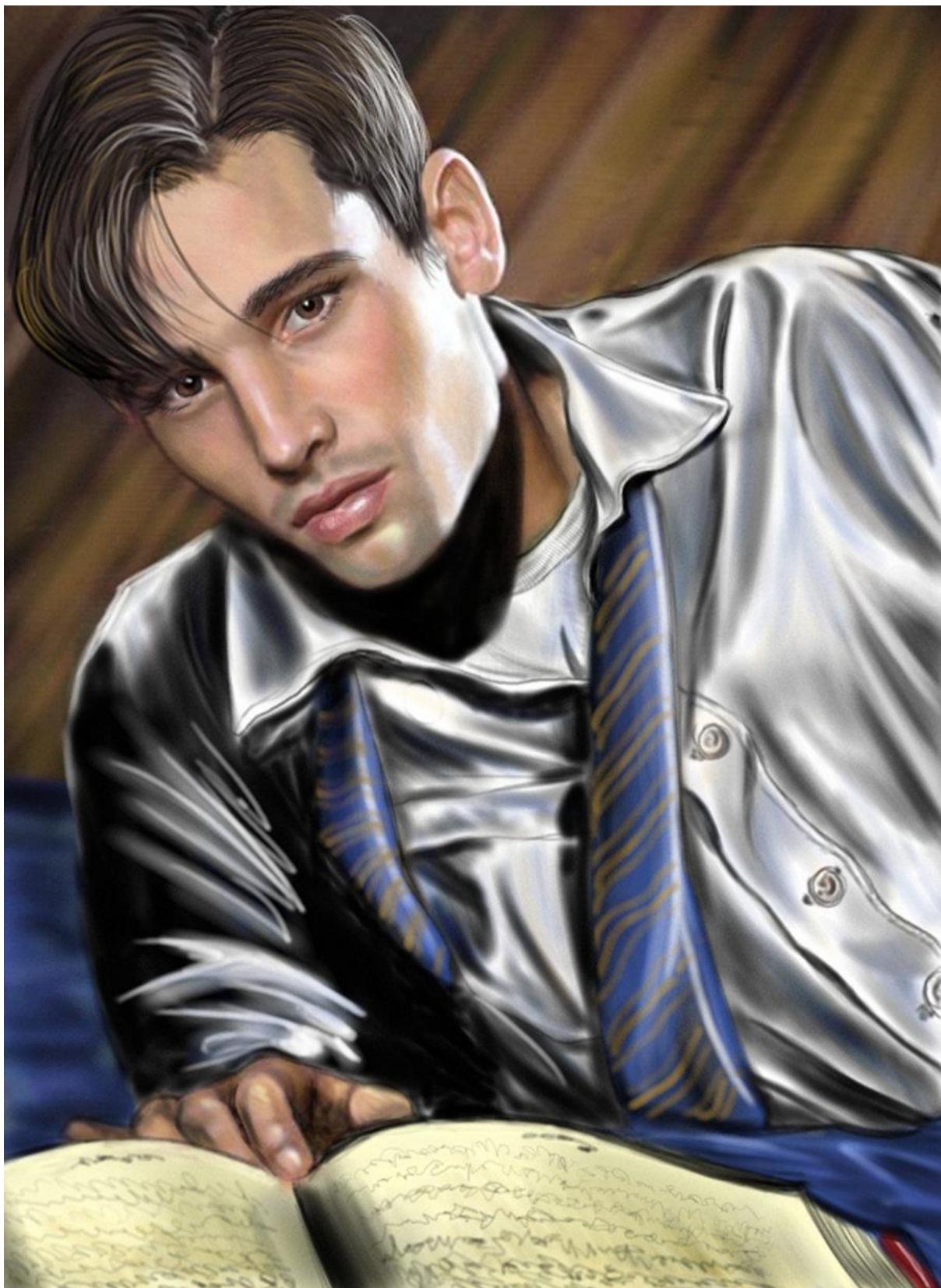
Neville Longbottom



Hannah Longbottom nee Abbot



Seamus Finnegan



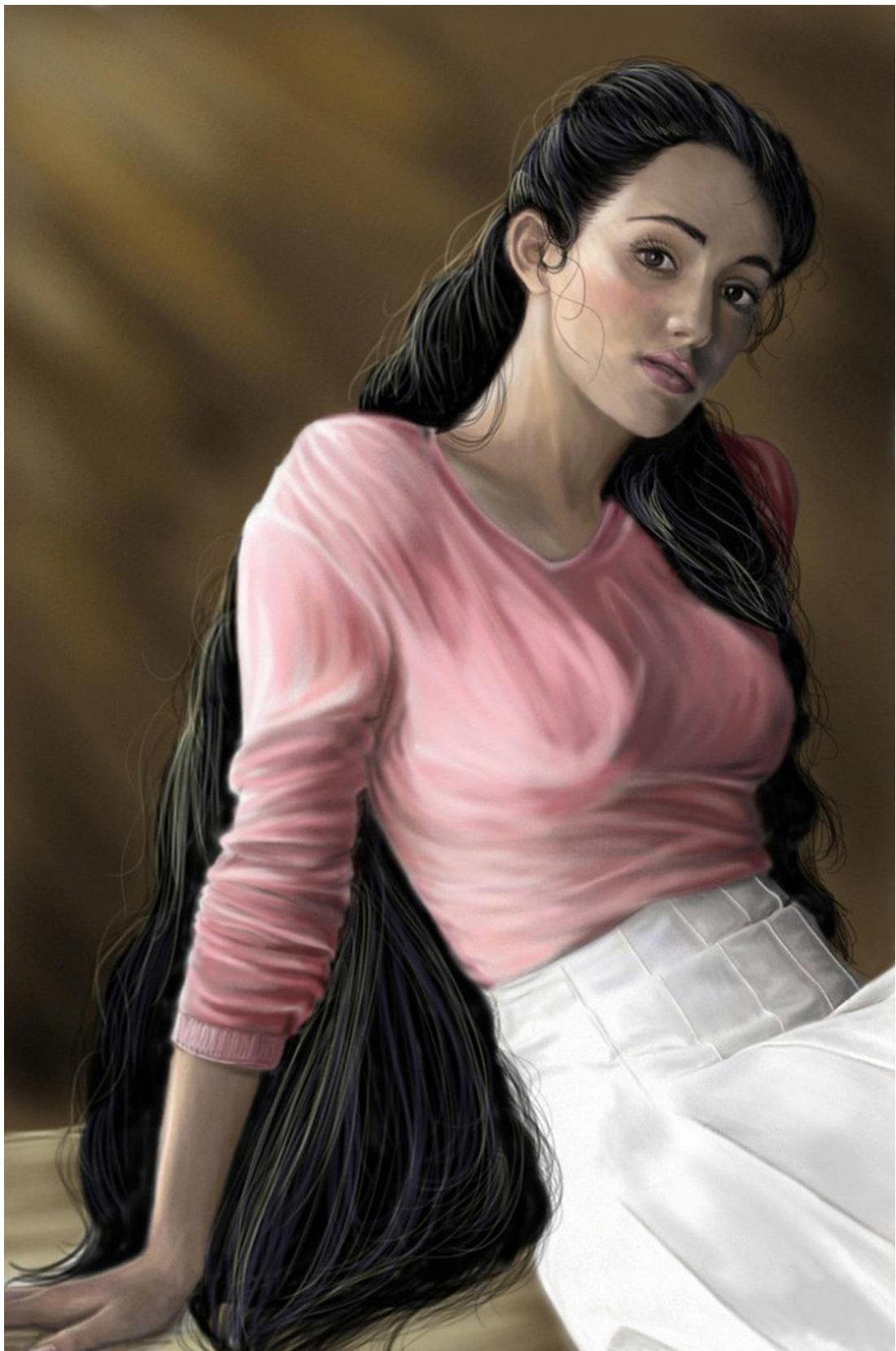
Michael Corner



Terry Boot



Ernie MacMillan



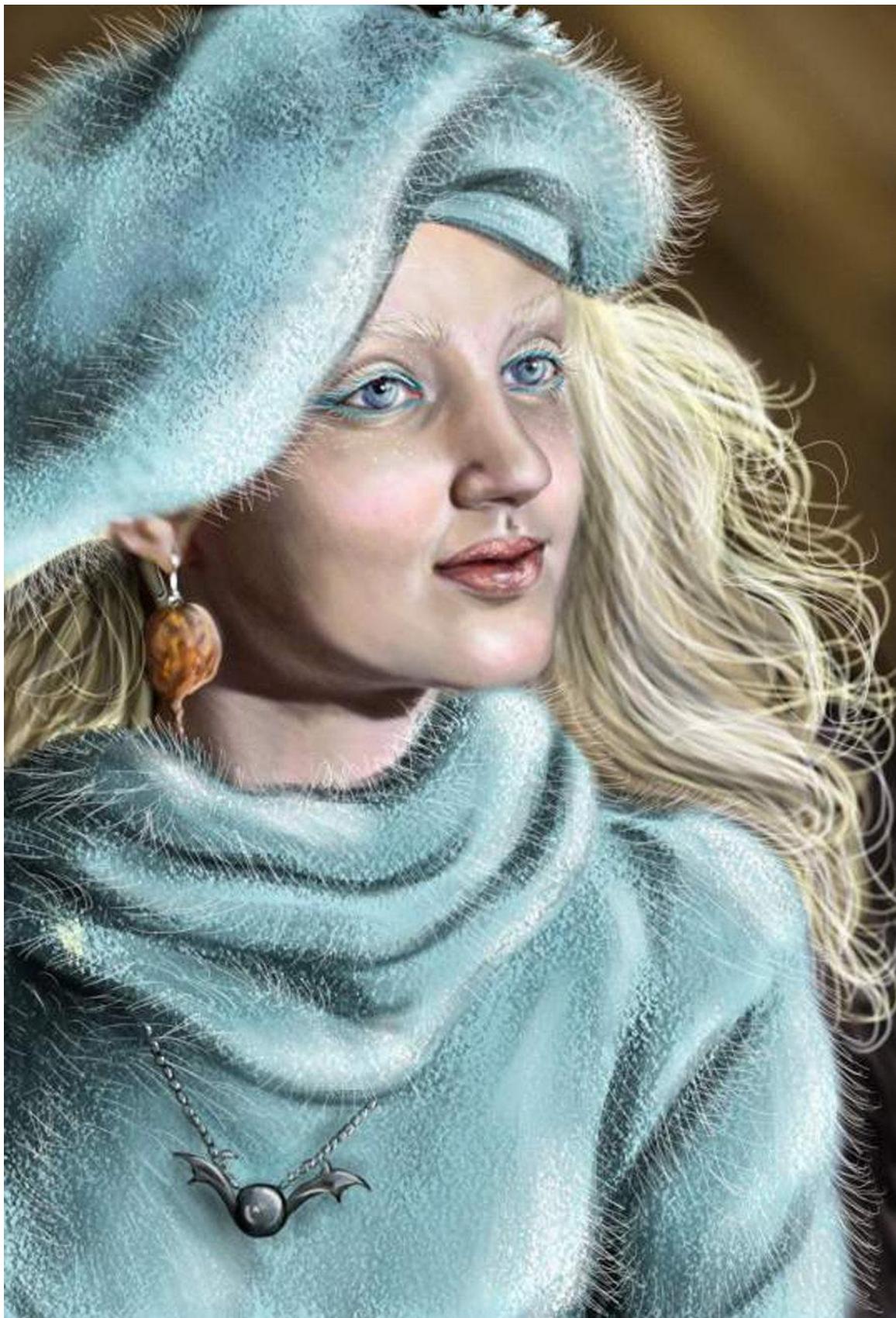
Susan MacMillan nee Bones



Colin Creevey



Dennis Creevey



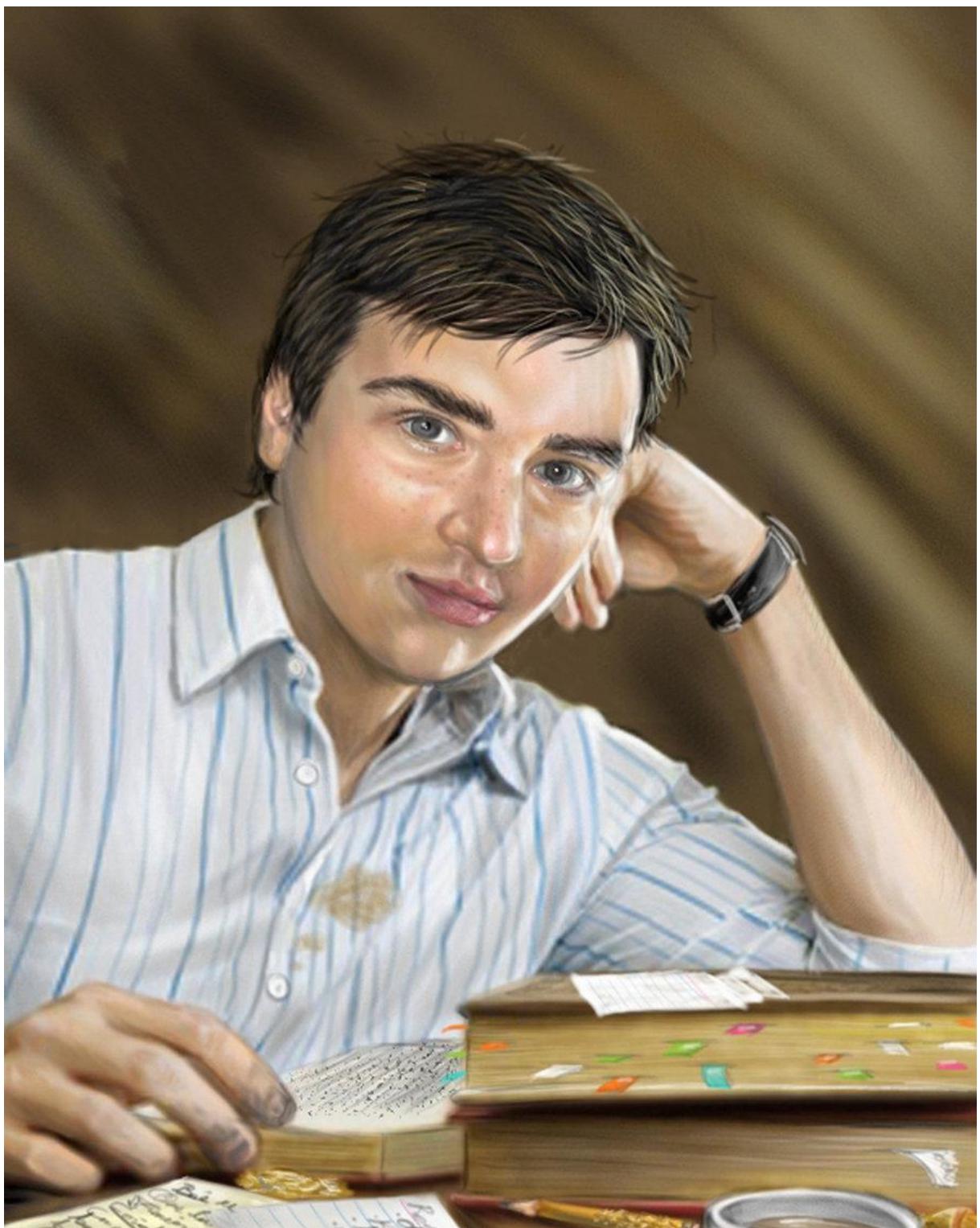
Luna Lovegood



Harry Potter



Ginny Potter, nee Weasley



Icarus Utterson



Terrence 'Renny' Runcorn



Derek Adams



Stephen Cornfoot



Zacharias Smith



Lavender Brown



Parvati Patil



Hermione Granger



Ronald Weasley



Flight Lieutenant Justin Finch-Fletchley, RAF



Anthony Goldstein

The Story of Dumbledore's Army continues in Book Two.



# Sluagh