

Chapter II

Harry Explains

Albus Dumbledore, a very confused wizard, slowly made his way through the crowd, trying to get to Harry. The crowd, also rather puzzled in general because of Harry's handling of the dragon, parted for him with only slight resistance. Dumbledore soon managed to step in front of Harry, the Golden Egg in the crook of his right arm and his left firmly around a shy Hermione Granger's waist. Dumbledore blinked at that -- this was not the confused young boy who had pled to be allowed some time to deal with the First Task. Behind them was a milling group of lively Gryffindors, with Neville Longbottom carrying that very surprising standard and the Weasley twins and their sister leading perhaps a dozen others in shooting multi-colored sparks into the air.

Harry looked into the Headmaster's twinkling eyes and smiled grimly. Sure enough, he felt the touch of Occlumency, and saw the surprised look on the old man's face when he realized he no longer had free access to Harry's surface thoughts. "Is there a problem, Headmaster?" Harry asked innocently.

"Ah . . . no . . . no, congratulations, Harry. Please come and speak with me sometime tomorrow."

"Of course, Headmaster," Harry said. "Good evening."

When Harry turned, he saw someone he really needed to see several yards away. "Excuse me?" he called. "Aren't you Luna Lovegood?"

Luna blinked, and nodded, surprised to be noticed by the Champion. Still, she approached when Harry beckoned. "Yes?" Dumbledore watched the unfolding scene with curiosity.

"Having seen how the reporter from The Prophet reports, I've decided I'm much better off with giving an exclusive to The Quibbler." Harry had come out of seclusion only for 'the weighing of the wands' and had barely avoided being interviewed by Skeeter. Her poisonous 'quack-quote' quill had still been nasty, despite having even less material to work with than in the original time line. "So, if you can grab a dicta-quill by next weekend, I'll give you a story which will surprise everyone. If you think your father would be interested, that is."

Luna blinked again, twice, rare for her. "You . . . you're . . ."

"Yes," Harry assured her, "I'm serious, Luna. I'm not teasing. I'm not like those nasty witches in Ravenclaw who harass you just because you look at things differently than they do."

"Thank you," Luna said, her wide eyes even wider.

Harry saw some of those Ravenclaw witches scowling at her. "You can call me Harry, Luna, if you want. If it won't get you into even more trouble with the Ravenclaws, that is. I had never noticed some of them were so biased and unthinking before this term."

"I don't think they could cause me much more trouble," Luna admitted. Her defense of Harry as a champion had been the last straw for many of them.

Harry saw the rather disgruntled Ravenclaw Quidditch captain lurking nearby. "Hey, Davies!"

"Yes, Potter?"

"We've played against each other, and I know you're a fair guy. Did you think the same of me?"

"I did," Roger said, considering the tense.

"If I swear an oath to you that I didn't enter this contest, and that I would have done just about anything to have prevented it if I could have, would you believe me?"

"I don't need your oath, Potter," Roger said. "I believe you."

"In fact, if Malfoy hadn't added the 'Potter Stinks', I would have worn a Cedric badge," Harry went on.

"I believe you, Harry," Cho said, coming up along side Roger.

"Luna, have we spoken before this?"

"No, Harry."

Harry turned back to Roger and Cho. "When finding out about my new friend here, I also found out that she is putting up with a lot of bullying, just because she's considered a bit different. I was wondering if either of you could help her."

Roger looked confused, but Cho said, "It has gotten out of hand. I'll stop it, if Roger will back me up."

"Of course," Davies said. "Now, will you tell us how you spoke to a dragon?"

"Yes," Hermione added, "tell us."

Harry turned to Luna. "Care to tell them?"

Luna frowned in thought, and then said, "We learned two years ago that you're a Parselmouth. Is this somehow related?"

"Very good," Harry said. "There isn't a charm to allow people to speak to dragons, but there is one that allows a Parselmouth to do it. I did some research, to see if this gift did anything useful other than talking to snakes and scaring people." That made sense to the Ravenclaws, who researched nearly anything for fun.

Harry and Hermione, with many of the Gryffindors still following, took their leave. "Is that really how you did it?" Hermione whispered in Harry's ear. He nodded. "Can you do anything else with the gift?"

"Some spells, especially wards oddly enough, are more effective cast in Parseltongue. More interestingly, speaking Parseltongue enchants the voice, including the lips and tongue," Harry said. "Using it on a woman is supposed to drive her to the heights of ecstasy . . . or at least it does you."

Hermione blushed.

Meanwhile, Roger had turned to Cho and the suddenly-shy Luna. He saw the looks on several of the witches in Luna's year and above. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this. If someone as generally clueless about other Houses as Potter has noticed something is wrong, then something is wrong." The general look of worry, and even a little guilt on a few, confirmed that Luna had indeed been bullied. "Well?" Roger thundered. "Get a move on, or should I ask Professor Flitwick to hold a more formal meeting?"

The worried Ravenclaws fled.

The Weasley twins had gone on ahead to get supplies for the party. When Harry and Hermione got to the common room, he gave her a brief kiss and went up to his room to change into some fresh clothes, as the others were still somewhat grungy. He was not surprised to see a very disgruntled Ron waiting for him. "What's wrong?" Harry asked a bit sharply. "Are you upset that the dragon didn't get me? Or that I'm dating Hermione? Or both?"

"If you want to date that know-it-all, go right ahead," Ron retorted, fantasies of Fleur and some of the other Beauxbatons girls dancing (literally) in the back of his mind. "Why did you offer to swear an oath to Davies?"

"Because he doesn't know me that well. You do, or you should by now. Even if you think I would go off and do something without telling you, you should know I wouldn't lie to you about it if you asked," Harry answered. "I've done daft things before, and I'll certainly do more. I would hope I wouldn't lie, especially not just to protect myself, especially not to you or Hermione."

Ron looked ashamed. "I'm sorry," he said. "You're right."

"Ron, I didn't pick you as my friend over Malfoy just because he's a slimy, worthless piece of blond dragon dung," Harry said. Ron almost smiled at that. "I picked you because you are a great guy, at least most of the time. I understand you see part of my life and feel jealous, but you, unlike nearly everyone except Hermione, knows the bad side, too. The good doesn't make up for the bad."

"Well, that's your fault," Ron groused. "You're too bloody normal. Anyone else who had to suffer all that would be a twister, to say the least."

"You know," Harry admitted, "I've sometimes wondered about Dumbledore, if he knew how horrible my life was before I came to Hogwarts, if he didn't set it up for me to be abused, just to see if I turned out as dark and evil as Riddle."

"Riddle? Oh, that's right, you mean, well, Riddle," Ron said. "Are you serious?"

"Not really," Harry said, getting changed, "but I do wonder. Riddle's life and mine before Hogwarts are very similar. Is that merely a coincidence? Or did someone meddle? If anyone meddled, it would have had to have been Dumbledore."

Ron thought about that. He couldn't refute what Harry had said, and that bothered him on many levels.

Five minutes later, Harry was ready to leave. "Don't forget that," Ron said, gesturing at the egg.

Since Ron was closer, Harry said, "Toss it here."

Ron blinked. "What?"

"Toss it here. It's not that much smaller than a Quaffle, and you can handle that."

"I can . . . touch it?"

"I would think so," Harry said. "Just don't open it. I might only get one chance at what's inside."

Ron picked up the egg and said, "Go ahead, I'll be right behind you."

"Okay." And so Harry made something of an entrance, looking something like a very small boxing champion, followed by Ron carrying the egg over his head like a championship belt. Half the house was already there, the rest had gone to dinner. They all applauded.

Harry thanked everyone, and, when asked, opened the egg a few minutes later. He shut it quickly. "What was that?" Hermione hissed in Harry's ear.

"It's designed to be heard underwater," Harry whispered back. He sat down in a very comfy chair near the fire, one usually reserved for Sixth and Seventh years, set the egg beside him, and pulled Hermione on his lap. She flushed from embarrassment, but made herself comfortable.

"Oooo, who's the champion? Ickle Harry's growing up," Fred teased.

"Fred?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think you're more frightening or dangerous than a dragon?"

Harry had said that looking directly into Fred's eyes. Fred's breath caught. This was not the sweet young boy whom all the Weasleys (well, except for Percy) doted on. Fred had seen something, something he had seen a fraction of inside of Dumbledore. Once.

Something profoundly powerful and potentially very dangerous.

"Sorry Harry, Hermione," Fred said.

"That's alright." Harry reached into a pocket and handed Fred a boiled sweet. "Here, if you like cinnamon."

"Thanks, Harry." Fred popped it into his mouth just as Neville became the first person ever caught by a Canary Cream. The laughter at Neville was quickly directed at Fred as his skin matched his hair, with steam coming out his ears.

Harry handed a piece of parchment to the howling George, who stopped laughing long enough to take it. "Devil's Sweet," Harry said. "A gift from Prongs and his spouse," he added. George nodded happily.

The steam had stopped coming from Fred, who asked, "How long until I change back?"

"Half an hour, unless you crunched and swallowed it all at once," Harry said. "Then about three hours. You'll blow off steam again when you do."

"Damn," Fred said, who had, in fact, crushed the sweet in his mouth.

The party picked up as more students came in from dinner.

The next morning, Harry handed the Headmaster a note, saying that, if the time was good, he would be at Dumbledore's office at 2:00. The Headmaster merely nodded.

Going back to his place next to Hermione, Luna caught Harry's eye, and mouthed a quiet 'thank you' to him. Harry would hear some of the details later (Padma would tell Parvati, who told Hermione who told Harry), but the Ravenclaw meeting the night before had revealed that while Luna was the most harassed, there were several other students being bullied. Roger and a few of the other leaders made their decision clear, that such bullying would not be tolerated.

It wouldn't end easily or quickly, of course, and much of the rest of the term would very tense in Ravenclaw. Still, life suddenly got much easier for Luna.

"Come in," Dumbledore said, responding to the knock on his door. To his surprise, it wasn't just Harry who came in, but Hermione and even more surprising Remus Lupin as well.

"May I ask what is going on?" Dumbledore asked.

"I have many things to say," Harry said, "and they need to hear it. If there are things you need to ask or say privately afterwards, I will stay of course."

Dumbledore looked confused, as this was not behavior he was used to from Harry. Finally, he said, "Very well. Come on in, the three of you." Dumbledore sat and said, "I believe this is your show for the moment, Harry."

Harry nodded, and actually stood up. "I have learned many things, things which some," he glared at Dumbledore, "would prefer I not know, although I have no good idea why. The most obvious explanations, I hope, are not true." Harry began to pace. "Seventy years ago, there were three arrogant, poor, and slightly mad Pure-Bloods, by the name of Gaunt. . . ."

"Where did you hear that name!" Dumbledore almost hissed, shocked.

"I won't leave without telling you, but I need to tell a brief version of the entire story," Harry answered. "If you don't force me to stop, that is." Harry's aura flicked visibly for a moment, "And I do mean 'force'."

"Very well," Dumbledore said, giving in for the moment.

"The father of the other two was Marvolo Gaunt." Hermione's eyes went wide. "They were the last three direct descendants of Salazar Slytherin, and that's about all they had. The daughter, Merope, was the least-crazed, but both she and her brother looked like what you would expect as products of generations of in-breeding." The other three winced at that. "She was in lust with the local squire's son, Tom Riddle." Now it was Remus who fully caught on. "She seduced him using a very powerful love potion. She got pregnant, and when she let the potion lapse, he dumped her." Harry frowned. "Voldemort told me that his father rejected his mother because she was a witch, but I don't know if he ever even knew." Harry shrugged. "For that matter, I don't know if

they were even married, although Voldemort seems to hope they were." Harry smirked. "As far as I'm concerned, he's a right bastard in both senses of the term."

"Harry," Hermione gently scolded.

"Sorry," Harry said. "Riddle was sent to a Muggle orphanage." Harry glared at Dumbledore and said, "Back then, whose job was it to evaluate magical children in the Muggle world?"

Dumbledore said nothing. Finally, a puzzled Hermione said, "According to Hogwarts: A History, between 1786 and 1947, that was part of the duties of the Deputy Headmistress or Deputy Headmaster. . . ." She trailed off and looked at Dumbledore, who had his eyes shut in pain.

"How many times did you look in on Riddle, sir?" Harry asked. "Or asked others to?"

"Personally, I went once, to tell him about Hogwarts the summer before he came," Dumbledore said. "The Ministry had checked three times before that, because of incidents of wild magic. It was because of the strength of those discharges that it was decided that funding was needed to be found to train him." Dumbledore's shoulders slumped. "The system failed Tom Riddle, and I was a very large cog in the system's machinery."

Harry nodded. "On the other hand, leaving aside the nature versus nurture argument, I rather think that Riddle would have been a sneaky, cold-hearted, sadist to some degree no matter how he was raised."

"That gives me but little comfort, Harry," Dumbledore said.

"We know that when he was a Fifth year Slytherin prefect, he let loose Slytherin's basilisk," Harry went on. "It killed Myrtle, and Riddle later framed Hagrid." Harry again looked at Dumbledore. "What was the diary?"

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore asked.

"It was more than memories, wasn't it?" Harry asked. "It contained part of Riddle, didn't it?"

Dumbledore shivered. Remus demanded, "Do you know what you're saying?"

Harry nodded. "Tell me, when someone splits off part of his soul and places it into an enchanted dark object, what do we have?"

"A Horcrux," Remus said, horrified. "That's why Voldemort didn't die from the rebounding Killing Curse, isn't it?"

"I believe so," Dumbledore said.

"So, he's mortal now?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head.

"Why not?" Hermione asked.

"Think basic arithmancy," Harry answered.

Hermione frowned, then said, "So he created more than one? But how many? It couldn't have been as many as thirteen, could it?"

"No," Harry said.

"Then three, five, or seven," Hermione answered. "I could make an argument for any of them."

Harry picked up his bookbag. "Number one, the diary. Number two, Slytherin's ring." Harry pulled the broken ring from his bag. "Number three, Slytherin's locket. Number four, Hufflepuff's cup." He pulled them out as well. "Number five is Ravenclaw's emerald, and that is currently inside Voldemort's mutated snake, Nagini. Number six, Gryffindor's dagger, which he created the night he came to kill me and when he murdered my parents instead. He doesn't know that it was created, and he wants a sixth very badly, and he wants to use my murder to do it." Harry laid the broken dagger on the table.

"Six?" Hermione said. "that's not a good number."

"Six Horcruxes, but seven pieces of his soul," Remus pointed out.

"Ah . . . right, never mind that then." She turned to Harry and asked, "But why does he want to kill you?"

"Care to tell her, Headmaster?"

"You would seem to have all the answers, whoever you are," Dumbledore said. "I would also like to know what you've done to Harry and how you've come and gone so easily, since you collected those somehow."

"I swear on my magic that I am Harry James Potter."

The Headmaster was stunned, and Remus wasn't much better off. "I saw the flare, but . . . but how?" Dumbledore finally said. "How could you know these things; how could you have gathered these objects, let alone destroyed them?"

"Soon, Headmaster," Harry said. "But first, let's talk about Harry James Potter." Harry turned to Remus. "Did you ever hear or read my parents' will, Remus?"

Remus blinked at not being called 'Professor,' but merely said, "I was told that they never wrote one after you were born, and those the earlier ones were invalid."

Harry shook his head. "They wrote at least one, and signed it just before they went into hiding. Professor Dumbledore was one of the witnesses. In it, they named numerous people I could be placed with if I survived and they didn't. The Dursleys were excluded by name." Harry turned on Professor Dumbledore. "What gave you the right to go against my parents' wishes? What gave you the right to condemn me to ten years of abuse and malnutrition? Would having been brought up by Professor McGonagall, for example, made me a spoiled child? Or raised by Madam Bones?"

"No, but I would have been more likely to have placed you with the Longbottoms, and you would not have survived the attack on them," Dumbledore retorted. "I committed a grave sin of omission with you, Harry. I cannot deny that. I should have checked up on you."

"Or believed Mrs. Figg's reports?"

"Or taken those reports more seriously," Dumbledore acknowledged.

"So, you were trying to redo the experiment? Have me as abused as Riddle and see if I turn out Dark? Or leave me so ignorant that I would be totally dependent on you?"

"Do you really think those possible? That I am that dark?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I think I'd rather have you actively evil than so uncaring that you just ignored my welfare."

Dumbledore said nothing.

Harry looked at Hermione. "I care a lot for you, but you should know why Voldemort is after me. There's a prophecy. Either Neville or I was predicted to be the only one who could stop Voldemort, and Voldemort would Mark the Chosen One. He chose me. I kill him, or he kills me. I'm making certain I kill him."

He looked at Dumbledore. "The question I have is, do I kill him now, when he's an homoculus, or do I wait and kill him when he's restored to his body?"