

CHAPTER 36

WORMTAIL'S HELPING HAND

Winter's bitter cold temperament appeared unbounded as Severus Snape plowed through the gusting winds and drifting snows outside the Riddle Estate late in the evening. He shuddered as the successive icy breezes ripped through his thickly layered robes and pierced his pallid skin. The mere hundred paces he needed to travel to reach the Riddle house from where he had Apparated visually appeared as endless miles in such inclement weather. Thankfully, it wasn't more than a few meager moments before he found himself inside the dilapidated home, being greeted by the likes of a sniveling Wormtail and an irritable Voldemort. However unsettling the company, the warmth of the space more than compensated for Severus's discomfort.

"Severus!" exclaimed Voldemort in surprise. "Shouldn't you be on duty?"

"Forgive me, Master," said Severus. "I needed to see you, to speak with you; it's rather *urgent*."

Voldemort's expression feigned an intrigued interest as he noted the touch of alarm in Severus's voice. "Wormtail, I believe you have some place to be."

"Master, I've only just owled Brickner's Pub mere moments ago. Surely, they're not ready for me."

"Then go on and tend to Nagini before you leave! Severus and I need to speak *alone*."

Wormtail scowled.

"*Now*, Wormtail!" hissed Voldemort.

When Wormtail disappeared around the corner, Voldemort turned to address Severus. "Now, Severus, you've come to me with concerns about Hannah, have you?"

"Yes, My Lord. It seems —"

"Save it, Severus! I've gathered all I need to know from that pathetic, sulking frown of yours!"

Severus straightened out.

"So how long do you suspect she's been sleeping with that *fool* Potter?" he hissed.

“A few weeks, perhaps a month. I can’t be certain. It’s mere speculation, of course. She’s denied it.”

Voldemort’s face contorted into an ugly and angry grimace. “Of course, she’s denied it!”

“Master, I —”

“Silence!” snarled Voldemort, pacing briskly before Severus. “Luckily, for you, I believe we can work with this curious turn of events.”

“My Lord?” inquired Snape, puzzled. “Shouldn’t we find a way to separate them?”

“I think not. You see, the closer that little *whore* gets to Potter, the easier it will be for us to use her as bait when the time comes for us to complete our mission.”

“What are you saying? We can’t possibly allow her to carry on with him in such an intimate fashion! She could destroy *everything* for you, My Lord!”

“Ah, Severus, you needn’t worry about me. I have enough power to keep a close watch on her, should I need to. Potter may be able to block me from his thoughts, but I am still able to see through him and into the eyes of the one’s he loves. Besides, I believe that little wench, Hannah, still holds a candle for you. If there is one thing I have learned in my time here on this earth, it’s that, sadly, *love never truly dies*,” said Voldemort eerily.

Severus bowed and turned to leave, when Voldemort called out to him, “Severus?”

“Yes, Master?”

“If she becomes too much of a *liability* for us, you will need to get rid of her,” said Voldemort, his eyes glinting a dangerous red.

Severus winced, then bowed to Voldemort, again, and apparated from his sight.

The short journey through an earthy, darkened tunnel was all that separated Harry, Hermione, Ron, and Hannah from their task of collecting the next Horcrux. The group traveled upon the crumbling pathway of the tunnel, scraping against the sides of the rounded walls as they went.

“W-where is it we’re going?” asked Harry curiously.

“You’ll see. This way, come on,” she said quietly, waving them through a rod iron trimmed splintered doorway she had conjured.

They passed through the enchanted entrance, piled into the darkness of a filth-ridden lavatory, then shuffled down a narrow corridor, finally answering the dreary invitation of a cluttered pub by gathering around one of its liquor-bottle-infested tables. Harry took in the full view of his surroundings, observing a crooked ancient catastrophe of a man tending to an equally pitifully aged patron at the bar. He spotted Rue seated in the darkened back corner of the room, noting the rest of the space was entirely devoid of any further signs of life. He breathed deeply, inhaling the sweet earthy aroma of the damp rotting wood that emanated from the paneled walls which was almost appeasing to his senses. On the other hand, the greenish hued lighting shimmering through the cracked and rusting lanterns altered his mind and presented the space as being dangerous, as it never allotted one to know *what* or *who* may be lurking in its darkened corners.

Hannah waved subtly to Rue, pushed the others in her direction, and said, “Harry — you, Ron, and Hermione are to keep hidden beneath the cloak until we secure the Horcrux. No matter what you see, or hear, Harry, you must promise me you’ll stay put.”

“W-where are we?” he asked quietly, still absorbing his surroundings charily.

“Brickner’s Pub, in the dodgy side of London. It’s Muggle-owned, but they get all sorts of scary cases in here, so we sort of blend right in,” whispered Hannah.

“You mean you’ve been here before?”

“Here and there. It’s a spectacular place to frequent if you want to get out and remain anonymous. Most of the lot here are the sort that don’t care to mingle much. They basically come here to pound down a few drinks and sulk, or try to get lucky,” she said matter-of-factly.

Just then, a tall masked figure materialized in the empty space in front of her.

“*Hey...Wes,*” drawled Hannah dreamily, her eyes glistening with a hint of the haunting ghost of her love for him, which made Harry fume.

Wes responded with an articulate bow of his head. He leaned in to kiss her, shifting a cold, conquering stare in Harry’s invisible direction as his lips met Hannah’s briefly. Harry felt his blood boil to the point he swore he could set the man on fire with a mere blink of his eyes, but he settled for a sharp clearing of his lump ridden throat, instead. Wes backed away immediately and moved to seat himself at the corner table next to Rue.

“Harry! I told you to *keep quiet!*” hissed Hannah with a cutting glare, which only added more fuel to Harry’s already raging inner fire.

Upon the close of her words, another figure emerged before them, just as briskly as the first. He was a ratty, balding man who recklessly flaunted his identity beneath the meager shelter of his worn, patched, and filthy wizarding robes, bearing no mask or cloak. Harry

felt his breath check, his jaw clench, and his heart surge with a rage that nearly devastated him as his eyes addressed the wasted stature.

“Why, Miss Hannah; how *wonderful* to see you again,” stuttered the dreadful man with surprise, bowing low, reaching for her hand, and brushing his coarse flaking lips across it.

“Wormtail, it’s lovely to see you again, as well,” replied Hannah sweetly, who, much to Harry’s dismay, didn’t so much as flinch upon the receipt of Wormtail’s slobbering touch.

“I was just about to head to the bar to collect my order of nettle wine. However, seeing as you’re here alone, perhaps you would care to join me in a drink?” said Wormtail, motioning to the case of large golden decanters sitting on the counter before them.

“I would *love* to,” said Hannah instantly, conjuring up two crystal goblets with a light plinking of her wand.

“Here you are,” said Wormtail eagerly, ushering her to a seat in the corner opposite where the rest of her group was stationed, and filling her goblet by the grace of his shiny silver hand.

Hannah motioned subtly to Wormtail’s hand to reveal to Harry that *it* was the Horcrux; the conjured silver hand that Wormtail had received three years ago after willingly sacrificing his own appendage to resurrect Voldemort. But, Hannah needn’t have bothered to reveal such a verity. For, the instant Harry caught sight of the dazzling spectacle, he knew. He watched on intently, visually tasting every portion of the blinking glare coming from Wormtail’s silver prosthetic. He felt his mouth water with instant gratification at the prospect of knowing he would soon be consuming the glory of demolishing another piece of Lord Voldemort’s soul.

“Here’s to the wondrous pleasure of being in the warmth of your company on such a bitterly cold evening,” said Wormtail, raising his goblet to meet Hannah’s and clinking it lightly against her goblet.

“Oh, Wormtail, you always say the kindest things,” said Hannah, batting her lashes at him in a nauseating attempt at simulated timidity.

Ron made a distinct gagging gesture, while Hermione passed a nervous glance to Harry, whose jaw was now pulsing along so furiously that his teeth were certain to crumble under the pressure.

Hannah sipped at her wine and moved to set it on the table. She purposely let it slip from her grasp and smash against the ground, where it came to a final rest as a bed of tiny glass daggers coated by the sheer burgundy droplets of her wine.

“Oh, dear! How clumsy of me!” she exclaimed theatrically while drawing her wand from her cloak pocket and preparing to clear the mess.

“*No, please. Allow me,*” said Wormtail insistently, wielding his wand across the floor with his back to her.

Hannah hurriedly plucked a light pink jeweled vile from her cloak pocket and released the contents into his goblet. Harry marveled at the smoothness in her delivery. Had he have blinked, he felt certain he would have missed it.

“There we are. No harm done,” said Wormtail dismissively, kissing her hand and conjuring another glass, then filling it and handing it to her.

“Well, *cheers!*” said Hannah in a rich sultry tone.

Wormtail chugged his wine in a subconscious effort at subduing his arousal.

“So, have you seen —” he started, abruptly collapsing in a shoddy heap at her feet and sinking beneath the table.

“Ugh! Thank goodness!” grunted Hannah, letting down her guard and shuddering as she conjured a towel to wipe her hand clean of Wormtail’s slobbery kisses. She leaned backward in her chair and shot her wand casually over her shoulder, stunning the two figures at the bar. “Wes, Rue...it’s all clear!”

The two made their way over to her.

“*You know WORMTAIL?*” snarled Harry, surfacing angrily from beneath his invisibility cloak and advancing on her, clamping his hand tightly around her wrist.

“*Settle down, Potter!*” she snapped, yanking her arm from his grip. “I happened upon him, by mere coincidence, months ago. The instant I saw his hand, I knew it was a Horcrux. So, I befriended him, knowing he would be of use to me, and it looks as though my sentiments were correct.”

“We must take him to the Ministry!” shouted Harry in a commanding tenor.

“For what? So that they can send him to Azkaban, only for him to escape next week? Have you forgotten that the Dementors are no longer there to guard the inmates?”

“He deserves to *rot* in prison!” snarled Harry, grabbing her wrist again.

“You’re absolutely right, Harry. He does. Although, for now, he is about to prove himself quite useful to us. So, *clear off!*” she snapped, stealing away from him.

Harry watched as Wes tended to Wormtail by dribbling the Veritaserum over his silver hand, and plying his wand in brisk persistent circles over it.

“Wes, what is it?” asked Hannah alarmingly when Wes shook his head ‘*no*’ at her. “But, it’s gotta be!”

“What’s going on?” inquired Harry anxiously.

A look of blaring disquiet crossed Hannah’s face as she leaned into Wormtail and worked her wand in a frantic swirling motion over his artificial hand.

“*No!*” she gasped in horror.

Harry gulped.

“Hannah, *please* tell me what’s going on!” said Harry pleadingly.

“Harry, I’m sorry. I thought it was —”

“It’s not a Horcrux, is it?” Harry confirmed her grimly.

“No, it’s not, Harry; I’m sorry. I thought for certain that it was. Why would Voldemort give Wormtail anything? Wormtail’s a wretched, sniveling coward of a man and Voldemort never does anything for anyone, unless —” There was an immediate plugging of the upset flow of her words. Her eyes widened as she sketched her finger over the ornate serpent etched onto the face of the hand.

“Unless what?” pushed Harry.

She looked to Wes, to Harry, and then to Rue, and said, “What would you lot say if I told you that I think I know *exactly* what this hand is?” An indubitable grin of hope began blossoming across her face. Wes eyed her curiously, and as if he knew what she was thinking, he nodded in accord.

“What? What?” inquired Harry impatiently.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I do believe what we have here is none other than a *Portkey*. The *very one* that will lead us to our desired destination.”

“A *Portkey*?” echoed Ron in surprise.

“Are you sure?” inquired Harry anxiously.

“There’s only one way to be,” said Hannah, smoothing over the seam of the silver spectacle fused to the flesh of Wormtail’s wrist. “And it looks as though we’re going to

have to take him with us. I'll have to charm him so that we can get back to Grimmauld when we're finished with our mission."

"WHAT? You're going to let *him* into Grimmauld!" said Harry.

"Yes, Harry. There's no spell that can separate this appendage without destroying it, and we can't end our journey back here. It's far too risky."

"What are we to do with him while we're retrieving the Horcrux?" asked Harry.

"We'll have to play it by ear," said Hannah evenly, intently examining her new discovery. "Alright, everyone, gather round and grab hold of him."

"Ugh! We have to touch that *filth*?" gagged Ron, thoroughly disgusted by the sickening prospect of laying so much as a finger on Wormtail.

"Unless you'd like to stay here and tend bar for the next gaggle of Death Eaters that arrive, Ronald." retorted Hannah obnoxiously.

"Don't tempt me," he grumbled.

Hermione scoffed and rolled her eyes, snapping out, "For heaven sakes, Ronald, you held onto him for *twelve years!*"

"Yeah, that was when I thought he was a *rat*, not some *ghastly murderer* who doesn't fancy taking a bath once in a while," he griped.

Hannah smirked and instructed the group, "On the count of three, we're to take flight. Ready? One, two...*three!*"

The warm breath of the room swept out from beneath them, and their bodies were left spinning, twisting, and jerking repeatedly. The journey seemed never-ending. Harry felt his stomach seize up in his throat, having been completely nauseated by the persistence of this rapid circular motion.

At long last, their rate of speed slowed, then, ceased, and the group found themselves delivered unto a sea of pure-white-coated peaks of mountainous earth. Harry spun full circle, staring out at the vast snowy summits, which he thought resembled thick white blankets draped over hundreds of sleeping giants. The narrow icy river trails that lined the valleys could have passed for the effects of the giants' frozen puddles of drool. He gave a prominent shudder as the bursts of icy wind gusts passed through the fabric of his clothing, biting into the flesh of his goose-pimpled skin.

"Wh-where are we?" he grunted through the rapid chattering of his teeth.

Hannah looked past the debris of what must have been thousands of white slated rocks poking up through the blankets of snow like frosted feathers. She lowered her gaze downward, tracing over the powdered sweeping valleys and onto a long and winding trail that sliced its way beneath the sheer flanks of infinite mountainous passes.

“Snowdonia,” she said with swift certainty, her crisscrossed arms hugging at her body to keep the heat from escaping her. “It looks as though we’re on the pinnacles of Crib Goch.”

“It’s ss-s-soooo c-c-cold,” quivered Hermione, snuggling up to Ron.

“Here; all of you; take one of these,” instructed Hannah, reaching into her cloak pocket and pulling out a handful of tiny purple tablets.

“What are *those*?” asked Ron in bewilderment.

“It’s a variation of the Rain-Shield Charm gum drops I invented for Fred and George’s joke shop. Only, these are more condensed, so you’re not inhibited by a giant bubble. I added a bit of a Warming Spell to it, as well. The shield hugs your silhouette, and you stay dry and warm. Here, watch,” she said, popping one in her mouth. Almost instantly, the outer edge of her skin emitted a soft golden glow. “Ah, that’s better.”

“Wicked!” said Ron, ingesting one of the pills and lighting up like an overgrown glowworm, along side of her.

“Oh, yes, that’s *very* nice,” said Hermione, after having swallowed one and feeling the splendid warming sensation flowing throughout her body. “How long do they last?”

“Six hours, as long as you don’t do anything to damage the shield, like fall too far a distance, or cut yourself too deeply. That will cause breaches, letting in the cold and wet.”

“This is *brilliant* magic, Hannah,” said Harry, equally contented by the brisk dismissal of the ill effects the bitter elements had once inflicted upon him.

“Well, I reckon we ought to give one to Wormtail so he doesn’t turn into a *rat-cicle*,” joked Hannah dryly, kneeling down over his unconscious body and tossing one of the pills into his mouth.

“Mobilicorpus,” she muttered, flicking her wand lazily at Wormtail, causing his body to rise slowly into a standing position.

He hovered over the ground like an overgrown rag doll on an invisible hook. Harry sniggered lightly. He was remembering how Lupin and Sirius had performed the same spell on an unconscious Professor Snape years ago in the Shrieking Shack. He thought of how his godfather, Sirius, had taken such delight in bumping Snape’s lolling head on the

ceiling of the connecting corridor. Harry suddenly found himself letting out a series of uncontrollable sharp guffaws.

“What’s so funny?” whispered Hermione.

“Nothing, nothing. I was just...thinking,” said Harry, watching curiously as Wes peered into his eyes with a severe look of loathing.

Then, Wes turned on his heel and marched off to meet up with Hannah. Harry thought Wes’s timing was — odd — and wondered what the fuss was about. But, he shrugged the incident away the moment Hannah had called for their attention.

“Alright, you lot; this way. You’re to follow Wes and me,” she said, waving the others after them and holding out her wand, bewitching Wormtail to glide along behind her. The pointed toes of his shoes fixed two shaky parallel pathways into the steep snow covered terrain as his hovering unconscious self scaled the craggy mountainside.

“I’ll tell you what,” huffed Ron. “I’ll be *glad* when we’re through with this. I can hardly breathe. Can’t we just...Apparate to the top?”

“*No*,” said Hannah firmly. “There are too many enchantments to prevent it. It’s Voldemort’s crass little way of making us work for our supper.”

“This is insane! Have you seen the drop from here? It’s gotta be at least eighty meters,” complained Ron

“85.69, once we reach the summit,” said Hannah simply.

“Oh, well, that’s spectacular. We’ll be reduced to a pile of shrapnel if we fall from there,” grumbled Ron.

“What the — ?” started Harry after glimpsing off into the distance ahead of them.

“What? What is it?” inquired Hermione alarmingly.

“I thought I just saw something....odd.”

“Odd? How odd? *Weird* odd, or *scary* odd?” inquired Ron fretfully.

“There! There it is again!” exclaimed Harry, pointing to the left of them at a cluster of broad stepped terraces carved into the side of the mountain.

“It’s a RED CAP!” shrieked Hermione.

“You saw that too, did you?” acknowledged Hannah coolly. “Lucky for us, only one of them lives in a cavern at a time. I believe the six of us can handle *him*.”

However, Ron saw it far differently, spluttering and pointing his quaking forefinger at the other two...three...five...seven...ten...*seventeen* Redcaps that he had now counted. “Th-th-there’s m-more!” he finally managed to squeak out.

Harry watched the horrid figures emerge from every direction around them. He had only ever read about and seen pictures of Red Caps in a text book and considered the mere thought of their existence to be inconceivably horrible: The creatures were chronicled as old broad-shouldered male fairies with strong skinny arms and hands, drawing claw-like fingernails, and wearing rust red caps, iron boots, and carrying pikestuffs. His textbooks regaled dreadful tales of their brutal will to murder by rolling boulders, or tearing at people with their claws, then drinking the blood of their victims and dipping their hats in it, giving rise to their awful name.

Harry felt their appearance was far more staggering in the flesh, that every documentation he had ever happed upon had *grossly under-defined* the true context of their being: The creatures standing before him were short and wiry, sporting ragged, pointed bucked-teeth, and long, sharp silvery fingers like blades of steel. They were heavily bearded with unnaturally wrinkled aged faces. Harry noted their blood soaked caps were like sticky wet sponges; the juicy red flow oozing from the tips of their caps, down to their shoulders, seeping into the backs of their raggedy worn shirts. He never imagined he would come face to face with what was once merely an atrocious illustration printed on the harmless page of a schoolbook.

The hairs on Harry’s body stood at attention. He was filled with sheer terror now after having absorbed the unspeakable energy dribbling from the Red Caps’ beastly, bloodthirsty frowns.

“Shit!” cursed Hannah as two of the Red Caps backed her against a large snowy boulder jutting out of the earth and began kicking at her with their iron boots and slashing at her with their spiky claws. She shot off a series of killing curses at the creatures in her defense, and they dropped dead at her feet.

“Wes, look out!” shouted Harry, scrapping with one of the malevolent fairies and watching as three of them charged after Wes from different angles.

“Oh no!” gasped Hermione, firing her wand at one of the creatures heading for her and Ron and noting ten more fading into her view from behind Hannah. “Hannah, *behind you!*” she shouted.

“AH!” Hannah shrieked when one of them took a swipe at her, slicing into her arm like a soft stick of butter.

“Hannah!” cried Harry, trying to push his way over to her while fighting against several of the Red caps that had formed a tight ring of death around him.

Wes stepped forward and fired his wand, killing the beast attacking Hannah, and then shot his wand several more times to destroy the one's closing in on Harry.

Hermione and Ron continued to dodge the swift angry blows of a mass of the evil creatures emerging from behind every rocky slate surrounding them.

“COME ON! RUN! There's too many to fight them all!” bellowed Hannah, waving the group toward the summit of the steep mountain and bewitching Wormtail to hurry along behind her. She sank her wounded arm into her gut to slow the bleeding.

“Hannah, are you alright?” shouted Harry worriedly, trailing along behind her in horror at the sight of the significant trail of crimson she was leaving off.

“Yeah, we gotta get to a safe place before I can take the time to heal it,” she grunted.

Harry turned his head, catching a glimpse of the horde of Red Caps that had gathered and were treading after them. He glanced to the left of him, to Ron, who was nursing a deep gash on the side of his face while he chugged along, and to his right, to Hermione, who was limping at a bumbling run as a result of multiple lacerations branded across the thigh of her left leg. He noted that Wes and Rue were trotting backwards and firing off their wands at a throng of the wicked beasts closing in on them. Several of the horrid creatures dropped dead amidst the bright green flashes of light emanating from their wands.

“I...don't...think...I can...run...anymore,” huffed Ron, gasping and coughing, struggling to pump enough air into his ever-deflating lungs.

Harry noticed Ron's face was nearly purple and caked in rivers of running sweat so intense, it looked as though he was melting.

“They're pulling back!” shouted Hermione.

Harry spun around for a quick peak and noticed that one by one, the Red Caps were indeed halting in their tracks and returning to the snowy folds from whence they came.

“Oh, *thank Merlin!*” gasped Hannah, collapsing to the ground and sending Wormtail slumping into a ragged heap beside her.

“Hannah!” shouted Harry, hurtling toward her in a flood of panic.

But, he was too late. Wes had stepped in and was holding Hannah in his arms, healing her wounds with his wand, and brushing his hand compassionately against the delicate fair skin of her face.

“HEY! Get your slimy hands off my girlfriend!” shouted Harry in a short burst of outrage, launching crossly at Wes.

“Harry...s-stop,” coughed Hannah weakly, notably snuggling into the strong muscle of Wes’s loving hold.

Wes had next conjured a small yellow vile and was smoothing its contents in tiny persistent circles over her wounds. Harry cringed as he watched Hannah reach her hand up to Wes and trace her fingertips down the side of his face, wearing an expression that was far greater than the likes of friendship.

She still loves him, Harry thought to himself, becoming more and more enraged by it.

Wes leaned in and impressed a gentle kiss upon Hannah’s forehead, driving Harry to howl out, “Alright, *that’s enough!* I can take it from here!” He reached in and grabbed Hannah’s arm, yanking her out of Wes’s comforting grasp.

“*OUCH! Harry, let me go! You’re hurting me!*” hissed Hannah, shoving away from him and catering to the reddened imprint his hand had left on her wrist. “What’s gotten into you? He was only trying to help me!”

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I —”

“Just back away from me, Harry! *Honestly!* You really need to get a grip on this jealousy streak you’ve been playing out. I’m bloody sick of it!” she spat and returned her attention to Wes, imparting a kind stroke down his arm, then scaling toward the summit at his side with Wormtail bobbing peculiarly along after them.

Harry felt his face burning beneath the torturous and unrelenting flames of fury and embarrassment. He could sense the sympathetic stares of his two best friends, Ron and Hermione, who were standing to the right and left of him, and he knew Hermione’s unsolicited words of encouragement weren’t far behind.

“Harry, it’s alright. Just remember, she’s with *you, not him.*”

“Right,” he mumbled incredulously.

“That Wes is a right foul git, isn’t he, Harry?” Ron chimed in. “I’d have done the same thing if he had his hands all over Hermione. I mean, who does he think he is anyway?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” muttered Harry.

They arrived at the summit of the mountain to meet the chilling whistles of the icy burst of wind.

“What now?” asked Harry.

“We start looking,” said Hannah.

“Can someone tell us what exactly it is we’re looking for? All I see is a great mound of snow!” complained Ron.

“Patience, Ronald...patience. All magic shows itself sooner or later,” said Hannah.

“Great. Meanwhile, we get to hang around here all night waiting for it,” grumbled Ron.

“Honestly, Ronald, why don’t you help us look around instead of griping,” said Hermione irritably.

“What is that?!” shouted Harry, pointing high into the black night sky.

“What is what?” asked Hannah.

“*That!* Right there!” said Harry more resolutely, pointing in the same direction.

“I don’t see anything,” said Ron.

“Where is it Harry?” asked Hermione anxiously

“It’s *there!* Right in front of us! Don’t you see it?” He said, motioning impatiently above him.

“Harry, I don’t see a thing,” answered Hermione tensely.

“I believe you must be hallucinating, mate,” said Ron.

The rest of the group began to strain to try to assume the vision Harry had sworn truly existed.

“*No, I’m not! It’s right there!*” said Harry in frustration.

Hannah stared in the direction he was looking for quite some time before responding calmly, “Harry, what does it look like?”

“What do you mean? Can’t you see it?” he retorted irritably.

“Harry, calm down. Tell me exactly what it is that you see.”

“It’s...*horrible...strange*. I reckon you could say it looks like the devil with a vast set of bat-like wings. It’s skin is scarlet red, it’s got a-a long pointed chin that stretches down to its chest, black hallowed out eyes with red slits in them, and two long thick horns on either side of its head. And there’s this strange sort of wonky flaming globe on its head.”

Hannah gasped and looked to Wes and Rue, then back to Harry.

“What? What’s the matter?” inquired Harry nervously.

“Harry, where is it now?” asked Hannah.

“Same place. It’s just hovering there, staring at the lot of us,” he said, continuing to review the ominous creature, which was clearly invisible to the rest of the group. “What is it?”

“Harry, it’s an Ardad,” said Hannah

“A *what?*”

“An *Ardad*, a demon, one of the guardians of evil. But, it’s not a creature that can be seen by just anyone. They *choose* to reveal themselves to the one who represents *the greatest challenge to them*. The one who’s spirit is *whole and good*.”

“You mean...it *chose me?*”

“Yes. He wants to fight you, to collect your soul and contaminate you with immorality,” choked Hannah.

“Is he the — the Horcrux?” asked Harry.

“No; but he has it. The flaming globe on his head — *that’s gotta be it.*”

Wes nodded in agreement.

“How am I to get it?” asked Harry.

“You’ll need a broom,” said Hannah resolutely.

“Where am I to get a broom around here? Grimmauld is too far away for me to call upon my Firebolt. It’ll take ages to get it. We’ll be here all night, waiting.”

“Ask the Ardad,” Hannah urged him gently while pointing in the direction of the demon.

“*What?*” hissed Harry.

“You’ve got to be joking!” scoffed Ron. “You think that thing is just going to hand Harry a broom?”

“*Ask him,*” Hannah urged Harry strongly, brushing against his arm reassuringly.

Harry cleared his throat and looked to the creature, and feeling entirely ill at ease, he rattled off, “Can I have a broom, please?” Then, he rolled his eyes at himself, thinking how completely foolish his request seemed.

Several seconds passed with no response to his inquiry. The rest of the group exchanged nervous glances between one another as they stood lost beneath a heightened sense of anxiety. Harry felt his cheeks burning with embarrassment, having realized that to everyone else it appeared as though he had just asked the empty sky for something that seemed almost ludicrous.

A sudden and inexplicable wave of irritation began raging up inside of him. He wasn't sure if it was a result of the expressions of doubt crossing the rest of the groups' faces, or if it was his own male ego stepping in.

Before he even realized it, he was spitting out in aggravation, "Well, I suppose this thing is only willing to fight me if it has the upper hand! *Ruddy coward!*"

Out of nowhere, a broom appeared at Harry's feet. And, this wasn't just any broom; it was a *Firebolt XL*; the top of the line, 0-100 in 6 seconds, unbreakable, indestructible, hottest model available to the whole of the wizarding world.

"Bloody hell!" gasped Ron in awe, smoothing his hands over the brilliant golden wood finish of the handle.

"Go on, Harry. Mount it," urged Hannah, elbowing him gently in his side.

"W-what am I to do then?" he inquired edgily.

"I reckon you fly it," answered Ron smartly.

"Right," said Harry breathlessly.

"Harry, wait," said Hannah, blocking his take off.

"What is it?"

"Let me see something."

She packed a ball of snow in her hands and threw it at the invisible creature. A flaming ball of fire hurtled toward her in return. She shot her wand at the fiery orb and it burst into cinders, singeing deep cavities into the snow covered earth and sending violent bursts of steam spiraling into the air.

"What the bloody hell was *that!*" whimpered Ron.

"An Acidium Orb."

"*Huh?*" spat Harry.

"It's an acidic structure that will melt anything it touches, particularly flesh and bone."

Harry gulped. “You mean —”

“That’s right, Harry. If one of those hits you, you’re done for. Perhaps Wes or I ought to take care of this,” she said insistently, trying to coax him off the broom.

“No. How is either of you to fight this monster and retrieve the Horcrux if you can’t even see it?”

“But Harry —”

“Look, I’m the best flyer out of everyone here, and you know it, Hannah.”

“But what if you get hurt?” said Hannah worriedly.

“What if *you* get hurt?” said Harry strongly.

“Harry —”

“Obviously, this thing wants *me*, so why not let it give me a go?”

“Harry, listen to me. This could very well mean your life.”

“It’s worth it if it brings us one step closer to destroying Voldemort, for good.”

Hannah eyed him reluctantly, and after several long moments, she said, “Alright; we’ll back you up. Just concentrate on going for the globe and *we’ll* destroy the orbs. Your Rain Shield Charm should be strong enough to protect you from the debris, but not from a direct hit, so you must be careful.”

“Alright, then. Wish me luck,” said Harry boldly, preparing to kick off the ground.

“*Wait!*” said Hannah, holding onto him and offering him the sweet sentiments of her delectable kiss.

Wes grunted aloud and scowled at Hannah in condemnation. Harry beamed.

“Good luck, Potter” whispered Hannah. “*Think Quidditch,*” she added.

“Funny, that’s exactly what I was planning to do,” said Harry lightheartedly.

“Be careful.”

“I will,” said Harry, and with a sound, reassuring nod, he kicked off the ground and headed straight for the demon.

Within an instant, a chain of flaming orbs came tearing after him. They were curbed by the brilliant flashes of white lights resulting from the defense spells being cast by the members of his group lingering below him. The intensity and occurrence of each flaming orb continued to increase until the sky was flooded in a pool of roaring flames.

“Ugh!” Harry retched through the acidic smoke pooling in his lungs.

“Harry! What’s going on?!” shouted Hannah.

“There are more of them!” he retorted anxiously, circling his gaze to the four other demons that had joined in the rush to overpower him.

“*What’s happening?*” coughed Hermione, dodging the blazing debris raining down upon them.

“It’s *us!* We’re making it *worse* by helping him!” shouted Hannah.

“So, what are we to do?” asked Ron worriedly.

“We’ve got to back off before — AH!” cried Hannah, having received a crushing blow to the center of her chest by an invisible force.

“Hannah! What is it?” shrieked Hermione.

“One of the demons, it’s trying sway Harry’s attention. It knows I’m Harry’s weakness!” she exclaimed, clawing at the air and finding herself being forced toward the edge of the mountain. “Shit! Shit! It’s trying to push me off!”

“Hannah!” yelled Harry as he watched her struggle from above.

“Harry, pay attention to what your doing up there! Don’t worry about me!” she hollered, struggling to seize control over the violent creature.

“Argh!” hollered Harry, dodging one of the flaming orbs in the nick of time, feeling the heat from the tail end of it as it melted a clump of hair by his ear.

“*PAY ATTENTION, POTTER!*” bellowed Hannah, still struggling against one of the demons. She shot her wand furiously in the direction of the blows, obviously missing each time, as the mischievous fiend continued to attack her.

Wes lurched forward, armed to kill it, when he was suddenly struck by a furious blow to his abdomen. He stumbled backwards, scrabbling frantically at the snow covered terrain to keep from going over the side of the mountain.

“NO!” screamed Hannah, watching helplessly as Wes clung to the rocky steps of the slopes with one hand and fired his wand randomly at the great flaming balls of fire with the other.

Harry looked on in pale horror as three more demons emerged from the darkness and began attacking his friends. He was the only one privileged to see them. *They're being punished for helping me*, he thought to himself. He swung around to seize his target with a determined and steadfast temper. Somehow, he had to lift the Horcrux from the demon's head. *But, how?* he wondered. He shot his wand at the creature several times, trying out Blinding Jinxes, Tripping Hexes, and Body Bind Curses, each one hitting some kind of invisible shield surrounding the Ardad and reflecting off it.

“Harry, you can't use your magic to defeat them — only your hands!” shrieked Hannah while the demon assaulting her inched her closer to the edge of the mountain.

When else had failed, she swung her foot high in the air and planted the steel tip of her boot right where she thought it would count. A loud shriek ensued, its reverberation piercing the chaos of the moment. There came the sound of a sharp rush of wings, chased by a swift burst of air as the invisible creature rushed past her.

“Serves you right for not showing yourself to me, *you ruddy coward!*” snarled Hannah.

She dashed off in Wes's direction to help him ward off the bright flaming orbs hurling toward him. Wes fought desperately to claw his way back onto the surface of the mountain, only to be knocked down again by the raging fury of one of the beasts.

“Hang on, Severus!” whispered Hannah raspily to him. “I won't let you fall!” She clapped his hands in hers and dug the steel tips of her boots into the snowy frozen earth.

Ron, Hermione, and Rue continued to struggle against the wrath of the demons attacking *them*. Their wands were firing off persistently into the blackened snowy night while they artfully dodged the countless blazing orbs they hadn't the chance to destroy.

Harry continued to fight the demons surrounding him. He rushed through the air on his broom, circling, twirling, and grunting as he feverishly dodged the swift passes of dozens of flaming orbs. He shot his wand blindly and fiercely over his shoulder, listening to the loud CRACK reverberation sounding off every time one of his spells managed to hit and destroy an orb.

Realizing he was now hovering directly above the creature housing the Horcrux and that it was temporarily transfixed by the actions of its brothers, Harry took the opportunity to swoop down in tight persistent rings toward the creature. He dove below it, dodging the never-ending orbs of fire being thrown at him, spinning around and around to confuse it. Then, swinging up over its head, he reached downward, brushing against the creature's side, slapping at its shoulders, soaring high into the air, and doubling back, snatching the Horcrux from the top of its head.

“*Got it!*” he shouted in time to hear the swift WHOOSH! of his broom as it was jinxed out from under him by one of the demons.

Harry was left plummeting toward the mountainous earth in a wild blurring mass. He hit the snow-slated ground with a loud THUD! Within an instant, the Ardads disappeared. His focus found Hannah, whose hands were going numb from the solid unrelenting grip she had on Wes. Her left boot had lifted from its place in the earth and her legs were parting as she was being dragged off the mountain by Wes’s weight.

“Hannah! Hang on!” Harry shouted, hopping to his feet and rushing toward her just as her other boot lost its grip on the ground. “*Gotcha!*” he yelled, catching her before she slid over the edge of the cliff.

“Harry, please help him! I can’t hold on much longer!” she begged.

“Hang on, just hang on. It’ll be alright,” said Harry reassuringly, climbing over her and reaching his hand out to Wes. “Take my hand!” he yelled.

Wes looked to him in defiance.

“I won’t let you fall! I promise you, I won’t!” shouted Harry resolutely.

Still, Wes refused him.

“Wes, *please!*” Hannah implored him. “You’ll die if you don’t let Harry help you! I can’t do it! I’m not strong enough!”

Hannah’s hands were numbed to the point she only knew she still had hold of Wes by looking. Wes grunted and scowled in disgust as his eyes met Harry’s eyes.

“GIVE ME YOUR HAND, OR YOU’LL *BOTH* SURELY DIE!” demanded Harry, panicking as Hannah inched further over the edge of the cliff.

Wes clenched his teeth and cinched his eyes, slapping one of his hands into Harry’s then the other.

“ARGH!” Harry grunted, slamming the toes of his trainers into the frozen earth, pulling Wes’s weight using every square inch of himself as an anchor. He pitched forward for an instant, his upper body draping over the sharp-knifed edge of the precipice. Every vein in Harry’s body protruded from his flesh in his attempt to pull Wes in his direction, his skin flushed and strained to the point he felt he was about to burst wide open at any moment.

“ARGH!” he yelled, again, gripping Wes’s hands tighter, pulling harder with a strength he barely recognized as his own; but it was not enough. Hannah lay beside him, shaking her hands furiously to restore the sensation to them, gasping as Harry’s body slipped further and further over the edge of the cliff.

Suddenly, Harry felt a strong grip of a hand clap and constrict around his right ankle. He threw his head back to catch sight of his flaming red-haired best friend, Ron, who had locked his legs firmly around a tall rock formation and was pulling Harry, in his direction with every ounce of his might, backed by Hermione and Rue, whom were both securing Ron's legs to the stone. Slowly, but surely, by the grace of the rest of the groups' stunning might, Harry and Wes cleared the mountaintop, and several minutes later, they were settled on the safety of its surface.

"Oh, *thank Merlin!*" exclaimed Hannah breathlessly, hugging Wes, then turning to Harry and Ron in tears, throwing her arms around them and crying out, "Well done, Harry! Well done, Ron!"

Harry slapped his best friend on his back with the unmistakable mark of indebted gratitude and dabbed the sweat from his own brow, flinching in surprise when Wes approached them, holding out his hand to shake each of theirs.

"Spectacular!" said Hannah. "Let's destroy this ruddy Horcrux and get out of here, shall we?" She scooped the brilliant hued orb off the rugged terrain, and kneeling down, signaling the others to sit, she called out hastily, "Gather round everyone, gather round! Wes, would you like to do the honors with the Veritaserum?"

He nodded in affirmation, and taking the orb in his hands, he dribbled the potion over top of it. Instantly, the night before them faded out and a new sense of darkness burgeoned in.

They were in Gryffindor Hollow, in the Potter's home. Harry saw his parents and himself as a baby. There came a mysterious knock at the front door: A tall, heavily cloaked man burst through the entryway and charged across the threshold. The haunting stranger threw back his hood, coming face to face with...James Potter.

"How did you find us here?!" demanded James.

"My, my, James, you look stunned. I told you before; you cannot hide from Lord Voldemort, forever! You had the chance to join us and hand over Harry, but you refused! Now you will pay with your life!" hissed Voldemort horribly. "Wormtail, come!"

A short ratty, balding man pushed through the front entrance of the home and bowed low before his master.

"No!" gasped James. "Wormtail, you?"

"Indeed, James!" answered Voldemort. "Your dear, loyal friend, Peter Pettigrew, consented to assist me by bringing me to you. Never fear! I assure you, he'll been thoroughly rewarded for his efforts."

“How could you, Wormtail?! This is my family! I thought we were friends!”

“‘I thought we were friends!’” mocked Voldemort, punctuating his delivery with a sharp eerie cackle. “Yes, and one of your other classmates is here, too, James. He was the one who uncovered the first part of the prophecy for me, which has lead us to this very moment.”

Another cloaked figure emerged from the darkness, throwing back his hood in defiance.

“Snivelus!” spat James at the sight of the figure.

“That’s SEVERUS, POTTER!” growled Snape.

Voldemort cackled again. “Yes, James; it appears as though you’re about to get what you deserve for all those years you spent tormenting my most faithful servant, Severus Snape, and the years you took your friendship with Wormtail for granted. You see, Quidditch and frivolous magic tricks will only get you so far in this life, Potter. Arrogance and ignorance taketh it all away!”

“Master, might I have a word with you, please?” inquired Snape in a soft urgent tenor.

“Enough, Severus! We’ve already been through this. I will be the one to kill Potter and the boy. You’ve been granted what you truly need! There will be no more!” growled Voldemort.

“Get out of here, all of you!” demanded James, stunning Wormtail and Snape. With a grand flourishing of his wand, he shot several curses at Voldemort, who, with a lazy flick of his wand, deflected James’s every spell. In a swirl of panic, James hollered out, “Lily, run! Take Harry and Run!”

“You fool! None of you will escape me this time! I’ve brought others to make sure of it!” hissed Voldemort. “Now, I want the boy! Hand me the boy!”

“Never! You’ll have to kill me, first!” howled James in defiance.

“It will be my pleasure!” said Voldemort in a fierce and unnatural growl. “Avada Kedavra!” he bellowed.

A bold flash of green light burst forth from his wand and struck James square in the chest and sending him clear across the room. James hit the ground almost instantly, stiff as a board, his lifeless eyes glazed over, having been granted the cold, cruel vigor of death....

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” bellowed Harry, lying in a grief stricken heap on the frigid snow covered ground, sobbing out uncontrollably.

“Harry, it’s alright, *it’s alright*,” whimpered Hermione, reaching for him.

Ron frowned. His lower lip twitched, and his tear strung eyes filled with equal dismay.

“Harry, come here, come here,” whispered Hannah, pulling him into her comforting hold and glaring at Wes, who stood to his feet and backed away, accompanied by Rue, who placed her hand compassionately on Wes’ shoulder.

“*I want to see **all of them DIE!***” howled Harry. “Snape, Wormtail, Voldemort, *all of them!* I want them to pay for killing my parents!”

“Harry, *calm down*,” said Hannah consolingly.

“I hate the lot of them! Severus Snape is a ruddy coward, hiding behind Voldemort to punish my father and all for some *silly childhood vengeance!* I wish he were here right now so I could *rip his heart out and shove it down his throat!* Perhaps then, he would get a taste of what it feels like to be left with *nothing!*”

“HARRY, *SHUT IT!* You have no idea what you’re saying!” snarled Hannah.

“Harry, listen to Hannah. You *must* calm down,” echoed Hermione.

Harry wrenched his face and followed the path leading to Wormtail, eyeing him up with a sense of ultimate loathing, as he thought to himself, *I could kill that wretched man....I could kill him, right now, and no one would question it: Wormtail is wanted dead or alive by the Ministry. I’d be hailed as a **hero** for destroying Wormtail, not a criminal.* He raised his wand.

“Harry, *no!*” whimpered Hannah, curling her hand gently around his wrist and lowering his arm. “Think of the mission, Harry. Think of the task at hand.”

“*I want him to pay for what he’s done to my family!*” grunted Harry through his clenched teeth and mounting tears.

“And he will, Harry, *he will.* But, now is not the time, nor are you the wizard to execute the charge,” she said gently, leaning into him and touching her cheek to his.

Harry closed his eyes.

“You must settle yourself,” whispered Hannah in his ear. “Settle down.”

Harry wrenched his face and cinched his eyes tightly shut, trying desperately to fight his urge to kill.

Hannah looked off to Wes, who looked back to her. Harry watched as they studied each other intently for what seemed like an eternity before they finally broke their visual connection with subtle nods of confirmation.

“Now, we’ve got work to do. We need to return to Grimmauld before anyone notices we’ve gone missing,” said Hannah resolutely.

Harry shoved off her and swooped up the Horcrux. “I want this one all to myself!”

“Harry, wait a minute.” said Hannah gently. “The Horcrux cannot be destroyed out of pure vengeance. We must destroy it because it is the right thing to do. Think of the mission. Control your anger.”

“I *am* in control of it!” said Harry in defiance, positioning himself before the glowing orb with his wand arm outstretched.

Hannah backed away from him and looked on.

“Seven times anti-clockwise, then seven times clockwise, right?” said Harry dazedly.

“You’ve got it,” said Hannah.

Harry proceeded with the ritual, and then he shouted out, “*Capio Caesus!*” A radiant flash of green light scorched the surface of the glowing spectacle and swirled away.

The rest of the group released soft winded sighs of elation.

Hermione threw her arms around him in a proud embrace, and in a choking whisper, she said, “You’ve done it, Harry! You’ve done it!”

“Nice one, mate!” said Ron, his voice cracking slightly upon the deliverance of the words. He slapped proudly at Harry’s shoulder.

“Shall we head back, then?” asked Harry, visibly shaken.

“We shall,” said Hannah.

“Er, guys?” whimpered Ron, pointing behind them to a group of horrid monsters that had appeared from the other side of the summit.

“More Red Caps!” gasped Hermione.

“Let’s get Wormtail and get out of here!” ordered Hannah.

“Hannah, look out!” shouted Harry as one of the Red Caps popped up out of nowhere behind her.

With its claws drawn, the evil Red Cap lurched forward and slashed at Hannah's face. She screamed as a sharp stinging sensation burst across her cheek, sending splatters of crimson splashing against the snow. The beast lashed at her again, but missed. Then it charged forward and snatched her wand from her hand, driving it into a large icy mound to the right of her. Harry lunged forward to try to save her when he was headed off by two Red Caps swooping in on either side of him.

The evil creatures swarmed around the lot of them like a horde of angry bees, stinging and slashing at them with a buzzing, raging ferocity. Within seconds, the entire group was confronted by the beasts' gruesome assault.

"UGH!" grunted Hannah, turning to face the Red Cap that was backing her against a huge snowy mass.

She was kicking furiously at its' knobby knees, trying desperately to break free of its wrath, struggling repeatedly and unsuccessfully to retrieve her wand. There was a distinct *CRACK* when she planted her heel into its right kneecap. The nasty being screeched, stumbled backward, and rolled down the mountainside.

"Hannah, watch out! There's two more!" bawled Harry while he wrestled upright with one of the evil fiends that was kicking and clawing violently at him.

Hannah glanced above her, spotting two of the Red Caps standing atop a large Cornice overhead. They were stomping madly on it with their heavy iron club boots. Before she had the occasion to flee, the overhanging mass of snow and ice plunged toward her, knocking her face down and burying her beneath endless mounting layers of white.

"Hannah! *NOOOO!*" screamed Harry in horror, trying with increasing desperation to escape the Red Cap that had now knocked him flat on his back with its pikestaff.

It was ripping ferociously at his flesh, sinking its razor-sharp claws into Harry's wrists and severing his tender veins. Harry's struggle was wasted. The strength of the vicious creature, which had now piled its entire weight on top of him, was overwhelming. Old and withered as it appeared, it was like wrestling a wild bull; the blood pouring from Harry's stinging and burning wrists was the flourish of the cape, which he was now waving madly about to distract the Red Cap from clawing at the rest of him. Its' revolting, hot, rank breath was on his neck, steaming in hungry puffs amid the frigid air as he fought to the end of his fight until his wrists were numbed and aching to the point he could no longer rely on them for his defense.

With a malevolent grin, the Red Cap pulled back its arm, splaying and twisting the blades on its bloodthirsty hand, coming in for the kill, aiming at Harry's heart. Harry cinched his eyes and clenched his teeth. He was going to die, but he refused to have his last memory be that of a bristly, blood sucking and buck-toothed beast. He concentrated with all his might and envisioned Hannah's stunning face, her dazzling green eyes, her sweet berry lips and honey-rose-kissed cheeks. And there it was: *CRUNCH!* It was as if someone had

just bitten into a crisp juicy apple. He felt his breath stop, his body numb, and a warming sensation spill out all over his chest, coating him like a thick salve. The weight of the moment closing in on his torso was too much for him to bear. His heart pounded wildly in his chest...his heart...his heart...was *pounding*?!

Wait a minute! he thought to himself, and he shot his eyes wide open, gaping at the sight above him.

The horrific figure, which once had him pinned mercilessly against the snowy earth, was now mysteriously suspended in the air, dangling several inches off the ground, **DEAD**. It was completely drenched in its own blood, which was still gushing out from the edges of a large hole that had been punched into the center of its chest, plugged by a familiar crimson-veneered steely contour. Harry crooked his head to see the thing that was standing behind the silver piece: a short, wasted, balding rat of a man draped in shoddy wizarding robes, fully ablaze with a striking look of valor that was so out of character for him, it had to have been stolen from the face of someone else.

Harry staggered his breath and croaked out in disbelief, “*Wormtail?*”

“Harry,” Wormtail answered him in a shrill and cool tenor, then he pulled back his arm to release the Red Cap, which slumped to the ground beside Harry like a soupy-sauced heap of spaghetti. Wormtail held out his other hand and helped Harry to his feet.

“Harry! Harry!” shouted Hermione and Ron in succession, bolting toward him with expressions of equal wonderment and eyeing over the unlikely hero who had just delivered their best friend from a terrible fate.

“Merlin’s Pants!” whimpered Ron, bouncing his gaze from the mutilated creature, to Wormtail, then to his blood soaked best friend, and back to Wormtail again.

“Y-you saved his life,” stuttered Hermione in a small stunned voice.

Wormtail bowed his head to her and hurried off to where Wes and Rue were digging frantically at a huge mass of snow.

“Oh, my god; Hannah! She’s still buried under there!” shouted Harry, pointing his blood spitting hands in their direction, jumping to his feet, and rushing toward the scene.

“Harry, *wait!*” shouted Hermione, snatching the collar of his cloak and jerking him to a halt. “We *must* heal your wrists, or you’ll bleed to death.”

“But —”

“It’ll only take a minute. You’ll be of no use to anyone if you’re dead. Now, come here,” she demanded, roughly pulling him to her and plying her wand over the deep gashes on his wrists until they were fully knitted. “There.”

“Come on! We’ve got to get her out of there!” he yelled, retrieving his wand and scrambling his way over to where Hannah lay entombed within the cosmic depths of white jagged slabs of snow and ice.

Harry didn’t know what propelled him do it, or how he knew to do it. Nevertheless, before he realized, he was stretching his crimson shrouded arms in front of him, reaching, his eyes set in a perfect trance-like focus, while his hands made a strong parting motion into the air.

The group stood transfixed, watching in sheer awe as the vast mound cracked, then split and pushed apart to reveal the stiff motionless body of Harry’s greatest love lying face down in the snow.

“No!” he gasped in horror as Wes reached in and flipped her over.

Her lips were swollen, split, and purple, her face brutally scratched and bleeding, her fair skin mottled with red and blue blotches, and her clothing and hair matted in frosted frozen layers. Harry thought she had literally been battered beyond all recognition.

“Is she...*alive*?” he choked.

Wes found her pulse and nodded, sending Harry falling on his knees in a show of thankfulness.

“We’ve got to get her back to Grimmauld, NOW!” said Harry frantically, scraping up Hannah’s limp body from Wes’s hold.

Next moment, Rue snuck up behind an unsuspecting Wormtail, who was entirely distracted and disoriented, and she fired her wand at his back, stunning him with such a remarkable force that he was launched several feet into the air. He landed with a crisp THUD against the snow-covered terrain, unconscious. She signaled strongly to the rest of the group to gather around Wormtail’s body and to take hold of his silver hand. The group obliged, and with the swift action of a rushing blur, the arctic wind petered out and they were spinning, swirling, twisting, and heaving forward. Moments later, they landed with a loud collective THUMP into the pleasing comfort of the Grimmauld secret room.

The instant they landed, Harry brandished his wand over Hannah’s body, casting a warming spell over her to dry out her clothes, skin, and hair. Wes directed his attentions to the four-poster bed, where he made long flourishing movements over it with his wand, transforming the cool silken sheets into glowing heated comforters. He helped Harry cart Hannah over to the bed, and they lay her beneath the steady, temperate current of the covers.

Harry watched as Rue emerged from the walk-in wardrobe with a small vile of Dittany and handed it to him, motioning for him to smooth the contents over the wounds that were so brutally etched into Hannah’s face. Harry received it with a wordless nod of

understanding and settled himself down beside Hannah, tracing over her abrasions with the potion in short tender caresses, his heart cramping at the sorry sight of her.

“Harry, if it’s alright with you, Ron and I are going to head off to bed. It’s nearly quarter to four and we have guard duty for the Order in a few hours. You *will* call on us if you need anything, *won’t you?*” pressed Hermione kindly, clamping her hand strongly over his shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah, I will,” said Harry quietly, heavily concentrated on doting over his unconscious girlfriend.

“Hey, mate, well done back there with that whole ‘*parting of the snow*’ thing. It was brilliant. So, er— I reckon we’ll see you at breakfast,” said Ron awkwardly, patting at his friend’s shoulder, clearly troubled and obviously trying to hide it. He hurried after Hermione, while chancing several concerned glances at Hannah as he departed the room.

“Harry, she’s going to be just fine. You got to her right in time. She’s quite lucky to have you,” whispered Rue in his ear, imparting a delicate kiss upon his cheek.

Those were the first sounds Harry had ever heard the mysterious woman utter, and he couldn’t have been more grateful to her for every word.

With that, Rue and Wes cleaved to Wormtail and vanished, leaving Harry alone, snuggled up to Hannah, his arms cradled lovingly around her.

He awoke hours later to the pleasing sensation of Hannah’s mouth brushing delicately against his.

“Hey you,” he uttered groggily as he blinked her into focus and kissed her in return.

“Hey, yourself, Potter,” she murmured weakly.

“How are you feeling?”

“Like a giant mound of snow buried me alive.”

“That bad, eh?” he said sympathetically, brushing his fingers affectionately through her wavy hair.

“Ugh! My whole body aches,” she said with a pronounced groan.

“Is there something I can give you for the pain?”

“Please...the bright-green vial — left hand side of my potions trunk — second row in,” she grunted, slowly rising to a sitting position.

“You need to lie down,” urged Harry gently.

“*No*, I need to move around a bit, otherwise I’ll stiffen up and feel worse.”

“Here you are then,” said Harry, handing her the small glass bottle and rubbing her back while she ingested its contents.

“*Ah*, that’s loads better. Instant magic pain reliever in a mouthful. All the benefits of a jug of wine without the hangover or the endless trips to the loo! There’s nothing quite like it!” said Hannah.

Harry let out a light chuckle and hugged her.

“You saved my life, Harry. Thank you,” said Hannah resting her cheek on his shoulder.

“How did you know it was me?”

“A girl knows. Anyway, you’re always so outrageously humble, and since you didn’t mention my rescuer, I figured straight away it was you.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Me too. How does my face look? That ghastly beast lashed at my face.”

“*Perfect*. I used dittany on it all night,” said Harry proudly, reaching into the nightstand and pulling out a small hand mirror.

“Not bad, Potter. Not bad at all. There’s not a scar in sight,” said Hannah impressed as she eyed up her own reflection, fingering over the impeccable glowing radiance of her newly healed skin.

Harry smiled and said, “Hannah?”

“Yeah?”

“Last night — Wormtail saved my life.”

Hannah raised her brow to him.

“If he hadn’t have woken and killed the Red Cap that was attacking me, I wouldn’t be talking to you right now,” he said further.

“Well, I guess I gave him the appropriate amount of sleeping potion after all,” replied Hannah solemnly.

“Where do you suppose he is now?” asked Harry softly.

“Azkaban,” said Hannah swiftly.

“*What?*” gasped Harry in disbelief.

“You heard me; he's in Azkaban,” said Hannah evenly with an ever-broadening grin.

“B-but, *how?*”

“Wes and I had a bit of a mind-to-mind talk just before you destroyed the Horcrux. He figured the wretched rodent could use a bit of time behind bars, and I wholeheartedly agreed. Don't get too excited though. He'll most likely escape before the week is out.”

“Wes? Wes put him there?”

“Well, let's just say he had to get a hold of the right wizards to perform the task,” said Hannah with a wink.

“B-but, won't Voldemort find out what happened?”

“Not likely. Wes was to wipe out Wormtail's memory of the entire evening and plant a false one in its place. Besides, no one will be surprised that the fool got himself caught. He's not exactly the brightest wizard of the lot.”

Harry nodded in agreement and said quietly, “So, five down and two to go. That just leaves....me and Voldemort.”

“Try not to burden yourself with worry, Harry....I'll find a way to get that Horcrux out of you. You have my word,” she said, stroking kindly at his face.

He smiled, then took hold of her hand and kissed it.

“Harry,” she started.

“Yeah?”

“I'm sorry for all those dreadful things I said to you earlier tonight. You know, the bit about you being jealous...and in front of your friends, no less. I didn't mean to embarrass you.

“It *upset* me more than anything — watching Wes hold you and kiss you. Then, watching you touch him and look to him the way you did. He still loves you, Hannah. I’m sure of it.”

Hannah’s face revealed, what Harry thought was an air of elation upon the receipt of the last of his words, and it made him sick. Yet, her reassuring speech had contradicted her expression entirely as she said to him gently, “Harry, remember what I told you before? I’m with *you*, now, not *him*.”

Harry let out a mellow chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” inquired Hannah.

“Hermione said the exact same thing.”

“Well, perhaps you ought to listen to her...*once in a while*, you know,” said Hannah, with a teasing grin.

“Hannah, do you still love him?”

“Harry, I love *you*. Wes and I have a long history together. I can’t just pretend he doesn’t exist all because we’ve broken up. As I told you before, he and I are still close friends. You must accept that.”

“I know. It’s just — I don’t want to lose you, that’s all.”

Hannah snuggled into his chest, and in a soft comforting voice, she said, “Don’t worry, Harry; you won’t.”