

# Harry Potter Fan Fiction

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## REVOLUTION<sup>\*</sup>

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*source*  
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*version*  
OCTOBER 26, 2010



Author's Notes:

When I came across the quote below in JKR's Book 4 about the low likelihood of Snape adopting Harry, I first considered addressing this topic comically, but that seemed too easy, and short, frankly. This is a serious attempt at making this realistic. Even though it is serious, it is supposed to be fun. Hopefully, even if the plot seems impossible, you'll find the resulting situations entertaining enough to make up for it. It has been way too fun to write.

No challenges being answered here except the unintended one from the mistress herself.

This story does not take Book 6: The Half-Blood Prince into account since it was written post-Book 5.

This is the second part of the Triology following the first Volume "Resonance". A sequel is being written: Resolution, but this story is complete in and of itself.

Rating: PG-13 *for occasional violence and very roundabout romantic references.*

Disclaimer: *I don't own these characters, this universe, or anything beyond the veil. JK Rowling, some publishers, and some film companies own it. I'm not making anything from this except a hobby.*

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE SEQUEL

This is the sequel to Resonance, which I'd recommend reading before reading this. In very quick summary though: (SPOILER ALERT for Resonance) Harry defeated Voldemort at the end of sixth year and, while he was stuck at Hogwarts over the summer, he and Snape came to an expected understanding. This understanding was helped by an episode in chapter 2 where Snape has to get Harry through a bad night after he has been maltreated by Crabbe and Goyle seniors. This understanding, through Dumbledore's prodding, becomes an offer of adoption. Many amusing scenes follow where various parties learn of this odd adoption, including Harry's friends, whom Harry hesitates a bit in telling. Harry gets through his seventh year with a parent around as a teacher, gets to visit the continent, applies for and is accepted into an Auror's apprenticeship with the Ministry and begins his training. Through this, Harry dates a number of people, but his heart is still stuck on Tonks, whom he is not allowed to date because she is now his boss. Not every loose end of Death Eater evil was tied up, and revenge found its way into Hogwarts and Snape is almost killed by one of his former associates. Harry sees all of this in his mind (in this AU he can see the Death Eaters as shadows) and comes to the rescue. In the end Snape not only gets far more than even with James Potter while beyond the veil, he even comes to feel guilty about it. Harry no longer sees Snape as a Death Eater shadow, so Snape in his risking becoming a ghost to return to Harry has actually, finally, redeemed himself.

## CHAPTER ZERO

This storyline is clearly now AU with the advent of book 6. The most glaring canon problems are: Madam Bones is not only alive and well, but is Minister of Magic. Snape's parents are both magical, but probably not much more adept at parenting than in actual canon. Snape lives in much nicer digs, although still old and a bit crumbly. Dumbledore is dead, but not offed by Snape, obviously. Harry likes Ginny, but not in that way, although she has made it clear she likes him. Ollivander is still around. I invented an Apparition which isn't totally off base, but given the lack of detail in book 6 regarding this I'm going to stick with mine, since it doesn't clash horribly. Some book 6 things are going to weasel their way into Revolution but their plot origin may be different from the original.

## CHAPTER ONE



# YEAR'S END

By her side stood a tall, thin man, clad in black. His face was turned from us, but the instant we saw it we all recognized the Count – in every way, even to the scar on his forehead. – Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

A single lamp upon a lone table lit the stone floor, providing a flickering yellow light. Frost framed the nearby window panes in a bristling white that glittered warm in the flame's glow. Harry exhaled loudly and flipped ahead a few pages in the small, worn spell book he held before him. With a flick of his wand he tried the spell again to no effect. His scarred brow furrowed as he held the rough paper closer to his nose, just in case he was reading the incantation incorrectly or missing an arrow on the gesture diagram. Uttering a noise of impatience, he lowered the book and gazed at his efforts so far. The Christmas tree standing before him looked pretty plain with just blue lights hovering in it and nothing else. But the tree itself was a nice full one with an attractive aquamarine tinge to its outer needles. He had picked it up at a neighbor of the Burrow just that morning after the all-night party Ron had hosted. This party was on top of the late evening the night before, when he and his fellow Auror apprentices had celebrated reaching their sixth-month review.

Harry rubbed his neck and his tender right shoulder as he carefully reread – from the beginning – the chapter on fairy lights, frustrated and determined all the more by the apparent utter simplicity of the spells he was attempting. He winced. His shoulder was even sorer today than it had been immediately after his six-month review testing. At first, he had been pleased to be assigned to Mad-Eye Moody for his spell examination, but the old Auror had apparently seen more confidence in Harry

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than he liked and had proceeded to put Harry on his backside with an Alibappa spell that they had not learned, and in fact one Harry suspected none of the other full Aurors knew either given their puzzled expressions. As Harry had picked himself up off the floor and caught his breath, Moody had looked about as pleased as Harry had ever seen him.

It was a subsequent chain binding curse that had bruised his shoulder. Harry had been required not to counter it, but to cancel it once it had captured him. He had accomplished this in record time, but neglected to point out to his trainer, who gave Harry a rare grunt of approval, that he had no choice given how little he could breathe with the spell so tight.

Harry soothed his pride with determined and almost dark expectations about his one-year review. He couldn't find a reference to the two difficult spells Moody had used, but he had sent a letter off to Penelope, a former girlfriend who lived in Switzerland, asking if she would check the archives where she worked. He was confident that she would find a source for them. Harry just had to work out a way of making sure Moody was his spell examiner next time as well.

Scratching his head, Harry decided to give the remaining fairy lights a go later. He put the book down on his stack of presents, noticing the one from Ginny on the top. This reminded him that he needed to work out how to convince her to trade brooms with him. If he just wrapped up his own broom, that would cause confusion. Instead, he sat down in the drawing room and began writing a charmed letter that would only let you open the second half of it after you had agreed to the first half. He wrote out: An unconventional present idea, but you must agree to it before you will be able to read the remainder of this letter.

Harry was just chuckling to himself, knowing how very batty that would make any Weasley, especially Ginny, when the doorknocker sounded. Harry set the parchments aside and quickly closed the ink bottle before answering the door.

"Elizabeth," Harry greeted his neighbor, who was still recognizable although extensively bundled up and half-swallowed by the early evening dimness.

"Hope it's all right to call?" she asked, sounding uncertain, but also smiling brightly with winter-flushed cheeks. She unwrapped her scarf, leaving her long brown hair to fall around her.

"Of course," Harry insisted.

In the main hall she handed over a large box of unevenly shaped biscuits. "My mum made me bake these for you."

"Thanks," Harry said and made a show of opening the box. The scent from inside was hard to place. He plucked one out and gamely took a bite, chewing thoughtfully. "Delicious," he said, hoping he didn't sound uncertain. "What's in them?"



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“Ginger, carrot, pumpkin and courgette.”

Harry ceased chewing and peered at the bitten edge of the biscuit in his fingers. He resumed chewing and even managed to swallow. “In that case they are really quite good,” he honestly said.

“They’re from a 1960 issue of Witch Weekly my mum keeps around for the holiday recipes. Those won that year’s recipe contest, the theme of which was...” Here she frowned at the ceiling as though trying to remember precisely. “Treats from things found rotting in the cellar.” She failed to notice Harry had stopped chewing again and went on with, “Mum makes them every year. It wouldn’t be Christmas without them.”

Harry was fairly certain that she was not joking. “There are a lot of them here... you wouldn’t mind if I take them into the Ministry, would you?”

“No, not at all,” she replied easily, to Harry’s great relief.

Her biscuit mission complete, Elizabeth clasped her hands, looked around the hall, spotted the tree and immediately headed that way. “You’re decorating,” she said happily. “My mum did our tree while I was visiting my aunt, so I didn’t get to help.” She picked up the book Harry had left open. “Do you want help?”

Harry, knowing Elizabeth wasn’t particularly adept at magic, shrugged in reply.

Elizabeth went on, “I love decorating trees. Can I borrow your wand?”

Surprised and curious how she would fare, Harry pulled his wand from his pocket. Elizabeth studied it for just a short hesitation and Harry expected that she was pondering what most people did: that it was the very wand that killed Voldemort. If it were, she recovered much quicker than most, and with a glance at the book incanted, “Feelichtrote,” while tapping one of the branches. A lovely red light sprouted into existence in that spot; the very charm Harry had given up on earlier.

“Do that again,” Harry said.

With a smile she obliged. She was pronouncing it differently than Harry expected, with gruff noises in the middle of the word. She added four more and said, “Enough red. How about yellow?” She flipped forward a page in the book and added copious yellow fairy lights to the tree, even reaching around the back with her long arms.

Harry took the book away while she was busy. “You’re pronouncing all of these strangely,” he commented as he looked over the spells. She grabbed the book back and flipped to the front and pointed out the cover page. Translated from *Der Magische Tannenbaum*, it read.

“Christmas trees are German, Harry,” she informed him in a teasing voice. “So, all the spells are German. How did you manage the blue?”

Feeling taken down a notch on top of his Auror testing, even though she sounded strictly amused, he said, “I’m not sure. Took a lot of tries.”

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She brightened more as she gently paged through the battered pages of the book. “Zapfen are my favorite. Do you want to get a pitcher of water?”

A glance at the book showed an illustration of an icicle-laden tree. Harry fetched a pitcher from the kitchen. “You pour,” Elizabeth suggested. She selected a branch with no fairy lights and drew a circle around it with the wand. A puff of frozen air hovered around the branch. Harry poured a thin stream of water into the vapor and it hardened into spear of ice fixed firmly onto the branch. The fairy lights beyond glittered pleasantly in it. They did a whole tree and three pitcher’s worth, until the branches were beginning to sag.

“How long do they last?” Harry asked, taking the book up to read about them.

“A few weeks. Ours have never melted before we canceled the charms. Take it outside before you do.”

They both stepped back and admired their handiwork. “Thanks,” Harry gratefully said. He suspected that he might not have managed before Snape’s arrival tomorrow without her help.

“Goodness, but you have a lot of presents,” she said, noticing that the tall stacks were all his.

Harry shrugged. The Floo flared, startling Harry because he had lost track of the time. “Oh, that’s my dinner date.”

“Oops,” Elizabeth uttered. “I’ve been keeping you too busy.”

Harry brushed his hair back repeatedly with his hand during the walk to the dining room to greet Belinda. She gave him a quick kiss and hug before allowing him to lead her into the hall, where he could sense her stiffen through the hand he was still holding. “This is my neighbor, Elizabeth,” Harry said, doing introductions.

Elizabeth gave a dainty handshake to Belinda and said with casual aplomb, “Sorry to be in the way. I spotted this lovely tree in the Snape window and thought I’d stop in for a quick hello. I’ll just be going, if you’ll excuse me. Nice meeting you, Belinda. Have a nice holiday, Harry.” With that and some quick rebundling, she was gone. Harry, until that very smooth lie, had never considered that she might have sorted into anything but Ravenclaw had she gone to Hogwarts.

Turning to his date, Harry said, “It’s good to see you. You finally escaped the Minister.”

With a look of great annoyance she shook her head. “It was close. Almost ended up scheduled to trail along to some big party at a Lord’s manor. But I’ve got five days off. Not sure what I’m going to do with myself.”

“Bones is going to Lord Frelander’s party?” Harry asked, remembering that Fudge had been absent.

Belinda stopped and looked at Harry in mild surprise. “Yes. You know of it?”

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“Went last year, but I turned it down this time ‘round.”

“We could have both gone,” Belinda said in clear disappointment.

Harry took up the box of biscuits from the chair and led the way back into the dining room where the house-elf, Winky, had set the table with candles and nice china. Belinda sniffed curiously, making Harry think quickly for an explanation for the odd biscuits. Until she asked eagerly, “Are those Rotting in the Cellar biscuits? My mum made those when I was a kid.”

Harry held the box open for her. She nibbled quickly through one, humming happily, and Harry experienced that displaced-from-the-magical-world feeling that he hadn’t had since he was a third-year at Hogwarts. “Want a butterbeer to wash those down?” Harry asked pleasantly when she took another. He hoped she accepted; it would make him feel better.

When they had finished dinner, Duck bones littered the plates and the candles had burned down to stubs. Harry sat back, feeling sleepy, not even caring that Belinda was eating yet another biscuit. His bum was sore, though, from Moody putting him forcibly on the floor. “Should we move somewhere more comfortable?” Harry suggested, trying not to frown at the memory of his review testing.

Belinda sat up straighter. “Sure,” she replied in a warm tone that caught Harry, who was thinking only of getting out of the hard straight-backed chair he was in, a bit by surprise. Scratching his ear, he led the way to the library, where they sat on the lounge, which wasn’t really a couch, but as close as it got. Harry, relaxing, leaned back and put one foot up.

“You aren’t going to sleep, are you?” Belinda asked, sounding startled.

Harry opened his eyes, which he had not meant to close. “No,” he denied, but after two long nights of parties in a row, it was a welcome idea.

With a doubtful, teasing smile, she leaned in closer and gave him a kiss. Harry winced as her shoulder bumped his when he tried to put his arms around her. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Um,” Harry hedged, and gingerly touched his shoulder. “My Auror review. I got knocked around by Mad-Eye. A bit hard, really,” he complained mildly, feeling now that the old Auror had been unnecessarily rough in making his point.

“Aw, did you get bruised?” She sounded almost sympathetic.

“Yes,” Harry breathed and opened the top buttons to pull the collar wide and reveal what he knew was an impressive, chain-imprinted bruise that wrapped around his right shoulder.

Belinda did gasp and said, “That looks terrible,” before leaning over and giving the bruise a light kiss.

“I don’t think that is going to help,” Harry commented, thinking that was perhaps

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a bit much. He wrapped her cashmere clad self up, ignoring the pain this time. She was pleasantly soft against him.

“No other bruises?” Belinda asked in a sly manner.

“None that I am telling you about,” Harry insisted.



Severus Snape stepped into his dining room from the hearth. One stub of candle flickered on the table, only feebly lighting the dark-paneled room. A hint of unfamiliar perfume hung in the air. He placed his small trunk on the floor, moved into the hall, and followed the lamplight toward the library, glancing in surprise at the gloriously glowing Christmas tree near the front windows. In the library he found Harry fast asleep on the lounge, his head tucked down into the crook of his arm, a telltale smear of red lipstick on his collar.

Quietly calling Harry’s name did not rouse him. Smiling faintly, Snape plucked Harry’s glasses from the table and hovered him off the lounge and carefully up the stairs. As Harry floated onto the bed, Snape wondered in mild concern at his ultra-deep sleep. He wondered with more alarm at the very distinct blue and green bruised imprint of a chain around Harry’s chest and shoulder that was revealed when the hover spell was canceled and his shirt fell aside.

“Harry,” Snape prodded loudly this time, while patting one limp arm well below the bruises.

Harry, hearing the stern, familiar voice, snapped awake, wondering groggily what he was in trouble for this time. “Huh?” Harry glanced around, surprised to find himself in his room and unable to piece the evening together quite properly as a result. Rubbing his eyes and sitting up slightly, he said welcomingly, “You’re home early.”

“Minerva dismissed the staff the evening before she originally planned to.” Snape crossed his arms. “I think, frankly, she was tired of us all. You should owl if you have a ladyfriend over so I’ll know not to drop in unexpectedly.” Glancing at Harry’s shoulder, he added in a disturbed manner, “Perhaps, though, you could use some closer monitoring.”

“I could?” Harry uttered doubtfully, thinking that the evening had turned out rather tame, what with his falling asleep repeatedly and all. In retrospect he kind of wished it had ended more interestingly.

Pointing at the bruises, Snape sternly demanded, “What is this?”

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Harry squinted at his shoulder. "That was Mad-Eye," he complained, and then looked around for his glasses, which Snape handed to him out of his pocket. Harry sat up to put them on and explained, "I drew Moody for my six-month review testing."

"Ah," Snape uttered in relief. "And how did that go? Besides the injuries, that is."

Harry frowned, thinking of his results letter which was downstairs stashed with the other post. "All right, I guess. I got a 94 on my written examination, and 65 is passing," he added more brightly. "Most of the questions were pretty easy, I thought."

Harry was glad to see Snape, especially since he was looking very much his normal self, healed completely. Despite wanting to chat a bit, Harry yawned widely, followed by a sleepy nod of his head.

Snape said, "We'll discuss it in the morning. Do you want something for the pain?"

Harry was already setting his glasses aside, intent on curling right back up. "No, it's fine."

In the doorway Snape turned. "The tree is rather impressive," he said.

"Oh yeah," Harry murmured, voice muffled by his pillow. "Merry Christmas."



The next morning Harry sleepily arrived for breakfast with Kali, his bat-like violet pet, on his shoulder. He did not sense the mood shift in his guardian right away, even though Kali was strangely restless. Plates arrived and Harry happily buttered his toast and squashed his roasted tomato out over it. He was relishing having this quiet normalcy which he came so close to losing for good. It wasn't until he started on his coffee that he noticed Snape had Harry's six-month results beside his plate on top of the Prophet.

Harry's glance at it was a cue to start, apparently, and Snape intoned darkly, "Your results are far less than impressive."

Harry grabbed up the handwritten parchment, wondering if the scores had changed magically overnight. "I did well enough. On the written, especially."

"Your score was third, behind two of your colleagues."

"You don't know the competition," Harry insisted, thinking of the two bookworms, Kerry Ann and Vineet who always knew all the details of the readings, every day.

Sharply, Snape asked, "You are happy with third?"

Harry's face twisted faintly. Some part of his score was due to joining Ron one evening two days before the exam, even though Harry had originally promised himself

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that he was going to go straight home every night and revise for the whole week before. “No, I guess not,” he conceded.

Snape wasn’t finished, however. “And you scored a 6 out of a possible 10 on your spell testing.”

Defensive now in response to Snape’s unexpectedly hard anger, Harry countered in kind, “Moody was really rough on me. Didn’t you see the bruises?” Kali, picking up Harry’s mood, stood up on his shoulder and circled his neck, pricking him with her claws. Harry picked her up and put her in his lap.

“He is presumably at liberty to test you however he sees fit, correct?”

Harry again was forced to concede, which ground painfully on his ego. “Yes. For the examination he had to do three predetermined spells and two of his own choosing. I can’t find either of the two in any of the books you have here.”

In his well-seasoned sneer Snape asked, “Is 6 a passing score?”

Kali stiffened and hissed faintly, head darting side-to-side to peer along the edge of the floor beside the hearth. Harry, with enormous effort, squashed the anger burgeoning in him. It tore at his pride to do so, but Kali’s reaction and her bristling alarm propelled him to. In a much quieter voice, that he hoped masked his sudden worry, Harry said, “Rodgers declared it a passing score because of the degree of difficulty involved.” He petted Kali until she calmed, hoping Snape didn’t suspect he had that poor of control over his lapses into the Dark Plane. “I scored 20 out of 20 on my field work evaluation,” he stated in a flat voice, not risking any emotion, but needing to point that out. His voice came out sounding defeated. “I’ll do better next time; I have six months to prepare,” he promised.

“I certainly hope so,” Snape said, and returned to reading the newspaper. Harry set the results aside and tried to eat a bit more of his scramble, which didn’t hold much appeal now. The remainder of breakfast passed in silence.

Snape stood eventually and at the door turned back and returned to stand beside Harry, where he almost placed his hand on his shoulder and instead settled for placing it on his head. In a vaguely conciliatory tone, he said, “I do not mean to spoil the holiday, but I demand the best from you because I see no other way to ensure your safety.”

Harry, despite insisting to himself a moment ago that he wasn’t going to argue, said, “But I am doing much better than the score on my examination shows. I’m doing really well on spells, in fact.”

Snape’s hand pressed down very hard on the top of his head. “You have apparently grown dangerously overconfident, Harry,” Snape chastised darkly. “And I am grateful to Alastor for demonstrating that to you so clearly.” His hand eased up and he said more gently, “Come, let’s see what we can add to the tree.”

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Doubtful, Harry said, "You're going to decorate the tree?" He leapt up and followed his guardian to the main hall. Snape went into the drawing room and returned with a box showing pictures of spherical ornaments on the side in a variety of bright colors. "Candide sent these." When he opened the box, however, the cardboard tray inside contained only clear globes with hooks attached at the top.

Snape removed one and with a quick tap of his wand it filled with smoke which began glowing dark blue with rotating swirls. He handed it to Harry, who hooked it on a branch with care.

"Where'd you learn that charm?" Harry asked.

Snape paused, one hand holding a clear ornament, wand poised over it. "I did have a tree as a child."

"Oh," Harry uttered, trying with little luck to accept the notion of Snape of all people having had a more normal childhood than himself. Snape handed him another blue globe. "Is that the only color you can do?" Harry asked, hearing in his voice that he was still smarting from the earlier chastisement over his review scores.

"Yes," Snape confirmed, "each person creates one that reflects who they are. So a large family, such as your friends the Weasleys, would have a rather colorful tree. When I was younger, the joke was that the One-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named's Christmas tree would be all black ornaments." He handed Harry another blue one. The box held eight, so Harry expected he would be given the other half to do himself. He hung this one higher up, trying to spread them out evenly. They added something the tree had been lacking and it was starting to look quite nice.

Snape colored the forth one and hung it himself before handing a clear one to Harry. When Harry turned it around in his hand to examine the glass and the way it reflected in the light, as well as the gold cap that held the hook, Snape said, "You merely have to tap it with your wand. A child can do it, even a non-magical one."

Harry cradled the glass in his hand and just touched it with the point of his wand. Smoke bloomed inside of it, which began to glow white from the core but only for an instant before the globe filled in jet black, suffocating the light. For a time, Harry stared at it dumbly. Snape scratched his chin and looked Harry over with chagrin.

"I don't want it to be black," Harry said in dismay. In the next instant the glass globe shattered, even though Harry was certain he had not squeezed it at all. He jerked his hand aside and the glass slivers crackled as they settled onto the floor.

Snape reached for Harry's hand. "Did you cut yourself?" he asked in concern.

Harry pulled his hand farther out of reach. "No," he snapped and reached for the box of ornaments. "Give me another one," he said, determined.

Snape grasped Harry's wrist as he held the new clear globe up. "Harry," he said, gaze intent. "It will be the same." It sounded like a promise. This globe shattered

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before Harry could even change it, leaving two large curves of clear glass resting in his palm and glass shards on his sleeve and Snape's. Snape calmly shook his arm off, sending more glass to the floor.

Snape shook out his robe front and picked up another clear ornament but didn't hold it out. "I shouldn't have told you that joke." He sighed and then firmly said, "Harry, I do not care if there are black ornaments on the tree."

Harry accepted the clear globe when Snape held it out. Feeling annoyed, he uttered, "I thought I was something more than Voldemort's puppet now." He spoke this in carefully banked anger, shaken by the violence of the accidentally shattered globes.

"You are," Snape insisted, as though Harry were a little dim.

Harry stared at the hollow of glass. "I don't want it to be black," he said again. Willing it to be otherwise, he tapped it with his wand. The light this time had a bright green tinge before it filled in black just the same. Snape quickly lifted it from his grasp and hung it up. Harry dreaded seeing it there all holiday but frowned and didn't complain farther. Snape held out the last clear one and Harry changed it too, and then repeated the tap again when Snape removed one of the blue ones from the tree and held it out as well to be changed over.

Harry didn't want to look at the tree, just stared down at the presents. Snape picked up the small book Harry had been using and paged through its index. "We need to capture an electric frost sprite for the top," he informed Harry casually, as though nothing were amiss. When Harry didn't respond, Snape demanded, "If I had not told you that silly story, which even I cannot verify, what would you be thinking right now?"

Harry was staring at one of the black ornaments. Unlike the blue ones, it perfectly reflected his distorted face back at him. He shrugged. Snape waited for more response before lifting Harry's chin to force him to look at him. Snape's eyes were full of something that Harry had not seen before; they had an aching in them, but it disappeared in the next moment and Snape was just studying him intently.

Chin released, Harry looked back down and sighed. So what if his ornaments were black? Pink would be worse. He half listened to Snape reading aloud about possible means of trapping sprites, including using colored cake frosting as bait inside a glass woven cage, and wondered what was in the present from Ginny.

At lunch, Snape seemed keen to make up a bit for his earlier stridency. He kept Harry talking about his last two weeks of training much longer than normal. "And we finally managed a Muggle-proof barrier, all four of us." Harry said. "We managed with three a week before. I was starting to spell barriers in my sleep I was so terribly sick of working on them. Does it matter how similar the wizards are who are trying



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to produce a barrier spells? It seems that way.”

“That is a common perception, yes,” Snape replied. “Barriers are not easy in any event even barring the need for multiple witches or wizards for large ones.”

“And I talked Rodgers into starting on triage and wound closing spells earlier than he planned,” Harry said, his voice dipping at the end as that now-familiar straining in his chest gripped him, leaving him as breathless as two weeks ago when he had found Snape lifeless in a pool of blood.

Perhaps as a distraction, Snape asked, “I did not hear, nor did Minerva, that there were any leads on locating Mr. Lockhart.”

Harry frowned and put his sandwich down on his plate. He swigged the remainder of his butterbeer before saying, “From what I’ve heard – and believe me, it isn’t much considering that I am there every day – they don’t know where to look. Apparently he used one of his best Memory Charms on Nott, because Nott, who should know where he is, has a lot of holes in his memory even under their best truth serum.” Harry watched Winky set another butterbeer on the table for him and considered that he heard less than he probably would if they trusted him to not run off and start investigating on his own, although he couldn’t entirely assure even himself that he wouldn’t.

“That is worrisome,” Snape murmured. “He was in no condition to be taking independent action... I believe.”

Harry shook his head that he agreed. He tried to imagine where Lockhart might be, but the former Hogwarts teacher had never been a Death Eater, so Harry would have no better luck finding him than finding anyone else, although he wished he could just zero in on him where ever he might be, the way one zeroed in on an Apparition destination. “The Ministry printed more wanted posters. Hopefully someone will report seeing him.” But, Harry thought, no one has so far and most witches and wizards knew who he was at one point, so they would have remembered if they had.



Christmas morning arrived and Harry, in a dressing gown over his pyjamas and sitting cross-legged on the floor, began sorting through the stacks of presents. Snape stepped out of the drawing room, holding a cup of tea, and observed him as he worked at this. As Harry rearranged the piles, he knocked one of the black ornaments onto the large bow bedecking the present from Ginny. With a frown he hooked it back up on a higher branch and then attempted to ignore it again.

In a dry tone Snape said, “So very many presents for a dark wizard to receive.”

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Harry rolled his eyes and didn't let himself be baited. Instead, he plucked a label that read H. Potter off one of the larger boxes and pushed it toward Snape. Snape's brow lowered and he shook his head at hiding his present in Harry's own pile. "I didn't want you to guess," Harry explained. Even though he had repacked the present from the Muggle packaging, it still rattled distinctively.

Snape hefted the unexpectedly heavy box and hovered a chair in from the drawing room to sit in while unwrapping. Harry paused in his sorting to watch. Snape revealed the plain white box and shook it curiously before opening the lid and pulling out one of the squarish glass containers with wire-clamped glass lids.

"Polly recommended those when I asked her. I was going to get you a decorative potion bottle but these seemed much more useful." The widow of Harry's second cousin was frequently canning when Harry visited.

"Much more useful," Snape agreed, plucking at the replaceable seal on one of them. "I think the wire may accept an additional protective hex as well without impacting the ingredients. Thank you, Harry. Open yours."

Harry dug through to find the one from Snape. "Too small to be a broom," Harry commented to the two foot square box. He shook it lightly, and it thunked strangely. However, when he opened the box he found nine smaller boxes inside it, arranged in rows. "What's this?" Harry asked, amused.

Snape responded, "Each of the staff wished to give you something."

"Oh," Harry said, and swallowed hard, remembering disquieting random pieces of what had happened. He had to distract himself to make it stop. He picked out the box labeled Hagrid and opened it. Inside was a new pair of rabbit-lined gloves.

Snape said, "When he inquired what you needed, I told him you had nearly worn out your previous pair. The resulting sniffles were a bit much, but he was clearly touched by your use of his gift."

Harry opened the rest, one at a time. McGonagall has given him a rare old storybook that read one of a hundred stories aloud to you. Trelawney had given him boots to match the gloves from Hagrid. Madam Hooch, a gift coin to the Quidditch Supply Catalog. Snape himself had given him a small pewter dragon lamp that stood straight and spread its wings when you lit the wick and curled up as though sleeping when you blew it out. Harry left it lit on the only table in the main hall. Its emerald eyes glittered and seemed to follow him as he went back to the pile of presents.

As Harry opened the gold Astral Compass from Sinistra, he said, "They must be happy to have you around still." He had attempted it as a tease, but it didn't come out right. Instead it cut straight through his own chest. Grateful that he was facing away from his guardian, he pretended that he needed to sort through the remaining packages to choose which to open next. Ginny's was right in front of him, he managed

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to gather through the haze of meaninglessness that had enveloped him. He had been curious about the rather sizable box and focused fiercely on the previously established emotion attached to it to drag himself back to the here and now. He was desperate for Snape not to see him struggling, because any outward sympathy from that quarter would render him helpless, he was certain.

Breathing slow and deep, Harry opened the box before him only to blink at yet another gift inside of it. "What is it with this year?" he asked, managing a convincingly light laugh. The box inside was wrapped in brown paper with the Tri-W logo stamped on it. Written upon it were the words: Do not open in the presence of Hogwarts staff, Ministry officials, or flammable pets. Harry resealed the lid and risked a glance over at Snape, who sat with his hands intertwined in his lap, appearing amused. Harry couldn't tell if he had been able to read the writing. "I'll open that one later." He pushed a box from Anita, Snape's mother, over to Snape, figuring that should keep him distracted for a while.



On Boxing Day Harry had promised to go to Belinda's parents' for dinner. It was the same night that Snape's father Shazor and his second wife Gretta were visiting, from which Harry was glad to have an excuse to leave early. Gretta was in good holiday spirits but her husband was his usual difficult self and ignored his wife's good-natured attempts to get him onto better topics.

"Well, your position is quite secure, it seems," Shazor rattled on as they stood in the drawing room, "what with Bones' announcement that all of the Death Eaters are put away for good."

Harry was pleased to see that Snape remained utterly unfazed by this. "Yes, quite secure, I think," Snape agreed easily, removing the sting from the words. With a glitter in his eye, added with grinding amiability, "And Harry's influence with the Ministry was boosted as well, should it ever be needed."

Harry exhaled and thought, I couldn't get Sirius off. But he put on a cocky expression when Shazor turned his way.

Finally, it was time to depart for his date, but Gretta insisted on giving him some final primping, which he barely stood still for even though he didn't really mind another set of eyes making sure he was acceptable for parental judgment. Gretta said, "Too bad you have to take the Floo, dear, it always makes a nice white shirt a little dingy with ash."

Harry, feeling the cockiness from earlier in the evening come to the fore, said, "No, I'll Apparate. It's only to London." Everyone turned at that and before he could lose

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his certainty, he scrunched himself down very small and the drawing room was gone.

Harry was very grateful that he had practiced localized steering with as much care as Snape had forced in their lessons. The trouble with getting to London wasn't the distance for Harry's power, it was finding his way to the place he had fixed in his mind. At a great distance, no matter how clear your mental vision, your destination was actually foggy and wavered unpredictably. Once you got close, it became easier, but by that time you were already expanding and the split second with which you could make any adjustment too short to recover from any serious error.

Harry's feet hit the ground with a resounding slap! when he fell the four inches he had Apparated above it. Exhaling loudly, he considered that that was much preferable to the alternative, which would have involved having his feet back near the border with Scotland and the rest of him here in London. Thinking that had perhaps been too risky at the same time as grinning to himself for succeeding, Harry stepped out of the alleyway, used an Alohomora on the outside door, and after a quick dash up the stairs, rang the bell at the door to Belinda's flat.

Belinda was a little slow in answering and when she opened it, it became clear why: she was simultaneously removing rollers from her hair and putting in earrings. But she greeted him warmly. "Come on in... I'll be ready in a mo. You look nice." Harry felt unexpected relief at that. Aaron, an always dapper fellow Auror apprentice, would think Harry a nutter for worrying that Belinda's parents could possibly be less than pleased with him, but apparently Harry could not shake the possibility.

When she was finally ready, a bit late by Harry's reckoning, she took his hand and Apparated them both into a small living room. A thickly bearded, nearly bald man with shoulder-length brown hair growing out the sides of his head looked up sharply at their arrival. Big band music played loudly elsewhere in the house. The man set his pipe aside and stood to greet them. He bore little resemblance to Belinda, but he greeted her warmly and then held out his hand to Harry. "And this must be Mr. Potter," he said graciously.

"My father," Belinda introduced the man, took Harry's cloak, and then urged him to take a seat in one of the overstuffed armchairs before heading off to greet her mother.

Harry clasped his hands together and settled back; Mr. Belluna did as well, clamping the tip of his pipe back in his mouth. Talking through his teeth, he said, "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Potter, I'm sure."

Harry, who had been surveying the sphinx heads carved in plaster below the mantel, turned back to his host. He had not imagined that he would be left alone to deal with Belinda's father quite so quickly. "Thank you, sir."

"How is your apprenticeship progressing?" the man then asked after a series of

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puffs on his pipe.

“Fine, sir. We’re learning a lot.”

“And getting some field work in as well,” he said with an odd twinkle in his hazel eyes. He had the appearance of a well-groomed hermit, which made Harry relax rather than wonder at the questions.

“Some, yes. We aren’t allowed to do much, though.”

“You missed the last dinner, I believe, due to your needing time to recuperate after a bout of field work?” he asked this with deceptive innocence, seeming almost amused.

Harry sat up a little straighter, remembering taking care of Snape after the attack the previous occasion he had been invited to dinner here. “Well, that doesn’t technically count as field work for my apprenticeship.”

“No?” Mr. Belluna queried, seeming disappointed. He puffed more on his pipe.

“So, what do you do, Mr. Belluna?” Harry asked, more alert.

Amiably, Mr. Belluna replied, “I am a watchmaker. I have a little shop in Greenwich.”

Harry was saved from further questions by Belinda returning with her mother, who was just stashing her wand into the pocket of her frilly white apron. “Harry! So good to finally meet you,” she exclaimed while giving his hand a dainty shake. “My! Well, please make yourself at home. Dinner will be on in just a moment.”

Harry and Belinda’s father settled at the dining room table instead, and Belinda, to Harry’s consternation, disappeared again. Harry sat straight and considered the man beside him on the end of the table.

Mr. Belluna asked, “So, your training is three years, correct?” The man seemed to be working up a profile on Harry, the way the Aurors did when interviewing a witness for the first time.

“Yes, sir.”

Clutching his pipe again between his teeth, Mr. Belluna asked, “And you are progressing well, I presume? Belinda said you just had a six month examination.”

“Well enough, sir.”

Belinda thankfully reappeared before more questions came Harry’s way. Had the man been anyone other than his girlfriend’s father Harry would have been more assertive, but with the constraint that he needed to make the man like him, he felt hobbled from defending himself. Belinda gave him a positively glowing smile; she seemed quite happy to finally have this dinner. Harry returned the smile, happy enough to make her so.

That was until she asked brightly, “So Daddy, do you like Harry?”

“How can one not?” her father asked airily. “Have you set a date yet?”

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“A date for what?” Harry asked in true confusion. Belinda looked as though she may have swallowed a skewer.

Mr. Belluna sat back and puffed his pipe. “In that case my opinion is of limited consequence,” he stated easily.

Belinda’s mother returned and, as she sat across from Harry, he found himself facing Belinda’s older image, even down to the dimple on her right cheek when she smiled. She was full of much less challenging conversation and the rest of the meal passed quickly.

Late in the evening, they Apparated back to Belinda’s flat. “Well, thank you for coming,” she said, and then added with some shyness, “I have a present for you.” She retrieved a sizable package from the floor beside the couch and presented it with aplomb. Harry opened it and held up a dark green cardigan with yellow edging.

“Thanks,” Harry said and laid it back in the box before reaching into his cloak pocket.

Belinda was explaining her gift. “I had a real hard time picking out a color. I finally decided on a color Professor Snape could stand to see you in.”

“Yeah, he’ll like that color,” Harry assured her. “This is for you.” He held out the slim box that another Auror apprentice, Kerry Ann, had helped him pick out, or to be more honest, had picked out for him. Upon seeing the thin silver chain with three pearls, Belinda let out a little whine of exclamation. She thanked him a bit more than Harry thought it deserved, but he didn’t at all mind the resulting attention.

When he returned home late, he found Snape at the dining room table, nose in a letter. In his hand he clutched a small glass stained with the liqueur that was open on the table before him. With a stab of emotion Harry wished then that he had stayed; Belinda’s parents could have waited yet again. Harry swung his cloak off, sat across from his guardian, and simply asked, “Are you all right?”

Snape looked up with some surprise. “Yes, quite.”

“How did the rest of the visit go?” Harry asked carefully.

“As well as one involving an overbearing and vengeful parent could go. And how was your dinner?” Still sounding flatly snide, he added, “Are the Bellunas already planning for a new son-in-law?”

“How did you know that?” Harry asked.

After a sharp look Snape’s lips curled slightly and his shoulders fell back. “Ah, and here I thought I had experienced the worse evening.” He hovered another stout glass over. “Here, have a swallow.”



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The next afternoon, Sunday, they Apparated to the front stoop of Polly Evans' small but rambling house. The door opened a second later. "I thought I heard something," Mrs. Evans greeted them. "Come in. Come in. Merry Christmas."

Snape shut the door behind them, blocking out the cold, although they had brought a roomful of it in with them. The stove and its boiling pots quickly negated it. Harry handed over the pot of turkey Winky had prepared. In the sitting room Patricia's children, Briar and Basel, were playing with plastic toys, presumably presents that year. Briar was making a small horse gallop along the worn edge of the coffee table. Mrs. Evans' daughters, Pamela and Patricia, stood to greet them warmly. "Did you have a good trip?" Patricia asked. Harry almost pointed out that the trip was quite short before realizing that the question was for her husband's benefit.

"Yes, thanks." Harry reached into his pockets and took out the presents he had brought for the youngsters. He had kept wanting to shop for something at Tri-W but that was right out, and instead from a Muggle shop he had bought very unmagical toy cars that went forward very fast after you dragged them backward a bit. Harry had bought an extra one and left it on Mr. Weasley's desk, knowing he would be delighted because they were a clever enough machine that they felt sort of magical. And since it didn't require a battery he expected that it wouldn't break the moment it was brought home to the Burrow. The children were tearing into the wrapping with relish.

"Uh, oh, Harry is playing uncle and spoiling you two," Pamela chided. The children ignored her in favor of car noises.

At dinner, Pamela sat across from Harry beside Snape on the end. The children were in the middle, forming a wall of noise that Pamela was taking advantage of to ask questions, mostly of Snape. "Maybe while Greg is taking a nap after dinner, we can see some spells?" she suggested hopefully, glancing to the opposite corner of the table where Patricia's husband sat, cutting up Basel's turkey while the boy squirmed impatiently. "Good turkey by the way; which of you cooks?" she asked teasingly.

Snape gazed at her momentarily before looking into his whiskey glass and dryly replying, "The elf cooks."

Pamela nearly dropped her fork. "An elf?" she whispered. "An actual elf? You have an elf as a cook?"

Harry opened his mouth to explain, but Snape beat him to it. "She is more of a general servant," he stated uncaringly. "Bound into servitude by a sort of enslavement spell."

Pamela stared at Snape; Harry wondered why he was intentionally shocking her so. "It's hard to explain," Harry hedged. "But it's not as bad as he is making it sound." He then tried to explain about Winky and why it was better that she have

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a household, but he couldn't even manage to explain about her previous employer without simply generating more alarm.

"This elf sounds evil," Pamela whispered.

Harry said, "No, not at all. I'm just not explaining well. Maybe some other time when it is easier. You should come visit and see her."

Previous invitations had been met with a better reception. "Uh, if you think it would be all right... sure."

Harry wondered that Snape appeared smug. He served himself seconds while searching for another topic. Snape said, "Perhaps you should tell your cousin about meeting Prime Minister Daire."

"Really?" Pamela exclaimed, bringing the table's attention to her.

Greg asked, "Did he visit the MI5 office where you apprentice?"

"Uh, yeah," Harry replied, finding his way through the version of his job Greg had been told. Harry told the table a heavily edited version of events.

"Well, that's good he's happy with you blokes. That isn't always true."

"He seemed happy enough," Harry confirmed.

"Is he really so cute in person?" Pamela asked.

"I... guess so," Harry hedged.

When the table's attention focused instead on the children – who had removed themselves from the table to play a game involving tossing colorful sacks of beans into a target – Snape crossed his arms and stated, "The real story is much more entertaining."

"Oh, let's hear it." Pamela leaned forward eagerly to listen.

"Uh..." Harry uttered, figuring out where to start. "So, Daire came, mostly like I said, to check up on how the Ministry of Magic is doing in fighting dark magic. So our trainer has myself and an Indian apprentice, Vineet, do a demonstration. Says he wants it loud and colorful. Oh, and Daire has two assistants with him who are about as terrified as you could imagine. And after the demonstration starts, they are basically hiding behind the Prime Minister." Harry paused while Pamela snorted into her glass of milk.

"So we are doing as he says, but Vineet is putting too much power in his spells and I'm trying hard not to hit him back too hard. He isn't as good at blocking and countering, you see, and I don't want to knock him down in front of all those people. So, Daire notices this difference and comments to our Minister that he thought I wasn't so great as he thought."

"Oooh," Pamela uttered with relish. "So you proved him wrong?"

"I tried. I disarmed Vineet with a new spell we had just learned. It makes a whip appear that wraps around the other person's wand and jerks it out of their hand.



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But it made Vineet a bit angry and he, well, he transformed into a tiger and came at me.”

Excitedly curious, she asked, “Can you transform into a tiger too?”

“No... my Animagus form, as we call it, is a... resembles a eight-foot griffin, except with a cat’s head.” She stared in silence at him. Harry went on, “So, I transformed into that. Imagine, there’s the Prime Minister, the Minister of Magic, all their staff, and this big white tiger and an even bigger bright red gryffylis tussling in the middle of the room.”

While Pamela giggled, Snape sat back and said, “The rumors generated by those events were almost unmatched. The wizard newspaper the Daily Prophet suppositioned that Minister Bones had set magical animals loose on Daire with the intent of rescuing him herself.”

Harry chuckled then. “I didn’t read that.”

“No, rumor has it Bones put a halt to the print run of that edition and insisted they change it. Ms. Skeeter replaced it with a one-column piece asserting that the Ministry should order Witch Weekly to allow Muggle politicians to compete for their annual best smile award.”

“You can’t mess with Skeeter,” Harry commented as he accepted a large slice of apple pie.

“She has left you alone for a while,” Snape pointed out.

“Who is this?” Pamela asked.

“A reporter for the Daily Prophet. She’s been the bane of my existence since I was a fourth-year.”

“The press harasses you?” Pamela asked, a twinkle in her eye.

“Even the American press,” Harry insisted.

Pamela propped her chin on her hands and gazed at him intently. “You really are famous, then?”

“Uh, only among the wizarding community.” Harry replied at the same time as Snape said, “Quite.”

By the time they returned home it was almost dinner time although Harry couldn’t imagine eating again. “Was that all right?” Harry asked, still uncertain why Snape had gone out of his way to shock Pamela, and worried it had been sheer boredom expressing itself.

Snape hung his cloak over his arm. “It was fine. Phenomenally normal relatives you have there. Congratulations, Potter.”

Harry, plotting out the rest of his free evening, said, “Yeah, they are, aren’t they? So, my friends are getting together at the Burrow, do you mind if I go?”

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“No, please do,” Snape replied, but Harry had a sense that he had expected him to be staying.

“What time will you be returning?” Snape asked from the drawing room when Harry came back down from getting ready.

Harry, rather than resist having to say, was glad to, due to previous times that something bad had befallen him and he had wished Snape had known his precise schedule. “11:00 I think. Will you still be up?”

“I may be out, actually,” Snape replied.

Harry grinned, “Well, in that case: what time will you be back?”

Snape matched his smile with a wry one. “Midnight, most likely.”

Harry fetched his broom and took the Floo to the Burrow because of his previous close call Apparating all the way to London. The endless teasing that would result from getting Splinched in front of the Weasley clan made the ash on his clothes seem very minor.

Harry arrived into a noisy living room and quickly stepped out of the hearth that returned to blazing hot as the Floo powder dissipated. He had to step over Charlie reclining on the floor, his wife draped over him, using him as a mattress. Harry greeted everyone on the way to butterbeers, floating in a pan of hot water with rocks in the bottom of it.

Ginny appeared at his side as he took a swig. Harry held out his broom to her.

“You sure?” she asked.

Harry nodded. “Yeah. ‘Course. I rarely use it what with Sirius’ bike and flying on my own.”

“I can fly on my own too,” Ginny pointed out, referring to her Animagus form, which was a red-tail hawk.

“Not during the Slytherin-Gryffindor match, you can’t,” Harry pointed out.

“Oh, that’s what this is about. You have a bet with Professor Snape or something?”

Harry’s denial was interrupted by Hermione coming up and giving Harry a holiday hug. “Have a good Christmas, Harry?”

“Yup. Except tree decorating was a bit annoying...”

Ginny took hold of Harry’s broom and with a smile sneaked off. Hermione continued levelly, “How are your fellow apprentices doing?”

“Good,” Harry replied, watching across the room as Neville was showing some no-heat fire spell to someone Harry didn’t recognize. The young stranger had an awed expression as he watched Neville’s spell, which made Harry smile. He responded to Hermione’s ongoing questions with only half an ear.

“And how is your Indian friend faring with his spell power?”

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The twins were putting a headband sporting glowing horns on Ron, who apparently was having a mental lapse on having been their brother his whole life. “He still can’t counter well.”

“Does he need more help?” Hermione asked. “I’ve been reading up on that a bit.”

Harry shrugged. “He might.” He was watching Ron’s eye’s glaze and the whites begin glowing like a jack-o-lantern so he missed Hermione biting her lip at the effort to sound merely conversational.

Ginny returned with her secondhand Cleansweep Seven. “You’re sure?” she asked again, voice tinged with pain.

“Yes, Ginny,” Harry insisted, taking her broom. Ginny for her part gave Harry’s Firebolt an inspection which involved trailing her hands on it a bit reverently. Harry explained to Hermione that for his Christmas present to Ginny he was trading brooms with her until the end of the school year.

“That’s very nice of you, Harry,” Hermione said. “Are you having a party soon?” she then asked, sounding a little out of the blue.

“I could,” Harry replied with a shrug, still watching Ginny testing the left and checking the true of her loaner broom.

Harry returned just before 11:00, just after the Twins insisted on quizzing Ginny on her future N.E.W.T.s despite not having taken them themselves. Their potential questions included things like: How often do giant spiders not eat their young and how do they chose which? and if you curse an object and then die, how much of the curse still remains? When Charlie joined in with detailed questions about Dragon breeding and Ginny’s blushing was matching her hair, Harry took his leave, partly to save her further public embarrassment. But once he had noticed the time, he really needed to head home.

“You don’t still have a curfew, do you?” Fred had asked in horror, when Harry made his goodbyes.

“No, but I said 11:00,” Harry explained.

George shook his head sadly, “An obedient Harry, where did we go wrong?”

“Goodnight all,” Harry said with a little wave before tossing powder onto the coals of the hearth.

Harry was surprised to find Headmistress McGonagall sitting across from Snape at the dining room table, a tall, tanned, brown and grey-haired man Harry didn’t know sitting beside her. McGonagall greeted him warmly. “Harry, how are you? You haven’t met my husband, Richard, have you?” Harry shook hands with the man, certain he was a Muggle without knowing for certain how he knew that. McGonagall was explaining, “Richard researches birds on the Savannah.”

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“Honored to meet you, Mr. Potter,” Richard intoned. “I’ve heard rather a lot about you.”

Harry took a seat across from him. “I hope some of it was good.”

Richard grinned. “Most of it, actually.”

“Your visit at the Burrow went all right?” Snape asked.

“Yeah, it was fun. Ginny still gets the worst of her brothers though.”

McGonagall put her glass to her lips. “I expect she can handle them by now.”

“Maybe if it were only three of them at a time. She was a little overwhelmed, I think.” Harry noticed Richard watching him curiously.

The conversation moved to school matters and Harry finally turned to Richard and gave him a sharp look. “Sorry,” Richard said. “Never met a legend before.”

“And you still haven’t,” Harry snipped, feeling ungenerous this late in the day. He felt that queasy slipperiness of the Dark Plane then and quickly bottled his annoyance back up.

“Harry,” Snape chastised at the same time as Richard was by McGonagall. Harry pushed his chair back and stood. It had been a long day.

“No need to go, Harry,” McGonagall said in concern.

“It’s all right. I...” He almost said he had an early morning the next day, but he didn’t have training. “I’m a little tired. Long day. Goodnight. Nice to have met you.” In the hall, the tree still glowed brightly, reminding Harry of much poorer Christmases. He shouldn’t let one gawking Muggle ruin his mood.

In his room Kali was clamoring frantically inside her cage. Harry let her out saying, “Maybe you’re the reason I’m ornery.” He sat down with his pet curled on his leg and answered letters that he had put off until holiday, somehow thinking the holiday would be less busy than normal times.

A half-hour later a light rap preceded Snape opening the door. “Everything all right?”

“Yeah,” Harry insisted.

“Minerva was concerned that Richard may have offended you.”

“No, not really,” Harry insisted, thinking he should have behaved better. “I’m surprised she married a Muggle, though,” Harry observed without looking up from a letter to Suze, thanking her for the Snitch-shaped tea cozy and offering her some advice in preparing for the upcoming match against Ravenclaw.

Snape had not moved from the doorway, and at the end of a sentence, Harry looked up at him. “How did you know that?” Snape asked. “Very few have met Richard, and fewer are aware he isn’t magical.”

Kali raised her head and cocked it curiously at Snape. “I don’t know,” Harry muttered. “He just didn’t feel magical.” Harry dipped his quill in the inkwell, but

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held it over the blotter instead of continuing his letter. "You are going to tell me this is some extraordinarily rare skill, telling wizards from Muggles?" Even Harry had to admit, he had never heard of it, but he still fixed Snape with a stubborn glare.

"No. Not extremely rare, but unusual at least."

"Can you do it?" Harry challenged. Then reading Snape's expression added, "Without Legilimency..."

"No." Then after a pause where Harry resumed writing with the quill, Snape continued, "It is a useful skill, Harry; why are you being difficult?"

Harry shrugged, still scratching away at some Seeker training suggestions.

In a harder tone Snape said, "I expect an answer."

Harry put the quill down. "It takes some getting used to, I guess. I never noticed I could do that before. I couldn't tell Tara wasn't a witch, for example."

"A new skill then, perhaps."

"Or a lucky guess," Harry countered.

Snape began pulling the door closed. "Let me know which when you determine it."

## CHAPTER TWO



# TRAILING THE MONSTER

January settled around Shrewsthorpe as a blanket of bitter white cold. Harry knocked the snow from his boots before stepping into the entryway. The house was quiet; Snape had returned to Hogwarts and Harry was back to being on his own.

Harry put his bag on the floor of the library with a thud in deference to it always seeming to weigh twice as much at the end of the day than it did at the beginning. The extra walk from the train station hearth, where the Floo network had ejected him instead of home, had felt burdensome as well as cold and he would have Apparated if the station hall hadn't been full of silly Muggles joking about a late Santa. He pulled out his newest Auror-assigned book, which he had picked up at Flourish and Blotts just that afternoon. *Accursed Aid*, the title read. Behind the title a logo was embossed of a wand with a snake twined around it. Harry flipped immediately to the chapter on wound closing and read until long after he usually went to the dining room for dinner, partially because reading about reconnecting tendons and muscle tissue didn't leave him very hungry for roast.

Finally, eyes aching, Harry put the book down. He was tempted to go down to the kitchen for a knife to try out the basic skin sealing spell, but he couldn't bring himself quite to that. Instead, his stomach began to insist on dinner, queasiness and all.

While Harry waited at the table for the food to appear, his eyes strayed to the silver combined salt and pepper mill that was a new addition to the table. Draco Malfoy had sent it to Snape for Christmas and Harry kept eyeing it suspiciously even though Snape insisted it was curse-free and Harry himself couldn't feel any evil upon

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it. Harry picked the weighty thing up. Salt came out the top which rotated to grind the pepper out the bottom. It was the kind of thing his Aunt Petunia would have treasured, which only decreased its appeal for Harry, but he couldn't credit Draco with being that clever in an attempt to annoy him. But it was working. It was such an odd gift and Harry entertained the notion that Draco had stolen it from somewhere. He plunked it back down as a plate of vegetable garnished roast appeared; too bad it wasn't breakable.

During dinner, Penelope's owl arrived at the window. Harry was very glad to see the bird as it meant she would have news of the two spells Mad-Eye had used on him. After his difficulty handling his sixth month testing, Harry had returned to his training after the break with a fierceness that surprised even himself, but he really wanted to have a counter to those attacks should the opportunity to demonstrate them come up again soon.

The letter started with wishes that Harry had had a good holiday, but it quickly moved on to the spell research in a way that made Harry suspect that she rather enjoyed the task of researching obscure things.

The Alibappa spell was not Middle Eastern but a middle twentieth century spell from the States, hence its appearance as a giant mitten, which was probably a boxing glove shape had you been far enough away to see it properly.

Yeah, Harry thought, it was a little too close to notice that, precisely. He frowned, pride still smarting even if his backside had healed. He honestly suspected Moody of avoiding him since the beginning of the year. Harry had moments where he hoped this was the case.

The Counter is JabbaJabba, the letter went on, and below she had carefully drawn in the wand motions, in diagrams nicer than most in any of Harry's books. It looked like a repetitive poking motion and it indeed was intended to puncture the giant attacking "glove".

The Swarm Curse you also described, which had no incantation, doesn't appear in any books on dueling, defense or war tactics. I did however, hence the delay in replying, find a reference to something similar in a seamstress' guide from the Middle Ages. There is a spell called the Blue Bottle Charm that could be used to hold pieces of a dress on a dummy for easy sewing without pins. Taken to an extreme, it could be used to pull someone's clothes and limbs so tightly that they can't move. Harry hoped she hadn't been grinning, or worse, laughing as she wrote that. The cancellation is Fliteeficus, but you have to aim it at yourself and to do that you would have to be able to move, presumably. Harry had to agree given the complicated weaving motion of the wand waving diagrammed below.

Harry felt less certain about facing that spell than the other one, even though it

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wasn't even a defensive one. But knowing something about them, especially given the spells' obscurity, made him feel better. He composed a very grateful response and sent it back with her owl.



The next day, training seemed to drag, probably because Harry had a date that evening. He began to suspect that the clock in the training room was cursed to always display a time a mere five minutes later than the last time one looked at it. Harry stopped glancing at it, just in case.

"We are going to start on tracking spells this afternoon-" Rodgers began.

"Tracking spells?" Kerry Ann blurted. "We didn't have any readings on those." She sounded alarmed about being unprepared.

Rodgers frowned at the interruption and said, "We haven't assigned a reading because we couldn't find a book fit for your training, unless you wish to limit yourself to only hunting big game in Africa, because there is a most excellent book available on that."

"Oh," Kerry Ann uttered, putting her books away and tightly interlocking her hands before her.

"Come up and help me demonstrate if you will, Ms. Kalendula," Rodgers said. With a sigh Kerry Ann obeyed. Rodgers instructed her to walk back and forth on the floor. "Give me your shoe," he then said to her. "This is the easiest spell, but you must have one of the shoes that made the tracks."

He tapped the toe and heel of the red patent leather shoe, back and forth until a pink sparkle like static zapped between the wand and the shiny leather. Then he gave a bouncing flick at the floor. A back and forth set of overlapping prints glowed pink on top of a muddied lighter scuffle of prints. "See the older ones? From previous days probably. Color indicates age, in case you hadn't grasped that." He waved the spell away and handed the shoe to Kerry Ann and had to prevent her from putting it back on. "No, you try it."

"Can you repeat the trail-revealing wand motion again?" Kerry Ann asked.

After many attempts she finally succeeded and each of them were called up in turn until they also managed the spell.

"Good," Rodgers said, sounding relieved. "Then we can move on to more difficult ones out in the field next week. For now let's repeat that with someone else's shoe and trail, perhaps Ms. Kalendula is just highly trackable."

"Don't I wish," Kerry Ann muttered when she resumed her seat and leaned over to tie her shoe. To Harry, she whispered, "I hear you have a date tonight."



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“Where’d you hear that?” Harry demanded.

Kerry Ann grinned. “Harry, you are highly trackable.”

Up front, Aaron was still tapping his own shoe, waiting for the static spark. Harry whispered, “No, really. Where did you hear that?” He had bad visions of Belinda, or worse Minister Bones, sending out a special newsletter.

Kerry Ann leaned a little closer, “Well, Belinda had her friend Jezzy over to help her pick out an outfit to wear and Jezzy told her sister Jami, and she told her best friend Sarah, whom I happened to run into on Diagon Alley yesterday.”

Harry blinked at that. “Please tell me that the first part of that, at least, isn’t true.”

“Why?” Kerry Ann asked. She chuckled and quickly looked to see if Rodgers had taken note. “You should give up on dating, Harry,” she said with a sad shake of her head.

Harry leaned over to whisper, “I don’t care what she wears.”

“She cares,” Kerry Ann said out of the side of her mouth. “Compliment her on it anyway. At least try to notice.”

Harry frowned; he had just been thinking he would do the opposite, just out of principle. He sighed. Kerry Ann was called up to repeat the spell and when she returned and Harry passed her, he asked, “So, what kind of flowers does Belinda like?”



Harry waited outside on the street for Belinda to come down. She had shouted from the window for him to wait and he didn’t mind because a very light snow had fallen and for the few minutes before it melted, the world would be a white fairyland. Harry stood, enjoying the windows and lamps glowing on the white pavement up and down the street. Belinda came down a few minutes later, trailing a rich brown cloak Harry hadn’t seen before.

“Nice cloak,” Harry said, admiring its fuzzy looking warmth.

Belinda actually blushed. “Thanks. It’s borrowed from a friend.”

Oh, it’s Jezzy’s cloak? Harry came very near to asking, just to see her surprise. But his aversion to gossip and his belief that too much was already circulating, held him back. “It looks warm,” Harry said instead.

“And it matches my outfit,” Belinda added casually, implying that that had been the deciding factor.

“Hopefully this matches your outfit too,” Harry said, holding out a pink rose and congratulating himself for that line.

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She was clearly touched. “Thanks,” she said, smiling almost girlishly and holding it closely.

When they began walking, Belinda asked, “So, you really want to go to the Wren’s Den?”

Harry had suggested the place he and Ron had been frequenting of late. Belinda had wanted to go somewhere quiet or stay in for their date, but Harry had nixed that without clearly explaining why. “I like it there,” Harry said, thinking that the noise would cover any lapses he may have. His moments of attracting the Dark Plane were few at the Ministry for some reason, perhaps because of all the magical individuals that were around all the time, but out in London he felt uncertain about making it through the evening.

Belinda frowned and looked straight ahead as they walked. After the next corner, though, she took Harry’s gloved hand in hers as they walked. The snow had already melted by the time they reached the pub. Harry noticed as they slid into a booth that she was rather overdressed for the place. Harry himself had pulled out slightly nicer clothes than he originally would have. He managed to compliment Belinda on her top as he took her cloak, which had led to another blush.

Drinks came quickly. It was only a Thursday, so it wasn’t too crowded, which meant that when the door opened and a familiar face appeared, Harry immediately put his drink down with a loud thunk.

“Rita?” Belinda uttered upon seeing the reporter’s smiling face standing beside their table. Her photographer skulked behind her, perhaps hiding.

“Good evening to you as well,” Rita said merrily without skipping a beat. “And you are looking spiffy as well, Mr. Potter.”

“This is a Muggle place, what are you doing here?” Harry asked.

Rita took affront. “We are allowed to be in here, Mr. Ministry, even to be reporters in here. Just have to change the flash to these expensive Muggle things, but it is a small price to pay. Especially since my employer has been screaming in my ear about not getting a nice picture of you two lovebirds.”

Harry, at that moment, was very glad that the pub was loud. He took a deep breath as a chilly, sickly breeze seemed to pass under his clothes. A small dog sitting under a bar stool across from them barked frantically in their direction until shushed, and then it growled instead. The photographer inched around to stand beside Skeeter, as though the tiny thing on a leash might be more dangerous. Harry tried valiantly to level himself and the dog quieted.

Belinda was biting her lips. She said, “I hesitate to suggest that we give her the picture so she’ll go away...”

Harry squelched the suspicions that tried to rise in his mind because they would be

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fatal to his control. Given the number of people who knew where they were, Skeeter wouldn't have had much trouble finding them. Harry said with no little derision, "Really Skeeter, aren't there more important things for you to be reporting on?"

Belinda said, "There are better things to be reporting on," in a way that implied rather a lot.

Skeeter turned her beady predator eyes on Harry's date. "Care to give me an exclusive, Ms. Belluna?" she asked hungrily.

Belinda returned the reporter a skilled, patronizing look. With a small laugh in her voice, she said, "There are plenty of upset people who would be happy to talk to you off the record, Ms. Skeeter. I for one don't care to. You understand of course."

Her tone and words flipped the power around in an instant. Harry was impressed. He was also curious as heck what was being discussed.

"My priorities," Skeeter explained patiently, "are not always my employer's. Trust that I am following up. But I need a picture. Chummy is fine, no need to look like you've purchased any small but expensive jewelry."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Harry?" Belinda prompted. Harry unclenched his teeth. He hated being trapped. Some of the other patrons were starting to eye the boxy old camera the wizard photographer was carrying.

"Sure," He uttered, thinking that getting rid of Skeeter by any means was absolutely essential to his regaining calm inside himself. He hated giving in though. Belinda stood and moved to Harry's side of the booth and took his hand in hers.

"Ah, that's nice," Skeeter purred, making Harry shoot the reporter a dark look. "Oh, you don't want that face in the Crystal Ball on the Street section, do you?" Skeeter asked, still patronizing. Harry straightened his face and the photo was taken quickly. Skeeter disappeared after a little whisper to Belinda and a little wave at Harry. The others in the pub looked at the two of them in curiosity before returning to their own conversations.

"What'd she say?" Harry asked.

"Nothing."

"Really?" Harry was still feeling annoyed and it came out in his tone.

Belinda pulled her drink over to their side of the table and swigged the remains of it. "She was just proving how much she knew."

"Knew about what?" Harry asked.

Belinda gave him a sideways glance and then shrugged. "Minister Bones is going to appoint Fudge as Head of the Department of Mysteries."

Harry nearly spit out his beer. "Oh, that can't be a good idea. Why?"

"Because he still has a lot of friends and they're making things difficult. Making politics out of issues that shouldn't be so laden. So she's throwing them a bone. The

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position does need to be filled.”

Harry waved at the passing server that they both needed fresh ales because Harry was planning on finishing his quickly to keep up. “I can’t bear Fudge,” Harry breathed into his mug.

“He’s not my favorite either,” Belinda admitted. “But how much damage can he do at the Department of Mysteries? No one ever knows what they’re doing.”

“Worse!” Harry uttered. “They could screw up and no could trace it to them. But he’ll be in good company with Ogden... he doesn’t like me either.”

Their beers arrived. Belinda lifted hers to clink their mugs. “You don’t think Fudge likes you?”

Harry drank a few sips while he thought about that. “No, I don’t think so. I think he’s afraid I’ll go into politics.”

“Are you?”

“I’d like not to,” Harry insisted, repulsively imagining turning into Fudge. The air felt oily, so he thought quickly about something else.

Much later, Belinda said, “Do you want another before last call or to go back to my place?”

Harry pulled out his watch. “I have field work tomorrow afternoon, so I shouldn’t have another.”

“My place?” Belinda asked.

Harry thought about being in a quiet place where any lapses in his emotional control may reveal to her that something was very disturbingly, ominously wrong. “Um, no, I think I have to get going.”

Out on the street as Harry walked her home, she said, “I don’t think you like me as much as I like you.” She sounded sad.

“It isn’t that,” Harry insisted, feeling immediately on the edge again, which angered him, which made it worse. He felt for the wand in his pocket, just in case, although he had no idea what spell he might use. “I just have too much going on right now.”

“That’s going to be true for a long time,” she pointed out pragmatically.

“I hope not,” Harry immediately returned. If his weakness toward attracting evil things went on much longer, well... he cut the thought off.

They stopped on the pavement before her flat. The street was empty and quiet. “Harry,” she began in a tone that caught his attention completely. “I know you’re not a virgin because-”

“What?!” Harry blurted.

“Well, during Rothschild’s trial, you had to answer...”

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Harry rubbed his forehead and stared at the wet pavement. As well as they connected on some things, like Harry's background and Ministry dealings, Harry was repeatedly reminded that they didn't connect at all in other areas. Some other part of him was nudging him not let this pass and to prove himself, darn it.

Belinda, hands on hips, spoke into the silence, "This isn't that your-actually-a-dark-wizard thing, is it?"

"I don't know," Harry uttered. He could feel himself closing her off and resisted it. Lots of replies came to mind, including accepting the invitation up to her flat. All of them had the potential to create even more misunderstanding. Harry took her by the hand. "It's too hard to explain."

"You are so hard to get through to," she commented.

"I don't mean to be. Look, you know once you start to talk about something, it makes it much harder." Harry uttered this without much forethought. Her resulting expression was rather dubious. "But it does," Harry insisted. He gestured with his arm at her building. "If I accepted your invitation up now, what would you think?" Her expression shifted to one more thoughtful.

She didn't answer that. She said, "You're very moody."

Harry dropped his arms. "You haven't yet seen me really wound up, either." A car passed on the street. "I have to get up and do three hours of readings before my field work to make up for tonight. Severus wasn't happy with my review testing score so I'm on a serious reading schedule. And I have to be alert out in the field."

"You aren't supposed to be put at risk when you're out," Belinda countered in an argumentative tone.

"So they say. Evil is attracted to me though," he soberly stated, thinking that in the right context it would be a confession. "I always have to watch out."

"Well, good night." She turned to go to her door.

"Belinda," Harry called in a soft tone. She turned slowly back, head tilted. Harry stepped over and gave her a nice kiss. When he pulled back she had a very different expression.

"All right then. Good night," she repeated, melancholy, but not angry now.



"Harry," Shacklebolt greeted him the next morning. "You are with me today."

"Oh," Harry uttered, his shoulders falling. "I thought I was with Tonks."

"She got called away," the tall black man explained as he tossed a coat over his broad shoulders. "Ready?"

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Harry buried his disappointment. After last night he had found himself looking forward to his shadowing the gregarious female Auror much more than previously. Probably a bad thing, given that any more-than-professional affection he still felt for Tonks was out of line.

Shacklebolt cleared his desk off and put all of his quills into a holder that snapped like a beak to hold them firmly. His desk was the only neat one in the entire office. “We’ll just be on patrol, unless something comes up. From what I hear, having you as a shadow is a good way of avoiding a boring shift.” He gave Harry a teasing smile full of white teeth as Harry pieced that together.

“I don’t mean to attract trouble,” Harry said.

Shacklebolt patted him on the arm as he passed on the way out the door. “Saves us the effort of looking for it,” he pointed out happily.

Harry rolled his eyes and followed him out of the office. They Disapparated from the corridor so as to be less disruptive to others working quietly at their desks. As their arrival echoed off the walls of the alleyway, Harry yet again wished he could do that in silence. Snape had explained some techniques, such as consciously unpacking yourself slowly, but it had only made a small difference in the sound and it made Splinching much more likely, so Harry didn’t usually attempt it.

They walked along the back alleys and small streets of London for a time. Shacklebolt sometimes stopped and talked to people, but much less often than Tonks. An hour into this, they were interrupted by a silver message. Shacklebolt read it before it dissolved.

“Ah, we have an assignment. What did I tell you?”

“What is it?” Harry asked eagerly when they arrived back at the Ministry.

Shacklebolt didn’t reply right away. He handed Harry a broom out of the cupboard at the end of the corridor. “Good gloves?” he asked and nodded in satisfaction at Harry’s newest pair from Hagrid.

“What is the assignment?” Harry asked again, hoping he wasn’t being too difficult.

“Errant pet,” Shacklebolt explained, deflating Harry’s excitement considerably. “Come,” he said, leading the way to the lift with his long stride. “We have to take the Floo.”

They arrived in a small stone cottage. The hearth had been allowed to go cold, Harry noticed and breakfast was only half eaten on the rough hewn wooden table.

Outside there was an argument going on. A short round man with a long auburn beard was arguing with a ginger woman of identical shape and clothing although she wore an apron. A cloud of mist rose from their mouths as they shouted. Shacklebolt led the way over the crunching snow.

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“You the Aurors?” the woman demanded in a rough accent. The man eyed Shacklebolt suspiciously.

“Indeed we are, Madam,” Shacklebolt responded with aplomb and bowed slightly with his hat off.

“Hmf,” the woman huffed grudgingly. “Didna want no one’s ‘elp, ya know. That ruddy daughter a’ mine should keep her long nose bludy well out... well, anyway.”

The man frowned more as he looked up at Shacklebolt. “Didna know there were any Moors in the Ministry,” he muttered.

Harry stepped forward, but not quite beside the Auror. He now understood Shacklebolt’s overly gracious introduction; he had been trying to head off exactly this. Anger boiled up in Harry at the bearded wizard’s sour expression. Harry couldn’t afford the anger though. It would be disastrous. As he struggled with himself, Shacklebolt went on, sounding unaffected, “You have a loose pet, we are to understand?”

“Aye,” the woman responded and pointed at a monstrous stake, the size of a ship’s anchor, pulled up from the mossy earth. The cottage and adjoining lands was situated in a picturesque cliff-bordered area open to the ocean.

“Where did it head do you think?” Shacklebolt asked.

“Iceland, no doubt,” the woman said, picking her teeth with her pinky nail. “Is’ breeding season, it is and he knows it. We’ve kept him light on food, we ‘as so ‘e ‘asn’t the strength to make it, I’m sure. Las’ year ‘e turned around on his own. Came right home.” The man snorted and she amended to say, “Eventually. Stopped fer a snack, I believe. Can’t blame ‘im fer that, can ya?”

Shacklebolt shook his head and looked out over the ocean. “What got away?” Harry asked, almost afraid of asking.

Shacklebolt angled his head down to reply, “A Welsh Green.”

Harry’s gaped before asking, “They’re not allowed to keep dragons are they?”

“Grandfather clause to when the rule was made three hundred years ago. A few families still keep them,” Shacklebolt explained. At Harry’s widened eyes, he said gamely, “Ready for a little dragon hunting?”

Harry, his anger completely forgotten, said, “Yes sir.”

Shacklebolt gave him a grin. “My partner and I will fetch your dragon, if possible,” he announced in that gallant way while putting a hand around Harry’s shoulder. For the first time, their attention fell on Harry and just as quickly, his scar. “See you in a few hours, I think,” Shacklebolt said. He hovered his broom and with a nod at Harry, who quickly did the same, took off out over the open ocean.

White mist obscured all but the immediate vicinity and collected as freezing dew on their cloaks and hair. Harry glanced back at the receding shore and shouted over

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the wind, “Are we really going to catch up to a dragon flying full speed?”

Shacklebolt flew close in, so their knees pressed together. As long as they each steered a little into the other it was easy to maintain that easier talking distance. “A wild one, not a chance. This is a sedentary, very elderly, underfed dragon. I think we can out-fly it.”

Harry shrugged, preferring a flight out over the white capping waves to an endless walk in the alleyways. The Ministry-issue Cleansweep Eleven would indeed do a pretty good clip, making Harry suspect that its safety spells had been tampered with by one of the others in their department. Harry wondered if he could have the same done to his borrowed Cleansweep, he liked the hair-trigger responsiveness of this broom that resulted from its not caring if you knocked yourself off of it with an unwise sudden maneuver.

Within half an hour, they could see something in the misty distance. If it wasn't a dragon, it was something awfully strange. Shacklebolt again flew in close. “This is the plan. It should still have its collar and chain attached, which is heavy and is probably slowing it down as well. I want you to fly out in front and distract it while I get hold of it to turn it around.”

“I'm flying out in front?” Harry asked in confirmation, thinking of the fire-breathing feature most dragons were equipped with.

“Yes,” Shacklebolt confirmed with another white-toothed grin. “Piece of cake, Harry.”

“You're going to owe me a piece of cake,” Harry muttered when Shacklebolt broke away and sped up again.

When they were just three hundred yards behind, Shacklebolt gestured in a throwing motion for Harry to go on ahead. Harry did so, cloak bounding and snapping as he sped up to pass the monster. It didn't pay as much attention to Harry as he expected. In fact it was so intent on looking far ahead that Harry had to shout and wave his arm to get its rummy eyes to shift up to him.

Its eyes narrowed and its chest expanded. Harry pulled up hard as a burst of flame came roaring his way, sizzling away the mist. He ended up just above the dragon's snaking neck where its wings sprouted. Raising its head had slowed it considerably, making Harry brake. Shacklebolt was moving; he had the chain end hooked over his broom and was making a broad turn to the left. Harry watched the slack in the chain disappear and suddenly the dragon was flying to the left as well, easily steered by its long neck. It snorted and tried to hit Shacklebolt with a burst of flame, but it mostly just let out a trail of smoke and made a hiccupping noise.

“Come on, you. Can't have you wandering aimlessly, eating sheep until you fall asleep like last time.” Shacklebolt urged his broom forward, but the dragon resisted



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and snapped its head like a whip, forcing the Auror's broom up and the chain to slip off. The dragon made a turn back west again, but the pumping of its wings was slower and it was losing altitude now as well as speed.

Shacklebolt made another dive for the chain and Harry dodged close to the dragon's head to distract it again, believing that it was out of methane. It wasn't. A burst of flame came rolling out and Harry was too close this time. He dodged and ducked under his cloak, which ignited. Again the dragon was tugged around by its chain and Shacklebolt shouted something that Harry had to guess at. "I'm fine!" Harry shouted back, even though he was still trying to use a freezing charm on his flaming cloak. He dove for the water and hovered just above the chop. Icy sea water splashed his legs, but it put out his cloak and sleeve quickly enough.

Harry, after a quick check that his broom tail wasn't smoldering, rushed to catch up to Shacklebolt who still dragged at the dragon's chain in the direction of home. The dragon flared again but the chain was just long enough to allow its master to be out of reach.

"You all right there?" Shacklebolt asked in real concern when Harry was flying just feet away.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry insisted. He couldn't feel any pain anywhere, but the iciness of his wet clothes was going to be a problem. "I'll catch up; I have to dry off."

"You'll stay here with me," Shacklebolt countered, glancing back at their charge. "We're not going that fast. Try a heating spell or two."

Harry tried about ten of them over the next few minutes and decided that was good enough. They landed a half hour later and between Shacklebolt and the two owners, they cemented the dragon's stake back into place. Harry, to hide his half-burned cloak, waited near the cottage. A few sheep stood at the very far side of a pen beside him, eyes wide and forlorn, presumably at the dragon's return. The dragon for his part curled up on the snowy ground, rested his head on his rump, and closed his eyes. Shacklebolt made the witch sign a few parchments and then they were off.

Harry could smell the charcoal of his clothes as soon as they arrived back at the Ministry. The sleeve the tailor could replace, but the cloak that Snape had given him the Christmas before last was done for. Harry bundled it up and put it in his bookbag. He was sitting beside Shacklebolt's desk as the Auror filled out reports when Tonks came in decked in all black Muggle clothing with a ring in her eyebrow. She sniffed and came over, immediately noticing Harry's sleeve.

"You tangle with a dragon, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry replied levelly.

"What, Control of Magical Creatures didn't take that call?" Tonks asked in confusion.

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Shacklebolt replied without looking up or slowing his writing. “Said they couldn’t get to it until the afternoon. And three years ago when they were called out there, the owners started a fight with them and Aurors were called out anyway. Rodgers thought it would be a decent training assignment.”

Tonks lifted Harry’s hand, which made his stomach turn strangely at the feel of her soft fingers. “Not burned?” she asked, examining both sides of his arm.

“No,” Harry assured her.

“That’s good. Simplifies the paperwork.” She took a seat at her desk. Her hair changed from green to its normal pink as she dug through the piles looking for something.

While Shacklebolt wrote out a report, Harry watched Tonks bend over another on her desk. By the time Shacklebolt’s prod came to get moving again, Harry had no idea how much time had passed. He really shouldn’t do that, he decided.



Sunday, Harry owed Belinda, asking if she wished to go to the Broken Candlestick on Diagon Alley for brunch. He felt he should try to make up for their previous date and he did want to see her; it was a raw ache without much reason behind it, but he found he couldn’t deny it.

They met at the little restaurant, which was tucked away above Madam Malkin’s with a creaky, hammered metal door on the street. A goblin ran the place but it was immediately apparent why he didn’t work at Gringott’s. After claiming to have no free tables, he spotted Harry and with startled eyes led them to one for four, beside the window even.

“The Minister doesn’t even get such service,” Belinda teased. She was all smiles and looked almost cute in a thigh-high boots and a thick, high-collared jumper that almost matched her auburn hair. Harry had worn the cardigan she had given him, hoping to assuage her further.

They chatted easily through servings of quiche; Harry was calm this morning and felt better than he had in weeks. If he could feel like this all the time, his whole life would be in order. His unusual calm was disturbed by a voice nearby saying, “Oh... Potter.”

Harry turned and found that Malfoy and Parkinson had just been seated behind them. Pansy was saying, “We’ll have to find a new place for brunch, dear; the riffraff are taking the good tables at this place.”

Draco didn’t add to this, just continued to appear stern. Belinda looked ready to snap back with something unladylike, but Harry, still holding a well of good will

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toward Draco from his rescue, found himself smiling instead. “Good morning,” Harry said amiably, which made Pansy’s face go sourly mystified.

Draco looked between Harry and Belinda and said, “Currying favor with the Ministry as usual, Potter?”

Still smiling, Harry retorted, “I don’t need to curry favor with the Ministry, Mr. Malfoy.”

Malfoy’s lips curled with a tinge of disgust. “No. I don’t suppose you do, Mr. Potter.” After a pause, his eyes narrowed and his voice dropped. “Would it be unrealistic to hope that you have added some desperately needed competence to that miserable place?”

Belinda’s eyes flashed and she drew herself up as though ready to counterattack. Harry took her hand to forestall her. He said, “You suddenly taking an interest in the welfare of the common witch and wizard, Mr. Malfoy?”

“Hardly,” Draco huffed with a snort. In an even lower voice he said, “Just hearing things.” He studied Harry very closely for a long pause. “But of course the Ministry is ignorant as always.” He turned away, seeming honestly disturbed.

Harry again gestured for Belinda to stay her anger. They paid and departed as soon as their tea was gone.

“I never liked the Malfoys,” Belinda grumbled through clenched teeth on the way down the stairs to the street. The stairs were illuminated only wanly by the dirty light coming in the small panes of bottle glass in the door at the bottom. Belinda bounded quickly down the steps despite this and was out into the cloudy morning. “The Ministry is supposed to bend to their purposes and theirs alone, I suppose,” she went on sarcastically.

“He was just baiting us,” Harry pointed out, fascinated by a truly angry Belinda. “Why give him the satisfaction?”

“Oh...” she grumbled as she walked quickly down the alley, away from the Leaky Cauldron. “He gets me going,” she growled. “Death Eater father and all.”

Harry stopped before Fortescue’s, thinking that a hot cocoa sounded good. Belinda turned when Harry stopped and stalked back, shoulders hunched, cloak crooked and off one shoulder.

“He isn’t the only one,” Harry pointed out.

Belinda zeroed in on Harry finally from her inward focus. “Hmf. What... you think his father shouldn’t be in Azkaban?”

Harry laughed, “You know how many times Lucius has tried to kill me? If I thought he should be out of Azkaban it would only be to give him a wand and stand him up on a duelling platform so I can get even for a few things.”

“You’re serious... aren’t you?” she asked.

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Harry was suddenly conscious of the wand in his pocket. “Completely serious,” he assured her. “I’d love a chance to go at him again. He loved Voldemort. Loved hurting people.”

“So, hurting him back sounds good?” Belinda asked warily.

Calm still, Harry said, “Only in a fair fight.” He didn’t expect her to understand, so it failed to bother him that she clearly didn’t. He ordered two hot cocoas when the children in long coats ahead of them moved away from the window.

“People don’t understand how hard it is to govern witches and wizards,” Belinda muttered but built in force as she went along. “Balancing between illegal magic detection and promoting magical activities. We spend three years preparing an expansion of Diagon Alley and all people can complain about is that they can’t buy a flying carpet. We fund a new wing at St. Mungo’s and all we hear is that witches aren’t allowed to brew toxic Nacissinium-laced beauty cream.”

Harry handed her a cocoa, hoping to quiet her diatribe. She sipped the chocolatey milk and sighed, which made Harry follow suit. He was used to railing against the Ministry and felt uncomfortable with her spirited defense of it.

“Do you know what Draco was referring to when he said he was hearing things?” Harry asked.

Belinda stared off into the distant rooftops and then shrugged. “Could be anything. I thought you said he was baiting us.”

“I think he was serious about that part,” Harry said, replaying Draco’s expression; this time certain Draco was concerned about something. Harry tried unsuccessfully to imagine dropping him an owl to ask.

“Well,” Belinda said when they reached the end of the alley. “I have to bail on you this time... there is a ribbon cutting at the expansion of the Museum of Magical Mining Apparati in Lopwell that I have to attend with the Minister.”

“On a Sunday, eh?” Harry confirmed.

Belinda shrugged. “It’s going to be a busy week, too. Come down and see me at lunch, okay?” she asked, sounding hopeful.

“Of course,” Harry replied.



Seven of them gathered in the morning light outside Shoreditch. Munz and Blackpool, the senior apprentices had joined in their lesson partly for a refresher and partly to help teach. An airplane flew overhead, buzzing annoyingly as only a Muggle device could. Rodgers watched it go by and waited for silence before beginning. “I suppose we can’t give all the Muggles broomsticks to help the peace, can we?” he uttered

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before saying, “This is a good day for tracking practice with the fresh snow since it masks tracks unpredictably. We’ll only have it for a few hours, so let’s get started.

He explained the new spells. One for showing all tracks in an area. When he used it the ground was blank. One for finding tracks by time up to a week or more old, depending upon the power of the spell and whether it had rained. Yet another for illuminating one distinct set based on a single print of the trail. This last spell was the hardest and involved a very long incantation and careful concentration. Only Augustus Munz, Harry and Kerry Ann managed that spell once each and couldn’t repeat it to their frustration. They were each called up to practice the spells after the others jostled around creating confusing trails for that person to investigate.

Harry had a hard time squashing his frustration over the one spell and had to step back from the others and make himself not care about anything. Even so the snow shifted ominously as though picked up by a countering wind. Rodgers looked around with a lowered brow when this happened, clearly alarmed.

“Hm,” he said, stalking in a circle with this wand out. “This should be a secured place... we use it all the time.”

Harry stared at his water stained leather boots and pretended to be thinking of other things. Kerry Ann and Aaron were whispering gossip about Fudge’s new appointment, announced that morning, including Percy’s lack of fashion sense. Vineet was watching Rodgers circle. Munz and Blackpool were off to the side chatting. No one was looking at Harry, who was feeling uneasy with how quickly his control had slipped that time. He had been doing well, he had thought, and perhaps had grown less vigilant. He swallowed and forced a normal expression onto his face before lifting his head and facing their trainer, who had just given up finding the disturbance.

“Potter, you next,” Rodgers said and for one missed heart beat, Harry thought their trainer had discovered that he was the source of the wayward magic.

Harry stepped over, turned his back and listened as the others scuffled about creating a visually misleading set of prints. Harry’s feet grew cold as he waited and he had to stomp them to get them warm. Finally, Rodgers gestured that he could turn around. Harry faced the trampled ground with its red starting flag. His fellows stood off to the side, looking distinctly pleased with themselves. Further contemplation of the snowy tracks, some melted clear to the grass, did not yield any clues to their sly smiles.

Harry stepped carefully around to the marker and used his eyes first to try and track who had placed the flag before retreating. Everyone’s boots were equally worn, it appeared, although differing in size, but the trails went over each other repeatedly. Harry waved a general track illumination spell and the whole ground lit up in one color, the tracks were too close in time to allow them to be distinguished. Harry

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crouched and lowered his wand and touched one of the prints and then incanted the spell he couldn't manage to repeat earlier. It took three tries and a nearly empty-minded focus on the magic, which wasn't easy over Aaron's and Babs Blackpool's heckling. The trail of nondescript prints illuminated pink as though an invisible person were rewalking them. The ghostly footprints went left, in a circle, then right and then just stopped, somewhere near the middle.

With a tilted head Harry considered this. He hadn't heard anyone Apparate. "Did someone carry someone else?" Harry asked. Aaron was grinning fully now and the others seemed genuinely curious if he were going to work this out.

"No," Rodgers replied.

Harry stood and walked to where the end of the trail was slowly fading to plain white. He was about fifteen feet from the potential trailmakers. They hadn't made the exercise this hard for any of the others, but Harry was certainly game for equaling their cleverness. Harry studied the last prints he knew were left by his target; they didn't have any distinct characteristics he could use to physically identify them. Harry dropped his glove between the prints so he wouldn't lose track of them when the spell finished fading and looked down the line of his fellow apprentices, none of whom appeared the least bit bored with waiting while he struggled.

Harry could go down the line and test each person's boots to see which caused these tracks. That would take time and be a bit awkward with each having to stand around one-footed in their socks as they had for Aaron, who had been determined to use the one spell he always got right. Aaron in fact held out one booted foot. "Want to check?" he offered. Harry resisted Legilimizing him, but at least he now knew that tact wasn't going to work. But why wouldn't it work? Harry wondered, and realized that he didn't know enough about these spells. Spell theory did help, Harry realized, even though it usually filled up his evenings with mind numbing readings.

What if the spell tracked a person and their boots as a unit? Harry considered, not just a particular pair of boots. Harry lifted his glove out of the way and tried to see what the closest next set of prints was. One set, in a line with the others, seemed a good possibility. Harry repeated the single trail spell again and, possibly due to his rising determination, got it to work the first time. The next trail illuminated, leading to Vineet.

"Oh, you figured it out," Aaron said in disappointment.

Harry put his icy glove back on as he stood up. "That's enough for today, I think," Rodgers was saying. He glanced up flatly at Harry, who couldn't read if his trainer were glad or not that Harry had worked out their trick.

Vineet after trading his boots back with Aaron came over and intoned, "You are difficult to fool."

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Harry turned off to the side with him as the others began Apparating away. “I’ve been fooled before,” Harry assured him. The surrounding buildings looked empty still but presumably their owners would be coming home from work although the barrier spells on this plot of land would continue to hold and continue to obscure the Muggles’ view of them standing there.

“Are you by chance having another party soon?” Vineet asked.

Harry put his wand away and waved goodbye to Kerry Ann when she waved before disappearing. “Hadn’t thought about it.” He shrugged. “I’ll let you know if I do.”

Vineet crossed his arms, apparently to ward off the cold. “I would be appreciating an invitation. You have most interesting friends.”

“Yep,” Harry replied as he thought about the incoming Apparition area at the end of the corridor in preparation for sending himself to it. “And I don’t see them enough, so I should plan something soon... the month is going fast.”



The next day they waited in the workout room, training long overdue to start. Aaron put his leg up on the desk before him—nearly folding himself in half to do it, and sighed at the ceiling in boredom.

Kerry Ann said, “So, Harry, nice picture of you in Witch Weekly’s latest issue. So, it’s official?”

“What’s official?” Harry asked carefully.

“You’re dating Ms. Belluna.”

Harry shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.”

Kerry Ann shook her head. “I’m glad all guys, even the most sought after, are as clueless as the kappa slappas I end up with.”

Harry was actually insulted. But he gave the cause of the sometimes uncertain state of his and Belinda’s dating some thought before composing a response. Maybe he was the one more at fault for that, but it was hard to tell. He always looked forward to seeing her but at the end of the date it seemed all mixed up. Maybe if she didn’t push so much to understand everything, Harry considered.

“Harry?” Kerry Ann prompted. When Harry turned a level gaze on her, she said, “Come on, I didn’t mean that personally. I was bucking myself up with that thought, not bringing you down. Or that wasn’t what I meant to do. You two make a cute couple. And her parents like you I hear.”

At Harry’s dark, narrow look, Aaron bust out laughing. Aaron’s feet hit the floor with a slap as he straightened up in his desk, unable to laugh in his overly-lounging

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position. “Bloody, no relationship could survive that kind of scrutiny. None of mine could, anyway.” He stood and said, “What IS up?” before going to the door.

With the door open a raised voice could be heard. The four of them were in the corridor in an instant, Aaron with his wand out. He put it away again when it was clearly just an argument between Ministry staff. Inside the Aurors’ group office. Tonks and Percy Weasley were having a face-off in the middle of the desks, but over what, was unclear. Rogan, near the door mumbled, “Fudge’s been in that office three days and already he’s making a power grab.”

Arthur Weasley, their Department head, wove between them all outside the door and stopped between the two red-faced combatants. “All right now, calm down.”

Percy turned his nasal argument on Mr. Weasley instead. “I have come for the artifact.”

“Do you have a req-?” Mr. Weasley began.

“YES. I have the proper requisition forms,” Percy stated, stamping his foot even. “SHE, has them. They have disappeared for the moment, but I doubt it was permanent. In any event, they were copies.”

“Tonks,” Mr. Weasley prompted, holding his hand out.

Tonks pulled a set of parchments out of her shirt. Mr. Weasley didn’t even look at them, just handed them back to Percy. “I’m sure you are aware that we are not finished with it.”

“You have admitted to failing to determine its function or spell origin. THAT is what the Department of Mysteries does,” Percy stated annoyingly, as though talking to an errant child rather his own father.

Harry had to give Mr. Weasley boundless credit for not only failing to deck Percy, but failing to rise to anger at all. Harry previously would have thought him a bit soft in the spine, but since his own struggles with anger and negative emotion, he felt awed instead. Mr. Weasley merely frowned lightly and glanced down at some parchments on the nearest desk.

More calmly, Percy said, “You cannot hold it back. Our paperwork is in order.”

“Tonks,” Mr. Weasley said calmly. “Give him what he came for.”

Tonks tossed her arms at her sides, fists balled. “Arthur...”

“Ms. Tonks,” Mr. Weasley said, more sternly.

Tonks moved around to the other side of the nearest row of cubicles and dug around. From the door the apprentices couldn’t see what she was doing and it was too crowded to move into the room for a better view.

“Here,” Tonks muttered. “I’ll put it in a box-” she started to say, but a quick crash of breaking pottery interrupted her. Percy gasped and turned fully red again.



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Tonk's eyes and hair were visible over the top of the cubicle when she straightened up. Her pink eyebrows were nearly in her pink hair. "I didn't mean to..."

Percy looked about as ready to kill as Harry had ever seen him. Mr. Weasley said, "Well, give him the pieces."

Shacklebolt and Rodgers moved to help Tonks clean up by hand, resisting using a spell for some reason. A covered box was handed over to Percy, who tugged it away and shoved it under his arm, making the contents rattle and probably break farther. With that he stalked out, knocking a path out the door with his boney shoulders.

Tonks approached Mr. Weasley and said pleadingly, "Honestly, Arthur, I didn't mean to..."

Mr. Weasley held up his hand to forestall her. "We weren't going to see it again anyway." He turned to go. "Back to work, everyone."

"What was that?" Kerry Ann asked. No one replied. The four of them shared a mutual shrug and returned to the workout room as the office returned to order. Rodgers came in soon after and went through their morning with even more cursory attitude than usual.

At lunch Harry wandered into the office to find Tonks. He had been worrying about her through the morning and wanted to at least try to cheer her up. She was working at her desk, head bent far over the memo she was reading. The room was empty otherwise.

"Hey, Tonks," Harry said.

She didn't lift her head. "Harry," she said, sounding glum.

Harry reached out and brushed the shoulder of her robe to get her to look up. As he stepped farther forward his foot bumped something. She brought her eyes up; they contained a complex mixture of things. "It's all right, Harry," she said dismissively.

Harry bent down and found what his foot had encountered. It was a broken piece of orange ceramic like from a cheap jug.

"We didn't get it all," Tonks said upon seeing it and then held out her hand for it.

Harry didn't hand it over. It felt stranger than its innocent appearance let on. It felt unexpectedly sharp against his skin, or perhaps charged as though with electricity. Tonks put her hand down.

"Are you feeling something from that, Harry?" she asked, sounding intrigued.

"Doesn't feel normal," Harry said, holding it out. "I don't know what it feels like. What is it?"

"We're not sure. Something someone doesn't want us to have. We only had a broken piece of it anyway. Discarded unwisely. Something the Department of

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Mysteries thinks is too dangerous for us to have. What does it feel like to you, Harry? You gave it a good scope there.”

“It feels electrically charged. Like when you put a battery to your tongue.”

“A what to your what?” Tonks asked, thoroughly amused.

“It feels like it is shocking me, just a little. You don’t feel that?” Harry asked.

She shook her head and slipped the piece into her desk drawer. “Didn’t mean to break it, but it worked out in the end,” she said with small satisfaction.

“Most things do,” Harry ventured.

She gave him a sideways look. “Aren’t you supposed to be in training?”

“It’s lunch,” Harry pointed out.

“Is it?” she asked in surprise.



At home, Harry found Snape’s owl, Franklin, at the window. He took the letter and gave the bird a toss into the chilly darkness to help it get going again. The letter was short and written hurriedly.

*Harry,*

*This weekend will be the first chance that I can possibly get away. I assume you are behaving yourself and keeping to your studies—certainly no one here seems to be. Minerva asks after you—perhaps you could send her an owl. Lovely photo of you in Witch Weekly, by the way, you can thank Minerva for showing it around.*

Harry cringed and sat at the table. He remained there, looking at the letter in the dim flicker from the hearth. As much as he wished to not disappoint Snape by letting him discover how bad things had become, Harry half wished Snape had at least asked, or suspected, or something. But at least he was coming home soon. Just thinking that made Harry feel a bit better.

Author’s Notes:

## TRAILING THE MONSTER

Thanks everyone for all the encouragement! I've been writing on the story, but not in the mood to fix up in preparation for posting. Finally got a quiet day to do that. is going to the betas today.

Yes, Charlie is married. I'll be fixing that. Thanks. (I blame book 6 for the confusion)

The plot will be picking up the pace in chapter 3, hopefully to not slow down until the very end, given all the subplot ideas swirling in my brain above and beyond those in the outline.

## CHAPTER THREE



# TWILIGHT

In the candlelit dining room, Harry welcomed Hermione in from the Floo and helped her brush off.

“Been getting grimier as winter gets on,” she complained as she shook out her long bushy hair. She tossed her cloak over a chair back and gave Harry a quick hug. “How have you been?”

Harry shrugged, started to compose an honest response, but was interrupted by her going on with, “I’m so relieved the holidays are over and I finally figured out why.”

Harry straightened up and avoided frowning. “Why’s that?”

“Because,” she replied as she took a seat at the table. “I was so very tired of pretending things were all right with Ron. We agreed to not totally split up until the holidays were over. I went along with it because I thought it was a good idea, but it really wasn’t.”

Harry stood beside the chair across from her. “So you’re officially, finally split now?”

“Yeah,” Hermione said softly. “We agreed we could date other people and everything.” She pulled her jumper sleeves down straight and crossed her arms. “That’s why I’m here alone tonight.”

“What?” Harry managed despite not being able to breath quite properly as he tried to deal with what sounded like a misunderstanding he hadn’t imagined previously.

Hermione tossed her thickly clad arms. “You know... without Ron. So, how are

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things with Belinda?” she plowed right in and asked, which returned the breath to Harry’s lungs.

Harry sat down heavily and said, “All right, I guess. She wants it to be a bit more serious than I do at this point.” Harry felt very relieved to have someone to tell this to. “At the same time, she has so little time to get together... I don’t feel like we know each other all that well.” He met Hermione’s attentive and caring face and continued, “I think she thinks sex would be a substitute for having spent enough time really getting to know one another, which we just haven’t done. I think she really believes she knows me, but she doesn’t and I know I don’t know her all that well.”

Hermione had put her chin on her hands to listen even more closely. After a long pause she prompted, “Go on...”

Harry laughed. “It’s nice and all to have someone to talk to about Ministry things, but that might be all we have in common.” He paused. “Well, that and liking me.”

Hermione laughed. “Oh dear, you aren’t dating a member of your fan club, are you?”

“I might be,” Harry admitted, putting his own elbows on the table. “Want a butterbeer or a hot chocolate?”

“Butterbeer would be lovely,” she said.

Harry snapped his fingers and a warm bottle and glass sparkled in before each of them.

“You are turning into Dumbledore!” she exclaimed.

“No,” Harry denied, smiling slyly at his guessed timing. “Winky’s just very good at knowing what and when you want to eat or drink. The finger snap was coincidental,” he teased her.

“Are you sure?” she challenged, pouring for herself.

“Very.”

“How are things at the Ministry?” she asked.

“Power struggles are already starting with Fudge,” Harry complained.

“Already! He just got that position,” she marveled, aghast.

“Tell us about it,” Harry grumbled. And something is going on, he wanted to say, but held back, wanting to keep the evening away from such musings. “How’s your job going?” he asked in the hopes of being distracted by someone else’s troubles.

Hermione didn’t disappoint, going on for a long while about the various cases she was working on. “But I think I have to get a degree if I want to be more than a grunt doing research and write-ups that someone else puts their name on. That’s a big leap and I have to be sure this is what I want to do before making it.”

During the lull, Chinese egg rolls appeared. Hermione stared at them suspiciously. “Winky is really good,” she said before lifting one gingerly and biting into it.

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Harry smiled, happy to see her pleased, happy to have her there. "You should come over more often."

"Without Ron my social life is dropping to zero, so I'd like that." She ate another roll. "So, when are you having another party?"

"Everyone has been asking me that," Harry commented. "When I can manage..."

"What do you mean 'manage'... Winky does everything."

"It isn't that," Harry said but found himself reluctant to explain, even to her, his difficulties with attracting dark creatures. He told himself it was because he wanted to keep the evening light. Dinner arrived then and the conversation stopped in favor of eating.

Much later, as she swung her cloak over her shoulders while getting ready to go, Hermione said, "It was really good to see you."

Harry was sleepy from post dinner sherry and too much food, which he discovered only when he stood up to see her off. "You too." He felt relaxed and safe and realized he had forgotten what that felt like.

"Have a party soon, Harry. You have interesting friends and they all come when you invite them."

Harry smiled but behind it he was wishing that he knew for certain that he could stay this safe to make that possible. "Sure."

She stopped getting ready to depart and let her hands drop. "Everything all right, Harry?" she asked, apparently seeing something he was trying not to show.

"Well enough," he said, stopping himself from fidgeting.

"You've never been a great liar you know," she said, sounding lightly exasperated. The hearth light was highlighting her dark brown hair with a halo of blonde. Harry wished that he could have this level of understanding with Belinda. But the events and years that had led to this instinctive friendship were unrepeatable, even should Harry wish to.

Harry said, "I'm having... these odd, I don't know what to call them, not visions but..."

"Something with the Death Eater shadows?" Hermione asked in alarm. "Are they closer?"

"No, no, they're all far off in Azkaban. And you know, Severus isn't one anymore." At her puzzled expression, Harry went on, "When he came back from nearly being killed by Avery, his shadow was gone."

"Harry, that's wonderful."

Harry dropped his gaze, feeling vaguely guilty for that distracting change in topic. "Yep, it is."

Harry needn't have worried. "So it isn't the shadows..." Hermione prompted.

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“It is other things... dark creatures.” He waited for her reaction – it was a bit distressed. “When I get angry, or upset, or even just frustrated. Which, just thinking about it, is making me right now.” Harry listened closely but the crackle of the fire was the only sound, and he felt warm, still safe. “So if I push you into the Floo without warning, you’ll know why,” he added lightly.

She considered him deeply thoughtful. “Does Professor Snape know about this?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, which was true enough to pass her subsequent verification. “I don’t like having others around who can’t defend themselves. So at the Ministry it isn’t so bad. Just worrying less makes it less of a problem.”

She stepped closer, throwing her face into shadow. “Yes, but Harry, you can’t go on like this... can you?” she said with pained concern.

Harry held her gaze, which wasn’t easy. “What else can I do? Severus has researched it all he can...”

“Next time I’m at the London library I’ll look too,” she said, sounding motherly.

“I’ve looked there, but I’d appreciate any help.”

She stepped closer still and gave him another quick hug. “Owl, or silver message, or something if you need anything. Okay?” she asked sternly.

“Sure,” Harry replied, feeling touched and even a little embarrassed.

“You said Professor Snape was coming home tomorrow, right?” Hermione turned to ask before tossing in the Floo Powder.

“Yeah,” Harry assured her.

“Okay,” she said, sounding as though she might feel compelled to check on him if Snape wasn’t. “Take care of yourself, Harry. Normally I don’t say that because you have a house-elf and all, but...”

“I will,” he insisted and this satisfied her, apparently, because she finally departed.

Harry took himself up to his room right after; he had field work the next morning at 10:00 a.m. and he wanted to be well rested for that. As he settled into sleep he mused that Hermione without Ron was a more interesting Hermione than she used to be.



Harry impatiently waited for the lift to ascend to his floor; he was five minutes late due to the Floo diverting him to Knockturn Alley. He was tempted to owl Belinda when he arrived to ask what was going on with the Floo network. But he arrived at the office and found Tonks in a close discussion with Shackbolt, and he found himself caring a bit less that he was late, if no one would notice his tardiness.

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The chat, or more accurately: quiet debate, went on for rather a long while and Harry finally stepped back down to the workout room where Vineet sat, waiting patiently, gaze distant.

“Do you know who you’re paired with?” Harry asked him.

“I expect Mr. Shackbolt,” Vineet intoned without turning to him.

“Oh,” Harry said, pleased by the prospect of being paired with Tonks.

The two Aurors came in soon after and Harry, his face carefully serious, gave his arm to Tonks to take him out on the pavements of London for patrol.

The streets were whipped by a cold wet wind and only a few others were out. The Muggles they encountered walked quickly without a glance at the two of them. Harry followed for many blocks beside Tonks’ sensible shoes that made no sound at all on the pavement. Nothing much happened as they went, except for Tonks stopping occasionally to look in a window – and she might very well have been shopping.

“I was thinking,” Tonks said when they stopped to wait for a walk signal, “of circling around to Diagon for a hot soup before continuing.”

“Sounds great,” Harry said, his arms now wrapped around himself. Today he only had his old cloak, which was only knee length and didn’t block the wind nearly as well as his usual one. It did have a good wand pocket, however, and Harry kept his gloved fingers near the edge of it all of the time.

Harry walked, pitched slightly into the wind. He began studying the passersby with more care the way Tonks was doing, as though looking for someone in particular. Two men dressed casually went by, arguing about a football match. A woman and her daughter went by, the woman keeping the girl close with a hand on her shoulder. Muggles all, Harry noted without much thought until a woman approached from a small square they were passing. It may have been the knitted jumper and shawl being just a little too handmade looking, but Harry was certain she was a witch. He slowed and waited for her to look up from the small notebook she held before her. He wanted to be certain, because it seemed like more than the clothes, really.

The woman looked up at the street sign, down the street and, just before Harry had to speed up to catch Tonks, she looked at him and her eyes did indeed go wide in surprise and recognition. Harry nodded in a kind of hello and hurried ahead. One last glance back before they exited the square showed the witch befuddledly scratching her head with a mittened hand.

Harry spent the rest of the walk to the Leaky Cauldron trying unsuccessfully to pin down what it was about each person that marked them as magical or not. By the time they passed through the marred old door, Harry had been distracted by his numb arms and he was grateful to be able to use a warming charm on them after they entered.



## TWILIGHT

“Two soups, Tom,” Tonks shouted across the pub. She tossed her gloves down and took up a place with the other patrons crowded near the hearth. The rest of the table gave them suspicious looks, some of which changed to glowing, half toothed smiles upon recognizing Harry.

Soup arrived with a sloshing thunk of the big pot on the end of the table and Tom used a rusty ladle to fill two bowls. Harry pressed his hands to his hot bowl and held them there.

“Winter isn’t my favorite,” Tonks said, sipping directly from the edge of the bowl, ignoring her spoon. Somehow it didn’t seem rude when she did that. “So, how are you doing, Harry?”

The pair of old witches beside them were listening in. Harry shrugged. A brown owl fluttered by and landed on someone’s shoulder. A family emerged from the hearth in a blast of green and, with a shriek of metal corners on the hearthstones, towed their luggage to the stairs.

The soup break ended too soon and they headed out again. On the Muggle street Tonks said, “Maybe I should have asked Rodgers for an easy assignment like Kingsley did. Doing something would be warmer.”

“Shacklebolt accused me of attracting trouble,” Harry teased.

“You do attract trouble,” Tonks asserted. “But how are you doing?”

Harry, rather than admit to anything even though he liked hearing those words from her, said, “Can you tell witches and wizards from Muggles?”

“Muggles dress better and bathe regularly,” Tonks said. “If you haven’t noticed that, Harry...”

“I mean without those clues,” Harry insisted, forced to dodge around a large man holding his bowler on and staggering a bit.

“I don’t think so. I usually ask something that would be meaningless to a Muggle when I need to find out.”

“You can’t just tell by... feel?” Harry persisted.

“No. Don’t know anyone besides Moody with his eye, who can.”

“Oh.”

Not ten minutes later, Tonks pulled up short and stepped behind a magazine stand to pull out her slate tablet. “Cripes,” she breathed and then almost frantically glanced around. “Not an alleyway when you need one, is there?”

Harry pointed at a parked lorry from which the delivery man had just wheeled something inside a shop. Tonks grabbed Harry’s hand and dashed up the metal ramp, making rather a racket. A voice shouted from somewhere but Tonks had already pulled Harry behind a stack of pallets and Disapparated. Harry imagined a very puzzled lorry driver returning just seconds later.

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They arrived back at the Ministry where Vineet and Shackbolt were just stepping out of the marked incoming area at the end of one corridor. Without a word the Aurors moved close, pulled their wands, and disappeared.

Harry huffed, feeling useless, but he quickly let it go. Vineet intoned, “At least we are being deposited somewhere comfortable.”

“Yep.” Harry stood there thinking, then had an idea. “Assuming they are going to be gone for a while, I’m going up to the Minister’s office.” As he stepped away, he added, “In case anyone is looking for me.”

Despite it being a Saturday, the Minister’s reception area contained Belinda and two other assistants. “Harry,” Belinda said happily when she noticed him lingering there in the doorway. The other two shared knowing looks. Harry ignored them and stepped in.

“Working hard?” Harry asked, thinking that was a safe topic.

She straightened and met him halfway across the room. She was dressed as nice as a weekday in a dark green pantsuit and waist-length cloak. “Not so much. Saturdays are fortunately quiet. What are you doing here?”

“My field work got interrupted,” Harry answered casually, but the eyes of the other two assistants came up with what had to be vague alarm. Harry wondered if he went back down to the Auror’s office, he could find any written record of the assignment Tonks and Shackbolt had been sent out on.

A figure stepped briskly out of the far office. “Fergus, do you have the... Mr. Potter,” Madam Bones said with a clear change in voice. “Just the man I wanted to see. Come in. Come in.” She turned immediately around, causing her monocle to swing, and headed back into her office. Harry followed slowly and took the offered tall leather chair that backed onto the real skylight by the wall. Bones hitched her hip on the edge of her desk and clasped her hand before herself. “So... have you decided?” she asked with interest.

Harry’s mouth fell open a bit and he worked his brain backward to what this might be. Her expectant expression didn’t help the process. “I’m not sure what you are referring to...” he finally admitted.

She smiled all the more, oddly enough, as though doting on him by doing so. “It is barely over three months away, Mr. Potter... Harry – the anniversary that so deserves to be a holiday.”

“Er,” Harry began, remembering her earlier threat in a rush. “I really don’t think we need a Harry Potter Day, Minister,” he quickly said, trying to sound reassuring rather than panicked.

She stepped around her desk. “I am certainly open to other monikers...” she stated easily.

## TWILIGHT

“Um, Demise of Voldemort Day?” Harry suggested.

“A bit negative don’t you feel using his name?” Bones said. She put her monocle to her eye and looked for a parchment on her desk. “Ah, here it is. We have compiled a possible list. Let’s see: Dark Diminishment Day... no. Ah, Dastardly Demise Day, Dark Lord Death Day. No. Or how about Free-As-You-Please Day?” She shook her head and let her monocle fall. “Demise of Voldemort Day you think?”

Harry, who would accept any option that didn’t include his name, nodded vigorously.

“And how shall we celebrate? Parade? Honorary Quidditch match?”

Harry, who had not considered the second, hesitated but finally said, “I was thinking of an annual dueling competition... where I’d be the judge.”

“Well!” She exclaimed, pleased. “You have been putting some thought into this... I’m so glad.” She paced back around her desk, her polyester pantsuit making loud fabric noises. “Dueling competition... dueling competition,” she muttered to herself. “I do think we can manage that.”

Harry almost folded in relief.

“Well, we’ll get planning on that,” Bones stated. Harry stood and followed her to the door. “I’ll let you know the exact time and such...” she said dismissively, to Harry’s dismay. Before he could even get out of the way, she said another goodbye, called one of her assistants into her office, and closed the door.

Harry approached Belinda where she was looking through the shelves. She said, “Want to do something tonight?”

“Can’t,” Harry said. “Severus is going to be home.” At her odd expression he quickly offered, “You could come over for dinner.”

Her expression remained strangely flat. “Um... Maybe not.”

Harry felt like he had stepped out of himself and now stood beside his own left shoulder. The files stacked on the floor across the room rattled and rustled, drawing Belinda’s and Fergus’ attention that way. Harry, for once, did not care if he, a poltergeist, or even a Shetani were causing it. Quietly, while stalling her from going over as well with a hand on her arm, he said, “What’s the problem?”

“Well, I don’t really want... well, Saturday night with Professor Snape doesn’t sound like what I was thinking of.”

Harry was back inside himself and feeling offense flowing into him. The files rattled again and this time Fergus jumped back in surprise since he had been bending over them to look more closely. Something snapped like small hungry jaws. Harry did not really wish to rein himself in; he wanted to let this all loose. He wanted to point out that her father wasn’t the best of company, frankly. A second later he did calm

## CHAPTER THREE

himself, for no one clear reason, perhaps just reason itself. He let go of her arm and her expression revealed that she realized she had made a mistake.

“Harry,” she said, disbelieving, “You are taking this the wrong-”

“No,” Harry only whispered but she fell silent. He had seen more in her eyes, a distaste and derision even although it was short-lived and she hadn’t really expressed it. “He’s my father now, you know,” he continued, sounding like someone else talking.

“Harry,” she said soothingly, “I know that. I didn’t mean-” A file exploded with an odd squeal, interrupting her. Looking between her colleague and Harry, she accused, “Are you causing that?”

“Not intentionally,” Harry said, backing up and thinking he had to escape here if he was going to pull himself back under control. She gave him a searching look now. Harry said, “Sorry, I have to go. Tonks and Shackbolt may have returned,” he added quickly. If she said anything more, he didn’t hear it.

Back downstairs, Harry found Vineet rehearsing Eastern Defense Arts in the workout room. Harry stopped in the doorway, queerly relieved to be in the other’s presence. The workout room and the whole floor were quiet. Needing a distraction, Harry stepped in, sat down, and started talking about the first non-Ministry topic that leapt to mind.

“Have you told your wife about your power yet?”

Vineet came to a halt, mid-turn of his hips, leg raised. He slowly stood straight and replied, “Not precisely.”

“What does that mean?” Harry demanded a little sharply. “You’ve either leveled with her or you haven’t.”

Vineet considered Harry in silence, head tilted to the side. “You think it so important?” he asked, sounding honestly curious, in contrast to his sharp gaze.

“I don’t know,” Harry muttered and leaned over the desktop onto his elbow. Antsy and annoyed, Harry stared at the far wall.

Vineet crossed his arms. “Is anything the matter?” he asked.

Harry was certain that this man – who honored him above anything Harry had encountered previously, had changed his life path even because of him – didn’t want to hear the truth. “It’s hard to explain,” Harry hedged. “I just had a little tiff with Belinda, is all.”

“Ah,” Vineet uttered. “Such an inefficient process, this dating.”

“I’m not looking for a wife,” Harry pointed out. “Not right now, anyway. Besides, as much as I trust Severus, I wouldn’t send him off to find me one, even if I were looking or hoping.” Harry let his shoulders fall and found calm finally. Vineet returned to what he had been doing.

## TWILIGHT

After watching Vineet hypnotically practice repeated movements for ten minutes, Harry said, "I wonder if their assignment is recorded anywhere. I'm darn curious."

Vineet paused and glanced at the open door. "I did not find anything meaningful."

"You looked!" Harry said, laughing.

"I was curious," Vineet argued. "You think I should not be?"

Harry shrugged. "You seem so honest otherwise..."

"I did not open anything that was not allowed for me to see," Vineet stated.

"Didn't find anything, eh?"

"Not unless MM means anything to you," Vineet said. When Harry shook his head, he explained, "It is coded in several places of interest among the assignment logs."

"MM? Malfoy Manor?" Harry suggested. "Draco Malfoy seemed more worried than suspicious the other day when I ran into him. I don't remember another Malfoy... sure it was MM and not NM?" At Vineet's nod, Harry frowned thoughtfully.

Tonks and Shacklebolt were gone until 4:00 p.m. They Apparated in and sank wearily into their desk chairs. Harry and Vineet, who had been occupying themselves with drills and just plain silly spells, stepped in at the sound of their arrival.

"What happened?" Harry asked.

Tonks and Shacklebolt shared a look. "Nothing," Tonks said.

"Absolutely nothing?" Harry demanded, remembering the last false alarm that interrupted their field shadowing. "Again?"

"Yep. Again," Tonks said. "Why don't you two head on home," she suggested in a manner that came out as an order.

"Who's MM?" Harry asked. When Tonks paused, Harry said, "It is on the log."

With a slash of her wand the door boomed closed. Shacklebolt said, "Whitley and Reggie didn't want it shared."

"Want what shared?" Harry asked.

To Shacklebolt, Tonks argued, "We don't know if any of this is even connected."

"Still."

"You going to squeal on me if I tell them?"

Harry and Vineet's gaze shifted together between the two Aurors, spectator style. Shacklebolt crossed his arms before his broad chest. "I would rather you not put me in the position of having to divide my loyalties."

Tonks put her wand back away. "They're not going to keep it quiet much longer."

"So you're not going say?" Harry demanded after a silence, acutely disappointed.

"No," Tonks admitted and appeared to move on to writing up a report.

Harry gestured between himself and Vineet. "Are we part of this organization or not?" he asked.

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“No. Not fully. Not yet,” Tonks countered.

“It’s always years away,” Harry complained as best he could while holding his anger on a chokingly short leash. “Can’t join the Order, Harry, until you’re of age...”

“For the record, I disagreed with that,” Tonks said while Harry continued with, “... doesn’t matter, Harry, that you’ve fought Voldemort more times than anyone else actually in the Order...” Harry went on despite her attempts to cut in. “And now you are saying that we have to wait two and half more years to find out who the enemy is? How many times is he going to have to try to kill us before you will tell us?”

“Finished?” Tonks snapped into the gap when he took a breath. Harry dropped his gaze and pulled himself together. “You are out of line,” she stated and it cut through him like a blade. With forced calm she said, “I will ask Reggie to revisit the issue of what you are allowed – of the vague suspicious, not facts – to hear. I trust you, Harry, up to the point where your discipline as an Auror is lacking. I honestly would trust Vishnu here a bit more to not do anything stupid, although in this case there isn’t anything personal for you, so perhaps you wouldn’t act on your own.”

The room fell silent. Harry stared at the floor, feeling less than nothing as the safest option. If he felt anything at all, he would be lost. Tonks said, “Go home. Next week I’ll ask Reggie to schedule a briefing for you. It’s overdue, I believe.”

Harry turned and departed without a glance at Shackbolt, whom he was afraid would be disappointed in his tirade. In the workout room Vineet approached as Harry was collecting his bag. “I will be seeing you next week,” he said.

“Yeah. Have a good weekend – rest of weekend.” Harry Disapparated from there to home right then, not having the patience to spin that long in the Floo.

The quiet house immediately didn’t feel so. Harry pretended everything was all right and put his things away as he usually did. When he turned from rearranging his books and emptying his mind until the house felt calm, he found Winky at the door to the Library, looking skittish and more suplicating than usual.

“Master Harry waiting for Master to have dinner?”

“Yes,” Harry replied.

Winky nodded to herself as she backed away. Harry dropped onto the lounge and closed his eyes.

“Shall we move your bed down here?” a voice asked from the doorway some time later.

Harry must have fallen asleep. He rubbed his eyes and asked, “Who’s MM?”

“What?” Snape asked, and his voice shifting made it sound as though he had returned to the doorway at that question. “MM?” he confirmed. “No idea.”

## TWILIGHT

“You’re certain you have no idea?” Harry asked while staring at the ceiling in a fit of calm control.

“Mad-Eye Moody?” Snape suggested.

“Doubtful,” Harry answered. “Besides those aren’t his real initials.”

“It was the first thing that came to mind. May I ask what brought the question up?”

“Something is up at the Ministry. Our field shadowing got interrupted by another non-emergency and they won’t tell us anything, but the logbook has MM in it.”

Their gazes locked for a long second. “If I knew I would tell you, Harry,” Snape stated in an almost soothing tone. “I’ll ask Minerva, who I presume is not the MM in question.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. He washed up for dinner and hungrily settled in across from Snape, who didn’t have a plate. “You already ate?” Harry asked.

“You needn’t have waited,” Snape said, rolling a tumbler of something between his hands.

Harry ate quickly, grateful that he was having a better time with the Dark Plane than earlier; Snape’s sharp gaze felt like a microscope. He filled his guardian in on what they had learned that week, lost in memory as he spoke. When he looked up, he found that Snape appeared worn a bit thin. So even though he wanted to talk more, he headed off to his room as soon as the plates disappeared.

As Harry awoke the next morning, he had a delayed reaction to his encounter with Belinda. He stared at the dim ceiling of his room and wondered what she was thinking right now. Noises came from the vicinity of the hearth that weren’t easily explained by the quiet glow of its coals. Reining in his emotions, Harry got up and went through his usual morning routine almost robot-like. On his trunk, he found the remains of his nice cloak. He rolled it up carefully and took it downstairs cradled in his arm.

Snape was most of the way through a cup of coffee, piles of post open and sorted before him. “Good morning,” he said without looking up.

Harry, numbed by the effort of keeping his emotions in control said, “I need Galleons for a new cloak.”

Snape raised his eyes to the bundle Harry held. He looked well-rested and bright-eyed this morning as he asked, “Why’s that?”

Harry unrolled the cloak to show him the missing half of it, the edge crinkled brown and ragged from fire. Snape’s brow twisted in alarm. “What happened?”

“Dragon,” Harry answered simply.

Snape studied Harry’s gaze as though looking for an alternative truth. “Goodness.”

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“I don’t need so nice of one since I wear it while on duty, which can be hard on it.”

“Well, certainly. But do try to be more careful, nevertheless.”

Doggedly pursuing this necessary conversation, Harry admitted, “I made a mistake. I thought the green was out of methane.”

“Do be more cautious next time. I have a bit of extra gold I can give you,” Snape assured him. “After breakfast though,” he said as breakfast sparkled in on top of his pile of discarded envelopes. He caught the plate as it tilted and cleared a space for it.

Harry sat down and ate slowly, wishing otherwise, but conflictingly grateful as well, that Snape hadn’t noticed his difficulty. At least, he thought he hadn’t. After handing Harry a brightly clinking small sack, Snape said, “You seem a little out of sorts.”

Harry parted his lips and for an instant teetered on the cusp of telling him everything, but what came out was the easy excuse. “I had an argument yesterday with Belinda.”

“Ah,” Snape stated dismissively. He moved to make ready then with purpose, putting on his gloves and tucking his post into his breast pocket. “Should I ask over what?”

“You,” Harry went on, unable to censor himself. Snape’s gaze shifted sideways back to Harry. Harry said, “I don’t think she likes you.”

Surprisingly easy going, Snape commented, “Many people don’t.” He raised his eyes to above the mantel. “I don’t remember being exceptionally hard on her as a pupil.”

Harry shrugged. He didn’t actually know what Belinda’s issue was. In the end he hadn’t given her a chance to explain and now Harry wondered if he had overreacted. A long silence ensued while Snape hesitated with Floo powder in hand.

“Owl me, Harry, if you will.” He sounded concerned now, which made Harry feel much better.

Harry nodded that he would, and a moment later he was alone.



Still on automatic, Harry went to training the next few days and answered owls from both Hermione and Snape. His replies, when he reread them before sending them, sounded as though someone else had written them. His momentary instinct to confess to Snape was overwhelmed by the memory of Snape’s own derisive words when Harry had long ago asked what he should do if he started seeing the Dark Plane



## TWILIGHT

all of the time. Get used to it, I should think, still rang clear enough in Harry's mind that he sent off the mundane letter exactly as he had already written it. He was so far inside himself that he didn't even get angry when Tonks informed him that Rodgers had nixed a briefing for them right now on the department's mystery investigation.

It was Wednesday before Harry was forced to face Belinda again.

"You've been very quiet, Harry," Aaron teased as they ate their bagged lunches in the tearoom.

"That won't last long," Kerry Ann commented and nodded at the doorway.

Belinda stood there, looking vastly overdressed for this level of the Ministry. "Can I talk to you?" she asked Harry.

Harry, grateful that his trainer and Tonks were both off elsewhere, stood up and joined her in the corridor. He didn't want to wander far, feeling an inexplicable instinct to stay close to his fellows while the two of them talked. Belinda backed up a few steps from the door and said quietly, "Look, I'm really sorry. I wasn't thinking before I spoke. You want me to have dinner with Professor Snape, I'll do that anytime." Her eyes were earnest as she spoke and the waft of her perfume livened up the corridor.

Also quiet, Harry said, "I overreacted, I think."

"I didn't realize that was such a sensitive topic. But I'm not a recently adopted orphan, either," she added with a light lilt. "Why don't you come over tonight. I'll make dinner."

Harry thought that sounded like a terrible idea, to be alone with her where the slightest distress would bring disaster. But he couldn't say no, it would undo the last thirty seconds and then some. "Sure."

"Eight, then?" She brushed his arm with her hand. "Really, I didn't mean to offend you. It's just that seven years of Professor Snape at school is hard to get over."

Harry's lips curled slightly. "I understand," he said, sounding robotic.

"I'll see you tonight," she said brightly, clearly happy.

When Harry reentered the tearoom, all eyes were on him. Kerry Ann dove in with, "So, how did it go?"

Harry had this dizzying notion that she knew everything from the weekend and just needed a little filling in. "None of your concern," Harry heard his temper, otherwise bound and gagged by fear, state.

"Whoa," Aaron breathed.

Sounding disturbingly like Belinda, Kerry Ann said, "Sorry, Harry. I didn't mean-

”

Crossing the warning track of his mind, Harry risked saying, "You already know everything, don't you?"

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Kerry Ann's mouth worked silently. "It's been going around. Don't have a tiff in front of other Ministry staff, Harry." This last was offered in a tone of truly caring advice and it pushed Harry into silence. She said, "Partner with me during the rest of drills. That will make you feel better."

Harry actually smiled at her humor. "No it won't," he said.

That evening, Harry, roses in hand, arrived at Belinda's door. He felt lightheaded, as though he were facing fate on a grand scale, as though the world was about to change irrevocably.

The door opened and a smiling Belinda welcomed him inside to the steam and heat emanating from the cook-top. She pressed a beer into his hand and they carried on an inane conversation while she finished dinner.

Through the meal, Harry was a bundle of nervous control. Repeatedly, he had to stop himself from fidgeting with the silver. He turned down a second beer on the theory that he needed a completely clear head. A wave of her wand sent the dishes to the sink before she took her pink cocktail to the couch and sat back. Harry joined her there, thinking he had been dumb lucky so far that he hadn't slipped and that he shouldn't push it further by staying much longer. She wrapped him up in a way that implied she didn't expect him to go anytime soon. Harry kissed her back as a way of pretending everything was all right.

They remained that way, despite Harry's wandering thoughts of concern. It was warm that close together, despite the draft from the flat's old windows. Harry so wished to not be concerned. He had a gulp of her drink when a pause allowed for it, tempted to ask for his own and get blasted drunk in a fit of the hell with it. Bad emotions were leaching in as her hands touched his bare back. He disliked himself for feeling only attracted to her lovely features and not her. He hated that he wished she were Tonks.

A chittering sounded from under the cabinet beside the stove. Belinda turned her head, brow furrowed. "I thought I got rid of the mice."

Harry sat frozen, even down to the hands he had around her. He began breathing faster. The chittering repeated and now a scratching as though of very needle-like claws could be heard too.

Harry stood up despite her grip. "I have to go," he said, barely finding breath to say it.

"What?"

Harry couldn't even spare anything to absorb her tone. "Really, I have to go," Harry insisted. The sound of something dragging over the floor came from near the pantry. Belinda turned again, but at that moment, her neighbors tramped past outside in the corridor, talking and banging their door open and closed again.

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Belinda angled her head up and stared at Harry, agape. “But why? What’s wrong?”

Harry pulled his shirt together and with fumbling fingers found a few buttons to hook, but they didn’t line up. He quickly retrieved his cloak. He needed to be alone to quash all of the emotion and close down the gateway. Fear for her was making that impossible at that moment and that ineffectiveness was feeding the fear.

“Really,” Harry insisted. “I’m sorry.”

She appeared alternatively concerned and upset. “What did I do wrong?” she asked, sounding a little angry now.

“Nothing,” Harry insisted. “It’s me. Really, it’s just me.” He Disappeared.

Harry reappeared in the main hall in Shrewsthorpe. The slithering, scraping noise sounded behind him, near the windows, breaking the silence of the house. Relieved to hear it, because it meant the opening had followed him, Harry relaxed and the sound stopped. Legs quivering faintly, Harry mounted the stairs to the first floor and entered his room. Kali was circling inside her cage, frantic. Despair was trying to grip Harry, but even that emotion might be deadly.

Letting Kali out to climb on his shoulder and leveling himself forcefully, Harry sat at his desk and opened the first book he found. It was *Rules of Riot: – A Primer on Crowd Control*. Despite the title, it was a rather boring text full of detailed instructions for dividing and quieting crowds of various sizes and states of inebriation. Harry wondered with ill humor if any of these quieting spells would work on a hundred vicious Shetani, should they come pouring into the room. The sounds quieted again as Harry chuckled darkly, making him chuckle more, but grimly.

The purple book was in the stack on top of the upper shelf, the stack that kept the roll-top from closing. He opened it and flipped through it, desperate for any help, something to close the gateway once open, or a spell to force the creatures back from the interstice. There was nothing, only theory and large words and supposition. The author had known but he had not understood. Disgusted, Harry tossed the book in the direction of the flaming hearth. It skidded on its open pages and stopped before the grate.

Harry took a slow deep breath. At this instant all was calm, but it would not remain that way. Shaking with frustration and angry helplessness, Harry took up a quill and a half sheet of parchment.

Dear Severus, Harry began but hesitated. He didn’t want to need help. He didn’t want Snape to know things had gotten this bad. He suspected that Snape couldn’t help in any event. A rattle like a snake’s tale sounded from the hearth. One could pretend it was the fire, but Harry strongly suspected it was not. Snape would have to manage, Harry insisted, using that faith to quiet things again. Merlin, he thought

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grimly, how had he let it get so bad.

I'm sorry I didn't say anything sooner, but I have to say it now: the Dark Plane has become unmanageable. It haunts me constantly and I don't know what to do.

Harry imagined an upset Belinda, pacing her flat and frowned.

I'm afraid to be near anyone, even Winky avoids me. I know you told me to "get used to it" if I sensed it all the time, but I cannot. I can't control my emotions enough anymore. It used to be just anger and ill temper that brought the plane too close, but now it is any emotion it seems.

I've reached my limit. I need help. I don't know what you can do, if anything, but I cannot continue like this.

There, he had said it. Despair tried to settle over him, but he shook it off with faith that his adoptive father would think of something. At the least, he could potion Harry to sleep until something could be done; then Harry wouldn't have to worry about hurting anyone. The faith that Snape would do what needed to be done, no matter the cost, relieved Harry no end. He gave the letter to Hedwig and urged her to her best speed.

## CHAPTER FOUR



# REFUGE

Severus Snape sat in the candlelight, a thin book entitled *Horobane: Curse Propagation and Astrological Conditions* open before him. It was late. The third-year Gryffindor, who had been doing detention for dangling another student's kneazel out of the classroom window, had long since left, hand appropriately cramped from doing lines.

A scratching sound emanated from the window just as Snape closed the book and bent to snuff the candles. The familiar white shadow of Hedwig showed through the glass, hurrying Snape to open it. Hedwig handed over a letter, which had been rolled rather than put into an envelope. With alarm Snape read its contents before striding from the room, leaving Hedwig on his chairback, head tucked in her wing.

The door to the headmistress' office was closed, which usually meant McGonagall had gone to bed. Snape knocked anyway and after a short delay the door swung open on its own. The headmistress stood on the second level of the office, just by the handrail, wearing an emerald green dressing gown. "Severus? What is it?" she asked.

"I just received a missive from Harry, and I am in need of your advice." He held the letter out. She descended and accepted it. After scanning it, she lowered the parchment and stared into the distance. Handing it back, she said, "Go and fetch him."

Snape froze while rerolling the letter. "Fetch him?" he echoed in alarm. "Did you not read this?"

Sounding intentionally patient, she said, "Yes, Severus; I did. First off, I believe

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this castle capable of holding back such a doorway, and second this school owes it to Mr. Potter to do all that we can. Go and fetch him... he is clearly at wit's end."

Snape used her Floo and powder with only one pause of hesitation, during which he failed to find the heart to continue to argue.

In Shrewsthorpe, Snape immediately went up to Harry's room. Harry lay across the top of his desk, head resting on his arm, his pet draped over his shoulder. Kali lifted her head at Snape's approach, blinking heavy eyes at him.

Rather than awaken his charge, Snape hovered a trunk from the corner and packed it with the contents of the wardrobe as well as the many stacks of books scattered about the bedroom, including the purple one that looked forlornly destined for the fire. After another moment of studying the sleeping Harry, Snape went downstairs and hefted the books lying out in the library. On the way back, he stepped down into the kitchen, Winky, shining a cauldron with a bundle of steel wool, flinched at his approach before standing and tugging her tea towel straight.

"Master."

The room seemed orderly enough but Winky had a row of scratches on her arm that didn't look owl or chimrian in origin. "I am taking Harry away," Snape informed her. "Look after the house as usual."

In an almost inaudible voice, Winky said, "Bad things happening, Master."

Snape, who had turned to go, turned back with a snap. "I expect they will cease with Harry removed."

Her long-fingered hands turned over one another. Sounding far away, she said, "Winky cannot protect master's house. Winky failed. Should Winky punish herself?"

"No. Just continue as you were," Snape insisted. Her pathetic posture didn't ease but she stopped wringing her hands.

"No punishment for Winky?"

"No," Snape insisted more firmly and with no little exasperation before stepping away.

Back in Harry's room Snape finished packing the trunk and latched it before moving to rouse Harry. Harry's wand lay loose in his hand lying across the desk. Snape considered slipping it away before risking startling him, but instead, trusting him not to jump immediately to a dangerous spell, simply patted Harry lightly on the shoulder and called his name. Harry's head jerked up and he did clutch his wand, but he didn't raise it.

"Severus?" Harry mumbled and rubbed his eyes.

"Come with me," Snape instructed him.

Harry turned in his chair but didn't rise. "Come where? Did you get my owl?"

"Yes. That is why I am here to fetch you."

## REFUGE

Harry swallowed hard. "Fetch me where?"

Snape hovered Harry's trunk to the door from where he stood. "To Hogwarts. Come."

Harry woke up quickly then. "Hogwarts? I can't go to Hogwarts," Harry fiercely insisted. A dragging sound and a burst of chittering came from beside the hearth. Snape turned his head slightly but didn't react otherwise. Kali growled, a sound more like a purr in her tiny throat. "Did you hear that?" Harry asked him.

"Yes. Come."

Harry stood and faced him down, visibly struggling. "Severus. I can't-"

Grasping Harry by the upper arms, Snape stated in a calm, measured manner, "Harry, you asked me for help and I am still legally your father and I am taking over." Squeezing harder on the muscular arms under his hands, he added, "You will do as I say."

Released, Harry swayed once before leaning on the desk. "What is Minerva going to say?" he asked blamefully.

Snape took Kali from him and placed her into her cage. He then put both cages on top of Harry's trunk and rehovered it. "She ordered me to fetch you. Come. No more arguing." His attitude grew unyielding, prompting a tired Harry to obey.

At the dining room hearth, Snape took the cages and gestured for Harry to lead with the trunk. "I'll follow. Go on." His voice had already lost its hard edge and sounded only sadly sympathetic, which left Harry zero space to argue.

Harry tossed in powder and disappeared. He landed with a slap and stepped out into McGonagall's office, trunk in tow. The headmistress stood beside her desk in a dark green dressing gown with a matching nightcap so long that it nearly reached the floor. "Harry," she said in a warm greeting.

Harry dropped his gaze. "Professor," he returned. She approached and ducked her head to catch his eyes. "You are always welcome here, Harry," she said in kind tones.

"I don't want to put anyone at risk. Especially not at Hogwarts." As he said this, Snape arrived behind him.

"Filch and the house-elves have opened up a visitor's suite on the fifth floor," McGonagall informed them. "First one off the staircase," she directed to Snape. "Harry dear, if you need anything..."

Harry nodded, wishing uselessly that he were elsewhere. Resigned, he followed Snape out of the office. The corridors were dark and quiet. At the steps, a portrait of a man with a lamp turned it up brighter to watch them pass.

"How are you doing?" Snape asked as they ascended.

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Harry hadn't heard a thing that didn't belong. "All right," he answered in a whisper. More thoughtfully, he said, "I may be all right here, after all." They had reached the fifth floor and Snape stopped at the first doorway they came to down a side corridor. Harry went on, "I remember when I was taking Nott up to McGonagall's office. I was furious with him. Threatened to kill him even... and there wasn't any sign of the Dark Plane."

Snape turned at this, his glowing wand tip hovering between them. His expression didn't change. "Minerva is quite confident in the wards of the castle." He unhooked the oversized latch on the door and wanded up the lamps.

Harry paused in the doorway. Before him was a room almost half the size of the Gryffindor common room, with two long couches and an overstuffed chair around a low table. Dormers were cut into the roof, though right now they showed the black night sky. Snape opened the room on the left and Harry followed, dragging his trunk. A large four-poster stood in the middle of the next room. "This is nice," Harry said, hovering his trunk over to rest beside the wardrobe. He brushed his fingers over the large claw of one of the carved phoenixes framing the wardrobe doors.

"You may be here a while," Snape observed.

Harry grumbled darkly and then relished that he could. He exhaled in relief and relaxed for what might have been the first time in weeks. Without turning around he said, "Thank you, Severus."

"I am glad we found a refuge for you."

The phoenixes had rubies for eyes, Harry noticed. "I can't stay here forever. What am I going to do?" His voice sounded difficult.

"We will discuss it in the morning after you have rested. Is there anything else you need?"

Harry finally turned around. "No. Thanks," he answered grimly.

"Send me a silver message if you do."

Alone, Harry paced around the room once before changing for bed and falling into it like a stone.



On the fourth floor of the castle, Ginny Weasley was returning from the kitchens with a bowl of chicken soup for a Gryffindor second-year who had not felt well enough to go to dinner. She spied something moving on the staircase and at first thought it was a house-elf, but they didn't have such a head of hair.

"VanEschelon, what are you doing out of your tower in the middle of the night?" Ginny demanded. Erasmus, shrunk down behind the railing a moment before re-



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lenting and coming around the balcony, feet dragging. Ginny huffed, “Stay RIGHT HERE. I have to deliver this before it burns my fingers off.”

Presently she returned and found Erasmus getting brow-beaten by a painting of a knight. “You should have more sense of chivalry and responsibility,” the knight was lecturing pompously, although he couldn’t stand up straight and his speech slurred.

“Yes, sir,” Erasmus replied obediently anyway.

Ginny grabbed the small boy by the arm and pulled him down the corridor. “Now, what are you doing out at this hour?”

Erasmus scrunched up his face and stammered, “Sir Nicholas told me that Harry Potter was here and-”

“Harry isn’t here,” Ginny interrupted, stopping suddenly.

“Sir Nicholas said he was,” Erasmus insisted. “Said he just saw him in one of the chambers on the fifth floor.” Erasmus stared at the floor and tapped his toe against a nearby banister pole. “I just thought, maybe, you know, I’d say hello.”

“Go back to your tower, VanEschelon. If Harry is here, you’ll see him tomorrow, I’m sure.” When the boy didn’t move she sternly said, “Now. Or I’ll give you detention... with Hagrid,” she added since she had heard he scared the boy more than Filch did.

“All right. All right,” Erasmus whined and headed down the stairs with a desultory step.

Ginny stood thoughtfully in the dim lamplight; unexpectedly, it grew just a little brighter. She turned to the painting of a man in a stained white nightcap and flowered pyjamas. “You didn’t see Harry Potter come up this way?” Ginny asked it.

The man yawned. “Someone came up this way, towin’ a trunk. Professor Snape was leadin’ ‘im.” Ginny was off up to the fifth floor like a shot.

The main corridor was quiet and deserted, but the cobwebs had been cleared from the first door down the smaller left-hand corridor off the staircase. Ginny ran a quick check for intruder spells and found the standard one they used in D.A. She neutralized it and opened the door onto a dark sitting room. The door on the left was ajar, so she tiptoed over to it and pulled it open a little more, flinching when it creaked loudly. She stopped still but didn’t hear any movement from within. After giving the hinges a quick oil charm she opened the door farther. Inside, a lamp burned low on the side table illuminating the bed’s occupant.

Ginny stepped closer on quiet feet. Harry was indeed here and he was quite soundly asleep, lying with one arm extended, his head tilted to the side, lips parted just slightly. He looked, Ginny had to admit, highly kissable. Feeling tingly she shook herself, remembering that stupid day she had taken her twin brothers’ bravery enhancing Hutzpotion and ended up in Harry’s bed, to Harry’s dismay. Rolling her

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eyes, which helped drag them away from the well-studied angles of his face, she stepped back, resisting the still sharp urge to lean in just a little closer. She huffed at herself and backed up again before dredging up enough self-disgust to turn to leave.

A dark figure loomed in just as Ginny turned, making her gasp and raise her wand. "Professor," she breathed, wincing badly.

Snape's wand ignited blue-white and he stepped by her with a swish of his robes. She watched him circle the room, dropping the wand low at his side as he reached each corner of the room. With growing mystified curiosity, she watched him stop in the corner where the cages sat and lift his wand to study Harry's sleeping pet for rather a lengthy half a minute. Snape then moved to the bed and, wand held at arm's length to reduce the light, leaned over Harry to study him as he slept. In the glow of his wand Snape's face took on a rather uncharacteristic look of deep concern. Ginny's brow went up under her hair, stunned to see that look on this man.

In the next instant, Snape was striding past Ginny again and the door to the bedroom soundlessly closed. "Ms. Weasley," Snape sternly snapped. Ginny followed him out and down to the Defense office.

"Sit down," Snape ordered her, and Ginny did so, wondering what was in store. "First off," Snape said, staring down at Hedwig who still sat on the back of his chair. "How did you find out so quickly that Mr. Potter was here?"

"Oh, Nearly-Headless Nick told Erasmus VanEschelon and I found him making his way up to the fifth floor. I thought Harry would still be awake if he'd just arrived. Actually didn't imagine he'd be here at all. Is Harry all right?"

Snape paced to his ingredient cabinets. "At the moment," he replied cryptically. "Tomorrow the Prefects will be told that he was in need of a rest and has come here to get it."

"But that's a lie?" Ginny suggested.

"No, it is quite true, but hardly complete." He turned to face her, placing his hands on his hips. "Harry is having difficulty with a new power he has acquired, the nature of which he can share with you if he wishes."

"Is he dangerous?" Ginny asked, then quickly added, "Sir."

Snidely, Snape replied, "Not while he is here. The castle renders him safe... for others and himself."

"Can I go visit him, then?"

"I am certain he would appreciate that," Snape replied neutrally although his eyes were oddly knowing. Ginny bit her lip. Her professor went on in a more stern tone, "And you were out of the tower, why?"

She cocked her lips in amusement at his gruff change in demeanor. While trying to square both the sneering professor she was accustomed to with the look she had

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seen on his face just minutes ago on the fifth floor, she replied a little cockily, "I was getting soup for Algie who was sick at dinner time, sir."

Snape's eyes narrowed in on hers and an instant later, his look went befuddled before he turned away with a jerking motion. Ginny blinked and wondered that he was checking for a lie in that; she was a Prefect and any decent excuse usually sufficed to be out of the common area during the night. She stood. "It's late... may I go, sir?" He gestured with a wave of his hand that she could.

In the corridor she walked slowly to the tower while considering things. Professor Snape was still a little strange but as long as he took care of Harry...



Harry awoke when the sun streamed through the dormers. He hadn't closed the drapes around the bed but the sun was up late enough this time of year that it made an acceptable alarm. Dobby appeared by his bed in a sparkle, bearing a covered tray. "Morning, Dobby," Harry greeted the elf.

"Breakfast for Harry Potter, sir," Dobby squeaked.

"Thanks." Harry accepted it and set it on the bed. The scent of ham and fried potatoes made his stomach rumble. Dobby departed only after many assurances that Harry didn't need anything else. A knock sounded on the door, and Harry invited in whomever it was.

Snape glided inside. "How did you sleep?"

"Good morning to you too," Harry teased. "Not bad."

Snape stood at the foot of the bed, arms crossed. "No dark creatures?"

"None. So what am I going to do... move into Hogwarts?"

Snape's lips twitched. "No one would mind if you did..."

"I would mind," Harry complained. "Not that I don't like it here... I just have other things to be doing. Speaking of which, I'm supposed to be at training in less than an hour."

"I took the liberty of sending owls to both Rodgers and Tonks."

Harry nibbled on a bite of ham since he was too hungry to resist it. "Saying...?"

"I requested for leave for you... I did not know how much you had told them--"

"Tonks knows," Harry supplied, rubbing the back of his neck in a nervous gesture.

Snape said, "I gave them an outline of the truth. It is not the easiest to explain to the Ministry that their star future Auror is attracting the attention of the vilest of dark creatures. Plus I am not certain exactly where we stand." He moved in closer. "Go ahead and eat, Harry," he said. "I can hear your stomach growling from here."

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Chagrined, Harry picked up his fork and ate while Snape talked. “Minerva has owed a number of witches and wizards with the intent of finding someone who can help, as have most of our staff members. Most of the letters need to travel quite distant, so it will be a few days before we receive replies. Also, according to research I set Madam Pince to, several Shaman in Mozambique have experience with opening a gateway for some of the creatures you are sensing, usually to intercede with powerful ancestors, but it would be a start. Certainly one does not call forth something one cannot send away again.” More dryly, he added, “At least I certainly hope not.”

“Mozambique?” Harry asked doubtfully between large bites of toast.

“I am not keen to send you so far, but we will do whatever is necessary, Harry.”

Harry frowned, but then shrugged. He didn’t have any choice, really. “I wish...” he began, then trailed off. No more wishing, he told himself firmly.

A knock sounded on the outside door and a moment later, Ginny stepped through the doorway to the bedroom. “Morning, Harry.”

“Ginny!” Harry said. “Good to see you.”

“Good morning, Professor,” Ginny said brightly.

“Ms. Weasley,” Snape muttered grimly before turning and stalking out. Ginny and Harry both watched this departure with some surprise.

When the outside door had closed, Harry asked, “What was that about?”

Ginny shrugged, but a moment later was distracted inward. “So how are you?” she asked after shaking herself.

“Better,” Harry admitted.

Ginny plunked down on the end of the bed. “So what is up with you?” she demanded.

Harry slowed his chewing. “I’m sensing the Dark Plane,” he admitted, figuring he could trust her not to tell anyone else. “Actually, I’ve been sensing it a long time, but now I’m some kind of gateway and these terrible creatures can come into our world whenever I get angry or even just annoyed.” As he spoke his shoulders tightened and his hand gripped his fork fiercely. But the room remained still and he allowed himself to relax again.

“That doesn’t sound good,” she commented.

“It isn’t. It’s really awful,” Harry said, feeling good to complain to someone. “I’m stuck here for a while, I think.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve been stuck here since September. Don’t tell me about stuck here.”

Harry laughed, which eased his heart rather a lot. “You need to get down to breakfast.”

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“Yes, Professor,” she teased. But she stood and left with a grinning promise to visit later.

Harry had barely finished breakfast before another visitor arrived. Rodgers came marching into the room with a sharp knock that didn’t wait for an answer. He crossed his arms and stood at the end of the bed, a disgruntled twist to his lips.

“What is this about?” he asked stiffly. “I received a rather bizarre owl early this morning. Something about you having Dark powers you can’t control. I would have ignored it except the letter was signed by the one dark wizard that I happen to know personally... who happens to be legally able to send owls,” he snarkily added.

Harry was tempted to point out to Rodgers that he and Snape had remarkably similar tones of voice sometimes, but he held back. “I’m apparently, without trying, opening a gateway to the Dark Plane. Here in this castle it doesn’t happen. So that’s why I’m here. Last night I got into a spiral of frustration that kept feeding on itself and it was too much... anyway.”

Shaking his head, Rodgers said, “A little warning, Potter. A little...”

“I told Tonks,” Harry countered, happy to be able to get a little angry. “I can’t help this. If I could help this I wouldn’t be here right now.” Harry banished his breakfast tray and stood up, only putting his wand back away slowly. Rodgers tracked him doing this with far too much attention. “So, do I get leave or are you just going to kick me out because I need a break?”

“We’ll see,” Rodgers snipped, looking Harry up and down a few times. “Keep up with your reading at least.”

Harry gestured at his Auror books lined up on the otherwise empty shelf on the wall, very grateful Snape had the foresight to bring them. “I will.”

With a deeper frown Rodgers departed. Harry, feeling annoyed and helpless, pulled down a book on sneaking and tracking techniques and buried his nose in it.

The day passed quickly enough considering how very quiet it was, given the thousand pupils below him going about their day. Harry moved his wardrobe directly under the dormer in the bedroom and sat atop it, reading with a view over the frozen lake and the mountains beyond. His breath froze on the cold window when he leaned close. Harry had another visitor just before dinner. Headmistress McGonagall seemed a little surprised to find him huddled up on top of a piece of tall furniture. Harry jumped down and greeted her properly.

“Would you like to come down to dinner in the Great Hall?” she asked.

“Not really, but thanks,” Harry replied.

“Are you certain? There is plenty of room at the head table...”

Harry grinned, thinking that didn’t help her invitation much. “No, really. I’m enjoying the quiet.” In all honesty he was a little stir-crazy already.

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“All right, then... perhaps tomorrow if you change your mind.”

Or the day after, or the day after that, Harry thought darkly.

She stepped a little closer and touched his arm. “Anything you need, Harry?” she asked kindly.

“No. I’m all right, right now.” He dropped his gaze. “Thanks for letting me stay.”

She squeezed his arm. “You are quite welcome.”

When she had gone, Harry felt the warmth of her hand on his wrist still. He didn’t particularly like being treated as though he were a terminally ill patient. Focusing his stubborn anger, he returned to his assigned readings, this time while lounging on the couch in the sitting room.

Over the next day, the room grew oppressive, so Harry decided to explore the fifth floor a bit. It required a few complicated unlocking spells to get all the way to the far attic, but once Harry started walking he didn’t feel like letting anything block his path, even as the rooms grew successively colder. In the last gabled section of the last wing, an array of broken statues stood like blind sentinels. Harry read their plaques. Iris the Irascible, who’s headless body clutched a thick stone book of hexes, was followed by Ivan Invisible who had been reduced to just a marble platform. Or perhaps he had always been just a marble platform and Filch finally decided that was too silly and shoved it up here. It certainly wasn’t broken. Harry turned at the end and found himself facing the familiar.

Sighing, Harry stepped over to the Mirror of Erised and made himself step directly in front of it because, if he didn’t, his curiosity would make him come back and do so. His parents were gone. Harry stared at his reflection smiling confidently out from the glass. It was him, unbothered by any dark creatures. Yup, he thought, that was exactly what he was desiring right now. He didn’t need the mirror to tell him that. More illuminating was the familiar arm hooked around Harry’s and the bubblegum pink Mohawk the arm’s owner was sporting. Harry shook his head in annoyance.

A foot scuffing on the dusty floor brought Harry’s attention to the robed figure standing by the status of Iris. “Everything all right, Harry?” Snape asked, seeming unwilling to invade Harry’s private moment.

“Yeah,” Harry said, moving away from the mirror to join his guardian.

“Learn anything?” Snape airily asked as they stepped from the room.

“No. I could have figured it out for myself. Any owls today?”

“You should relock the door,” Snape said as Harry closed the door to the attic.

Harry obliged, using a spell even harder to break than the one that had been on there. If it made trouble for Filch later, that would be fine. “Any owls?” Harry repeated.

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“Two, both recommending the same Shaman. I will owl him tonight, but I wanted to borrow Hedwig.”

“Sure,” Harry said, his spirits lifting a little. “Is he African, then? I could use a break from the cold weather, I’ve decided.”

“No such luck,” Snape replied. “He is in Finland.”

“Oh,” Harry said, following along back through a disused corridor with faded tapestries on the walls. “What’s his name?”

“Per Hossa,” Snape replied. “Master of the Dark Plane.”

“Seriously?” Harry asked, sounding doubtful.

“So he is reputed.”

“What kind of wizard is he?” Harry asked, wondering about trusting him.

“Standoffish, so I am informed.” They had reached Harry’s rooms where Harry handed Hedwig over after insisting that she carefully deliver this letter Snape would give her.

When Harry was alone again, he found he really didn’t want to be. He put on his cloak and headed down and out to Hagrid’s hut, stopping halfway along the snowy lawn to be certain either his emotions were controlled enough or the castle’s wards extended far enough. All seemed quiet, so Harry followed a trail stomped through the drifts by boots the size of a small trunk. Hagrid gave him a hug when he opened the door, and warned Harry that he had to get off to class in half of an hour.

Harry settled into a mug of tea and cauldron cakes that seemed to have improved a bit, at least one could bite into them, sort of. Harry dipped it in his tea, determined to actually finish one for once. He explained to Hagrid why he was visiting, to exclamations of certainty that everything would work out all right.

“I don’t know, Hagrid. This is fighting something inside, not someone outside.”

Hagrid stood to poke the fire up a bit and the little gamekeeper’s cabin warmed up even more. Hagrid’s small place with its massive hearth was always toasty even on the most blistering days. “Yer always fighting yerself, Harry, even when it’s driven by meetin’ up with someone else who wants to do you harm.”

“I suppose,” Harry uttered, giving that surprisingly philosophical view due consideration.

The new log on the fire sent a pop of sparks out onto the floor. Fawkes fluttered his wings in the wake of it and cocked an eye at Harry.

“How is Fawkes?” Harry asked.

Quietly, Hagrid answered, “Right ornery bird that is. Doesn’ pay any heed when ya’ talk to him, barely deigns to be a class demonstration, and can’t keep any kind of molting schedule.”

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Harry sipped his tea and secretly thought Hagrid didn't believe the bird dangerous enough to respect. "Does he carry you places if you ask, like he did for Dumbledore?"

Hagrid gave a burst of laughter that nearly shook the cauldron off its hook over the fire, let alone forced Fawkes to flit back to his perch. "E's got no interest in that."

"Dumbledore was his favorite, I guess," Harry said, eyeing the bird knowingly.



In his office Snape penned a polite letter and addressed it after no short deliberation. He had two different addresses for the man in question, one in Finland and one in Norway. The addresses were possibly seasonal, but both were at the same extreme latitude, making distinguishing them impossible. Worse, a quick second look at the atlas showed both to be north of the arctic circle. Eyeing Hedwig, Snape decided that she was smart enough to work it out if the first address was wrong, so he wrote out one followed by the other on the front of the envelope.

With the letter off the only thing to do was wait. Well, that and grade essays on Dementors. After the third one that expressed rather creative guesses about the creatures, he was half-tempted to call on Harry to grade them.

A knock sounded on the door and Professor Cawley put his head inside. "You sent me a message?" he asked, fidgeting with the door handle.

"Yes," Snape said, "I have a question for you. You studied African magical arts... do you know any Mekonde Shamans, by chance?"

"Mekonde? No. Totally other side of the continent from my expertise. Most South American African slaves came from the west coast."

"Ah, well, never mind then." Snape thought to himself, that would have been too easy.

"Oh," Cawley said, leaning back in after beginning to close the door. "Can you do a little demonstration for my class this week? I asked Headmistress McGonagall and she suggested asking you."

Dryly, Snape asked, "What is it?"

"I want to do an Animagus demonstration..."

Snidely, Snape asked, "And you aren't one?"

"No, no. I am, it's just that... well, my shape is not the most conducive to a class demonstration. It ah, well, it's a sea slug... you see," he explained in the voice of a man who sees no hope for putting off the truth. "It is most inconvenient and embarrassing, frankly. Headmistress McGonagall is a rather attractive house cat, but she is too busy, she says. She suggested you,"



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“Perhaps you should ask Mr. Potter. He has copious time on his hands.”

“Ah,” Cawley uttered, looking a bit put-upon at having been handed off again.

“But if Mr. Potter is unwilling, I can probably arrange to be available for a short demonstration.” Cawley thanked him and started to depart, hesitating only when Snape began muttering something along the lines of: “There’s been a shortage of screaming around here lately. A bit too quiet really.”



Per Hossa glided to a stop outside an empty corral and kicked his skis off the curved toes of his boots with practiced ease. His pale slate eyes scanned the twilight-lit snow. A figure emerged from the trees, also on skis, but stouter and shorter than himself and gave him a wave. Siri Blind approached and accepted the supply sack Per carried.

“Have you finished charming the area?”

“For all the good it will do in the winter talking to rocks... it is charmed.”

Per scanned the hillsides of the valley that led into the corral. During summer calf marking, the reindeer at the end must be driven downhill against their nature. “I think this will be good. Did you ward those erratics there?” he asked, pointing at the tall stones dotting the distant hillside.

“Yup,” she answered. “Now I’m ready for coffee.” Before she slid off toward the snow covered goathi with a plume of smoke emerging from it, she asked, “How long has that owl been following you?”

Per huffed. “Since yesterday. Stubborn. Won’t even go off to hunt.”

“Lucky it’s an artic,” She held up her hand, breaking the wards Per had up to keep the owl at a distance. The snowy owl immediately launched from the branch it rested on and glided down to land on her woolen-covered arm. She took the letter from it, then reached into her hide bag for a strip of smoked reindeer meat. Despite Per’s scoff, she held it out for the owl, who snarfed it hungrily. “You shouldn’t make the animal suffer. It is only loyal to its master’s command.”

Per used a glove to clean the ice off the bottom of his ski. “It should learn to think for itself in that case.”

“Mr. Hossa,” she began aloud, translating the letter into Saami, their native tongue. “I am writing to you on behalf of my son who is experiencing grave difficulties with the Dark Plane.”

Per dropped that ski, base up, and began scrubbing at the other one.

“I am only taking this extraordinary step of contacting you because I fear he may be on the verge of causing harm to himself or those around him. The only option I see

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is to arrange for him to receive training in controlling the gateway he is inadvertently opening to this other Plane. You are highly recommended by wizards from both Britain and Denmark, so I am appealing to you to consider providing—”

Per stuck his feet back into his skis. “Don’t bother,” he interrupted. “Silly man has a typical teenage son with brooding dark magic he’ll outgrow on his own and assumes the worst.”

“He signs the message as professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” Siri pointed out before folding the letter and holding it out. Hedwig swayed on her shoulder when she moved, but held fast.

Per paused and then scoffed again. “Send the owl away,” he said, before skiing off, retracing the bands through the snow he had just broken.



Friday morning came with ice crystals covering the dormer windows so there was no view out from his usual perch. Harry had been at Hogwarts all week. His only scheduled task was to happen today when he had agreed to help with a demonstration in Transfiguration at 10:00 a.m. Mostly he had agreed to this because the very notion, after years of struggle in that class, had made him chuckle. He occupied himself before then with wondering how he could get Belinda to reply to his owls. He had sent two letters to her, explaining, but not really, truly explaining. Harry frowned and scratched his head. He didn’t fancy writing yet another dodgy letter to her and he couldn’t bear laying the full truth out, so by the time class arrived, he hadn’t written anything.

Harry stepped into the Transfiguration classroom just on time. It looked much the way it used to with its tiered seats and animal cages lining the tall shelves. Only Snape, who stood cross-armed beside the teacher’s desk, was a unique addition. The class was of fifth-years – the oldest Cawley taught. Harry accepted the professor’s welcome and introduction as though perhaps, just maybe, someone in the room wouldn’t know who he was. A glance around the blue and green uniforms showed keen interest in him. Harry wondered at this point what exact rumors were circulating to explain his presence.

“As I said last class,” Cawley continued lecturing, “Animagia is one of the hardest Transfigurations attempted by ordinary witches and wizards. Few succeed, although this school has an unusual number of registered Animagi seventh-years, due, I am told, to Mr. Potter here.”

“Hermione Granger, really,” Harry supplied.

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Cawley gave him a distracted smile. "Of course." He went on with the lecture, "Animagia is the ultimate self transfiguration. Metamorphmagia is a quick make-over by comparison. If you will demonstrate, Mr. Potter."

"Most everyone here has seen this," Harry pointed out, "But here goes." Harry transformed on the spot after only an instant of concentration, it had become so natural. A few students oohed and stared up at him with wide expressions. Cawley on the other hand, fell backward in surprise.

"My Merlin! What is that?" he exclaimed, picking himself up after scuttling to the first row of seats.

Harry transformed back so he could reply. "A Scarlet Mountain Gryffylis. It is native to the Ural Mountains."

Cawley closed his mouth with a clap of his teeth. "Well, amazing, just amazing. And do you fly?"

"Yes."

"Ah," Cawley muttered, looking disturbed and perhaps jealous. "Must be nice. All right then, Professor Snape is also an Animagus." He gestured for Snape to approach and quietly asked, "You aren't anything quite so big, correct?"

"Not at all." Snape leaned back on the demonstration table before transforming so he could slither into a tall coil on top of it. At least two students, both Ravenclaw, ducked behind their desks when the asp hissed at the room, long teeth bared.

Cawley seemed to be frozen in place beside the table. At least, Harry expected that if he could have moved when Snape slid over beside him, he would have.

"Be nice," Harry teased and it must have come out as a hiss of Parseltongue given Cawley's further, frozen, unblinking dismay now turned upon him instead.

Snape returned to his human serpentine self and gave his colleague one of his thin-lipped smiles.

"Do we get to learn that?" one of the Slytherins asked, hand raised in the air. She sounded intensely interested in the prospect.

"Well, if we get through your O.W.L. preparation..." Many students began madly pulling out their notes and sat straight and attentive, quills poised. "Well, we'll try..." Cawley began before dismissing the two of them. "Thank you, Professor, Mr. Potter, for the demonstrations. I think," he muttered more quietly.

In the corridor the afternoon sunlight shot straight along the floor, glinting on a nearby suit of armor. Snape said, "I will be finished with meetings and detentions after 4:00 today if you would like to play a bit of chess."

Harry thought ahead to his extraordinarily open afternoon. He was tired of doing his readings even though he had intended to reread nearly all of his books so as to impress his trainer when the opportunity arose. "Sure," he replied.

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Snape was unaffected by Harry's delay in replying. "Come down to my office around then."

Harry really needed to find something productive to do to combat this boredom or he might go stir-crazy. "I think I'll go to the library in the meantime."

"Madam Pince has done an exhaustive search—"

"Yeah, but she doesn't really know what to look for."

Snape conceded this point with a tilt of his head. Small figures had gathered nearby by passing along the corridor and then slowing with artificial casualness. Harry recognized two of the first-years who composed the unofficial Harry Potter fan club. They gave him shy giggles, half hidden behind hands or books.

Snape's stern voice cut through their wide-eyed trances. "Is there something you need?"

Sobering, they shook their heads and moved slowly on, large eyes darting back over their shoulders. Snape growled in annoyance.

Harry said, "It's hard to be cruel to them."

"No, it isn't," Snape countered forcefully, making Harry grin. Ginny stepped up in their wake with a warm greeting. Snape turned suddenly, sending his cloak billowing. "I'll see you in my office later, then. It is good to see you out of your chambers," he added over his shoulder while stepping briskly away.

Harry watched his rapid departure and said, "That's the second time he's done that. What did you do to him?"

Ginny crossed her arms and casually replied. "I think I showed him his soul, but it was his fault."

"What?" Harry uttered.

"I'll explain some other time." She adjusted her backpack and stepped away in the other direction.

Harry watched her turn the corner and considered going back to his chambers instead of the library and trying another letter to Belinda. But failing to get a reply yet again would only frustrate him more. He really needed to go talk to her, or send someone else to go talk to her. Snapping his fingers, he realized that there was someone who could go talk to her for him.

"Dobby?" Harry called out in the nearly deserted corridor. A moment later the house-elf appeared, pulling nervously on one ear. He had scaled back to wearing only one pair of socks at a time but today they were a huge pair of white and red striped ones that spilled around his stick-like legs.

"Harry Potter called Dobby?"

Harry crouched down before the elf so as to talk to him more easily. "Yes. I need you to do something for me. Is that possible?" The elf nodded vigorously, sending

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his ears bobbing. “All right, then. Can you go see Belinda Belluna? She’s Madam Bones’ receptionist at the Ministry. She hasn’t answered my owls and I think she’s upset with me. Can you tell her that I really care about her, but I just can’t fully explain some things.” Harry frowned, frustration at himself overtaking him. “Just say that, I suppose.”

“Dobby will deliver this message, Harry Potter,” the elf promised.

“Thanks.” The elf disappeared in a bang. Harry wondered anew at how he did that inside the school, getting around the Apparition barrier. As he straightened and stood, he found Ginny standing nearby with an uncomfortable smile. “Hi again,” Harry said.

“Sorry, forgot to tell you something,” she said.

Harry assumed she had heard his message to Belinda. He shrugged, “All right.”

“There’s a party in the Gryffindor tower tonight...” she offered.

“Thanks, I’ll think about it.”

She twitched one shoulder. “Okay. Maybe see you later...”

“Sure.” Harry headed toward the staircases, firmly deciding that moment on going to the library. Dobby sparkled in ahead of him, hands clasped, looking humble.

“Harry Potter, sir,” Dobby said. “I delivered your message.”

Harry glanced back and saw Ginny again turn the corner at the far end. “What did she say?” he asked the elf.

“She said that if Harry Potter doesn’t trust Belinda enough to tell her what is happening that she is glad to be knowing that now.”

“Tell her Harry Pot- tell her, I don’t know how to explain, but there are some things I just have to take care of on my own, without explaining.” Dobby spent a dubious moment taking that in. Harry added, thinking grimly that his not explaining had become a bigger issue than the terrible new power itself that he didn’t want to explain. “Nevermind, don’t tell her anything. No,” Harry said, pointing for emphasis. “Tell her she should trust me.”

Dobby bowed and disappeared again. Harry stalked off to the library thinking that he had bigger things to worry about and he couldn’t let her bull-headedness get to him. He would sort it out later with her when it was easier to.

Professor Snape returned to his office to find Hedwig waiting there. He glanced around the desk, but didn’t see any new envelopes. “Did you deliver the letter?” he asked the empty-clawed owl. Hedwig dipped her head up and down a few times. “No reply?” The white owl looked out the window and back and tilted its head. Snape made a tisking noise with his mouth and the owl looked up at him. It was dangerously unpredictable to Legilimize an animal, especially one with such radically

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different instincts than a human, but needing to know; he delved into the bird's thoughts.

Flashes of distorted memory flickered by. White fields and forests of pine. A man. A barrier. Hunger. Being forcefully sent away for her own good. Snape put Hedwig in Franklin's cage and sat rubbing his fingertips together in thought for many minutes. The sun came and went from behind small white clouds, sending many transient beams through the numerous panes of the tall windows.

When Snape did move it was to rapidly assemble a good quill and fresh ink.

Mr. Hossa,

Your lack of answer leaves little chance for argument, forcing me to guess what your objections may be. Were you not my only option, I would not be bothering you again. Certainly, I can send this disturbed young man to an African Shaman, but I fear he will be seen as a tool rather than an unskilled wizard in need of guidance and I cannot risk that unless it is truly my only option.

My first guess as to your objection is that you believe I am sadly mistaken and do not have the skills to recognize the Dark Plane. Let me assure you that I am no stranger to the Dark Arts as a teacher nor as a practitioner.

Snape hesitated. He needed this man's help badly enough that he felt this second and possibly only chance had better get the Shaman's attention.

I have stared straight into the eyes of evil many, many times – into the eyes of Voldemort himself as one of his servants – so trust that when I hear the sounds from the corner of the room and see the odd injuries to my house-elf – that I do indeed recognize what I am encountering.

Your second likely objection is that you believe this young man is not worth your attention. I do not know how bad things were in your particular village during the previous reigns of the Dark Lord, but trust that here they were most grievous. And here in Britain, at least, we feel that we owe every last effort of assistance to the one who freed us from this horrible Dark Reign. For the young man I am asking you to instruct in your rare skill is none other than the Destroyer of Voldemort himself, Harry Potter, my adopted son.

I will be concrete in my request. All I ask is that you see him and judge the first for yourself. I will send him to you strictly for this consideration with no further expectation. Simply tell me where and when and I will see to it that he is there.

Author's Notes:

Pronouncing Candide – Like the Opera. CanDEED. I figure her parents liked the name but were too clueless to know the origin. Candide (a man,

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by the way) in the opera maddeningly always sees the bright side of even horrendous circumstances. I figured someone who was with Snape had to have a bit of that.

Harry/Hermione – I'm just going to shoot this here. I'm not going that way. That one instant of Harry's panic at a potential misunderstanding actually emphasizes how much he needs her purely as a friend.

Demise of Voldemort Day – Wizards can't have a cool/catchy name for something; that would be unwizardish. Besides, this makes it d-v-day, which harkens to other vaguely similar holidays.

Why doesn't Harry just tell Snape? – Well, that wouldn't be very much fun... Better reason though is he is in denial, which is not rational. This has been remarkably hard to write with Harry as my primary point of view, because it makes him an unreliable source of information and reasoning on unfolding events. It means the events he observes and his internalization of them have to not match so that the reader is ahead of him. I may be failing on pulling that off – and thank goodness we are past it, it made for very slow writing – but I wouldn't feel bad if I failed, because it is tough to do. And by the way, I don't know jack about writing; I'm just making this up, really. Sounds good though, doesn't it?

## CHAPTER FIVE



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The Hogwarts library was nearly empty, as it usually was on Fridays. Harry went straight for the gate at the back and let himself into the Restricted Section. It was quiet and musty and the sun streamed in, lighting tilted columns of dust motes between the shelves. He walked all the way to the back where hooks held extra lamps and a wooden lectern sat against the wall for reading the heavier lead-bound grimoires. Harry moved down the row, reading faded titles in gold on cracked leather: *Suspicious Suppositions*, *Trident's Inheritors: Powers of the Water Dwellers of the Lake District*, *Pyres of the Vampyres*... He was set upon this as a long task, so he went on to the shelf below, reading each title there. He pulled *Magycle Manifestation* out and flipped through it, grateful that it didn't bite, scream or slam shut again when he did so. It appeared to be mostly about Ghouls and Poltergeists, but he thumbed through it slowly, glancing at phrases on every few pages, looking for anything even vaguely related to the Dark Plane or the creatures he knew to dwell there.

Madam Pince stepped back in from having her tea, something she never did in the library because of the crumbs. Hungry things attracted by cake crumbs often didn't stop eating when the crumbs were gone. She headed for her desk at the front but stopped instead in the middle of the floor and turned around, feeling something was not quite right. Her eyes scanned the room, the high upper windows visible over the shelving, the two young students whispering over a small pink-paged book of affection charms. Unable to shake the out-of-place sense, she stepped toward the gate to the Restricted Section and stopped just short of it, breath unusually loud in the hush. She studied the tall still shelves, the swirling dust motes. Her predecessor had



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mentioned watching for this, but she could not recall, thirty-five years later, what he had said regarding it.

A figure moved into view, scanning the small shelves on the end of the farthest row. “Mr. Potter,” Pince uttered, not a greeting, more a quiet exclamation.

Harry looked up. “Madam Pince. Sorry, you weren’t here when I came in... I assumed it was all right for me to look around in this section.”

Her face relaxed into an odd little smile. “Of course, young man.”

She turned and departed, trying not to appear to hurry. At the top of the stairs to the Headmistress’ tower, she knocked and when called to open the door, discovered why it was closed – she and Professor Snape were having a meeting. Files and a few long-tasseled scrolls were open on the large desk.

“Oddest thing,” Pince said. “The books, every last one, are all quiet right now. I’ve never seen it before.”

McGonagall’s brow furrowed in response. Snape finished reading a parchment before glancing up, back down, and then back up again, slightly startled. “Harry is in the library, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Pince replied.

McGonagall shook her cloak out and sat back in her chair. “Never know with that boy.”

Pince rubbed her hands together. “Well, but I was wondering, you know, if that meant Her Book might be... calm as well.”

This returned McGonagall’s attention directly back to the librarian. Snape appeared confused. “What book?”

“Her Book,” McGonagall echoed as she came around her desk. “Why don’t we see,” she suggested with a keen look about her.

Back in the library the last students had departed. The trio of Hogwarts’ staff approached the gate to the Restricted Section and stopped, listening. Sure enough, there wasn’t a single sound from within. Not a creak of leather, a groan of binding, a rattle of shelf, nor even a rustle of paper. McGonagall reached for the gate and several books on the immediate shelf jostled each other, banging their metal covers on the oaken shelf. She pulled her hand away. Harry stepped into view near the far wall, carrying a book over which he was hunched, reading. He appeared to be pacing.

“Harry,” McGonagall said, drawing his attention, which grew curious to see them there. In particular he eyed Snape questioningly. The headmistress went on, “I wonder if you wouldn’t do me a favor, young man? Do you see that cabinet over there just to the left of the lectern?”

Snape turned sharply to her. “You don’t mean-”

She cut him off and continued. “Take a look inside for me, will you?”

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Harry, looking a bit as though he questioned their right-headedness, went over to the brass metal grate mounted flush in the stone wall where a stone block was missing. He peered inside as best he could. "There's a book inside," Harry said. "A very dusty one."

"I would imagine," McGonagall intoned. "Put your hand on the latch if you would... see what happens."

Snape said, "Do be careful."

Harry turned back and looked at each of them. McGonagall appeared unusually eager, Snape vaguely alarmed, Pince somewhere between the two. With a shrug Harry grabbed the handle and opened the grate. The book was barely discernible through the inches thick layer of dust blanketing it. Without preamble Harry waved an Expulsion spell at it to clear it out. A gasp brought his head around and he found the three staff members ducking even though they stood on the far side of the metal barrier.

Giving them all a doubtful look, Harry, with a modest effort, set the book out on the lectern and looked it over. It had a chiseled stone cover with the four house mascots, one in each corner. He opened the cover and blew the dust from the cover page, which had the same mascots repeated in a row of fanciful hand drawings. Below that a message was penned.

"There's a letter," Harry said, thinking it an odd introduction to a book.

The metal gate rattled as McGonagall put her hand on the lever to open it. The stone cover of the book slammed closed with a resonating boom! Harry pulled his nose back, although it would have been too late had it actually been in the way. He shot McGonagall a chastising look and she backed up again. Several books rustled on the shelves around Harry, and he waited for calm and for the noise to cease echoing before reopening the cover.

"The letter says..." Harry said, squinting dangerously close to the unfamiliar handwriting. "Knowledge should never be mistaken for learning, information, or insight. Herein collected are the notes of the builders. So forced by apparent betrayal, I present this: Warning: take only a pure heart inside, take only pure knowledge away. You have been warned." Harry stared at the signature before exclaiming, "It's signed by Rowena Ravenclaw."

"Yes," McGonagall said, keeping her hands locked behind her back now. "She collected all the information about the castle's construction and locked it away in there. After someone..." Here she sent a glare at Snape. "Disturbed the very foundation of this place by building a secret chamber of dark power within it."

They glared at each other, making Harry grin in amusement. He turned the page. A diagram of the lake and forest stretched across the next two pages, with no

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castle but with measured landmarks. Next was a list of materials, like a thousand, thousand gross of stone and brick, 1375 tall straight oaks, 500 men to dig, 400 Mules and Thestrals to pull carts, windmills even. The list went on for pages. “Neat,” Harry said.

A glance up at the teachers showed McGonagall looking pained and, ironically, caged. “Harry, I don’t suppose you could flip ahead to anything regarding the basement retaining walls and the waterproofing spells used on them?”

Harry thought that sounded rather dull, but he reached to thumb the disparate cut and torn edges of vellum and parchment to look ahead. He barely got his hand out of the way before the heavy slabs snapped closed. “Feisty book,” Harry quipped.

“It has done much worse,” Snape muttered, and then directed at McGonagall, “Hence the always empty painting in your office of Wilfredus Thurgoodmaster...”

She waved him to quiet. Harry waited for stillness and again opened the book to the cover page before trying to turn to the next. It banged closed again with an ear-splitting clap of stone.

“Perhaps, this is not the best-” Snape said, sounding exasperated.

“No, I think I need to read the letter again,” Harry insisted. The cover refused to budge when he pulled up on it. Annoyed, Harry put his hands on his hips, and insisted, “I’m pure of heart.” The cover still would not move. It felt as though the book had become a solid block of stone. Miffed at the notion that the book could believe him the enemy, he went on, “Hey, who do you think kicked Slytherin’s heir out of the Chamber?” The book still refused to open and Harry didn’t want to pry too hard. He calmed himself and assumed his earlier attitude of easy curiosity. It still held fast. “Hmf,” he muttered and looked up apologetically at the teachers, noticing that Snape had his wand in his hand although pointed at the floor.

“I don’t think that’s helping, Severus,” Harry said.

Snape frowned and reluctantly stashed his wand away, garnering accusative glances from the other two. This time the book opened. Harry read the letter aloud, just in case, and then turned each page forward. Diagrams of floor beams, roof beams, and enchanted circles of tower stone were followed by instructions for landscaping the lawn and rose garden. No Quidditch pitch appeared in the plan map, Harry realized. Uninterested, he merely glanced at the rose garden planting and upkeep notes. The book slammed closed.

“What happened?” McGonagall asked.

“Er, I think I have to learn every page before going on.”

“That would be rather like Ravenclaw,” McGonagall breathed.

Harry pulled over a stool and settled in before the book. The cover opened easily and again he read the letter aloud before turning to the first page.

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“Thank you, Harry,” the headmistress said with affection. “If you need anything, please let Madam Pince know.”

Harry waved them off, conjuring up an interest in perennial flowering plants as he studied the gardening notes.

Twilight brought gloom to the library’s Restricted Section. Harry moved the largest lamp closer to the book and peered dangerously close to a diagram that apparently explained the original layered spell barriers at the edge of the forest. Harry didn’t recognize some of the spells and worried that paging ahead without fully understanding would force him to begin yet again.

A sound from the gate brought Harry’s attention around. A lamp hovered on the far side held by a familiar figure, who gave him a small crooked smile. “I brought you dinner,” Snape said.

Harry rose from the stool to discover how very stiff he had become from sitting there. He opened the gate from his side, which didn’t disturb the books, fortunately. “Thanks,” he said, accepting the tray.

“You are being rather diligent. The lake water has been flooding the lower dungeons for over three centuries.”

Harry peeked under the plate warmer. “I don’t have anything else to be doing,” he pointed out. “But I found reference to a Compelling Barrier Charm that I don’t know. Maybe you know something of it? If I can’t figure it out, and I’m stuck on this page.”

“You don’t mean Repelling do you, like the spells at the edge of the forest?”

“It is at the edge of the forest but it definitely says Compelling.”

“I don’t suppose you could show it to me?” At the far end of the room, the book rattled on the lectern. Snape said, “I guess not. No sign of foundation sealing spells?”

“Not yet. I found another likely hidden passage though,” Harry said, while plucking a bite of ham off the plate. “Madam Pince better not see the tray.” Talking around another bite of ham, Harry went on with, “I’ll give it another hour and then hope that I can continue tomorrow where I left off.”

That night Harry dreamt of stones being stacked into arches and raised up, of men with sharp axes carefully whittling massive trees into notched ceiling beams, of windmills and Archimedes screws. When he woke in the morning, the castle felt less like a home and more like a piecemeal construct. Feeling lighter of heart, he decided to go to the Great Hall for breakfast.

“Harry,” Ginny greeted him warmly. The Gryffindors made space as the hall buzzed louder and many glanced his way in curiosity. “I hear McGonagall locked you in the library all night,” she teased.

“Ravenclaw locked me in the library last night.”

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“The house?” Dennis asked.

“Rowena, the Hogwarts founder,” Harry clarified.

“You have such an odd life, Harry,” Ginny declared while passing him the butter and juice.

“I learned a few things, though,” Harry said with a mischievous grin. He pulled out his wand and glanced up and down the hall. “Watch this.” He tapped his hand with his wand and then pointed up at the ceiling with his index finger. The usual four vertical Gryffindor banners above their table vanished. Harry tapped his hand again and again pointed with a sweeping motion. A very long single banner appeared, hooked near the walls and draped low in the middle, a dazzling gold lion outline stretched across its length.

“Wow,” Ginny said, gazing at it. “I like that one much better.”

The rest of the hall quieted and turned their heads up at the new banner; mostly the reaction sounded positive. Harry ate a few casual bites before hazarding a glance in the direction of the head table. McGonagall shook her head. Snape stood and came around and off the dais.

“I think you’re getting detention,” a younger student said in concern.

“I’m already in detention,” Harry retorted. “Professor,” he said sweetly when Snape came up behind their bench. “I’m not in trouble, am I?”

“Headmistress wishes to remind you that magic is not allowed in the corridors or the Great Hall between classes. That said,” he went on factually, “She suspects that was tame compared to what you could have done and requests that you replace the other three in the same style, as she rather... likes this one.”

Several students giggled. Harry turned on the bench and repeated the spell, pointing above each of the other tables. Even he had to admit that the silver Slytherin snake was best suited to such a very long banner. Most of the magical ceiling was hidden now. Snape raised a brow as he studied his house banner. “Very nice,” he conceded. He clasped his hands before him and said more quietly, “I am a little worried about what else you may be able to do.”

“If the puddings for lunch were ready I could call them up to the tables. Not terribly dangerous. These are the stormy sky banners, by the way. There are several sets for different ceiling conditions.”

“Are there? I’ll inform Minerva, I am certain she will wish to have you show her the spells. I believe her banner repertoire is limited.

“Harry Potter,” Dennis teased after Snape was back out of range. “Hogwarts housemaster.”

“Watch it or I’ll see that your tower room is shrunk down,” Harry threatened.

“Can you do that?”

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“Haven’t you noticed that years with extra students have extra-large rooms, even though the tower is the same size all the way up on the outside? ‘Course I can do that.”

“What else can you do?” Ginny asked with quite the twinkle in her eye.

”I’m not completely sure, but I’m going to wander the castle today to find out. After I try the library again,” he added less enthusiastically.

In the Restricted Section, Harry retrieved the book from the brass cabinet and read the letter aloud. He paged – one slow page at a time – to where he left off and let out a loud sigh of relief upon arriving at it successfully. Late into the night he had researched Compelling Spells to determine which one would be at the edge of the forest. He assumed it wasn’t one to compel customers into a shop or Quidditch fans into a queue – two of the most common Compelling Spells. He looked over his notes again and looked back at the notation on the diagram. It was a circle with two lines and an M drawn over it. The only possibility on the list was a Compelling Spell for amphibians. The notation could be a crude drawing of a frog. But why anyone would want to compel amphibians to live along the edge of the forest?

Harry remembered Neville’s constantly wandering toad and slapped his hand on the lectern. He put his notes aside and biting his lip, turned the page. The book mercifully remained open. The next page contained instructions for framing paintings. He settled in as though revising for an examination and simply tried to memorize every notation.

“Going all right?” A familiar voice asked from the gate.

“Hello, Severus. Yes, I finally figured out the spell I didn’t know and now I’m...” Harry studied the page before him. “Learning about art. Still nothing in detail about the foundation. The notes aren’t in much order, but since you have to learn them all anyway, why should they be?”

“Are you coming down to lunch?”

Surprised by the question, Harry glanced up at the time. “Wow, sure.” He shut the book and put it back away, hoping he didn’t have to take it out too many more times.

On the way down the quiet corridor, Harry asked, “Any reply to the letter?”

“No, not yet,” Snape answered easily.

“It’s been a long time,” Harry pointed out.

“It had more than one address.”

“So maybe Hedwig is having a hard time locating him,” Harry conjectured.

Snape remained silent. They reached the main staircases and a commotion from a painting behind them drew Harry over that way. A drunken Sir Cadogan was in the middle of disrupting a tea party on a lovely lawn before a lake. The other painting’s

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occupants were dropping their frilly umbrellas and running. Harry drew out his wand. "I've always wanted to do something about him. *Resertum Provenance!*"

Sir Cadogan was sucked like a flimsy paper doll out of the picture, through the nearby pictures, and disappeared down the line. Harry restashed his wand with a cocky motion. "There. That's better."

Snape tilted his head at him. "Ravenclaw does not know what she has done."

"Haven't you seen that spell?" Harry asked.

"No."

"You're saying I know a whole bunch no one else does?" Harry asked with a delicious gleam in his eye.

They made the floor of the Entrance Hall. "No one has been able to open that book for eight hundred years. Much has been forgotten."

"But don't the old headmasters remember?" Harry asked, stopping before the doors as a few stragglers entered the Great Hall. "Why else keep all those paintings around?" Harry was remembering a spell for the Entrance Hall, one, like many of them, that he knew no good purpose for.

"They are kept around for their memories, but what they mostly are is what the painter can capture, which is personality."

"Why is the book letting me read it?" Harry asked. He tapped the floor with his foot four times and whispered the incantation *Pupilprism*.

With a vaguely disdainful sneer, Snape said, "You are pure of heart, remember?"

"Really," Harry insisted. The stones in the floor were changing color, forming zones leading to the doors.

"I certainly do not know what the book is thinking, nor does Minerva. It is either reacting, like the other books in the Restricted Section, to something about you that calms them down—"

"Or scares them to death." The uneven stones were now tinted green, yellow, blue, and red, lined up with the tables inside.

Snape went on, unaware. "Unlikely. Ravenclaw's book has dealt out only violence to those seeking to abuse the knowledge within it." Snape studied Harry as Harry studied the stone floor. "Or, perhaps it is as you said, in jest I believe, that you have done more for this place than anyone in a very long time."

Harry tapped the toe of his trainer against the brass plaque in the floor, now surrounded by blue-tinted stones. "Maybe," he said. "What purpose does this serve?" Harry asked, gesturing at the floor.

Surprised, Snape glanced down in all directions. "Did you just do that?" At Harry's nod, he calmed and said, "I expect it is for organizing students for the Grand Entrance to the Grand Feasts."

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“Why don’t we have Grand Feasts anymore?”

“We do: Christmas, Easter, Welcoming, Leaving...”

“Oh. Hey, did you know there’s a spell to make all the windows black to avoid taxes?”

“Best forgotten, I expect,” Snape said, pulling open the broad door beside him.

“It wasn’t permanent. It went away when the assessor went away.”

“And on that note...” Snape waved at the floor behind them.

Before following into the hall, Harry tapped the floor four times with his foot and the stones returned to their usual grey selves.



That night, Harry had a bad dream; his first in a long time. He was running down the longest Hogwarts corridor on the second floor, except it continually grew longer ahead of him. He was desperately trying to find Dumbledore, because in his mind, Harry believed he had gone to face the dark creatures himself to distract them from Harry. As he ran, Harry had a terrible vision of the dear old headmaster in the Defense classroom, dragged down to the stone floor, flesh shredded and consumed by all manner of distorted hungry things. The corridor continued to have no end no matter how fast Harry pounded his feet and, frantic, Harry began shouting for the old wizard, insisting that he not face the darkness for Harry – that he himself must do this.

“Harry?” A voice sharply cut through the dream.

Harry groaned and rolled away from the eye-stabbing lamplight beside the bed. “Yeah?” he muttered.

“Are you quite all right?” Snape asked.

“Yeah,” Harry spoke into his pillow.

The bed tilted as Snape sat down on the edge. “Willing to tell me what is in your nightmare?”

Harry closed his eyes into his pillow and rather than answer, asked, “How did you know I was having one?”

“Hm. This,” Snape said. Harry was forced to turn to look at the glass ball Snape held; it previously had been sitting on the nightstand.

“I thought that was a sneakoscope someone had left behind.”

“Not exactly.” Snape set it back down with a dull clunk. Harry picked it up and peered into it. It had color stripes of glitter inside of it, waving slowly. On the bottom it read: Toddler Tattler, by the spellbinders who brought you Wee-Watcher.



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Utterly aghast, Harry said, “You put a baby monitor in my room?!” He set it back down hard, hoping it would break. It just thudded loudly. He tossed himself back on his pillow with a huff. When he finally did turn a glare on Snape, he found only vague amusement on his guardian’s face.

“Quite finished?” Snape asked.

“You make me wish I were home.”

“That would not be wise.”

Still miffed, and unable to come up with a response equal to his disdain, Harry demanded, “Get a reply yet?”

More soberly, Snape replied, “No. But I am still hopeful.”

“That’s saying a lot,” Harry muttered.

Snape sat straight and looked up at the nearby wall and the painting of a herd of ponies on the Dartmoor. “I realize that you are impatient with your situation. But do try to act your age.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who put a baby monitor in my room,” Harry retorted, appalled all over again.

“I wished to be informed if there were any disturbance in the room. Such as a horde of Lethifold slipping in,” he stated firmly. “I was not prepared to be as trusting as Minerva.”

Harry picked up the flattened glass ball again. “Can this thing really detect Lethifolds?”

“According to the user’s manual. Goblins and Ghouls are its primary detection mode, however.”

“Goblins?” Harry queried. “What, in case they come into your kid’s room in the middle of the night and ask them to open an account?”

“Goblins have a much older and worse reputation than merely exorbitant exchange rates,” Snape informed him. He took the monitor from Harry and set it gently back on the nightstand. “In any event, was your dream meaningful at all?”

“Just stuff I’m worried about,” Harry hedged. “The only person dying in it was Dumbledore, and he’s already dead.” He shifted to a more comfortable spot and pulled the covers up in the cool air. “I’m all right. You didn’t have to come.” He closed his eyes and pretended to sleep. After a long pause the lamplight went down and a hand brushed his shoulder as the edge of the bed lifted.



Saturday night, a restless Harry took a stroll around the grounds just outside the castle. He felt less certain out here of the protection from the Dark Plane, but he was

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too in need of diversion to care. He bundled his old cloak tighter as he rounded the wall and an icy breeze lifted it. The snow absorbed Harry's footsteps and at the next turn the wind quieted too. The rose garden lay ahead of him. Harry, with renewed interest in it, headed closer to wander through it. One couple walked hand-in-hand, too absorbed in their whispering to notice him as they stepped down a path lined with brown-leaved bundles of dead stems. Closer by, a shock of red stood out from the deep bluish snow.

"Hello," Harry said as he came upon the curved stone bench where Ginny sat.

She brightened instantly. "Wotcher, Harry. Have a seat."

"A little late to be out," Harry commented.

"Yeah, I was going to take points away from them, but I didn't have the heart." Harry realized then that she was referring to the wandering couple. She asked, "How are you, Harry?" When Harry merely shrugged, she said, "Still the secretive Harry."

"No, I'm not. I told you what was happening... much more than I told Belinda."

She crossed her heavily insulated arms. "Sounded like that was causing trouble."

Harry didn't reply. He was feeling stubborn about this issue and didn't feel like examining it any more. He examined the moon – only a sliver, but it looked to be waxing – took out his wand, and used a Winter Bloom spell from Ravenclaw's book on the rose bush beside him. A single green stalk grew up out of the snow and slowly blossomed into a blue rose. Harry picked it and handed it to Ginny.

"You're a tease, Harry Potter," she said, breathing in from the center of the flower. The other couple was wandering back to the doors.

"Sorry, just thought you might like a flower."

She sniffed it again. "I do like a flower. But you're still a tease. Maybe you don't know what that's like."

"No. I do know what that's like," Harry said, thinking of seeing Tonks every day.

During the resulting silence, Ginny looked around the broad, snow-blanketed garden. "So, what are you going to do? You've been here a week."

"Severus is trying to find someone to give me some instruction. It's taking some time though. He could only find one good book on the topic and it isn't very useful. He isn't going to give up, though," Harry heard himself go on.

"No, of course not," Ginny said reassuringly.

"Right now I feel as though I could just go back home and it would all be okay again. But it isn't true. I've been having this happen for months now where these creatures try to come into our world around me. At first I just heard them and felt them, sorta, this oily evil they bring to the air." Harry sighed. Ginny patted his leg. "Knowing that I'm channeling evil doesn't bother you?" he asked her.

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“No. Why should it? It’s not as though you’re doing it on purpose.” She waited for a reply and when none came, said, “Professor Snape does seem worried about you.”

“He hides it well around me. Speaking of which,” Harry said, turning on the bench to make another rose. “What about that comment you made yesterday?”

“Oh.” Ginny glanced around them, but the expanse of snow leading to the castle was empty and the torches framing the doors were the only thing moving in the dim air. She accepted the second rose, putting it with the first. “The night you arrived I heard from Erasmus that you were here and I came up to the fifth floor to see you. But you were asleep already. Of course I must not have detected all of the charms on the door because as I turned to leave, Professor Snape was blocking the way. Scared me silly for a second and I almost hexed him. It was close. Anyway, he goes into your room and circles it, checking the corners, maybe for monsters, and then he comes back over and checks on you.”

“I don’t remember that,” Harry said.

“You were completely out. You didn’t even hear the door squeaking when I came in.” She sighed and continued, “So, as I said, he was checking on you with a lumos... anyway, he had such an odd look on his face. Like one my mum would have and I would think she was completely overdoing it. But this was Snape.” She shook her head at the befuddling memory.

“But you said-”

“Yeah, so he takes me down to his office wants to know how I knew you were here and when I tell him – the truth – he Legilimizes me. But at the moment I was thinking how funny it was that he could also try to be so mean, you know, after that look. So, I think he saw my memory of the look. At least that’s the only thing that would have set him off so.”

Harry blinked as he thought this through. He laughed lightly and said, “And this is making him avoid you?”

“Harry, you didn’t see it. Like my mum when Ron was made Prefect... remember that? I think she cried, even.”

“What about when you were?” Harry asked.

“No. She just said, ‘Well, why wouldn’t you be?’ ”

Harry gazed over the snow to where it met the grey mass of the forest’s dormant branches. His nose was growing too cold as he breathed. He said, “That would explain the baby monitor in my room.”

Ginny laughed in a sharp bark, carrying loudly even over the snow. “The what?”

Harry stood. “Come on, I’m getting cold.”

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Ginny was still chuckling when they stepped inside the castle and relocked the doors.



Harry, armed with extensively moldy knowledge from the school's builders, followed Headmistress McGonagall and Professor Snape down the dungeon steps. As they approached, Greer stepped out of her empty classroom and glared suspiciously at him and Snape as they passed. Snape ignored her and Harry tried to do so as well, until she brightly asked, "Oh, Professor, need any extra extract of Ociumum?"

Harry stopped and spun, wand in his hand without thought. In that instant of turning he had fallen into a state of concentrated clarity, prepared to do battle. A hand grabbed a hold of his wrist as he raised his arm to aim. "Harry," Snape said sharply.

Greer had dropped her arms and stepped back to duck into her office, but she recovered quickly and smirked. "Quite a temper on that boy. One would think he'd never learned an ounce of discipline in his life. Oh... that would have been your lacking, wouldn't it, Professor?" she sneered at Snape.

Snape's hold tightened. "Harry. Put your wand away," he stated easily, perhaps to avoid catering to his nasty colleague.

The sudden fury didn't let go of Harry though. He relaxed his wand hand but stood leaning toward the Potions classroom door, breathing rapidly, glaring at the pudgy, badly make-uped women who so casually tossed such painful words at them. McGonagall stepped into the fray. "Gertie, I know you don't agree with Mr. Potter being here, but that was uncalled for," she chastised tiredly.

Spells flashed through Harry's mind, vicious takedown spells for a dangerous opponent, followed by more subtle castle altering spells. His arm ached to toss a series of them at her taunting face, to wall up her classroom with immovable stone blocks, for example, with her inside.

Still holding his wrist firmly, Snape twisted around to block Harry's view of Greer by stepping in front of him. "Harry," he said, more gently. "Come, there are better things to expend magic on." Harry gave in reluctantly, feeling raw and almost hungry at giving in. But he let himself be led to the end where McGonagall opened a large door with very rusty metal braces holding its warped boards together. The scent of mildew and cave wafted up from a set of stairs leading down into darkness. A wave of the headmistress' hand lit the torches.

"This is the alternative route to the cave entrance from the lake," McGonagall explained as they descended a curving stone staircase, stone blocks on one side, but

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cut directly into the rock on the other. Her footsteps began to sound wet, even before she reached the bottom. Doors led off this lower corridor, but they were missing their bottom foot of wood due to rot and their hinges and latches looked sulky about opening. The lower hall had inches of stagnant water covering it and patches of green algae near the torches. Harry held up his robes like the others did as he looked around with interest at the wide, low arches that held up the mass of castle above them. This part of the castle wasn't on his Map; he would have to add it.

"This way," McGonagall said, sounding the tour guide.

At the far side a short set of steps led up to the end of the ledge where the boats docked with the first-years before the welcoming feast. That explained the water, Harry thought. He walked along inside, parallel to the ledge, ducking under an arch. Water was seeping between blocks higher than he estimated the lake to be on the other side. Perhaps it was rainwater or condensation. The stones were worn and round at the edges where the water lapped at them. Harry took out his wand and selected an area that didn't look quite as bad as the others to try out the spells. He tapped one stone with the incantation *Lapisvigil* then tapped all the stones that touched it before returning to the first and reciting *Aqua et Igne Interdicere Aqua*. At first there didn't seem to be a change but as Harry watched, something like mortar rose to fill the cracks around that stone and solidified.

"Bravo, Harry," McGonagall exclaimed from beside him.

Snape glanced around the arches with a baleful eye. "Rather a lengthy task."

"Not so bad," Harry said. "The other stones are still awake. The book had some suggested patterns." Harry demonstrated by tapping in a ring around the first ring with the first incantation and then repeating the second with the inner stones. The area of solid wall expanded as they watched.

McGonagall moved to her own area and began spelling. After a short while, she stood straight with a groan and said, "Perhaps I will send Grubbly-Plank down to learn the spell." She looked at Snape standing behind them, arms crossed. "You are not going to help?" she asked him.

"I... think I will just observe," Snape replied a bit haughtily.

McGonagall gave him a sharp look until Harry said, from his crouched position to reach the very lowest stones that were mostly underwater, "He tried the spell and it didn't work."

"Convenient," McGonagall grumbled as she stalked off.

Harry slopped in the water to shift to the left. His trainers were wet all the way through now, but he kept at it, finding the task strangely satisfying.

"Minerva will have to find or make up a medal to give you for this," Snape stated. Harry wasn't certain if he were serious.

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"I'd prefer one for not turning Greer into a giant octopus the next time I see her. That's going to be harder."

Snape put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "I realize you are frustrated, but I expect you to behave, even when so provoked."

Harry pushed himself to his feet. "I lost myself," he admitted as he ran his hand over the newly smooth surface before him. It was only a fraction of the area between just two of the arches. "You're right, this is a huge job." Harry stretched his arms to the sides and over his head and started on a new area that would expand to meet the one he had just finished. When that circle grew too large to continue, Harry stopped again and let out a yawn. A few seams had been missed and he went back and did those, which required waking all the stones around the cracks again.

Harry shook out his arms yet again. "Why doesn't Headmistress order Greer to do this?"

"Professor Greer, Harry," Snape pointed out quietly.

"Fat chance," Harry retorted.

Snape started to step away. "For that, finish this section before you come up." He stalked off, high-stepping in the water, which only seemed to be getting higher.

Harry rolled his eyes, but once Snape's footsteps faded the only sound was the amplified lapping of the water in the cave, a lulling sound. Harry, humming faintly, tapped his wand against a new, unsealed array of stones.

By the time Harry finished, just that one section, his arms ached terribly from holding them up to tap repeatedly with his wand and he couldn't feel his cold toes. He used the boy's bathroom off the Entrance Hall to wash up for lunch and dry his shoes with a spell. He was feeling surly about what had turned into a kind of detention, so he didn't look up at the head table as he made his way to where his friends sat.

"Wheh," Colin said. "You smell like a crypt."

"Thanks," Harry retorted sarcastically. "I apparently did get detention for learning too much about the castle." At the raised heads, he added, "Well, that and threatening to turn Greer into a cephalopod." Numerous giggles followed this, which made Harry smile faintly, but Snape was right, frustration was beginning to rule him. Trouble was, knowing this didn't help, perhaps the opposite. "If I show the next D.A. a few spells can you get a few members to help me with something this afternoon?"

"Sure," Ginny answered eagerly. "What do you need help with?"

"Sealing the castle foundation against lake and groundwater."

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him. "You're so secretive, Harry."

"You think I'm kidding."

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After lunch twenty students Harry knew well from his school days followed him down to the lower dungeon. All were quite excited to see such a remote part of the castle. Suze stepped down last, seeming reluctant to get her tiny cloth shoes wet.

“Clearly you have not spent enough time pawing around in the bowels of this place, chasing monsters, chancing Voldemort,” Harry criticized them, half-playfully. “Chasing Ginny,” Harry added, elbowing his friend. Ginny rolled her eyes and frowned – still a sensitive topic, apparently. Harry moved on quickly, “So this is the spell...”

Two hours later when the footsteps on the staircase revealed themselves to be McGonagall, they were almost halfway finished. “My,” the headmistress exclaimed. She studied the newly sealed arches a moment, looking nostalgic. “Well, we’ll have to come up with a treat for all of you in appreciation for this, and I’ll send some staff down to assist.”

“That’s all right,” Ginny piped up from where she sat on Wereporridge’s shoulders so as to reach the upper part of an arch. “We’re fine.” Everyone else seconded this.

“Perhaps I’ll have the elves send some butterbeers down then?”

Strong ascent greeted this suggestion. Someone quietly suggested real beers would also be welcome. McGonagall either didn’t hear or ignored it.

It was nearly evening when Harry, after heartily thanking his friends and the other students, like Wereporridge, who consented to be dragged along, headed to his fifth-floor chambers. Upon opening the door, he found Snape sitting on one of the couches, grading papers. Snape gave him a sideways glance as Harry stood in the doorway, taking this in before moving to his room with the intent of changing into something fresher smelling. Snape’s voice stopped him as he opened the door to the bedchamber. “Just because I correct you, does not mean I am not on your side.”

Harry tweaked the door handle, making the latch clatter. He wanted to get angry, just to feel it. He teetered at the cusp of hot anger before letting it go. “Yeah, sure,” Harry said. He went in and returned presently in a fresh set of robes and clean trousers. His ankles, tired of having damp cuffs pressed against them, thanked him as he sat down across from his guardian. After a pregnant silence, Harry said, “What are we going to do if this Finnish Shaman-”

“Saami,” Snape corrected.

“What?”

“He is actually a Saami.”

Harry didn’t know what that was, but he went on with, “If this Saami Shaman doesn’t respond or says no?”

Snape didn’t look up from his grading. “We will find an alternative,” he replied easily.

“It isn’t like you to be so optimistic,” Harry pointed out with a grumble.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“We have no choice but to find something... unless you relish the roll of housemaster?”

“No.”

“Pity.” Many minutes and two essay markings later, Snape asked, “Still angry?”

“No.”

“Even though you have nothing to look forward to but sealing stone walls?”

“That’s finished.” Snape did look up at this proclamation. Harry went on, “Although I’ll go down tomorrow and make sure no joins were missed. Likely some have been. The D.A. are now the D.A.A.W.I. – Dumbledore’s Army Against Water Infiltration.”

“It pays to have lots of friends.”

### Author’s Notes:

Ociumum – I don’t usually explain but this may be too remote. That is the ingredient stolen from Snape’s cabinet at the end of Resonance and used against him. We have a word for people like Greer, and ironically, it rhymes with “witch”.

Harry/Ginny – This will be clarified in um, Chapter 9. And it’s a very funny scene. Oops, make that Chapter 10, otherwise 9 would be way too long. I’m trying to stick with 20 pages to a chapter because longer than that I can’t carefully check before posting... my brain melts.

Updates – I’m going to try for weekly, but real life and quality issues may override that. But the next 5 updates should be Wed/Thurs. (Weekends have enough fun already)

Voltaire, yeah, that guy. I was thinking that for a pronunciation one needed it spoken, but opera is just written down too, isn’t it? Although, there might be a performance tradition that preserves pronunciations. I have to confess that my idea of studying the classics is to read George Eliot. Man is she subtle and sometimes I think I’m hallucinating the underlying things in her dialog.

Erasmus and Nearly Headless Nick – I figure Erasmus regularly pumps Nick for stories about Harry and that made Nick not unlikely to go whisper in Erasmus’ ear since the ghosts have free run of the castle.

Candide – She’s around; she was just one plot line too many for the already overloaded chapters 1 and 2.



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Not following – I’m trying harder to not leave readers behind. If you find this happening, it is either intentional, because I’m going to clarify it later (as in the case of Snape and The Look), or it will ruin the flow of the scene to provide more detail, or I’ve messed up. So in this case – why Snape is avoiding Ginny – I didn’t have a point of view to provide more detail than was provided until Ginny was forced to explain. Just because Snape is doing better as a father doesn’t mean he’s accepted that fact to the degree of turning into Molly just when he has to deal with so much Darkness. It would be out of character for him to. When McGonagall points out how well he is doing, he can snarl at her and feel better, but Ginny is serving as a mirror in this case and he can’t dismiss it so easily. The Mirror of Lained I guess you could say.

Arrogance – Usually masks something else.

Harry climbing the furniture – Those of you mystified by this behavior have never been stuck in a room with only dormers. They let in great light, but you can’t see out and it can feel claustrophobic.

## CHAPTER SIX



# ARCTIC FLIGHT

Snape wandered through the Ministry of Magic atrium where something had clearly gone very wrong. Shredded wall hangings were strewn across the floor and ash from the hearths had been scattered and tracked across the broad wood boards of the floor and hovered in a ghostlike haze in the light. No one guarded the dreamily glittering gateway at the end of the atrium and Snape hurried his pace to the lifts, feeling a surging sense of doom. The metal gate on the lift had to be forced closed to get the lift moving and only then did it move reluctantly with much squealing of damaged parts.

The chaos only grew worse on level two. Shredded parchments were piled in the corridors, scattered with discarded pointed hats and gloves, many of which appeared to have been gnawed upon. In the main Auror's office a barricade of desks had been hastily erected and Tonks crouched on the near side of it. Snape stepped around it, not even pausing when the Auror hissed a warning to be careful.

Beyond the last desk – the only upright one in a sea of spilled files, ink bottles, and a few wounded, fluttering memo airplanes – crouched Harry, one arm covering his head, the other clutching his wand, although not in a manner that would allow him to spell anything. Something rustled under a pile of parchments and chattered at Snape. It didn't sound like anything terribly dangerous, but Harry started badly at the noise and rather than raise his wand properly, ducked farther into his arms.

"Harry," Snape called his name and when he didn't respond, hauled him to his feet by his raised arm. This was his old Harry, a head shorter and much narrower in the shoulders. "Come. Let's go," Snape said, sounding confident to help bolster his

## ARCTIC FLIGHT

charge.

Snape turned to lead the way out, but Things were emerging from behind the toppled furniture, from under the piles of parchment. Harry stepped closer to Snape and finally raised his wand. Stick-like limbs and distorted bulbous bodies crept out of hiding, sensing the dominance of their numbers.

The next instant, without consciously Apparating, they stood in an utterly grey world. It was silent here as though vastly open and empty. Harry shifted the aim of his wand back and forth, but there was nothing to point it at. "Where are we?" he asked, sounding hopeless despite being relocated from obvious danger.

Snape moved closer still and gripped Harry's bony shoulder blade with the intent of not losing track of him. Not recognizing this place of vague light and meaningless distance, he was forced to answer, "I do not know."

Snape started awake. As he stared at the almost equally grey ceiling of his chambers, he had to admit the truth of the dream: he truly had no idea what he was going to do for Harry.

Alert now, Snape considered that he had not checked on him since the alarm several nights ago. Motivated by that concrete task, one that would certainly mollify the dream, Snape tossed on a heavy robe to face the chilly winter castle.

At the door to the guest chambers, Snape removed the alarm spells, including the two that Ginny Weasley had not detected, and crept inside. Harry had trustingly not added any others. The door to the bed chamber was open and Harry lay deeply asleep in the streaming pale moonlight and orange glow of the flickering hearth. Snape clearly needn't have worried, given the lightly snoring slumber going on.

Kali rose up in her cage, fingers tweaking the bars like strings on a musical instrument. Snape went over and released the door latch. She groggily climbed on his arm and accepted a ride over to her master. The normally vicious Chimrian had accepted Snape ever since Harry's kidnapping, and he patted her head once in memory of that before she climbed down and curled up between the pillow and Harry's shoulder.

"We just need to tame a few more monsters," Snape whispered wryly to the sleeping, tussle-haired visage. "Trust that no matter how vile and dark they are, I will not abandon you to them."

Harry shifted in his sleep before falling still again. Snape closed his eyes and grimaced, he probably looked about how he had the first night, a mirror of that bizarre vision he had seen in Ginny Weasley's eyes. If he grew too weak, he was not going to be fit for this task, and he feared that he already had. Had the vision been of anyone else, he would have believed them already far too fatally sentimental. Spinning sharply on his heel, Snape purposefully departed for his own chambers.

The sun, as usual, woke Harry, who proved reluctant to close the drapes around

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his bed at night. He didn't have drapes at home and perhaps they reminded him too much that he was back at Hogwarts. He dug through his trunk in search of clothes for the day, deciding that he should just hang everything up in the wardrobe. It depressed him a bit to do this, since it meant he was moving in longer term. A welcome knock interrupted his chasing the worst of the dust out before putting in his clothes.

Harry found the petite Suze at the door. "Is it all right if I visit?" she asked, blinking her white eyelashes nervously.

"Of course it is," Harry said, inviting her in with a sweep of his hand. He retied his housecoat and said, "As long as you don't mind if I haven't gotten dressed yet... Have a seat," he said.

She pulled a spindly straight-backed chair from the corner to beside the bed while Harry returned to sorting out his clothes. "You haven't unpacked?" she asked.

Harry's shoulders fell as he shook out a crumpled shirt from the middle of his trunk. Snape had stuffed the entire contents of his wardrobe at home into it, it seemed. "I was kind of hoping to not be here so long. That was wishful thinking."

"I hope you're feeling better soon," she said with almost innocent encouragement.

"I do too." As he sorted out his socks, he considered asking her what the current rumors were about him, but then he decided he didn't care, which felt better than knowing.

Suze said, "We have Quidditch practice this afternoon, if you wanted to come watch?"

Harry gave her a grin. "Not afraid that I'll tell the Gryffindor captain what I see?"

"You wouldn't do that," Suze asserted with a laugh. "And we don't play Gryffindor 'til the end of the year."

Harry was almost to the bottom of his trunk. "Planning on beating them?" he asked as he plucked up the dingy grey jumper that he had inherited during his last visit to Hogwarts. Snape needn't have brought it since he was going to use the old thing for gardening and that was months away. Age had softened its woolen threads to the point of near disintegration.

"We always plan on beating everyone," Suze pointed out.

Harry considered a response to this as he fingered the Glad Rags tag on the jumper. He flipped the tag up and stared in frozen fascination at the faded initials T.R. inked on the back of it. Suze had said something but Harry didn't hear. With slow movements he held the sagging jumper up and looked it over. It looked old enough all right.

"Harry?" Suze's sharp prompt pulled him away from his deep thoughts.

## ARCTIC FLIGHT

“Um, sorry.” What should he do with it? Should he throw it into the hearth? He turned to do that and then thought perhaps he was overreacting. It could have belonged to anyone with those initials.

“Harry, you all right?”

Bundling the jumper up and clutching it, Harry said in a little embarrassment, “Yeah. Just, um, thinking.” He held the jumper out and said, “Old thing, I think I’ll just toss it on the fire.”

With no little distaste, the primly dressed Suze said, “Good idea.”

“Good idea,” Harry echoed.

Irrational or not, Harry felt better just getting rid of the jumper. It burned up rapidly in a halo of bright blue flame from the dye.



“Another letter for you?” Siri demanded when she met Per outside the supply store in the nearest village that had one. It sat on the same lake their village did, but lakes were long, many armed things, so the distance was significant. The same white owl was perched on the roof edge of the store waiting for Per to reappear from within, apparently. Its feathers showed bright against the perpetually twilight sky behind it.

“You may answer my post whenever you wish. I can do without it,” Per said dismissively.

Siri called the owl down and again fed her after taking the letter. Per was skiing away, and Siri needed nearly a mile to catch up to the much longer-legged Shaman. Fortunately, he had skied away along the shore, out on the flat frozen lake. Footprints and snowmobile tracks also ran along on the snow-coated ice and Per used the well-packed paths for his skis. The white owl followed along with ease, dodging and stopping in trees ahead of them.

“Are you coming with me to see if this boy down the lake really is a Stauncher?” Per asked.

“If I may. Mostly, I am delivering your post.” She handed him the letter. It fluttered in the wind, blowing steadily off of the sheer expanse of the lake.

Per grumbled but accepted it. He opened it and handed it back to her to translate for him. Siri read the letter aloud until Per interrupted, with, “Are you certain it says that? That you have it right: Voldemort’s servant?”

Siri reread the sentence out loud in English and then shrugged that it indeed read as she had originally translated. She read out the rest, Per growing more perplexed

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as the letter went on. When Siri finished and folded it, Per said, “This British wizard presents us an enigma.” He shook his head as though he had water in his ears.

“It does seem likely that...” Siri began.

“Harry Potter is a foci of the Plane. He is another enigma on his own. Two enigmas... bound together by an adoption. And the father wishes to send the famous Boy Hero here to us... begs us to be allowed to, in fact.” He stared out over the lake with his bright slate eyes. “Well, how can we resist, if only to unravel some of these mysteries.” He stashed the letter inside his coat and skied on toward the cluster of pole and turf goahti at the bend of the lake shore, each with a banner of smoke trailing out the top of it.



Monday morning, just as Snape collected his things together for class, Hedwig scratched at the window. He quickly moved to open it, grateful that she carried a rolled up letter this time. Well, a letter of sorts – it was written on the inside of a piece of cardboard packaging for a box of Muggle cereal. In the brightly colored picture a bear wearing a bib was holding a spoon before a bowl of puffy yellow things in milk.

But the letter read. “Oulu train station, 8:00 Saturday. Hope you have a safe place for him until then.”

Snape sat down in his chair a moment before he gathered his wits and put the letter away where Harry wouldn’t see it, having to admit that lack of proper parchment didn’t inspire confidence in the sender. He gave Hedwig a toss out the window to go to the owlery and went to class, an unusual five minutes late. Lunchtime was the first chance he had to find Harry and give him the news.

“He’ll take me then?”

“He agreed to assess you,” Snape clarified as they strolled quickly down toward the Great Hall. “But it seems likely he will take you, I believe. We now must work out your travel arrangements. I think an airplane flight is in order. We can limit it to one, if you wish.”

“Can’t I just take my broom?” Harry asked.

“To Finland?” Snape asked derisively. “Across the North Sea... in winter no less? NO.”

“How about my bike-”

“NO. You will take Muggle transport.” They had reached the doors to the hall so the debate was cut off.

## ARCTIC FLIGHT



Harry spent the week getting as far ahead on his readings as possible, since he couldn't carry all of his books. Midweek, Snape had presented him with stiff pieces of paper like those he had seen his Uncle Vernon with a few times, but Harry had never taken a very close look at them before. They were covered in confusing robotic numbers; even the date wasn't locatable without rather a lot of hunting and deciphering. With the airplane tickets beside him on the desk, Harry swallowed his pride and wrote out one more letter to Belinda after he had written to all of his friends.

In a fit of pique he ended the letter with: To avoid turning into a dark wizard I have to visit a wizard in Finland who knows something I don't. I don't know how long I'll be gone. Minister Bones most likely knows this from the Auror's office, so tell her if you like. Even knowing that was an unfair thing to say, didn't stop him handing the letter to one of the tawny school owls to take away.

Friday night, Harry packed his things into his backpack, the limit Snape believed that Harry should carry. He had taken perverse pleasure in not packing a single book, but had packed excess parchment at Snape's insistence. His two extra thick woolen weasley jumpers, Harry tied to the straps of it and set it down where he had laid out his new boots, knee-length woolen coat, mittens, gloves to fit inside the mittens, and fur muffler purchased just for this trip.

A knock on the door brought Harry's thoughts out of the dark loop they were caught in. It was McGonagall. "Harry," she greeted him warmly. "All packed?" At Harry's nod, she fetched a silver flask out of her pocket. "You should bring a gift and I believe this is most appropriate."

Harry sniffed the contents and his eyes watered at the whiskey assault they suffered. "Thanks," he said and turned to make a space down the side of the pack for it.

"Ready to go?" she asked in concern.

Harry shrugged; his initial excitement had been worn down over the course of the week and now he felt numb as an alternative to feeling hopeless.

"You may always return here, Harry. Your friends will certainly not abandon you, no matter what."

Kali rattled frantically in her cage at that moment. Harry went over and took her out and let her climb to his shoulder. "Even though this was my first real home... I don't want to be here any more," he admitted. Kali chewed on his hair, which he had unintentionally let get long since the New Year. He shrugged his shoulder to get her to stop. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful..."

"No, no, Harry. I understand. You will watch yourself while you are gone?"

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“Course.”

She patted his arm. “Have a good trip, Harry.”



Harry stood before a series of gateways, each with a row of flashing lights atop them. People and bags were queued up leading to them. He was told by a chubby guard that only people with tickets were allowed through. Harry had to be told everything today, it seemed, and he felt very wizardishly lost in the fast-moving complexity of Heathrow Airport.

“She says only people with tickets,” Harry said to his guardian, who, in his cassock and robes, continued to attract unwarranted attention from the uniformed and armed people helping usher travelers through the queues.

Snape’s eyes again swept the strange place they stood in. People towing small wheeled bags swept past in one direction; people pushing orange trolleys maneuvered by in the crosswise direction. “You will watch yourself, correct?” Snape demanded.

“Yeah,” Harry said. He had been careful with his emotions all day but the feeling of oily dark watchfulness from elsewhere had only increased as he tried to push it away.

“Take the potion if you have any difficulty. There are several doses.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, impatiently. He wasn’t keen on being half-sedated while traveling, but if it came to that...

Snape unhooked his fur-lined cloak and folded it lengthwise before handing it over. “Take this, just in case your new coat is not sufficient.”

Harry hefted the heavy faded cloak under his arm. “Thanks. I gotta go,” he said. “See you...”

“Take care, Harry. And behave yourself,” Snape intoned, sounding as though he wanted to be sterner but failing.

Harry nodded and said goodbye before moving to join the shortest queue. Snape stood waiting until Harry made his way forward through the square plastic gateway. On the other side Harry turned and waved and at that moment, seeing those strained dark eyes, wished no one cared for him so; the burden was too much on top of everything else.

Sighing lightly, Harry collected his bag from the conveyer when it was disgorged and stopped to decipher the lit-up signs hanging from the ceiling to determine which way to go.

The airport was a very busy place but not a single person gave him a double-take or sharp look of recognition. He found his gate eventually and was relieved to see



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“Helsinki” printed on the lit-up display behind the counter. He sat down between a man in a suit and a woman who chatted into a mobile phone. Startling numbers of people streamed past in the wide corridor and continued to do so pretty continuously until the man behind the desk spoke into a microphone. Trouble was, Harry didn’t know his row number. He peered at the additional piece of round-cornered stiff paper he had received when he arrived at the airport and read it, eventually locating this information. Many other travelers were also squinting at their tickets as though they needed stronger glasses, which made Harry feel better.

On the plane, Harry copied everyone else and stashed his bag overhead like he would on a train except with latched doors before sitting down and strapping himself in same as he used to in his uncle’s car, not because his aunt and uncle ever told him to, but because they always made sure Dudley did. Harry peered out the window at the row of airplanes beside theirs. They didn’t look like contraptions that wanted to fly without magic. They were ungainly, weighty monsters that looked perhaps able to roll easily, but certainly not get aloft. Harry, as he puzzled this, thought that he could better understand Mr. Weasley’s fascination such things. The woman who sat down next to Harry immediately took out a magazine covered in snapshots of people and buried her nose in it, for which Harry was grateful.

While they all waited for something to happen, Harry played with all of the interesting things around him, like the air nozzle and flip-down tray, until the woman beside him asked in a very posh accent, “First time flying?”

“Uh, yeah,” Harry admitted, figuring he couldn’t fake this given how poorly he had navigated things so far today.

“Visiting family?” she asked.

Harry kicked himself for attracting her verbal attention. “No. Visiting someone I know in the north, in Lapland.”

“Primitive up there,” she pronounced, raising her magazine again.

After the day Harry had had, that was a welcoming thought.

Sure enough, the metal contraption was more than willing to fly – with enough of a running start, which Harry could understand rather well. The ground fell away and soon clouds fell from above, obscuring it. Within minutes they were higher than Harry could go on his motorcycle and he grew interested in the view again. His feeling of security from Hogwarts was slipping away as fast as the ground and he dearly hoped he could hold out until they landed; this fragile, unCharmed, tin can he was riding in wouldn’t take much to come down.

Fortunately, they landed safely with a screech that at first made Harry grip his armrests in alarm, but it was only the tires. Off of the plane, Harry felt as though he were chewing on a piece of the twins’ Babble Bubblegum, which made everything

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you heard incomprehensible. He moved through the Helsinki airport well enough but found the swell of gibberish conversations around him unexpectedly disturbing and he kept trying to listen closer as though that might let him understand. Fortunately, the first person he asked for help – a man in a long overcoat who had just put away his mobile – spoke perfect English and pointed to where one could catch a shuttle to the train station.

The bus ride was long but Harry had plenty of time since he was taking the overnight train. He watched out the window at the city and people bathed in the angular light. He thought he heard the chittering from the Dark Plane a few times but with the loud motor of the bus it was hard to be certain. This uncertainty did not help. A well-bundled infant in the seat across from Harry stared at him with wide eyes; Harry turned to watch out the window instead, calming himself as best he could.

Harry had a few hours to wait at the train station. He wandered through the shops and sat on a bench on the platform for a while, letting the flow of passengers in and out wash over him, wishing he had brought just one of his books to read. The yellow warning track stretched out before him. That was what he himself needed around him, Harry thought, a warning to others about the hazard he represented. He couldn't even conceive of the chaos that would ensue if hordes of grotesque dark creatures poured into this world here in the train station. Was there even a Finnish Ministry of Magic to clean up such things? Harry rubbed his eyes; he could always take some potion, he reminded himself.

Finally, his train arrived with a hiss of its brakes. Harry stood by one of the doors while the incoming passengers stepped down. He had a reserved seat in one of the few cars without sleeper compartments and when he found it, he fell into it with relief and closed his eyes.

Harry woke from his drowsing when the train stopped at the next station, confused about where he was. The landscape outside was shrouded in black but the lights of the station revealed snowy ground and snow-laden pine trees. The train lurched forward and the station slid out of view. A young blonde man sat down in the seat across the aisle. Harry peered out into the blackness, using his hand as a shade for the lights which had been turned low after they resumed moving. Harry wished he wasn't here, or that it was bright enough to see where "here" was. The distinctive chitter sounded nearby. Harry wasn't the only one to hear it; the young blonde man ducked down to look under his seat in curiosity. Harry reached for his backpack and fished the potion bottle out of the front pocket and downed a gulp. Moments later the world grew soft and meaningless and blissfully silent. Harry stared at the reflection of the carriage in the dark window for a long while after that. Whenever that grew boring, he took

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another small sip of potion.

The train pulled into Oulu at 7:30. Morning only by the clock as the sun gave no hint of rising yet. Harry bundled Snape's cloak around himself after almost forgetting it on the shelf in his dazed condition. This prompted him to go back and check again that he had everything. Ominous noises of the train decoupling hurried him off.

The platform lights illuminated cones of misting snow in the greyness. Harry looked up and down the platform but didn't see anyone waiting. He walked with the small crowd through the station out to the front. The other passengers moved off, including the young man from across the aisle, who unlocked and boarded a bicycle, despite the deep snow piled alongside the pavement. Harry around this white-shrouded area but didn't see anyone waiting. Back inside, he settled on a bench across from the ticket booth and relaxed; he was a little early for the meeting.

At 8:00 a.m. Harry again made the rounds, first checking the platform and then the front of the station. This time a squat figure stood on the pavement in a thick grey belted tunic and yellow rubber boots. Harry stepped in that direction and the woman, he realized, looked up curiously at him. She had deep weathered lines in her face and nearly Asian eyes. She gave Harry a slightly cocked smile and with an unfamiliar accent said, "Harry Potter, I presume."

Harry swallowed and nodded. She held out her hand, Harry believed to shake hands, but she took his wrist and the front of the train station disappeared.

Harry stumbled on uneven ground and caught his bare hand on frigid, wind-swept stone. The woman was gone. Thick snakes slithered over the dim flat plane surrounding him, slithered bizarrely through boiling, steaming snow. Blasting icy wind sucked the breath from Harry's chest the way a Dementor sucked happiness.

Harry struggled to pull his mittens out of his pockets and put them on, fighting the wind that tried to rip them away from him. He then struggled to tug his cloak tighter, relieved that Snape's cloak was as heavy as it was. There were no snakes, he realized after finding his breath by angling his head diagonal to the wind, only trees growing horizontally in the twisted shelter of the crevices in the rock, and the steam was just finer snow lifted into the air in billows. He drew another breath with effort and scanned the area. Two figures stood a distance away, one significantly taller than the other. The taller one stepped away. The smaller one turned too, but gestured for Harry to follow.

Harry tried another breath through his mitten with more success. He stepped forward into the wind, losing the grip on his cloak which let the wind cut through him as though he were merely a skeleton with no flesh to warm his bones. By the time he made the edge of the plateau, his stunned bones rattled with the cold. Dazed and having a hard time focusing for the bursts of white filling the air, Harry was

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given skis, which he had never worn in his life. They were strapped over his boots and the man bent for a minute as though talking to them, but that must simply have been Harry's deranged impression. The woman tested the weight of Harry's cloak and waited while he added his gloves under his thick mittens. She then nodded in apparent approval and two of them turned gracefully to slide away. Harry's skis moved to follow of their own volition. After a dozen strides, Harry got the feel of the motion and managed to move with the long clumsy things, rather than fighting them.

They slid down-slope a long, long way, through gloom and blasts of snowy air. Harry truly began to worry about the future as his clothing although the best he could get, seemed unsuited to this climate. Perhaps if he wore all of his jumpers at once, he thought hopefully. After a time, the repeated movement began to warm up his middle, at least, and eventually even his hands.

The blue-tinted dark-grey world flattened out and they crossed a low treeless expanse where the wind held less sway and one could see a bit farther between less frequent waves of airborne snow. Harry's skis followed in the exact tracks of the man's until they reached the far valley side where the Shaman stopped before one of a row of very small hills, the grass of which showed through. The man left his skis behind and walked around the nearest one. Harry, with a grunt of cold-stiff limbs, moved to follow only to discover that this hill had a perfectly ordinary window in the side of it, and opposite the window, a door, albeit a small one.

A candle flared as Harry ducked inside the darkness. He was directed by gestures to sit on a log to the left and he copied his hosts as they removed their boots and deserted them on the bare dirt. Behind him, furred hides were piled over dense tree branches spread on the frozen ground. The walls were lined with closely spaced, barkless branches of the size a wizard might use as a staff. The woman quickly went to work at the firepit in the middle of the hut. Harry shucked his pack and climbed backward to settle on the surprisingly springy and soft fur pile. He watched as the woman lit a curl of birch bark and drop small twigs onto its eager flame. Across from him the Shaman, Harry assumed, was shucking his ice-matted hat, revealing short light brown hair. He reached for his boots next and pulled bird's nests out of them. Well, they certainly looked like nests. Harry watched, mystified, as these were pulled apart and spread with great care on the edge of a hide. Harry scratched his head and tried not to wonder what he was doing here. The hut was filling with smoke from the sputtering fire. Harry removed his ice-coated mittens and set them on a rock near the fire – but not too close – and warmed his hands. No one spoke, so Harry remained silent as well.

As he watched the fire catch, Harry concentrated on the world around him and,

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surprisingly, felt safe. He relaxed with an exhausted sigh. Maybe this strange place was charmed, he thought. When his hands had warmed, Harry took out parchment and found his never-out quill would not work; it was frozen apparently. He placed this on the rock beside his mittens to thaw and put the parchment back away. Snape had said he would send Hedwig to fetch a message. She may be outside now. Hopefully she could find him all right; she certainly had in the past when Harry had made unexpected moves.

The hut warmed a bit more and the air cleared out as the fire rose higher and stronger. Everyone still sat in total silence. Harry tried his quill again and found it working well enough to write out a message telling Snape he had arrived all right, but found he couldn't put down much more than that without sounding terribly uncertain. He wrote that he wasn't bothered by dark creatures at the moment, but he wasn't certain what was blocking them. He stashed the letter back in his bag to send when Hedwig arrived.

Since no conversation, nor anything else, was expected of Harry, he laid down on the furs using his cloak as a blanket, and closed his eyes. He was awoken a short time later by two things, one was his host leaning very close over him and the other was a conversation that he couldn't understand. Harry studied the lined face and bright slate eyes of the Shaman above him. He was examining Harry's scar. Apparently satisfied, he moved away and said something to the woman.

"He is a gateway but it doesn't seem to have anything to do with that mark upon him," Per said as he settled back beside the fire and took up a knife and a piece of antler.

"So what is your plan, other than settling into a summer home in the middle of the winter?" Siri asked.

"Lars used to live here all year," Per pointed out. "We are here because no one else is."

Harry, used to being discussed as though he weren't there, rested back and re-closed his eyes; the cold had leeches a lethargy into him that he didn't feel like fighting.

Per went on, "As to my plan... I need to know him better. Then we shall see."

Harry woke next to the most unexpected scent of bread baking, his stomach growling plaintively as he breathed in the wondrous odor. Siri was turning a flat circle of bread on a large flat stone balanced over the largest logs of the fire. Harry stretched his neck; he needed to find the toilet, or equivalent. No one said a word when he moved to put on his boots, re-hooked his cloak around him, and fetched his mittens, now toasty warm, from near the fire. Outside, the slightly brighter sky revealed a new trail in the snow, which led to an outhouse where apparently an ax

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had been utilized just recently to hack away the ice around the door.

On the way back to the hut, Harry stopped and looked up in amazement at the sky. It was ablaze in color as though a giant were throwing buckets of fairy dust through the atmosphere. Harry had seen the aurora borealis before but it had only been yellow and green and sparse. This was a festival of the night sky and he stood transfixed by the silent spectacle.

Harry apparently stood gaping too long, because the hut door opened and the Shaman looked out. He had pulled on only his boots and tunic. He stepped out and looked up where Harry's chin was still pointing. He grunted and went back inside. When Harry followed, the woman spoke as he removed his boots.

"There are wolves nearby, you must be careful. They are hungry."

"Wolves?" Harry confirmed.

She handed him half a loaf of bread when he had settled back on the hides and passed him a stone bowl which turned out to hold butter of all things. Harry happily spread some on the warm and wondrous bread before passing the bowl around to the Shaman. Harry was glad someone was talking... in English especially.

She went on in a warning tone, "They go for the hands first so you cannot knife or spear them."

Harry didn't know her name, introductions had not been made, were not expected to, apparently. "I'll watch out," Harry said with confidence. "Thanks for the bread... it's delicious." And it was; Harry quickly devoured his half loaf and was immediately handed another from what turned out to be a pile lying on the coals. Before total silence could rule again, he asked her name.

"Siri Blind," she replied. Harry glanced over at the man but she didn't expand the introduction. Harry assumed he was Per Hossa, whom Snape had written to. What Siri did say was, "His English isn't very good."

"Oh," Harry said. "I don't speak Finnish."

She smiled then, which completely took over her face. "His Finnish isn't so good either."

"Oh." Her smile made him relax. He settled back with his second loaf of bread and ate until he thought he might burst out of his double layer of jumpers.

After sleeping, Harry had to check his watch to assure himself that it indeed was 10:00 in the morning. The sky was still merely a dull grey-blue and only the glowing snow made the world apparent, although misleadingly so. Harry discovered how flat the light rendered the snow when he tripped over a two-foot high snow-covered rock while wandering along the row of what he now knew to be huts, looking for Hedwig. He picked himself up and brushed off his face which burned from the cold crystals adhering to it. Harry had never experienced cold like this, it changed his very spirit,

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simultaneously dampening and awakening it. The woman, Siri, came aside Harry as he walked and at that moment Hedwig appeared over the trees and alighted on Harry's arm. Harry greeted his owl, very happy to see her. He gave her his letter and she took off again, instantly disappearing into the surroundings.

The day passed quietly after some things were attended to around the hut. A metal cage on top was removed and repaired. The ice on the lake was hacked open to fetch water. The wood pile was uncovered and wood moved to just inside the door. Harry practiced on the skis while the sun was highest, meaning that the light revealed at least the largest rocks and dips under the snow. He headed out 20 yards onto what he now knew was a lake, turned around with very ungainly movements, and returned. He repeated this many times until he was out of breath and his fingers numb from clutching the poles. He hoped he didn't have to go very far on them anytime soon.

The scent of coffee brewing filled the hut when Harry returned to it. He accepted a cup of it gratefully. It tasted odd as though it had been salted. He swallowed forcefully and also accepted a bowl of what appeared to be green leaves mashed in milk, which it was, except highly sweetened. Harry sat back and forced the food and drink down without any outward sign of the strangeness of the meal. As he dug in his pack for fresh clothes, Harry found the flask McGonagall has given him, but that he had forgotten about. Per wasn't in the hut and it didn't feel like the right moment for a gift presentation, so Harry restashed it.

Night came again. Harry curled up to sleep until a dull thrumming made him lift his head again. Per sat cross-legged on the other side of the hut, pounding on a shallow drum with a forked piece of antler. Harry sat up and scooted closer, curious. The drum had silhouetted animals and stick figures drawn on it in red. A deer, a wolf, a hut, a wolverine, something demonically grotesque, a hut, a bear, the sun, the moon, the mountain and more symbols Harry couldn't make out. Per drummed lightly for a while before dropping a ring onto its surface and whispering something. The ring bounced when he resumed striking the hide. It bounced around and halted its slide when it reached the demon where it simply bobbed up and down. Per grabbed up the ring and set the drum away, not looking up at Harry who finally laid back in the resulting silence.

Harry slept very soundly but had an odd dream about a following a bear while wearing skis. The bear skirted the edge of a deep ravine and Harry struggled to keep from sliding into the misty depths to the left of him, yet he had to keep following. Harry woke to a howling outside nearby. The fire was down to glowing coals. By that poor light he saw Per rise up from his side of the hut and go out, not even taking the time to put on his boots; perhaps he was still dreaming.

The next day when the light was good enough, Harry went out and investigated

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the little settlement again. He stashed his wand in his cloak pocket in case the wolf came back. He had little concern for his skills against it. As Harry paced back, Per was towing a sled, which he left before the door of their hut. He spoke in Saami to Siri in response to what sounded like a question from her.

“I cannot rest and watch the boy. I am going to set up some wards.”

Harry stepped over at these unknown preparations and asked Per, “Can I help?”

Per gestured at the skis and Harry moved to put on the pair he had practiced with yesterday. He had to hurry to catch up to his host as he skied off, towing the sled. When Per finally stopped on the hillside above the settlement, Harry was long since out of breath and his arms were drooping with fatigue from keeping himself from sliding backwards downhill. He coughed and didn’t fail to notice the odd look his gasping was garnering. Per shook his head and bent to uncover a rock. He looked it over and uncovered the snow from the next. This one had an odd twisted shape to it. Per pushed it with his foot hard until it rocked up and then he bent as though to heft it in his arms. Alarmed, Harry took out his wand and said, “Do you want me to do that?” Per ignored him, Harry tapped him on the shoulder and repeated the question.

Per released the rock and turned to look at Harry, obviously annoyed. “Sorry,” Harry said. “But...” he held out his wand and mimed moving the rock to the sled.

Per looked between the rock, the sled, and the wand before standing and gesturing that Harry should give it a go, in the way one might if one sincerely doubted the outcome. At that, Harry hesitated. He hadn’t used any magic since arriving. What if magic were different here? Why didn’t either of these two have wands if they were magical? Harry swallowed and swished and flicked at the rock. It obediently lifted into the air, oblivious to Harry’s doubts. Harry directed it to hover over the sled and down again.

Per, hands on hips, considered the rock in its new location. He tilted his head like an animal might before moving to secure it to the sled with ropes and grab the harness to tow it away. Harry would have offered to hover the rock the whole way but he didn’t think he could manage a hover while also managing himself on the skis.

Back at the hut, Siri came out and a discussion ensued. Per cleared a spot in the snow and gestured for Harry to move the rock. Harry did so. Per made some final adjustments to the positioning and then crouched before it as though communing with it.

“Come inside,” Siri invited. “Talking to rocks in the winter is slow.”

Harry, with one last look at his host bent over an inanimate object, followed her inside. “Do rocks talk back?” he asked.

“No,” Siri said with a laugh in her voice. She handed him a cup of coffee. “Trees



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sometimes do though. Water always does.”

Harry nearly spit out his coffee. He swallowed finally and, to cover, asked, “Is there salt in this?”

“Yes. Tastes awful without salt, snowmelt coffee does.”

Some time later, Per leaned his head in, barked something in Saami, and let the door close. “He wants you to help again,” Siri informed Harry.

It took until the end of the day to find and move two more odd-shaped stones to form a triangle around the hut. As they came back in for the last time, Per gave Harry what sounded like a long string of instructions Harry didn’t have a chance of understanding. Siri piped up immediately though with, “He says the rocks will keep the Dark Things away and that you should remain nearby. Don’t leave the village unless you are with him.”

“Oh. Sure. Thanks,” Harry said. His host though made no acknowledgment to this, simply stretched out on the hides and fell asleep.

Bored and not tired enough to sleep so early, Harry reached for the antler his host had been bent over the night before. It had a fantastically detailed pattern carved into it of a bear walking along a ridge. This felt queerly familiar to Harry, who had forgotten his dream. The antler was stained with grey fingerprints around where soot had been rubbed into the carving to make it visible. Harry carefully returned the antler as he had found it.

“Would you like to try?” Siri asked from where she sat working over something in the stone paved area of the hut. She didn’t wait for an answer, just dug out a piece of antler and gave Harry one of the knives from her belt. “Knife’s sharp,” she warned before returning to her task.

Harry, very carefully, tried to work out how to carve antler. He didn’t manage much more than scratching it randomly. Clearly there was some trick to it. Harry would have to watch more closely next time Per was working at it, or maybe even risk asking for a lesson.

The next few days passed this way, in regular chores to keep the hut livable, such as clearing the vent holes of snow, cutting new birch branches for the floor, hacking the ice of the lake, and always, always, chopping wood. Harry had never wielded an ax before, but it was handed to him without ceremony one day and he spent most of an hour working out the trick of splitting logs. Hitting them along one of the radial cracks was the only way to avoid strain. Otherwise one was required to either lever and heave the heavey, razor-sharp blade back out of the log, or pound the log and wood into submission until the ax re-emerged. As he stretched his unbelievably sore arms, Harry thought wryly that at least his physical training was continuing while he was away from the Ministry.

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Harry went back inside. Per had headed off some time earlier and had not returned. Siri was weaving something on the right side of the tent. They seemed to leave the left only for Harry's use. Curious what she was doing, he sat on the log on the right and tried to catch a glimpse.

"It is a shoe band," Siri explained, holding the colorful strip of red and white zigzag weaving up for him to see. "To keep the snow off of the socks." She bent her head back over it and resumed plucking the treads from a notched piece of cardboard and swapping them with one of the opposite color.

Harry started to remove his boots until Siri, without looking up, said, "Per is off hunting if you wish to help. We are low on meat and he has scented an unmarked and unburdened Vaja in the area." Harry replayed that sentence in his head without much illumination. Siri went on, "If you want to help you can put on your skis, go up the hill and circle along the ridge of the hill, through the trees." Harry wondered how she knew this. She sounded far away as she spoke. "Take that bucket with you," she said, pointing at the one nearest the fire.

"Okay," Harry said for lack of an argument against this task.

"It is probably unnecessary to tell you to make noise as you go."

"Probably," Harry said, thinking of his sorry skiing ability.

Harry carried the skis up the hill, trudging through waist-deep drifts at the deepest parts. The wind and cold now didn't seem so fatal when he was out, rejuvenating almost as his body rose to the task of keeping itself alive. Harry strapped on the skis and poled himself forward. It was hard going over the deep, unbroken snow, but he made his way well enough. He was so much in the rhythm of his skiing, in fact, that he didn't notice the reindeer until it flushed from the cluster of small trees where it had been standing, grazing on hanging moss.

Harry froze and watched the animal, the size of a small pony, turn one way and then charge back toward Harry only to turn yet again, snow pinwheeling off its hooves. As it leapt a thicket another figure flew by, low to the ground. With a growl the wolf bit firmly around the back leg of the reindeer and was pulled forward through the snow. Harry, stunned, scrambled for his wand, which was stupidly tucked in his jumper pocket. He dropped the bucket and one of his ski poles and scrambled to get into his coat. The deer dragged the wolf to the edge of the clearing – the wolf braking with its feet the whole way – where the prey fell and was immediately seized at the neck. Thrashing ensued while Harry tried to extract his wand with cold clumsy hands. Blood-flecked snow flew as the deer thrashed and Harry started to think that it didn't matter anymore. As he raised his wand, the deer fell limp.

The wolf turned to him and Harry recognized the light, slate-blue eyes. He lowered his wand and pocketed it, picked up his pole and the bucket and started across the

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clearing. When he arrived, the wolf was washing its paws clean of blood with its tongue, turning Harry's stomach. He held out the bucket and seconds later Per was standing there, blood smearing his face. He wiped up with a cloth from his pocket and with a knife he made a cleaner slice into the animal's throat and let the blood drain into the bucket.

Per fingered the animal's ear. "No mark," he said. "No owner. Any season is legal for wolves to hunt." He laughed then; this was apparently a more humorous statement than it sounded. He moved very quickly after to skin the animal and hack it apart, saving even the tendons. Harry was given the skin, now frozen into an ungainly shape, to carry. The heavier meat such as the ribs was propped up on poles and Per put the neck meat and smaller scraps into a sack he carried and they headed back. Red quickly soaked the bottom of the cloth sack.

"You never see wolf I think," Per said awkwardly, carrying the bucket so as not to slop the blood out.

Harry could barely ski as fast as his host walked. "No, just werewolves," Harry admitted.

Per came to a sudden stop and for a moment Harry felt his vision blurring, but he attributed it to his physical exhaustion. "Just werewolves," Per repeated. Harry wondered if Per thought he were lying.

Harry rested the edge of the heavy, frozen hide on his skis. "Yeah. My good friend is a werewolf, for example. And my friends fought Fenrir Grayback in the final battle."

"Voldemort's servant?" Per asked, his English suddenly improved.

"Yeah," Harry confirmed.

Per didn't move, just gazed at Harry with his abnormally bright eyes. "Like your father?" he asked, picking the strange words out as though taking them from Harry.

"My father?" Harry echoed in confusion. "Oh, you mean Severus," he said, understanding then. "Yeah," Harry admitted, wondering how Per knew that.

Per's eyes narrowed as though seeking something behind Harry. He eventually turned and walked on. Harry, fighting the dizziness again, picked up the hide as best as possible and used his other hand to hold both ski poles together.

Back at the hut the neck meat was put in a roaster and set over the fire. The scent that soon filled the place was heavenly. Per made a show of making a notch in one of the thicker wall sticks near the kitchen. There were at least twenty other notches above it. Per collected the remaining meat from the forest and when he returned Harry helped him arrange wood in one of the other huts that turned out to serve as a smokehouse.

By the time they finished, reindeer meat was being laid out into bowls. A bowl of

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liquid was placed on a wide board balanced between the entryway logs. Per dipped his meat in it before eating it. Harry did the same, only to discover the bowl was filled with melted reindeer fat. It tasted pretty good though, once Harry got used to the mouth-feel of it. He dipped his next piece as well.

“You hunt with that wand?” Per asked in slow English.

“Only dark wizards,” Harry admitted.

Per laughed, loudly, and continued to chuckle between hearty bites of meat balanced on his knife, cut against another wooden board. Harry’s meat had already been cut, he realized, making him feel a little chagrined. Harry remembered the gift and figured the moment didn’t get more congenial than this. He fished out the flask and handed it over. “A present,” Harry explained.

Per’s eyes went very wide as he accepted the silver flask. With a crooked grin at Siri who shook her head, he unscrewed the top and took a deep sniff. “Scottish,” he pronounced.

“I expect,” Harry agreed.

Per took a sip. “To the hunters,” he toasted. He handed the flask back to Harry who took a very small sip and still had to clear his throat to avoid coughing.

After the meal, Harry, from his usual seat on the left-hand pile of hides, asked for an antler carving lesson. Per shrugged and picked up the antler he had been working on. Eager, Harry picked up the antler piece Siri had given him and started across the hut to the other side. “Uh, uh!” Per said sharply when Harry was about to step onto the stone floor between the window and the fire. Harry stopped in confusion. Per gestured with his hand that Harry should go around the other way. Less certain, Harry obeyed, crossing from one log to the other to avoid the dirt floor in his socks.

Harry settled in, accepted a knife and a lesson in pressing hard and rocking the knife to produce straight deep lines. Then he was shown how to tilt the knife just so to get a curved line. Harry’s appreciation for the myriad different lines and detail of the bear carving went up considerably after these explanations. Harry set back and worked at his own antler, careful to keep the knife from slipping.

Harry paused in his work to shake out his hand and slowly asked Per, “What is your plan for me?” Asking this made a chill go over Harry’s neck, but he needed to know. He waited while Siri translated.

Per didn’t answer; Siri did. “He knows what is outside trying to get in, but not what is inside to meet it.”

“Oh,” Harry uttered, and bent back to his antler. Carving occupied the rest of the evening until the candles were snuffed for the night.

## ARCTIC FLIGHT

Author's Notes:

Another suggestion was pointed out for getting to the new chapters: Use the link from your favorites list (thanks Ezmerelda).

Ah, then The Book could be described as a Semisentient Sisyphusian Object. Or SSO. I like that. Sounds like a classification from the Department of Mysteries.

Stressed Harry – Harry's pride is probably easier to wound in given how little of his life is in his control at that point.

Finns – Boy, so many Finnish readers (and Scandinavians too). That's great! And bad, given that I've only been to Finland once and am now using it as a major setting for the next few chapters. We'll see how I do. I'm getting some extra betaing... Quiet people, the Finns. I don't do well there; I'm pretty loud.

Chasing Ginny – This is in reference to the Chamber of Secrets. That other unresolved throwaway I still haven't resolved.

Greer – I think I've succeeded where JKR failed – in creating a Potions Master that everyone universally hates. None of this, "oh, but..." that Snape generates :) Evil characters are fun and in fantasy stories, they fit in so well.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



# BLIND MAGIC

The next day a buzzing noise invaded the quiet and Siri said, “Scooter,” to explain, which actually didn’t explain. A snowmobile finally came into view around a tree-covered point in the lake. The rider got off and spoke with Per. Something like an argument ensued, where Harry was certain the rider wanted Per to come back with him. Per waved him off and the man reluctantly departed, slower than he had approached.

Per and Siri then exchanged words. “Come,” she said, “we should not keep them waiting.” She moved to get the skis and re-tarred them quickly. Per stalked off to check the smokehouse. He made a point of moving more wood inside. Harry moved to help but Siri restrained him with a shake of her head.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked, quiet enough to not be heard four huts down.

“The village over the mountain needs a Seer,” she explained.

“Per is a Seer?” Harry asked with interest.

Siri frowned and tilted her head while she worked at smoothing a ski bottom. “He used to be.”

“Oh,” Harry said, grasping at understanding.

“But used too much it is like staring wide-eyed into a blizzard and going snow-blind,” she explained. She finished the last of the skis. “Fortunately, I am a Seer,” she breathed more quietly.

“Why don’t you go?” Harry asked, accepting his skis back, hopeful that they would work better somehow.

She gave him a wry grin. “Woman cannot be Shaman,” she explained.

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“Why not?” Harry asked sharply.

“There is not supposed to be any magic at all anymore. Per is accepted, but I would not be,” she explained gently before going inside to collect a pack together. She came out and silently handed Harry a light sack of supplies to carry. Harry must have still looked difficult, because she pointed out, “You hide in your home country as well,” which Harry couldn’t argue against. She added, “Per is a very old friend to me, do not look so judging.”

Per reappeared, looking sullen. He took up his skis without putting them on and grumpily held out his arm. Siri grabbed it and they both disappeared. Maybe I’m not going, Harry considered, although he held a freshly tarred pair of skis. Siri reappeared with a bang and took Harry next.

They Apparated into the forest and Per was already gliding away. Harry struggled to get going and get into Per’s trail where he stood a chance of not being a drag on their travels. They slid down into a village composed mostly of cabins with a few of the turf-covered huts. The simple wooden cabins looked like the life of luxury to Harry with their metal smokestacks out the top and tightly sealed walls with no drafty airvents for the fire.

People gave Harry glances and then ignored him. He took off his skis and propped them on the side of a cabin with a long row of others. Then he hung back and watched as a discussion involving the lake ensued. Per gazed out over the water and the crowd fell silent. People were ice fishing out in the middle, otherwise there was nothing of interest. Per stalked away to the left along the frozen surface of the lake. Only Harry spotted that Siri had tugged the back of Per’s coat in that direction, and the group made their way down the lake shore following him. Harry followed as well along the top of the low hill that bordered the village. The wind was stronger up here, but it was warmer here in general, so it felt almost balmy.

Per led the way, Siri just behind. Eventually they stopped about a half mile down the lake. Harry had long since moved in closer, keeping himself just outside the crowd. Per pointed at the ice below him. A chain saw started to life and a stout man moved in to cut in the ice. Harry, intensely curious what exactly was going on, moved farther on away from the crowd to see better. The chain saw whirled higher pitched and was plunged again into the ice to form a square. When the ice broke loose, the saw was pulled with a jerk out of the way of the water that surged in as the ice block bobbed. The chunk was leveraged out of the way and a pole with a hook was put down into the hole. Surreally, someone sobbed just once, a woman. Harry leaned against a sapling and stood on tiptoe to see better. The hook had grabbed on something bright blue with red and white tassels. It matched the hats some of the villagers wore. Hands reached in and a body was heaved onto the ice.

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No one made a noise; everyone moved efficiently to lift the body onto a tarp and away back toward the cabins. Per and Siri remained behind. Per, with a great shove of his foot, slid the block back into the hole with a splash. He then gestured impatiently at Harry to follow. Harry hurried over. Strands of red and white yarn had frozen to the ice where the body had laid, only for a minute. He hurried past, jogging to catch up to his hosts, who seemed in an even less talkative mood than usual.

It wasn't until they were back to their own hut and having a meal of reindeer meat, bread, and tiny berries that Harry couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. He turned to Siri and asked, "Why was that person under the ice?"

"Accident or he was old," Siri explained.

Harry puzzled this, wondering bizarrely if somehow the man accidentally didn't stay above the ice, forgetting it was there because of a failing memory. Another possibility then occurred to him. "Oh," Harry said.

"The home is death too," Per muttered.

"The home?" Harry asked.

"The state-run home for those who cannot be cared for in their village," Siri clarified. "It is considered a slow death by some."

"Ah," Harry said, understanding that, but not feeling any happier.



"Come in, Severus," McGonagall invited when a black-robed figure appeared on the staircase to the Headmistress' tower.

Seeming distracted, as he had the last two weeks, Snape accepted the indicated chair and stared into the hearth. A jangle of porcelain brought his attention to the teacup and saucer the headmistress held out to him.

"Have some tea. I have chocolate as well..."

"What?" Snape uttered, pulling himself into the present finally.

A crystal model of Hogwarts Castle drifted nearby, suspended on a thin metal arm off the corner of the desk. It swung over Snape's teacup when he set it down, scattering miniature snow into it, creating a puff of steam.

"How is Harry?" McGonagall asked over her own steaming cup. "You have heard from him, I assume?"

"Yes. Hedwig is reluctant to make the trip, but I have convinced her to do so twice and will do so again soon." Snape clasped his long-fingered hands in his lap and resumed staring at the hearth. "He is living in a turf hut, apparently, despite the arctic temperatures and nearly nonexistent sunlight, but he insists that his host



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is keeping the Darkness at bay. He is also learning to ski,” Snape added as an afterthought, sounding wry.

McGonagall didn’t respond right away. The bright partial moon appeared and disappeared from the charcoal clouds out the tall window behind her. Two clocks ticked in tandem, setting a rhythm to the crackles of the fire. A portrait near the ceiling snored faintly.

“So, what is wrong?” McGonagall finally prompted.

Snape huffed. He had not moved at all in the silent minutes. “I do not know if I am doing the right thing, sending him off like that to someone I barely know anything of.”

McGonagall smiled lightly. “You’ll never know if you are doing the right thing. You just have to try your best,” she stated philosophically. “Things in the end always seem to work out.”

Half a minute later, Snape snorted.

“Your tea is getting cold,” McGonagall pointed out.

Snape stood and excused himself, gaze still inward.

“Severus,” McGonagall called when he had reached the doorway. “It will work out.”

“Are you branching into Divination, now?” he asked with some derision.

“No,” she said, smiling against his harshness. “I have just never seen Harry defeated by anything, that’s all.”



Short days passed north of the Arctic circle. In the mornings before Per got around to it, Harry fell into a routine of hacking the hole in the lake ice back open and splitting a fresh supply of wood from under the big tarp. The task was easy now – his aim as good as a practiced Quidditch Beater – but also satisfying, because the benefits of it so stark, as in, having water to drink and not freezing to death overnight. These meaningful, athletic tasks left him relaxed and almost tranquil for much of the day.

The sky glowed blue-grey earlier in the day now and stayed that way longer. The temperature didn’t seem to improve much as a result. Hedwig returned again with a bundle of letters from all of Harry’s friends. Harry impatiently finished the chopping before returning to the hut to answer them all. His hand cramped as he wrote out replies, already growing unaccustomed to holding a quill.

After Hedwig headed off with an equal bundle of letters, Harry swallowed a sigh at the notion that he had nothing else to do now. Siri’s narrow weaving was hanging

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from a nail on the wall. “Can you show me how to make one of those?” Harry asked, pointing.

Rather than getting annoyed at being interrupted from the work of pounding something in the stone-floored kitchen area, she gave Harry a broad smile. Without speaking she located a folded and sliced plastic card and long lengths of yarn. She started a weaving by tying each thread to a stick, notched to hold the yarn securely. At the end she made a hoop with the excess, just the size to hook it over a toe. Then she meticulously slipped each length of yarn through a slot on the card, alternating edge and fold for where they passed through. Folding and flipping the card up easily swapped the two layers of thread to make a weave. This didn’t produce a pattern though, Harry noticed, after he passed the longer weft thread back and forth a few times, getting corrected in silence with slow re-demonstration. The trick of using one’s finger to bunch the weave the same tightness after each pass of the weft was going to take some practice, Harry could see.

Harry only had two colors to work with, white and red and the old shoe band Siri laid beside him had a pleasing, and dauntingly complicated diamond pattern on it. She took the weaving back from him and slowly showed him how to swap selected threads from the edge of the card to the middle to get the colors to change. Or, alternatively to skip selected thread when passing the crosswise weft thread through. Harry realized that even a simple diamond was going to take some concentration, which explained how someone could bend for so long over the task.

She handed the rig back to Harry who hooked it on his toe and stretched his already stiff back before hunching over to try the next line. He undid it many times before deciding he had finally gotten it right. Siri moved back into the kitchen and said, “I will make you a matching hat. Then all you will need is some reindeer.” She was grinning broadly as she said this.

When Per reappeared, Siri announced, “We need supplies.”

Without further discussion, they put every empty sack over their back and shoulders and, towing the sled, skied to the village at the far end of their lake. Harry’s skiing was almost acceptable, he thought, although he was by far the slowest. Siri didn’t suggest Apparating this time and Per started out fast, getting far ahead, which implied that he did not want to. They made the distant village in four hours and some, by Harry’s watch. Most of the good daylight was gone the fires inside the huts windows glowed even from a distance. There were three cabins in this village, one of which housed the store.

“We will stay here with a friend for the night,” Siri informed Harry.

This raised Harry’s spirits. He waited outside as his hosts greeted and caught up with acquaintances. A pair of girls trudged by wearing tunics with colorful belts

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around the waist and thigh-high fur boots. They giggled at him standing there and glanced back many times before going out of sight. Harry doubted they spoke English, but he wouldn't have minded a little conversation with someone his own age, even one-word sentences. He sighed, leaving a puff of breath in the air.

A group emerged from the hut, including Harry's hosts and they all trudged down to another hut and piled inside. Harry bundled his feet under him to keep them out of the way. Conversation bubbled and then quieted. Harry looked around at the various faces, all worn and lined except for the very young. A plastic bottle of something alcoholic was passed around. Harry, feeling like he should remain alert, passed it up. The offerer said something insistent and Per explained – Harry assumed – that he didn't speak the language. An uproar of sorts ensued at the stranger in their midst and explanations and questions went back and forth until the topic was dropped as suddenly as it had been taken up. The small children were lying down, Harry wished he could too; it had been a long trip getting here although neither Per nor Siri showed any effects. Harry shucked one of his jumpers in the warmth of the hut and hung it up where the other guests had, on one of the crossbeam poles. His clothes were looser, Harry realized as he straightened his soiled shirt. They needed a wash but that had only come up once and had involved tediously heating lake water and very cold hands and in the end, even with the help of some spells that Harry had never been very good at, things hadn't gotten all that clean, or at least not house-elf clean.

Pipes were drawn out and the hut filled with blue smoke. Harry was offered a pipe that he turned down also, to much amusement of the assembled. The women sitting at the edge of the stone floor by the window gave Harry small smiles of sympathy at the ribbing. Eventually the crowd thinned and Harry could stretch his sore legs out. Their hosts were a man and woman and two small children. The man made a strange sound after he put the children down to sleep as though singing but not like any singing Harry had ever heard. It put him strangely in the mind of waterfalls and rolling waves. He had to shake his head to clear it in fact, the image was so strong. Harry lay down now that no one was paying any attention to him, making certain to leave space for Per and Siri who were also sharing the left side of the hut this time. The singing sent Harry directly off to sleep despite the loudness of it.

Harry woke in the middle of the night when the fire shifted. Per was adding wood, carefully lining the logs all up in the same direction. Harry raised his head and looked at the sleeping forms around the hut. Per sat back, reclined against the entryway log and sucked on a pipe. He gestured impatiently with his head that Harry should go back to sleep. Harry lay back then, realizing that Per had to stay awake to guard everyone from the Dark Plane. Harry glanced at the fur bundle on the far side that held two children and hoped he was indeed a Master of this.

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A commotion interrupted their fish breakfast. Someone was knocking on the door and calling for Per. Siri followed quickly out the door, both dressing as they went. Harry was slower but the crowd still huddled in the middle of the village when he made it out. Several people were talking to Per with animated gestures. Harry watched as Siri looked around, gaze distant. She had to pretend to be nothing, Harry thought, and do Per's job. Harry at first had wanted to think less of the Shaman, but anyone willing to stay up all night to keep Harry's Darkness at bay, Harry could hold nothing against. The conversation went on. When Harry saw Siri shake her head every so slightly at Per, Harry moved into the crowd.

He tugged Siri by the sleeve away from the others and asked what was going on. Per either noticed this or just happened to step away, moving the villagers with him. "What is happening?" Harry asked, feeling like himself for the first time since he had arrived. His wand felt warm in his cloak pocket.

"A child went missing in the night. The villagers believe the Shaman from the neighboring area is responsible." At Harry's mystified look, she explained quietly, "It is believed the Shaman take the form of wolves to wreak havoc on rival Saami."

"Do they?" Harry asked, thinking that Per had made a point about the reindeer he had taken down not having an owner. Perhaps that wasn't ordinary care.

"Perhaps," she replied. "Partly they believe this because Per is here now. Coincidences are not readily accepted here."

Harry, feeling danger on more levels than he had recognized before, said, "I know some tracking spells. I can find the child," he said. He had even practiced in the snow, he thought gratefully. "What house did the child disappear from?" Harry asked insistently.

Per led the crowd farther away. Siri said, "Per is explaining that he doesn't have his drum, but he doesn't really need it."

"But he isn't a Seer anymore," Harry insisted.

"He can often manage. He can be stubborn about these things, and sometimes the trees tell him, I think. Or he uses a wolf's sense of smell." The crowd had moved far enough on. Siri headed the other way and stopped before one of the cabins. "This one," she said.

Harry pulled out his wand and looked all around. "No one is supposed to see," he explained, although the British Ministry of Magic certainly wasn't going to know. Harry wondered who else might notice magic in the middle of a nonmagical village; not knowing made him more careful. Siri moved to stand between his wand and the crowd, which wasn't paying any attention to them.

Harry whispered the tracking spell which caused glowing trails to appear on the packed snow, colored according to how old the tracks were. There was one set of small

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tracks leading away, orange because they were old and then a gap in colors until red for this morning. The orange trail disappeared between the buildings.

“Nice magic,” Siri breathed.

“Why don’t you have a wand?” Harry asked.

Siri tilted her head side to side. “It would be talking to me all the time. I would have to get rid of it.”

“This has never talked to me,” Harry said as they moved to follow the trail. “Although it has gotten me into an awful lot of trouble with its silence.”

Rounding the next cabin hid them from view. Harry repeated the spell and the tracks reappeared leading up the hill and disappeared from sight in the copse of trees beyond. Snow hadn’t fallen in a few days so the physical tracks were not distinguishable from the general pounding the ground had taken. “I’ll fetch Per,” Siri said.

Harry stashed his wand away and stood off to the side. Per passed a minute later, leading the crowd. He turned and with a sharp argument and a gesture, insisted they stay behind. They clearly didn’t want to do this. Siri stood in their path and the crowd seemed to deflate, letting Per walk away. Harry took a few quick steps to join him. Per walked on without speaking, with Harry jogging occasionally to keep up. They made the trees and Per kept going. Harry considered repeating the spell but he would have to stop to do so. Per seemed to know where he was going, so Harry followed beside along the well-used trail of packed snow.

Per stopped suddenly and Harry had to turn and step back to rejoin him. A trail crossed the main one, a trail of large dog tracks. Per started out again. He stopped again a few steps later and turned left, following a small set of prints through the close brush. Harry wanted to ask if children were silly enough to run off at night often. It seemed a self-limiting behavior. He remained silent however. Per shifted to wolf form and sniffed the air before shifting back to himself without breaking stride. The trail stopped at the edge of a steep downhill of rocks. The view would have been breathtaking if the situation had not been so serious. Snowy hills stacked up on top of one another all the way to the pink horizon. Harry tried the tracking spell but it came up empty.

After they stood there for a cold minute, Harry suggested, “Maybe she turned into a bird?”

Per tilted his head and appeared to give this due consideration. “Perhaps an äparis took her off in revenge,” he replied, suddenly speaking clearly, although Harry’s eyes seemed to be blurring strangely as Per spoke.

“What’s an äparis?” Harry asked, when he decided that wasn’t just an English word he wasn’t hearing properly.

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“A ghost we don’t want to meet without Siri here to put it to rest.” He finished this in a way that made Harry’s skin prickle. Per turned back into a wolf and scanned the distance before transforming back to man. “Can you take us?” he gestured forward ahead, seeming angry at himself.

“Sure,” Harry said and took the arm held up for him. Harry focussed on a point three hilltops away and bunched them both down for the trip. They reappeared on uneven stone and struggled to stay upright.

Per turned into a wolf again, and this time he growled before he transformed back. “There, a wolf leads her.” He pointed. Harry followed along where Per indicated and with a great deal of squinting and pushing his glasses up his nose, could barely make out a figure in blue moving among the rocks following something grey. Per transformed yet again and started down, slaloming easily between the rocks. Harry followed slower, not wanting to intervene in something he wasn’t completely clear on.

The invading wolf heard or smelled them approaching and it turned and snarled. Per continued forward, weaving around the larger boulders. Harry realized as Per got close that the invader was substantially larger, with a collar of long thick fur and beefy haunches. Per on the other hand was as boney a wolf as he was a man and the match didn’t look so promising. The wolves faced off and growled in unison, fangs bared. Per lunged.

“NO!” Harry shouted, fearful of the mismatched outcome and perhaps remembering too starkly the fight between his godfather and a werewolf. Harry transformed and leapt from the nearest high-jutting rock, flapping twice to get above the fight, his wings relishing the cold wind. The invading wolf turned its snout up in surprise as Harry angled his wings and dropped forward fast. The wolf dodged as he descended. Harry swerved as well, cutting him off and then swerved farther to separate the invader from the other two figures. The girl let out a squeal of panic. Harry’s claws hit and he hefted the thrashing wolf into the air and tossed it aside. It landed hard and struggled to its feet, red streaked on its flanks. Harry wondered if it were truly animal or just a man.

Harry used his wings to hop agilely from rock to snowcapped rock, following the creature as it angled away. It turned and lunged at him, but a powerful flap took Harry easily out of reach and, as he drifted back to earth, he took a swipe with claws as long as the wolf’s snout and much sharper than its teeth; it heeded and jerked away.

Harry, not fully understanding the situation, wasn’t keen on seriously injuring the wolf, which was now slinking off with purpose, belly low. Harry hopped a few more boulders to follow and make certain it slunk away for good. Eventually, it found a wash and disappeared more rapidly. Harry landed and looked back. Per, now human

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and leaning down to talk to the girl, gazed at Harry in wonder. Harry flapped his way back over to them. The child gaped at him, eyes like tea saucers before burying her face in Per's coat. Harry transformed back to himself, but Per gestured for Harry to go, holding the girl's eyes against him so she could no longer turn to see the human Harry.

Harry transformed again and flew back up to the ridge where he watched Per carry the girl over the rocks and up to the top much farther down. When they were gone, Harry flew down to the wash and made sure the wolf had continued to retreat, and indeed, it was crossing over the next hill already, moving fast. Harry followed and landed ahead of it. With a last sweep of his wings for balance, he transformed back to himself and pulled out his wand.

"Are you man and not beast?" Harry demanded and then berated himself inside because were this another Shaman, he probably didn't speak English. The wolf growled. "One bark for 'yes'," Harry joked and to his surprise the animal barked once. When the wolf tried to advance and pass him, Harry aimed his wand and said, "Don't."

The wolf turned to him with a furious glare in its eyes. "What were you thinking?" Harry snarled, making the wolf pull its head back in surprise. The wolf simply glared balefully at him in response and finally Harry ordered, "Get out of here."

The wolf sidled away. "And don't come back," Harry added.

At this the wolf turned and gave Harry a look of derision. But Harry's anger was opening gateways again. Things slithered and snapped their jaws. Many, many things. An oily air blew around the rocks. The wolf froze for just an instant, eyes wide, ears back, before it loped away in a panic.

"Oh well, that worked," Harry said, calming himself with the humor, which helped the noises considerably.

Worried now that more villagers were in the area that might see him, Harry Apparated back to the top of the first ridge, rather than fly, and then began walking, reversing their earlier route. "Sure, sure," Harry said aloud. "That idiot is going to go home and insist some friggin' British dark wizard has invaded Finland." He sighed and shook his head. "Talking to myself is not helping."

When he reached the trail finally after two wrong turns, Per was there. He seemed relieved to find Harry. "I scared him off," Harry said. "Or the Dark Things scared him off, anyway." Per shook his head, looking like someone who had been in a panic and now realized it was for nothing. "Sorry," Harry said, regarding the gateway. "I got angry with him." Per didn't comment just started walking back the way they had come.

A party was in full swing when they returned. They were urged to stay but Per

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shook his head repeatedly and they went back to the hut to collect their things.

Packs laden from a visit to the supply store, which opened just for them, the three of them headed back over the frozen lake. Harry's legs felt like jelly and he really didn't think he could make it all the way back, even with his pack as light as it was compared to the others'. After they were out of view he was going to ask if they wouldn't mind him just Apparating the rest of the way, but after fifteen minutes or so, his legs unstiffened and warmed to the task and the miles disappeared behind them. When they arrived, he helped unload and immediately curled up for a nap under his cloak, even though the hut was icy from the fire being out.

Harry woke again to a meal of reindeer meat and more of the bitter leaf mush in sweet milk, which wasn't half bad now. As well there were now oranges from the store. Per and Siri ate bites of the peel as well as the middle. The coffee could lose the salt still, but this serving had whiskey in it, so it mattered less. Per ate, seeming impatient about something before dressing again and disappearing out the door. Harry sat twiddling his thumbs without anything to do.

"Do you wish to help with the bread?" Siri asked.

Harry shrugged, bored enough to take any task. She gestured for him to come to her part of the hut. Harry moved to join her, but stopped at the edge of the stone floor. She gestured again for him to come closer. Harry pointed out, "Per said I shouldn't be on the stones."

She gave Harry a narrow, doubtful look. "Are you certain you defeated Voldemort?"

Bemused, Harry replied, "Yes. Very."

"Per did not say to stay off the stones." She gestured with her arm back and forth. "He told you not to cross the stones. To go around the goahti the other way."

"Oh," Harry said, thinking that made more sense, but then thinking again that perhaps it didn't. All parts of the hut seemed more or less equal to Harry.

Harry made loaves of bread, kneading and flattening with his fingers. Siri started a lesson but halted it to just watch. "You are good at this," she said suspiciously.

"What?" Harry's thoughts had flown off elsewhere, to Hogwarts, to the Ministry, to Belinda, which had sunk him into a moment of anxiety. "Oh, yeah. I had to do a lot of cooking for my aunt and uncle, to earn my keep, I guess, when I lived with them." He set that flat loaf aside and started on another ball of dough that was handed to him.

"The stone should be hot enough soon," Siri said, putting a crooked, time worn finger on it. "Almost."

Per returned later and crouched beside Harry, taking a chunk of the bread that was on the stone and eating it. He looked Harry over as he ate, seeming to be thinking



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about what to say. Instead, he spoke in Saami to Siri who returned a question and a long conversation ensued.

Siri finally said, “He says you can become a monstrous cat griffin. He didn’t think the British had this art.”

“It isn’t very common,” Harry admitted.

“He says you took on the Skolt Shaman without hesitation.”

“I wasn’t sure it wasn’t just an ordinary wolf,” Harry pointed out, moving the bread from the stone to the coals to brown. “And at the time I was a beast too. Besides, how evil could he be? He doesn’t have a wand.”

Sternly, Siri said, “Do not underestimate powers you do not see.”

“I’ll try not to,” Harry said, but found himself dismissing the events, nonetheless. “What did he want with the girl?” Harry asked.

Siri replied, “Probably just wished to increase the rivalry between the groups. When people lived closer to the reindeer, slaughtering a few guaranteed this, but now the reindeer are on their own more, so the dead ones aren’t always found.”

Harry frowned at this explanation. “I didn’t know if I should kill him or not.”

His hosts gave each other a long look. Siri said, “Sending him off defeated is best. He will be embarrassed to return.”

Per was still eyeing Harry very closely as though they had just met. Eventually, he backed up and occupied himself with looking for something among the lockers. When all the bread was baked, Harry returned to his side of the hut and relaxed on the soft furs, enjoying the heat of the fire. The wind was lower today so the smoke trailed obediently out the hole at the top of the hut and the place was actually quite pleasant.

Per took out his drum and eventually the brass ring. Again the ring ceased its bouncing over the distorted stick demon. Per put the drum away and took out his pipe instead. After a long span of smoking he said, “Tell me a story.”

Harry wasn’t certain who was being addressed but Siri was looking at Harry expectantly so he said, “A story about what?”

Per shrugged, gaze far beyond the sapling and turf walls.

Harry sat up and crossed his legs. His socks were wearing out, he noticed, and his big toe was peeking out on both feet. “Um, you want a story about me, or Britain...?” Per didn’t respond, just puffed on his pipe. Harry waited for an answer but these two were good at silence, so he didn’t get one. “I could tell you about Dumbledore, he was the greatest wizard of our time. When he died, he was over a hundred and sixty years old-”

“A story,” Per repeated.

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Harry stopped and thought that over. A story. He had never really told a story before, he didn't think. "Um..." Harry finally began. He wanted to tell a story about Dumbledore, but where to begin? When he and the old wizard first met, Harry was too young to remember, although Hagrid had described the meeting often enough. "Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was already older than most when he took over being headmaster." Harry paused, this was hard, he thought. Especially since Harry really didn't know the old wizard all that well, really. He had to guess. Harry waited for Siri to finish translating before going on, "He needed to live longer, though, because he suspected that one of his old students was going to sink deeper into evil and would need to be countered. So he and another wizard by the name of Nicolas Flamel created a Philosopher's Stone. Flamel was a master of this and was already eight hundred years old."

Per sat up a bit at that with a sharp look and, for a moment, ignored his pipe as he took in Siri's version in Saami. Harry went on when it was quiet. "Dumbledore didn't just finish Riddle off though, I don't know why," Harry said in frustration.

"Story," Per insisted sharply.

"Oh, yeah," Harry said, forgetting. Also forgetting where he was going with the story. "To combat Voldemort's rise to power, Dumbledore gathered his friends and others together in an organization called the Order of the Phoenix. The Ministry didn't believe in the threat that he warned of, so they had to operate in secret as well. They also had to operate in secret because when Voldemort learned who they were, he would seek them out and kill them, or send one of his Death Eaters to." That is what happened to my parents, Harry wanted to say, but it needed to be a story, so he said, "More than a decade into this struggle, Dumbledore heard a prophecy that said that one was coming with the power to destroy Voldemort. Lily and James Potter, who were members of the Order, fit the prophecy and went into hiding. They had defied Voldemort three times, that's what the prophecy had said, and they had a son at the end of July, which fit as well. So they went into hiding and assigned a secret keeper to make them impossible to find.

"But the old friend from school they had trusted to keep them safe, instead betrayed them, and Voldemort came to where they were hiding, intent on killing their son." Harry paused for longer than it took for Siri to translate. It was harder telling it this way, as though it wasn't himself. It was easy now, through practice, to say, Voldemort killed my parents, but it was all so complicated and it so easily could have worked out differently.

Harry was seeing the scene clearly now as he spoke. "My fa- James Potter was downstairs when Voldemort came in, black hood pulled over his head so that he looked only out of the depths of it. But... James, despite being a... pretty good

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wizard, didn't manage to stop Voldemort." Harry stopped; he could imagine this confrontation too well, having been in that position himself. Had his father made a mistake? Had he been too surprised or panicked with a wife and young son to defend? Harry released the pent up breath he had been holding. He didn't know why his father had failed. Maybe he was just overwhelmed and not good enough. "Voldemort went upstairs where Lily Potter was left guarding their son. She pleaded with Voldemort." That I know, Harry thought and swallowed hard. "But Voldemort was hardly going to heed her. He killed her too and then turned on the boy. But in dying for him, Lily had created an old magic charm more powerful than anything Voldemort had, including the Killing Curse. So when he used it next on the boy, it bounced back at him and nearly killed him instead."

Per sat in silence after Siri's retelling. Harry didn't feel like telling any more; the rest of the story was too long. He hugged his knees even though he wasn't cold and stared at the tiny blue flames flicking occasionally above the red coals of the fire. The sudden silence turned out to be acceptable, since no one spoke.



"You are exceptionally quiet this afternoon," Candide observed over a steaming mug of butterbeer. The Three Broomsticks was quiet as well, the only movement coming from Madam Rosmerta wiping down the bar.

"Yes," Snape uttered, sounding not quite present.

"Worried about Harry?"

Snape didn't bother to reply to this, just continued to stare at the far ceiling.

"How long is he supposed to be gone?" she asked. When Snape shook his head to indicate he didn't know, she added, "The Prophet has been full of all sorts of theories. Rita Skeeter's last column said you refused to talk to her. Why don't you just set things straight?"

Snape laughed mirthlessly. "She does not truly wish to print the truth. It would be better if she made something up."

Candide appeared dubious but dropped the topic and moved to collect her things. "I was going to ask if you wanted to go out this weekend, but I expect the answer is no."

Quietly, Snape stated, "Harry always comes first."

Candide leaned forward over the table and said, "Harry isn't here to come first. That and he is eighteen." She shook herself and hitched her pocketbook over her shoulder. "Sorry, forget that. Of course he comes first," she conceded. She moved to

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stand but then held off. “You’re making me feel sorry for you, Severus.” His angled left brow and sharp disbelief made her confirm, “Yes. You’re tormenting yourself.”

The bitter wind made the window rattle. Snape said, “I should have been able to help him. He has already gone beyond me.” Candide dropped her gaze and he said, “If you wish to do something, perhaps a distraction is in order.”

She shook her head with a wry grin. “All right. I’ll owl you then.” As she stood, she said, “Who’d have known you were a sucker for sympathy?”



The next morning, Per pulled out a waist-high corkscrew and the three of them tramped off carrying a small tent to sit on the lake for the day and fish. Harry watched his host speak to the ice drill and it must have listened because the task of cutting a hole went quickly, and Harry didn’t ask if he should use his wand instead. The task of fishing did not go quickly, and a quarter hour into it, Harry decided this had to be one of the most boring activities in the world. It was cold on top of mindless and Harry constantly tugged Snape’s fur-lined cloak even more thoroughly around himself as he sat on a crate beside Siri. Even an extra inch of overlap of the cloak seemed to make a difference in his comfort.

Per fished not with a pole but with a large empty tin with a line tied around it. He could wrap and unwrap the line with ease though and soon a pile of stiff fish sat on a plastic sheet laid on the ice. “Tell me a story,” Per said after an hour of silence. “O red winged one.”

Harry, who had opened his mouth to dive into a story about Quidditch that he found he must have prepared without thinking, shut it again and tried to read what was behind that comment. He was forced to decide it was merely playful, because he couldn’t sense anything else. “It was a beautiful day and Gryffindor had a Quidditch match against Slytherin,” Harry began and decided from Per’s expression of dismay upon translation, that he had gotten even. “Harry Potter was only a first-year, but he had been allowed on the team anyway as Seeker, which was a first in over a hundred years.” Harry felt himself warming to this method of telling, especially given the rolling of Per’s eyes when he heard what Harry had said.

Per baited his hook from a worm that had been staying warm in his mouth, and dropped the line into the icy water. Harry had even gotten used to that.

“Terence Higgs was the opposing Seeker for Slytherin and had at least played in a match before. Harry had practiced a lot but he had never played, but he had a very good broom that the teachers had bought him and he was small and light enough to be quick on it. That and he made a very small target for the Bludgers.” Harry

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paused to huff into his mittens for warmth while Siri translated. “But well into the match, Harry’s broom began to jump about, trying to toss him off. He was high off the pitch and had a long way to fall.

“Harry’s two best friends were watching this through field glasses and noticed that Professor Snape appeared to be the one cursing Harry’s broom. He was looking up intently and mouthing something constantly while the broom kicked around.”

Per appeared to decide that this story was perhaps interesting after all, so much so that he let a fish tug his bait away by being half a second too late in jerking on the line. While Harry continued, he re-baited the hook with a fresh worm from his mouth.

“Harry’s friend Hermione was one of the smartest students in school. Maybe the smartest. She hurried around to the other bleacher where the teachers sat and lit Professor Snape’s robes on fire. Harry’s broom calmed down immediately in the commotion and he caught the Snitch, thereby defeating Slytherin, Professor Snape’s house. It was the first time Harry had won anything, so he was pretty happy.”

Indeed, Harry re-felt that moment of primitive joy even this many years later. He sat enjoying it again, until Per said, “That isn’t the end.”

“Yes it is,” Harry countered. “It’s my story.”

Silence ruled for a long while as fish after fish was pulled up out of the water after patient waiting in between. Per said something to Siri and she said, “Didn’t you or your friends complain about Professor Snape?”

“Oh, yeah. We complained to our friend Hagrid, the gamekeeper. He told us we had to be mistaken. Then he accidentally confirmed that the Philosopher’s Stone was being held at the school to protect it from being stolen. We decided that Voldemort wanted to use it to return to life and that Professor Snape was trying to steal it for him.”

Per relayed through Siri: “Did you know he was a Death Eater?”

“No. We just didn’t like him. Didn’t trust him. In the end after finding my way to where the stone was hidden, I found another Professor, Quirrell, trying to steal the stone, and he told me he was the one cursing my broom and Professor Snape was countering him to save me.”

Another long silence was finally broken by, “So, what happened?”

“Quirrell dissolved when he attacked me trying to get the stone. He was harboring Voldemort like some kind of parasite so he couldn’t touch me. The charm from my mother was still on me.”

Per again missed a fish. “So, how did you get the stone?”

“Ah, that’s another story,” Harry said tiredly, to his audience’s dismay.

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Per rolled up the line and hook, scooped up the plastic sheet with the fish and said, “Tomorrow we take a journey.”

Harry stood when they did and, given the complaints of his muscles, thought his legs could use a little more rest, but he didn't argue.

### Author's Notes:

Quidditch Schedule – If there was a canon fixed order of games (I honestly never noticed), then McGonagall must have rearranged it when she got the chance ;-)

Lapland – The Saami culture presented here is an amalgamation of 1970's setting and 1600's pre-missionary Shamanism. (Nearly every Shaman drum was burned, for example, and just a few remain in museums. Their owners may not have fared any better.) The culture is changing very rapidly, due to imported goods and technology, tourism, land use rights issues, flooding of grazing areas to build hydroelectric dams, and now, and probably the clincher, arctic warming. (Warm is worse in the arctic because the snow ices over and the reindeer can't dig for moss to graze on.) Do the Saami exist as written here in 1999? I'd imagine some still do since it is only 30 years since the publication of the books I read to write this part, but it is fast disappearing or reinventing itself for tourism, so a distorted snapshot is perhaps all you could ever capture unless you want to try to capture change itself, which I didn't attempt.

I finally put up a page of my own: [darkirony\(dot\)com](http://darkirony(dot)com) If you want links to all other stories.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



# THE JOURNEY

The next day Harry waited for his hosts to get the skis ready or to settle the foodstuffs into the lockers or some other sign of departure. Instead, after the fish were tended to in the smokehouse, Per worked at a powdery mixture on the other side of the hut. He was using a mortar and pestle to grind things up which he then poured into a tanned animal bladder. Eventually, he tied this closed and said, "Come," to Harry, who quickly put his boots, gloves and cloak on and followed outside.

Per cleared a firepit in the snow. There had been no sign of it from the white trampled surface; apparently, Per knew the area well. Per then started a fire without speaking. Harry sat on a sawed off log and watched and waited. The sun was trying valiantly to clear the low hill to the south and an occasional streak of orange would cut across the snow as a few stray clouds drifted by.

Per piled small twigs onto a burning curl of birch bark and when its flames grew to survive the tossing of the wind, he added three split logs, arranged in a pyramid. He pulled a moose hide from the hut and spread it on the snow beside the fire and gestured for Harry to sit upon it. Harry did so, pulling his feet close and hugging his legs beneath his cloak for warmth. The bare sunlight seemed to make it feel colder than usual. Per stared in silence into the flames as they stretched higher.

Siri came out and joined them, carrying the ungainly cooking stone. Her round, flattened face appeared even more deeply lined in this light. Per held his hands out to warm them and then placed the stone before Harry; upon it, he placed one of the well-lit logs, letting the other two collapse flat. He then swept the old blanket

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from his own shoulders over Harry's head, stretching it out over the stone. Smoke stung Harry's eyes and he turned his head to the side to breath. He watched Per untie the bladder and pore a handful of its contents onto the glowing wood. Acrid smoke billowed, and the blanket was pulled down to trap it in. Harry didn't want to breath but instinct made him and the world before him, the moose hide, the red glowing log, his own legs, twisted bizarrely. Another shallow inhale and the acrid smell became bursting color, sound became scent, color became noise. Harry tried to toss the blanket aside but it was too late; he couldn't lift his arms.

Harry opened his eyes. He was crouching on the ground, not snowy ground, but gravel and dirt. Around him, waist-high hillocks strewn with rocks and saw grass blocked his view except for Per standing before him. Harry dizzily got to his feet. The whole landscape, to the horizon, was composed of these same little clumps although some sported tangles of rusty metal wire. It was dim, but the light seemed to come from the ground itself rather than the sky, which was a flat grey, with no clouds and no stars.

Per gestured for Harry to follow and, on unsteady legs, he did so. They walked a long distance, their footsteps crunching on the gravelly sand. Harry, still confused, fell behind a bit. Something clapped its jaws together nearby and rocks shifted over dirt. Course metal snaked suddenly around Harry's leg, ensnaring him. Per spun back and stepped right up against Harry, lording over him, suddenly taller. His gaze was sharp as it swung around the nearby ground. The metal released Harry just as suddenly and whatever creature he had heard, scrambled away. In the distance, so did many other things. A breath of oily air touched Harry's cheek and he froze in stark horror. They were in the Dark Plane and Per truly was master here.

Per backed up a step and gestured for Harry to keep close this time. Harry stutter-stepped quickly to make the pace, having little interest in being left behind, unescorted. They walked a very long time, weaving around the hummocks and clumps of jagged metal. Eventually, they reached the edge of the world and below and beyond lay only greyness. Harry's eyes blinked, trying to find a distance to focus on, but there was none. The ragged cliff edge beyond his boots fell away into nothingness.

Per finally spoke, "When you understand this, you will rule here."

Understand what? Harry wondered. There was nothing here; although, as he thought that, a drift of icy fresh air struck his face before returning to stillness.

"Of course, you must believe that you rule. That is important," Per added. He eventually led Harry away again and they met another cliff, and again they stopped and looked out. Harry swallowed his frustration and confusion and let his eyes lose focus, trying to be open to what it might mean. Per turned away and gestured back inland. "Can you lead us back?" he asked. Harry realized that Per had no



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accent here, perhaps because he wasn't really speaking. Harry looked out over the ubiquitously uneven land that revealed no significant landmarks. Harry shrugged.

"Go on," Per urged.

Harry only had a vague notion of what way to head so he started out that way, making certain Per remained close behind.

Harry was accustomed to finding his way by broom and Sirius' bike over the hilly landscape around home; that wasn't too different from this. Rubbing his suddenly dizzy head, he made his way more to the left, since that felt correct.

It was difficult to decide if they were close. Per gave no hints either way, just kept close behind, driving the slithering, chattering, hungry things before them until they scabbled away in a panic. Finally, Harry, whose dizziness was only increasing, stopped and said, "I think we're there, but I don't really know."

Per said, "You did better than expected. We are running out of time. Come."

Harry followed his guide's faster footsteps as he made his way farther to the left, detouring around an exceptionally large weaving of metal, looming like a giant old box spring. By the time they stopped, Harry could barely keep his feet his legs had grown so wobbly and his head so dizzy.

Per reached out and put his palm flat on Harry's forehead and Harry collapsed.

Harry awoke while he was being carried into the hut and placed on an extra high pile of hides. His skull felt like a log which had an ax lodged in it and was being repeatedly pounded against a sawed off tree trunk. The only other time Harry had felt this awful was when Voldemort had taken him over. Same as that time, he was truly thinking death was a viable option. Someone knelt nearby and lifted him up to press a cup to his lips. Bitter liquid tasting of nettle slid down his throat and the pounding in his skull eased to feeling merely as though reindeer were dancing on his temples. He closed his eyes as he was laid back and blissfully fell asleep.

Harry still had a nearly blinding headache when he next awoke and, as he levered himself up on his hands to look around the darkening hut, he found he dearly missed Severus, not only because if he were there, Harry was certain his headache would be cured, but because he wanted desperately to return to the familiar.

Siri handed him another cup of bitter tea and Harry rested back. The board blocking the air vent nearby had been removed, letting in a steady breeze of cold, but wonderfully fresh air. Harry pulled his cloak closer around himself and drifted back into sleep.

It was a whole day before Harry felt like sitting up for more than five minutes at a time. Per was out and Siri was weaving her shoe band again. When his headache receded, boredom moved in. Needing something to do with an almost psychotic ache, Harry found the piece of antler he had been practicing scrimshaw on. The previous

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scratches looked a little like a broom shape, so he decided to extend them more in that direction. Given his errors though, he may need to add a rider as well. Harry worked at adding a tie to the bristle bundle, which meant making a short, deep cut in the antler. He pressed hard with the knife and rocked the blade side to side to make it bite deeper. His hands were not up to this much carving though and his hold on the work slipped. The knife broke loose and flashed downward into the fleshy part of his hand.

Harry let out a cry of dismay and closed his uninjured hand around the blood that oozed forth. Siri was up in an instant, calling out the door to Per in a long string of Saami. Harry felt very odd then; his cut hand went cold and compressed as though already tightly bandaged. When he lifted his covering hand the bleeding had stopped.

The hut door banged open and Per ducked as he came in. “Did you do that?” Harry asked, indicating his red streaked hand by lifting it before him.

Per nodded before kneeling on the hides beside Harry, booted feet carefully hooked on the entryway log. He inspected the wound and then released Harry’s hand, seeming less concerned.

“That’s pretty good,” Harry said as he dug his wand out of his backpack one-handedly. “You weren’t even here.” With careful concentration Harry used the wound sealing spell he had just learned but had not practiced for real. The cut was shallow enough that it closed up and disappeared on the first try. Harry moved to put his wand back away but was forestalled by Per grabbing up his now uninjured hand and gazing in total shock at it. “Oh, come on,” Harry said. “All Aurors know that one.”

Again, Per was gazing at Harry as though they had just met. He then pushed himself to his feet and stalked out.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked Siri, who had returned to her weaving.

“Nothing,” she insisted in a singsong.

Harry threw his cloak on and stumbled to his feet where he struggled to put his boots on. Moving was making his head pound again, but he ignored it and went out.

Twilight ruled the landscape. The snow glowed that eerie blue that made it seem the lake below them had risen up and now stood above them as a flat hill. Harry walked disconcertingly downhill toward this elevated vision where Per was chopping a fallen tree in half. Harry stood back and watched each long arc of arm and ax, the chips of wood scattering before the razor edge at the end of it.

Breathless, with the tree broken into three long logs, Per finally stopped and leaned on the ax handle. He was probably around forty but looked a worn down and weathered sixty and in his native shapeless outerwear, he almost seemed menacing.

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Harry wasn't certain what to say and Siri hadn't followed to translate anything complicated. Harry didn't want the Shaman annoyed with him, and he definitely seemed in a fit of jealousy. Harry had no interest in this being a competition; he needed help with only one thing, at which Per was an undisputed master.

"Look," Harry started, trying to think of simple enough words to express himself. "I really appreciate that you're helping me. I'm very grateful for that." Nope, none of the words were getting through, Harry could tell by the furrowed brow, but the tone might be. Per used the back of the ax head to knock the snow from his rubber boots. "Look, I didn't ask for this much power, but since it's the only reason I'm alive, I'm not complaining," Harry was talking more to himself now. "I don't want this other power for certain. I don't want to be Master of the Dark Plane, no offense. What I really want is a chance to live my own life for once."

Per had returned to leaning on the long ax handle and simply watched Harry as he ranted. Just as well he can't understand, Harry thought, I don't have the right words anyway. "Well, just... thanks. Thanks for trying to help me." Harry gripped the front of his own cloak to make more of a point of his feelings. "That's all that matters to me."

Per's bright slate eyes flickered to Harry's ungloved hands. In the heat of trying to be understood, Harry couldn't even feel the cold on them. He waved his earlier-injured hand. "I'll leave it cut next time if that makes you feel better," Harry offered, half serious.

"That would be silly," Siri's voice came from the stand of birch nearby. Harry hadn't noticed her approach. She spoke a few words to Per then and walked away.

Per rested the ax against a birch tree and approached Harry. When he stopped a foot away another world slid hazily on top of the current one, but oddly, upside down. Harry froze, trying to feel what this was around him. The breeze had stilled. Per spoke and Harry understood him perfectly.

"How did you, with your dark wizard hunted life, your prophecy-weighted childhood, with your... Death Eater father... how did you preserve such purity of heart through all of it?"

Harry relaxed a bit and half shrugged. "I don't know. This is just me."

Per laughed through his nose. "That Charm of your mother's still working upon you?"

Harry considered that. It was strange standing here in stillness with the wind clearly tossing the snow and pine branches around them. It was as though, somehow Per had pulled a pocket of the Dark Plane around them. "I don't know. I wouldn't mind imagining that." The effect fell away in the next breath and the wind cut through Harry. Per returned for the ax and they started back up to the hut where

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they ate smoked fish and bread in the usual silence.

Rather than return to carving after injuring himself, Harry worked on a letter to Snape and had a difficult time explaining how his instruction was going. He felt now like he was learning something, but when it came to writing down what, he realized he had only learned what he needed to learn.

Severus, Hopefully Hedwig comes soon to take this letter. I still have not seen any other owls delivering post here. I saw today the depths of Per Hossa's power over the Dark Plane. You chose teachers well. Harry imagined Snape being pleased by that. I'm still doing well. My skiing has gotten quite passable and I've gotten used to the cold, so don't worry about me, if you have been.

Harry folded the short letter, trying to count the days since Hedwig's last visit. He found that he couldn't, but it felt as though she should be returning soon. Every cold, dimly lit day stretched into the next, it seemed. Harry put the letter into his pack and stared into the fire, letting his mind relax.

He picked up the shoe band he had been working on and, noticing how much better the weaving was at the end versus the beginning, he painstakingly unwove and untangled it all in order to start again. Unfortunately, the previous weaving had reminded him of the pattern of it and with just loose threads it wasn't so clear how he was to start. He experimented a while until he had something that looked okay and had a nice pattern of interlocking zigzags but it wasn't how it had been woven before.

As he sat pondering it, wondering if he should start yet again, Siri said, "Every group has a pattern. You may invent your own, if you wish."

Harry shrugged. He was mostly doing this to pass the time so he continued on rather than restart.

Before the sun completely set, Per led Harry out on skis to the top of the nearby ridge. He gestured for Harry to stay and skied away about 20 yards before stopping and turning to look back. Harry slapped his arms around himself a few times to warm himself, wishing he had taken the time to put on more than one jumper under his coat and cloak. The wind pressed the cloak against his legs where it prevented a wave of blown snow from battering them and Harry felt very grateful to have it; although, given the wear it was taking, he was going to owe Snape a new one.

Per stood watching for long cold minutes and Harry realized that he was being tested. Per retreated another 20 yards and stopped again to wait. Harry had been starting to feel confident until then. An oily feeling came over him like an oddly warm breeze and Per immediately came back half the distance. Harry frowned in frustration and after that, 20 yards was too far. Per returned to Harry's side in two long strides of his skis.

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“Sorry,” Harry said. He really wished he could do better. He really wanted to go home.

Per started away without speaking. Harry followed, certain this wasn't the direction that led to the hut. They skied for half an hour or so, until Harry had wonderfully warmed even to his fingertips and toes. He was glad to be warm if only because he couldn't complain about cold feet when his skiing companion was using grass for socks.

Per came to a sliding stop on a flat area and Harry managed a clumsy one and stood just as still. Head tilted as though listening, Per scanned the sky. He finally pointed at a small bird flitting through the bare tree branches.

The otherworld calm slid over Harry and Per said, “That band Siri has you weaving, do not ever lose it in the snow.” Per was still watching the bird, which had fluttered to a stop on a high branch. Per explained, “I thought I heard it crying out, but it is not carrying anything.”

Harry pondered this without luck. “What would it be carrying?”

Per shrugged. “A piece of clothing. A shoe band. Because you create it, the band holds a part of you in it, so it is most dangerous to lose. That is a gouttalvis bird... it is deadly.”

Harry eyed the tiny thing, which didn't look large enough to survive the winter, frankly. It flitted up a branch. Harry still was not following the logic. Per adjusted his ski binding and straightened up, giving Harry an expectant look. Harry was busy trying to see the otherworld layered before him like a window reflection, but the snow was too bright. He hadn't asked more about the bird because he worried he was being put on.

Per continued, “If you see such a bird carrying something and you recognize the person's voice that it cries in, you must call out their name to make the bird drop the thing it carries. If the bird reaches the graveyard with its burden, the person is cursed to die.” Per started away. “Do not lose your shoe band,” he repeated sternly.

“Got it,” Harry said, and they slid out of the overlaying otherworld into the fresh, sharp breeze; this time in the direction of home.

The next few days were quiet ones of chores, weaving and carving. Harry tried hard not to think of home or of the Ministry and what his fellows were working on without him, because it made him feel left out and even more isolated. It also made the twice daily testing sessions with Per go much worse.

One day, up on the same ridge on a cloudy evening, Per came in close and eyed Harry with impatience. Harry heard himself apologizing again and when Harry spoke, the otherworldly feeling descended, presumably so Per could understand. “I don't know why I can't do better. I used to have lessons similar to this with Severus.”

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Harry took Per's interested look for an invitation to explain further. "Voldemort used to get into my head when I got too emotional so Severus was assigned to teach me Occlumency. But Occlumency doesn't work against this. I wish it did."

A long pause and then Per asked, "Those would be difficult lessons. Is that how you came to understand each other?"

Harry burst out laughing. Clearing his throat with effort, he answered, "No." After he laughed a little more, Harry admitted, "It took me a year to get a handle on the Occlumency. I really hope this doesn't take as long."

"You need to believe in your power. You do not."

And with that Per skied away to try again. Harry did a little better that time and after three more rounds of approaching and retreating, Per led the way back to the hut for the night.

The next morning, Siri got her things together and said, "Since you do not need me for communication I am going to see my family and to delay the others from coming here early if they get it in their heads." When she had everything together she said, "Keep weaving," to Harry and then held up her hand to stop him, when Harry started to say goodbye.

Harry looked up and down the row of huts; he hadn't considered that others might start arriving. Per was here in an empty, seasonal village to keep Harry isolated and that wouldn't last forever, he now realized.

It was the very next day that a snowmobile could be heard approaching. Per led the way out to greet it and spoke to the rider incomprehensibly. He came back and collected his things together in a pack and started off with an admonishment in Saami to Harry and a gesture that clearly said he was to stay put.

Harry watched the snowmobile as it seemed to rise up with the vision of the floating lake and finally disappeared over the hill bordering the far shore. Harry fingered the wand in his coat pocket before fetching his gloves to stack the day's wood inside the door.

A very quiet day and night passed. Harry lay awake listening for wolves. A low distant rumble went by in the night that made him squint at the ceiling in curiosity. Going out to investigate wouldn't get him far since he shouldn't go more than 20 yards from the hut and its wards. Although, Harry thought, no one was here and all he would put at risk would be himself.

With that thought Harry, by the light of the precious batteries in the torch, threw on his cloak, mittens, and boots and went out into the night. The moon was shrouded by clouds and Harry didn't see anything when he circled the village, wand out. Back before the hut he stood in the stillness, his breath puffing fog into the air around him. The rumble had stopped anyway, so he went back inside and tried to go to sleep.

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The next morning broke slowly through the clouds. Bored and frustrated, Harry took up his weaving and carving in quick succession only to hang each of them back up again. He decided on an early lunch, and as he looked around for more butter he came across the skin full of powder that Per had mixed for the journey to the Dark Plane. Harry untied the top of the bladder and very carefully sniffed. It didn't smell like much more than dried leaf. Per hadn't needed this for the journey, Harry realized now, rethinking that day.

Harry ate a little plain bread and smoked fish, trying hard to ignore the tanned bladder lying on a shelf on the other side of the hut. With the point of the blade Harry was painstakingly attempting to carve a Snitch above the broomstick on his practice antler, when he could resist no longer.

He dropped the knife and carving where he sat and put his outdoor things on with fierce purpose. He found the firepit and after several failed tries, got a good blaze going in it. He arranged everything as before on the moose hide, the bladder beside him, stiff from the cold air.

A light snow had begun to fall when Harry picked up the well-lit log by a cold corner and placed it on the cooking stone. He bit his lips as he held the blanket at ready and reached for the bladder with unsteady hands. The tie almost defeated his chilled, uncertain fingers, but he finally opened it and, using his palm, tried to measure out the same amount as he remembering from last time. Heart beating fast, Harry lifted the blanket over the glowing coal before him and tossed the powder over it.

One choking breath and then, before taking the second, he dizzily lifted the blanket off of the stone to avoid having it catch fire when he passed out. A second tainted breath and the world twisted away, even though Harry grabbed desperately for it with a second, more rational instinct.

Harry came to on the same gravely ground as before. Things shifted around him, including the thick rusted metal. You need to believe in your power. Harry quickly got to his feet and rather than retreat from the onslaught of scrabbling claws and snaking metal, he stood his ground. There was no choice. If Per could master this, then he could. The noises slowed, but things still moved in closer. A tall shadow flitted by as though trailing a cloak, but it didn't look like a Dementor. A creature crept out from behind the nearest hillock, long clawed fingers – half jointed the wrong direction – pulled the sawgrass aside to better peer at Harry with slitted eyes.

Harry met the rancid yellow eyes and didn't blink. The beaked creature tilted its bulbous head and brought another limb around. This one was capped by something like a lobster claw. Harry wondered if it was the powder that distorted his vision of the thing, or if it revealed its true form.

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Pointedly ignoring it, real or not, Harry started off, passing it as though it wasn't there. It balefully watched him step by. Farther along, Harry could hear it, and many others like it, moving to follow. Metal windings shuddered threateningly as he passed them. Even they felt hungry.

Harry's confidence in his actions faltered as he picked his way around the misleading ground and the air grew oilier. "No," he uttered and mastered himself out of sheer fear of failing to do so. He turned and looked behind himself, trying to mark the spot where he had arrived so as to find it again. Then he turned with purpose and hiked toward the edge of the world.

By the time Harry meandered his way beyond the worst of the metal barriers and stood at the cliff edge, he had attracted quite a following. Dark shadows with pin wheeling light inside them hovered above salivating Shetani which jostled and climbed over things that looked like thorny puffballs except with human mouths on the bottoms. The shadowy cloak folded down into a bat shape and flitted around Harry's head. Many other slightly less aggressive things scrambled around behind the first line of creatures. The stench of them all resembled fermenting rancid earth and as their numbers increased, the air grew weighty and slow like being underwater.

Harry studied the grey vastness before him beyond the edge, then turned and looked back at the hungry distorted things trapping him in. "No going back, I think," he muttered aloud. He had gotten himself into this; he was the only one who could get himself out.

Taking a deep breath and holding it, Harry stepped off of the cliff.

Bitter wind and blinding light bombarded Harry's senses. He couldn't breath and below his chest he couldn't move. He shaded his eyes with his blessedly mittened hand and tried to see through the onslaught of cutting white wind. He was buried up to his waist in powdery snow but it was the intense sun, slicing through the thin atmosphere, which was hitting him the hardest.

Harry, feeling his poor footing with alarm, drew a difficult breath into his lungs and looked about himself. Snow-shrouded mountains of indescribable beauty spread out before him. The vision of it alone stripped his breath away. From each reaching craggy peak streamed banner-like blowing snow which mixed with the thin clouds hugging the mountain flanks. The air was too thin; Harry stood still but breathed as though he were running a race. He wondered where in the world he was. It could be any one of many mountain ranges. The clouds prevented him from seeing down into the nearest valley to gain any clues.

Precise questions of geography were tossed from Harry's attention by his feet slipping again and his body plowing forward through the snow. He stood just a hundred yards below the actual peak. To the right and below him was a slightly



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flatter area where a smaller side peak rose, grey and unforgiving, out of the snow. Harry lost what little breath he had as his feet slipped again and a tiny avalanche poured down the endless slope before him, fading into the clouds.

Harry stared off a hundred miles into the distance, gathered his wits, and launched himself off the face of the mountain as a Gryffylis. The wind caught him as he cleared the peak, throwing him eighty miles an hour into the open space above the nearest valley. Harry oriented himself by shifting the angle of his wings to dump the air carrying him along. The peak he had arrived on was miles distant by the time he had himself stabilized in the buffeting gusts. He twisted his largest wing feathers to reduce their lift and flapped back to where he had started. This required wide zigzagging passes against the wind, but eventually, Harry dropped low enough to enter the lee of the mountain. He then flapped easily up to the small bowl between the peaks. His four clawed feet found easy purchase on the rough granite and he folded his wings and ducked under the breeze. His Gryffylis lungs were fine at this altitude and he was warm from the flight and the sun on his fur.

He seemed to have two choices. Fly down to civilization – whatever kind that might be – or find his way back to the Dark Plane. Harry found the best spot he could, cleared it of snow with powerful kicks, and transformed back to his breathless, unfit-for-this-environment self. He had gotten here by stepping off of a cliff and he had arrived at the top of a mountain. That probably wasn't merely coincidence. Every time Per had pulled the Dark Plane around them to talk, it had felt upside down. Harry pondered all this as his limbs numbed and his head grew faint.

Somehow the Dark Plane was close here; as in the Alps when he had sensed the Shetani on the train. It was an easy place for them to cross as well, apparently, although they hadn't followed Harry into the blazing sunlight. Harry needed to re-invert himself into the mountain again somehow. He adjusted his boots on the granite and imagined the uneven cliff edge as the inverse of the mountains here. He replayed what it felt like when the otherworld was pulled down around him by his host. He let his mind go and his eyes lose focus and fell, backward, into the sheer granite.

Harry's heels barely caught the edge of the cliff and he almost slipped back into the abyss-which-really-wasn't. The still air of the Dark Plane was a relief to his frozen limbs, and the burst of cold fresh air that came with him dissipated quickly. Something howled hungrily behind him and he turned forcefully to face it. The creatures that remained backed off a step or two and fell silent. Harry turned from them dismissively and walked along the cliff, zigzagging along with it for a long distance. He had to try that again to feel absolutely at ease with it.

As he walked, he let his mittens slide off his overheated hands. His earlier belief: that only his mind had traveled here last time, was apparently mistaken. And he had

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gone out the other side – a staggering thought.

Harry stepped off the cliff edge again, this time not at the very deepest scarp but somewhere along an edge. He arrived in much deeper snow and slid a long way downslope until he reached a bowl that was fed by a massive glacier. The sun was low in the sky here and the glacial ice glowed with an unearthly blue. Its hulking creak and groan could be felt even miles away.

Harry took flight again and circled the area. That was, until he spied an encampment, an actual cabin surrounded by tents in the middle of the miles-wide white bowl. Marks in the snow hinted at a landing strip. Harry veered away, hoping that he really had not seen someone pointing up in his direction. Time to go, Harry thought and quickly returned to the exact markings in the snow where he had appeared. He was, after all, bright red and hard to miss against the snow and white sky.

Again, Harry cleared a spot to stand, although this one was precarious. He didn't have much time to work out the falling, and he didn't manage it on the first attempt which required sliding down again on his cloak to fly back up and try it again. The second time he was successful and scrambled for the cliff edge again on the other side. This time he saw the creatures cower at the burst of air that arrived around him. Something larger snarled and snapped at him. It resembled a disfigured werewolf with one human arm and bare patches of pink skin on its sides rather than fur. Its flesh was torn away revealing white boney ribs. It snarled again and flattened its mangled pink ears against its head.

Harry lifted his cloak edges upward and took a confident step forward, toward it. It made a yelping snarl and twisted away to growl quietly from a safer distance. The other smaller things scampered backward to peer at him from behind cover. Harry's lips quirked; he was whole and could move at will in and out of this place of rot and twisted nightmares; he didn't have to let it touch him.

He stepped away, in the direction he had originally come. He had to find the exact place where he had arrived; his last test.

Harry walked a long time, growing dizzy and weary as he did so. His heavily booted feet began to drag, sending small stones before him and making him trip more and more often. His arms quivered from generating the willpower it took to keep moving.

Finally, he found the large pile of twisted metal resembling an old box spring. He was close. He moved to the left and meandered around more metal. The ground was disturbed here; it looked like footprints. Elated, Harry followed them, intending to stop when they did. He shuffled along, following the disturbed ground for a mindless time, until the ground began to dip. Harry didn't remember that from before and he came to a halt and lifted his head to look around. He was in a completely unfamiliar

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area, making his heart skip in momentary panic. Things shifted around him, closing in, claws snapping, limbs sawing together. He had walked into a trap, or was just about to; the trail had been faked. Harry turned and surveyed the ground. He had been paying too much attention to the trail to notice where he had travelled. It may or may not be safe to follow the same trail back out again as it may have been erased and recreated behind him as a further trick.

Harry rubbed his pounding, swimming head. He picked a direction and walked, ignoring the trail he had just followed, including his own new footprints. Turning back repeatedly to gauge his current view in that direction against his dizzy memory of just minutes before, he managed, with much backtracking and much anxiety, to make it back to known territory.

Utterly exhausted and even shakier, Harry stood before the same twisted metal box spring as before. He walked in a widening spiral away from it, hoping dearly that he would recognize where he had first arrived. He trudged for half an hour, long after the adrenaline surge from his near miss had worn off. He stumbled repeatedly now, unable to reliably sense what direction was up though his dizziness.

Harry stopped and turned a slow full circle. This looked like the right place; although he couldn't be certain given his blurred vision. He rubbed his eyes and turned again. The creatures had perhaps grown bored with him because few moved around nearby now.

So, if this was the right place, what to do? Should he fall into the ground? He was going to fall, literally, any moment, drop like a dead weight and then who knew what the creatures would do to him. Even the shyest Lethifold could get him then. Desperate now, Harry let go again as he had done on the mountainside and fell. He hung upside down on the ceiling of a white world for just an instant, and then darkness overtook him.



Per Hossa stepped off of the back of the snowmobile before it even stopped. As they had made the far side of the lake, he had felt uneasy, as though there were an opening to the Dark Plane nearby. The snowmobile driver raised his arm in a wave as he turned the noisy machine around and departed. Per pounded quickly up the shallow hillside to the village. He found Harry unconscious beside the fire pit, now long since cold. The bladder of hallucinogenic powder and the blanket tangled around him made it clear what had transpired.

Per knelt beside Harry's unmoving figure and tugged the snow-sprinkled blanket aside to feel how cool the skin of his neck was. Harry had been lucky to get wrapped

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in as much of the blanket as he had or he may have frozen to death after the fire burned out. But he was here in the Above World, apparently whole. Per quickly rewrapped Harry and carried him inside the hut. Siri usually sensed that there was trouble, and Per expected that she would arrive shortly.

Per piled the new wood from inside the door – Harry must have put it there – onto the fire pit. He needed a lot of heat, right now, not in half an hour when the wood caught fully. He crouched before the pile of fresh wood in the center of the pit, a circle of half-blackened stones. When he was younger, he could have ignited this pile to a blaze with conceited ease. It had been a long time since he had even risked the pride in attempting it. Were Harry awake, Per expected the British wizard could light a fire without effort. Having Harry around had worn more roughly on Per's pride than he had expected, especially given the pleading letter to take him in.

Per took up his drum and pounded it lightly. When he was learning Shamanism, it had been a necessity, but he later decided it was a crutch. Perhaps, a return to the beginning was in order. He let the drumming set his mind into focus and summoned heat from the surroundings, the way a master herder can summon and direct his dogs without speaking.

Unblinking, Per knelt before the hearthstones, gathering and summoning warmth in a place that had very little to give. He grimaced and almost gave up; except, the slightest wisp of smoke trailed up from the center of the pile. Bolstered by this, Per drummed louder and clenched his hand on the drum rim. He used to do this with ease, he reminded himself and rather than get dissuaded by that disgusted thought, used the heat of it to narrow his summoning to a single spot, which ignited in a pop of sap. He broadened the focal point, using the new heat that was escaping the small blaze to spread the fire quickly out the lengths of the logs.

Per dropped the long antler he used for drumming and more carefully set the drum aside. The heat was building fast from the fire, but it gave him more relief than victory. He re-approached Harry, noticing in the confined space that his soiled clothes were going to have to be taken care of.



Harry awoke to a not quite blinding headache and he swam up from unconsciousness into confusion. He was hot, very hot, and more confusingly, naked. Cracking his eyes open, he squinted around himself. He was in a different hut. This one had only wooden benches around the walls and a large fire in a sawed off barrel in the center with rocks placed on top of it. A bucket of water and wooden ladle sat near the fire. Harry managed to sit up and nearly passed back out again when he did so.

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A sauna... he was in a sauna, Harry's cottony brain decided. This was unexpected. He was warm though, all the way through, which he had not really been since arriving. He leaned over and used the ladle to pour water on the rocks. A satisfying sizzle of steam erupted into the air, raising the heat considerably.

The door opened and Per put his head in, spied Harry awake and reached in to hand him a pile of clothes. They weren't Harry's clothes – just the boots were his – but he put them on anyway. Wearing a heavy tunic edged with white and red weaving and the warmest trousers he imagined existed, he staggered out the door. The sauna hut was the last one on the end. Harry trudged through the snow beside Per who had been waiting outside for him. Per didn't speak and Harry's head hurt too much to try a conversation. At their usual hut Harry discovered that Siri had returned as well. She handed him bitter tea without a word and Harry honored the silence while sitting cross-legged to drink it.

Silence raged for nearly an hour. Harry's headache was almost manageable by the time his hosts began talking, in Saami, of course.

"You were very lucky," Siri said. When Per didn't respond, just continued to work at his ski binding with a tiny pliers, she said, "He is very famous. His death would have caused quite an uproar."

Per snorted. "He is unthinking, childish and impatient. I had no imagining he would journey without me."

Harry watched their faces for clues as they talked. Per sounded more like Snape than ever as he spoke. Harry figured that for a bad sign.

After finishing his binding repair, Per laughed as he set it by the door. "He is utterly unharmed. I would not have survived my first two visits were I not a Stauncher."

Siri handed Harry bread and smoked reindeer meat as well as two apples, which tasted like sweets. Harry started to settle in to rest his still vaguely aching head, but Per stood and said, "Come," sternly.

Harry followed his lead and put on his boots and cloak. The rest of his clothes were boiling in the large pot on the fire, apparently, or someone's were. Outside Per put on skis, so Harry did as well, slowly, because bending down made his temples pound. He followed behind as they skied up to the ridge. Using the well-worn trail from previous trips, they made very good time.

Per stopped and gestured for Harry to go on ahead. Harry did so, stopping 30 yards away, or so. Per leaned on his pole, waiting. Harry pounded his feet to warm them, sad that the residual heat from the sauna hadn't lasted longer.

Long minutes passed and there was nothing. No strange sounds, no oily hunger. Per backed up farther. Harry felt something then, but he easily pushed it away,

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instinctively walled it off. He bit his lip as hope tried to swell his chest. Per waited rather a long time before skiing back over. His pale eyes looked pleased, perhaps. Without a word he turned and skied away. Harry hurried to follow.

As they set their skis upright in the snow, Per said, "You are good."

"You're saying I'm done?" Harry asked eagerly.

"You are foolish boy," Per stated slowly.

Harry swallowed at the fierce look he got with that admonishment. Per gestured with his head toward the hut. Inside he spoke to Siri, "Explain to the young wizard that he is finished. I have nothing more to teach him."

Siri relayed this and Harry simply stood in the dirt entryway, trying to accept it. He felt lightheaded with elation. He could go home! Harry scrambled into his bag to write a letter to Snape. Hopefully Hedwig would come soon, he thought, as he pressed the nib of his never-out quill against a warm rock to get it flowing.

Severus, I have completed what I came to learn. I have the return ticket and will come home-

Harry stopped. "What day can I get home?" he asked.

Siri said, "You should stay for the Equinox. There is a little gathering in the village at the end of the lake we can attend."

"The Equinox?" Harry uttered. "That won't be until... March 21 or so."

"Two days," Per grunted.

Harry failed to breathe for many seconds. "I've been here a month and a half?" he whispered, stunned. Back at the Ministry his fellows must now be very far ahead of him. Belinda must think he was nutters. His plans for making it up to her seemed pale given the time that had passed. Harry's heart, which had been flying rather high, now sank. "A month and a half," he uttered again.

Harry returned to his letter, having a hard time focusing on the parchment with his thoughts circling around so many distant things... and will come home on the 22nd. Sorry it took so long for me to master this. Harry was sorry; he wondered if he were still in the Auror's program at all. Snape would not have forwarded anything regarding that to him, for certain. But I have mastered it, rest assured. I am looking forward to being home and seeing everyone. Harry then wondered what state his Chimrian was in. Hopefully Snape kept her with him at school; she seemed to tolerate him now, so perhaps she was all right.

Hedwig arrived the next morning. Harry accepted the thickest yet stack of letters, fed her, and immediately sent her off with just the letter for his guardian. Unable to sit still, Harry put his cloak on over his borrowed clothes – his were hanging in the sauna to dry – and skied out across the lake. He followed in the trail a snowmobile had recently left, which let him make very good time. When he was out of breath,

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he turn around with an almost graceful maneuver and skied back, stomach rumbling in the hopes of lunch.

Per and Siri were quiet through lunch, but it felt like a different kind of quiet this time. Per almost seemed melancholy. Harry returned to his weaving, determined to finish at least one shoe band before leaving.

“Thank you,” Harry said. “For everything.”

Per shook his head and continued to load his pipe up with something that didn’t really smell like tobacco, it smelled like wood. It was a long time before he spoke. “You go back to hunting dark wizards?”

“Yes. If they’ll let me,” Harry added grimly.

“How can they stop you?” Per asked, confused.

Harry grinned. “True.”

Per gestured with his pipe at the notched stick in the corner. “How many marks... for you?” he asked.

“Oh,” Harry said. “I don’t know. I lost count.” Per favored Harry with a most disturbed look. Harry said, “I wrote them all down once, but I didn’t count them. And there are more since then.”

Siri provided a translation of this when Per looked her way.

“Some I’ve had to catch twice,” Harry complained. “Three times even.”

“Best get back to it, then,” Per commented through Siri.

Harry grinned again, feeling happy despite the uncertainties he faced when he returned. He had survived this, the other details should be easy.

## CHAPTER NINE



# HOME, PART I

The next day Harry regretted his long skiing practice as they headed out for the Equinox party in the nearest village. He had noticed that Per was resistant to Apparating unless there was no choice, so Harry did not suggest it out of deference to his host. The second half of the trip, carrying everything he possessed, was all sheer willpower against lead-weighted limbs. The others gradually slowed down for him and even stopped occasionally to give him a rest.

Harry caught his breath and said, “We don’t do this at home. Although I kind of like it so maybe I’ll start.” He breathed in deeply a few times, leaning heavily on his poles to bend over comfortably. “Okay, I’m ready.”

The long meditative trip left Harry too much time to think and he began to wonder seriously how everyone, Snape in particular, were getting along. Of all the letters he had received, the ones from his guardian had been the most reserved and now Harry wondered if he had been keeping things from Harry to avoid distracting him with events out of Harry’s control. As his skis made their own gliding way in the packed trail, Harry, for the first time in a month, experienced that haunting memory of finding Snape beyond death. Trying to ski too hard with his lungs constricted, required yet another rest stop. When they started moving again, Harry ached for tomorrow to come and did so for several miles.

In the village a bonfire was blazing, filling in nicely for the sun which had just dipped sideways out of view. People were drinking glögg and sitting on sawed off logs around the fire. Per and Siri joined their friends and Harry circled outside the small crowd, just observing. Another group were having a lassoing competition and a dog



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barked excitedly every time the rope was tossed. While Harry watched this activity, someone giggled nearby. He glanced around and found the two young women he had met in the village last visit. One of them spoke and Harry found himself surprised to recognize the words, despite being foreign, and even returned the greeting. His pronunciation elicited another giggle.

The shorter one with her hood pulled up asked, “English?” At Harry’s nod she went on, “You are far from home. You have been staying with our cousin Per, I think.”

“He’s your cousin?” Harry asked.

“Yes.” Her companion gestured in the other direction toward another fire lighting the trees and cabins. “She wishes to join our friends,” she explained. They started to walk away, but she turned and said, “If you want to come...”

Harry eagerly followed to smaller fire with another a girl and a young man sitting at it. The boy was telling the girl about a great wolf his grandfather had once killed and wore every winter except for herding when it would scare the reindeer. Harry recognized the little girl as the one he and Per had rescued, but of course she didn’t recognize him.

Harry sat down without introductions, something he still found very odd. The fire crackled and spat, lighting the trampled snow. Conversation went on, although Harry found himself understanding a few common words here and there.

The boy asked about Harry and the young woman explained that Harry was staying with Per. Harry caught almost all of that sentence, even if he couldn’t have spoken it himself. Watching the Saami teens talking, Harry realized how dearly he missed all of his friends including Belinda and his fellow apprentices. He sighed; a sound taken away unheard by the wind in the boughs around them.

The young woman moved closer to let the little girl sit on their side, away from the smoke. “You dress like a native,” she said, referring to the borrowed tunic Harry still wore. “What is your name?” she asked.

Harry smiled, feeling better knowing some names. “Harry. And yours?”

“Anna.”

“And yours?” Harry had to specifically ask each of them, leaving him feeling maddeningly foreign.

They chatted for a long while, interspersing some English for his sake. Eventually, Anna stood and said, “Do you want to go for a walk? The wind is gone.”

Harry, whose exhausted legs were stiffening from the rest they were getting, stood also and agreed. When Anna’s friends declined to follow, Harry wondered how far they were going. They walked around the backs of the cabins and up the small rise behind the village until the fires were out of view. The stars were thick like sand in

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the sky and a few green threads wove randomly in the north.

"It's very beautiful," Harry said. He stared up and tried to take it in despite wishing for home more strongly than before.

Anna stepped closer. Very shyly, she said, "You are beautiful too. Or is it cute for boys? You are dressed like a herder," she then teased.

"Er," Harry began, but she had grasped his arms and the next moment they were inside somewhere.

After some scuffling a candle flared. "You Apparated us!" Harry said in surprise.

"Siri taught me," she said, sounding sly.

"Ah. You should study more magic if you can do that."

She carried the candle and its halo of warm light to a table. "Not much use for magic here. That Sending is useful. It is easy to get stranded in the snow, and I can always get home, although I am not supposed to let anyone see. Since you are with Per and Siri..." She poked at the coals in the stove to make them flare before coming back to where he stood. "Is this all right?"

Harry, not wanting to bluntly dissuade her, took a chair at the table. "I guess. Where are we?"

She took the chair beside his at the small table. "My house."

Harry studied the stove with its metal pipe running out the wall. "It's very nice. It's not a... goahti."

She giggled. "No. Much warmer." She stood suddenly as though unable to sit still. "I have a few of these," she said and pulled three magazines from the end of a shelf on the bottom. When they were laid out in the candlelight of the table, Harry saw that they were Swedish wizard magazines, worn ragged with the staples rusted. Still sounding like she couldn't contain herself, despite trying, she said, "In the south, Stockholm, they have, um, witches, women shaman." She turned a few pages. "You have these where you come from too, right?"

Harry nodded, feeling pained at her excitement; she wasn't allowed to practice witchcraft here and the notion of it clearly pulled at her. Harry could identify with that agony from his own fights with the Dursleys over his returning to school.

"And here, flying carpets!" she said with a laugh, pointing at an advertisement. "But I think I am boring you."

"No, no," Harry denied, but she closed the magazine anyway and clasped her hands between her knees.

"You have girlfriend?" she asked.

"Yes," Harry replied, mind leaping to Belinda and her shining hair and attractive turn of her head. He was glad also to settle the issue.

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“Ah,” Anna said softly. “Would you like tea? I can show off my other charming.” She heated the pot by placing her hand upon the side of it until she couldn’t hold it there any longer. “I know it is hot enough then,” she said with a laugh as she shook her hand to cool it, clearly enjoying the audience. “It is nice to have someone to talk to about magic,” she said wistfully. “You do not mind?”

“No,” Harry insisted. “Not at all. I’m going home tomorrow and we talk about magic all the time there.” He shucked his outer coat and hat as she poured since the fire had warmed the small room.

“I do not think I could talk only about magic,” she said, clearly disdainful. “There are so many other things, like reindeer and stories. Singing,” she added.

Harry grinned and cradled the cup she handed him, which on this journey he had come to associate with the immeasurable pleasure of warming his hands. Anna did the same a while before drinking. She also folded herself in the familiar slouch that kept one just a little bit warmer.

“But you do lots of magic?” she asked.

“A fair amount,” Harry answered between sips.

Anna studied him now that his outerwear was off, eyes going over his hair, which must have been sticking up everywhere. She gasped. “You have this,” she uttered, pointing at her forehead.

“Yeah,” Harry said. The candlelight must be making it stand out; mostly it was becoming less noticeable.

Anna studied him in strange alarm before turning back to her magazines and flipping through the one whose cover had a family wearing tall pointed hats posing before tall pointed mountains. She flipped hurriedly before stopping and turning it toward Harry. On the right hand page was an article on the Tri-Wizard Tournament with a big photograph of the four school champions, or more correctly, three school champions and Harry. The text wasn’t readable, being full of strange letters with cross-outs and dots in odd places, but Harry said, “That takes me back. That’s Cedric,” he said, indicating the smiling boy, confidently pulling his shoulders back. “And Fleur Delacour, and Victor Krum.” Fleur was tossing her long hair and primping a bit. In the lower right was an ink drawing of Harry holding the cup as though he had just won it, looking like he might have done if everything had gone normally. The artist had actually drawn him as though he were happy to have won.

“You are this wizard?” Anna asked.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“This wizard?” she asked again, pointing this time as though he might not be easily recognized out of that disparate group.

Harry laughed lightly. “Yep.”

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She looked at the picture of one very uncertain, much younger Harry and then back up at him to compare. “You are very powerful wizard in this case,” she said.

“I work hard to be,” Harry said.

This comment was greeted by more wariness. Harry sighed silently and poured himself more tea while she reread the article.

“It says something mysterious happened at the end. This boy died.”

“It was bad what happened,” Harry confirmed. “And a very long story... even if you like stories.”

She didn’t get a chance to come up with a response. A rapid knock was followed by the door creaking open; the other girl’s head peeked in. “Dad is coming!” she said in Saami, but Harry understood it and the tone conveyed the rest. The door closed again and Anna started to clean up rapidly and a bit clumsily as a result of panic.

“We’re only having tea,” Harry stated.

“Still,” she breathed.

Harry stood and restrained her arm. “Stand back.” He pulled out his wand and with two quick spells – Pack for the magazines and candle and Tiptop for the teapot and dishes – the room was untouched. But the sound of boots on the wooden steps meant the cleanup was probably a mistake.

“Don’t,” Harry hissed when she moved to grab his arm as though to Disapparate them. The noise would be too loud, he feared. He tapped her on the head with a Disillusionment charm and then himself. He pulled her into the corner and waved a quick Muggle illusion barrier before them. He hadn’t done so many spells in a row in a long time and it felt good to feel magic flowing so freely and easily through him as though the holiday from it had made the path for it clearer and wider than before.

He touched a finger to her lips and held her fast behind the small barrier. She stood against him, small and rigid under her tunic and fur. Wane light seeped in from the open doorway until the electric light overhead switched on. Anna gasped quietly as her father’s eyes stared in their direction before roving around the room. The man turned his wind-worn face around with a frown before he stomped out with his thigh-high reindeer skin boots. Anna almost collapsed with relief.

“He didn’t see us,” she whispered, confused. “We were right here.”

Harry cancelled the spells and re-stashed his wand. “We should get back to the others.”

“What else can you do?” she asked.

Harry shrugged but couldn’t help grinning. “All kinds of things.” He took her hand and Apparated them both back to the ridge above the village. In silent consensus they walked along the ridge and then down through the trees beyond where the smaller fire burned. Fish-drying frames stood, incased in ice along the lake edge. The two of

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them came around the long way and joined the larger group at the bonfire. An old man was speaking slowly and gesturing as the other's listened.

Per turned at their approach, but his expression revealed nothing. Harry, intending to claim that they had been wandering nearby all along, didn't move in any closer until the story ended. Same as at the end of all speech, silence descended. A few men took out their pipes and lit them, staring into the fire contemplatively.

Harry had gotten used to the length of the silences and began to feel the end of it was near and wonder who was going to speak. Per finally did, and everyone looked up at him. Harry couldn't understand any of what he was saying, but he turned and gestured for Harry to come closer.

In question Harry pointed at his chest with his thickly mittened hand. When Per nodded, Harry approached the inner circle. Siri, sitting beneath him on a long log cut into a bench, said, "He wants you to tell a story."

"Me?" Harry glanced around the expectant crowd. "Are you going to translate?"

Teasing, she said, "If your Saami is not yet good enough..."

"No, I definitely need a translator," Harry muttered. With a deep breath, he composed his thoughts and wondered what story to tell. Leaning down close to Siri, Harry asked, "What was the last story about?"

"Gregov was telling about the time when he was young that he saw a ghost herd and managed to throw a lasso over their heads to bring them from the underworld. He still laments that he only got five of the hundred he saw."

Harry straightened and thought that stories about magic might be all right in that case. "Once upon a time," Harry began, "there was a... an evil Shaman named Tom Riddle." This opening seemed to capture the wandering attention when Siri provided a translation. Anna's father stepped up to the far side of the circle, looking angry, but he held silent.

"Riddle loved power and he wasn't afraid to use dark magic to get what he wanted. For ten years he worked his evil magic, growing more powerful and gaining more followers as the years went on.

"One good Shaman, a very powerful one, stood against him but it wasn't enough. One day this good Shaman, whose name was Dumbledore, heard a prophecy that one was coming who could destroy Riddle. Unfortunately, this person wasn't yet born and soon after he was, his parents had to hide him from Riddle and his followers, who wanted to kill him. They didn't hide well enough and Riddle came one October night and killed them, but when he tried to kill the infant, his evil curse bounced back and nearly destroyed him. But it left a strange scar on the boy, in the shape of lightning."

As the attention grew more intent on his story, Harry suspected Siri of elaborating

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a bit. She looked up at him when she had caught up.

“For ten years Riddle was nothing more than a spirit haunting the forest, his dark heart – that could feel nothing warm and renewing, like love – refused to die completely. He roamed like this until someone very weak sought him out and let him live upon him, like a parasite. This began his rise back to power and he tried still to kill the boy from the prophecy but failed, twice, each time returning to being a mere spirit. Finally, years later, with the help of his most traitorous follower, he set up an elaborate trick that brought the boy and his schoolmate to him at the end of a contest. He had turned the trophy into a magical portal, so instead of winning, they were taken away to a strange place, a graveyard. Riddle killed the boy’s schoolmate, the way one might kill... a fish – without thought. He then tied the boy to the tombstone of his Riddle’s father and took his blood and brewed a fantastical potion from which he emerged a whole man again, no longer just a spirit.”

Harry glanced down at Siri and found her gazing at him oddly. She shrugged though, and dove in with retelling.

“Riddle intended to kill the boy but the boy was more a Shaman than Riddle expected. As well, the ghosts of his parents and even his schoolmate cheered him on in his battle and the boy got away back to where the good Shaman could protect him.

“Riddle had to plot again to trap the boy and this time his godfather died trying to rescue him, which made him very sad. The boy had lots of friends though and despite efforts by those in charge to keep their magic weak they worked in secret to increase it. And one day Riddle came to their school with 22 of his evil followers. But the boy’s friends stood with him, fighting his followers and giving him time to overwhelm the evil Shaman. The good Shaman had told him how to do this. He had said that feeling love was his best weapon, so that is what the boy did – he made the evil Shaman feel love by showing him the longing for his lost parents and his affection for his friends, who would do anything for him.

“This was enough to paralyze the evil Shaman, which left him defenseless. The boy then killed him with the same curse that had bounced off of him as an infant. And now Britain is quiet again, and people can go about their lives without this dark threat over them.”

Harry waited through the translation. He had wanted to say that Voldemort was dead once and for all, but he couldn’t find the words for it. This left him with cold prickles under his collar. Silence had fallen; Siri was waiting for more; the audience was waiting for more.

“Riddle, who threw away that name and called himself Voldemort, is gone, not even a spirit anymore, and his followers are all in prison. And the boy found a home

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and a father, finally. Not his original one, but a pretty good one.”

Someone asked Harry something and Siri translated. “He wants to know where you heard this story.” She was smiling slyly as she spoke.

“It’s my story,” Harry said.

Much murmuring followed this pronouncement. Per stepped forward and spoke then. Siri quietly supplied, “Per is explaining that you were sent here by your new father to learn magic from him.” The crowd seemed impressed with this – more impressed by Per than Harry, perhaps.

Eventually things quieted in the usual way and pipes were refilled. “Was that story all right?” Harry asked Siri from a spot beside her on the log.

“It is true. How can it not be?” she returned with a wink. “And it had a good ending.”

“It did,” Harry agreed, feeling that everything was all right in the world at that moment. He leaned back and watched the sparks from the fire swimming up into the blackness. The aurora was gone and the stars glittered thickly across the whole dome of the sky when Harry’s breath wasn’t obscuring them.

Anna’s father stomped over to them and looked down at Harry with uncertainty. He seemed about to speak as his eyes roamed Harry’s face and finally fell on his forehead. In the end he stomped off without saying anything.

Siri leaned closer. “He is an important man. You should not have gone off with his daughter.”

“She went off with me. And we only talked about magic. And by the way, you should send Anna to Britain; her magic is very good.”

“That would just make her more unhappy, I think.”

Harry frowned but didn’t argue. He studied the orange glow on the faces around the fire, finally coming around to Per’s with his unusually light eyes. Per looked up at Harry as though sensing his gaze and Harry stood and took the two steps to close the gap between them. Quietly but eagerly, given that he didn’t have much time left, he asked, “Can you teach me how to Staunch?”

Per glanced over at Siri, apparently needing a translation, and Harry realized now that Per only pulled the Dark Plane around them to understand when they were alone. Per stood, collected Siri without any indication he wanted her, and wandered from the immediate circle into the cold. Harry repeated, “I was asking Per if he would teach me how to Staunch wounds.” Harry, feeling even more eager, removed his mitten and held up the hand he had cut. The ache from the day before came back and Harry, thinking that he need not have been almost too late to save his adopted father, was almost prepared to plead for a lesson in this.

Siri said, “One does not teach a Stauncher, one simply is.” Per held up his hand

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to stop her speaking. He spoke and Siri translated, "It is a dying skill, so he is willing to test you."

They stepped over to the second fire in the trees, which was now unoccupied. Per tossed two fresh logs on the flames and sat across from Harry on a tree stump that, given its gouged surface, must frequently be used for chopping wood. Per took a knife off of his belt and removed his mitten. Harry tried to stop him. "I don't want-" Per gave him one of those looks that Snape favored and Harry quieted and watched as Per nicked his hand, letting the blood course down his palm.

Per watched Harry as Harry itched to take out his wand; this wasn't a test of that kind of magic, though. This worked at a distance, which was what Harry desperately wished to learn, believing that the knowledge would help staunch the haunting ache that still occasionally reared up inside him.

Siri spoke, "You need to concentrate." She translated for Per then, "Like a weaving, blood holds its owner's spirit inside of it. If you can sense its escape you can squeeze down the opening it leaks out of. Per says that he imagines packing snow around the wound. But first you must feel its escape."

Harry cleared his mind and watched the trickle of blood, which was slowing on its own. His focus relaxed and for an instant, Harry had the same sense he had with his quills, the sense of their Radiance. Per's leaking blood would be radiant, Harry realized. He relaxed again and the sense came quicker this time, although the bleeding had stopped naturally.

Per took the knife, still held at his side as though expecting to need it again, and reopened the wound, making Harry flinch at the necessity. The Radiant sense was stronger now as the blood ran thicker and dripped into the snow between them. Squeeze it closed, he had been told. Harry imagined a binding and then a cold binding, cold like the biting wind that came off the frozen lake. Per stiffened discernibly, even through his thick clothes. Harry lost his concentration and a new trickle of blood emerged. Trying harder to imagine binding and cold simultaneously, Harry focused on the point of leaking Radiance again. The bleeding stopped again. Harry held that imagining a full minute, long enough that the small wound should remain closed on its own. He raised his eyes to Per, half expecting another bout of jealousy, but Per had a crooked, pleased smile on his face instead.

Per spoke and Siri provided, "He says now he truly has nothing left to teach you."

Harry glanced in the direction of the rest of the villagers before pulling out his wand and healing Per's cut for good. Per scoffed and shook his head as though Harry were cheating.

"Thanks for the lesson," Harry said as Per held his hand to the fire to warm it. "That's a good skill to know."



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“You knew all along,” Siri said, “You just did not know that you knew.”

Harry watched the black logs settle lower on the fire and said, “Most all magic is that way, isn’t it?”

“The kind we have here, yes.”

They spent the night in the same goahti as last time. Harry woke long before the sun when their host was carefully laying logs on the low fire. Harry was immediately wide awake and eager to get on with his travels home. For once he was the one waiting impatiently for others to put on their outdoor gear. This was after a quick, and he assumed his last ever, smoked reindeer and coal bread breakfast.

The village was quiet when they put on their skis and slid away around the first bend in the lake shore. Breath heaving in clouds of steam, they stopped. Harry removed his borrowed skis and handed them to Per. The wind blew blasts of biting snow down the lake and Harry was not unhappy to be leaving on that regard.

“Thanks for everything,” Harry said to his host. When Per simply nodded in silence, Harry went on, “Really, if you ever need anything, just owl, or post even.”

Siri removed her skis as well and held a hand out.

“I can make it on my own,” Harry said, thinking that he could easily relay himself using the Oulu station as a halfway point.

“I will take you,” Siri insisted. Harry shrugged. “You may take the train from closer, if you wish, now that you are not a risk,” she pointed out.

An impatient Harry could not imagine the extra long hours of worry. “No, I’ll Apparate the rest of the way.”

“Goodbye,” Per said when Harry held up his arm for Siri.

Harry, who had been stopped from using that word earlier, replied in kind this time. With a clap! the icy flat expanse disappeared and a snow-covered rail yard appeared. They had Apparated behind a concrete block building adjacent to the Oulu train station.

In her methodical speech Siri asked, “Do you have an uncrowded place to arrive to in Helsinki?”

Harry nodded. “I was thinking of the employee toilet at the bus station. It was locked,” Harry added with a crooked grin. “But I used it because I couldn’t find another.”

“Well, Harry,” she began. “It is difficult to say goodbye but I think we should.”

Harry was glad to hear a sentiment that implied he had not been strictly a burden. “Goodbyes are that important?” he teased.

“One only says goodbye if one never expects to see the other again,” Siri explained.

Harry understood then why he had been kept from saying it earlier. He pulled off his cloak and removed his woolen coat which he had seen Siri admiring as she hung

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it up to dry after its sole wash. “Here,” Harry said, “in trade for the tunic and hat.”

With slow movements, she accepted the dark grey coat and slipped it on; it nearly reached her ankles. With a little bow she said, “Goodbye then... you have far to go.”

Harry bundled his fur cloak around himself and pictured the dingy little toilet carefully before saying goodbye yet again and Sending himself away. The small closed space of the toilet was a shock after the open air, but he hadn’t impinged on any walls or porcelain. He lifted his hand from his wand pocket where he had held it in case he had needed to do a quick memory charm.

The corridor was empty. The noise of his arrival had mixed in with the rumble of bus motors and the hiss of brakes. Harry purchased a ticket to the airport and found the proper stand for that bus. The others standing there occasionally tapped their feet against the cold. Harry thought it quite balmy this far south. The sun was even shining for real here, glinting blindingly off the icy road.

At the airport, Harry got another round-cornered ticket, this time to Edinburgh, and again waited in line to pass through the plastic gates. This time his backpack was pulled before it arrived at the end of the conveyer. The guard searched through it, staring dumbly for a moment at the quills he pulled out. He then pulled out something Harry didn’t recognize and measured it with a ruler and handed it to Harry along with his backpack. Harry looked down at a small knife with the familiar bear carved into the antler handle, but he was holding up the queue, so he quickly stashed it back away and moved on.

When he sat down he found a note in his backpack, written on a sweet wrapper: We cannot send you off on such long travels without a knife. Touched, Harry carefully packed the note where it wouldn’t get crushed more and fingered the expert carving that seemed to speak more than its simple picture could.

Given how much time he had before the flight, Harry backtracked to where he had spotted a row of gift shops promising authentic souvenirs of Finland. Inside one store he found little burl wood cups like those he had seen people drinking glögg out of at the Equinox party. Each one had a leather loop to go over one’s head – an essential feature for a long night of drinking when one is likely to misplace one’s drink. Harry, despite the high price, bought a handful of them. He also bought a jar of cloudberry preserves for Belinda and smoked reindeer meat for himself. All of this he managed to add to his bulging backpack as he waited for the plane to board.

When they finally allowed the passengers on, Harry took his seat with an insufferable ache of anticipation of being home. He couldn’t rightly worry about the immediate future because he would know very soon where he stood with his training and Belinda. Instead of worrying, he sat tensely, watching the men load luggage onto a conveyer that went into the belly of their plane.

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This flight was only sparsely occupied and no one took the seat beside Harry. He watched the snowy preparations for departure with a vastly different outlook than the flight out. This time he had no fears, just a painful longing for home to occupy him. Sitting back with a sigh, Harry imagined he was already home, seeing his guardian, his friends, and with the happy prospect of his own actual bed to sleep in.

The flight passed quickly and it wasn't until he felt the dip of the airplane and the steward announced that they were descending, that Harry remembered he wanted to test a hover spell. With a glance around him he pulled out his wand and set his foam tea cup on the tray before him. The stewardess was rapidly coming down the aisle to collect rubbish and he didn't have much time. The man across the aisle was reading a newspaper, and he conveniently turned the page and held it up so it blocked his view of Harry.

"Wingardium Leviosa," Harry whispered. His swish and flick was limited in the small space, but the cup flitted upward and hovered half a foot above his tray. Harry caught it, and with a smile dropped it into the stewardess' rubbish sack while hiding his wand under the tray.

Hm, he thought. Snape had not thought that would work. Harry would have to tell him that it did. He put his wand away, stowed the tray, and then crossed his arms, impatient to land.

Harry disembarked late from the back of the plane and he wasn't looking around much, so when Snape stepped up beside him, just as Harry passed the gate counter, he started a bit.

"Severus!" Harry said in pleased surprise. He almost reached out automatically to give his guardian a hug, but immediately thought better of it given how public this place was. To his complete surprise, Snape gave him one, albeit a quick and stiff one.

"How are you?" Snape then asked while eyeing Harry about as closely as he ever had, which was saying a lot.

"Good," Harry assured him.

As Snape continued to hold his upper arms firmly and verify that with his dark gaze, Harry noticed that Snape looked a little more worn than he had expected and that a few strands of white were sprinkled along his part. He looked noticeably older, even though Harry hadn't been gone that long.

Snape backed off and looked Harry up and down with his brow furrowed. "You have gone native," he uttered at the sight of Harry's belted tunic with hand woven diamond trim and the matching hat Harry clutched in his hand, half covered by Severus' cloak which he also carried.

"This was much warmer than what I brought. I traded the coat for it," Harry

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explained. "They joked about getting me some reindeer, but said my skiing was still too atrocious and I would lose them."

Snape smiled lightly then. "You are probably eager to get home..." he said, finally releasing him.

Harry nodded and they stepped away with Snape's arm around Harry's shoulder. Harry wondered if he were just misremembering his guardian after a month and a half, but he didn't think so. They passed between a large pillar and the back of a display of nuts at the first shop and Snape halted them, took a half step back, and after a glance around, including the ceiling, Disapparated them to their main hall.

"So that's how you got past security," Harry teased. He glanced around the house; it was just as he remembered it, full of dark varnished wood and grey stone.

Snape said, "I took the liberty of allowing a few of your friends to invite themselves over this evening... if you are up for it, that is."

"That's brilliant. I'd love to see them." With a glance down at himself, he added, "After a bath, though. And I should check in at the Ministry since it is only half past one."

Harry's heading for the bath was interrupted by Snape saying, "Your letters were tantalizingly short on detail. I would like to hear a bit more..."

"Sure." Harry gestured at himself. "I'm dying for a bath, though."

"It smells it."

"Thanks," Harry countered in a hurt tone, but he was laughing. It was too good to be home, and Snape's frankness certainly didn't detract from that. "How is Kali?" he asked from the doorway that led down to the bath.

"She is fine. A bit subdued. She is in Hagrid's care today."

"Oh good. Thanks for taking care of her."

"It was no problem," Snape answered softly.

Harry put a foot down the first step but turned again. "You aren't really Molly Weasley using a Polyjuice potion, are you?" Snape's fiercely disturbed expression answered for him. Harry muttered, "No, I guess not," before he escaped down into the dimness of the corridor to the toilet.

The first tub full of water grew alarmingly dingy even before Harry got around to soaping much of himself. He drained that water and started again, wondering how he had grown so used to not bathing given how happy his skin was to be clean.

Harry hadn't brought any clothes down. so he wrapped the bath towel around his waist and padded out toward his room, leaving damp foot prints on the stone floor. On the way, though, he found his bag still in the hall and decided to sort the gifts out of it for giving to his friends that night. As Harry crouched on the floor, wet

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hair sending rivulets of water down his neck and back, Snape came out of the dining room.

“Aren’t you cold?” he asked.

“What?” Harry replied, as he considered whether to give the reindeer meat to Ron or keep it. “No, not at all.” He reached farther into his bag and found the knife.

“You must be cold. There isn’t even a fire in the hall hearth.”

Harry stood, pulling the antler sheath off the knife to look at it more closely; it glistened and the edge looked quite sharp. “Severus, this is a house... it can’t not be warm.” He held out the knife. “Look at what they gave me,” he said.

Snape accepted the knife but did not look at it. He said, in the unmistakable tone of an order, “Get a housecoat on, now.”

Harry blinked at him in surprise. “Severus,” he uttered in disbelief.

In an equal tone of disbelief, Snape said, “You are making me cold. And I have on a cassock and a robe. Go.”

Not really hurt by being ordered in such a manner, Harry gave in. “All right.”

He returned shortly after dressing, wearing his ragged old Gryffindor slippers. His trousers had to be cinched at the waist with one of his old, smaller belts. He returned the fur-lined cloak to Snape. “I think I owe you a new one,” he apologized. As Snape looked the threadbare garment over, Harry added, “Thanks for letting me use it, though. I don’t think I’d’ve made it otherwise.”

Snape examined a long ragged tear that Siri had sown up. “How did that happen?” he asked.

“Oh,” Harry hesitated. “I’m not sure, but I think it was Tibet. I slid a long way down a slope, on the cloak fortunately.”

After a pause, “Tibet?”

“It’s kind of a long story,” Harry hedged. “Can I tell it to you after I check in at the Ministry?” he asked hopefully.

Snape failed to find an immediate response. He finally asked, “How did you get to Tibet?”

“I’m not sure it was Tibet,” Harry pointed out, starting to get impatient. “It could have been somewhere else in the Himalayas.”

This only dismayed Snape more. “How did you come to arrive in this place that you aren’t certain was Tibet?”

“That’s the really long story part,” Harry explained with extra care.

“I see,” Snape muttered. He stood and in a sudden change in topic, said, “While you are gone then I will fetch Kali.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. He wondered if Snape had decided that deferring understanding wasn’t such a bad idea.

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At the Ministry, Harry interrupted the afternoon reading review session. The room erupted with noise that seemed far more than three people could produce as his fellows leapt up to greet him.

“Hey!” Aaron said, giving him a slap on the back. “Rumor had it you’d be back today.”

Harry looked past them to Rodgers, who stood beside the front table, wearing a displeased expression. “Sir,” Harry said in his most respectful voice.

“Potter,” Rodgers uttered. “Going to be in tomorrow?” he asked with a hint a snide.

“Yes sir.”

Using a tone that implied someone else was making him do this, Rodgers said, “Give him the reading list, someone.”

Harry’s heart leapt – he was still in the Auror’s program, and at the moment, he didn’t even care who’s influence it had been that had kept him in. After Kerry Ann wrote down the readings from memory, Harry quickly departed so as not to try Rodgers’ good will any more than necessary. The only thing Harry said as he departed was that they could all come to his place that evening.

Hoping his luck held, Harry then headed directly for the Minister of Magic’s office.

Later, when the Floo deposited Harry in the dining room, he discovered a serious deficiency of arriving that way – there was no door to slam. Furious, in a way he had not been in months, Harry stomped into the main hall after resisting tossing the fireplace irons across the room. He only carefully set down the jar of cloudberry preserves because he was certain that Hermione or Elizabeth would be happy to have it. His ranting attracted Snape from the drawing room.

“What is the matter?” Snape demanded, sounding uncharacteristically alarmed.

Harry stopped in the center of the floor, far away from the single lamp so as to not make it too easy to smash. “Belinda...” Harry began but was too stung to go on. Snape’s sigh penetrated Harry’s red thoughts. “You knew didn’t you? It’s been in the paper’s Crystal Ball column I suppose?” he demanded.

Snape ignored the tone that could have been construed to imply he was somehow at fault. “Yes. It was hard to miss given the lack of other things to print lately. I did not tell you because it could not have assisted you to know.”

“It would have saved an awful lot of embarrassment just now,” Harry countered, smarting from his confused response to Belinda’s dismissal of him when he arrived at the Minister’s area.

Snape crossed his arms. “Ah, your pride is all that is at stake, then?”

“No!” Harry argued, but immediately wondered if that was honest.

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Snape glanced around the room as Harry continued to fume, and finally put his wand away; Harry hadn't seen him take it out. "You are not having any difficulty with this anger?"

"No," Harry said. He had learned to instinctively shut out the Dark Plane and hadn't even thought of that in his rage. He felt around himself. The interstice was there but it was idle and quiet.

"Well, good," Snape said in clear relief. "An interesting little test then."

"An interesting little test," Harry mocked. "Thanks."

Snape still refused to be baited. Calmly, he said, "I am indescribably pleased that you have control now. And besides, should you wish for meaningless companions, you are well positioned to have as many as you have time for."

Harry stared at him. Was pride all that was bothering him? He rethought the confrontation of just minutes ago. Belinda had been smug and that had bothered him the most. "But she's going out with Percy now!" Harry argued, cringing again as he tried to visualize that. "Says he's nice and attentive," Harry quoted, wondering now if that meant she hadn't thought him to be so. "Doesn't that bother you?" Harry demanded, thinking even Snape could see how disturbing that was.

"I am only pleased that you are better," Snape stated flatly.

"Didn't fancy having to lock me in a Hogwarts dungeon for the rest of my life, eh?" Harry taunted.

Quietly serious, Snape responded, "By far the least-disturbing choice available."

This sober sentence brought Harry up short but to really get past the anger he needed a distraction. "I have to get ready for my friends," he said. When Snape simply nodded, Harry stalked off up the stairs. At the top he leaned over the railing and stated, "I have total control," in an almost dark voice. Snape's unreadable gaze had lifted up to follow him. He didn't respond, prompting Harry to assert, "I'm a master of the Dark Plane now too." This statement flowed through him as though it were a spell. He could feel it even in his fingertips clutching the cold railing. "Those vile creatures stay away from this world now because they have to come through me to get in. And they are frightened of me," Harry asserted, pointing at his own chest.

When Snape again failed to react, Harry pushed away from the rail and stalked into his room.

When Snape approached, a short five minutes later, Harry sat sorting through his Auror books, just removed from his Hogwarts trunk, marking his readings for tomorrow. Harry wished he hadn't blown up like that and his unease made Kali circle his shoulders. "Sorry," he uttered. "I actually am feeling pretty good, despite dealing with maddening Belinda. I'm still an Auror's Apprentice, for example."

Snape hadn't moved, forcing Harry to look up at him. He didn't look like himself,

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making Harry's earlier accusation about Mrs. Weasley return to mind. Harry was beginning to suspect that the last month and half had been as hard for Snape as it had for him.

"I regret having been unable to help you myself," Snape said.

"How could you have?" Harry said. "You don't know..." he began, then stopped. "He took me there, you know, into the underworld, the Dark Plane, whatever you want to call it. I wouldn't have expected you to know how to get there. I wouldn't have expected anyone to know how to get there."

After a pause Snape asked, "What is it like?"

Harry put his books aside and said, "It is all grey, even the sky, with these small hills of coarse grass and lots of twisted metal everywhere. And the creatures follow you everywhere. Shetani and shadowy glittering things that I've never seen in any book, and ancient werewolves..." Harry was stopped by the notion that Lupin could someday end up there. The thought made him cold all the way through. "But it is the edge of the plane... where there is a cliff. When you step off you are suddenly in the mountains. I think the Plane is closest there; that's why I sensed the creatures on the train in Switzerland."

Harry paused, thoughts far away. Snape didn't interrupt his silent musings for a long time, but eventually he sat on the bed beside Harry and said, "I had no idea what Mr. Hossa might be able to teach you. But if it is effective at rendering you safe, I believe the ends justify the means."

Harry neglected to mention that he had gone to the Dark Plane on his own the second time, garnering the wrath of said teacher at his impudence. "I don't think he ever expected to teach this. He spent most of the time figuring out who I was. He seemed a bit fascinated by you too... knew you were a Death Eater."

"I told him that in the letter to get his attention."

"Oh," Harry uttered, surprised.

"So you know as much as Mr. Hossa about the Dark Plane?" Snape asked.

"I doubt it. He just said he didn't have anything more to teach me."

Snape clasped his hands before him and stared down at them. "I am very pleased you are home, Harry."

"Not as pleased as I am to be home," Harry countered.

Snape's lips curled a bit as he stood. "Your friends are most eager to see you, but given that you have training tomorrow, do try to make it an early night."

"I will," Harry promised, even knowing how hard that might be.

Snape turned at the door. "And if you should feel warm wandering wet in merely a towel, you are free to do so. It did serve to reveal how very much in need you are of a week of good meals."



## HOME, PART I

Harry plucked at his loose shirt. “I ate a lot, but I was out on skis a lot too. And I’m used to an Arctic hut, you know.”

“So your letters stated. They were not reassuring,” Snape pointed out.

Harry laughed. “I didn’t mean to worry you more. I just wanted to share what was going on.”

“And so I wished to hear. If you need anything, Harry...”

Snape still sounded very much unlike himself, but Harry didn’t want to tease him about it again. “Thanks,” he said instead.

### Author’s Notes:

Harry’s foolishness – Harry did not think ahead at all to returning and that the cold might be an issue. At worst, returning would be a luxury that would seem easily dealt with. And Per and Siri, while Harry may have learned to be a bit more circumspect in general while with them, were not going to cure him of being Harry. If they did, there wouldn’t be anything left to write.

Marks – The marks were Per’s, noting how many reindeer he’d gotten, presumably in wolf form. He was asking Harry how many dark wizards were on Harry’s own marking pole at home.

Dark Plane – The Dark Plane exists just below Harry’s feet so he has to invert himself into it. Stepping off the edge is just an absolute way of being forced between the worlds. I suspect that Per thought the edge exceptionally meaningful because that is how he figured out how it worked. The whole thing is bit fanciful on top of logical so spelling its function out completely is going to lead to literary trouble. The second mountain range was someplace with a high bowl like Denali that actually does have a cabin and a landing strip. Harry’s mastery – Maybe fast, but he only needed to learn that confidence in his power was all he needed. The power to open the gateway is equivalent to controlling it, but if you don’t know this you are merely a victim of your own situation. Which is why after one visit Per kept testing Harry, assuming he would catch on. Per could have taken Harry for another visit at the end to be sure, but he is more blunt than hospitable and assumes Harry would like to get on with his life now that he is not a danger. If rushing this is the only serious problem the story ends up having, I’ll be pretty happy, and maybe I can rework 8 to fix it.

## CHAPTER TEN



# HOME, PART II

“Good to see you, Harry,” Candide said as she came out of the hearth, almost the first guest. Hermione eyed her with interest as Candide then greeted Snape in what might have been a restrained manner. She handed Harry the triple layer collection of Honeydukes chocolates with a red ribbon around it. “I assumed you were probably missing these.”

Harry eagerly accepted the box. “Yes, thank you. Would you like something to drink?”

“Sure, something small... I can’t stay long.”

Harry glanced at his guardian, realizing that he didn’t know what the status was in this department, but Snape’s neutral expression gave nothing away and Harry led his guest to the drinks table in the main hall.

People began arriving in earnest after that and the hall filled with the pleasant rumble of conversation. Harry welcomed Vineet in from the front door. “You could have used our hearth,” Harry pointed out.

“I did attempt this. I was redirected to a very nice house up the street,” Vineet explained.

“Probably the Peterson’s,” Harry said, as he hung Vineet’s cloak up on top of three others on the overloaded hooks. “Elizabeth, the daughter, is here. Where’s Nandi tonight?”

“Visiting with our mothers,” Vineet replied evenly.

It bothered Harry that he couldn’t read anything into that, positive or negative. “In India... didn’t she just visit last month?”

## HOME, PART II

“If her mother were not willing to pay for these tickets, to make this trip she would not be able.” As they entered the noisier main hall, Vineet had to bend closer to say, “I am thinking the weather may have something to do with these repeated visits.”

“This feels like typical March weather,” Harry pointed out, thinking it wasn’t too bad, really.

“Precisely,” Vineet intoned.

Fred and Ron pulled Harry away then, through the many chatting clusters, undeterred by Harry’s attempt at doing introductions. “We just got it working, you have to come,” Fred insisted. “George is with Dad, just for this, rather than here.”

Harry was pressed down into a chair before the desk in the drawing room. Upon it sat something similar to a large crystal ball, although a badly scratched one.

“Look inside it, then,” Fred insisted, pushing Harry forward so his nose left yet another mark on the old glass. Harry squinted at something that seemed to be moving inside of the globe. The shape came into focus and Harry sat straight when he recognized Mr. Weasley. Fred leaned over Harry and said, “He wanted to welcome you home. Said he was sorry he was in a meeting when you stopped in today.”

Harry hadn’t actually gone to look for his department head. After his stop in the Minister’s office, he had forgotten. “Mr. Weasley?” Harry asked the exceptionally large-nosed vision of his friends’ father.

“Harry!” a very tinny voice said. “Good to, uh, see you my boy!” Mr. Weasley appeared to be getting as good a picture as Harry was, given his close squinting. “Everything all right, then?”

“Yes, sir,” Harry assured him, just as he had assured every guest that evening as they had arrived. This had inevitably been followed by assertions that he was better off without Belinda.

Mr. Weasley was saying, “Well, that’s just splendid, Harry, my boy. Do stop in as soon as you can at the Burrow. Molly’d love to see you and it is just too quiet. We’ve even let the gnomes move into the broom shed, just to get a little noise.”

“I will, Mr. Weasley,” Harry promised.

Mr. Weasley began to reply but the crystal sphere went blue and then clear, flickered in and out a few times with bright streaks, and then went clear for good.

“Aye,” Fred said in a very tired tone. “Well, you were finished, right?”

“Yes. That is slick. Did you invent that?” Harry asked while Fred carefully wrapped the crystal ball in black velvet and tenderly lowered it into a battered pink Muggle bowling ball bag.

“Yep, but it only works about a quarter of the time. Still working out the glitches and also getting the charms to stick long-term, and not cancel each other out...” He

## CHAPTER TEN

sounded worn down by the notion.

Ron said, "It's ruddy brilliant and it'd be a real seller if you could get it working better."

Fred tilted his head from side to side. He was wearing a violent purple smoking jacket with tails this evening which made him look like a showman. "Yeah, but I'm blasted tired of working on it. I think I'll put it aside for a bit."

"That put-aside cupboard of yours must be getting rather full," Ron criticized.

"Hey," Fred countered as he hefted the bowling bag. "Some of our best new ideas come out of that cupboard – usually on their own," he added in tone of confession. To Harry he said, "Dad really does want you over for dinner."

Ron added, "Yeah, he's been making us right crazy with asking us if we've a new owl from you and how we thought you might be doing. I kept telling him it wasn't worse than most stuff that usually happens to you."

"No, it wasn't," Harry agreed, wanting dearly to put it behind him and return to normalcy. Maybe after this party everyone would return to treating him as they had before, rather than with the extra curiosity and side whispers he had been noticing early in the evening.

Harry left them packing up and returned to the drinks table only to discover that he had forgotten where he had put his cup. He retraced his steps around the room with some dismay. "Looking for this?" Aaron asked, grabbing up the burl wood Finnish cup tethered to Harry's neck.

"Oh yeah, thanks," Harry said. "No wonder I couldn't find it." He went back to the punch bowl and filled his small cup, drank it down, and filled it again before joining Aaron and his date as they discussed the upcoming Gryffindor-Hufflepuff Quidditch match.

Over near the door to the quieter library, Kerry Ann abandoned Vineet to intercept Fred Weasley, the only interesting male in the room who was reputed to be unattached. Vineet watched the house-elf creep in to hand a steaming mug, smelling tantalizingly of chocolate, to Hermione. Using this interruption as an opening, he followed the elf in.

Hermione was just closing her eyes with her nose over the mug. "No one makes a hot cocoa like Winky," she reverently stated.

Vineet put his hands behind his back as a way of resisting a bout of chocolate jealousy. "Harmony," he intoned with a small bow of his head.

"Hi," Hermione said, gesturing with her mug. "Lots of interesting books." She sounded as though she wished to excuse herself for hiding away from the party, but she couldn't help continuing to peruse the shelves.

## HOME, PART II

Vineet stepped over and looked the shelf up and down. “The collection is incomplete, I think.”

“Is it?” Hermione asked in surprise.

“Flight or Fright, should be here beside Goldwing’s Duel or Die,” Vineet pointed out.

“Oh,” Hermione uttered. “I have to admit... I’m not as well read in offensive magic, more defensive... as well as general knowledge.” She lowered her mug to the small desk, careful to set it on the blotter. “Like these old Wizard Encyclopedia Albion Annuals. I don’t remember these here before.” She pulled one of the tall thin books off the bottom shelf and flipped it open. “Nineteen Hundred and Seventy Five, that was ages ago. ‘Harvey Meyers becomes the first assistant to the Minister in five years to survive more than six months in his position before he mysteriously disappears...’ Bad times, I guess.” She put the book back away, as though that long ago was not worth dwelling on. “It’s Vineet, right?”

“Few call me that, actually,” Vineet said, running his brown finger along a high shelf. “Usually I am called by Vishnu.”

“Oh, that’s a nice name,” Hermione said. “Why does Harry call you Vineet?”

“It is officially my name. I was mistaken in introducing myself in this way to him, perhaps.”

Hermione’s brow furrowed. “Is the other your dachnam or something?”

Vineet ceased his shelf browsing. “Yes. You know of such things?”

Hermione blushed lightly and shrugged. “I’ve... done a bit of reading.”

Vineet eyed the abandoned mug on the blotter and bit his lip before saying, “Harmony, you have been Harry’s friend for a long time, I think.”

Hermione replied, “A very long time, and my name isn’t Harmony.”

The evening wound on and the party was beginning to thin out. A glance at the clock showed it to only be 10:00, which meant that many people had responsibilities the next day. Harry wandered into the dining room. Snape sat at the table, apparently sharing a pot of tea with Hermione who stood beside the hearth. Harry, his feet unaccustomed to so many hours standing on a hard stone floor, sat heavily across from his guardian.

“How is the party?” Snape asked.

“S good,” Harry replied. “People are going home early, though.”

“Fortunately,” Snape said, the flicker of the hearth making his expression unclear. “As it may be getting to be that time.”

“You think?” Harry asked in disappointment.

Snape sat back and turned his teacup in his long hands. “I expected that you would wish to impress Rodgers upon your return...”

## CHAPTER TEN

“Yeah,” Harry breathed. “I do wish.”

Aaron came in then, arm around his date. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Bro. Good to see you again, Professor.” They were gone moments later. Even less sound came from the main hall after that.

“I have a question,” Harry asked Snape, thinking of Aaron’s arm comfortably around his date’s waist. “If you had to arrange a marriage for me...”

“If I what?” Snape interrupted. “How much of that punch have you consumed?”

Harry stared into his cup, still tethered to his neck. “I lost track.”

Snape appeared highly disapproving of this. He sighed and said, “Better mix you a dose of neutralizer before you go to sleep.”

“Thanks,” Harry uttered gratefully; he really did need to be at his best.

“Do not expect it next time,” Snape growled lightly. “But... you were in the middle of some bizarre question...”

Harry regrouped his thoughts. “Yeah. So if you HAD to arrange a marriage, who would you pick?”

“For you?” Snape confirmed sharply.

“Yeah,” Harry persisted.

Snape fell thoughtful a few seconds before replying. “I expect I would choose Ms. Weasley.”

“What?” Harry uttered in surprise.

Hermione giggled and said, “That would go over well all around.”

“Why her?” Harry asked.

Snape crossed his arms. “Why not? Seems to tolerate you well enough.”

“Well, she’s like a sister, for one thing,” Harry countered.

“I also think she’d be a good match,” Hermione offered.

“Don’t you start too,” Harry complained before he glanced around, “Did Ron go?”

“No, I think he’s still here,” Hermione replied. “Ginny and he are very different, you know.”

“No, they aren’t,” Harry argued, sounding difficult.

Snape sipped his drink and retorted, “You did ask.” Eyes sharp he said, “Perhaps you were hoping for a different answer?”

Harry looked away. Maybe he had been.

After the few remaining guests had gone, Harry yawned and rose to go to his room. “Are you going back to Hogwarts tonight?” he asked.

“Others are covering until morning,” Snape replied. “I will go then.”

Harry smiled broadly at this news, making Snape glance away from his bright elation. “I’ll see you in the morning, then,” Harry said.

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Snape stood as well. "I'll mix you a bit of potion..."

Harry rubbed his forehead where a mild headache bit at him. "Thanks."

Harry was sitting on his bed reading a bit more for training the next day when Snape entered, carrying a mug half-full of thick fizzing pink liquid. As he accepted the mug, Harry said, "Maybe I should have held off on the party. I barely skimmed tomorrow's readings."

"Rodgers cannot kick you out," Snape stated.

"And you would know this, how?" Harry asked suspiciously.

Snape's lips curled. "I work closely with a member of the Wizengamot, remember?"

Again, Harry found himself not caring that such influence had been brought to bear on his life. "Tell her thanks; will you?"

"Certainly," Snape intoned. "And I think sleep will serve you better than reading more at this point."

Harry closed the book on advanced distraction techniques and set it on the nightstand. When Snape moved toward the door, Harry said, "Thanks for everything."

"Thanks are unnecessary, Harry," Snape stated soberly.

Harry considered Snape as he stood in the doorway, worn robes lit both by the chandelier behind him and by Harry's bedside lamp. He had changed in Harry's absence; he had mellowed and his hard edges were no longer sharp enough to cut. Harry too had changed, but he hadn't yet figured out how, exactly. All he knew was that they had drifted apart and he couldn't see how to pull them back in sync.

"Should you need anything, Harry..." Snape intoned with a dip of his head.

It was queer for Snape to be so outwardly caring yet feel more the stranger for it. "Sure," Harry said.

After a long look Snape departed and a minute later the chandelier went dim.



The next day Rodgers treated Harry as brusquely as he had before Harry left and seemed resigned to his resuming Auror training. To Harry's relief, he didn't expect him to produce spells that Harry had missed, nor did he select him more than average to discuss the readings and Harry managed all right on that part, to his relief. His mind felt clear and uncluttered, and remembering what he had read the day before was unexpectedly easy.

The day passed quickly, bringing with it the wonderful feeling of a life back in order, and soon they were packing up their things to head home. Mr. Weasley appeared while Harry was chatting with Tonks, who had given him a very welcome

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hug upon his approach to her desk. It was Mr. Weasley's slap on the back that really reminded Harry how little physical contact he had had during his time away.

"Everything all set, my boy?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, unable to avoid dropping his eyes as he replied.

"Good to have you back. Things sure are busy around here... we could use the extra help." With that and a wink he was gone.

"Don't listen to that," Tonks breathed when Mr. Weasley was out of range.

Harry merely snickered, too happy to be back in these surroundings to care if he were being teased and by whom, happy enough to be near Tonks that he found himself caring much less about Belinda's breaking up with him.

Folded up on the desk was the Daily Prophet. Tonks scooped it up and opened to an inside page. With a mischievous glint in her eye, she asked, "The Regionals are coming up for London. Think I should enter?"

Harry stared at her dully. "Regionals?"

"Gosh, you don't know? Harry, you're the judge, aren't you?" She quickly folded the paper and said, "Oh, only for the championship..."

Harry grabbed the paper away from her and read the article.

Free Field Filling Fast

The 1st Annual Demise of Voldemort Dueling Competition enters its first phase when the London Regional commences this Saturday at the Ministry of Magic Atrium. The Minister herself will introduce this inaugural competition. It is expected that the Championship judge, Harry Potter will make an appearance, as he has recently returned from a mysterious and previously unannounced retreat in the Far North. The finals will also be held in the Ministry Atrium on May 10th. Tickets are available at the Leaky Cauldron and all Gringott's locations, or by owl to our offices here at The Daily Prophet.

"Wow," Harry uttered. "Bones really is putting together a dueling competition."

"It was your idea, wasn't it?" Tonks asked as she took the paper back.

"Severus' actually... he suggested it as a joke."

"It's brilliant," she said. "Think I should enter?"

"Why not?" Harry asked.

She twisted her mouth and said, "I'm not really a dueler."

"Yeah, but you're an Auror, doesn't that already give you an advantage?"

She looked up at him with a grin. "I'm pretty sure some others around here are going to be in that regional. You and me have a history, does that give me an advantage?"

"Uh..." Harry began, having not thought ahead to having to judge his friends, should they make it to the finals. "I would try to make it not," he insisted.



## HOME, PART II

“You’re no fun,” she teased.

“It has to be fair,” Harry asserted, unable to imagine a tournament that wasn’t.



That Saturday, Harry, and a surprisingly large number of others, made their way to the Ministry Atrium. Harry emerged from a hearth at the far end from where a dueling platform had been set up and had to weave through the audience filling the hall to get closer. Minister Bones stood off to the side, near the golden gate; she was reading a parchment and put it away then as though ready to start. Right beside the platform, the crowd was packed tightly and Harry had to push his way through. He was hurrying because he expected the Minister would be looking for him before she started.

“Aye thare!,” a middle aged witch in old maroon robes complained when Harry slid in front of her.

“Scuse me,” Harry said. The witch’s eyes widened from annoyed to meek when he glanced back.

“Ah, Mr. Potter,” Madam Bones greeted him offhandedly when he finally made it to her side. Belinda already stood at Bones’ side. She glanced away, down at the papers she held, and then off over the crowd. The Minister spent undo time giving detailed instructions to another member of her staff regarding registration requirements, so Harry had far too much time to glance repeatedly at Belinda and attempt, unsuccessfully, to imagine her and Percy out on a date.

Their long, awkward moment ended when Bones stepped up onto the wooden platform and announced the opening of the First Annual Demise of Voldemort Dueling Tournament. As she spoke, a broad-shouldered figure gimped up beside Harry.

“Potter,” Moody muttered in a kind of greeting.

“Sir, are you competing?”

Moody snorted. “I’m judgin’ ”

The gathered spectators began clapping and Moody gave Harry a shove toward the Minister. Harry wondered, as he put his grimy trainer up on the polished wooden platform, if he shouldn’t have worn a bit nicer robes.

“Mr. Potter is deeply disappointed that he cannot compete, but that means the field is wide open for the rest of you. And...” With a flourish she pulled out a stack of note cards and waved them. “There are rather a large number of you wishing to claim the title of Britain’s best dueler. So we will have a long show for you today while we eliminate all but the toughest, fastest, and smartest of you all.”

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She invited the competitors onto the platform and handed the introductions over to Moody. Harry tried to depart the platform with the Minister, but Moody clamped a hand on his shoulder and held him fast. Harry had to turn his head hard to see the whole line which ran the gamut from a stooped old man who must be well over a hundred and twenty, to a housewitch, still in her flowered apron, to a pigtailed girl who looked as though she should be just starting at Hogwarts next year. Harry glanced back again when he thought he recognized his trainer, and indeed Rodgers stood on the very end of the line beside one of the Weasley twins.

Moody went over the rules in a voice that sounded more threatening than informative. He finally released Harry when he selected two competitors for the first round. As he passed them, Harry gave Rodgers and the Weasley twin a wave. He wondered where the other twin was.

Harry spotted Mr. Weasley in the crowd and made his way over beside him. “Fred or George?” Harry asked.

“Fred.” Mr. Weasley replied and then leaned closer to whisper, “George is registered in the Wales/Midlands Regional. Used our cousins’ address to avoid one of them getting eliminated so early.”

The crowd howled in delight as the first pair – the little girl and the old man – simultaneously wrapped each other up in toffee. Moody waved the sticky sweet away and growled at them to start anew and warned that if they did it again, they were both disqualified.

As the competitors’ numbers were whittled down, few showed any real dueling ability and ones that did went through untouched until the final round where Fred and Rodgers faced each other. Real spells banged forth then rather than exaggerated pranks. The crowd made appreciative noises – and backed up a few steps – after Rodgers’ dome block sent Fred’s ice curse shattering to the floor and off the edge of the platform. In the end though, Fred could not hold out against someone who spent hours everyday drilling. Time was about to be called for a draw when Rodgers demonstrated that he had been holding back all along. He sent a polymorphic chain binding at Fred who didn’t recognize it and attempted a Charmer Counter probably because the chain did seem to snake a bit as it flew out of Rodgers’ wand.

Rodgers didn’t leave Fred in a helpless heap for long. Rather than wait for Moody to do the cancellation, as had happened after most of the rounds, Rodgers freed Fred and helped him to his feet.

The crowd cheered, most likely for the winner being determined rather than any acts of sportsmanship. Moody handed Rodgers a half-size brass wand on a chain with a tag attached upon which Moody used a spell to inscribe Reginald Whitherspoon Rodgers below the tournament name. Rodgers accepted the award with more delight

## HOME, PART II

than Harry would have expected from him. The crowd clapped again and the Minister returned, calling Harry back up just long enough to remind everyone to return for the Finals.

“Congratulations, sir,” Harry said to his trainer, and then turned quickly to say, “Good try, Fred,” to his friend, who merely mumbled something unintelligible in reply.

When Fred had joined Mr. Weasley, Rodgers, apparently still captivated by victory, gave Harry a quirked smile and assured him, “Easy win. Hope the Finals present more of a challenge.” He said this while holding the brass wand up by the chain and letting it swing back and forth.

Harry hurried home from the competition to see if his guardian had arrived yet. He had not, but Winky had put out chocolate biscuits and hot cocoa and the scent greeted Harry upon his arrival. Harry was looking forward to the next day’s lunch at the Evans’, idle thoughts of which lifted him lightly above the troubles of the last few months.

Halfway through the plate of irresistible treats, Harry finished reading the day’s Prophet and sorting the post. The Floo flaring preceded Snape into the room.

“Hey, Severus,” Harry greeted him. “I wasn’t sure McGonagall was going to let you off two weekends in a row.”

Snape put down the small trunk he carried and helped himself to a biscuit. “She was remarkably amenable. I think she may believe you to be in need of closer watching.”

“That’s not true,” Harry complained. “Everything’s fine now.”

Snape ceased nibbling and said, “I did not attempt to dissuade her assumptions, I must confess.” He picked up the post and tapped the nearly empty biscuit plate with the edges of the letters. “I see Winky is working to fatten you up.”

“Is she?” Harry said in surprise. He tugged at his exceptionally baggy shirt. “I suppose that is easier than buying new clothes.”

“They fed you there in Finland?” Snape asked snidely from the doorway.

“Yes, rather a lot. You should try five hours of Nordic skiing in one direction and five hours back the next day.”

The two of them had a quiet dinner with Harry absorbed in his far-behind readings, but asking Snape about anything of interest in the text. “So, it says here a repelling barrier rarely holds around a cursed object. But it doesn’t say why.”

Snape put down the two chunks of bread he had just torn in half. “I don’t believe a good theory exists to explain that. Magical theory is a spotty affair, you do realize.”

“Speaking of theory, I didn’t tell you that I tested a hover spell on the airplane.”

“Did you? And the result?”

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“Worked like a charm.”

“Did it?”

Snape sat thoughtfully for a while until Harry said, “You missed the first Regional today at the Ministry. Rodgers won it.” When Snape responded only with a raised brow, Harry added, “Only Fred provided any real competition for him and not really that much, so he won easily.”

“Did he?” Snape confirmed in a tone that indicated he had changed the topic of his deep thinking.

“I think Fred was lucky Rodgers was in a good mood,” Harry opined.

The logs in the hearth shifted, throwing sparks into the room. “And the other twin?” Snape asked.

“Registered for a different Regional.”

“Still flaunting the rules,” Snape muttered.

“Does it really matter if it’s not your rules they’re flaunting?” Harry teased.

“They flaunt Ministry rules all of the time in that little shop of theirs. Those would be your rules now,” Snape pointed out in a deceptively mild tone.

Harry frowned and tried to pretend to be reading, but the book was not holding his attention. A little peevishly, he said, “You know, they won’t let me do anything at the Ministry, so I don’t think of them as my rules yet.”

“And when they are truly yours?” Snape continued to probe, which Harry wished he wouldn’t.

Harry put his nose closer to his book. “I’ll figure it out then.”

A minute later Snape said, “Some believe in allowing a little cheating. I find it leads to an uncontrolled atmosphere of poor behavior.”

“I’m reading about curse limitations here,” Harry pointed out.

Dryly, Snape said, “Rather slowly. You have been on the same page for ten minutes.”

Harry couldn’t deny that. “Want to play some chess?” he asked brightly, prepared to close his book.

“Your readings...” Snape commanded, tapping Harry’s book with one long finger.

“All right...” Harry breathed and redoubled his efforts at taking in the words before him.



Polly Evans’ small house, as usual, was overflowing with the scent of cooking and home when they arrived. The sight of the children gave Harry a painful twinge that he might have been isolated forever from all of this. Patricia’s husband stood to shake

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hands and Pamela gave Harry a hug. Basel, Patricia's son, toddled up and handed Harry a toy rocking horse with almost grave seriousness.

"Thank you," Harry told the boy as he shook off his cloak. He then took a chair near where he and his sister played. Snape sat on the end of the couch and considered the room with a hooded gaze. Conversation resumed and Harry noticed that Snape was drawing into himself.

Feeling he needed to make up for Snape's lack of sociability, Harry launched into a long description of his trip to Finland. "So, I can ski rather well now and it feels downright warm here," Harry concluded, holding back a frown at Snape's continued reticence. It was almost as though Harry's story had sent his guardian farther away.

Briar handed Harry a toy plastic goat during the silence, so Harry shifted to sit on the floor to play farm with the children, occasionally hiding toys or holding them out of reach in the hopes of inspiring some magic in the children to get them back, but he had no luck with this and the children were deciding he wasn't a very good playmate.

Greg departed to run to the store for something and Pamela immediately moved to plunk down beside Snape. "How are things in the magical world? Can I see a spell?"

Even though she had asked this of his guardian, Harry took out his wand and said. "I learned this one this week. *Repulsum Captum*," he uttered while drawing a circle in the air around a toy sitting on the table. "Try to pick it up," Harry said.

Pamela gave it a try, but when her hand got close, the toy house moved away in a little burst as though magnetically repelled. She tried again, with a quicker motion and the house slid off the far side of the table onto the floor.

"Oops. Usually we use it on large, heavy things," Harry explained.

Snape said, "I think that you have been doing so for practice because larger objects are harder to charm. Small objects one does not want stolen are the most common use for that spell."

"Maybe," Harry said. "It would be like our trainer to make learning something as hard as possible."

"Aw," Pamela sang in false sympathy and Harry was surprised to find Snape smiling lightly in the wake of it. She slapped Snape on the arm. "Let's see one from you now."

After a moment's thought, Snape tapped Briar on the head with an *Obfuscation Charm*.

"She's melting? Where'd she go or did you make her invisible?" Pamela asked. "Oh wait, I still see her... no I don't."

"This spell does not impart complete invisibility," Snape explained, sounding as

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ever the teacher. “If one knows the person is present and concentrates, they can see the person just fine.” Pamela called for Briar to come over to her and had to use her hands a lot to locate the girl to pick her up.

“That’s a eerie one.” She stood up and carried the invisible girl to the kitchen. “Hey Patty, take a look.”

“Uh, oh,” Harry uttered.

Patricia stepped to the doorway and with some surprise, accepted the invisible, giggling burden. “Who did that to you?” she asked.

Pamela said, “I’m not telling.”

Patricia seemed a bit alarmed, even though Briar, from her conversation and giggles, was not. Harry stood and cancelled the charm. Briar re-melted into clear view and clapped her hands. “I hope neither of you turns magical,” Patricia said to the girl. “It’s hard enough keeping track of you when you aren’t.” She set Briar on the floor, where she quickly returned to her playing.

Pamela returned to her seat and said wistfully, “We missed a lot of fun growing up, I see.” To Snape she said, “So, how is teaching going?”

“Same as always. The students are unruly, uninspired, and unrepentant about doing poor work on their assignments.”

In a mock serious tone Pamela said, “But you keep trying anyway.”

“Yes,” Snape admitted quietly, and Harry thought he was unsettled by the unaccustomed teasing.

Lunch was being carried to the dining room and Harry jumped up to help. Minutes later they settled into eat and Harry enjoyed two heaping plates full of lasagna while listening to Pamela untiringly keep a conversation going with Snape. For once, Snape was putting some effort into his side of things, despite the lack of topics in common between them that were safe within earshot of Greg.

It wasn’t until Harry caught sight of Polly’s furrowed brow as she listened in on this conversation from the far end of the table, that Harry thought anything of it. He watched more closely then as Snape was saying, “The Board that oversees our school, for example, was influenced too easily in the past by the interests of a few, but now with these people gone, it is in a state of lethargy and the headmistress and I have been working out ways of injecting our own agenda into their discussions in the hopes of moving some things along.”

Harry expected this dry political topic to fall flat, but Pamela leaned in slightly on her elbow and said, “When it was manipulated before, what purpose did they put it to?”

Snape paused, presumably to formulate a Muggle-safe response. Harry let the bite on his fork go cold as he glanced between the two of them and attempted to

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overcome the sense that they were getting along startlingly better than they had been just a half hour ago. At Harry's welcome-home party Candide had been distracted and hadn't stayed long at all and had only cursorily interacted with Snape. After listening to Snape and Pamela's continuing friendly conversation, including Snape's highly unexpected outgoing contribution, Harry found himself sending a small helpless shrug at Polly, who he hoped wasn't as unhappy as she looked.

By mid-afternoon, when Patricia began bundling her children in layers of outerwear, Polly seemed resigned, although the conversation had not gone beyond general amiability, but for Snape, that was odd enough. Harry found himself shaking the notion that something was possibly budding between his guardian and his cousin. Pamela was just curious about magic, Harry argued to himself regarding her extra attention to Snape.

But when they arrived back in their own hall, Harry heard himself say to his adopted father, "You were having a good time."

Snape turned sharply, his boot scraping on the stone floor. "What of it?" he asked, clearly defensive in an instant, which spoke volumes.

Harry, careful not to appear to backpedal, said casually, "Well, last visit you were baiting Pamela terribly, not exactly cruel, but pretty close."

Snape hesitated as he formulated a response. "I wasn't in the mood to be bothered," he finally said and headed for the stairs.

"Bothered with what?" Harry asked, pursuing him.

Snape turned at the bottom of the stairs and said, "Muggle females. Overly curious ones who are inspired by what they see as a challenge."

Harry took this in and instead of arguing on the merits said, "You use that Legilimency a little too much."

"Don't you?" Snape countered.

"No."

"Really? I find it almost always useful." His tone turned against Harry then. "I cannot imagine working in the Ministry without knowing what was going on around me. Nothing is on the surface there."

"It is with Mr. Weasley," Harry argued.

"Well, consider yourself fortunate to have him, then. Honestly, you have never used that skill at the Ministry?"

Harry gave in trying to steer the conversation and thought back. "Once, accidentally with Minister Bones."

Snape seemed intrigued. "Learn anything useful?"

"That she likes me well enough but is mostly very happy I'm not opposed to her."

"Very useful information," Snape pointed out.

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“I suppose. It’s not fair to people to do that all the time though. You aren’t at risk anymore, Severus,” Harry argued to Snape’s back, because he was now heading up the stairs.

At the midway point Snape turned and said over his shoulder, “Survival habits can be very hard to break.”

By the time Snape reached the balcony, Harry remembered the original topic. “But what about Pamela? Polly didn’t seem exactly pleased.”

Snape leaned over the railing to say, “There is nothing with Pamela except an unexpected possibility and unlike you, who must supposition, I know Mrs. Evans is displeased.” He leaned away and then back again to add, “And I know Pamela would be pleased to have displeased her so.” Then he was gone.

“Wonderful,” Harry muttered under his breath.

Harry went to his own room and took out his nicest parchment to send a thank you letter to Per and Siri. His gratitude flowed easier now and he was glad he had waited to write the letter. He also wrapped a box of Weasley Wizard Wheezes Fruit Metamorphos Sweets in brown paper for Hedwig to take as a present, but when he collected his owl out of her cage she didn’t hold out her claw for the package and nipped him instead.

“Hey,” Harry chastised her. “This is hardly the first time you’ll have made this trip,” he pointed out to her. “And this will probably be the last time.” Her head bobbed a few times but she still didn’t hold out her claw. Harry pondered this unusual behavior. “Do you want me to address the letter to Siri?” Harry asked. When Hedwig tilted her head as though interested, Harry put the letter in a new envelope with a different address. Hedwig took the delivery this time without hesitation.

After finishing his post and faced with the prospect of poorly defined worry, Harry went to the door of the drawing room and asked, “So is anything up with Pamela?”

Snape’s shoulders fell in annoyance. “Nothing at the moment. Probably nothing ever. What is this leap to conclusions about?”

Harry stepped in and would have dropped into the chair before the desk, except it held a pile of large parchments. “I just don’t want you to upset Polly, is all.”

Snape lowered his quill and straightened up from the document he was working on, although his hair still hung before his face. “I do not intend to put your extended family at risk of wishing you had never entered their lives. Besides, blood relatives cannot be lost so easily.” He bent forward again and muttered, “Believe me, I know.”



Tuesday’s training still hadn’t started and it was already a quarter to nine. Aaron



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and Kerry Ann sat joking and exchanging prank spells while Harry stared off into the distance, wondering again if Belinda had really meant everything she had said when Harry had stopped in to see her after his return, or if some of it was just anger speaking.

“Someone should check, perhaps, what is going on,” Vineet suggested without looking up from the book he held open before him.

“I nominate Harry,” Kerry Ann chimed in.

More than willing to be distracted from his thoughts, Harry shrugged and went down the corridor to the office. It was empty, as was the file room. Growing more curious, Harry wandered down to the department head’s office. Mr. Weasley was sitting with his feet up on his small desk with a report open before him. He quickly sat up normally when Harry greeted him. “Harry, my boy, what can I do for you?”

“Do you know where everyone is? Rodgers and Tonks aren’t around, nor is Shacklebolt or any of the senior apprentices.”

“Hm,” Mr. Weasley huffed, put the report down and passed Harry in the doorway.

Harry moved to follow but jerked his head back to glance at the report which was entitled, *Magical Threats Post-Voldemort*. To his displeasure he didn’t have enough time to read even a sentence of it, since Mr. Weasley had turned around to see if he were following. They reached the office and Mr. Weasley was just confirming for himself that the whole staff were absent when Tonks came flying down the corridor from the lifts.

She looked frantic and her spiked hair drooped raggedly. She held out a parchment for Mr. Weasley, who read it with his brow lowered. Harry leaned over a little to try to see. The title line read, *Muggle Liaison Office followup request to telephone call of 8:27 a.m.* “Why the panic?” Mr. Weasley asked.

Tonks said, “Reggie kept that office number in his wallet, and he hasn’t come in yet this morning, and there’s no word from him.”

“Something happened to Mr. Rodgers?” Harry asked.

Tonks replied, “We don’t know, but I want to check. The police found someone in the Docklands with, as it says on the note: a strange wooden rod in his cloak pocket, no apparent identification in his wallet but a note saying to call that number in case of emergency. And its the number for the Muggle Liaison desk here at the Ministry.” To Mr. Weasley she said, “Note says whoever it was ’as been taken to the Royal. I can nip over and double-check in just minutes.”

Mr. Weasley handed the note back. “Tone down the hair and take someone with you.”

Harry tried to appear available. Tonks looked through him as she said, “Fetch Kerry Ann; will you?”

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“Sure,” Harry said, feeling let down as well as worried about their trainer, even as little as he liked the man personally.

Kerry Ann bounced to her feet when Harry explained the little he knew. From the doorway, Tonks said. “Harry, you too. The both of you,” she looked at Vineet and Aaron, “Go man the office with Mr. Weasley, just in case.”

Aaron, who moments before had been jesting, immediately fell serious and obeyed.

Tonks said, “I picked you two to come along because I know you have Muggle clothes with you. Change and let’s go.”

The information desk at the Royal London Hospital was not cooperative in helping them locate one Fred Bloggs. The overly made-up woman insisted that they speak with the police if they had information. Tonks was about to launch into something sharp, when Harry tugged on her sleeve. She allowed Harry to pull her aside, where he said, “I know whom to ask.”

She gave him a coy look and said, “Your Legilimency is getting as good as Severus’. Lead the way.”

Harry went to the directory to find the right department and they rode up in the lift in their own silences. The nurses at the station outside the lift were more than willing to give them a room number.

As soon as Tonks opened the door, after receiving no answer to her knock, she breathed, “Oh, Reggie.”

In the first bed the Auror trainer was lying unconscious with a pale sheen to his skin and unusually deep-set eyes. His roommate was intently watching a loud television and didn’t even look over at their entrance.

Tonks pulled the curtain to separate the beds and leaned over Rodgers. “Reggie,” she prompted, shaking him lightly. He didn’t look capable of coming around, but his eyes cracked open and zeroed in on Tonks. “Still with us?” Tonks prodded. At Rodgers’ weak nod, she straightened and said to Kerry Ann, “Go over to Mungo’s and arrange for an ambulance transfer.” Kerry Ann appeared a little doubtful, but headed out. Tonks said to Harry, “Stay with him. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” She started away but then turned and whispered, “Consider yourself on guard.”

Harry pulled over a chair and sat beside the bed. He tossed his cloak over his shoulder and held his wand before him under it, ready for use. Rodgers’ gaze found its slightly unfocussed way over to Harry. “What happened?” Harry asked.

Rodgers raised his hand to rub his eyes. A thin tube was taped to the back of his hand. Harry traced it up to a plastic sack of liquid above the headboard. “I’m not sure,” his trainer admitted. He narrowed his eyes as though lost in memory and said, “I was investigating a call about some silent fireworks in the abandoned Titan warehouse. I heard some strange noises and when I stepped inside a Blasting Curse

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hit me. I didn't even see anything move. I got a block up for the second one but it was the hardest one I've ever had to counter. And then another one came... and another. I couldn't see a target and decided to beat a retreat." He hesitated then, eyes unfocused as though he were back at the scene he described. "I got outside behind a hunk of equipment and tried to Disapparate. I don't remember anything after that."

Rodgers stared at the ceiling, his sunken eyes pink. Harry unexpectedly found himself feeling sorry for the man.

Tonks returned then, with Mr. Weasley in tow. Harry had started to pull his wand around, but hadn't revealed it. He put it back away. Mr. Weasley leaned over the other aluminum rail on the bed. "All right there, Reginald? Who got the best of you?" he asked, sounding his most caring self.

Rodgers hmfd wryly. "I didn't see who hit me. And I couldn't seem to hit anyone back, even though I threw some serious spells in the direction of the attacks."

"Not just cloaked?" Tonks chimed in.

"They didn't move," Rodgers insisted in annoyance. "I can hit someone in a cloak who isn't moving between casts."

Mr. Weasley patted Rodgers shoulder. "Well, we'll get you to St. Mungo's and get a fuller report there."

Harry followed the two of them as they arranged to fill in many crinkly thin white sheets of Muggle paperwork. Finally, they wheeled Rodgers to the garage where an antique, but well-kept ambulance, waited. It had long, gleaming chrome horns on the roof and resembled a large old London cab except that it was white. The orderlies loaded the patient and then walked around it, pointing at the whitewalls and brass oil headlamps in astonishment.

Mr. Weasley rode inside, leaving Tonks and Harry behind. They walked around the garage until they were out of sight and Disapparated back to the Ministry. Tonks didn't speak, just went to her desk and with hard-set features, began filling out a report. Moody was also there now, intent upon something on his desk. Harry hovered beside Tonks' desk a minute before returning to the workout room and filling in his fellows, who were quizzing each other out of the assigned readings.

Figures stepping rapidly down the corridor drew all of their attention away from that and down to the office where Shackbolt and Munz had just returned. Shackbolt held out curved broken pieces of orange ceramic. Tonks took one of them and turned it in the bright light from the ceiling lamp.

"Found it near where Reggie was picked up. I think we have it all this time, so I was going to piece it together." With a clink Tonks set the piece back into his broad hands.

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“Don’t use magic to put it together,” Tonks said. “There might be some residual charm on it.”

“What is it?” Aaron asked. Harry had held back and was glad his fellow had dived in and asked.

“We still don’t know,” Tonks said, returning to her report. “But we keep finding them in suspicious places.”

Mr. Weasley returned. “Ah, Kingsley,” he said, sounding haggard. “Find anything?” When Kingsley held up a piece of the object he was reassembling with the help of a bottle of Almers glue, Mr. Weasley was at his side to take it up. “So we can tie this to Merton, then,” he said idly.

Tonks looked up sharply.

“Who’s Merton?” Harry asked.

The room had grown a little tenser. “Someone we’ve been wanting to talk to but we can’t seem to find,” Tonks replied.

“His first initial ‘M’ as well?” Harry asked, feeling as though if he didn’t receive an answer he might get extremely angry, now that he was free to.

“Maurdant,” Mr. Weasley supplied. “Maurdant Merton, perennial trouble for years and years. Collector of unique objects, who isn’t above stealing them when the owner refuses to sell or be coerced into giving them up. When we aren’t investigating him, he comes in and raises a stink about someone he doesn’t like. He’s taken up new lodgings all of a sudden and we don’t know where. Every time we get close we find some inexplicable things left behind.”

Shacklebolt held up the patchwork object, the grey glue still oozing from the seams. Mr. Weasley gingerly took it. It was bulbous with three lobes melded together in the middle and three opposing fluted extrusions not unlike a vase might have. The main body wasn’t much bigger than a crystal ball. “So, what is this?” Mr. Weasley asked rhetorically.

“Give it to Harry,” Tonks suggested when the room remained silent.

Mr. Weasley seemed mildly surprised by this suggestion but gamely gestured for Harry to come take the specimen. Harry, curious, but also aware of all the eyes upon him, approached their department head and reached out to take the orange object. Before his hand got close he felt a queer shiver run through him and he pulled his hand away. That retreat wasn’t enough though; as if a channel had been opened between himself and the object, his chest buzzed with a queer vibrating alarm. Harry must have stepped back because he bumped the cubicle partition, knocking down a pinned up photograph of Shacklebolt’s dog.

“Harry?” several voices said in concern.

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Harry focused on the object held in Mr. Weasley's hands. He couldn't imagine how the man was surviving that. "Put it down," Harry insisted in alarm.

Mr. Weasley did so, setting it on Shacklebolt's clean desk. "Harry?" Mr. Weasley prompted.

"It's evil," Harry explained, but that didn't seem to cover it. Most cursed objects radiated their dark power with the personality of their spellbinder. This strange thing felt mindless, like a machine, but at the same time malevolently powerful.

"Harry?" Mr. Weasley prompted again from much closer, although Harry hadn't noticed him approach. With him stepping between Harry and Shacklebolt's desk, the effect snapped off and Harry drooped, limp with relief. Mr. Weasley surveyed the others in the room as though looking for advice. "Maybe no one should touch it without dragonhide gloves or metal gauntlets on. You all right, Harry?"

Feeling his face heat up at all of the odd attention he had attracted, Harry said, "Yeah."

"Well, fortunately Reggie is going to be all right... should be out tomorrow, in fact, although I told him to take a few days off. Moody and Munz, can you two work out handling the junior Apprentices until he gets back?" He didn't wait for a reply to this before departing.

Moody heaved himself to his feet and led them back down to the workout room. Kerry Ann said, "We can do our reading review... that's what we've been doing in fact."

"How about drills?" Moody growled.

"Not today yet," Kerry Ann admitted.

"We'll do some o' those then." Moody then uttered something that made Harry's bones ache in unpleasant memory. "Potter, you up here in front. Two others o' you pair up there."

Harry pulled out his wand before even returning to the front of the room.

"You disappointed me last time you were up here, Potter. And you've been gone. Getting out of practice, I'll wager." He tapped his wand on the ring on his hand as he spoke. "Let's see how bad the damage is then."

He threw a chain binding that Harry dissolved with a combination fire curse and blasting counter. They weren't spells he had ever used together before; they had simply flowed out of his wand as though it was natural for them to.

Moody lowered his wand. "That was interesting," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said, taking that as a compliment.

"Overconfidence, Potter," Moody growled and Harry guessed what was coming as soon as Moody's wand started turning in a circle. Harry had the counter ready and actually had to wait to cast it.

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“Jabbajabba,” Harry calmly incanted just as the maroon ballooning beast emerged from Moody’s wand.

It popped like a giant bubblegum bubble, momentarily leaving jagged maroon splotches on the walls and ceiling. The other apprentices, rather than running their own drills, had stopped to watch this unexpected duel.

“You asked your dad about that one, I suppose?” Moody asked.

“No,” Harry honestly answered and then declined to explain further.

Moody huffed but returned to drilling normally after that, before finally switching off to work with Kerry Ann instead.

Harry felt a bit like he had won his own Regional dueling competition.

Author’s Notes:

Thanks for the Britpicking. Would not have thought the perfect tense of “get” would be different.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



# TANGLED WEBS

Harry's training continued to be chaotic until Thursday when Rodgers returned, looking a little run down and moving stiffly and slowly.

"How are you, sir?" Kerry Ann was the first to ask.

"Mostly here," Rodgers returned in a tone clearly intended to deflect sympathy.

Aaron asked, "Was someone getting even for losing in the dueling competition, do you think?" This suggestion had been floated around in the Department.

Rodgers replied, "If he or she were that good they should have just won it outright. I'm not sure what the motivation was. Let's get into some real training, though. I have a meeting and some paperwork to attend to as well once you are set on the new spells this morning."

He taught them some new blocks, which were not on the agenda – dome-surrounded crystalline blocks that were extremely hard to produce because they were really two blocks, one inside the other. Despite his stooped posture, Rodgers' patience was higher than normal and he worked meticulously with each of them for most of the morning, only mentioning once in a stab at being snide, that he would have expected Harry to have mastered it on the second try. His attempt at being difficult came off so badly, that Harry actually felt more sorry for Rodgers after he had said it.

They worked on the new spells by themselves until Tonks came in and told Harry that Mr. Weasley wanted to see him. Oddly, she followed Harry down to their department head's office and even knocked on the door before Harry had the chance.

"Ah, Harry," Mr. Weasley said graciously. "Come in, have a seat. Shut the door."

There wasn't much space in the office with the door shut, since visitors usually sat

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half in the corridor. Harry managed to sit only by propping his knee up against the closed desk drawer. Mr. Weasley clasped his fingers together in his lap. On top of his filing cabinet, his gloves did the same. Harry noticed how much older Mr. Weasley looked with his hair thinning away to nothing on the top of his shiny head.

“I need to talk to you, Harry, about the issues that drew you away so unexpectedly.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Harry said truthfully. “If I’d been a little more honest with myself, I could have given you more warning.”

“It isn’t the lack of announcement that matters at this point,” Mr. Weasley clarified. He fell silent and looked around his desk. Harry was used to silences now, but didn’t expect them from Mr. Weasley. Releasing the corner of the folders that he had lifted, Mr. Weasley finally said, “It’s like this, Harry. There are concerns about your sudden attractiveness by dark creatures and I—”

“From whom?” Harry interrupted.

“Uh, it doesn’t matter who initiated the investigation; it is an organizational issue now.” Mr. Weasley rearranged folders on his desk for no purpose.

Harry sat back; he had thought that he was clear of this. Someone had used influence, in fact, on Rodgers to keep Harry in the program. The likely candidates for that influence were Minister Bones herself and McGonagall working through the Wizengamot. Someone else with influence was still working against his presence, apparently.

“What do I have to do?” Harry asked.

“Just go through this interview with me,” Mr. Weasley answered reassuringly. “Others tried to insist on conducting it but I pulled rank, so to speak, as your departmental superior. On the other hand if my report isn’t sufficient, the issue may not be put to rest.” He pulled out a scribbled note that Harry couldn’t read due to handwriting that may have been done while flying top speed on a broomstick. “So, Harry, I need a list of the dark creatures you have encountered. Severus provided a few to me, although I don’t think he realized it would end up in an official report. He said his research indicated that you were seeing Shetani, Lethifolds, and Rakshasas at least.”

Harry replied, “I don’t know the names of all the things I saw. There were shadows of vampires and at least one decrepit old werewolf. These other small things like sea creatures but with human mouths...” Harry cast his mind back to his walk alone through the Dark Plane. “Lots of other shadowy things and small things like black mice with spider’s legs.” Harry shrugged. “I don’t know what else. There were too many to pay close attention.”

Mr. Weasley looked concerned as he wrote out just the things that were identified



## TANGLED WEBS

by name. “Dementors?”

“No.” As Mr. Weasley wrote that out specifically, Harry asked, “What is the Ministry worried about?”

“The obvious, I should think. That if you show signs of dark wizardry that you shouldn’t be in the employ of the Ministry... at the very least.”

“I’m not a dark wizard,” Harry said, half laughing nervously. He said that now without hesitation, partly from living with Per for six weeks who, while capable of traversing the underworld, was clearly not evil. “I just have this weird skill.”

“I know you’re not a dark wizard, Harry, but my vouching for you only goes so far. People are still nervous, almost more nervous, even with He-Wh – Voldemort gone.” He put the quill down and sat back. “Word’s traveled around that you are quick with that wand at picking up even the toughest spells and that you aren’t short on raw magical power.”

“That should make people happy,” Harry pointed out. “I’m trying to be an Auror, here.”

In a calming tone Mr. Weasley said, “I know that, Harry. Anyone who knows you at all, knows that as well. But not every last wizard in this Ministry is so confident and some of them carry the burden of not doing enough last time and that makes them overzealous.”

Fudge, Harry thought to himself. “What else do you need to know?” he asked, glad to have identified the enemy.

Mr. Weasley pulled out an old, stained booklet with the title Dark Wizardry’s Dementia and flipped through it. “Have you in the last three months considered or acted out magic that would do harm to another whom you disdained?”

“Greer,” Harry replied, feeling perhaps too honest for his own good.

“The Potions professor at Hogwarts?”

“She said something very cruel,” Harry elaborated, jaw clenching even now. “I wanted to wall her up alive inside her classroom.”

“She said something very cruel to you?”

“No, to Severus.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing. Told me to put my wand away.”

Mr. Weasley scratched his nose and peered at his pamphlet. “Let’s see, A. Physical Harm or permanent disfigurement. No. B. Verbal threat of A or another dire action.”

“I didn’t say what I wanted to do,” Harry provided.

“No? Well, that’s good. C. Curse placed upon subject or subject’s descendants. Not that either. D. Destruction of subject’s property or business interests. E. Torture

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until subject relents. No. I guess that one doesn't count, then," he said. "That was the only time? No evil thoughts targeting anyone else?"

"I certainly don't like Lucius Malfoy very much."

"No one does," Mr. Weasley said, flipping the pages of the pamphlet. "What would you do to him, if you could?" He asked this rather conversationally.

"What I really want is a chance to duel him," Harry explained honestly although he sensed Mr. Weasley's easy tone as a kind of trap. "Be across from him on a platform and really show him that he isn't made of much, even if he is a pureblood."

Mr. Weasley considered Harry a moment before saying. "I'd pay to see that. You haven't been plotting to kill him though?"

"Only if he shows up at my house."

Mr. Weasley put the pamphlet down with a slap of his hand. "Harry, if he shows up at your house, you have my permission to make him wish he were dead." He didn't release Harry, though, after this pronouncement. He stared at the battered photographs pinned to the wall over his desk of the many Weasley children at various ages, all waving vigorously or performing acts of mischief upon one another.

Harry waited, wondering what was going through Mr. Weasley's mind. While he waited, Harry flipped his hair behind his ear off of his face; he really needed to get it cut.

Finally, Mr. Weasley said, "Harry, there is no doubt in my mind that you are as kindhearted and humble, frankly, as you always have been. Those Muggle relatives of yours didn't leave you much of a legacy, I don't think, but they did make you very aware of what it feels like on the bottom of the pile, and that's important for someone destined to have too much power." He pulled out a report form that had the words Official Inquiry printed across the top. Harry forced himself to breath deeply. Mr. Weasley dipped his pen and said, "I just have to figure out how to write that up to convince everyone else."

"And if you can't, what will happen then?" Harry asked, wondering where his own state of calm was coming from.

"Someone else will probably interview you."

"Like whom?" Harry wanted to be prepared, didn't want to get caught unexpectedly before a more strident questioner than Mr. Weasley.

"Alastor, perhaps... he's roundly considered to be paranoid enough to judge anyone with a critical eye. Worse case, would be the Wizengamot itself, I should think, but you have a lot of allies there." Harry realized with a prickle on his arms that he had been feeling too secure over the last week and wondered what he had been thinking. Mr. Weasley said, "You can go. I'll do the best I can on this."

## TANGLED WEBS

“Thanks, Mr. Weasley.” Harry stood but held off on moving the door latch. “Has Severus been drawn into this?”

Mr. Weasley didn’t look up from neatly filling in the form. “No, not that I know of. I’ll be honest and open with you, Harry... I think he could easily be, mostly because it is detrimental to your case.” He did look up then. “Keep your nose clean, Harry.” Here he pointed at Harry with the quill. “And keep that temper of yours in line.”

“Yes, sir.”

A subdued Harry ate his lunch quickly while the others talked. He wandered into the Auror offices to see if Tonks was there. She was, but she, Rodgers, and Shacklebolt were having a discussion around Rodgers’ desk in the far corner. Harry, figuring this for a secret discussion, turned to go, but Tonks waved him over.

She said, “So, Harry, we are deciding on which applicants to accept for testing this year.”

“Applicants?” Harry echoed.

“First, we have to decide if we are going to have any at all,” Shacklebolt pointed out.

Tonks argued, “Shouldn’t we offer the test and see if there isn’t someone we would want no matter what? That’s how it was done for Munz and Blackpool. We didn’t have a set number of Apprentices in the past.”

Harry blinked at her, stunned at the notion that he had been at this long enough to see new Apprentices coming in.

Rodgers said, “We took four only to make up numbers, and honestly we can’t handle six.” He sounded extra tired as he said this, and no one argued.

Grinning too much, Tonks held up a sheaf of applications before Harry and said, “What do you think of this applicant?”

Harry squinted at the tiny writing on the familiar grey parchment form. “Ginny?” At that, he took the stack away from Tonks and read over the application. Her responses read pretty standard, only really boasting where she mentioned having a flying Animagus form and fighting in the final battle against Voldemort. “What did Mr. Weasley say?”

“He hasn’t seen it yet,” Shacklebolt explained.

Rodgers rubbed his eyes and looked up at Harry, “What do you think his reaction will be?”

“Er...” Harry tried to imagine it. “I...” Really, he thought, any reaction seemed plausible. Mrs. Weasley on the other hand... “I don’t know. I think he’d be all right with it. Molly Weasley though might not be so sanguine.”

Shacklebolt sat back in his chair. “Hadn’t thought about that.”

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“Are you considering inviting Ginny to apply?” Harry asked.

“She has the application that looks the most like yours did,” Tonks teased. “But if we aren’t planning on accepting anyone, we shouldn’t invite anyone to apply.”

“In the old days, we did that all the time,” Shacklebolt argued. “Everyone knew that they had to convince us to let them in.”

Rodgers said, “I agree with Kingsley. Last year was an exception and, because it was more open, the number of applicants went up enough that we didn’t need to drop our standards to fill out even a large cohort.”

“Harry?” Tonks questioned, apparently looking for support.

Harry shrugged. “I guess make it clear that you are back to being extremely selective when you send out the examination invitations.”

Tonks tapped her fingers on Ginny’s application. “And we’ll deal with this if we have to. If we don’t have testing this year, we can skip dealing with this.”

Harry said, “I don’t think Ginny’s N.E.W.T.s are going to be sufficient anyway. But she might manage if she really wants to get in,” he added quickly, because it felt wrong to be so negative about a good friend.



April brought not just the long-awaited promise of spring to the air, it also brought decent weather for Quidditch. Harry met his friends in Hogsmeade, most of them already heavily into the cask-aged mead. Ron put a chummy arm around Harry and said, “Good to see ya, Harry. Good to see ya.”

Harry waved to Madam Rosmerta and said, “I think I need to catch up.”

Hermione said, “I wouldn’t try.”

“Hermione’s a spoilsport,” Ron complained.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Harry changed the topic. “How are the trolls, Ron?”

“Good,” Ron assured him, while rocking unsteadily on his feet. “Too good,” he pronounced soberly seconds later. “Sometimes I think they are smarter than we think.”

Harry started in on his own mug of mead and found that the first sip explained the state of everyone here. He held the stone mug angled into the light to peer at it better. “I think this stuff would burn,” he said.

Hermione giggled. Ron just looked at him oddly as though he were being stupid. Dean came up then, looking ready to burst. Ron interrupted him before he could talk. “You’re late,” he accused the other.

“I was at the Devon Regional,” he said in excitement. “Wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” He leaned in conspiratorially and said, “Draco Malfoy lost in the final

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round to a total unknown. He was livid. I thought he was going to curse the judge and he might have if it hadn't been Whitley, this old retired Auror. Guy was strictly regs, which messed up Malfoy as you could imagine. Deducted a whole point, he did, for Malfoy spelling out of turn even though it was blocked all right."

"So who beat him?" Hermione asked.

"Some little guy named Vogle. Never heard of him but he was fast with his blocks. Had to be, the field was much better than the London Regional."

"Wished I'd seen it," Harry said, feeling the spirit of the thing from Dean's excitement. "Speaking of which, we should go up and get seats. It's getting late."

They needn't have worried as the match didn't start on time. Madam Hooch marched between the gates of each of the changing rooms and stopped before the Gryffindor one with an impatient posture and chatted with someone inside.

Aaron arrived then and everyone made space for him beside Harry. "Thanks," he said. "I must say that about Gryffindors, you are all deathly polite. Have I missed anything?"

"Not yet."

The teams, Hufflepuff on the far side and Gryffindor on the close, were finally coming out, leaving little puddled footprints on the soaked spring field that positively glowed in the intermittent sunlight. The players took flight and circled once before falling into formations. Harry looked for Ginny and found her, tying her hair tightly while steering her broom with her knees.

"Ginny really likes your broomstick," Ron leaned over to say. Harry noticed then that he had snuck a full mug of mead in under his cloak.

Aaron chuckled and then cleared his throat. "Sorry."

"What?" Ron queried.

"You brought more mead," Harry said, hoping for a distraction.

Ron grinned broadly and toasted Harry in the air. "Yeah," he said with pleasure.

Aaron nudged Harry with his elbow and gave him a knowing glance.

"Knock it off," Harry grumbled.

Aaron leaned in closer. "You don't find someone else, Witch Weekly is going to run another essay contest."

"Don't say that," Harry pleaded.

Hufflepuff put up a long fight, but in the end lost the Snitch while they were only down one goal. Ginny shook the Hufflepuff captain's hand, then bounced over when she spied her mum and dad just coming out of the stands, and received a hug from each of them.

Someone tapped Harry on the shoulder, distracting him from somewhere farther away than he realized. It was Aaron. "Going back down to the pub?" he asked.

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“Yeah, sure.” Down on the pitch when he spied the teachers ducking under some low-hanging bunting above the steps leading up to their seating, Harry told his friends, “I’ll catch up.”

“We’ll wait,” Aaron said amiably, and they all stopped in the middle of the pitch to chat in a spot of sunlight.

Harry congratulated the Gryffindor team as he passed by them, waving off a blown kiss from the Seeker, Louisa, a freckled blonde with very short hair. Harry hoped he wasn’t blushing as he greeted headmistress McGonagall, who was wearing a wide-brimmed, pointed hat.

“Did you have a good week?” Snape asked when he came up beside.

Harry, thinking of his questioning by Mr. Weasley, hesitated before replying, “It went well enough.”

Snape’s gaze narrowed sharply, but any further questions he may have had were cut off by McGonagall linking her arm through Harry’s and stepping away, asking, “How are you settling in, my boy?”

“Very well, thank you,” Harry replied, glancing back to see if his friends were following. Snape and the other teachers were – Snape with his hands linked behind his back, cloak tossed over one shoulder.

McGonagall was patting Harry’s hand, making him wonder if mead were served in the teachers’ section. “You may come use our library anytime, Harry, you know that.”

“Yes, Professor, I know that.”

Harry didn’t get disentangled from her until the castle steps when he insisted he had to join his friends.

“Owl,” Snape commanded before stepping away.

“Have a good week,” Harry offered before turning to catch up to the others.

Aaron talked Quidditch all the way down the lawn to the path beside the lake, sparking a friendly argument with Dean and Ron.

“Slytherin is back,” Aaron insisted. “They beat Ravenclaw right out last month. Gryffindor is still too undisciplined on defense and we’ll take them out too.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that,” Ron grumbled.

Back at the Three Broomsticks, which had grown very crowded, the group of them took their mugs out onto the street at Harry’s suggestion. Hermione hadn’t said a word, letting the boys carry on about Quidditch with a doubtful expression as though it confirmed something in her mind.

Harry wandered around to her. “How was your week?”

She shrugged. “Pretty good... and yours?”

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The attack on Rodgers hadn't been made public so Harry, despite wishing to, couldn't share his concerns. "It was an odd week. But I can't talk about it."

"I know what you mean," Hermione said, sipping from her warm cider.

Harry spied that the billboard before the newsstand had the evening headlines on it. He bought a copy of the late edition and brought it back over. "Thought I'd read about Malfoy's defeat," Harry told his friends. On page two he found the announcement and began reading, "Two of the Regionals for the Annual Dueling Competition have run their course and the second was more exciting than the first, with four nearly-matched contenders battling 'til the end to see who would carry the honor of going on to the Finals. When the last spell had been cast, the favorite, Draco Pentheus Malfoy fell in the Cornwall/Devon Regional to another more worthy contender, Wesley Armanily Vogle. The remaining two Regionals will be held in the upcoming weeks and we are all looking forward with high anticipation to the Finals which will culminate the Demise of Voldemort Day festivities. The Ministry of Magic would like us to remind you that private bets over ten Galleons are strictly prohibited vis-à-vis a law handed down from the Wizengamot just one month ago today."

"Like we have that much to put on a silly duel," Ron complained.

"Duels aren't silly," Harry said. "How come you didn't enter?"

Slurring slightly, Ron said, "I can't even beat the twins. It didn't make sense to air that fact in public. I thought as long as one of them wins, it'd be all right. George can still win it." He gestured with his mug laughing, "Or Fred can try again..."

"How much would you be willing to wager on that?" Aaron smoothly asked.

Ron, rather than be offended, fell thoughtful, shook his pocket, and said, "Two Galleons... no three."

They shook hands as the rest of them laughed.

"So," Aaron said to clarify, still holding Ron's hand. "We are betting three Galleons that one of your twin brothers... no keep it simple... one of your family will win?"

"Yeah," Ron blurted.

Aaron pulled out his wand. "You don't mind if I seal that, do you?"

Ron blinked. "No, go ahead."

Aaron tapped their joined hands and repeated the bet. "I have a policy of sealing all my wagers – saves enormous annoyance."

"You could take Ron on his honor," Harry said.

"I've seen that spell save any number of friendships," Aaron pointed out.

"Only among Slytherins," Hermione commented quietly.

Harry glanced at the time on the tower above the Hogsmeade branch of Gringott's and almost dropped his beer. "I have to go. I have field shadowing in five minutes."

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He handed his mead to Ron, who accepted it easily. He didn't even wait to hear everyone's goodbyes before rushing into the pub to Floo home for a hurried dose of fizzy pink stuff. As he stood in the before the small mirror over the sink, letting it work and halfheartedly combing his hair, it became apparent by the contrast after it took effect that perhaps he had had one too many. He quickly mixed another half dose, checked his robes and cloak, checked for his wand and Disapparated for the Ministry.

In the Auror's office, Harry, at a run, found Rogan waiting. "Sorry," Harry breathed.

Rogan stood and put his cloak on quickly. "Don't make a habit of it."

"No, sir," Harry agreed.

In the corridor Rogan stopped and turned. "How much mead did you have? You smell like the Hogs Head."

"A bit, but I'm completely sober now," Harry insisted.

"Fortunately not every weekend is Quidditch weekend," Rogan muttered. "Let's go down to the Docklands this shift. And keep an eye out."



The keystone above the large rotting delivery doors read 1814. The doors were abandoned portals to a derelict warehouse which stood in a row of similarly half-rotting buildings just on the edge of the sound of the bells. Almost no one came up the street, along which blew random newspaper pages and plastic bags, and even should someone happen to wander by, the tenants were most careful to not give any outward sign that they were lurking within.

The old oak beams of the first floor were laden with silencing charms, which made it possible for the most fitful occupant of this place to pace at will, which is what he was doing at that moment.

Maurdant Merton wasn't a tall man but he walked like someone who was. He had wild greying hair that he had stuffed under a moth-eaten beret. His tweed coat had once been very stylish but he wore it now against the chill. They could only run the kiln on rainy nights to avoid notice and ironically the sun had been shining for three straight days, so it was cold.

"This takes too long," Merton complained and turned his displeased gaze on the other occupant of the large room, a smaller, Indian man with light brown skin, a disproportionately round belly and constantly moving eyes.

This man obsequiously replied in an accent, "There is nothing for it. It just takes time."



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“Perhaps if we could run the kiln...” Merton started to say.

Impatiently, the man interrupted with, “That would not help. We have plenty of suitable vessels. We have solved that problem.”

“And our guest is still no help?”

The Indian fidgeted a bit before answering. “He is some. He is some.”

“I want to do more,” Merton ranted and resumed pacing. “This inaction after such success is maddening. There must be something...” He stopped again, sending dust into the air with his quick turn. “Perhaps another guest... someone who can provide more power?”

The Indian frowned and pointed out pragmatically, “Our current guest cooperates because he does not know any better. An uncooperative guest could be trouble.”

“There must be something. I want to show them another demonstration... watch them struggle pathetically to understand something so very simple at its core.” He drew himself back from this joyful reverie. “Tell me what you need and I will get it. Many people owe me favors or will simply do as I wish. I have much to offer people in trade because like the man who has found the one most valuable pearl, I have no need of my collection of trinkets anymore.”

“We need time, really.”

“I don’t want to wait any longer,” Merton growled. “The time is ripe.”



Harry left the Ministry by one of the telephone boxes and walked in the sunshine to meet Hermione. His friend had sent an insistent owl earlier telling him that he must meet her for dinner. Her owl nearly bit him when he hesitated responding while he thought about his plans.

The walk did Harry enormous good. The streets were full of other Londoners getting a touch of sunshine after the long winter. By the time he arrived at the small restaurant Hermione had specified, Harry thought he was ready for anything.

Hermione ordered drinks for them both after the waiter seated them and then made a shooing motion to the waiter’s back as he departed, as though to hurry him away. Leaning forward over her clasped hands, she said, “I need to talk to you.”

“I’m here,” Harry said.

“I need to talk to you about Vishnu.”

“What about him?” Harry asked, feeling less ready for anything all of a sudden.

“So, I’ve owled him a few times-” Hermione began.

“You have?”

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“Yeah, he seemed very nice at your party and you’ve never said anything bad about any of your fellow apprentices... So, I figured, why not?”

Their drinks arrived, for Harry just in time. “Hermione, you do realize he’s married.”

She didn’t spit out her drink as Harry expected, just sipped at it calmly. Harry took a gulp of his.

A tiny bit patronizingly Hermione said, “I figured that out, Harry.”

“Why are we discussing this, then?” Harry suddenly disliked white tablecloths over glass tables, especially turned diagonal like these were.

Hermione paused before going on, her face set as though considering things from many aspects. “I thought I could talk to you.”

Harry tilted his head back to look at the dark blue paint over the mechanics of the uncovered ceiling, the ducts, beams, and electrical pipes for the lights. “Hermione, this is such a bad idea.”

“Harry, in an awful way, I’m really, really happy.”

Harry gazed at her incomprehensibly. He had received no sense of anything amiss from Vineet. “Have you... been getting together?”

“No. Just owling.” She didn’t say this defensively, more... melancholy.

Harry waved away the waiter who came to take their order. The man took one look at Harry’s face and closed his mouth on whatever follow up he was going to give and moved to check the next table. Calming himself, Harry said, “Has he given you any indication? Are you misreading things, perhaps?”

In an honest voice that now sounded exactly like his old friend, Hermione said, “That’s actually what I wanted to ask you.” She stirred her drink with her straw. “I brought the letters, but I don’t want to show them to you. I’m too embarrassed.”

“I don’t want to read them, anyway,” Harry said.

She speared the olive in the bottom of her martini, then plucked it off the straw with her teeth. “Harry, don’t you think that there is this person out there, just for you?”

“No.”

Harry felt strangely numb and when the waiter looked their way, he waved him back over and ordered the first thing his eyes fell upon. Hermione didn’t open her menu. “I’ll just have a hamburger,” she said.

The waiter executed a small bow. “Yes, madam.”

When he was gone, Hermione asked, “Was there one on the menu?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“I thought you’d be a little more helpful,” Hermione said quietly. Harry attempted a response but was too slow, because she added, “You’re too perfect, you know. No

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wonder you go through girlfriends so fast.”

“This isn’t about me,” Harry came back with an edge.

“Sorry,” Hermione said honestly. “I’m upset.” Then a minute later: “I feel cheated.”

“Hermione,” Harry began softly. “He’s married, forget him.”

“You are almost the only person who says that. The women I work with say the opposite.”

In a harder tone Harry returned, “Stop talking to them, then. Right now, no one is hurt. There is nothing going to come out of this but hurt.” Harry shook the ice in his glass. “I wish it were Thursday so I could get drunk.”

“Sorry,” Hermione said again.

Harry felt something inside relenting in the face of that repeated honest apology. “I understand, Hermione, really. You see someone you really think is right and you just can’t have them. I’m sorry you have to go through that. I’m not trying to be anything but a friend here.”

Hermione’s eyes had grown bright as Harry spoke. “Have another drink – I’ll walk you back to your place after dinner.”

Hermione nodded, apparently afraid to speak. By the time their food arrived, she was halfway back to being herself and asking how his training was going.

“Since you can keep a secret, I’ll tell you one,” Harry offered to take her mind off things.

She smiled finally and said, “What’s that?”

“Ginny applied for an Auror apprenticeship.”

“Oh no!” Hermione blurted.

Harry bit through a shrimp and dropped the tail on the edge of his plate. “What’s wrong with that?”

“She’s only doing it to get closer to you.”

“Hermione, I don’t believe that. That would be pretty extreme... if only because it means she actually has to study for her N.E.W.T.s like a demon to even have a chance.”

Hermione conceded, “There is that. True, that is a stretch.” Then more quietly, she muttered, “Like Ron that way.”

Hermione didn’t really need an escort home, but Harry walked slowly with her anyway until they found a good alley from which they could Disapparate directly to her flat.

Hermione shucked her coat in a dismissive fashion and pushed her piled up post aside on the table.

“You going to be all right?” Harry asked.

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She shrugged while she leaned over the chair. "Yeah. Thanks for going out on such short notice."

"Anytime."

She ran her fingers over her coat. "Well, it's late and you have training. I'll see you later."

"Owl if you want to talk again," Harry said. She nodded for a reply and after a long wait to see if she spoke, Harry Disapparated for home.

His own house was deathly quiet when he arrived. He went up and woke Kali to have her in his lap as he sat on his bed and took a glance at the readings he was supposed to have done, hoping to learn at least one fact he could spill forth the next day. But despite the agitation from his dinner with Hermione, his head nodded and soon he curled up in his clothes, Kali nestled against his chest.

Harry woke groggy the next morning, stiff from the cold of not being under the duvet and sticky from his day-old clothes. A quick wash-up and change helped a lot as did coffee and soon he was yawning in the corridor at the Ministry and wondering what in the world he was going to say to Vineet.

Harry sat down in the desk beside the Indian, who looked the same as he always did. Rodgers came in right then, so Harry had to hold off. At lunch, similarly, they weren't alone and Harry wasn't in the mood to pull his fellow aside and confront him. In the end he wondered what he was going to confront Vineet with; Harry hadn't seen the letters.

Distracted during a round of afternoon drills, Harry's counter failed and that left him with a bruised elbow from smacking the wall as he flew into it. After that he put Hermione's problems from his mind as counterproductive to worry over without a better understanding of them.

Field shadowing went along quietly the next day as Harry followed Shackbolt around while he questioned people in the area of the Docklands where Rodgers had been attacked. They were both dressed as Muggles and Shackbolt was pretending to be journalist. Other than his difficulty remembering to click his ball point before it would work, he pulled this off all right. Harry, given nothing else to do, tried a little Legilimency on the people they talked to, but he got nothing but concerns about wayward daughters, overdue rent, sick parents, and a headache for himself.

Saturday, restless and wishing he had confronted Vineet, if only to settle his own nerves, Harry went to visit the twins' shop as a much needed distraction.

"Arry!" One of them said, coming around from doing invoices at far too small a desk behind the counter. The female shop clerk gave Harry a glowing smile. "Come on upstairs, Harry, Verity can watch things alone for a bit. It will get crazy later, but it is early still."

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Harry followed up the unlit, uneven staircase. The twin knew it well and had to stop and wait at the top. "Hey, George, Harry's here." When a mad scramble ensued inside the workroom, Fred said, "Don't worry about that stuff... Harry's not going to say anything about it."

Harry had reached the top where Fred was holding the door only cracked open. "Give him a minute. How are things with you? You dating our sister yet?"

"No," replied. "Why would you ask that?"

"She wanted to know how much trouble one might get into using a real love potion. The real kind, not that pale substitute the kids brew when they think no one is looking." He peeked inside. "It's clear." He led the way inside.

"Ginny wouldn't do that," Harry asserted as he stepped inside. A complicated arrangement of glass tubing bubbled and steamed on the heavy table in the middle of the room. Boxes lined the walls, stacked to the ceiling, making the room cramped. Harry wanted to be distracted from his concerns about Hermione. "So, are you working on anything I can try out?"

Later, sporting a sour stomach and full pockets, Harry made his way back out into the sunshine. Fred leaned out the upper window and gave Harry a shout goodbye. Harry waved back and threaded his way between the shoppers who had stopped stock still upon recognizing him.

At home, Harry put away his collection of sweets in the box where the others from Christmas were kept. He hadn't touched most of those either, even though he could clearly remember a time when they would have been among his prized treasures. The gum bombs, Harry separated from the others in a small tin since they sizzled when he put them down.

His things organized, Harry settled into the dining room with his books and felt the oppression of the quiet house. He was very glad his guardian was coming home that weekend. He hadn't the weekend before and Harry had missed him. Now Harry dearly needed someone to talk to and there wasn't anyone else to which he could air this dilemma.

That evening, the Floo's activation brought Harry from his barely productive reading. Snape was in a bright mood, a strangely bright mood, but Harry was too tangled up in his own problems to wonder about it for long. Snape sat down to sort through the large stack of post, and Harry sat across from him, resting his chin on his fist to watch.

Snape looked up from a letter he was slashing open with a shining blade and stopped. "Something the matter?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, plucking up an empty envelope and fussing with it. "Hermione dragged me out to dinner this week and wanted to know if I think Vineet likes

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her. At least I think that was what she wanted to know.”

Snape returned to his letter. “And the problem is... ah, he is married, is he not?”

“Yes,” Harry muttered.

Snape read for a minute. “Not really like Ms. Granger to make such a mistake.”

“No, but I think she’s smitten.” Snape paused to survey Harry, but didn’t comment. Harry said, “I feel bad for her.”

“There is an anti-love potion. Shall I write out the recipe for you to send to her?”

“How long does it last?”

Snape again resumed slicing letters open. “A week perhaps.”

“Maybe, then. And on top of that Ginny sent in an Auror’s application and Hermione thinks she is just trying to get closer to me.”

This garnered a doubtful tilt of the head. “Her N.E.W.T.s will not be good enough.”

“Still, it’s the thought.”

“So you haven’t been out today? You have been moping about, worrying over things you have no control over?”

Defensively, Harry said, “This morning I went to Diagon Alley... got caught up at the twins’ place.”

“Then you have not heard the news,” Snape asked.

“What news?” Harry prompted, sitting up.

Snape reached into his pocket and pulled out a half-sized brass wand on a chain and set it on the table. Harry gaped at it and picked up the tag, which read Newcastle Upon Tyne & All-Parts-North Regional – Severus Prince Snape.

“I didn’t even know you were entering!” Harry complained. “They better not disqualify me from judging, otherwise I’d have been in the competition.” More forcefully, Harry insisted without forethought, “Keep an eye out, someone may want revenge.”

“Mr. Vogle has not had anything befall him, has he?”

“Not that I’ve heard.” Harry was grateful he didn’t ask about Rodgers. He picked up the brass wand again to study it. “Why didn’t you say you were entering?” Harry asked a little hurt.

“I thought you would come on your own to watch, in all honesty.”

“I was thinking of it, but I got tied up. How did it go?”

“Only one serious challenger and that was Tertius Ogden.”

“You beat Tertius Harry-you’re-a-pathetic-substitute-for-Dumbledore Ogden in a duel and I missed it?” Harry complained.

Snape was about as amused as Harry had ever seen him. He seemed to be trying not to laugh. “I didn’t realize you referred to him thusly.”

“Yeah,” Harry confirmed. “What’d you hit him with?”

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Snape glanced at the clock and stood suddenly. "I can give you a full recount later. As amusing as your As the Wizarding World Turns difficulties are, I do not wish to be late."

Harry had to follow him to the hall and up the stairs to ask. "Late for what?"

"A date," Snape replied from inside his room. Harry stood considering that until Snape returned a minute later wearing a better shirt. He followed to the entryway cupboard where Snape took out his dress cloak.

The preparations seemed not quite right. "With Candide?" Harry asked.

"No."

Harry's stomach did a queasy little flip. "With whom?" he asked, feeling doomed just asking.

Snape shot him a knowing look rather than reply and plucked up the tall collar on the cloak to make it stand straighter.

"You aren't," Harry uttered. It was the best he could do.

"I'm not what?"

"You're not going out on a date with my cousin." Harry wanted to make that some kind of demand but it was a statement of dreary fact instead.

"It is just a casual date, Harry."

Harry thought that had to be one of the most unexpected things to hear Snape say. "Does Polly know?"

Sounding vaguely patronizing now, Snape replied, "Yes. Her sanctioning is not required in any event."

"What time are you going to be home?" Harry then asked, sounding methodical and very much not like himself.

Snape paused and gave him a long look that seemed on the verge of a glare, but simply replied, "Ten."

"All right."

Snape Disapparated and Harry stood alone in the entryway, feeling not all that well. He stomped out the door and almost didn't wait for traffic to pass before transforming and leaping into the air.

It had been a long time since his last meaningless flight around his house. The wet wind still flowed cool enough over him to refresh his furred and feathered limbs. Unsure where to go, he circled over the village with its miniature grid of street lamps and its sparse necklace of tail and headlights leading to and away from it. The sun was just completing its setting and the clouds at the horizon were ablaze with orange and pink. Harry thought that maybe he should have taken the bike instead. He circled once again and decided that this physical effort was more distracting. He lowered his head and flapped madly north.

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Flying wasn't distracting Harry nearly enough. He turned at the edge of a city and drifted back southward, using an updraft to hover and work on his fine steering control, a skill that suffered from lack of practice; without it, he grew tired too quickly on long flights.

Too soon the Shrewsthorpe train platform was beneath him again, lit more brightly than anything around it. Harry landed in the dark square of their garden a hundred yards away and went in the back door, not feeling much better than when he had left.

He tried to study; he tried to reorganize his books; he wished he knew where Ron was tonight. He considered that he could Apparate to the Burrow and ask. He was just thinking that this might be the best course of action, when the doorknocker sounded.

Harry had thought that the evening had reached its limit on romantic difficulties, but he was mistaken; in the darkness of the front garden stood Candide.

"Sorry to just pop in, but I wanted to speak to Severus."

"He's not here," Harry said and then because he dearly wanted anyone to talk to, said, "But come on in for a spot of tea."

"Oh," she hesitated. "Thanks Harry."

"What are you doing home on a Saturday night?" she asked as she hung her cloak up and put her hat and gloves in the cupboard herself.

"I was just trying to figure that out," Harry explained dully.

"So where is Severus?" she asked.

Harry had no desire to lie. "Out on a date."

This brought her to a halt in the hall. Harry stopped beside the staircase and turned. "Oh," she said. "Really?"

"Yeah," Harry confirmed.

"You... don't sound happy about it?" she probed with mixed feeling coming through.

Harry took a seat, wishing for hot cocoa, and expecting that would induce Winky to bring some. "Everyone's gone mad this week. My best friend has fallen for a married man, apparently, and all of a sudden doesn't have the sense I thought she did. My other friend may be trying to become an Auror because she is still holding a candle for me." Talking felt very good, and her sympathetic surprise kept him going. "The other friend that the first friend is smitten with, I don't know what is up with him. I couldn't bring myself to confront him. I don't even know if he's done anything wrong and that all of this isn't just in the first friend's head."

Hot cocoa appeared in a sparkle and Candide pulled the closer mug to her nose. "Love makes people pretty stupid – especially impossible love."



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“Yeah,” Harry agreed and sipped his beverage. “Did you want tea?”

“No, I wanted this, thanks.”

“Good. I should have asked. But... Winky usually figures it out, anyway,” Harry commented distractedly.

“Haven’t you ever been in love, Harry?”

“All the time,” Harry heard himself answering.

“Really? Where’s this lucky girl?” she teased, glancing around.

Harry smiled wryly. “Not here,” he answered wistfully.

“Don’t tell me she’s married too.”

“No. My boss.”

Candide shook her head. “So even Harry Potter can’t have who he wants.” She lifted her cocoa mug for a toast. “To unrequited love.” Harry halfheartedly joined the toast and Candide said in consolation, “You know she probably isn’t any good in bed anyway.”

“No, she is,” Harry replied, and then suspected the cocoa of having been cask-aged. Although, given how much lighter his heart felt after saying that, he didn’t want to take it back.

“Harry,” came the highly chastising comment. “Better not let the Press get wind of that.”

“It was before she was my boss,” Harry argued.

After a long pause Candide asked, “Is she good looking?”

“Who, Tonks?”

“Severus’ date... or haven’t you met her?” She downed half her mug then, even though the question came out rather smoothly.

“No I’ve met her.” Harry pictured Pamela. “Ordinary looking. You hoping for a grotesque hump or something?”

“Something,” Candide confirmed.

Drearily, Harry stated, “She’s my cousin.”

Candide froze. “Really?” she asked a bit bleakly.

Harry nodded. Same as with Hermione, he was on horrible footing, having little clue as to what had recently transpired between the two of them. He had to ask even though it was disloyal to. “Severus isn’t... cheating on you or anything?”

“No,” she replied easily. “We’ve just been getting together as friends.” Currents underlied the tone she used. She flipped her mug around between her hands. “While you were in Finland, Severus was miserable, and it seemed to do him good to drag him out for a pint or a cup. It was a good thing you made it back as soon as you did.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I'm always very hard on whoever is my parent," Harry glibly offered but it came out sad. "So, nothing is up between you and Severus?" Harry asked, wondering if there was an out here somewhere for this thing with Pamela.

"At this point in my life, accepting less than everything doesn't make any sense."

Harry pondered that. "He doesn't want to get married."

"He doesn't want to get within a hundred miles of the topic," Candide corrected with an air of bitterness.

After a long silence, Candide said, "A date. He's really on a date?"

"Came as a shock to me," Harry asserted and they both chuckled. He picked up the brass wand that still lay nearby on the table and said, "This was a surprise too."

She accepted the thing with curiosity and Harry explained, "Severus won one of the Dueling Competition Regionals."

"That's wonderful," she said brightly, reinforcing Harry's belief she really did care for Snape. She put the wand back down and rested her hand on it for a moment too long. "Well, I shouldn't be here when he gets home and I shouldn't stretch your very kind hospitality."

"That's all right... I needed someone to talk to," Harry admitted.

She took out her pocket canister of Floo powder, waving off Harry's offer of theirs. "Anytime, Harry, really. And I'll leave it up to you whether or not to tell Severus I stopped by."

"Right."

She was gone. Harry fetched one of his books and with a fresh mug of cocoa, began reading in earnest. He was still at it when the blast of green flame hit the hearth and Snape reappeared.

After he removed his cloak, he spied the second used mug and asked, "You had a guest?"

"You had a guest," Harry clarified a little stiffly, which he hadn't intended.

After a pause, Snape said, "Ah," before taking his cloak away. He returned and sat down.

"How was it?" Harry asked.

The tiniest of shrugs answered this, and Harry knew from his expression that he wasn't going to say anything. Harry returned to his book, wishing it were just a little later so he could go to bed.

"Would you like a game of chess?" Snape asked.

"I have to do my readings," Harry replied without looking up.

"Hm," Snape uttered with an insinuating lilt. "At least you are turning the pages this time." He got up and left.

Harry sighed loudly, finished the chapter, and went to bed.

## TANGLED WEBS

Author's Notes:

There will be a 2-week delay before Chapter 12. Have to work out some plot line/time line issues. Plus, learning Flash is sucking up literally all of my time, not to mention, melting my brain.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



# POWER PLAY

Rodgers was feeling well enough the next week to drill against each of them while they worked on the advanced double blocks he had shown them the week before. He tired easily though, and eventually stood off to the side offering advice. Their training schedule was now seriously out of sync, but no one mentioned that fact, especially not Harry, who was getting a chance to catch up on his readings.

“It should be more like a Diamona than a Chrysanthemum, Kalendula,” Rodgers critiqued. “You have almost no vertices on the inner block.”

“I can’t do both at once,” she said. “They are too different.”

“Keep trying,” he replied.

Again Vineet sent a mild blasting curse her way and parts of it reflected around inside between the inner and outer blocks before fading.

“Wickem, now you and Potter.”

Harry held a deep breath when the first curse came his way. He hadn’t been doing much better than Kerry Ann, and discouragement was starting to seep into his attempts. Rodgers repeated demonstrations made it clear that it was possible to layer a crystalline block inside a dome. As each mild curse arrived, Harry easily blocked with a wavering, warped Chrysanthemum that was really one bizarrely twisted dome rather than two layers like it was supposed to be. His wand simply didn’t want to emit two different block forms at once.

“Still not getting it, Potter. You need to produce the inner before the outer block, as I’ve said countless times, I’m certain.”

Harry wondered if two wands might work better. He imagined he held two in

## POWER PLAY

one hand and produced the crystal form of the Chrysanthemum out of one and then pretended to focus the dome out of the other. A solid structure appeared around him in the form of glowing rods and a shimmering dome. Aaron dropped his hand rather than aim another curse as Kerry Ann oohed.

“Much better,” Rodgers complimented Harry. “What was different?”

“I pretended I had two wands.”

“Whatever works,” Rodgers stated tiredly.

During lunch in the tea room, Harry – when Kerry Ann headed off to pick up dress robes on Diagon Alley and Aaron needed to renew his dangerous magical pet license – found himself alone with Vineet. Harry’s sandwich suddenly seemed too thick to eat and he had to swallow hard. He was seriously wondering why he couldn’t properly bring up this topic when Vineet did, in a roundabout manner.

“You are having another party?”

Harry answered, “Probably on the weekend before DV-Day, which is a month away. I wasn’t thinking of anything sooner.”

“Hm.” Vineet returned to his eating his daal with a piece of flat bread.

“Why do you ask?” Harry ventured.

In his usual solemn tone, Vineet replied, “You have interesting friends.”

Harry considered and disposed of possible rejoinders. All of them revealed that Hermione had spoken to Harry, and Harry didn’t want to give that away for reasons he couldn’t pin down. Instead, he said, “I’ve spent years collecting them. Most of them stood by me, or more accurately, in front of me, when things were at their worst.”

“It is good to have such friends,” Vineet declaimed in that philosophical way of his.

“Yup,” Harry said. “It’s good to have loyal friends.” With that and the immediate evidence of Vineet’s calm, he gave up on delving further.



Maurdant Merton slapped open a large book with a binding so broken it laid fully flat on the table. In the corner of the hazy room, stacks of large books and grimoires stood beside battered trunks of supplies. The books ranged from worn and cracked to pristine, but all were now hopelessly dusty and marred with fingerprints of red clay. Cursed trinkets and charmed baubles lined the edge of the floor, many of them broken.

“There must be a way to speed this up,” he grumbled, reading the smeared printing on the page. He tore the page free from the book and carried it to a side room where

## CHAPTER TWELVE

a small, round Indian woman sat with the tip of her wand inside a clay vessel. She ignored Merton's entrance and continued to stare straight ahead.

"Where is Debjit?" Merton demanded.

"Errand," she replied, still unmoving. She moved only when Merton bent down to scoop up a toroidal vessel from atop a shipping crate, and that was only to give him a sharply disapproving look.

"This one ready?" he asked as it crackled faintly.

"It is an experiment," she answered in a clearly annoyed tone. "And it is dangerously fragile."

"Another experiment?" He placed it back down gently and said, "Debjit needs to see this," as he waved the page. "We can use two wizards using a barrier technique."

Annoyed, she returned, "We tried that... unsuccessfully."

"We need a way to store more energy more quickly," he complained. "This requires a ridiculously long time."

"They are working, though," the woman said stiffly. "You did not manage this before."

Merton paced. "That's just it. If we had more of them, we could do anything."

A rattle of cups brought his attention to the tray carried in by their guest. "My, my but this place is such a mess!" the man declared. He pulled a battered feather duster from his sleeve and dusted the crate and the ceramic vessels upon it before setting the tray down with a last dusting of the teapot. He looked hopefully between Merton and the Indian woman. "Is it going to be cold again all day today?" he queried.

"Yes, probably," Merton replied, scooping up a teacup and filling it.

"Hm," the blonde man replied in disappointment before strolling out again, passing Debjit in the doorway.

"Hello, Gildie," Debjit said in passing.

"Too bad we haven't come up with a good use for him," Merton mulled. "Holding onto him as a favor to someone who cannot touch us anymore seems a waste of time."

"He is very pliable," Debjit pointed out, putting down the grocery sacks he carried. "Some use will come of him, I am sure."

Merton put his hands on his hips and, sounding difficult, said, "We need more magic." He stuffed the page under Debjit's nose. "I am tired of waiting. I have plans I wish to execute and they have been on hold too long. We could hold the entire Ministry for ransom if we could only work faster." Here he pounded his fist on an invisible surface.

Chastened, Debjit studied at the torn page, but immediately dropped it to his side. "We are working as fast as is possible. Svaha is better than I at charging the

## POWER PLAY

vessels, and our guest's magic isn't so strong, even though he is willing to put in long hours trying. If only there were a way to make our guest more powerful."

Merton's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps we should look into that." He pondered his stack of books thoughtfully. "We must have someone with more power, no offense to your lovely wife." He paced to the fouled window and stared out. "Pay our good friend a visit and ask who he would recommend. I want to have enough vessels in reserve to make a statement that we can afford to take credit for. The Ministry is a sitting duck." When he turned back, he had a darkly determined look about him.

Debjit bowed his head once and went out again.



Headmistress McGonagall turned to the last page of her staff meeting notes. "The elves have been instructed to not serve bangers and mash again for the rest of the year after the unexpected incident..." Here she eyed Snape over her spectacles. "At the Slytherin table last night."

Snape returned a haughty look back to her. Vector chimed in with, "Those old spells never quite die do they? Some enterprising pupil always manages to dig them up."

With a sigh McGonagall let it drop. "I believe that covers it," she said, stuffing her notes away in a folder.

Everyone shuffled to their feet around the large table. Firenze clopped his way out of the staff room, followed by Hagrid, both of them needing to duck deeply at the doorway. Parchments were gathered together and eventually only Vector and Grubbly-Plank remained other than the headmistress and her deputy headmaster. When Snape moved to stand, McGonagall put a restraining hand on his arm. Half a minute later they were alone, hurried along by Vector who had noticed them waiting there, still seated.

"So, Severus..."

Snape gave McGonagall a questioning eyebrow when she hesitated.

"Harry has long since returned and you have not," she stated frankly. Snape flipped his raven quill over his fingers and didn't speak, so she asked, "Is anything the matter with Harry?"

"No, he seems quite himself, if not a bit more independent and with an almost eerie resistance to cold."

She folded her diary closed and pushed it aside. "Well, that is good. So what is the matter?"

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Snape's gaze went distant and then he shook his head faintly while tugging on the barbs of his quill to make the vane edge even.

McGonagall persisted, "You don't wish to say, I see. But it is not Harry?"

"I don't know," Snape replied.

She sighed and began polishing her glasses with her kerchief. As she held them up before the lamp in the center of the table, she said, "I only ask because a rather unexpected report was presented to the Wizengamot two evenings ago." Snape simply waited in curiosity, so she continued with, "The Department of Mysteries has an open case on Harry right now, which I should not tell you, but I will, because you will be finding out soon enough, I expect."

"And why will I be finding out?" Snape asked suspiciously, sounding more his old self all of a sudden.

McGonagall's lips curled. "You are like Harry, Severus, you need an enemy to really get you moving." She sighed. "You will be finding out because the Wizengamot voted to leave the issue open and sent it back to the Department of Mysteries. Arthur owed to inform me that they have assigned another investigator and I expect that person will be paying you a visit."

Children ran by in the Entrance Hall outside the door, feet slapping loudly, and the voice of the Nearly Headless Nick could be heard berating them.

Snape asked in rapid succession, "Who was the first investigator? Harry did not mention this... was he aware?"

"I expect. Arthur interviewed him for his report. Told me in his letter that he was disappointed the matter hadn't been closed, but that there was nothing he could do. According to him, Harry has the full support of everyone in the Auror's office, with the possible exception of Alastor, who is now handling the case."

"Secretly?"

"I think he would like to be. Whether he can dole out enough memory charms to keep it that way..."

"Thanks for the warning." Snape stood, hands propped on the table, over which he leaned rather than move away when McGonagall commented darkly, "There were concerns among the Wizengamot that I, and several others, could not allay regarding Mr. Potter."

Snape, bent forward, hair over his face, said, "Something along the lines of his being the Lord of the Underworld."

"Something along those lines," McGonagall conceded unhappily.

Snape stared into the flame of the lamp on the table. "Harry is no danger that I can see. The day he returned I saw him raving with fury over Ms. Belluna and



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there was no sign of anything impugning on the interstice between the worlds. He has mastered control of it to my personal satisfaction.”

McGonagall said, “I would not have believed it existed before all this.”

“Every sensitive child who is deathly afraid of what lurks beneath their bed or behind an ajar cupboard door is apparently well aware that it exists.” He finally stood straight and gathered his things.

“Severus,” McGonagall called his attention back. “I feel you are unwilling to be frank with me because of my position on the Wizengamot. Is that the case?”

Snape gathered his diary and folder to his side. “No, that is not the case at all. I am relieved beyond measure that Harry is back. I realize now that I was expecting the Shaman would simply teach him how to close the barrier he was opening. I did not imagine he would show him how to traverse the two worlds, and be calm and walk safely among the vile creatures of the underworld. I am still absorbing that, I suppose.” With a dark huff he added, “It is not a skill even the Dark Lord had.”

McGonagall stood as well and said in an official tone, “So you feel there is no basis for this inquiry?”

Snape let the diary and folder in his hand slap back onto the table. “Are you losing faith in Harry?” She started to speak, but he interrupted her. “Because I find no conflict in my trust regarding your position with the grey beards of the Wizengamot but if you have lost faith in Harry, then I cannot be so open with you.”

She studied him in a tense silence before laughing lightly. “Funny, Arthur’s owl mentioned that Harry’s main concern was that you not be drawn into this.”

Snape’s shoulders dropped as he took in her words, and he looked away with a grim expression.

She rubbed her forehead. “You’re right, of course. I spent too many hours last night with the overly cautious grey beards, as you call them. Harry’s been through so much and has managed to remain this kind-hearted... there is no reason to expect that to change.”

They exited the staff room. The last of the sunlight was glinting on the beveled glass above the main doors.

“Severus?” a familiar but unexpected voice said.

“Candide?” Snape returned, surprised to find her standing before the doors to the Great Hall. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to speak with you.”

Snape glanced at McGonagall, but she merely shrugged and headed off. Snape angled his head toward the Grand Staircase and said, “Come up to my office, then.”

“The students said you were in a staff meeting and I thought it all right to wait,” she explained as they walked. They reached his office and he removed the protective

## CHAPTER TWELVE

charms on the door. She said, "I stopped by Saturday night, but you were out." This was clearly hard for her to say.

Snape, moving stiffly, gestured at the visitor's chair before sitting behind his desk.

She propped her hands on the arms of the chair and sat awkwardly as she said, "All the things I planned to say seem much harder now." Snape didn't reply, just clasped his hands before him. She said, "What does it take to get through to you?"

"You have asked that before," he pointed out softly.

"I know it's possible. Harry certainly has managed." As she spoke, Snape turned his chair sideways and leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling. She added, "Otherwise, I would have given up long ago."

"You didn't ask Harry?" Snape inquired snidely.

"No. What would his answer have been?"

Snape laughed. Still staring at the ceiling he replied, "Ah, let's see. Something along the lines of understanding me too well, I suppose," he answered dryly.

Candide glanced around the mixed shelves of Defense Against the Dark Arts books, Potions manuals, and bleached out Potion ingredients floating grotesquely in thin green liquid. "Oh, well, I'm flat out of luck then," she commented.

Snape laughed lightly again. "Was there some point you were hoping to make?" he asked, finally sitting forward, but still facing the window.

"Only to myself, I now realize," she answered, crossing her arms as though the room were too cold. "It hurt more than I imagined to find out you were out on a date."

That garnered her a sideways glance. "Surprised, were you?" he asked snarkily.

She shrugged. "Yes. Harry seemed to be too. Said it was his cousin you were out with."

"She was more fascinated by the notion of Wizardry in general than by the notion of me in particular," Snape stated. "If that is any consolation."

"Some, I suppose. Why are you rubbing it in?"

Taken aback, Snape returned with a hint of concern, "I am not trying to."

Candide looked down at her hands and said, "What do I have to do?"

Snape leaned forward over his desk and asked, "Why are you persisting?"

"Because I can't seem to do otherwise," she confessed.

Snape's head fell forward slowly but he lifted it again immediately. "You are asking too much of me. I do not mind your company... I will even go so far as to admit that I prefer your company, but I am not marriageable material. What would your parents say?"

"I don't care."

"You care dearly," Snape snapped back harshly.

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Candide pursed her lips. "You have an unfair advantage here."

"Yes, and I have no qualms about using it," Snape stated as though it only added to his side of the argument.

"You won't even meet them."

"It is all too quaint," Snape sneered. "I cannot take it."

Candide's brow lowered as though she were figuring something out. "You have these moments where you are utterly shallow."

"I do?" Snape mocked.

"Do you want to be alone forever?" she asked.

"I am not now. There is Harry," he pointed out tiredly.

"Oh, so I'll come back when he's gone then. That should only be a half year away," she pointed out. Snape's eyes fell distant, prompting her to amend. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

He shook his head. "No, you are correct. He certainly will be on his own, probably in London, sometime in the near future." More quietly, he added, "Though I was thinking it would be more distant than that. Perhaps I am deluding myself." He clasped his hands on the desktop again among the overlapping open books and stray parchments.

"Can we go out again?" Candide asked. "I'd like that."

"I scheduled another date with Pamela."

"Oh." Candide stood then before the desk and hooked her cloak over her shoulders. "I don't understand you," she complained.

"I don't want you to," Snape pointed out.

Candide dropped her arms, the breeze making the candles on the desk flicker. "Now you tell me." She returned to buttoning her coat. "So do you want this... cousin of Harry's to understand you?"

"Certainly not," Snape replied.

"Well, there's that," Candide said under her breath. "Owl if you want to get together."

Snape crossed his arms. "Silly to keep stringing it along... isn't it?"

She shrugged. "It is easier than the alternative."

Snape studied her closely before standing and seeing her out, appearing thoughtful.

Much later, at the eve of midnight, as he was turning down the lamps, Snape reached for his wand and spun on the instinct that he was no longer alone.

"Hmf," a voice grunted and then Mad-Eye Moody pulled an invisibility cloak off of himself.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Snape lowered his wand and criticized, "You could have knocked. Next time I will let instinct react for me."

"Wanted to see if I could get in unawares."

"Neither the castle, nor my office, is charmed to resist Ministry Aurors," Snape sneered before taking a seat behind his desk. "What is it you want?" he asked dismissively.

Moody circled the room, examining the shelves, stopping to stare up at the Pensieve before perusing the Defense books below it. "Answers."

"Perhaps try a question first," Snape pointed out dryly. "I was in the midst of retiring when you arrived... if you could hurry this along."

Moody didn't reply, just stomped on his peg leg around the full circuit of the room, stopping before the dangerous ingredient cabinet and letting his magical eye rove over it. "Some rather interesting things in there," he grunted. "Rather illegal things."

"You may take them with you if you wish," Snape stated easily.

Moody finally stomped to the desk. "As long as I know you've got them, you can't very well use them for anything questionable. A few of them I'm certain you are the only one in all of Britain to possess them. Keep that in mind."

Patronizingly, Snape replied. "I certainly will."

"I don't particularly want to be on your bad side, Snape," Moody said. "You are a too good a liar for one and your notion of loyalty is questionably fluid."

"Albus never questioned it," Snape pointed out mildly, fingers peaked before him.

"No, Albus never did. So what have you been teaching that boy?"

Snape laughed. "By 'boy' I assume you mean Harry... and lately, I have had nothing to teach him that would do him any good."

"No dark magic spells? I know you have mastered rather a large number of them over the years. I know that because I've seen you use them myself."

"I have never taught Harry a dark magic spell."

Moody leaned on the desk. "See, you are too good o' a liar to make this a job possible. The way I figure it, you groomed him for this Dark Plane skill. He is just a little too tempting to mold, isn't he?"

"You are letting your paranoia out. May I recommend a new cage for it?" Snape huffed as he stood up. "What is your purpose here, Alastor?" he asked in a tone clearly short on patience.

Moody began pacing again, rocking side to side as he did so. "I'd rather not say."

"I can guess. The Ministry is concerned about Harry given his need for rather unorthodox training in Shamanistic magic."

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Moody paced for a while longer. “Could be, but I’m not sayin’ ” Snape rolled his eyes. Moody, not noticing this, said, “So, say your claim is correct that you have nothing to do with this, then where is this skill from? ‘E didn’t get it from Voldemort.” Here his eyes slid over to Snape. “I’m pretty sure.”

Snape didn’t respond.

Moody went on, “ ‘E didn’t get it from his parents.”

“I don’t know where he got it from. It is his own. It is not unprecedented, witness the fact that I found someone with expertise in it to send him to.”

“Yeah, I was thinkin’ on payin’ the Finn a visit.”

“By all means. He doesn’t speak English and he is highly suspicious of outsiders... you and he should get along splendidly.”

Moody came back around to the desk and faced Snape down. “Are we on the same side, here, Snape?”

“I don’t know,” Snape stiffly replied. “Are we?”

“Albus left you with a big responsibility,” Moody pointed out after a pause.

Snape crossed his arms before him. “He had no idea how big.”

“Is that so?” Moody responded as though this were exceptionally meaningful.

Snape huffed. “Have you spoken with Harry?”

“Many times. Not about this. He isn’t to know.” Moody backed off then and went to the door. “Pleasant evening to you I suppose. Your helpfulness is overwhelming.”

“I told you nothing but the truth,” Snape countered, now angry. His anger stalled Moody from turning the door latch. Snape continued, “Harry is a young man in need of loyalty, security and trust, not suspicion. Tell that to Fudge in your report.” When Moody twitched just slightly at that, Snape sneered, “It isn’t difficult to guess who is persisting in this. What is harder to understand is why you are here as his representative, given the feelings you have for him... and I know this because I have heard you speak them.” Snape ended with an exceptionally mocking tone.

“I do what needs to be done. I always have.” Moody tossed the cloak over his head and departed without another word, the office door swinging closed as though of its own volition.



“Gwynedd!” Harry shouted after tossing in the Floo powder. He spun around almost as long as it took to get to London before being dumped out in a hearth in a grimy little apothecary with only one small circular window in the door to let in any light.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

A little man shuffled out of the back and glanced at Harry before shuffling away with a, “Ach, another one misdirected.”

“Do you know where the dueling tournament is being held?” Harry asked politely.

The man stopped and, shoving his hands deep in his pockets, arched his back, and said, “Ah, is that what this diflas day is all about?” He waved his arm. “It’s up at the castle, I hear.”

Harry paused in taking out his Floo powder for another attempt. “Which castle?”

The man scratched his rough beard thoughtfully. “Abergwyngregyn Castle is the closest. But I don’t suppose they’d be holding it outside?”

“Aber...” Harry blinked. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, then Penrhyn Castle would be it. Hideous place... all fancied up.” He shuffled off into a back room.

Harry turned back to the Floo to give it another go, hopeful that the man had the location correct. Harry had been expecting that the Floo Network would direct everyone from London to the right location. Unfortunately, the event wasn’t large enough to warrant having portkeys set up.

When he arrived in the next hearth, Harry was greeted by robed figures filling a grand white ribbed hall, all facing a dueling platform. The competition was already underway. Whitley was again judging and two figures were battling it out relatively well. A quick look around revealed Hermione standing near a large arched window. Harry crossed over to her and they shared a smile.

The competition varied in skill as much as it had in the first Regional and soon it was down to merely George Weasley and two others. Whitley declared a round robin because of their odd number and Harry cheered along with a cluster of red heads much closer to the platform when George won his first pairing with ease and with the help of a Japanese water demon spell that his opponent had no counter for.

“How are you doing?” Harry asked his friend during a lull.

“Okay. Do you want to come over tonight?” Hermione asked.

Harry replied, “I have field work this evening... may have to leave early from here if it runs long, even. Fortunately, I don’t have to wait for the Floo getting out. Had a real bugger getting here. Has the Floo Network been misdirecting you more lately?”

She shook her head.

“Oh,” Harry uttered.

George was now facing his second opponent of the round robin, a small, older woman who was still shaking off a Jelly Limbs Curse from her previous opponent. George actually let her get in the first spell, apparently feeling gracious. He paid for it though when it turned out to be a Belt Tightening Curse that doubled him over. Gaze fierce, he clenched his arm around his middle, and returned a Hornet’s Nest

## POWER PLAY

that chased her off the platform and then required help from the audience to cancel it completely.

Harry and Hermione joined the assembled Weasleys: Molly, Ron, and Fred, as well as the Weasley cousins as they congratulated George on going to the finals. George dangled the small brass wand before his twin brother tauntingly until Harry said, "You didn't have to face my trainer."

George collected the chain against the wand and stashed it away. "But I will next. How tough is he really? Someone took him down, I hear," he whispered and Harry wondered and immediately doubted if Mr. Weasley had let that slip. The conversation was dropped when Skeeter approached.

"George Weasley... oh, and Harry. What a find, well, a few words from you, Mr. Weasley, in a moment." She peered at Harry through her tortoise-shell glasses, quill poised and asked, "Ready for the final tournament, Harry? Disappointed that you aren't competing?"

"A little, but judging will be fun."

"Even with all of your friends battling against each other? No qualms about a conflict there or... losing any friends?" She asked this with no little insinuation.

Harry had not worried about that. "I intend to be fair," Harry asserted and left it at that.

Ron put an arm around Harry and said, "He intends to be fair by favoring Weasleys over any others." The twins grinned at this.

Hermione crossed her arms. "Over Professor Snape, even?" she sniffed doubtfully.

George leaned in and despite Skeeter standing right there, said, "We are going to need some help there."

"I'm not favoring anybody," Harry insisted, feeling surrounded.

George stared at his fingernails and said, "No, you see you have to favor some o' us to make it even, so as to not be favorin'."

"Right," Harry said doubtfully.

Ron patted Harry and let him go. "We'll work on him," he assured Skeeter.

Skeeter was grinning in amusement but she straightened her face and turned to George. "You and your brother use rather a lot of foreign spells. Where do you learn them?"

Fred replied. "Pen pals. We trade spells with some students in Kyoto."

"Have to use Muggle post, in fact," George added. "It's too far to send an owl."

Harry had been watching the time and saw that he needed to go now to be ten minutes early rather than ten minutes late as he had been last week. He tugged on Hermione's sleeve. "I have to go. Tell everyone I said goodbye."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“Be careful, Harry,” she said automatically and turned immediately back to the conversation.

Author’s Notes: Ginny fans – It isn’t piling onto Ginny if she herself has made a point of not wanting to finish school and freely admits to hating studying and exams. Everyone else is simply locked into this notion from long association with it. Only Harry is a loyal enough friend to realize that if Ginny now wants to do better, that she could still manage to. Although, like many teens, she may be deciding too late.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



# A HERO'S WEAKNESS

Harry stopped at home to pick up a warmer cloak for his shift and he arrived right on time. It was only six but it felt as though the day should already be over. He rubbed his arms and tried to gather up the energy for a full shift of Auror patrol. In the workout room, Kerry Ann sat reading a curled and yellow Muggle paperback. She waved hello and Harry wandered down to the Auror offices, surprised to find them empty. He was turning around when he spotted the logbook on the stand against the right-hand wall, its automatic quill lying beside it, twitching.

Curious where everyone was, Harry stepped over to read the last entry in the thick tome. The last entry was Tonks, checking in to say she had arrived at the Titan warehouse. Harry stared at the writing a long breathless moment, trying to remember where he had heard of that just recently. He checked Tonks' desk to see what files were out. The usual disorganized stacks were there but on top of them was a note stating that she had gone to take another look around where Rodgers had been attacked.

Harry had a stab of panic as he remembered Rodgers' description in the hospital of what had happened. A noise from the log stand brought Harry's attention back over there just as he set the note back down. A five pointed star was being scratched out on the board in pink, Tonks' color. Action took hold of Harry, he dashed to the corridor, looked both ways and spied the light in the workout room.

"Kerry Ann," Harry breathed from the doorway. "There is an emergency call from Tonks, who apparently went back down to the Titan warehouse where Rodgers was attacked. There isn't anyone around, so I'm going." With that, he Disapparated.

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Kerry Ann had been getting to her feet, with the usual need to disentangle herself from the desk, and as Harry disappeared she said, "Harry... you idiot." She ran down to the Auror's office and then around the corner, trying to find someone. Blessedly, around the next corner, light spilled out from Mr. Weasley's open door and faint conversation could be heard. Kerry Ann pounded down there, bringing Mr. Weasley to his feet when she arrived. He was alone, which seemed curious, but she disregarded it.

"Mr. Weasley, thank goodness. No one is around and Harry said he saw an emergency call from Tonks and so he took off."

"He what?"

"But, there isn't any call that I can see. And he for some reason thinks she's at the Titan warehouse in the Docklands, but she's logged in with Shackbolt in Devon to help the Magical Reversal Squad. So, I have no idea what he's talking about."

Mr. Weasley stared at her a long befuddled second before pushing past her. Kerry Ann said, "It sounds like some kind of trap." She glanced into the office before following and noticed an old crystal ball on the desk. She hesitated on her toes because she thought she saw something in it, but having never seen anything in one, despite years of Divination classes, she assumed it must have been her own reflection.

Down in the Auror offices, Mr. Weasley was peering at the log book. "Did you see a five pointed star?"

"No."

"The quill certainly didn't log one."

"Should we go down there, sir?"

"And leave the office completely unmanned? No. We have reinforcements we can call in at times like this. Mr. Moody, for example, who should be at home." He thought a moment about direction, and fired a silver message away and slightly upward.



Argus Filch's eyes narrowed when he heard glass breaking somewhere high above where he stood. He dropped his cat – who landed easily – stomped to the nearest window, and threw open the sash to peer up. A figure high above on broomstick, clearly in a school uniform, was whispering in a hiss to someone inside the tower. A second later the pupil took off at top speed.

Filch hurried his way along the corridor and pounded on a door midway down the line. The door swung open forcefully and Professor Snape straightened upon seeing the school caretaker there.

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“Student just took flight from the Gryffindor tower,” Filch grumbled. “Thought you’d like to know.”

“What?” Snape didn’t wait for a reply, just went to his window. “Heading which way?”

Filch stooped to pick up his cat, who was circling and bumping his legs. “South.”

Snape swore quietly and went to his cupboard for his own broomstick.

Filch said, “If you catch ‘em can I use the manacles?”

“Possibly,” Snape said through clenched teeth while mounting the window sill to push the sash wide. “Tell the headmistress that I will silver message her when I catch this pupil.” With that he was gone.

Snape flew straight south, squinting into the distance. A glowing mist clung to the lowest corners of the hills despite the thinnest sliver of moon. The only lights ahead beyond Hogsmeade came from the railroad signal just before the bridge where the rail lines came together. It also marked the edge of the Apparition barrier. On a hunch, and suspecting that he saw a dark figure swooping down toward the light, Snape kicked his broom into its top speed. Whoever it was ahead of him must have a fast broom as well since he didn’t gain on his quarry at all.

A crack! that sounded as Snape began descending over the tall trees indicated that someone had indeed stopped there to Apparate away. Snape landed hard and immediately used a tracking spell to find the exact spot where the person had been standing. By the red light of the railroad signal, he marched off a pentagram around it in the tall grass. Two steps, stop and set a flare, two steps... This was a Dark magic spell, but he was not going to be deterred while chasing a run-away student. Red bars rose up from the corners of the pentagram and subsided, which indicated that the spell had worked. Snape stepped into the center, activated the spell again so that it formed a glowing cage around him, and blindly Disapparated on the faith that the spell would take him to precisely the same spot as the last person had gone.



Harry stepped along the fence surrounding the Titan warehouse. He had been down here twice on patrol since the attack so he felt he was on familiar ground. All appeared quiet, but his concern for Tonks imagined all kinds of bad possibilities that might account for the lack of obvious battle. He cut a gap in the chain link fence and ducked inside, dodging a hulking piece of mysterious, rusty equipment. The heavy padlock on the door to the warehouse had previously been cut and the door pushed open silently after Harry used a charm on it to ensure this.

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As dark as it was outside on the waterfront, it was even darker inside the massive building. The vertical skylights offered the only light and it was paltry at best. Harry made his way carefully forward, aware of the tall pillars arrayed from here to the far side but not much else. His eyes strained to make out anything and he was beginning to wonder exactly how best to proceed given that there were no obvious clues as to where exactly Tonks, or the trouble, was.

Stepping gingerly and silently, Harry stopped at the first pillar and breathed slowly so as to remain quiet. He didn't want to shout or use a light, so he wasn't certain what he should do since he wasn't giving up yet.



Shaking off the quivers that the spell left him with, Snape looked around himself. He was in a tree-lined field and ahead of him the low clouds radiated the glow of a large city's lights. He took a few steps and the distinctive outline of the Burrow came into view through the trees. Swearing again, Snape took flight and flew at top speed toward the glowing sky. If she had only gone home for a visit, he could deal with her later, but he had a hunch she was headed into London. As he flew, he sent a silver message to McGonagall indicating that he believed that it was Ginny Weasley he was chasing.

A distant figure fluttered tantalizingly as a speck against the bright sky, too far away to apprehend with a spell that would not put Ginny at risk. She presumably rode Harry's Firebolt, which meant it was not possible to catch up. Snape fired several Tracker Charms in case he lost her, but none of them seemed to hit their mark and soon she dipped below the sky, out of sight against the grey mass of buildings.

Snape urged his broom forward even though it was already at its top speed; the cold wind bit fiercely into his bare hands. He slowed when he reached the lazily winding river through the city. Ginny appeared to have descended in a broad swoop somewhere in this area. No figures were on the street, so Snape swooped low to read a street sign and sent another message to McGonagall. He had been moving too fast to receive any back, if she had sent one.



Inside the warehouse, a noise up and to the left boosted Harry's already fast heart rate even higher. Moving as quickly as he could, while remaining silent, he found the metal stairs up to what appeared to be a windowed row of former offices that overlooked the warehouse floor. At the top of the stairs, glass from the mostly broken

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windows littered the floor, making it very difficult to move in complete silence, even while casting a silencing charm ahead of his feet.

A doorless opening led into the old office area, now empty except for a smashed telephone and some dangling wiring. The noise he had heard may simply have been vermin moving about. Harry stepped cautiously, his wand damp in his fingers but radiating his nerves back at him as energy, which made him feel more confident.

At the outer corner where the gaping window frames looked down upon the vastness of the warehouse, Harry turned. There was nothing here. His shoulders fell as he frowned into the darkness. But just as he was relaxing his wand arm, his spine prickled with a warning vibration and a sickly malevolence. Harry spun while generating his best block but he was too late to finish the spell before a blast of sparkling blue and white struck him, buckling his knees.

Fiercely angry, mostly at himself, Harry desperately fought the blackness trying to envelope him. He guessed which direction to fire a returning spell and issued a blasting curse that pounded against the window frames, splintering the rotted wood and plaster in a shower that rained down onto the floor below.



Ginny Weasley was just maneuvering herself through a broken skylight and wishing she knew some kind of night vision spell, when a first floor area in the corner lit up blue-white. Without thinking she leaned her broom into its highest acceleration and held fast to her wand. Another blast out of the windows forced her to veer severely to the left and fight the magical currents to cut a new course to the long row of side windows. She landed inside with a crunch of broken glass and immediately needed to block a shot that she thought must be cast by a cloaked person on a broomstick since it was emanating from twenty-five feet in the air beyond the glassless windows.

By the light of the clashing spells she saw Harry collapsing to the floor as his block failed, and she immediately stepped forward into the onslaught to get him at least partially under her own block. The glass shards shivered around them on the floor. The spell finally let up and Ginny had to catch herself with her hand on the broken glass as a wave of sleep tried to overcome her. A Sleeping Curse, that's what the spell resembled, she realized. The world was tilting distressingly like a funhouse as Ginny scrambled forward. On her knees beside Harry she cast a hatchet class curse out the widened window, imagining it lodging in someone's chest and not caring if it did. It clattered to the floor far below instead and she had no choice but to find the power for a second block as another interminably and impossibly long bombardment

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of Sleeping Curse lashed out at them, from closer yet; although she saw no one who could be casting it.



Snape landed at the base of an old bridge that crossed the river thirty feet above the waterfront quay of cracked, sagging tarmac. The street lamps atop the bridge shed scant light around him.

As he approached a hole cut in the fence bordering the nearest property, a cloaked figure approached. Snape aimed his wand and the figure tossed back its hood to reveal Mad-Eye Moody. “Got a message that we have an errant Apprentice,” he growled almost inaudibly.

Snape tilted his head. “I am chasing an errant student.”

Moody’s magical eye moved without his head. “What’s this then?” he uttered just before a flash of light could be seen through the cracks in the rusting wall of the building. Another spell followed on its heels, accompanied by the sound of excessive debris being thrown about.

Both of them broke into a run, but Snape reached the door first, having the advantage of two good legs and far greater determination. He stopped just behind the first pillar and peered around it. Dust settling in the air caught the paltry light available and then lit up brightly when a spell poured forth from the first floor area to the left. Blinded by the spell, Snape was slow locating the stairway up and had to follow Moody, who was more cautious than Snape’s blind determination would allow for.

At the top, Snape slipped on deeply layered blades of broken glass and had to right himself with his hands as yet another spell lit the area ahead of them, outlining two figures, one down and one kneeling, the latter clearly Ginny given the long hair.

Moody shouted for Ginny to duck and fired something that streamed out on a sizzling white wire before meeting up with something beyond the window opening and exploding in a blast of sandy particles and white light.

Silence fell as the debris settled with a strange rustle of the glass shards around them. Ginny shook Harry and called his name in an attempt to rouse him. Snape crouched quickly beside her, wand illuminated, and laid two fingers on Harry’s carotid artery. He then exhaled in relief and asked, “What did he get hit with?”

Ginny answered, “It looked like a Sleeping Curse. It felt like one too.”

“Let’s get out of this confined and highly trap-like area,” Snape snarled.

Moody, who was peering out into the warehouse said, “It’s clear now. Although there was a barrier just a second ago. Odd.”

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"I don't care if you don't see anything," Snape countered. "I'm taking Harry outside." And with that, he grasped Harry's wrist and Disapparated to the shadowy area at the base of the bridge.

Moody appeared beside him a second later, Ginny firmly gripped by the wrist. "What do you want with her?" he asked.

Another voice said, "It will take some time to come up with something appropriate." They all turned and watched as McGonagall stepped carefully down the uneven stone staircase from the roadway above. "There is fortunately an old tartan shop down here that despite being closed for a decade is still on the Floo Network. What happened to Harry?" she asked in concern, pushing Moody aside to bend over Harry's supine figure.

"He was lured into a trap," Moody supplied. "A rather cleverly laid one. A Sleeping Curse got 'im." As he spoke, his magical eye roved constantly around them.

McGonagall turned on Ginny, "And what are you doing here, young lady? Alastor, you can let go of her."

"You certain?" Alastor asked.

"Yes," McGonagall assured him. "We know where she lives, even if she may or may not be a student at our school after this is sorted out."

Ginny dipped her head. "I was talking to dad about George's win in the dueling regional and overheard one of the other apprentices saying that Harry had headed off here thinking that Tonks was in trouble but she said the logs and the note he mentioned weren't at all as Harry had said. She said it must be a trap and that no one was around to take care of it." She nervously shifted Harry's broom from one hand to the other. "If I hadn't arrived-

"Help had been called," Moody pointed out, leaning toward her.

"You were too late," Ginny countered angrily, gamely leaning into the argument as well.

"Enough!" Snape snarled, crouching beside Harry again. "We need to take Harry somewhere safe until this is sorted out. If we are dealing with insider help at the Ministry in trapping him, I am leery of doing the predictable."

"He doesn't need St. Mungo's?" McGonagall asked.

"He needs to sleep off the curse." Snape leaned farther over Harry in the dim light. "Although, he is showing nervous agitation from an overdose of the spell, it doesn't appear dangerous."

"We can use the Floo node I arrived in to take him back to Hogwarts," McGonagall pointed out.

"Harry gets misdirected in the Floo all the time, you know," Ginny pointed out. "In his last two letters he's complained about that."

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“Plod’s coming,” Moody whispered and pushed McGonagall and Ginny a little more into the shadows. Up on the street heavy footsteps could be heard approaching the bridge.

“Take hold of my bracelet,” McGonagall instructed them, holding out her arm and pulling her sleeve back to reveal a glittering gold band.

All but Moody obeyed. He stepped backward into the shadows and held his wand at ready. Snape lifted Harry’s limp hand and McGonagall lowered her arm so Harry’s arm could reach and a rushing two breaths later they were in a small sitting room with bookshelves lining one wall surrounding a cold hearth, a tall wing chair, into which Ginny plunked down with a groan, and a dark green sofa, where Snape hovered Harry’s slumbering self. Harry’s arm twitched strangely followed by his head as he was covered with his own and Snape’s cloaks. Snape again checked his pulse and leaned back, apparently satisfied.

A figure came to the doorway just as Ginny asked, “Where are we?”

“Minerva?” the figure queried. “What is happening?”

McGonagall went over to him, standing close and putting a hand on his arm. “Richard, we needed a quick escape. Sorry if we startled you-”

Snape interrupted from the sofa where Harry was growing more agitated, although not any more conscious, “Do you have a Calming Draught, Minerva?”

“Yes, I’ll fetch it.” She stepped away, leaving Richard rubbing his arms nervously just outside the doorway.

Ginny gave him a thorough looking over, fascinated by the notion of a married Professor McGonagall. Richard appeared to be an average, middle-aged man, medium brown hair, unkempt, wearing a blue cotton shirt with a cardigan over it. “Is that Harry Potter?” he asked, leaning his head sideways to see around Snape, but not approaching.

“Yes,” Ginny replied. “Foolish Harry, running after someone he can’t have.”

“Oh,” Snape sneered. “And we don’t have anyone else in this room who qualifies as foolish under that metric.”

“And, I was going to add, when they weren’t in any trouble anyway.” Ginny finished and sat back with her arms crossed. “Sir.” Harry’s leg jerked this time. “What’s wrong with him?” Ginny asked.

“Multiple Sleeping Curses can over-stimulate selective parts of the nervous system even as it shuts down consciousness. How many times did he get hit?”

“About two and a half but the spell was long. I tried to get him inside my block but my block was leaking since the spell almost took me out too. I’ve never seen anything like it; It just went on and on, unstoppable, like a gushing spigot rather than a wand.”



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He considered her, and she held his gaze, part of her hoping she had scored enough credit with that to avoid the worst of the punishment that could be upcoming. On the other hand, she didn't regret at all what she had done. She slouched back in the tall chair and watched Harry's fitful face with no small ache of sympathy.

McGonagall returned to the doorway and murmured something to Richard. Ginny leaned forward in the chair to observe them interact, but she felt strangely heavy when she moved, as though she moved through water. A stinging on her ankle made her pull her leg over, but it resisted her tug and the pain shot higher. A high-pitched chattering noise emanated from the corner of the chair and Ginny turned and discovered the most grotesque creature clinging to her ankle. It had hair growing right out of its rancid yellow eyes, which were surrounded by wrinkled excessive flesh. It had what appeared to be a lobster claw latched around her leg and it was opening its shockingly large mouth – relative to its tiny head – as though in preparation for taking out a chunk of her flesh.

Ginny shouted and leaped fully onto the chair, pulling her leg free and scrambling for her wand. The whole room was in motion. The floor was crawling with similarly distorted creatures. Snape had pulled Harry to a sitting position and was shaking him. McGonagall had thrown herself backwards into her husband, wand out and spelling anything that approached the door.

“Minerva, the potion!” Snape shouted over the chattering of teeth and clacking of mingling boney and chitinous limbs.

McGonagall gathered her wits and pushed forward into the room, her floor-length robes immediately caught up in claws and grasping long fingers. She tossed the potion bottle the last few feet. Snape caught it up, yanked the stopper, and forced it between Harry's lips while chanting a swallowing charm.

The noise in the room dwindled and the creatures melted into the floor. One last one was climbing over the armrest of the wingback chair and Ginny, crouched on the cushion, hit it with Harry's broom, which she had left propped against the chair. It slapped into the corner, fell, and sunk into the floor. Limbs shaking, Ginny lowered herself slowly down to sit, although she kept her feet up on the blessedly wide cushion and she kept the broom held at ready. Snape, still clenching the potion bottle, was holding Harry's limp head against his chest.

Except for the sound of everyone's breathing, the room remained silent for nearly a minute. Eventually, Richard asked in a quavering voice, “What was that?”

Everyone turned to him, including McGonagall, who released her panicked grip on the doorframe in order to push Richard away and shepherd him off. Snape, still with a slouched Harry leaning into him, stoppered the bottle and put it in his pocket. He then pushed his straggly hair back repeatedly, eyes far away.

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Ginny leaned forward in the chair and glanced around the room, including under her own chair. She still didn't wish to put her feet down when she sat back. Her sock was wet. She shifted and examined the slices in her ankle that were leaking blood down into her shoe. The vision of the creature that had had a hold of her made her shudder. A sharp query drew Ginny from that memory. "Did you get hurt?" Professor Snape asked.

Thinking that it could have been worse, Ginny replied, "Just scratched."

McGonagall returned and stepped to the couch. Snape lowered Harry back and removed the potion from his pocket and handed it to her. He stood and asked McGonagall, "Did you get injured?"

McGonagall shook her head without lifting it from her scrutiny of Harry's absolute stillness. He looked as quiet as death now. Ginny wrapped her arms around herself as though the room had grown icy cold. Snape approached her and lifted her foot, yanking off her shoe without preamble.

"Did you get bit?"

Ginny shook her head, "No."

"Well, that is something." He dropped her foot and headed for the doorway. "Come."

Ginny stood and hobbled two steps before kicking off her other shoe. "What would have happened if I did?"

Snape's reply was muted by his striding away. "I do not know precisely, but nothing good, presumably."

Ginny hurried to follow as Snape stopped to check each room branching off along a linear line of small rooms. He stopped at the door to a pink tiled toilet and waited for her.

Ginny sat on the closed toilet seat and washed off the blood with the warm wet cloth she had been unceremoniously handed. Her bloody sock she tossed into the rubbish bin. The jagged slices were still bleeding so she pressed the cloth firmly around her ankle and watched as Snape prowled through the pink cabinets and the cupboard before finding what he needed. He sat on a footstool and opened a plastic bottle that boded ill with the sharp aroma of denatured alcohol. With a thick white towel under her foot, propped on his leg, Snape poured the half-full contents of the bottle over the wounds.

Ginny very nearly screamed. Without meaning to, she tried to yank her foot back, but it was held surprisingly fast. All she could manage was to rock back and forth as the crucio-level pain peaked and subsided in waves of cold and hot from the wounds. The air itself was misery on the lacerations in the wake of the alcohol. She dried her eyes and felt embarrassed to need to, but Snape wasn't paying any attention; he was

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opening a tin of salve and covering the wounds, which relieved most of the remaining pain. Gauze and significant amounts of white tape followed.

Ginny's foot was released to drop to the floor without warning before Snape stood and said, "It will have to be checked hourly to see that nothing is changing." When Ginny responded by pulling her leg close as though to protect it, he added, "You would look far less ladylike with a giant lobster claw for a foot."

Ginny shuddered at the thought. Snape was tossing out the plastic bottle, leading Ginny to ask, "Wasn't that sufficient punishment for leaving school grounds?" while drying her eyes yet again.

Snape's black gaze slid over to her as he closed up the other supplies. He didn't reply, and Ginny found herself lowering her gaze.

Back in the sitting room, McGonagall was in the chair Ginny had occupied and Ginny, who would normally willingly sit on the floor, opted instead to sit upon the armrest at Harry's feet, even though it wasn't her house. No one even glanced at her, so she relaxed. Harry was lying so still he did not appear to be breathing, but his color was good, and Snape stood straight after checking him over, so he must be all right.

"We should take him to Hogwarts," Snape suggested.

McGonagall tiredly replied. "There is no Floo network here, that is why I was allowed the bracelet to get home. But now it is reset to the Docklands as its second port. This is actually Richard's house and Cornelius denied me a permanent attachment because I am here so little of the year. I could reapply, I suppose now that it Amelia I could appeal to for a dispensation."

Snape said, "I could take him on my broom from beyond the Apparition bar—"

His speaking was coincidentally interrupted by twin cracks! of Apparition which brought everyone's gaze to the doorway where Moody and Mr. Weasley appeared. As they entered, the small room grew quite crowded. Ginny swallowed hard at the disturbed look her father sent her way. But she was given a temporary reprieve when he turned to the others and asked about Harry.

Snape spoke: "He was hit with multiple Sleeping Curses, otherwise he is unharmed. Ms. Weasley arrived in time to prevent further harm or anyone from taking him away."

Ginny stared, eyes wide, at Professor Snape, shocked silly by his moral support.

Moody grunted doubtfully. "We were right behind 'er." His magical eye circled the room inside its socket. "No other problems?"

"No," Snape lied easily and then in an apparent distraction added, "If he is in need of further care we will take him."

McGonagall shifted in her seat, but did not speak. Mr. Weasley bent over Harry,

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touching his forehead and then his cloak covered shoulder. "We're still sorting out what happened at the Ministry. But if it was only a Sleeping Curse then someone clearly wanted to capture him unharmed and went to great trouble to do so... someone who has too much access and knows far too much about Harry," he finished grimly.

Moody looked Ginny over, noticing her bare foot with both eyes. "What happened to your leg?" he asked softly.

Ginny opened her mouth and managed to reply almost as smoothly as Snape had, "I must have cut it on a piece of glass." She held up her nicked hand which actually had been cut on a glass shard at the warehouse. "There was a lot of it about."

Snape stood suddenly and said, "Harry should recover in a few hours. We will let you know how he is faring and I would appreciate a patrol or two being assigned to Shrewsthorpe for the next few weeks."

"Already arranged, Severus," Mr. Weasley replied. "I'll assume he's coming in on Monday unless I hear otherwise." He sounded as caring as Ginny had ever heard him and she felt a stab at having to lie to him. He turned to her, glanced at the two teachers and then back to her, saying, "I'm assuming that you aren't supposed to be here."

Ginny shook her head faintly.

Her father sighed and said, "We'll sort it out later after they decide on their punishment for you. I'd say a Quidditch ban is in order."

Ginny nearly collapsed in reaction and just barely resisted swearing. She straightened up immediately, though, upon deciding she still wouldn't have changed what she did in the face of that. Against her will, her eyes were burning in frustration, but she didn't touch them in an effort to avoid drawing attention to it.

Mr. Weasley asked the teachers, "Do you want me to take Ginny home with me?"

Snape glanced surreptitiously at her ankle and said, "No, she may remain here," leaving Ginny in the bizarrely unexpected position of preferring the company of Professor Snape to her father's.

After Mr. Weasley and Moody departed, Ginny let out the breath she didn't realize she had been holding. McGonagall stood and said to Snape, "If you can handle Harry alone, I need to attend to Richard."

Snape nodded and since he was sitting on the couch, hand resting on Harry's arm, Ginny took the tall chair again. That was, until Snape said, "Light a fire, will you, Ms. Weasley?"

Ginny immediately stood back up to do as she was told, beginning with pushing the chair out of the way in the small space, but still having it face the couch. Minutes and one firestarting spell later, a fire was flickering merrily in the hearth. Its warmth contrasted distressingly with recent events and failed to feel comforting.

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Brushing ash off her hands, Ginny returned to the chair and jumped poker-straight on raw nerves when Harry's hand jerked. Snape, moving with rapid confidence, lifted him upright and, using his arm to hold Harry's head up, again forced potion into him. After stoppering the bottle, he turned around to sit back on the couch and continued to hold Harry while staring intensely beyond the floor.

Ginny relaxed only after a long, quiet time passed. She found her gaze unable to remain fixed on the scene of a hunched Professor Snape cradling Harry's head on his arm and looking as though the future were grim. She finally let her heavy eyes close and drifted to the sound of the fire behind her.

Harry awoke to a pummeling from an array of confusing memories. His face was pressed into warm robes and the familiar scent of his guardian. With his comprehension of this, his immediate alarm drained away and he floated in absolute security despite being unable to piece the immediate past together. When he could, Harry blinked his eyes open and pondered the sliver of unfamiliar wall and ceiling visible beyond Snape's shoulder and the curve of his chest. Harry's hands were stinging in places and he moved them under the heavy cloaks to feel what might be wrong, startled when he was suddenly raised into a sitting position, his head lolling against Snape's breastbone.

Harry wanted to lift his hands before him to look at them but Snape had too firm a hold. "What's going on?" Harry managed to ask through what felt like a potion haze in his mind. Oddly, a potion bottle was before him as he asked this. It retreated slowly and the hold on him loosened enough for him to bring his hands up to study the numerous small cuts on them. Flashes of recent memory came back at that: broken glass, the dark warehouse. "What happened? Is Tonks all right?" Alarm brought clear thinking back for a moment, but it faded again into a general cottony pressure.

Snape set the potion bottle down nearby with a thunk. Snidely, he chastised, "She wasn't there."

Harry tried to take that in while gathering his strength to sit up on his own and not be draped against Snape. "No?" Harry then noticed that Ginny was sleeping in a chair nearby, feet curled under her, head awkwardly angled into the corner, mouth open. Harry rubbed his forehead and managed to get upright with a little help. Memories and nightmares were competing in his brain, making him woozy.

"Why don't you have another sip of this?" Snape asked, bringing the potion bottle back before Harry.

Harry put his hands around the frosted green glass bottle and tried to stare down into it. "What is it?"

Snape's arm was around him and it tightened as he replied, "Calming Draught.

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Just another sip and I think you will be fine. You are recovering from the effects of repeated Sleeping Curses.”

Harry didn't want his limbs to be any more rubbery than they were now. He gripped the bottle in both hands thinking he should resist.

“Go on,” Snape urged softly.

Harry obeyed; the potion was bitter and it reflected the stale taste already in his mouth. Snape took the bottle before Harry might drop it and set it aside. Harry's head fell to the side and Snape sat forward and let him down onto the couch to lie flat. Harry's last perception was Snape bending over him, laying his fingers on the side of his neck.

Harry awoke later when Ginny added logs to the fire. He looked around the unknown room and felt at a loss. “Where is Severus?” he asked.

Ginny turned to him and said, “Sleeping in the other room. Do you want me to fetch him?”

Harry sat up and found it easier than expected. His fuzzy memory regarding potions was confirmed by the bottle beside the arm of the sofa. “No.”

Ginny stood and came beside him. “Are you certain? I'm under orders to fetch him if you so much as ask where he is.”

“No, no, it's all right.” Harry put his feet down on the floor, massaged his head and sniffed. “I had the worst nightmare.”

“Really?” Ginny asked facetiously as she dropped back into the wing chair and crossed her legs.

Harry fumbled through his thoughts and laughed lightly. “Yeah. I dreamed I set demons loose on McGonagall's husband.” He shook his head and looked perplexed.

“Ah huh,” Ginny muttered. She linked her fingers together and rested them over her knee. “Now ask where we are...” she invited.

Harry's stomach dropped an inch. “Where are we?” he asked despite not wanting to hear the answer.

Ginny shot him a look that Snape frequently used. “Headmistress McGonagall's house.”

“No,” Harry breathed.

“Yes,” Ginny stated.

Harry's eyes roamed the room, trying to hook this place into his memory, but he couldn't. “Did I really let them loose?” Harry asked bleakly. “Did anyone get hurt? Did Richard get hurt?”

Sounding more upbeat, she said, “Professor McGonagall went on defense for Richard. It was kind of cute, actually. The only person who got hurt was yours

## A HERO'S WEAKNESS

truly.” She pulled up her trouser cuff. “And just a scratch that Professor Snape said is healing all right.”

Harry studied the bandage on her ankle. “I’m sorry.”

“Harry, it’s all right. No harm, no foul.”

“Right,” Harry muttered, rubbing his hair back repeatedly. How did he lose control? he wondered.

Ginny laughed. “I was thinking that whoever was trying to kidnap you would have had a rather nasty surprise if they had captured you.”

Harry tried to piece that in with the previous evening. “What happened?”

Ginny filled him in while Harry leaned far back, eyes fixed on the fire.

“Someone went to that much trouble to trick me?” Harry asked at the conclusion.

“Yes. Wanted you rather badly.”

“Who?” Harry asked, and then thought he might know the answer.

Ginny shrugged. “I don’t know. My dad and Moody stopped by, said they hadn’t worked it out yet.”

Harry shifted his head to look at Ginny again. “Moody was here?”

“Yeah. Everyone lied to him.” Ginny sounded sober. “It was freaky standing by and watching Professor Snape lie to my dad. I think he needs to know, Harry.”

“I think he does too,” Harry agreed, although it made his empty stomach do a flip. “I need to get something to eat. Is there anything?”

“There are some snacks in the kitchen.” She stood and led the way down the long row of small rooms that made up the old house. The kitchen was at the far end just past a long formal dining room. Its white walls and cabinets were blinding when the electric lights were switched on. Ginny pulled bread and cheese out as well as chutney. Harry took them and sat down at the small table to eat.

A bit of food improved Harry’s outlook and he almost felt like himself after two cups of tea.

“So how much trouble are you in?” Harry asked.

Ginny sipped her tea and said, “I don’t know. Professor McGonagall threatened to expel me.”

“Isn’t that what you want?” Harry teased.

“At the beginning of the year, maybe,” she replied sharply. “Now that I’ve made it this far... no. My dad suggested a Quidditch ban.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, and if he insists on it, I think I’ll insist on becoming a professional Quidditch player.” She looked determined and Harry didn’t doubt she would do just that. “You think I’m good enough?” she asked.

“You’re pretty good,” Harry admitted. “I think you’d need more training, though.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She took a cracker and munched through it. "You think Suze is good enough, though," she pointed out, sounding a little hurt. "She hasn't been doing as well this year," Ginny added, sounding as though she were scoring points.

"Don't tell anyone, but Severus changed the Snitch to a professional one."

Ginny dropped her hand onto the table loudly. "No wonder the games have all been so bloody long this year. He do that just for her?"

"I expect," Harry answered, pouring himself a third cup of tea.

Feet scuffing on the floor brought their attention to the doorway where Richard stepped in and immediately scuffed to a stop upon seeing Harry. Leery, he glanced behind him as though contemplating a retreat. Harry's fingers suddenly felt the sharp outline of his teacup handle as he fiddled with it. He felt rather bad, but didn't know what to say.

"Good morning," Ginny said easily, as though everything were normal.

After a hesitation Richard returned her greeting before quickly going to the icebox for the milk. He fumbled in cabinets he must know well, but at this moment didn't appear to know so well, to get out a glass. Harry stared at the chipped edge of the table, feeling worse. Richard put the milk away and departed.

"He'll get over it," Ginny asserted when quiet descended.

"Doesn't look like it. How many creatures were there? I didn't notice any damage."

"I wasn't counting, and they seemed to want to get at the people mostly." She frowned as though regretting saying that. "Professor Snape thinks the conditions in your head that made it happen won't easily occur again. But avoid Sleeping Curses, if you can... especially three in a row."

Harry's stomach felt sour and he pushed the remainder of his tea away.

"Harry," Ginny cajoled. "Everything's all right. If you hadn't been rescued, everything would still be all right because of those things. They weren't going after you that I could tell. What's the problem?"

Harry stared in the direction Richard had shuffled off to and sighed lightly. "What did McGonagall say?"

Ginny sent the dishes to the sink with a wave of her wand. An early morning glow filled the small window high on the wall. "Nothing."

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "Nothing?" he repeated and Ginny confirmed with a nod.

Snape stepped in then, looking around as though still on alert. His hair was exceptionally mussed and he looked in need of far more sleep, but he stepped over to Harry and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked.



## A HERO'S WEAKNESS

Harry looked away, at the salt and pepper shakers beside a jar of toothpicks, utterly mundane things. He shrugged. "All right, I guess." His stomach burned fiercely and he only felt worse in the face of Snape's sympathy. He didn't see Ginny's chagrined frown at his guardian.

More firmly, Snape said, "Harry?"

Sounding annoyed, Harry turned straight and prompted, "Yeah?" What he was realizing with grim outlook was that he was a potential time bomb for everyone around him.

"Any nervous twitches or sudden weakness?" Snape asked.

"No," Harry replied, hoping dearly that meant he was through it for now.

Snape's hand squeezed his shoulder. "Good. We should depart soon and leave McGonagall's household in peace." He crossed his arms. "As to you..." he said, staring down his nose at Ginny.

In his mind's eye Harry saw himself rising and raging at Snape for even considering punishing Ginny, even though a moment before he had been tempted to hypocritically point out her poor judgment himself. He imagined Snape's shock and alarm with detachment. He sat quiet, though, not even fidgeting outwardly.

"Someone had to do something," Ginny was arguing.

Snidely, Snape demanded, "Did it not occur to you, Ms. Weasley, that you could have come and informed me and that I would be more than capable of dealing with it?"

Ginny bit her lip. "I didn't think of it."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Identical bloody hero instinct. I take it back, Potter, I would not choose her... you would mutually self destruct."

Ginny's brow furrowed and she turned to Harry and asked, "What is he on about?"

"Don't ask," Harry replied quietly. He stood and said, "I'm ready to go home."

Familiar footsteps indicated McGonagall was approaching. She took in the room with calm eyes and greeted everyone. Harry dropped his gaze for what felt like the tenth time that morning. "Recovered, Harry?" she asked, as though he might have had touch of flu.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry replied, eyes roving the worn laminated floor.

To Snape she said, "I'll expect you early Monday, then?"

Snape nodded and went to fetch their cloaks from the far room. Harry stood waiting awkwardly. Ginny gave him a hug, which did not aid in reducing the awkwardness. Snape returned, grasped Harry's wrist and Disapparated them to their main hall.

"I could have Apparated myself," Harry pointed out, sounding peevish on top of tired, "that didn't feel very far."

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“Why don’t you go to your own bed for a little more rest?” Snape suggested stiffly.

“I just had three cups of tea,” Harry pointed out.

“Why don’t you work on your readings then.”



Ginny tensed as she was left alone with the headmistress. “We should be going as well,” McGonagall said. “I left Grubbly-Plank in charge, but I do not like to be gone so long... especially when there is apparently more trouble brewing than I previously realized. Get your things together,” she commanded Ginny.

“Yes, Headmistress,” Ginny responded politely, but as she stepped away, McGonagall said, “Little late for a bid for obedience, Ms. Weasley.”

Ginny returned as McGonagall was collecting a broom for herself from a hall cupboard. Upon seeing Richard hovering outside another doorway, she said, “Go on ahead Ms. Weasley, but wait for me at the doors to the castle, I doubt they will be open this early.”

Ginny slipped her hand-knitted gloves on, grasped Harry’s broom and Disapparated to the end of the railroad bridge.

The valley and its bridge spread out before her in misty steep hills and low stray streaks of wan sunlight. It was beautiful and for a moment, all she wanted to do was to fly off into the scene rather than go back to Hogwarts. Sighing, she hovered the broom and took off on it in the direction of the school, quickly collecting moisture on her cloak as she flew. The castle walls were streaked grey as though it had rained and the torches beside the doors were unlit blackened stumps, making the castle appear unoccupied. She landed before the front steps and sat down on the top one, damp cloak tugged tight around her.

It was almost ten minutes before McGonagall appeared and Ginny had fallen into a bored stupor, watching the matted grass of the lawn flutter in the wind. McGonagall didn’t speak, just unspelled the door and led the way in. A few students mingled in the Entrance Hall even this early and they watched in curiosity as Ginny tramped in behind the headmistress.

McGonagall hadn’t instructed it, but Ginny continued to follow her up to her office, where she glanced at a few notes on her desk before turning her attention to her charge. While she waited, Ginny examined a glass model of Hogwarts castle that hung from a stand on the desk. It was wet, dripping the occasional water droplet onto the floor.

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Still standing, McGonagall asked facetiously, “Well, Ms. Weasley, what are we to do with you?”

“If I hadn’t gone, Moody might have taken Harry to St. Mungo’s and he would have opened the Dark Plane there, which would have been terrible.”

“Claiming the ends justify the means does not fly with me, young lady, especially accidental ends,” McGonagall stated. “But the kind of trouble you caused did not put other students at risk, so I have little reason to expel you.” She paused while looking Ginny over. She adjusted the bun in her hair and took a seat before saying, “But we must be hard enough on you to deter others. Three weeks detention would be a start. And would you consider banishment from the D.A. a severe punishment?”

Ginny thought a moment. “It takes a lot of time that I’ve been thinking I should be using to revise for my N.E.W.T.s.”

McGonagall considered Ginny with what might have been a grudging acceptance of her attempt to sound the dutiful student. “Would others think it a severe punishment?”

“Probably. I’m in charge of it at the moment.”

“As little as I wish to remove you from what essentially constitutes teaching duties, it does sound the best option.” Ginny was just letting her tense shoulders fall when McGonagall ordered, “Give me your badge as well.”

Ginny required a second to realize that it was her Prefect badge that was being requested. Frowning, she pulled it from her pocket and handed it over. McGonagall said as she accepted it, “Your behavior is not exactly becoming of a Prefect, Ms. Weasley.”

“No, ma’am,” Ginny agreed and felt more lacking than expected from losing that status.

“You may go, Ms. Weasley. I will ask the staff who needs extra help, so report here this evening after dinner for your detention.”

“Yes, Professor.”

“And if you ever again leave school grounds without permission,” McGonagall threatened, “it will be a full Quidditch ban.” Under her breath she added, “As little as I wish to give Slytherin any additional advantages.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



# DUELS

Harry sat at the dining room table, mostly reading successfully until lunchtime when Winky asked what he might like. He had been up since 4:30 and thought that it felt more like dinner should be arriving and wondered if that was why she felt the need to ask. Snape was in and out of the room, sorting old piles of post and dealing with other random things. He always gave Harry a bit of a looking over before departing.

Harry, for his part, could get lost in his readings for a while but then Richard's fearful visage would float before him and make him feel ill all over again. He was resting with his eyes pillowed on his arm, trying to deal with that, when Snape reappeared and took a seat across from him.

"I'm sorry about everything." Harry said after lifting his heavy head. "You haven't even yelled at me for taking off after Tonks."

"Would you do so again?" Snape asked evenly. Harry knew that level tone meant the question was a test.

"I'd try harder to find someone to help, I guess. But..." Harry could not, after everything that had transpired, imagine staying put at the Ministry. He rubbed his gritty hair, and said, "I guess I would." And then he laughed wryly. "You don't seem angry. You don't seem angry about any of it."

Snape steepled his fingers before him on the table. "That instinct of yours to take action is the reason I am still here, so I cannot by rights insist that you always do otherwise. I do wish you would be more careful. Someone clearly wishes to do you harm."

"Merton," Harry said, and when Snape's head tilted with great interest, Harry

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said, "He also attacked Rodgers. At the same place. Took him two days in Mungo's to recover and he still isn't himself." Snape eyes were intent as he took that in. Harry added, "That's why I was certain there was trouble; it was the same place."

Snape leaned forward with interest. "Did Rodgers also get taken out with a Sleeping Curse?"

"No. Blasting Curse. Seemed like they intended to kill him. He just barely managed to Apparate away, but he passed out after that so he may have tried to go through a barrier. The Muggle police ended up finding him just outside the warehouse"

Snape rubbed his lip. "Is this the mysterious M.M. of whom you were asking before?"

"Yes. I shouldn't be telling you any of this, by the way."

Reassuringly, Snape replied, "I assumed as much." Lunch appeared before them and Snape took up the Draco pepper grinder that still annoyed Harry. Sounding unusually concerned, Snape said, "Rodgers is hardly unskilled with that wand of his."

"Whoever was spelling me yesterday wasn't either." Harry imagined getting a better shot next time, hopefully in the light, and felt a determination to do much better should the opportunity arise.

"Fortunately this Merton fancies convoluted traps rather than direct assault, or I would drag you back to live at Hogwarts." Without missing a beat, he continued with, "How are your readings progressing... are you catching up?"

"I am, slowly. Rodgers did a review day last week. I think someone insisted he be nicer to me and after the attack on him he's changed our lessons to strictly blocking so I've had more time to make up the older readings."

"What are you learning?" Snape asked between bites.

"Combined dome and crystalline blocks. Also rubber shields, which can also be thrown over your opponent once their energy stabilizes, but we haven't learned that yet. We're still working on the basics. It's going slow."

"As little as I like the man personally, I am pleased by the level of training you are receiving," Snape stated.

"I'm having a hard time staying on Rodgers' good side."

Snape said, "You will receive more effective training, perhaps, if you don't."

"I suppose," Harry returned. He stared at his plate, remembering, yet again, Richard's obvious fear. "You think I'm all right, though?" he asked, pained. Snape was behaving as though everything were normal, and if he didn't believe it was, he certainly wouldn't remain silent.

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Snape put down his silver and put his hands on the table. "Have you had any other episodes since returning from Finland?" When Harry shook his head, Snape prodded, "None at all?"

"No."

"Then I expect you are all right... in general. Avoid Sleeping Curses, certainly," Snape stated easily.

Harry didn't feel so confident; he felt a bit like Dr. Jekyll must have. "I need to tell Mr. Weasley what happened."

Snape picked up his fork again. "If you feel you must."

"You think I shouldn't?" Harry challenged.

Gently, Snape explained, "I don't think everyone is going to understand, Harry."

Harry held Snape's gaze and felt relief at the reinforcement that Snape would be his ally, always, for good or ill. "I think he needs to know," Harry restated.

"Then by all means tell him," Snape continued in the same soothing tone. "It is your decision."

The next morning, just as the sky was lightening, Snape stood ready to depart. Harry, after a very early night, came down in his housecoat and slippers to see him off. On the stairs, Harry remembered dreaming that Tonks had come to his room to see how he was. At least, Harry thought it a dream and then wondered with warm insides if she really had come. He found Snape standing beside the hearth, which had just been lit and crackled with fresh wood. Harry dismissed asking Snape about Tonks because he didn't want to give away that he might have been dreaming about her, if it had been a dream.

"Have a good week," Harry said.

"I shall attempt it." Snape reached for the canister of Floo powder, but then set it on the table and faced Harry. "I should not be telling you this, but I will nonetheless. Alastor has been assigned to investigate you. The Wizengamot debated Arthur's report and left the case open."

Harry frowned lightly and said dismissively, "Mr. Weasley warned me that might happen."

Sharply, Snape said, "Do not take this lightly. Mr. Moody came to interview me and exhibited his usual extreme paranoia."

"Ginny said you lied to him when he came to McGonagall's house."

"I had no interest in handing him sufficient evidence to have you removed from the Auror's program."

Harry put his hands into his housecoat pockets. "Thanks," he uttered.

"You are welcome," Snape returned, yo-yoing back to calm. "I truly believe such circumstances will not easily occur again, but you must be careful."

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“I will. You too.”

Snape hesitated. “Do you need anything at all?” he asked solicitously.

Harry, with the fresh memory of the care he had needed the night before last, flushed lightly and shook his head.

“Do keep me informed,” Snape said, recovering some of his snide tone.

“Yes, sir.”

After his own breakfast Harry put his things together a little clumsily and, feeling less than adept, took the Floo into the Ministry. He arrived in the very farthest hearth from the golden gates, but at least he arrived in the right place. He joined the long, but fast-moving queues being checked in at the desk and arrived on his floor earlier than expected.

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley said from the end of the corridor. “A word with you, young man.”

Harry scratched his head and followed nervously, his vague dread now properly realized. Mr. Weasley led the way to his office and took a seat. Harry closed the door behind him and leaned against it since the visitor’s chair was absent. “Harry,” Mr. Weasley began, sounding disappointed. “When I suggest you keep your nose clean, this isn’t what I had in mind.”

“No, sir,” Harry agreed. He started to explain further but gave up on the belief that he wouldn’t be capable of composing an excuse of any benefit. He also had no will at this moment to explain that he had opened the gates to the underworld in McGonagall’s sitting room, so saying nothing seemed the best course.

Mr. Weasley was happy to speak. He glanced over an official report parchment on his desk that had a detailed timeline scratched onto it. “Partially, it is our fault,” he admitted. “The office was left unstaffed, and apparently invaded, to boot.” He dropped the parchment. “It has also been pointed out that you have not been informed of proper procedures and that, perhaps if you had, you would have taken wiser action.” Mr. Weasley’s reassuring words were tempered by his continuing dismayed tone. “Procedures are usually covered at the end of the second year of training, but I’ve asked Reggie to cover the Ministry office procedures as soon as he can work it into the regime.” He gazed up at Harry then, waiting for something.

Harry nodded. “Yes, sir.” It sounded lame to his own ears.

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley said firmly. “You are not an Auror yet. You are not authorized to take action of the kind you did on Saturday. Is that clear?”

Harry nodded, not raising his eyes from the floor.

“For now you are a liability to this organization. We are responsible for you, your welfare, safety, et cetera. Actions like yours the other evening make our responsibilities too difficult to fulfill. I, for one, would not want to be in the position of having

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to inform Severus that something tragic had befallen you.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry repeated yet again, feeling severely chastened by that particular vision.

Mr. Weasley sighed. “On the other hand we have a traitor in our midst and that is our failing, not yours. Without inside help none of this would have happened. Nevertheless, you are on probation for two months.” Here he wagged a finger up at Harry. “Don’t slip up again.”

“No, sir,” Harry replied, sounding obedient and feeling overly so as well. Mr. Weasley’s chastisement, on top of what Harry knew to be real concern, was having an unusually powerful effect on him.

Mr. Weasley appeared satisfied with Harry’s reply. He asked, “Are you completely recovered, Harry?”

Harry had been staring at the worn and cracked leather of his trainers. “I’m all right now, but...” He took a deep breath. “But the repeated Sleeping Curses had a really bad side effect.”

Mr. Weasley leaned back in his creaky office chair and laced his fingers over his slight paunch. “How so?”

“I uh... Severus said that an overdose of Sleeping Curses hyper-stimulates some parts of your nerves, even as you lose consciousness. I don’t remember much of this, but I apparently...” Harry took another deep breath to fight the uneasiness beating at him. “I opened a gateway to the Dark Plane while I was out cold.”

There, he had said it; now he awaited a verdict. Mr. Weasley studied him closely while rubbing his chin. He said, “I’ll keep that in mind. Happens again, let me know.” The second comment had a tone of finality that squeezed at Harry’s chest.

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, yet again. He turned to the door and Mr. Weasley said, “Molly wanted to know if you were free for a luncheon this weekend...” Harry nodded without turning back around. He felt ashamed all around but mostly from admitting his weakness with the Dark Plane. Mr. Weasley asked, “Sunday noon, then?”

“I’ll be there, sir. Thank you.”

Harry returned to the training room just as Rodgers arrived, giving him his usual vaguely disdainful glance before beginning. Harry focused on his notes and Rodgers’ voice, ignoring everything else.



“I am sure you are busy,” McGonagall said when she gained admittance to Snape’s office late in the evening, midweek. “But there is something I need to discuss with you.”



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She sounded even more serious than usual, so Snape closed the grade book he had open and put down his quill. “What is it?”

McGonagall paced to the tall windows. “The incident this past weekend with you running off after Harry-”

“I ran off chasing one of our students,” Snape corrected.

McGonagall turned and nodded in concession. “Nevertheless, the incident quickly became one centered around your adopted son.” She clasped her hands behind her back where they fidgeted. “We had an emergency meeting of the Wizengamot this evening to discuss... what happened to Harry and some other incidences.” She turned around. “I very much need to know: if you were faced with choosing between being here to help protect this school and going to Harry’s aid, which you would choose?”

Snape sat back in his chair and considered that. While he thought, McGonagall went on, “There is a belief at the Ministry that things are getting bad again, although they are nowhere near the level they were at two years ago. In comparison, things are extremely quiet and if someone were not singling out the Aurors, no one would be noticing yet, let alone worrying, I don’t believe. But, it is clear that someone is testing the Ministry’s strengths and if they are holding back on something larger, there could be real difficulties when they are brought to bear.”

Snape rubbed his fist on his chin. “I cannot promise you what my priorities might be in the future. It would depend too heavily on the circumstances.” More softly, he said, “I do not mean to sound disloyal...”

“I realize that.” She paced to the bookcase on the other wall, the one full of Potion manuals. “I also realize that I do not inspire the same loyalty from you as Albus did.”

“It is close,” Snape conceded.

She gave him a small smile at that. “What I propose is this: We bring Remus in to assist in teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts because your deputy headmaster duties are taking up too much time. At least, that will be the ostensible reason for his presence. The real reason will be so he is present as backup for you, should you feel your loyalty divided too far.” They considered each other. “Is that equitable to you, Severus?”

Snape shrugged.

McGonagall pointed out, “You have not got along with him terribly well in the past and have previously strongly resisted his presence here. I don’t want to bring him into an environment of enmity, although given how badly he needs the employment, I don’t think he would complain.”

Snape sighed. “I will not resist your hiring him.”

“Nor working with him?” McGonagall prompted.

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“Nor working with him,” Snape conceded. “But others will resist. Are you prepared to fight the board and the parents on his behalf?”

She tugged her forest green robes straight at her sides and said, “After last weekend’s little invasion of my house, I find myself in the mood for a fight.” With a small, knowing smile she departed.



“How are you, sir?” Harry asked his trainer as he entered the workout room. For once, Harry had arrived earlier than everyone else.

Rodgers stopped and considered Harry before replying. “Getting better.”

“Are you going to be well enough to compete in the finals?”

“Oh, is that what this is about?” Rodgers snapped nastily.

“I was just curious, sir,” Harry said, alarmed that his attempt at being nice was apparently backfiring so brilliantly.

“Yeah, sure,” Rodgers scoffed.

“I really was only asking,” Harry explained. “Just curious how you were doing. Making conversation.”

Rodgers organized his notes on the table. “That Death Eater father of yours teach you how to lie that well?”

Harry frowned. “Sorry sir, I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just asking for myself, not because Severus wanted to know. He hasn’t even mentioned it.”

Rodgers bit his lip. “He isn’t even supposed to know, Potter.”

Harry straightened, cringing at his error. “I had to tell him after what happened last weekend,” he explained quickly. “He rightfully wanted to know what was going on. Not like I have much to tell him.”

“You want him to win the tournament that badly, what?” Rodgers mocked. “Bad enough that you are judging.”

Harry dropped his head and found hurt burgeoning rather than anger. “I intend to judge the tournament in complete fairness, sir.” Harry took a seat and opened his backpack. “And I’m glad you’re feeling better, even if you don’t think I am.” Harry opened the first book he took out to its bookmark and began reading, ignoring Rodgers until training started.

The whole day became an exercise in graciousness in the face of enmity. Rodgers used Harry for every demonstration, even of blocks they had not mastered.

Harry was just picking himself up off the floor for the fourth time, rubbing his elbow, which seemed adept at finding hard surfaces, when Rodgers said, “Again.”

Harry held up his hand. “Can you show me again, sir?”

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The other apprentices were sitting in tense silence. Harry was certain it was only their presence that made Rodgers run another demonstration of a domed Diamona. “You were doing better last week, Potter. Something happen between then and now?” he taunted.

“Apparently, sir,” Harry answered tiredly, finding stress of this kind to be a surprisingly strong deterrent to learning. He was starting to pin his hopes on making a visit to Hogwarts and getting a lesson from Snape that weekend.

Another Blasting Curse and Harry was on his knees again, his distorted block shattered and casting yellow stabs of light around him.

Finally, Rodgers said in clear disgust, “Vishnu, you come up and try it.”

“Harry,” Tonks said at the end of the day as Harry packed his things. She stepped close even though they were alone, reminding Harry of the dream he wasn’t sure was one. “What did you say to Reggie?” she asked in a hiss.

“I asked him how he was,” Harry explained, sounding hurt.

“You asked him how he was,” she repeated doubtfully. “You pissed him off that bad asking him how he was?”

Harry sighed, feeling surrounded. “He apparently thought I was looking for information for Severus for the tournament.”

Tonks’ expression shifted into a befuddled one. “Oh,” she said, sounding saddened.

Sticking with the hurt tack, which he found easy with her, he said, “I was trying to be nice.”

“Don’t, I guess,” she suggested.



Professor Snape circled his classroom at the end of the day on Friday, checking that everything was in order and put away. A rap on the open door frame brought his attention that way, where Lupin stood, a battered leather case held before him in his hands.

“Severus,” he said in greeting.

“Remus,” Snape replied neutrally. He picked up his files from the front table and considered the newcomer before approaching him.

Lupin tilted his head and said informationally, “Minerva put me in an office one floor up.” He pointed up. “Just above here, in fact.”

Snape strode down the corridor to his own office and Lupin followed but stood in the doorway while Snape put his remaining things away. When Snape straightened and noticed Lupin still standing there, he gestured abruptly at the visitor’s chair.

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Lupin accepted the invitation, straightening his faded and excessively patched robes as he did so. "If you have copies of the syllabi, I can get acquainted with where the courses are before Monday."

Without expression Snape opened a file drawer and went through several folders to pull all of the requested copies. He handed them over and stood, hands on hips, while Lupin perused them.

Lupin glanced up and said, "I'm not trying to be the interloper, Severus."

"I realize that," Snape uttered flatly. He settled behind his desk and rubbed his fingers together. "You are going to be indisposed already at the end of next week."

"Yes," Lupin confirmed easily.

Snape's fingers still rubbed over one another. "Are you properly stocked with potion or do you need more?"

Lupin stopped reading. "I could use more, if you are willing to make it."

"I shall start it tonight," Snape said grimly. In a more neutral tone he asked, "In what way do expect you can assist next week? You can certainly be useful for demonstrations."

Lupin laughed dryly and stated, "Yes, I'd expect you to find me useful for that."

Snape's hand slapped the table. "You are doing me a favor by being here."

Easily, almost teasing, Lupin replied, "You certainly aren't acting like it." When Snape frowned and looked away, Lupin asked, "Minerva made clear the real reason was for my presence here. Harry still that much of a burden?"

"More so," Snape muttered.

"How's that?" Lupin asked with a laugh.

After a long pause Snape replied, "He has moved beyond me. He needs a necromancer or a mage as a keeper, not me." Snape sat in pained silence after this confession.

Lupin put the parchments down. "I thought he came back from Finland in good shape," he said in real concern.

"He did... from one aspect. He gained controlling power to match the uncontrolled power he was exhibiting." Snape picked up his quill and dropped it again.

Lupin adjusted himself in his chair. "So this isn't about protecting Harry at all."

Snape's hand hit the desktop again. "Of course it is about protecting Harry."

"This is really troubling you, isn't it?" Lupin asked, clearly surprised. When Snape merely rubbed the knuckles of one hand under his chin, Lupin prodded, "Severus..."

Snape stood suddenly and said, "It is no matter."

Lupin tried to go back to the syllabus before him. "Doesn't seem like no matter. Is there something I can do?"

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“Such as?” Snape asked snidely.

“Anything,” Lupin replied.

Snape paced to the bookshelf. “If he doesn’t need me, he most certainly doesn’t need you,” he retorted quietly.

Lupin’s brow went under his hair. But he closed his mouth on his initial reply and observed Snape instead. Finally, he asked, “You think Harry doesn’t need you anymore?”

With his long finger Snape tugged out the binding of one thick book on pressure brewing. “He no longer asks me for help when I could provide it, which is getting rarer. He works on blocks now that I cannot produce, although I am somewhat relieved he has not asked for help, from that regard.”

Lupin rested his chin on his hand and continued to observe Snape as the other prowled the Potion shelves without purpose. Lupin said, “I am really quite certain that Harry needs you and that he is doing fine.”

“Good,” Snape said, sounding unconvinced.

“Severus,” Lupin argued, “I saw him just last week. Spoke with him in the Ministry Atrium for ten minutes. He seemed perfectly normal.”

“You have no idea, Remus,” Snape returned in a low growl. He had finally pulled out a book and flipped through it intently.

Remus laughed then. “He even asked me to take the stain out of his shirt cuff, claiming he could never get the spell to work right.”

A knock came on the door and Ginny Weasley stepped in when called to enter. “Headmistress sent me down to see if you could put me to work for detention, preferably on something miserable. Those were her words. Hello, Remus,” she said, noticing Lupin sitting there when he turned to her in amusement.

“Professor Lupin, for now, my dear.”

“Oh,” she said brightly. “Of course, sir.”

Snape stepped over. “How timely. I have just the thing for you to assist with, Ms. Weasley. But first, how is the ankle?”

Ginny bent as though to touch it, but didn’t, and said, “Fine, sir.”

Snape said, “You are certain?” in such a sharp tone, that Lupin interrupted with, “What’s this then?”

Ginny opened her mouth to explain and Snape muttered, “He is not to know.”

“I was going to lie, Professor,” she pointed out smartly. “And it’s barely visible now I’ve been using Roop’s tincture on it.”

Snape collected his cloak off of the coat rack to go to the dungeon and swung it over his shoulders. “You didn’t show it to Pomfrey, did you?”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Headmistress said not to. I got someone else to get the Roop’s from the dispensary.”

Lupin eyes were moving between them. “What did you get detention for?” he asked carefully.

“It’s general knowledge around here, to my misery: running off to rescue Harry.”

This befuddled Lupin unusually so.

Snape said, “Feel free to stay as long as you wish, Remus. The files of examinations and assignments are there...” He gestured at the cabinet below the window. “Should you wish to review them.”

Snape led the way down the corridor, striding fast enough that Ginny had to jog intermittently to keep up. “I’m glad you have something for me to do, sir, otherwise I was going to have to ask Professor Greer.”

They reached the bottom of the Grand Staircase and Snape turned and waited at the top of the dungeon staircase. “Where are we going?” Ginny asked.

“Potions classroom,” Snape stated snarkily.

“Oh,” Ginny groaned.

Snape released the spells on the classroom door and entered, waving up the lamps without breaking stride. “We will start three cauldrons and take them up to my office to brew overnight.” He spelled open the ingredient cabinets. One required four charm cancellation attempts before it would open.

“Professor,” Ginny prompted carefully. “Is Professor Greer going to like this?”

“The classrooms are open to all teachers in this school,” Snape said while moving ingredient baskets out onto the front table before crouching to look through the bottles on the bottom shelf.

“I’m sure Professor Greer doesn’t feel that way.”

Snape stood and shifted some of the baskets to the first bench. “Sad for her then,” he mocked, making Ginny have to catch a laugh with her hand. Snape ordered her, “Come here and chop.”

Ginny obeyed, finding the clean knives and a stack of wooden boards to cut on. “She’s not so bad now that Harry’s gone.”

“Really?” Snape uttered, sounding only half interested as he dug around for more ingredients.

Ginny looked at the basket label which read Poison Hemlock Root. “Yeah, she kept accusing him of being a dark wizard. Couldn’t get over the Parseltongue thing. Isn’t that funny?”

Snape didn’t reply immediately, not until he came over and handed her a basket labeled Helleborus Niger. “She has no idea... does she?” he asked with an odd lightness. “Cut those diagonally into one-inch strips. And these, grind into a powder.”

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Using the ruler burned into the edge of the board, Ginny began cutting. "Are you worried about Harry, sir?" she asked hesitantly.

Snape was cautiously sniffing a jar of something grey and viscous. "Your detention assignment is the only topic allowed right now, Ms. Weasley," he stated coldly.

"Right." She went back to cutting and added, "Sir," as an afterthought.

"What is this?" a strident voice came from the doorway half an hour later.

Snape answered offhandedly as he stirred a cauldron, "Brewing. I would have thought it obvious."

Ginny shot him a look of disbelief and then bent back to her task of dripping spirits over seared mandrake tongues and collecting the essence in a tiny glass phial. Greer was stalking about the front of the room the way she did in class. She picked up and examined the crocodile claws, the high mallow, the moonwort. She stared at Snape who was ignoring her better than any student could.

Snape came and took the phial from Ginny and gestured impatiently at the next task: juicing buds of beauty of Livermere.

"Papaver bracteatum?" Greer asked snidely, hands on hips. "Are you brewing a Lynconthropic potion, Professor?"

"And if I were?" Snape queried.

"For whom?"

Snape evenly and without any indication of falsehood, stated, "The gamekeeper insists upon a new pet and since the last time he had a dragon all kinds of trouble resulted, and then he was keeping a hippogriff, and that was... even more trouble. So we have finally simply found him a werewolf." Ginny was staring at him and almost squashed her fingers with the wooden mallet she was using. Snape went on, "To keep him busy, you see."

Greer turned her beady and challenging gaze upon Ginny, who said, "I've seen the werewolf, ma'am."

"Minerva knows about this?" Greer challenged Snape this time.

Snape finally raised his gaze, his hair well tangled before his face. "It was her idea," he said, disdain now clear as well as clearly honest.

"Well," Greer uttered. "Clean up when you are finished, and don't leave that noxious substance brewing in here." She stalked off.

For the next minute Ginny appeared to want to say something but in the end went back to squeezing bud juice into a sandalwood box.

Hours later, Ginny was carefully rubbing her eyes with a corner of her robe, since her fingers were foul with all kinds of odd things.

"Use the neutralizer," Snape ordered, even though he hadn't looked up to see her doing this. "It is beside the sink in the back room."

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Ginny went into the back, picked up the narrow-necked glass bottle and shook drops onto her hands, which were rendered normal after a rinse. “How come we don’t get to use this during class?” she complained.

Snape gave her a derisive look. “It would lead the students to be even sloppier than they already are.” He peered into the cauldron he was stirring and pulled the stirring stick out.

Ginny yawned. “Are we finished, sir?”

“Yes.”

“So we have been making Wolfsbane?” Ginny asked as she shook the cutting boards over the rubbish bin.

“Correct.”

“Hm. Complicated one,” she opined tiredly.

“One of the most,” Snape said, waving the fires away from under the cauldrons.

“Do you think it will be on the N.E.W.T.s?”

“It sometimes is,” Snape replied.

“I hope it is,” she said wiping down the bench she had used.

Snape handed her a cauldron to carry. “Why did you apply for the Auror’s program, Ms. Weasley?” he asked. When she merely blinked at him in stunned response, he went on, “You do realize dating is right out among the Aurors?”

Ginny recovered herself and snapped, “I thought my detention tasks were the only allowed topic.”

Snape conceded this point with an angled nod of his head, but his own point had already been made.



The next afternoon, Snape opened the door to his office and gestured abruptly for Lupin to enter. Three cauldrons bubbled and steamed on the wide window sill. Lupin wandered over to them, wrinkling his nose. “I think it smells worse than it tastes, Severus. Just as well I can’t brew it myself... I’d get kicked out of my flat.”

Snape hooked his cloak and said, “Those are set until tomorrow. I am going home for the evening. If Ms. Weasley stops by, you may put her to some task as you see fit.”

“Should I ask her about her ankle?” Lupin prodded.

Snape shook his cloak straight and replied, “You do not wish to know what happened, I assure you.”

“I’ll give Ginny something easy to do,” he said, as Snape moved to the door.



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Snape stopped before pushing the latch to say, "As you wish. Oh, and if Alastor stops by, don't tell him where I am."

"You don't think he'll figure it out?" Lupin asked.

"You're right," Snape sighed. "Lie and tell him I am in the Forbidden Forest with Hagrid."

Lupin laughed. "I'll do that, but don't you think he'll know better?"

"That magical eye of his has its limits and that Forest is one of them." Snape finally opened the door. "I'll return tomorrow evening, since you are so fortuitously here to cover."

"Shall I do checks on your house, then?" Lupin suggested.

Snape hesitated. "You may do so if you wish. Good luck if you do."

"Tell Harry I said hello," Lupin said before the door closed.

In the library in Shrewsthorpe, Harry looked up from his reading to see Snape striding in from the dining room. "Didn't expect you so early," Harry said in greeting, eagerly closing the book in front of him.

"Don't stop learning on my account," Snape said as he shook out his cloak and draped it over his arm.

"I was thinking you might want to do something. The weather seems to be holding out. We could go somewhere."

Over his shoulder as he crossed the main hall, Snape said, "I only have a few hours."

When he returned to the library doorway, sans cloak, Harry asked, "A few hours only, because...?" Snape's response was an insinuating lift of one brow, leading Harry to drop his shoulders. "Oh. You have another date."

"You disapprove why?" Snape asked as he came into the library and sat at the small table in the corner, arms crossed.

It wasn't a pose that invited open conversation, but Harry chose to ignore the signals. "I guess I just don't know why you are dating her."

Snape's head angled sharply. "You don't trust me?"

Harry, tired of this sort of banter rising between them, said, "It's not that. Exactly. I trust you not to do anything untoward. I just can't imagine your... you and she's... understanding of it are the same." Harry huffed at himself and his trouble finding words. He tried for something easier. "If Pamela gets hurt, Polly will be completely miffed. More so than I expect she is now."

Snape considered Harry before replying. In a vaguely lecturing tone, he said, "There are two things you do not understand, Harry. Firstly, there is the reduced risk of misunderstanding between two adults. Pamela is not one of your teenage friends; she is twenty six. Secondly, and perhaps more important to your own sense

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of well-being, you could not lose Polly so easily as a pseudo-grandmum, as she has clearly become to you.”

Harry glanced away, mulling that over. Snape went on, “These particular blood relatives are not seeking any excuse to be rid of you. They care quite deeply for you and in fact have shown protective instinct for you that you are not aware of.”

“Is this dating getting serious?” Harry asked, choosing to bypass Snape’s arguments for the moment.

“Only an eighteen-year-old would ask that about a second date,” Snape countered. “But to mollify you, I would have to answer no. She is merely curious and I... a bit bored, I suppose.”

“Bored with Candide?” Harry prodded.

“Hm,” Snape uttered gruffly, indicating further questioning would not be productive.

Harry sighed, feeling slightly appeased by Snape’s lecture. “So, we have a few hours to do something. You’re probably leaving again tomorrow morning already.”

Snape shook his head. “Remus is filling in and will be present to do so for the foreseeable future. I don’t need to return until dinner, when I should make an appearance and check on my house.”

“You can go to the Burrow tomorrow, then,” Harry said brightly. “Mr. Weasley invited me.”

“You must not have told him what really happened last weekend,” Snape gibed. He uncrossed his arms and now sat with his fingers steepled, looking relaxed.

“I did,” Harry countered, not sensing the insincerity of the question. “I’m not sure, however, that he understood the ramifications,” he confessed.

Darkly, Snape commented, “One would have had to have been there to do so.”

Harry frowned. “I’m sorry about that, I-”

Snape cut him off with, “I was not fishing for further expressions of regret.” Snape sat forward then, which made him appear almost candid. “Last weekend worked out as well as it could have under the circumstances. I do not want you to take yet more regret away from that experience.”

Harry started at the forcefulness of Snape’s statement.

Toned down slightly, Snape went on. “The only lesson I wish you to take from it is that you must be more careful. You are not at your trainer’s level, which implies that had Merton, if that is who is behind this, wished to do harm to you rather than render you immobile, you would have been gravely hurt or worse.”

“I already got this lecture from Mr. Weasley,” Harry quietly pointed out, unsettled by hearing it revised.

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Snape fell silent for a brief spell before he asked, “How would you care to occupy the next few hours?”

They sat in the library – Harry with Kali climbing over him – playing chess. Harry lost the first game but drew the next two.

“You aren’t letting me tie these matches up, are you?”

Snidely, Snape asked, “Would I do that?”

Harry grinned. “No, I guess not.” He stretched, stiff from sitting, inducing Kali to circle his shoulders. “It will be warm enough to take the bike out soon.”

“We could take broomsticks out anytime.”

“It’s not the same,” Harry insisted. “We could go to the zoo on it.”

“You enjoyed the zoo that much?” Snape asked, resetting the board before setting it aside.

“I’m nostalgic for it,” Harry explained.

“You are not old enough to be nostalgic for anything,” Snape countered disgustingly.

“What are you nostalgic for?” Harry asked, picking Kali up off his shoulder to hold her in his lap and pet her.

“Nothing, I hope. I abhor nostalgia,” Snape said, sitting back to reach the shelf where a stray book needed reshelving. He dropped his arm. “Perhaps that is not quite true. I believe I am nostalgic for one thing from the past.”

Harry looked up from studying Kali’s tiny fox-like features. “What’s that?”

“I miss Slytherin not winning at Quidditch all of the time. Used to be that way... in the old days.”

Harry laughed lightly. “More fun to win when you have a chance of losing, or when you lost the time before,” Harry asserted.

“No, it is always better to win.”

“Planning on winning the dueling competition? Are you practicing? It is just over two weeks away.”

“I plan to employ Remus, if he is amenable, as a drill partner.” Snape thought that over. “Next weekend is the full moon, so I should ask him tomorrow evening, in fact.”

Harry let Kali, who had grown restless, fly off back to her cage. “You don’t want me as a dueling drill partner?” He pulled out his pocket watch. “We have half an hour before your date...”

Snape stood. “I could perhaps hold out that long,” he muttered as he led the way to the main hall.

As Snape hovered the two pieces of furniture out of the way, Harry asked in disbelief, “Are you afraid I’m going to beat you at this?”

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Snape took his place a pace from the front wall, in the wide space between the two windows. He pulled his wand and stroked it as though it were a quill in need of unruffling. Finally, he replied, “Unless I employ something underhanded against a weakness of yours... yes, I am certain you will come out on top.”

Harry stood, wand pointed at the floor, dumbfounded. “Severus, be serious,” Harry laughed, “there is no way I could best you in a duel.”

Snape aimed his wand at Harry and commanded, “A crystal-dome block. Raise it.” Without hesitation Snape fired a Blasting Curse. Harry instinctively brought up the double orange block they had been working on relentlessly at training and the curse shattered away inside it, between its layers. It was the best he had ever managed by far, which reinforced his belief that his stress with Rodgers was dragging him down during training.

Snape slowly lowered his wand, his expression opaque. “Very good,” he said, sounding vaguely startled.

“That’s the best one I’ve done,” Harry admitted, replaying the feel of it in his mind to better replicate it.

“It was textbook,” Snape said.

“But, it’s just one block...” Harry began to argue.

“I cannot produce that block, Harry,” Snape interrupted. “Despite endless attempts at it over a span of years. It is beyond me.”

Harry stared him, trying to rearrange all of the assumptions in his mind necessary to accepting this. “But you know loads of spells I don’t-”

“Most of them illegal,” Snape pointed out with clear enunciation. “Or they would be if the Ministry officially knew of them.” When Harry still didn’t move as he worked this out, Snape asked, “Do you still wish to duel?”

“Um... yeah.” Harry rubbed his hair back, still oddly unsettled. He gathered his wits and waved a chain binding at Snape, but he was befuddled a bit about how much power he should put behind it, and it appeared cracked, some of the links just hooks.

Snape canceled it with a sharp motion and said angrily, “If you pull your spells for me-”

Harry cut him off with quick excuses. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to do that. I hadn’t decided exactly what I was casting.” Strongly desiring to prove that last was an accident, Harry cast a torpedo spell that Aaron had taught them during one of the many drilling periods when they had been left on their own. Snape didn’t have a counter and had to duck and use a Titan block to deflect the pillow-sized, black pill as it zipped overhead. It turned before the wall and came back around in a broad loop, slowing as it ran out of magical energy. Snape cast a cannonball curse at it that

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shattered it before it could finish its turn.

“Where did you learn that one?” Snape asked. “That is an old Slytherin one.”

“Aaron.”

“Ah.” Snape aimed again. “Modulated this time,” he instructed Harry before casting a blinding beam of light at his eyes.

Ten spell exchanges later, Harry dropped his aim. “You need to go,” he said.

“True,” Snape admitted, sounding reluctant. But he moved off to collect his cloak. When he came back into the hall, he muttered, “Limit of my Apparition distance, Godric’s Hollow.”

“This relationship isn’t a competition, Severus,” Harry chastised.

Snape froze mid-adjustment of his shirt collar inside his cloak collar. “No, but it means I am not much help to you anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Harry demanded. “You think all I care about is whether you can teach me spells?”

“No, I do not think that,” Snape said, now brushing off the shoulder of his cloak with his hand.

“You better not,” Harry said, feeling stung.

Appearing to take a bit of affront at Harry’s tone, Snape asked, “So, what do you care about?”

“I...” Harry launched himself in but then had to think. “Just... that we’re a family. What else matters?”

Snape shrugged his cloak together in the front so he was completely shrouded in it. “And what does family mean to you?”

Harry stared at him. “What a ridiculous question, Severus.”

Snape stepped closer, his tone softening. “Only if you don’t have an answer is it ridiculous.” He stared closely at Harry a breath before muttering, “Hm.”

Harry said, “It means having a place where you’re always cared about.”

“So you are not planning on moving out anytime soon?” Snape asked.

Harry again found unsettled surprise filling him. “No. What would make you think that?” He finally stashed away his wand which he still held pointed at the floor.

Snape again adjusted his cloak by tugging on the edge of it and shifting his shoulders under it. “Just a general expectation that you would prefer to live closer to your friends.”

Harry, feeling for the first time in a very long time as though he were gaining some insight into Snape’s strange moods, said softly while gesturing to take in the hall, “This is the first home I’ve ever had... I’m in no hurry to leave it. And I certainly still need you – you’re the only person who understands...” Harry finished

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much quieter, "... what's happening to me." Speaking this so unsettled him that he dropped his gaze.

"It does not bother you that I cannot aid you in magic any longer?"

"I didn't think that," Harry admitted and re-raised his eyes. "I still think of you as my teacher, somehow." Quickly though, he added, "But, it doesn't matter. I'm certain to encounter dark magic that I need explained." As they considered each other, Harry remembered how after his letter about the Dark Plane, Snape had swooped in and taken him off, with no hysterics, not even a flicker of stress. Harry had desperately needed that commanding stability. Flushing lightly, Harry said, "I'm still really happy to be your son... in case you need to hear that again."

An awkward silence descended until Harry said, "You're going to be late."

"Work on your studies this evening," Snape said, recovering his poise.

"Yes, sir," Harry responded easily. His alternative was meeting up with Ron, whom he was going to see the next day anyway.

Author's Notes: Fell way behind in writing over the holidays. Next chapter probably will be late, but you will all be hung over from the new year and won't notice, right?

## CHAPTER FIVETEEN



# BAD DATES

In Godric's Hollow the wind, as usual, blew harder than expected. Snape stepped from the copse of trees bordering the Evans' property and crossed the narrow, cracked road to reach Pamela's house. No one was about and the house windows up and down the line were all dark or had the curtains pulled closed, giving the village a withdrawn air.

Pamela opened the door as he approached it, making him instinctively assume, and then have to dismiss, the notion that she had placed a visitor alarm charm on the property line. She had a crooked smile on her face as she greeted him. Snape couldn't help taking one last glance around outside as the door closed.

Pamela looked very Muggle in wool trousers and a jumper. She touched his arm as she led him into the sitting room. "I was hoping you'd want to go out this evening," she said. "I had a ruddy awful week at work and need to get out." She dropped onto the couch, much more relaxed than the previous date, Snape observed. She asked, "Can you zip us off to London?"

Adjusting his cloak, Snape sat in the white wicker chair across from her. "In theory. In practice it is against Ministry rules."

"Oh, like you not being able to use magic at this house?" she asked, disappointed.

"Something like that. Your mother's house is the one filed with Harry's dispensation. Very minor magic would be ignored in any location," he informed her while glancing around the room, thinking idly of the conversation he had just had with Harry regarding what made a home. This home was a mishmash of old and new furnishings in no particular style.

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Snape stated slowly, "On the other hand I am quite capable of hiding most any magic I do from the Ministry."

Brightly, Pamela asked, "Does that mean we can go to London?"

Feeling strangely reckless, perhaps due to the vague flattery of her attention in general, Snape said, "Why not?" As he stood, he suggested, "You should fetch a cloak... coat, perhaps."

She jumped forward but didn't stand. "We're really going to London?"

Dryly, Snape said, "You expressed a desire to do so."

"All right," she cheered and fetched a long camel-colored coat. When she had buttoned it, Snape took her wrist in his hand and used his wand to cast a fogging magic barrier around them before Disapparating them to an alleyway in Soho.

Pamela gazed around them in surprise, patting at her ears from the shock of the popping air. "Very, very cool," she stated and gave him a glowing smile. "And if the Ministry of Magic decides to come after you for that?"

"They won't detect it," Snape stated, thinking then that he did know a set of spells to show Harry, ones he really should learn.

As they walked along the pavement past rows of mouldering red-brick houses darkened by rain, Pamela asked, "So, do many wizards know how to block the Ministry's magical detection?"

"No, not many," Snape replied, thinking that most of the ones who could were in Azkaban. He waited to speak further until they were clear of a little old woman towing a trolley bag. "The spells that fog what magic one is casting are themselves forbidden and most witches and wizards are basically law-abiding even if they are skilled enough to master them."

She studied him as they walked. "So you aren't basically law-abiding, is that it? When I told Mum that we had another date, she threatened to tell me things about you that I, quote, wouldn't believe, let alone want to hear."

They turned and followed the pavement beside a wider road carrying heavy traffic and well lit from the bright shop windows. The increased number of pedestrians forced the topic to remain vague.

Pamela asked, "Does she really know bad things about you, or is she, per usual, disliking anyone I date who is the least bit interesting?"

They had reached a corner with steps leading up into a pub. Snape gestured for Pamela to decide to go in or not. "Sure, I'm thirsty," she replied.

They found a small, high table in the corner, near the rear door. Snape immediately tossed his cloak over the chair in the moist heat of the place. Pamela tossed her coat backwards over the chair back and leaned forward on her elbows to ask, "So, which is it?"



## BAD DATES

“You do not wish to know,” Snape replied and used a touch of Legilimency to compel the waitress over when her eyes flickered over them. “Two pints of bitters,” Snape told her.

“I don’t?” Pamela confirmed in a teasing tone.

“Correct. Especially since I do not feel like sharing my past.”

Silence fell until the pints arrived. Between sips, Pamela said, “Mum only likes incredibly boring men. Like Greg.” She spoke his name with some disdain.

“You do not like Greg?” Snape prompted, mostly since it was an easy way to hold up his side of the conversation.

Pamela took another large sip of her drink. “Greg is all right. NOT my type, despite my mother’s insistence that I find someone just the same as him.” She considered Snape over her glass. Snape resisted reading her thoughts under the belief that the evening conversation would lose all interest if he did so. He had glanced away as part of this effort and watched a couple putting on their coats by the door. The young man was holding the long brass door handle for much-needed balance. If someone coincidentally should enter, he would be on the floor.

“Bored already?” Pamela asked with a hint of unhappiness, sounding as though the bitters were already at work.

“No. Simply disciplining myself.”

“How’s that?” she asked

Snape, before such long exposure to Harry, would not have spoken thusly, but he did now. “I am attempting to avoid reading your thoughts. You are an open book.”

She stared at him, color gradually filling her cheeks beyond what the alcohol had already accomplished. “You can’t read minds...” But this ended uncertain.

“Shall I prove it?” he asked airily and then paused for a response which was not forthcoming. “What is your favorite color? Ah, red,” he finished immediately. An imagine of her in the mirror in a silken red dress had popped into her head. “You should have worn that dress,” he added with a touch of snarkiness.

She took that in with a vague choking movement before swallowing a gulp of her beer.

Snape went on, “Harry has been criticizing me for using that skill too often.”

“I’d say,” she stated forcefully. They stared at each other. “Still doing it?” she asked. She was recovering well. Muggle reactions to magic could be so unpredictable, Snape mused.

“No, I will resist,” Snape assured her, feeling an odd flush from his unusual frank honesty.

She huffed and stared into her drink. “Is that what Mum was on about?” she asked.

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“Goodness no, she does not know about that.”

“Oh. Perhaps a new topic?” she suggested.

“Wise idea,” Snape agreed.

“How did your week go?”

“It was a typical week, all things considered,” Snape replied. He began fiddling with his glass and, annoyed at himself, forced his hand still. “Bit of trouble with Harry weekend last.”

“Oh, what was that?” she asked in concern.

“Nothing you truly wish to know.”

A group at the far table broke out in drunken song but quickly faded. “Oh, some weird magical thing, then?” Pamela asked.

“Yes. Some weird magical thing,” Snape awkwardly repeated, but then half-wished he could unburden himself to her with his concerns. Fleetinglly, he considered that he would willingly have told Candide.

“He’s all right, though, Harry is?” Pamela asked.

“For the moment.”

“Oh, that’s reassuring.”

Snape admitted, “I wish I could be more certain. Someone or something always seems to want to do him harm.”

“Lucky he has you to protect him then,” she said.

Snape frowned mildly and didn’t respond.

“New topic?” she asked.

“Please.”

“Even though I really want to know more about that last one.”

With light snide Snape asked, “You wish to discuss Harry all evening?”

“I just want to know that he’s all right.”

“He is all right,” Snape assured her. “I just never know what the future holds.”

Pamela sipped her drink. “Is he all right with us dating? You wouldn’t answer that last time.”

“He was somewhat better with it this time ‘round.”

“Oh, so he is unhappy about it. Why didn’t you say?” she asked blamefully.

“It would have changed your mind?” Snape asked.

She shrugged. “Perhaps, I don’t want to make Harry uncomfortable.” She looked around the table, finally borrowing a menu from the next table over. “Unless we are going somewhere else to eat?”

“We can if you wish.”

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“Nah, just get some grub here.” She read the menu over, which did not require much time as it was only six items long. “What about it upset Harry?” she asked without looking up.

“I’m not actually certain,” Snape replied.

“What, you don’t use that little trick on him?” she asked.

“I cannot... he blocks me from doing so.”

“Good for him,” she asserted, glancing around for the barmaid.

“I taught him how to do that,” Snape pointed out.

She gave up on ordering for the moment and turned back to him. “It would only be fair for you to.”

“Now, it would be fair,” Snape muttered. “Used to be the only way to keep track of his overly active imagination before Voldemort was destroyed.”

“Let’s eat somewhere else,” she said after failing again to wave the barmaid over.

They paid at the bar directly and headed out. On the steps outside, Pamela asked, “So do all... of you people...” She waited for a large group to stagger in the other direction and then spoke more quietly, “Do all witches and wizards read minds?”

“No, not many at all,” Snape responded. They crossed and turned down a quieter side road and stopped before an establishment where the Latin letters of the name had been rendered in gaudy Chinese strokes.

As they pondered the hot pink menu taped in the window, Pamela pointed out, “You know how to do a lot of things only a few people do.”

He considered her before replying, “Yes, I do,” in a manner that was intended to cut the topic off.

Inside, they found a table near the window looking into the kitchen, Pamela said, “You play the bad boy too well, you know.”

Her making light of him set off something inside Snape that he had not felt in a long time. He could sense the strength of that other, older self rising eagerly up, wanting its chance to appall her simply by setting her straight. His odd silence had unsettled her on its own. He squashed the old instincts and calmly and soberly, as though offering her important advice, said, “You truly do not wish to go there.”

She bit her lip. “You’re no fun. Don’t tell me my mother is right about you.”

“Your mother knows nothing about me,” he snapped, immediately surprised to find that instinct still waiting just below the surface when he was certain he had suppressed it. “Apologies,” he muttered. “Pick a new topic.”

She ordered Thai noodles and then doubled the order when Snape waved that she should choose something for him as well. “Never eaten in a noodle shop?”

“No,” Snape admitted.

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She drank the glass of water before her, clearly wishing it were something stronger. “Most bad boys aren’t really. But you are the real thing then?”

“Yes,” Snape replied quietly. “Barely reformed, shall we say.”

“But you adopted Harry...” she prompted.

“Yes,” Snape said with a laugh. “My penance, I realized later. Although, I have never regretted taking him in.” He breathed deeply and avoided outwardly revealing anything; her questions were bringing the past to life far too effectively. Harry’s lamentations to him about not ever connecting with someone who could not understand were feeling painfully true at this moment.

“Regretting this date?” she prompted, sounding teasing, rather than displeased.

“Partially,” Snape admitted, “I don’t like revisiting the past unless absolutely necessary.”

Silence fell until the waiter returned with their order. Snape accepted the oversized bowl placed before him containing a neat pile of shiny noodles with peanuts and chili pepper forming a hill atop them.

Snape said, “I am not who you think I am, even if I, for a delusional moment, thought perhaps I could be.” He hesitated picking up his fork due to wincing at how much he had revealed with that statement.

Pamela chuckled wryly. “And since you are an expert both on who you are and who I think you are, then you would know.”

Snape let his lips curl slightly at that. “Yes,” he confirmed.

Partway through their bowls, Pamela asked, “So, you won’t give me a chance of accepting who you are?”

“You would not,” Snape stated. “Your vision of the world is too black and white. Even as much as you have an unusually flexible acceptance of magic and dark humor, you would not accept this. I have assured Harry that I will not put this extended family in any jeopardy, and I will not do so by satisfying your curiosity.”

“How bad are we talking? Did you murder someone?”

“I have never killed anyone,” Snape assured her quietly, lest he be heard two tables over despite the banging woks in the nearby kitchen.

“Have you been in prison? Do wizards have prison? They must, mustn’t they?” She wondered aloud.

“They do. It is a magically warded island far off the coast,” Snape informed her.

“Been there?” she prodded.

“No. Why are you still pursuing this?” Snape asked with some snide.

“I’m curious still despite, or because of, the warnings.” She shrugged. “My noodles aren’t gone yet.” She grinned then.

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Snape rolled his eyes and put his fork down. The dish was bizarre, tasting of oily nuts and rancid fish despite appearing to contain only chicken.

She ate a bite containing just one noodle, carefully rolled up on her fork. “So you haven’t ever been sent to this island, yet you insist you are too horrid for polite company.”

Snape said, “I was not sent to that island purely by the grace of someone with enough power to keep me out because they desperately needed my help. Otherwise, I most certainly would have been.”

“Oh,” she said. Apparently taking this as truly a bad sign, she began eating her noodles at a more normal pace. She paused though and said, “Harry, in his letters – because for some reason you have no telephone – certainly respects you.”

“Yes, he does,” Snape softly agreed. In his head he was realizing that living up to that respect was half of the reason he had changed so much in the last two years.



Ginny knocked on the door to Professor Snape’s office. After a pause it opened but Lupin stood inside holding the door rather than the expected Head of Slytherin house. “Good evening, Professor,” Ginny said. “I was just wondering if Professor Snape had anything I could do for detention.”

“He isn’t here, but I can find something for you. Come in.” He backed off and gallantly waved her inside. The cauldrons still bubbled on the window sill although the noxious odor had muted from earlier.

“Where is Professor Snape?” Ginny asked.

“Home for the evening,” Lupin replied from where he looked over the shelf of Defense books. “Ah, here. Severus said you may come looking for a task and when I threatened to give you an easy one, he said to do as I please.” He handed her a book. “Amazing how mellow he has grown. There was a time he would have thrown out all the pickled rat’s brains just to force students to extract and pickle more. Sit down and read chapter seven aloud to me.”

Ginny peered at the spine and had to squint to read the flaked gold leaf. “Dodging Dreary Disadvantages,” she read. “What’s this?”

“A beginners book on Defensive spell theory.”

Ginny pulled the visitor’s chair closer to the desk and peeled the book open in her lap. The pages were brittle with brown age. Chapter seven was titled Sustenance for the Credible Counter. “Why chapter seven?” she asked.

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Lupin, who was staring out at the lawn which was brightly lit by the waxing gibbous drooping over it, replied lightly, "Because starting at the very beginning would be discouraging."

Ginny couldn't argue with that. She began reading, "Counters are generally of the class *aegidis vorare* and are therefore boosted easily by increasing general magical effort. However, counters of the class *compulsum resilio* each require a different technique- I'm actually quite good at Counters," Ginny stopped and pointed out, sounding as though another topic would be more appropriate.

Lupin turned to her from the window. "But are you good at writing a test on them?"

Ginny frowned. "No. Probably not."

Lupin turned back to the window. "Keep reading then."

"Did Professor Snape tell you I'd applied to the Auror's program?" Ginny asked in surprise.

"Did you?" Lupin asked.

"Yes. But he didn't tell you that?"

"No." In the dim lamplight and blue glow from the window Lupin's eyes appeared less kind than normal, although his voice was its usual gentle self. "I just assumed that since, despite hopes to the contrary, you are still attending Hogwarts, that you intended to try for as many N.E.W.T.s as possible." He put his hands in his cardigan pockets and considered her additionally. "Have they accepted your application and sent you the test time?"

"Not yet," she said, sounding hopeful.

"Go on and read then. After each paragraph, close the book and summarize that paragraph for me."



After the meal and returning Pamela to her house, Snape returned home directly to his main hall, interrupting a conversation in the drawing room. After hanging his cloak in the front entryway cupboard, he stepped into the well-lit room prepared to point out to Harry that he was supposed to be studying. He closed his mouth upon encountering Aaron Wickem in the guest chair, heavy book open in his lap.

"An unusual pose to find you in, Mr. Wickem," Snape managed to recover enough to say.

This chagrined Aaron appropriately. "Harry and I are equally far behind so we are doing readings together. My date bailed on me this evening so it was either Harry's glowing company or nothing. How was your date, sir?"

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“None of your concern,” Snape responded flatly, but this made Harry’s eyes narrow in alarm. Snape sent him a reassuring glance.

“Do you want your desk?” Harry asked when Snape came to collect letters from the middle drawer.

“No, I’ll be in the library,” he said, taking up a quill and inkwell. “Don’t let me disturb you.”

Harry, however, couldn’t hold out until Aaron departed. “I’ll be right back,” he said after ten minutes of reading the same page repeatedly and still not knowing what it was about.

Harry stepped just inside the door to the library and leaned on the side of a bookshelf in a relaxed pose with his arms loosely crossed. “Did it go all right?”

“It was undoubtedly our last date.”

Harry stiffened. “How’s that?” he asked in concern.

“Do not be alarmed. It is for the best. I cannot possibly tell her my past and she is too curious to stop asking about it. As you have said previously, with unusual wisdom I might add, there is not much understanding in such a situation.”

“I’m sorry for that,” Harry said.

“Are you?” Snape challenged mildly.

“Well,” Harry hedged, tilting his head to the side to stretch his neck. “Not entirely sorry it isn’t working out, but I’m sorry for you.”

“Hm,” Snape uttered noncommittally. “I catch you pitying me you will be in deeply serious trouble.”

Harry laughed. “I’m not pitying you,” he said, lowering his voice in case Aaron could hear across the hall. “You have a perfectly good girlfriend.” Snape froze at that assertion and Harry added, “Just because you are too chicken to marry her...”

Snape’s gaze sharpened severely at that, but it rapidly faded to merely bemused. “Go back to your studies,” he said.

Harry didn’t budge. “Really Severus, what’s your problem?”

Real anger came forth then. “I have no interest in discussing this with you.”

Even more quietly, Harry rhetorically asked, “And who else do you have to discuss it with?”

“You misunderstand. I do not wish to discuss it with anyone.” His anger was gone already, seeming to have been replaced with mild uncertainty.

“I think you’re making a mistake,” Harry said after a pause. Snape glanced down at the parchment before him, prompting Harry to ask, “Are you writing a letter to Candide?”

Snape held off a breath before replying, “Yes.”

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“Oh.” Harry straightened and feeling a little regretful of being so forthright, backed up a half step and said, “I’ll go back to my studies now.”

“Good idea,” Snape said dryly, but without rancor.



Harry arrived in the Weasley hearth, met by many bright voices echoing up the blackened stone chimney. He ducked out as Snape arrived just behind him and the voices dipped and turned their way. Ron nearly dropped the heaped bowl of mashed potatoes he carried when he attempted to enthusiastically wave to Harry.

“Take a seat, take a seat,” Molly Weasley invited over her shoulder from where she worked at the counter.

The old dining room table was packed tight with Mr. Weasley at the head, the twins beside Molly’s empty chair, followed by Ron. On the far side sat Charlie and his wife, Bill and his date, and surprisingly Percy, mercifully sans date, and looking sulky.

“Everyone’s here,” Harry said, surprised. He took the last seat beside Ron, leaving the end for Snape.

“Well, almost everyone,” Molly said with overdone melancholy while setting an overflowing platter of sliced roast before her husband.

Snape had pulled out his chair but he didn’t move to take it. Instead, he stood considering the full table. After a pause he asked, “Shall I fetch the last of you?”

The clanking of silver halted and serving bowls froze mid-pass. Ron asked, “Wha? You’re saying you could fetch Ginny?”

A tad stiff, Snape replied, “That was what I was suggesting.”

“Severus, isn’t that sweet of you?” Mrs. Weasley asked brightly.

“Mum, don’t dissuade him...” Charlie grumbled at her, but stopped mid-whisper with a blush.

“Can you do that?” Bill asked, also appearing awkwardly stunned.

Snape gripped the back of the chair in his long-fingered hands. “I am the deputy headmaster... I expect I can.” His eyes circled the table once again as though counting redheads. “I will return shortly.”

After Snape had disappeared up the Floo, Ron said, befuddled, “That’s awful nice of him... what’s he up to?” Across from Harry, Percy appeared relieved that Snape was gone.

Harry grinned and accepted the platter of meat Ron passed him. “He’s been trying harder.”



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In the long second floor corridor, Snape stopped to consider where Ginny Weasley may be. Gryffindor had reserved the pitch that morning for practice, but they should have returned from that as the pitch was usually booked solid on the weekends. The tower seemed a likely place to look, or at least ask.

Snape folded himself to step through the Gryffindor portrait hole and found his quarry in the common room surrounded by the rest of the house Quidditch team, all of whom turned to him in surprise before rapidly stuffing away large parchments with play diagrams on them.

“Ms. Weasley,” Snape intoned in a manner that invited her to follow him elsewhere.

Ginny stood without complaint but Dirk Hickory, a fifth-year Beater, was having none of it. “What’s Ginny done, then?” he demanded.

Not in the mood to argue, Snape returned, “Nothing. Simply being a Weasley is sufficient grounds in this instance.”

Hickory flushed as red as his bottle-brush hair. “Sufficient grounds,” he mocked. “What’s that about? You’re being unfair as usual. You just want Slytherin to win the cup.”

Snape propped his hands on his hips and as though speaking to an idiot, said, “Of course I want Slytherin to win. That is why we play Quidditch... so that someone can win.”

“Dirk, it’s all right,” Ginny began.

Hickory continued angrily though. “It’s not all right,” he said, standing as well and imposing his oversized self across the small table.

“You are inches from detention yourself, Mr. Hickory,” Snape threatened.

“Dirk,” Ginny, repeated firmly. “Let it go.”

Hickory’s glare and the other players’ concerned gazes tracked them both as they departed the common room. They had traversed the many staircases and reached the gargoyles before Ginny asked, “Am I in trouble for something new, sir?”

Snape didn’t reply, simply gave the password and gestured that she should lead going up the stone staircase. Ginny did so, commenting as though to herself, “I don’t remember doing anything else I could get in trouble for...”

Snape said, “Just being a Weasley is the reason for your removal from your little strategy session.”

“Is it?” Ginny confirmed bleakly. “I’m getting it for some recently discovered transgression of one of my brothers?”

McGonagall’s office was empty, but many of the portraits straightened their robes and watched them as Snape led the way to the hearth. He lifted down a Persian slipper from the mantel and gestured for her to hold out her hands.

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“What’s that?” she asked.

“Floo powder.”

Ginny stared, mystified at the grey granules cradled in her hands. She glanced sidelong at the hearth behind her. “What’s this for?” she asked, dividing the pile into her two palms.

“You are the only missing Weasley offspring from the Burrow Sunday luncheon,” Snape stated, sounding as though her questions were vaguely tiresome.

Her face lit up and, closing her fists tightly around the grainy powder, she jumped forward and gave Snape a lightning quick hug. Ginny jerked back immediately, apparently as startled by her own behavior as Snape was. “Sorry sir,” she stammered, flushing fiercely. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

Snape squared his shoulders and forced himself to step forward. “I should think not,” he said. An awkward pause followed before Snape impatiently commanded, “Go on, then.”

Back at the Burrow both Snape and Ginny took their seats quickly – Ginny after a hug and hair petting from her mother. She sat beside Harry, crushed in close. Mr. Weasley said, “Thank you, Severus.”

Snape nodded without looking up from his place setting. Harry nudged him with an elbow and received a sharp look in return. Harry grinned at him and thanked him quietly as well. He was also grateful that his guardian was back to provide a barrier between himself and Percy, who was starting to get under Harry’s skin.

During a lull, Percy, in his usual nasal-sniffy way, asked, “Have a date for the VIP dinner yet, Potter?”

Snape turned to Harry in curiosity as well as everyone else sitting at their half-end of the table. Harry hated to do so, but he asked, “What dinner?” and wished he didn’t sound so defensive.

Percy scoffed with a smile curling his lips just at the corners.

Ginny chimed in, “You look Slytherin with that expression, Percy. Got a place for him, Professor?” Beside her Fred nudged her as though to silence her and Harry overheard him whisper something to the regard that their mum had insisted that everyone be nice to Percy no matter how obnoxious he himself behaved.

Snape’s expression of masked distaste as he considered that suggestion made Harry and Ginny both giggle. Coloring, Percy said, “Only the DV-Day VIP dinner, Potter. How can you not know about that? Doesn’t anyone tell you anything?” More airily, he said, “The Minister is just sending you an invitation same as everyone else, I suppose.” While Harry withheld his tongue, Percy continued, “Too bad you are in a department so very in the dark about what is happening.”

“Oh, I know what is happening,” Harry insisted, tossing vague insinuation into

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his statement. He was thinking that Percy was just using Belinda. This gut twisting thought was followed by one he should have thought of sooner: That there was someone who apparently knew more about what was going on, and that Harry should break down and go talk to him.

Harry's tone had the desired effect on Percy. Upper lip twitching, Percy colored additionally before returning to his eating, although he only picked at his plate with nervous movements.

Bill asked, "Security for the tournament is going to be tight, I hear. Some of Gringott's personnel have been hired to supplement the Ministry. You are, aren't you, Ron?" he asked.

"I'm doing sweeps the night before. But I get to just watch the show..." Here he glanced down the table, first at his brother and then at Snape. With a fast broadening grin, he said, "And I'm looking forward to it. People at the bank keep asking me who you're favoring, Harry," he teased.

"I'm not favoring anyone," Harry argued, suddenly almost physically aware of the black-clad figure on his right.

"The bookies have Rodgers to win by just a hair," Ron went on, then to Snape asked in an innocent tone, "Are you aware of that, Professor?"

"I do not care," Snape said in a tone that conveyed the self same.

Harry took great interest in spooning himself more cabbage as he considered that he also believed that his trainer had a slight edge. Unless Snape tried something underhanded, in which case it was up to him to penalize him for it.

Harry had spooned himself half a plate of boiled cabbage while he pondered this and began to truly wish that he were not judging.

"Hungry still?" Snape asked in his slight sneer.

"Excellent cabbage," Harry announced to the table as though to compliment Mrs. Weasley.

Ron cornered Harry again while they were all relaxing after eating. The twins were outside trying to coax more of them out for a Quidditch match, but everyone else was resisting. "I'm glad I'm not judging this tourney," Ron said in great sympathy.

Ginny gave Harry a grin as she scooped punch from a giant ceramic bowl nearby. Harry lamented, "I may have to let this Vogle person win so as to not seem to be favoring anyone I know."

Quieter, Ron asked, "I got paid on Friday and was thinking of putting more Galleons down on this match with the Goblin bookie at the bank. I'd love to see his face when I collect," he laughed. "Who do you think is favored? You aren't really going to overcompensate in trying to be fair, are you? That would really mess things up."

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Harry sighed. "I'm going to be glad when this is over."

"What weaknesses would an Auror trainer have?" Ron rhetorically asked, then immediately followed more forcefully with, "What weaknesses does Snape have?"

Harry, remembering Candide teasing Snape once, said with a laugh, "He might be ticklish." At Ron's horrified expression, Harry quickly added, "I don't know that first hand."

"Oy, I hope not," Ron said, looking pale as he downed his punch. He handed his mug to Ginny to refill and shook his head. "Well, I better cut my losses then and stick with my brother. Harry here is too honest," he complained to his sister.

"Definitely," Ginny confirmed with a sly smile.

Later, when Ginny reluctantly began to remember all of the incomplete assignments she had stacked up on top of her trunk back in her dormitory, she sighed and approached Professor Snape, who sat on the old couch talking with her parents and George, who most likely had quit the backyard Quidditch match to research his opponent.

"Professor," Ginny interrupted. "Can I get a note or something to take back to Hogwarts?" At his odd expression, she explained, "I have to go back through McGonagall's office. She isn't going to believe my story."

"You don't think?" George chimed in, fully sarcastic.

Snape said, "Go on Ms. Weasley. You don't need a note."

"Did you leave Headmistress one?" Ginny said, sounding as though she now understood. She made ready to leave. "Good, I fear how she'll react if I tried to pawn off this story on her."

"No, I did not leave a note," Snape stated. "But go on anyway and see what she says... and do take careful note of her words. It will be most amusing to have to prove her wrong."

Ginny stared at Snape, trying to take that in. George bent over the armrest he was laughing so hard. Molly Weasley had her hand over her mouth.

Ginny said, "I think I'd prefer a note, sir. At least then I don't have to go through the trouble of being un-expelled when you do return."

"I shan't be long, Ms. Weasley," Snape insisted with a softness that could be interpreted either for good or ill.

Ginny slowly moved to pick up the tin of Floo powder. George said, "Here, I'll write you a note." He moved the stacks of magazines around on the table before him as though looking for a scrap of paper. "I can even sign it S. Snape," he added with a wicked grin.

Snape crossed his arms. "I would like to see that," he stated darkly.

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George found a never-out quill, which he had to suck on to get flowing, and a sheet of parchment was eagerly handed to him by his father. George, parchment before him stretched his arms, his neck. He made circles in the air with the quill as though directing an unseen orchestra.

"I'll just wing it," Ginny grumbled and scooped out the Floo powder and after an eye-rolling at her brother, departed.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, Snape put his things together to leave and Harry followed him to the dining room to see him off. "Before you go, I have a quick question," Harry said before he could scoop out a handful of Floo powder. Snape set the tin on the table and gave Harry his full attention, which a moment before had appeared to have been cast ahead to Hogwarts. "Where is Malfoy Manor?" Harry asked.

Snape's brow lowered. "Why do you wish to know?"

"There's something I want to talk to Draco about."

Snape considered this before saying, "It is in Devon. I can draw you a map of the nearby Floo nodes, but none are particularly close. You will want to take a broom the rest of the way... or simply fly yourself, I suppose."

"That'd be great," Harry said, taking up an unanswered letter from Hermione from the sideboard for Snape to draw on the back.

Snape drew out a map, carefully annotating it. "This wall here, marked by the entrance gate, is not where the barriers are. They are usually spelled halfway along the main drive to the manor itself. Do not try to land inside that area. The drive winds so you can land unobserved from the Muggle road a hundred feet inside the gate. Do not veer from the drive into the wood, it is set with all manner of traps as can the drive be if they want to resist any visitors." Snape hesitated in pushing the map over. "Do you wish me to go in your stead?"

Harry tugged the map out from under Snape's fingers. "No, I'll go. Thanks."

"Owl me upon your return, if you will," Snape commanded before again taking up the tin of powder.

"Sure. Are you going to come home again next weekend?"

"No. Remus will be indisposed, so I cannot." He stood before the hearth, hand clenched around a ball of Floo powder. "You are going to speak with young Mr. Malfoy this week?" At Harry's nod, Snape said, "Owl me before you depart and if I do not receive another owl from you by 8:00, I will assume the worst."

"Severus," Harry criticized. "I think I can handle Draco."



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The next evening Harry, upon returning from training, changed and made a quick second check of his appearance in the hall mirror before stepping into the hearth with the destination of a rambling wizard book shop in Devon named Dealer Démodé. The place smelled of yellowed paper and must and the other customers, with their noses buried in books as they stood before tall shelves, paid him no heed when he squeezed by them carrying his broom on the way to the door.

Outside the shop the wind was warmer than Harry was accustomed to, balmy even. He found a well-treed area and hovered his broom, which he had opted for upon the realization that he couldn't put a Obsfucation Charm on himself once he was already in his Gryffylis form and he certainly wouldn't go unnoticed flying like that.

Snape's map was accurate to a fault and Harry soon circled Malfoy Manor with its rambling, hilly property, thick with trees and brush except immediately surrounding the main buildings which were framed by a neatly cropped lawn. Harry's neck prickled as he landed one-quarter the distance up the main drive, as promised, well out of view of the road.

He removed the charm on himself and, whistling faintly, strolled the long distance to the house. He had imagined himself knocking on the door and surprising the occupants no end, but he should have thought better. Before he reached the last bend and just as the upper corner of the grey, moss-spotted hulk of the old manor came into view, a figure appeared before him, tossing an invisibility cloak aside.

"Potter," Draco breathed disgustedly.

Harry had his hand on his wand, but Draco was putting his own away so Harry returned his empty hand to his side.

"What are you doing here?" Draco asked rather than demanded, befuddled with disbelief, it seemed.

"I wanted to talk to you," Harry said.

Draco frowned and glanced behind him back at the manor before stalking down the drive past Harry, who assumed he should follow. Sunlight glowed ahead of them before sliding on into the dense forest lining the road. The new leaves rustled but no birds sang that Harry could hear.

Draco stopped and flipped his black cloak off his shoulder as he turned. His invisibility cloak was clenched in his thin pale hands and with his back bent in annoyance he resembled his father even more than the last time Harry had seen him.

"What is it?" Draco hissed.

Harry, who had been working out approaches all day during training – to the detriment of his elbows which were now re-bruised – said, "How did you know something was going on before anyone else did?"

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Cagey, Draco said, "Know what was going on?"

Harry, who had to pretend to know more than he actually did, had to pretend to be only looking for confirmation, said, "About Merton. How did you know he was a threat?"

The news about the two attacks had been well enough kept secret that Draco turned to him in surprise and made a grudging sound in his throat. Harry held his excitement firmly in check at this sign. Not looking at Harry, but instead staring into the trees, Draco replied, "Like I said, I'd been hearing things."

"From whom?"

"Like I'd give you names," Draco sneered. "Old associates of my fathers – fellow collectors of objects the Ministry likes to confiscate. Merton, whom I dislike immensely, had been on the hunt for particular kinds of things and was bragging about his plans because he's an idiot. Anyone with any real sense would keep their bloody mouth shut about wielding unchecked power for his own amusement."

"What does he want?" Harry asked, truly curious.

Draco scoffed disgustedly. "I've only met the man twice; my father hated him and certainly didn't have him over often."

"Because he collected things your father wanted?" Harry asked, trying to understand.

Yet another scoff. "Better reasons than that," Draco mocked. Gaze still far away, he went on, "He came by half a year ago to buy things he had heard were in my father's collection, things the idiots at the Ministry hadn't found when they thought they had taken everything. He caught my mother in the right mood to sell... it's the money we're living on now," he said in utter disgust. He paced away across the drive and Harry had to strain to hear, "To think we have fallen so low; it's unbearable to contemplate."

Harry waited in silence, hoping for more and not sure how to coax it out. Draco was in the mood to rant, though, so giving him space to do it worked well enough. His blue eyes reflected the patches of blue in the sky as he paced back. "Merton wanted anything that had stored power. Figures. Wasn't interested in your ordinary cursed object, no matter how useful. My mother did make him pay handsomely. Father would have a fit if he knew what she had sold... things he had specifically told her not to."

Stored power, was replaying in Harry's head. "What things?" he asked, still thinking with a kind of cold horror about the smashed ceramic vessel and spells too strong for himself or even his trainer to counter properly. Harry came back to the here and now when Draco glared suspiciously at him.

"I'll only tell you if you promise to get them back," Draco growled.

## CHAPTER FIVETEEN

“What? Expecting your father to return soon?” Harry scoffed.

Draco pulled his cloak tight despite the balmy weather. “I don’t like... fearing his return. I certainly don’t expect it,” he snapped. “She should not have sold him two of the things she did. Father specifically said they were to be kept safe – threatened to kill us all if they weren’t.”

Harry breathed deeply of the scented air wafting from the surrounding greenery. A patch of sunlight made them both blink as they stood measuring each other. Harry did not want to be on the hook to steal something Lucius Malfoy wanted kept safe, but he thirsted for more information. “All right. But I can only promise to try, assuming I am around when Merton’s place is found.”

Draco spent many seconds judging the value of this, before saying, “A golden inkwell and a seal.”

“That’s it?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Draco said, his posture shifting as though to downplay the request. “Father truly will kill us should such a time come that he discovers them missing. But, of course...” Here he gestured magnanimously. “I don’t expect to see him anytime soon.”

Author’s Notes: We will eventually get back on a schedule, but not for chapter 16 either since I can’t assume there is much internet in hurricane ravaged Yucatan.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



# A FULL, COLD MOON

Harry arrived just in time for training the next morning after lying awake much of the night, reliving in slow motion and guessing at unperceived details of being attacked at the warehouse. He was also thinking – round and round in his head – about objects storing magical power. Kali had been as restless in her cage as Harry had been in his mind, so he had released her to sleep beside him on his pillow and it was she who had woken him – with a sharp prick of her claws to the neck – just in time to dress and Apparate directly from his bedroom.

In the training room, each of their desks contained a tall stack of manuals with unpromising titles such as Rules and Regulations Amended Vol. IV.6 and Archives & Records Retention Policy. His fellows all had the same dull expressions as they flipped through their stacks with the exception of Vineet, who appeared intrigued. Rodgers came in and with little ceremony dropped an additional, similar book on Harry's stack. Harry almost complained, had opened his mouth to, in fact, until he spied the title: Uniform Manual on the Arte & Code of the Magical Duel.

"Minister Bones sent that down," Rodgers informed Harry in his usual hard tone.

"Thank you, sir," Harry replied in his usual Best Boy way of combating his trainer's vitriol. This attitude had been wearing away at Rodgers, slowly; so Harry was hopeful. He also hoped, with a twist of his gut, that if Rodgers won the dueling tournament fair and square, that that would also improve his mood and his attitude towards Harry. Harry wanted Snape to win, though, but he would also be happy with George Weasley winning, because the dismay it would cause Snape would be amusing. His trainer losing would only make him more annoyed with Harry, although

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

if George did manage to beat him, perhaps he wouldn't be quite so cocky during training.

Rodgers' reading the introduction to the Magical Law Enforcement Recordkeeping Manual pulled Harry from his circular, angsty thoughts into mind-numbingly mundane and trivial rules.

During lunch, which his stomach complained bitterly about the prospect of skipping on top of lacking breakfast, Harry tried to find Tonks, but she was out on a call. Instead, Harry approached Kingsley Shacklebolt who was working at his desk and eating mixed nuts from a tin. Without comment he held the tin up for Harry, who gratefully accepted a handful.

"Something you need, Harry?" Shacklebolt asked easily.

Harry had rather a lot on his mind, and he wasn't certain what order to address things in. He settled for beginning with, "So during the attack on me at the warehouse, Ginny said that Moody fought back at something that exploded and then the attack stopped. Was it one of those orange vessels?"

Shacklebolt leaned his chair back on two legs and turned his broad body to better face Harry. "We think so. Mad-Eye said he had never seen anything quite like it."

"It wasn't a person, then?" Harry confirmed, feeling better about that notion given his poor faring.

"No, it wasn't," Shacklebolt said, sounding reluctant to say more.

"So," Harry stated, looking for a reaction if not a response, "Merton has some kind of spell casting object, like a Muggle machine gun." When Shacklebolt didn't respond, Harry said, "You aren't supposed to say, I suppose."

More quietly, Shacklebolt said, "It is being kept secret. Minister Bones isn't keen to overly concern the wizarding public and so far Merton's only gone after us, and we're considered fair game, at some level, or at least game not worth calling a conference before the press over. You understand that, right?"

"That the Ministry, as usual, doesn't want to air its lack of ability? Yeah," Harry taunted grimly. Shacklebolt's eyebrows rose halfway up his forehead. Harry added, "You don't think the average witch or wizard deserves fair warning?"

Shacklebolt rubbed his forehead while Harry helped himself to another handful of nuts from the tin still open on the desk. Shacklebolt said, "The average witch or wizard does not take simple advice about even common problems well."

"Wouldn't you want to know?" Harry asked.

"I'm hardly an average wizard," Shacklebolt argued. "But, yes, I would. It isn't your place to decide to announce it," he warned.

"I wasn't going to," Harry said, stung. "I just don't like how it's being handled, is all."

## A FULL, COLD MOON

“When you’re in charge, you can change it,” Shackbolt retorted.

Harry considered fulfilling his original intent, which was to tell someone what he had learned from Draco beyond confirming what the department already knew, which was that Merton had been collecting similar objects. But that was obvious; how else did he learn how to store magical spells except by studying objects that did? Harry decided the information wasn’t worth revealing that he had essentially gone off and started investigating on his own; especially since he was already on probation.

“So...” Harry began, voice pitched low. “Has anything been found out about who changed the logs?” It occurred to Harry only now that they may not have believed he had misread the logs.

Shackbolt’s frown didn’t look like the doubtful kind. “That’s still being investigated, Harry.” His tone ended on a note of finality.

“Well, thanks, and thanks for the nuts,” Harry said and stepped away, honestly grateful that Shackbolt had spoken as freely as he had.

At home before dinner appeared, Harry opened the dueling manual rather than his studies and began reading, intent on getting through all the way that evening so that he could study it in more detail over the next week and a half; he definitely didn’t want to have to reference it before an atrium full of spectators and he definitely didn’t want to get any rules wrong given who he would have to be arguing with over them.



Ginny knocked and entered when called to and found Lupin staring out the darkened window at the moon, hands clasped behind his back. Only one small candle was lit in the sconce by the door.

“May I spend detention revising with you again, Professor?” she asked.

“Certainly,” he answered after a long pause.

“If you’re busy, I can ask someone else,” Ginny said quickly and more willingly than she truly was. She had grown clearly aware of how dearly she needed this extra tutoring before the N.E.W.T.s.

“My workload is actually quite light,” he assured her.

“Is it?” she asked, taking the battered desk with half a writing top that sat before Lupin’s desk in the corner. “I thought you were hired because Professor Snape was too busy.”

“I was,” he assured her pleasantly, and Ginny had the strangest sense that he was lying.

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As she read through of a tome entitled Calamitous Charms a knock came on the door succeeded immediately by it opening. Snape strode in carrying a stone goblet that trailed a noxious stream of smoke behind it.

“For you, Remus,” he said, setting it carefully on the desktop.

“Thank you, Severus,” Lupin said, not approaching from the window where he stood. The only significant pool of light in the room was the lamp hovering before Ginny’s reading. There was a long moment where the two professors considered each other as though facing off and then Snape departed with only a cursory glance at Ginny sitting in his path.

After the door closed, Lupin took a grimacing sip from the cup. “Keep going,” he instructed her.



Merton paced along a grimy wall lined with magical objects from his vast collection. Most all were cracked, burned or broken due to investigations into their curses and charms. Broken vases – Chinese, Grecian, Roman – made up the bulk of the collection, but other odd things occupied the piles: candlesticks, a coffee grinder, a picture frame.

Merton was still angry from their failure. “Such a waste... I cannot believe we were foiled,” he raged for the hundredth time, eyes narrow. “EVERY last contingency had been planned for. We drew away the entire on-call staff of Aurors with plots we cannot repeat. An utterly wasted opportunity,” he growled again, slapping his fist into his hand and kicking at the few plates of glass still scattered on the floor – glass that had been charmed as portkeys to carry their quarry to them. “And in the end some block shielded him from the portkeys. Even that failed.”

Debjit stood to the side, only his eyes tracking the pacing man.

Merton paced back to the table where a thick book lay open, its iron covers chained to a slate slab – a discarded, rough-edged end of a billiard table. The book rattled against its bindings and a distant howl emanated from it. “I like your earlier idea, Debjit. We have a pliant servant... let us make better use of him.” He trailed his finger down the vellum page, eliciting a thrashing of sorts from the book, albeit a restricted one. Debjit took a step back, swallowing hard.

“Yes,” Merton cooed. “It is perfect. The spells work best on a weak personality. We have an entirely blank personality to work with. Message our friend who was so cooperative last time. I want a meeting with him myself. Let’s put his bragging to the test. We need a few things that only he can get for us. Those along with a few things we fortuitously already have should put us in very fine shape.”

## A FULL, COLD MOON

He carefully unhooked that page and tucked it on the other side under the other loop of heavy, rusted chain. "Prepare the clay to be molded, it says. How ironic."



Friday, Harry returned home after drinks with Ron and Bill to find a parchment envelope bearing a color version of the Minister of Magic's seal among the pile of post delivered that day. It was the invitation Percy had mocked him about; the invitation to the VIP dinner to take place the evening before the second anniversary of Voldemort's defeat. Harry stared at the handwritten invitation, decorated with gold leaf cartouches in the corners which repeatedly erupted into fireworks.

In nearly indecipherably flourished writing it said that his presence was requested at 6:00 p.m. at the Wickem residence, which had been kindly offered for the occasion. Harry grinned at the opportunity to see his fellow apprentice's mother again, and hoped that meant his friend Aaron was invited or could slip in. Harry hoped someone interesting to talk to would be attending. Perhaps Headmistress McGonagall would be, Harry considered. He stood the invitation up on its edge on the mantel where the gold flickered in the dimness above the hearth. Two years, he thought to himself. It felt more like two decades.



Snape closed the door, pressing until the latch clicked. Lupin's sparsely furnished office flickered with shadows thrown by the light of one stout candle. Snape looked about himself and back at Lupin, who was making notes at his desk with avid motions.

"How long have you been completely without potion?" Snape asked bluntly.

Lupin's writing ceased abruptly. He set the quill down gently and said. "This is the first I have had in months."

Sharply, Snape said, "Then you are not fit to be in this castle. Why have you lapsed?"

Not meeting Snape's gaze, he said stiffly, "I haven't exactly had Galleons for the ingredients or the Apothecary's fee, which is exorbitant."

Snape flicked his cloak out as he paced to the window to look out at the dusk that settled over the low mountains. "Any number of people would be willing to assist you with that," he pointed out fiercely. When Lupin didn't reply to that, Snape said, "Four days of potion is not sufficient to render you sensible through the transformation... you must leave the castle."

Lupin drooped as though terribly fatigued, but he nodded.

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“I will collect some things together for you,” Snape said, and hurried from the room.

Ten minutes later they were leaving by the heavy rear doors near the rose garden. The spindly stalks were quickly awakening for spring and many tiny leaves crowned the otherwise dead twigs. “I will tell Hagrid that you are in the forest tonight, so there won’t be any difficulty,” Snape said, leading the way quickly over the muddy ground. Sparse cloud cover might buy them a little bit of time, but they were cutting it close.

A quarter mile into the Forbidden Forest, where the massive trees stood far apart and the forest floor was open, Snape stopped and hung the bundle he carried on a low, broken branch. “You can find your way back to this spot, correct?”

Lupin nodded, barely discernible in the dimness. The forest was eerily quiet, not even the leaves rustled. Snape used his wand to charm the bundle, saying, “Animals will leave it be. There is a bit of food and pepper-up potion as well as a warmer fur cloak, which you may keep.” Lupin opened his mouth to protest and Snape cut him off with, “Once you see its condition you will not think it any great favor. Ask Harry what befell it, if you truly wish to know.”

Lupin’s head jerked to the side as though he heard something. “You should go, Severus.”

Snape strode away quickly then, masking his trail with a spell periodically so as not to be followed out. Around the side of the castle at Hagrid’s hut, he found the gamekeeper and his hound having tea before their fire, the hound using his great tongue to lap from a steaming bucket.

“Aye, ‘ello Professor. What can I do for you?” Hagrid said in welcome as he stood his great frame up when Snape stepped in.

Snape took in the room and said, “Remus is in the Forest this evening for the full moon. He has not been drinking Wolfsbane regularly and presents a danger as a result. If you could keep an eye on things?”

Hagrid sat back in his great chair and, with one long arm, checked the stringing of his giant bow propped in the corner. “Fang and I’ll go for a few strolls this evening, then.”

“Thank you. And, I have not informed Minerva of Remus’ rather irresponsible lapse, just so you know.”

Hagrid stirred his great fire until it roared even higher and sat back again with his hands on his patched knees. “Kind of you, Professor,” he opined.

“Yes...” Snape said in a hiss. “I am going to regret it, I believe. But if you are keeping watch...”

“I will,” Hagrid assured him.

## A FULL, COLD MOON

In contrast to Hagrid's cottage the air outside was bitter and it stiffened Snape's robes. As he made his way back around to the rose garden he spied a small shadow moving over the lawn and arrested it with a Leg-Locker Curse. When he arrived at the errant student, he hoisted him up by the back of his robes and canceled the curse with a violent wave of his wand.

"Mr. VanEschelon, WHAT are you doing out?" Snape demanded.

Erasmus was too startled to respond immediately, eventually jabbering, "I... I was looking for my toad. She got away."

"You are NOT to be out of the castle at this hour," Snape snarled, dragging the small boy toward the doors.

Erasmus had trouble keeping up and tripped repeatedly, swinging by the grip on his uniform. "But, Peeves said he saw Pippin out here," Erasmus complained. "And she's a firebelly, she can't take the cold."

Disgusted all around, Snape said, "Peeves was undoubtedly lying."

A howl went up, echoing off the broad castle rampart before them. They were only ten feet from the door, but Snape stopped to aim his wand and check the perimeter of the lawn. Erasmus stopped struggling and whispered, "What was that?"

"Werewolf," Snape replied.

"Really?" the small voice queried.

"Yes. Let's get inside," Snape said, more levelly than before. But when he released his charge and pushed the latch, the door would not budge. He pushed more forcefully before moving his wand over the metal-strapped surface, considering several spells, but discarding them all as ineffective against the castle's exterior wards.

Another howl made Erasmus grab hold of him. Querulously, he asked, "We're locked out?"

"I believe Peeves may be blocking the door." Snape didn't really know this, but it was the only explanation that came to mind. He grabbed hold of Erasmus' shoulder and said, "We will go around to the front." He could send a silver message to McGonagall, but he held off, still bent on preserving the secrecy of his errand.

"That's a long way 'round," Erasmus complained.

"We will stop at Hagrid's cottage then," Snape said, trying to soothe the boy, but as he said this, he lost his grip when Erasmus stopped and backed up four quick steps.

Standing small in the vast dimness of the dead grass, Erasmus whined, "I don't want to see Ha- Hagrid."

Snape, momentarily mystified by this unexpected fear, came back to himself and snapped, "If you don't come along now, I will spell you to a tenth your already small size and carry you back in my pocket."

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This tactic was a mistake. Erasmus began backing up slowly, in the direction of the forest. Snape rolled his eyes and said more gently, “Mr. VanEschelon, come, we need to get back into the castle.”

An abbreviated howl sounded. Snape wished it didn't seem closer, and in his mind cursed all things Lupin and the circumstances that made his presence necessary. Erasmus glanced at the dark mass of the trees and sprinted for Snape, who took hold of his uniform again. As Hagrid's cabin came into view, Erasmus slowed down, but his size gave him little influence on their pace.

“Hagrid!” Snape called out, but there was no answer. “He is out. No worries, Mr. VanEschelon,” Snape stated evenly as though everything were all right. Erasmus certainly relaxed.

At the main doors the latch worked normally and they were soon inside the warm Entrance Hall. A few mingling students glanced at them. Snape didn't release Erasmus, but dragged him to his office. “Sit,” Snape ordered. “You are in detention for the evening.”

Erasmus slouched in the visitor's chair. “But what about Pippin?” he asked in a small voice.

“If you still require a toad tomorrow, I will be happy to turn you into one.”

Erasmus fell quiet.

“Bloody Baron!” Snape shouted and half a minute later the Slytherin ghost came up through the floor. Erasmus leaned away from the disturbing apparition, almost falling out of his chair. Snape commanded, “Go down to the rear entrance and if Peeves is there, banish him to the lower dungeon for the week. If he is not there, come back and tell me immediately.”

Erasmus remained silent but fidgety for the rest of the evening as Snape worked. The Baron did not return.



At a quarter to four in the morning just as the east began to glow in earnest, Snape rose and dressed. He found himself unable to resist heading down to check that Lupin did not need entrance to the castle. Why he was intending to do this, he wasn't entirely certain. Perhaps it was merely the notion that if Harry were here, it was certainly what he would be doing. But as he adjusted his robes, he heard a creak overhead as though someone were walking across the rooms above him – Lupin's office and chambers.

Snape dropped his arms and stood in the wan light from the windows. Clearly Lupin had been shown the new spells to enter the castle at night and Snape need not



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have worried. But still he stood there, not removing his robe and returning to bed. A full minute of pondering in the soupy greyness of his office was required before Snape decided that he could not return to his own bed without actually checking on Lupin. This realization disgusted him, but was not sufficient to eliminate the original compelling motivation.

Dismayed at his actions, Snape nonetheless rapped on the door of the office suite a floor above his own. Having come so far in overanalyzing this, he felt a undeniable need to finish it. The door opened after a long pause and Snape squinted in the dimness at the blanket clad, haggard vision of Lupin, who was using the door handle for support.

“Need anything?” Snape asked and wondered with a sleep-deprived kind of detachment, whether he was indeed under some surreal kind of Imperio.

Lupin, fortunately, wasn’t cognizant enough to take in the significance of Snape’s unexpected behavior. “No,” he said, clutching the blanket around his neck as though hypothermic.

Snape began to doubt the man’s better sense and sharply asked, “Are you certain? Have you eaten?”

Lupin glanced behind him as though seeking help from the inanimate objects in the room. Snape snarled faintly and slipped inside the door. “Dobby,” Snape called in a hoarse whisper.

After a pause the house-elf appeared and with a half bow asked, “Harry Potter’s father called Dobby?”

Snape paused at that Harry-centric title, but let it go. “Yes. Bring up a tray of food. Joint, pies, whatever you have that is extremely heavy, along with chamomile tea, a big pot of it.”

Dobby nodded and disappeared. Lupin essentially fell into the chintz armchair behind him, breathing fast and staring across the room with glazed eyes. Snape paced as he waited.

“Remus, if you run out of Wolfsbane, whether you are in Hogwarts’ employ or not, come ask for it. Your pride cannot be worth this,” he added insultingly.

“I’m surprised Minerva’s not here reading me the riot act,” Lupin said groggily.

“She does not know,” Snape admitted.

Lupin’s eyes raised slowly to peer at Snape. He laughed lightly. “You have really changed, Severus.” After further consideration he asked, “Or are you planning on holding it over my head?”

In a poor attempt at a sneer Snape said, “Only if I need to.”

Dobby appeared with tray in hand and placed it on the table beside Lupin. “Masters require anything else?” he queried. Lupin was clumsily lifting lids. Mounds of

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mashed potatoes, slices of roast, and a square of pudding were revealed.

“No, thank you,” Lupin said and Dobby disappeared. Lupin managed to hold the fork but gave up on attempting to spear anything from the tray with his quivering hands. Instead, he said, “I really don’t need anything else, Severus, unless your plan is to reduce me further by some additional twisted act of unprecedented charity.”

Snape straightened. “That was not my plan, believe me. I just wanted to... make certain you realized Minerva did not know,” Snape lied and felt better for it. “If you believe any specific potions will help, let me know rather than Greer; she does not realize who the werewolf in the school is and I would suggest you keep her unaware unless you wish to be on her bad side.”

Lupin half smiled. “As you clearly are, I’ve noticed.”

“Yes.” With that, Snape departed.



The Ministry buzzed the next week with preparations for the upcoming celebration and tournament. As a result, training was less focused, except on Wednesday, when Rodgers made each of them pair up with him for drills that seemed more to Harry like dueling practice. Harry wisely did not voice this observation to his trainer.

As he departed the atrium that afternoon, Harry noted the unusual queue of people waiting to be checked in at the desk. The desk staff had burgeoned to five from the usual one and extra spells were being cast at those wishing to enter the Ministry, even staff coming into work. Gold bunting was being hung from the ceiling, draped to just above the doorways and hearths. Harry had slowed to observe all of this and turned when his name was called by a very familiar voice.

“Harry!” Hermione called out again before he had a chance to wave. She dropped her paperwork-stuffed attaché and gave him a broad hug when they came together, attracting smiles from complete strangers. “What time on Sunday can you arrive?” she asked.

“I don’t know for certain yet,” Harry explained, thinking of the formal dinner he was scheduled to attend.

“Well, get away as soon as you can, all right? ” she asked as though extracting a major promise. “Nearly everyone from Hogwarts has said they’re coming, it’s going to be like a reunion.”

“You have room in your little flat for that many people?” Harry asked doubtfully.

She became vague. “I, uh, took care of that. Just temporarily,” she added quickly, making Harry laugh.

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“There is a special filing specifically for that; you know,” Harry falsely lectured her. “Form 7802, Special Event Magical Preparation Permission.” He thought further. “Or maybe actually, Form D-63, Temporary Dwelling Tardification.”

“Harry,” she said, sounding concerned. “I hope you are more fun at the party.”

They both giggled. “We have been reviewing Ministry paperwork policy instead of spell training.” More quietly, he added, “Ever since I messed up and changed the schedule, but I’m not allowed to talk about that.”

Both of them quieted as Percy, Belinda on his arm, strode by, nose in the air. “See you on Sunday, Potter,” he said. At least Belinda looked embarrassed.

When they were distant, waiting in queue at a hearth, Hermione said, “Poor Harry. You can hint more about your troubles on Sunday and grouse about you-know-who after you survive Bones’ party.” She aimed a thumb over her shoulder as she said this. More brightly, she said, “You and George can come together.”

“George is going to the VIP dinner?” Harry asked.

“Haven’t you read the Prophet coverage of the event? The Fashionably Gossipy section has covered nothing else all week,” she said in disbelief.

“I don’t read that section,” Harry admitted. “Skeeter writes it.”

“All the more reason to read it, Harry, to keep track of her. But at any rate, all four of the finalists were invited.”

“Severus was invited? He didn’t tell me he was.” When Hermione simply shrugged, Harry said, “Probably assumed I knew.”

Once home, Harry immediately owed his guardian to ask if he had accepted the invitation to the dinner. Upon visualizing tables full of Ministers of Magic, he then felt compelled to check his wardrobe and what he was planning to wear. Since he had ceased dating Belinda, his wardrobe had not been subjected to this kind of scrutiny. In the far right corner, he found his dark blue dress robes. He had only worn them a handful of times and they glowed like new, calling out to be worn.

Harry slipped them on, glad he had never had them taken in, because now they fit perfectly, which meant that Winky’s cooking had filled him in and then some since his return from Finland, something he wouldn’t have noticed wearing his usual workout clothes, t-shirts, or his bulky casual robes. Over the top of his dress robes, his replacement red lined black cloak was not going to be fancy enough, he didn’t think. Downstairs he tried it on and discovered that not only was it too plain, it clashed with the blue. Sighing as he turned side to side before the old mirror in the hall, Harry considered that he needed to get another, but purchasing a cloak just for one evening would be silly. Aaron, the nicest dressed friend he knew, floated up before his mind’s eye. Without even removing his mismatched cloak, Harry went to the drawing room to write out a request to Aaron to borrow a dress cloak to match.

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As he stared at the completed letter, he pictured Percy from the atrium and then wondered with a chill of embarrassment if he needed a date. He thought over possible dates and then thought about Skeeter and how much attention bringing someone would attract. Hermione could hold her own in the face of insinuation, but she was already busy that evening with her own party. As much as he disliked being dateless in the face of his ex-girlfriend and Percy, he didn't see an alternative.

Harry folded the letter, but he had already sent off his owl, so he changed into a dressing gown to await Hedwig's return.

As he sat in his room, giving Kali a break from her cage, Harry was gripped by another panicky thought: he may need to give a speech. Kali picked up this concern and flew out of his hands, scrambled even with her claws to get free.

"Sorry," Harry said to her, fetching her from the paltry remains of the drapes. "I'll just make something up, if necessary," he said to her in reassurance.

Hedwig returned and Harry let her in from the still night air. Snape's letter was just a note scrawled on the back of his own letter. It stated that he was not attending the party because he did not really care to and as well because McGonagall was and they did not wish to both be absent from Hogwarts. Harry's hopes for the evening sank a bit.

Before closing the sash after sending off his second letter, Harry breathed in the dewy night air and thought that he should really find a regular date again. If Skeeter decided to write about his datelessness specifically, he worried what she might conjure up, although that probably was not the best reason to find an acceptable girlfriend. Elizabeth's even-headed self came to mind, but she was in the middle of a term and unlikely to be home soon.

Idly thinking about various woman he knew, Harry dressed for bed and crawled under the duvet, which chilled him and made him wish he had used a spell to warm it up first.

The next morning before training, Aaron swooped in and handed Harry a large shopping bag. "Best I have in blue," he announced.

Harry, as he took the bag, said, "As long as it isn't powder blue."

Aaron winced and said in dismay, "Powder blue makes me look like a Healer's apprentice."

Harry couldn't hold back a noise of appreciation as he pulled the piles of deep blue velvet from the heavy paper bag. Silver needlework ran along the front edges in a fancy interlocking snake pattern with the occasional bead for an eye and clusters of tiny sequins for the border. "Wow, thanks," Harry said. "It's perfect. Are you going to be there?"

Aaron became comically evasive. "I don't exactly have an invitation... but I

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certainly know where the servants' entrance is," he said, nudging Harry in the ribs.

Rodgers came in, so Harry quickly dumped the cloak back into the bag and took a seat. Aaron moved a little slower as though to attract attention to himself. Vineet entered then followed by Kerry Ann at a run. Rodgers, apparently distracted by internal concerns, didn't even look up from his notes.

When it became clear that Rodgers wasn't ready to start, Aaron leaned over and whispered, "Who's your date?" Harry frowned and shook his head. Aaron leaned closer and asked, "Want me to find one for you?" Harry favored him with an expression of distaste. "Take Kerry Ann, then," Aaron suggested.

"We're not allowed to date," Harry pointed out. Kerry Ann turned around upon hearing her name, and Harry said, "He thinks I should take you to the DV-Day dinner." When Kerry Ann appeared very interested in this, Harry asked, "You really would like to go?"

Aaron raised his hand and Rodgers, after setting his notes aside, called upon him. Aaron asked, "Is it all right if Harry takes Kerry Ann to the VIP dinner as just friends?"

"Aaron," Harry began. "You can't just ask for permission..." he turned to their trainer, "Can he?"

"It would look bad if you took a fellow apprentice to the dinner," Rodgers said, making Kerry Ann's shoulders sink and her lower lip pop out.

"But it's not against the rules?" Aaron prodded. "He wouldn't be dating her, really."

"The rules are not so specific to include precise events that are off limits to joint attendance. No one in the department is allowed to date anyone else. The only exception is married couples who were married before they entered the department and that has only come up once." Rodgers turned to Harry and snidely asked, "Trouble finding a date, Potter?"

Anger prickled at Harry's back and he couldn't find a safe reply before Aaron chimed in with, "He – and I – would have dates just fine if we didn't have five hours of reading every evening."

"Keeps you out of trouble, though, doesn't it?" Rodgers asked facetiously.



After washing and repeatedly combing his hair down, Harry dressed in his dark blue robes and checked himself all around for lint or anything amiss. He looked good, he thought, as he gazed at himself in the hall mirror. The robes could have been custom made for the occasion and the addition of Aaron's formal dress cloak

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rendered him ready for the fashion page of Witch Weekly, he felt certain, except for the clasp on the robe which was set with a gaudy blue gem, too big and bright to be real. Harry rushed up to his room to find the clasp from his old ruined cloak. The snake-shaped silver clasp, once polished, nicely set off the embroidery bordering the cloak edge.

Confident that he looked the part and realizing he was on the verge of being late, Harry pictured the entry foyer of the Wickem house and scrunched himself down to Apparate there. His feet remained planted on the floor of his room, however, as his chest smacked into a solid wall or something that felt very much like one. Harry gasped and stepped back to catch himself. He hadn't even considered that the house may have a barrier around it, but clearly it did. Coughing, he made his way downstairs and took down the Floo powder. This was undoubtedly going to make him fashionably late, but he didn't know another nearby Apparition target.

As he stepped into the flames, Harry announced both the Wickem house and the party itself, just in case. He landed in a cloud of ash in a small stone building containing an old carriage and some horse tack hanging from the rafters.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter," a young man in formal robes said, waving his wand at him.

Harry, getting his bearings, held up his hand but was hit by a grooming charm anyway to remove the ash he had picked up. "Thanks," Harry muttered, shaking out his robes. He recognized the man from Bones' office now that he took a second look at him.

"This way," the man said invitingly, gesturing to the broad doors that were cracked open. Fully open they would easily allow the big carriage out.

Harry stepped out into the evening air. Torches lined the stone path up to the house, which blazed with light from all of its windows. Fortunately for Harry, everyone seemed to be late and a small queue waited at the door to be checked in. The couple in front of Harry were forced to hand over their invitation, which was checked with some kind of spell to reveal a hidden message as though to verify its authenticity. The couple themselves were each checked with spells as well to detect if they were enchanted or disguised. Harry wondered if the spells could detect a Polyjuice potion.

The queue finally advanced and the middle-aged wizard held his hand out and rotely asked for Harry's invitation.

"Do I really need one?" Harry asked in surprise. He hadn't even thought to bring it.

The man stared at him and uttered an "Uh..."

"I'll handle this one, Thornwater," Shackbolt said graciously, stepping over in his Auror dress robes to lead Harry away.

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“The minister said everyone was to be screened,” Thornwater insisted. “Without exception.”

“I’ll let Madam Bones screen him herself, then,” Shacklebolt said with a wink. When they were five steps away, the Auror turned and explained, “Thornwater works in Games... can’t stand to break the rules.”

They stepped out of the foyer and into the broader main hall which had been attacked by the same purveyor of gold bunting as the Ministry atrium. Fairy lights floated in orbiting clusters, casting long warm flickering shadows across large round tables draped in yet more gold cloth. A string quartet played unnoticed in the rear left corner. Witches and wizards in rich robes of midnight black with a few in dark colors of maroon, blue, or green milled about carrying drinks and chatting. No one looked ready to start.

Following behind Shacklebolt in his distinct robes made Harry wonder if the parts of the invitation he couldn’t decipher mentioned what he was supposed to have worn. He had come as himself without considering that they may have expected to come as a Ministry employee. Shacklebolt stopped at a large cluster where Madam Bones stood speaking with foreign dignitaries and Ministry people.

“Ah, the guest of honor has arrived,” Bones said, handing her drink to the person on her right, probably expecting it to be one of her staff, but instead it was Cornelius Fudge, who appeared bemused to be treated thusly. Bones used her free hands to take Harry’s arm and lead him to the head table.

She gestured at the seats. “You are here, Mr. Potter, beside me, and the regional finalists are here and here, and-”

“Only two finalists?” Harry asked.

“Two of them declined our invitation, stating prior engagements... on a Sunday, no less.” She sounded mildly insulted.

Harry squinted at the little crystal balls sitting above each plate, each with a name floating inside it. Only George Weasley and Harry’s trainer were going to attend this evening, it seemed. “I was hoping to meet this wizard, Vogle,” Harry commented to the minister.

“You will tomorrow, I expect.” She continued down the line. “Select elder members of the Wizengamot: Tiberius Ogden, Griselda Marchbanks, Headmistress McGonagall... ah, Minerva,” Bones said in greeting, holding out her hand as McGonagall stepped up just then.

“Hello Harry,” McGonagall said in a twinkling welcome.

“Professor,” Harry returned. Around the room the mingling crowd began to look for their seats, which required lots of bending low and squinting at the tiny crystal balls. Belinda and the other Ministry staff were hurrying about trying to assist with

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this. Bones headed off to collect her other head table guests.

McGonagall came aside Harry and put her hand on his arm. "I almost sent Severus in my stead, but I selfishly decided I needed a break from the school more than he did."

Harry smiled, "That's all right, Professor. You're letting him off for tomorrow, right?" he teased.

"We will switch roles for tomorrow, yes," she said with another twinkle in her eye.

Voice pitched low, even though the murmur of the room provided cover, Harry said, "You're that concerned about security?"

"I'm not taking any chances, Harry." She removed her white gloves and smoothed them before bundling them into her pocket. With an air of admission, she said, "Sometimes the responsibility I've been entrusted with staggers me and I wonder all those years how Albus managed to take it so lightly, or appeared to."

"I hope Severus hasn't been shirking his part being home so much lately," Harry said.

She patted his arm. "Not at all. It isn't the day-to-day activities I am speaking of; it is the larger obligation of determining when extra precautions and reduced privileges are required to protect my charges."

The guests were settling into their seats en masse now, and George gamboled over and aggressively shook Harry's hand. "Mr. Judge, good to see you this evening."

Harry took his hand away and felt something in it. He rolled his eyes and held his hand back out to George without opening it. "Here," Harry said, "take that back."

"No, my dear man, you keep it."

"No, really," Harry insisted.

"What is it?" McGonagall inquired.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. A bribe I assume."

McGonagall reached out unexpectedly, took Harry's hand, and pulled it down to his side, near his robe pocket. Out of surprise, Harry didn't resist and was glad he hadn't when McGonagall brightly said, "Ms. Skeeter, having a good evening?"

Harry slipped whatever it was into his pocket. A pan of flash powder went off when he turned with a carefully neutral expression. He shook Skeeter's hand, just to ensure she knew his hand was empty. George, grinning very widely, took his seat with overly-done dignity, nose high in the air. Rodgers appeared at that moment and shook everyone's hand as well, resulting in a few more blinding flashes for the camera. Bones returned and Skeeter insisted she and Harry and the two finalists line up for a picture.

Despite Skeeter wanting to take yet another photograph, the Minister waved her off and gestured for Harry to sit while looking him up and down as though noticing his



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appearance for the first time. She leaned down and asked, “You weren’t in Slytherin, were you Mr. Potter?”

“Not officially, Madam Minister,” Harry said with a smile.

“Hm,” she uttered in consternation before turning to the room and announcing, “Welcome everyone to the minister’s dinner to open our Demise of Voldemort Day festivities. Some of you have traveled quite a distance and we are honored that you took the time and effort to do so...”

As the speech went on, Harry scanned the dim room. He spotted Obolensky, the Bulgarian Minister, seated with others who were vaguely familiar from past parties and were dressed in foreign robes edged with colorful embroidery. The next table contained Ministry staff, but the only one sitting, because he was not helping the stragglers be seated, was Percy. He sat with his chin on his palm, looking far away and not particularly happy. When Harry glanced at George to see if he had noticed his brother, the Weasley twin winked at him. Behind the Ministry staff table, the Order of the Phoenix table held the usual suspects, including Mundungus, nearly unrecognizable freshly shaved. Mrs. Wickem floated, despite her size, along the back wall, shepherding the chefs steering carts of food out of the kitchen. Aaron stood against the wall nearby, enjoying the room and apparently eyeing the tables for an empty seat. When he noticed Harry’s gaze, he waved.

The speech ended with Bones tapping Harry, who had not been listening, really, on the shoulder. The room was clapping. Chagrined by his own lack of attentiveness as well as lack of preparation, he put on a smile and stood beside the Minister of Magic.

“Thanks,” he said and the clapping died down. “Two years is a long time...” He then hoped Bones had not just said that. “I’m sure everyone has forgotten already how it was before.” Noises of denial echoed faintly. “Living with no sense of real security. The regular disappearances and mysterious minor catastrophes.” He tried to cast his mind back to that time; back to when the Ministry of Magic could barely remain below average Muggle awareness. But he could not fixate on the past for long; Merton and the unknown threat he represented kept intruding. “This... holiday should serve as a reminder to remain vigilant, always, against new threats.” Harry stopped, afraid of implying that there already was another threat. In a mere thirty seconds he had boxed himself in as though in a poorly opened chess match. Any moment now the knight was going to come through, mace swinging.

Harry backtracked quickly. “We also can, when we remember how bad things can get, better appreciate the peace and freedom we have, which we are apt to take for granted otherwise... without this annual reminder.” Harry shook himself; that had been an okay recovery. He noticed that George had filled the glasses of mead at their

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table. Gratefully taking this opening, Harry picked up his mug. "So with that in mind, we should all properly enjoy this evening." A few chuckles emanated from the room as he raised a toast and the other tables scrambled to fill their own mugs.

"To quiet times," Harry toasted, hiding the forbidding sense that the current times were not going to last much longer.



Ginny strode down the cold and dim fourth floor corridor on her way back from serving a long and mind-numbing, door-hinge-polishing detention with Filch that involved copious use of caustic liquids and an old toothbrush. A strange noise behind her, where she had just passed, made her pull her wand and turn. The sound repeated and a small figure emerged from behind a crooked suit of armor. It was Mrs. Norris. Half laughing at herself, Ginny re-stashed her wand and continued on.

"Ginny?" a small voice queried at the next turn.

"Colin?" Ginny asked, sounding annoyed to her own ears. "What are you doing skulking around here?"

Colin pulled himself up a bit and said, "Professor Trelawney asked me to help her move some things. Big things. I wondered why she didn't just hover them, but I think..." Here his voice dropped to a whisper so that Ginny had to lean over to hear. "I think she's drunk. Why else would she ask someone my size to help move furniture?"

"Oh," Ginny muttered. She wasn't a Prefect anymore and things like this weren't supposed to be her problem. "I guess I can see what she's doing," she said nevertheless.

Colin gave her a grateful smile and headed off. Ginny sighed loudly and mounted the steps to the nearby tower, wishing for an Un-Prefect badge to wear so as to relieve her of the responsibility of habit. Trelawney's off-key, mumbled singing echoed in the curved stairwell, rising and falling. A bat took flight when Ginny opened the door at the top.

"Professor?" Ginny asked loudly, pulling out a straightforward attitude to bolster herself. Trelawney was sitting on one of her mushroom chairs, painting little stars on a tall bureau that had been pulled to the center of the circular room. The visual effect on the ugly hunk of furniture wasn't half bad. "Everything all right, Professor?" Ginny asked.

"Huh?" Trelawney gave a start and squinted at Ginny through her thick glasses. "Everything's fine!" she proclaimed, waving her hand grandly so that she slopped yellow paint onto the dusty floor.

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Ginny looked around for the bottle of alcohol Trelawney must have near to hand, but didn't see it. She was hoping to gauge how long this state would continue, since she didn't relish informing the headmistress about this and would prefer to think it was temporary.

"You know my dear," Trelawney began conversationally, just as Ginny turned to leave. "That talking horse might have something there. The stars, you know. They go around and around." She put the paint down and gestured with the long handled, fine pointed brush she held. "But you know, every time they go around... they change just a little... tiny... bit." She held her forefinger and thumb close together up to her own eye to accent this point.

"Yes, ma'am," Ginny responded patronizingly, quietly adding to the score of things that she thought Hogwarts owed her for this last unnecessary year. "I really have to go, Professor. Have fun with your decorating." She started to back up. A waft of incense hit her nose, making her rub at it. Shoulders falling, she held off on retreating again when Trelawney continued speaking. "Really-" Ginny started to say, but stopped; the Divination professor was not speaking in her normal voice, more of a croak. Ginny strained to pick out the words.

"... darkness bound, sought and released... they do not understand what they have wrought... they conjure allies that they cannot control and poisonous dark hordes will be liberated to rend the land... only the one born into prophecy is equal to stopping the fountain of evil at its source..."

Ginny stood with breath gone. "What?" she uttered.

"My stars, I seem to have spilled rather a lot of paint!" Trelawney had leapt up and was checking her many layered translucent gowns that floated over her robe.

Ginny swallowed hard against simply being sick right there on the spot. Breathe, she ordered herself and ran from the room as soon as her lungs filled.

The corridors were too long reaching the stairs. The stairs too numerous. The returning corridors too long again before she reached the gargoyles. Out of breath it took two tries to say the password to get them out of the way.

At the top of the stairs the door was closed. Ginny didn't even think to knock. Inside, Professor Snape reclined in McGonagall's chair. At her unceremonial entrance his head snapped up with a very displeased expression. Ginny looked from him to Lupin and back.

"Where's Headmistress?" Ginny asked desperately.

"Late returning from the party," Snape uttered grimly as though just by asking Ginny had crossed the line.

Ginny looked between them again. Lupin's eyes held concern, but it was clearly held in check by his own general fatigue. Ginny simply had to say what had happened.

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She couldn't keep it in or even judge who should or should not know.

"Professor Trelawney..." Ginny started and then ran out of words.

Snape pulled his foot down off of the desk. "What? Drunk again?"

"Uh," Ginny put her hand to her forehead, which felt clammy. "Well, probably, but, she..."

"Ms. Weasley," Snape began firmly. "If she isn't cavorting with animals or performing black magic, it isn't important enough to bother with."

Oddly, his chastisement calmed her completely. Ginny un-balled her fists and said, "She prophecized."

The effect of this statement was even greater than Ginny had expected. Snape almost collapsed before catching himself on the desktop. Lupin bowed his head and shook it, swearing quietly.

Snape rubbed his forehead rather hard with his long fingers for nearly half a minute. "Recite it, Ms. Weasley. Exactly as you heard it."

"I might have missed the very beginning of it." At Snape's furious look, she insisted defensively, "I didn't realize what was happening."

"It's all right, Ginny," Lupin said gently. "Just tell us what you heard."

Again, Ginny had a moment's panic that she could not judge who should hear the prophecy. Wanting desperately to shed this burden, she recited it quickly. Lupin swore again, loud enough to hear it this time.

"Can I go check on Harry, sir?" Ginny pleaded.

"What for?" Snape demanded.

"Well, it is certainly about him isn't it? 'The one born into prophecy?' " Harry doesn't deserve this, she thought angrily.

"The prophecy is almost certainly not going to come to fruition this evening," Snape stated derisively. He gazed hard at her, unfortunately just as she was considering alternative plans. "And if you so much as step foot outside or fetch a broom – as I see you are considering – I will personally curse you to spend an extra year here repeating seventh year with all of the classes, such as Advanced Astronomy and Astral Linear Algebra, that you so conveniently choose not to take."

"We don't have a class on Astral Algebra," Ginny uttered in confusion.

Snape stood up and leaned over the desk like a predator. "I will see to it that we do. Go back to your tower."

Ginny shirked back at the very notion of even the next week here. At the door she said angrily. "You'll tell Harry?"

"Of course," Snape said, voice now tired and level. "As soon as it is convenient."

"Tell him we're all with him, you know," Ginny insisted.

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Snape sat back, making McGonagall's chair squeak. "I am certain he is aware of that. GO ON WITH YOU." His attempt at returning to fierce was pale compared to just seconds before, but Ginny went anyway, if only to hide her damp eyes.

When the door closed, Snape put his hands to his head and uttered, "Bloody hell."

Lupin said, "We can probably call one of the old Order members from Hogsmeade if you want to go now."

Snape shook his head. "Ignoring that I promised Minerva I would be here, I need time to prepare."

"Harry probably won't even blink when you tell him," Lupin offered lightly.

"The reaction I would fear the most," Snape growled. "Ms. Weasley is correct, Harry does not deserve this."

"She didn't say that," Lupin said.

"Didn't she?" Snape asked rhetorically.

Lupin dropped into the visitor's chair. "You have to watch that Legilimency, Severus."

"Why? It has kept me alive so far and it seems extreme measures are likely to be needed again."

Author's Notes: Should be posting back on the usual Wednesday/Thursday schedule starting next week.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



# DEMISE OF VOLDEMORT DAY

Harry leaned back on the open spot on the couch just vacated by Lavender. Hermione's flat was quieter now that half the partiers had left to go to yet another party. Lots of people were taking advantage of the Monday holiday to celebrate tonight, it seemed. Aaron himself was having his own late-night party which his fellow apprentices were attending. Harry was starting to think he should Apparate over before he had another mug of ale, or give up on the idea in the interest of personal safety.

"Going to leave the room this big?" Ron teased Hermione following a burp. He too was slouched low on the couch, his lanky legs bent out over the floor.

Hermione gave Harry a questioning look. "I'm thinking not..." she replied airily.

Harry laughed. "You think I'm going to report you for unlicensed domicile enlargement?"

"Harry wouldn't do that," Neville chimed in from his spot on the floor leaning back against the couch.

"They really don't let me do anything, so I'm not exactly out looking for evildoers," Harry said. "Your father," he added, nudging Ron, "said, 'You aren't an Auror yet, Harry. You can't go out... taking care of things...'" He waved his hand in the air as he forgot Mr. Weasley's exact words, then dropped his arm with a sigh.

Ron pointed out, "It's not as if you... haven't not spent years taking care of things."

"Huh?" Hermione prodded with a giggle. "Cut Ron off."

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“He talks like that sober,” Harry said. “Maybe give him another beer.”  
They all laughed more.



McGonagall returned to find her deputy headmaster still sitting at her desk where had she left him. “You’ve been here all evening, Severus?” she asked, startled to see him there. “You needn’t have waited here for me. I just wanted you to fill in post dinner in case a student came with a concern, as they tend to do at that time.”

She hung up her cloak and considered Snape as he grimly rose from her chair. She rambled on a little tipsily: “Your son conducted himself with his usual aplomb, but you were correct that the party was mostly intended to give Amelia’s longtime associates a chance to mix with the foreign ministers. At least, that was just about the only interesting thing to do.”

“There was a student with a problem,” Snape stated vaguely.

“Oh, who?” McGonagall asked, hesitating in heading up the stairs to the other half of her office. Her red rimmed eyes focused on Snape with a little difficulty.

“Ms. Weasley. I had to threaten her with an eighth year of school to keep her from leaving the grounds.”

“What happened?” McGonagall asked, clearly alarmed.

“Sybill saw fit to proclaim a prophecy to her, and since it regards Harry, she wished to rush off and inform him of it.” Snape sounded tired now. “Something I should perhaps go and do, now.”

“Is he mentioned literally?” McGonagall asked. Snape shook his head, causing her to moved to sit at her desk and arranged a parchment before her.

“What are you doing?” Snape asked.

“In that case it should be registered with the Ministry.” She rapidly recut a quill with a pen knife from her drawer and stared at it cross-eyed to check it.

“It is unnecessary,” Snape insisted. “It most certainly pertains to him and I will tell it to him myself. Only prophecies whose subject or subjects are indeterminate need be registered.”

She poised the quill. “Tell it to me.”

“I don’t particularly wish it to be officially recorded,” Snape pointed out harshly.

A small standoff ensued until McGonagall pleasantly said, “Severus, I can simply ask Ms. Weasley to recite it.”

Snape put his hands on his hips and said, “If I tell her not to, I am fairly confident she will not.”

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McGonagall snorted. "Surely you don't imagine that possible, Severus." When he failed to reply or ease his stance, she said, "Severus, you are being unreasonable. Is Voldemort mentioned in this prophecy?"

"No."

She put the quill down and addressed the freshest painting in the room, the one that snored the quietest and therefore was allowed to hang at eye level. "Albus," she prompted.

The painted version of Albus Dumbledore shook himself and blinked his bright blue eyes. "Minerva, you've returned. How was the party?"

"Did you overhear the prophecy Ms. Weasley recited earlier in the very office?"

"Prophecy?" Dumbledore echoed dully. "Hm, prophecy... prophecy. I'm sorry, my dear Minerva, I must have been sleeping."

"Albus!" McGonagall snapped in disgust. A glance around the walls showed all the other paintings slumbering as well. She tapped her fingers on the desk. "Severus, I expect better from you," she criticized in real anger. "And you as well, Albus." But all the painting did was shrug as though amused with itself.

"Hear it before you determine that you must register it," Snape insisted.

She pushed the parchment to the side and rubbed her eyes. "All right, then."

"Ms. Weasley believes she missed the very beginning of it—"

"Wonderful."

"But, it goes as follows: 'Darkness bound, sought, and released. They do not understand what they have wrought. They conjure allies they cannot control and poisonous dark hordes will be liberated to rend the land. Only the one born into prophecy is equal to stopping the fountain of evil at its source.' "

McGonagall tapped her fingers on the broad top of her desk in thought for a minute before she called for one of the house-elves from the kitchen, whom she instructed to fetch the Gryffindor house ghost. Nearly-Headless Nick she then instructed to send Ginny Weasley up to them. "While I consider what course to take, I wish to satisfy my curiosity about your challenge," she primly informed him. She squinted at her watch as though suddenly thinking of the time, "No class tomorrow, tower should still be awake."

The clocks around the room marked the time until the door knocker tocked loudly. Ginny Weasley, wearing a dressing gown with her uniform, stepped inside when called to. She moved her blurry gaze between the two of them, appearing deeply saddened.

McGonagall said, "You heard the prophecy from Professor Trelawney, Ms. Weasley?"

Ginny nodded and opened her mouth to speak but Snape cut in with, "Headmistress McGonagall is insisting that the prophecy be registered, which I do not wish



## DEMISE OF VOLDEMORT DAY

to happen. Do not tell it to her.”

Ginny blinked at him, rising in alertness. She looked between the two of them as though carefully gauging them.

McGonagall said kindly with a sigh, “Ms. Weasley, kindly recite the prophecy you heard from Professor Trelawney this evening.”

Ginny looked back at Snape and then back at McGonagall and swallowed. “Why do you want to register it, ma’am?” she asked.

“No one is named outright in it, Ms. Weasley, correct? So technically the subject of the prophecy is indeterminate. All indeterminate prophecies must be registered.”

Ginny stood thoughtful for a few seconds before she said, “No. I won’t tell you in that case.”

“You what?” McGonagall snapped.

“If Professor Snape thinks it should be kept from the Ministry then I won’t tell you. He can tell Harry, or I can tell Harry. No one else need know.” She sounded more tired than defiant as well as a little shaky as though the emotional load had gotten a little too high.

“You win, Severus,” McGonagall said. With extra gentleness, she said, “Go back to your tower, Ms. Weasley.” When Ginny hesitated, she added, “It’s all right. It will be dealt with.”

“You’ll withhold it from the Ministry, then?” Ginny asked, sounding very concerned.

“Yes,” McGonagall reassured her.

“Good,” Ginny breathed and then took her leave.

When the door clicked closed, McGonagall said, “Liberated dark hordes sounds a little familiar, Severus. Which part of the prophecy exactly applies to Harry?”

Snape stared down at his interlocked fingers and didn’t reply except to say, “May I borrow your Floo node?”



Empty silence greeted Snape in his own main hall. “Winky!” Snape shouted and the elf instantly appeared. “Where is Harry?”

“Master at friend Hermione’s house, Master,” Winky replied with a little curtsy.

“Thank you,” Snape muttered and on the sideboard found a letter from her open but still in its envelope with the address written clearly in Hermione’s neat hand.

After taking the Floo to Diagon Alley and Apparating as close as he could manage, Snape knocked at the door to Hermione Granger’s flat. London was bathed in rain

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and quiet and Snape was soaked from walking much farther than he needed to in an unusual fit of stalling.

“Professor!” Hermione said in surprise when she opened the door. She wore a dressing gown as well at the late hour. Behind her the remains of a party littered the room and apparently all the other guests had departed.

“Severus?” Harry said, standing up and approaching. “What’s wrong?” he asked upon seeing Snape’s dark countenance.

“Sit down,” Snape ordered after he stepped in.

Harry obeyed, mostly out of surprise. He took one of the flimsy kitchen chairs and watched his guardian circle. Snape eventually stopped before him, arms crossed. He looked extremely annoyed. Harry didn’t dare ask again what was wrong, even when Snape rubbed his forehead and delayed starting.

“Sybill... prophesized again,” Snape finally explained.

Harry’s shoulders curled downward. “Oh,” he uttered breathily.

“That’s it? ‘Oh’?” Snape demanded.

“I haven’t heard it yet,” Harry argued. “I’m assuming it’s about me or you wouldn’t be here.” When Snape stalled additionally, he prompted, “I want to hear it.”

Snape glanced at Hermione, who appeared grave. He recited the prophecy. Harry repeated it aloud to make sure he had it. “Huh,” he uttered uneasily from far away. “At least it doesn’t mention my dying.”

“I do not want you to take this lightly,” Snape said.

“What?” Harry responded with arms gesturing. “You want me to freak? Curl up in a ball and insist I can’t handle it?”

Quietly, Snape said, “I’d feel better if you expressed something more. Some measure of the unfairness of it.”

“Course it’s unfair,” Harry said with a laugh. “That doesn’t change it.” He dropped off into thought again, repeating the phrases to himself and considering different possible interpretations of them. Hermione emitting a noise like a stifled sob interrupted whatever Snape was going to say. She hurried to her room, hand over her mouth, and closed the door. Harry thoughtfully said, “So you heard the prophecy from Trelawney?” He could picture the scene, her odd voice, her confusion afterward.

“No, Ms. Weasley did. She is most concerned about you; perhaps you should owl her. She insisted that I point out that she and everyone else are with you.”

Harry looked around at the remains of their pizza dinner. “I know that, but it helps to hear it anyway.” Harry stared at the stove with its little row of spice jars along the back. Snape’s cloak smelled of fresh rain and it competed with the stale food scent that lingered in the utterly mundane room. Facing a prophecy-laden future

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was something he had grown unaccustomed to and he resisted it with a painful twist of his midsection. “Do you think it’s Merton?” he asked in a whisper so Hermione couldn’t overhear.

Snape paced, looking fierce still. “I don’t know, but he is the likeliest possibility at this point.” Sounding as though he wished to reassure Harry, he said, “The last prophecy required nearly eighteen years to run its course.”

“No, there was another that took only one night,” Harry corrected him.

Snape’s eyebrows rose and then he sighed. “You aren’t in this alone, Harry. You were not last time either, although you never seemed to fully grasp that.”

Sounding annoyed, Harry said, “That’s because no ever told me what was going on.”

Flicking his damp cloak wide, Snape said, “Well, I certainly will not keep anything from you this time. Please do not keep anything from me.” He frowned as he stared beyond the wall for a while. “This is a rather large flat, how does Ms. Granger afford it?”

“Don’t ask,” Harry muttered.

“Smart girl,” Snape said in a low voice. “Keep your skilled friends near at hand, Harry.”

“I will,” Harry assured him.

“You are leaving for home, soon?” Snape asked, sounding protective.

“In a little while.” Here he glanced at the closed bedroom door. “I want to talk to Hermione a while.”

Snape nodded and gathered his cloak close around himself. “Keep me informed. And I will see you tomorrow.”

“Good luck tomorrow,” Harry said quickly, before Snape could Disapparate.

Snape nodded with a raised, knowing brow and disappeared.



The Ministry atrium glowed gold with bunting and a scattering of gold pointed hats that some in the crowd had chosen to wear. Harry ducked back behind the black curtain backdropping the dais as Minister Bones gave instructions to her assistants, including Belinda, who looked too harried to notice him. Bones finally turned to Harry with a bright look of pleasure as her staff scattered.

“Well, this has turned out to be a roaring success, Mr. Potter. Pure genius. We’ve sold every last ticket available.” She took his arm. “And you’ve read the rule book, correct? People can be astoundingly picky about these things.” Here she leaned sideways to see a little around the curtain. “Especially when Galleons are

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being wagered on the outcome.” She smiled, widening her round cheeks even more when one of her assistants waved from near the first hearth that everything was set. “Whenever you are ready, Mr. Potter.”

Harry glanced down to verify that his dress robes were straight and neat enough. He took out his wand and then stashed it again, wondering why he thought he might have needed it. At the edge of the curtain, he took a deep breath and stepped around and up onto the dais. The boisterous crowd, which stretched all the way to the far end of the atrium, noticed him immediately and began cheering. Behind him, Bones was stepping up as well. Harry remembered why he needed the wand and quickly did a Sonorous charm on himself to be heard over the noise.

“Thank you everyone for coming,” Harry said, and almost stepped back as his voice echoed around the vast, filled space. The crowd quieted. “And we also must thank the Minister for sponsoring this competition, this, the First Annual Demise of Voldemort Dueling Championship.” The crowd noise surged appreciatively.

Bones beamed and stated, equally Sonorous, “We were going to call it Harry Potter Day, but Mr. Potter wouldn’t allow us to.” Harry was glad that the crowd didn’t sound entirely on her side. She went on, “We are honored that Mr. Potter, while not loaning us his name for this day, has nonetheless agreed to loan us himself to be the judge this afternoon. The prize for the First Annual Duel is this wonderful trophy.” She gestured behind her where two assistants were carrying out a monstrous trophy in the shape of a hand holding a wand done in silver with a helix of crystal sweeping up and around it as well as forming the base. Harry found himself severely torn between being horrifically appalled at its ungainly stature and incredibly jealous that he was disqualified from possibly taking it home personally. The crowd unabashedly loved it, perhaps because of the distance most of them stood away from it.

Bones waited for a lull. “To go with the trophy there is also three hundred Galleons of prize money.” This was greeted by even more cheering. “Mr. Potter, if you will introduce the regional winners...”

Harry took the note cards she held out and looked at the top name, which he was very familiar with. Harry announced, “Representing Ipswich, Dover, and London as the easy winner of that region, we have Reginald W. Rodgers, head Auror apprentice trainer – and my boss here at the Ministry, but I’ve already promised not to be biased... one way or the other.”

Rodgers was giving Harry an overly doubtful look which made the crowd laugh more. Harry glanced at the card and found a note below, which he read, “Mr. Rodgers claims to have been dueling since the age of ten. Must have a few older brothers,” Harry commented.

“I do,” Rodgers mouthed as he took the position Bones indicated and glared at a

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spot in the crowd.

Harry went to the next card. “Here from the Midlands and Wales Regional, one of the more memorable competitions, we have George S. Weasley.” George bounded upon the dais with an overdone leap. He was wearing a silvery cloak that alternated between floating and sinking as though it were underwater. Harry said, “We think this is George, but it may be Fred, but it probably doesn’t matter either way.” George took up a stance beside Rodgers and Harry said, “And that cloak will have to go.”

George gave Harry an insulted look complete with hand upon breast. “Yes,” Harry confirmed. “No magical clothing allowed.”

George sighed loudly as a few people jeered as though terribly insulted by his apparent attempt at cheating. “And I thought we were friends,” George lamented, generating more rumbles of complaint from the crowd.

“We are,” Harry said quietly, but with the Sonorous charm it came across to everyone. “But I still promised to enforce the rules evenly. Especially with the next competitor... from the Newcastle Upon Tyne competition, we have Hogwarts own Professor Severus P. Snape.” A chorus of supportive hooting emanated from the back left corner of the crowd as Snape flipped the back curtain aside and came up, prompting Harry to comment, “I see he has brought some Slytherins with him.”

Snape gave him a look that said, Of course before giving Rodgers a dark glance and standing beside George, who appeared honestly uneasy about his position. George asked with a tilt of the head at Snape, “Shouldn’t ‘e be disqualified with you judging?”

Harry lowered the card he was about to read from and said, “We’d have to disqualify you as well, Fred or George, you’re like a brother to me. Brother, father, boss...” Harry said, summarizing the line so far. “Good thing I had absolutely nothing to do with selecting any of you for this.” Harry returned to the card since the crowd had fallen the quietest yet. “From the Cornwall and Devon regional we have Wesley A. Vogle. Wes I don’t know at all. We’ve never so much as met, let alone share any kind of past.”

Onto the back of the dais stepped a fine-boned man in his twenties with a black goatee and severe widow’s peak with contrastingly light brown eyes. With graceful steps he took up a position beside Snape and surveyed the crowd as though gleefully memorizing it. Compared to the others, he looked as though the first serious breeze would blow him off the dais.

Harry put the cards away to keep from waving them around as he talked. They bumped something in his pocket as he did so, and he remembered that George had given him something disk-shaped and it was still in there. Figuring that now was not the time to examine what constituted a bribe, he put it out of his mind and announced, “Now, the format of the tournament will be a round robin, which, if it

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works out properly will reduce us to a single winner, or a final duel, if necessary. Two points are given for a win and a half a point for a draw. No dismembering, disemboweling, or personality changing spells are allowed. Neither are forbidden curses, but I hope I don't need to point that out." The goblet of fire was being carried onto the front of the dais and placed on a rickety tray-table. The crowd oohed at its appearance.

"The four competitors' names have been put into the goblet which will select the order of the pairings." Harry waved his wand over the low blue flames of the goblet and two slips of parchment burst forth with a small explosion that made the people packed in front lean into the strangers behind them. "First up we have Mr. Rodgers and Mr. Weasley," Harry announced, dropping the slips back in immediately.

The goblet was swept efficiently away and the others stepped back behind the curtain. George and Rodgers arranged themselves back to back, each concentrating hard on what was to come. Harry figured that he needed to worry about George more than his trainer with regard to the rules but he couldn't catch his friend's eye to give him a warning look. "Ten steps turn and spell. This is alternating format, you must wait for your opponent to return a spell before making an additional one yourself if the spells are not simultaneous."

Harry backed up to the curtain and began counting aloud. George looked intense as they marched away from each other, but Rodgers almost relaxed and happy. Harry felt a little sorry for George. As they turned, spells rolled out right on the mark allowed, making the crowd gasp hungrily. George had fired something curly and bright with no incantation but Rodgers blocked it without effort and his blasting curse sent George back two steps to catch himself. Two more spells came forth coincidentally and met in an explosion that brought cheers from the crowd; that is, the ones not in the front who were patting at their smoldering clothing.

George had been knocked back again and had to put a hand down to get up. Harry considered calling for a pause to verify he was unharmed but held back. He could see in George's eyes that he had begun doubting himself; Harry began cheering for him silently. The dragon spell rolled out of George's wand during the lull that Rodgers gallantly gave him to recover. Unfortunately, Rodgers had seen this one from Harry's own wand and he used three quick zapfen spells to shatter the incoming line of flying amphibians.

George was biting his lower lip but at some cheers of encouragement, he sent a rainbow beam from his wand. Rodgers ducked his head, hand over his eyes, blinded. This time he had spelled at the same time, but his chain binding curse was blocked. George quickly sent another spell at his impeded opponent. But, Harry thought as it unfolded before him, he should have chosen one with no incantation because

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Rodgers brought the correct block up easily just hearing the spell. Blind still, he cast a mummy curse back, and George, realizing too late that he should shift to one side to make himself harder to hit, got caught by the sticky streamers and despite repeated cancellation attempts, fell in a bundle to the wooden floor.

Harry went over to Rodgers first, who gave him a half-focussed look but waved off any assistance and headed for George, whom he released with a quick flick of his wand. George stepped back up onto the dais and gave Rodgers a sad shake of the hand as Harry announced the first match was going to his trainer.

The competitors stepped off behind the curtain. "Wasn't that fun?" Harry asked the crowd, who wholeheartedly and loudly agreed. An anticipatory calm fell and the goblet was brought forth again. "Weasley and Vogle," Harry announced, feeling sorry for George not getting a chance to recover.

Vogle, expressing determination in every line of his body, did well against the rattled George and after four exchanges, the unfortunate George was again sent off, this time with his fingers turned into ivy which he insisted didn't keep him from holding a wand, but Harry had made his decision, and George didn't argue long. Vogle was elated, the first expression he had shown. He fairly bounced off of the dais after shaking hands... when George returned to having hands.

The goblet next selected the pairing Harry was dreading. He tried hard to read it off as if he weren't. "Snape and Rodgers."

The two of them stalked onto the dais and to the center, accompanied by isolated cheering. "You both know the rules," Harry felt compelled to say before he stepped back and began the countdown.

What resulted was a textbook battle of power. Neither tried anything strange or self-invented, they just alternated attacks and counters that rattled the chandeliers and knocked the bunting behind the dais down. Both men had such deep looks of concentration that no other expression reached their faces as spells and blocks exploded between and around them. Both returned precisely to their starting spot to restart after getting knocked back. Both aimed their wands with exactly the same finger grip.

"Time!" Harry shouted. Both of them stopped and gave him the same look of shock. "One hundred seconds," Harry pointed out. "It's a draw." Some in the crowd booed, wanting to see a real outcome. "Maybe you'll tie for first and get another chance," he pointed out. "Shake hands," he then had to sternly command them because they were both heading off to the back as quickly as possible. Harry couldn't help grinning at getting to order them both around as they grudgingly obeyed and then stalked off same as they'd come.

"That's the halfway point, everyone and we have a fifteen minute break to put

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things back together here. There are refreshments being sold along the back wall to benefit St. Mungos.” The goblet was stood up in the center of the dais and allowed to flicker quietly to itself.

Harry tapped his throat with his wand and went back behind the curtain. Snape was standing, arms crossed, pointedly ignoring his recent opponent. When he saw Harry, he snapped, “You could have let it go longer.”

Replying easily, Harry countered, “You could have tried a more imaginative spell.” He glanced at his trainer and added, “Either of you.”

“Looked like a draw to me,” Vogle piped in gruffly.

“Me too,” George said. “It was like watching someone duel a mirror.” Unaware that they had mirrored expressions, Snape and Rodgers gave George horrified glares. “See, you still look like twins... and I should know.” Snape stalked farther away, beside Vogle, who considered his dark demeanor with bright amusement.

“Everybody ready?” Harry asked when it was time to resume. He stepped back before the curtain and over to the goblet. He started to speak and then remembered that he needed to renew the Sonorous. “Welcome back everyone.” The crowd had quieted a lot during the break and many conversations were still going on. Harry waved for another pairing. “Vogle and Rodgers,” he announced.

Vogle took his position slowly as though trying for a little more time to prepare. Rodgers looked ready to take out his annoyance on this next opponent, and indeed his first ice curse was full force but Vogle was agile and jumped aside most of what he didn’t block. That was one advantage to being small, Harry thought. In return Rodgers got a faceful of what might be seaweed; it certainly smelled like seaweed and since the spelling was even, Vogle could send something as a followup, and it turned out to be a web charm that tangled the seaweed up all the more.

Rodgers managed to stab his wand out of the mess and issue a blasting curse that made a portrait on the far wall fall down with a cracking of its frame. Vogle blocked it but almost lost his balance and fell off the edge of the dais, which would have ended the match. His eyes narrowed and with a grimace he sent a broad shrinking curse at his still tangled opponent. The mass of slithering wet greenery and white webbing pulled taut, binding Rodgers from raising his wand, although he continued to struggle for the ten seconds he was allotted to respond.

Harry called the match, secretly pleased his trainer had been gotten the best of. “Match to Vogle,” Harry announced and then had to wait while the man worked out the right cancellations to free Rodgers, which resulted in a lot of audience jeering. By the end Vogle was beet red and didn’t meet Harry’s eyes as he dashed off the platform after shaking hands with a thoroughly peeved Rodgers.

“Next we have one I am personally looking forward to: Weasley and Snape,”



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Harry announced as the goblet was again carried away. Harry was hoping George would look ready to get even, but he mostly appeared resigned.

“Care to forfeit, Mr. Weasley?” Snape asked smugly when they arrived at the center but hadn’t turned their backs yet.

“NO,” George responded, showing more spunk in the face of Snape’s sneer. He spun his back to him to prepare for the countdown and raised his wand, much more determined. Snape gave Harry a wink as he copied this move. When they turned after the pacing, George, perhaps inspired by the previous match, sent a rain of toffee at his former teacher and received a fat chain binding in return. While each cancelled the others capturing spell, the audience hooted. Snape, yellow toffee still stuck in his hair, spelled a weight hex at George who could only block part of it and fell to his knees, but his swarm of hornets curse had Snape occupied with repeated titan blocks and then finally a water canon, which he turned on George after clearing away the stinging beasts. The water pushed George off his end of the platform and Harry called the match.

Ministry people raced onto the dais to dry it. Snape came to the center, obvious stings on his face and even his nose. Harry thought it a good thing George was well out of school. There was a longer delay as things were cleaned up and Snape managed to procure salve from somewhere because the bites were much reduced by the time Harry called him and Vogle up for the last match.

“As it stands now,” Harry said to quiet the chanting and unruly crowd, “Mr. Vogle is in the lead with four points and Professor Snape and Mr. Rodgers are tied with two and a half each. This match is indeed for the whole win. It’s almost as if the goblet knew,” Harry insinuated.

Snape appeared utterly confident as he turned his back to his small opponent, who looked rattled initially but then recovered by the time the count reached ten. Vogle reused the toffee curse, only with more power and dealt neatly with the fireball from Snape that Harry was tempted to call out of line but let slide. The audience roared in appreciation of the danger level going up. Snape didn’t manage to free himself from all the toffee before the next exchange, which exploded between them more or less harmlessly, as did the next. Snape’s expression grew as determined as Harry had ever seen it. And Harry had an inkling that he was trying to Legilimize his opponent but he must have been failing since the match went on evenly with Vogle’s unusual and borderline childish spells tangling Snape and his just managed survival-level blocking and countering of Snape’s textbook attacks.

“Mutushorum,” Snape shouted fiercely, sounding victorious. Vogle ducked, but got caught in the backlash of the spell and fell on his wand as his body went stiff. Harry was stepping forward to call the match, when Vogle moved his wand hand and

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held it up, albeit shakily. It was his turn, Snape had to wait. Harry began quietly counting down from ten. Vogle had to have at least one foot flat on the floor to spell back. Slowly, he pulled one foot forward beside his arm, displaying great flexibility, and pushed it flat, shouting “Rictusempra!” in desperation.

Snape jerked, his face going surprised. And then he started laughing. Laughing with such force that his attempted chain binding curse flew to wrap up the bunting. Harry stood in surprise an instant until the crowd began chuckling as well. Harry called the match on time and cancelled the laughing spell himself, trying hard not to grin at the strange vision of his guardian doubled over in magical glee. Snape released his breath and awkwardly got up off his knees. “We ran over?” he gasped.

“Yep,” Harry confirmed. “But a half point each gives Vogle the win.”

“Yes!” Vogle shouted with a high-pitched hiss, putting a boney fist in the air.

Snape staggered to the side, making Harry step along with him backwards to verify he was all right. Snape shook him off and uttered, “Whatever made me think this might be fun...”

The competitors were all brought up before the crowd. Vogle stood as though shell shocked while everyone moved around him, bringing up the trophy, getting the Minister into position for a photograph. “So,” Bones was saying while holding her wand over the brass plaque for the trophy. “We’ll just engrave this, let’s see...” She looked for her note cards in her many pockets until Harry remembered that he had them and handed the correct one over. “Yes, Wesley Armanily Vogle, correct?”

“What?” Vogle uttered.

“Your name,” Bones patiently asked. “Would you like it engraved that way?”

“No, that’s not right,” Vogle uttered as though in a trance.

“No?” Bones responded, holding up the card. “I have the spelling wrong?”

“Yes,” Vogle confirmed. He lifted his wand and waved off his beard with a metamorph cancelation. “It’s actually...” he began while tapping himself on the head. His dark hair faded and red bushy hair came in its place. “Ginevra Molly Weasley.”

Harry bit his lips tightly to keep in what was either an oath or a barking laugh. The crowd was rumbling with sharply whispered conversation.

“Ginny!” George uttered in complete dismay. “My own teeny tiny sister?” Beside him, Snape dropped his head and shook it tragically. Rodgers merely appeared thoughtful, perhaps because recognized the name from the apprentice applications.

“Uh huh,” Bones uttered, failing to notice that Percy was straining under the weight of the trophy in addition to the shock. He finally set it on the floor with a grunt and moved as though to yell at his sister. Bones leaned over to Harry, “Anything in the rules about impersonations?”

“No,” Harry said, grinning so wide it hurt.

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“We’ll amend them for next year,” she said easily. “Well, Ms. Weasley, the trophy is yours.” She pulled Ginny close as the flash powder went off and whispered, “But enter as yourself next time.” She patted Ginny and gave herself a Sonorous Charm. “Well, ladies and gentlemen, witches and wizards, we have a bit of twist here...”

A commotion in the crowd nearby caused her to pause. Molly and Arthur Weasley were shoving their through the tight crowd to get to the dais, followed by a wake of redheads.

“Young lady,” Mrs. Weasley said as she she stepped up to them. “What are you doing out of school!?”

Only a tiny bit cowed, Ginny replied, “Winning the tournament?”

Mr. Weasley shook his head with a frown, but he patted her on the arm and said, “Good blocking, champ.”

Ginny positively glowed. “Thanks dad.”

He patted her arm further and added, “But you are grounded for two months.”

“Yeah. All right.” She pointed at the trophy. “But can you help me carry this home?”

Bones caught the attention of the crowd again. “Seems our winner was incognito and AWOL to boot from Hogwarts, but of age, so that is no issue for the Ministry. Here are your Galleons, Ms. Ginny Weasley.” She held out a heavy black silk sack to Ginny, who accepted it with an intense expression of hunger. The crowd gave a little cheer. Bones added, “Be sure to join us for the afternoon picnic at the Puddlemere Quidditch grounds.” The crowd began to disperse and the buzz of conversation surged as a happy sound. The noise of the row of Floos flaring in rapid succession rose to compete.

In contrast Ron glumly said to his sister, “You owe me the ten Galleons I bet on George. I even let Harry’s friend spell-seal the bet...”

Harry straightened in memory and said, “You won that bet. It was for anyone in your family.”

“Hey! That’s right! Wow, twenty Galleons,” he said dreamily.

Ginny rolled her eyes and stepped up to Snape. “Sorry about that last spell, Professor. I had insider information.”

At this, Snape sent a disbelieving glare at Harry.

“What?” Harry blurted, protesting his innocence. “I didn’t... Oh, maybe I did. It was an accident,” he insisted. Snape shook his head and Harry pointed out smartly, “If Ginny hadn’t won, you and Rodgers would have kept drawing until the picnic began and it’d have ended a tie. We’d have had to cut the trophy in half.”

Ginny said, “You did a good job judging, Harry, really.”

“You’d say that,” George complained. “You won.”

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“Shall we move onto the picnic?” Harry suggested as a distraction.

“Where’s the basket?” Molly Weasley said in sudden alarm, looking around herself.

“I have it, Mum,” Bill said, holding up an overflowing, monstrous basket with a red and white checked blanket dangling out of it.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Molly said.

“I want to take my trophy home, first,” Ginny insisted, moving to pick it up with her money sack bundled awkwardly under her arm. It nearly came up to her waist it was so tall.

“I’ll get it for you,” Harry said, stepping in and hefting the thing with no little effort.

Fred said, “Let her carry it; she shouldn’t win trophies she can’t carry.”

“You’re just jealous,” Harry accused him. “Coming, Ginny?” He Disappeared and reappeared in the Weasley living room. Ginny appeared beside him a half second later.

“Thanks, Harry.”

“No troubles,” he said, straining to avoid sounding strained as he mounted the rickety, creaking stairs. “You were really good, you know. Your blocks and counters, anyway. Your attacks were a little... nonstandard.”

They walked down the narrow crooked corridor to Ginny’s room. “How do you think I saved your arse the other night?” she asked pointedly.

“There is that,” Harry said with a light blush.

“My blocks are always at your disposal, Harry,” she added in a more serious tone.

“I may need them again,” he admitted as he placed the heavy trophy on a rough shelf under the window where it caught the sunlight and sent prisms around the room. “Looks good there.”

Ginny was staring at the trophy. “I really won. I don’t care if they expel me. I really won.” She turned to Harry. “Professor Snape didn’t say anything about that, did he?” she asked in alarm, negating her previous statement.

“Not that I heard,” Harry reassured her.

Ginny opened a small trunk and put her Galleons into it before re-locking it. “Can’t wait to do some shopping...” she sang with relish. “Oh no,” she then breathed in horror, hands at the sides of her head. “I hope I get expelled! I remember now that he threatened to make me take an eighth year!”

Author’s Notes:

## DEMISE OF VOLDEMORT DAY

Congratulations to the three (and apparently only three) people who caught on that Vogle was Ginny right away: Lady A, Potterfan44, & siriuslymental. Highly symbolic (read: tiny) gift certificates to amazon will be winging their way to you, suitable toward whatever you please.

Honorable mention to Chandlia Jade, who almost figured it out on a clue I didn't mean to leave (Vogle apparently is German for "bird" – who knew?)

I left a lot of clues beyond the anagram, that despite lengthy effort contained the name "Wesley" a whopping single letter different from "Weasley". Ginny is also blatantly late for Quidditch the day of that Regional tourney.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



# THE FOIBLES OF YOUTH

The sun emerged momentarily as Harry, walking with the Weasley family and his guardian, stepped through the rusted, wrought iron gates leading onto the Puddlemere Quidditch grounds. Families were braving the wet grass and spreading out woolen blankets with picnics upon them. Children on half-size broomsticks squealed and shouted as they chased each other around the high, high goal posts.

Ginny glanced yet again at Professor Snape, who had yet to comment on her status or punishment for being absent from Hogwarts without permission. Fred and George with some help from Bill had convinced the Weasley parents that the winner of the dueling tournament could not skip the picnic; that all Hogwarts students should have been allowed to attend; and anyway, she couldn't get into additional trouble that day with all of them watching her.

Molly stopped in an open spot and decided that they had found a good place to spread out. The Weasley brothers turned drying the ground into a competition and soon they were all lounging comfortably on the huge checked blanket. Some pre-Hogwarts youngsters, wearing brand new gold hats that must be for sale just for the event, asked Harry to autograph theirs. Harry borrowed a quill from Bill to accommodate them. They stood with hands quaintly behind their backs as they waited their turn. As soon as their hats were returned they dashed off excitedly with them clutched in their hands.

As the picnic basket was unloaded, Ginny came around to the edge where Snape sat, eying a nearby group of wizards who were prepping fireworks while glancing around as though to see if they had attracted attention from anyone in authority.

## THE FOIBLES OF YOUTH

“Professor...” Ginny began. “Deputy Headmaster Professor...” she said with a light grimace of reluctance. Snape’s brow furrowed oddly at the convoluted title, but he didn’t comment. Ginny crouched down, glanced at her closest brothers, who were playing a mini dueling game with their wands, and asked sheepishly, “What is my punishment going to be?”

“I have not decided yet. Professor McGonagall should certainly be involved in the decision. I’m assuming she knows of your location from listening to the tournament on Wizard Wireless with the rest of the school.”

Ginny balked at that. “Wizard Wireless was broadcasting the tournament?”

“You didn’t notice them off to the left in a wooden booth?” he asked. “I guess you were otherwise occupied,” he went on snidely.

“I was,” she retorted smartly. “You were using non-reg spells on me that required a bit of extra attention to counter.”

Snape glanced sideways at Harry, who was just biting into a chicken leg Molly Weasley had given him. “I almost called you on that,” Harry told him and then pointed out to Ginny, “But, you handled it all right, so I didn’t.” Sliding his eyes back to Snape, Harry added with false gravity, “Wonder what Minerva will say about you tossing a fireball at a student.”

“I did not realize my opponent was a student, so it does not count,” Snape returned smartly.

The fireworks erupted and everyone turned and watched the colorful display as the perpetrators scattered in the face of approaching Ministry personnel. Some people even clapped in appreciation and called for more. The Games and Sports Department staff who were running the picnic slunk away after sending threatening glances around the nearby blankets.

Harry scanned the now crowded pitch, which resembled a giant quilt with all of the colorful blankets laid out upon it. Children scampered about, mothers tended to the youngest, fathers tossed Quaffles back and forth with the older kids. Despite being surrounded by friends and family, Harry felt wholly isolated from the events around him; the prophecy hung like an impenetrable membrane between him and everyone else in their apparently carefree lives.

“Harry Potter,” a small voice prompted from Harry’s right. Harry started and found a small boy removing his commemorative t-shirt which he then held out and asked to have signed.

“Bill, can I borrow that never-out quill again?” Harry asked.

The boy stood shivering with his exposed pink skin while Harry used the marker pen charm and signed his shirt, which Harry admonished the boy to put back on immediately. A harried looking witch in plaid robes came up from behind the boy

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and said, "Paisley, there you are! Whatever are you doing with no shirt?" When she spotted Harry, she said, "Oh," and her mouth held in that shape.

The boy, Paisley, held up the t-shirt in her view before moving to put it on but it was snatched away. "Save that, dear," the witch said, carefully folding it before draping her bright orange shawl over the boy instead.

Fred and George were pounding the blanket, laughing, as the pair walked away. "Oh, Harry Potter, sign my hand," George teased, holding out his hand as though to have it kissed. "No," Fred interrupted while holding out his foot. "Sign my shoe! My shoe first!" He grabbed Harry around the neck to better hold his foot up in front of him and they tumbled backward onto the blanket. George pretended to reach for his trousers as though to pull them down. "Sign this!" he said, wagging his bum back and forth. Fred's hands slipped away because he was laughing too hard to hold on and they all fell into a hysterical heap, and for one glorious minute the membrane between Harry and the rest of wizardry was pierced.

"Boys," Ginny grumbled as their antics continued and their jokes grew incomprehensible over their laughter. She accepted a carrot stick from the bowl of them that was held out by Ron, who eyed the pile as though looking for an opening. Ginny munched on the carrot thoughtfully. "You can't really make me stay an eighth year, can you?" she asked Snape. "I'm of age. I didn't actually have to come for my seventh year."

"Anything is possible," Snape uttered softly.

"No, it isn't," Ginny countered, now sounding more confident.

"With a special decree from the Wizengamot," Snape enunciated carefully, which made it come out more threatening, "anything is possible."

Ginny bit through the carrot stick loudly and paled a little as she held off on chewing. A shadow fell across her and she looked up at Reginald Rodgers, standing above her, hands on his hips which spread his cloak wide.

"Weasley," he said in greeting, and then "Snape," with less enthusiasm. He glanced at the wrestling match with mild dismay, but Harry didn't notice him. "A word with you, Ms. Weasley, if I could."

Ginny eagerly stood up and followed him a few steps away, out of hearing. The scent of seaweed still clung to him and Ginny considered apologizing but waited to see what he would say first.

Rodgers said, "You made a good showing, considering. And I couldn't help but recognize your name from the apprentice applications. We would certainly be remiss if we didn't offer you a chance to apply." At her excited reaction, he added sternly, "But realize that we are not necessarily opening a spot this year."

"No?" Ginny asked in disappointment.



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“No. You will have to convince us that we cannot do without you.”

“Ah,” Ginny uttered, thinking that didn’t seem quite as hopeful as she would have liked. “I’ll certainly try my best,” she said. “Do I have to have N.E.W.T.s to be accepted?”

Rodgers appeared concerned. “Usually. Why?”

Ginny hedged and gestured at Snape behind her. “Well, I may get expelled before I get a chance to take them.” At his further confused expression, she went on with: “I was already in trouble for trying to rescue Harry at the warehouse and now I’m not supposed to be here either. Professor Snape won’t tell me what my punishment is going to be.”

Rodgers leaned around her to peer at Snape, who gave him an unyielding look in return. “Your Auror test scores will have to be impeccable and an exception would have to be made. That is not unheard of, though, so you certainly should come to the initial testing.” After another glance at the full blanket behind her, he said, “I assume since I have not heard anything from Arthur, that he does not know you have applied?”

Ginny bit her lips and shook her head.

“Hm,” he grunted and giving a little bow with his head, said, “I will see you at the Ministry this summer then, if not sooner, Ms. Weasley.” With a last dismayed glance at the roughhousing young men, he stepped away.

Ginny bounced back to the blanket and sat down, thinking hopefully that things could still work out. Now if only she were certain that was what she wanted.

Molly Weasley leaned over and asked through the melee, “Was he congratulating you, dear?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, he was.”

Snape gave her a very dubious look, but didn’t speak. Harry somersaulted through between them and gracefully stopped in a crouch, dress robes fluttering. “Scuse me,” he said, his face red from exertion and laughing. Snape’s expression made him add, “Sorry.” And rather than restart the wrestling, he sat down between them and took up a carrot.

“E’s given up, then,” George complained disparagingly.

“About time you decided to act your age,” Molly said, handing sandwiches to each of the twins.

Harry sighed and brushed his hair back. “You did really well today, Ginny.”

“That’s what your boss just said,” she pointed out.

“Who? Rodgers?” Harry asked, looking around with much less of a confident attitude.

Smirking, Ginny said, “Yeah, he was just here.”

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Snape said, "Looked willing to trade her for you, in fact, given your position at the bottom of the pile."

"It was two against one," Harry pointed out, feeling a little embarrassed to have been behaving so juvenily in retrospect.

Ginny nudged Harry, "Get Professor to tell you what my punishment is."

Harry stared at her before that sank in. "Oh, for being out of school, you mean?"

"Again," she clarified.

"Oh yeah. You had good reasons both times," Harry pointed out.

"Tell him that," Ginny said, even though Snape clearly must have overheard.

Harry turned to his guardian. "So, what's Ginny's punishment?"

Snape replied, "Minerva will have to decide." Far off near the banner poles more fireworks were erupting.

"What are you going to recommend?" Harry needed.

"What do you recommend," Snape immediately asked Harry. "Oh ye, who was so fond of breaking the rules himself."

"Oh," Harry uttered, munching his carrot to stall answering. "I don't know," he sheepishly admitted. "There's only a month and some left..."

"So it will have to be something exceptionally harsh to add up during that time," Snape stated with a twisted pleasantness.

Harry leaned closer to Ginny and murmured, "I think you're in trouble."

As it turned out, Ginny was. When she and Professor Snape arrived in the headmistress' hearth an hour later, McGonagall strode quickly down from the upper half of the office to face her. The paintings behind her held supporting expressions of dismayed disappointment, although one of them appeared to be leering as though punishment were the ultimate form of entertainment.

When Snape hesitated behind Ginny, McGonagall said, "Go on, Severus, I'm certain you have grading since all I heard today were complaints about your extra assignment to make up for the holiday." While she spoke, she didn't take her eyes off Ginny, or her hands off of her hips.

Snape didn't move immediately. "I am curious what punishment you are going to assign... I had some ideas."

"I think you are too biased, in Ms. Weasley's case, to consult on any corrective action."

Snape's expression grew disturbed. "Biased in what way?" he asked carefully, sounding on the verge of anger.

The two of them stared each other down. Ginny lifted her shoulders and glanced around uneasily. More of the former headmasters appeared to think entertainment

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was being provided and were smirking. Ginny didn't speak because she would rather be expelled than end up with an eighth year.

"I will handle this, Severus," McGonagall insisted firmly but conversationally. Snape stalked out, closing the door just a little louder than usual. Ginny shifted from one foot to the other nervously. McGonagall paced the room and finally spoke.

"I'd have liked to think that once you made the finals you could have come to me and asked for permission to leave," the headmistress said slowly, green robes swishing as she walked. "Given that you clearly deserved to be in the tournament. But I suppose I would have simply been forced to punish you then for being absent without permission earlier." She looked Ginny up and down as she passed her. "You don't seem as trouble-seeking as your brothers on the surface, Ms. Weasley, so I find myself shocked to be dealing with such blatant and repeated transgressions. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Ginny wanted to simply shrug, but she would have derided that in someone else. "I guess I just would rather not be here at all. It's too constricting here at school."

"Is it?" McGonagall asked doubtfully.

"Planning for the tournament and working out how to sneak away unnoticed has been the only thing keeping me going the last few months. Otherwise I'd have lost my mind," she admitted.

"It at least explains your long hours in the library," McGonagall commented.

"School doesn't matter," Ginny pointed out. "These horrid prophecies are what matter, and helping Harry with them."

"And to this end you wish to be an Auror, do you?" McGonagall asked in a tone that implied she knew the answer.

Ginny wondered who had told her. "I was considering it," she allowed.

McGonagall wandered to her desk and straightened the stack of files there. "Do you have any idea how much discipline the Auror's program requires, Ms. Weasley? How much studying, rote memorizing, repeated practice and drills? I suspect that you do not have the self-discipline necessary if you cannot keep yourself satisfied for a mere year here in varied and presumably occasionally interesting topics, among your friends, no less, with Quidditch as a diversion when all else fails."

Ginny had not considered it quite that way. It was true that Harry seemed to do nothing but read his Auror books. "I just said I was considering it. And I've been invited to apply, so they think I have enough skill."

"I don't doubt that you have sufficient skill, Ms. Weasley... many have sufficient skill. It is not as unique as you think." She stepped around her desk, sat down, and began taking out official looking parchments and a quill. Ginny wrung her hands a moment before forcing them to her sides.

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“Do you wish to be expelled, Ms. Weasley?” McGonagall asked.

“Depends on what the alternatives are.”

McGonagall’s brow furrowed. “What could be worse than that?” she asked in confusion, but then immediately answered her own question. “Ah, yes, Severus said he threatened you with an eighth year, didn’t he?” She was smiling now in real amusement. “The only difficulty with that, is that we’d be punishing ourselves as well; otherwise it is a splendid idea given that you are already in detention for the foreseeable future.” McGonagall began scratching out something on a parchment. “Do you at least regret what you did?”

Ginny thought of the three hundred Galleons stashed away in her room at home – more money than she had ever imagined having at one time. She remembered her intense happiness when Harry called the last match a draw, giving her the win. “No.”

McGonagall rolled her eyes. “Very short term thinking, Ms. Weasley, I would have expected better foresight from you.”

“Why?” Ginny prodded, sounding difficult.

McGonagall paused. “I just would have. I’m surprised you sacrificed your last Quidditch match, as well. You’re letting your team down severely.”

“I didn’t expect to win the dueling final. If I’d come in second or third, it wouldn’t have mattered, no one would have known. I just... couldn’t let them make out the trophy wrong. For once I was out from under my many brothers’ shadows.” It hurt to say that even though, or perhaps because, it felt incredibly true.

McGonagall’s writing paused again. “A Quidditch ban and detention for the remainder of the year is barely more punishment than you are already under. But I don’t wish to expel you, if only because I fear that you will become entangled in worse troubles. I feel we should keep you isolated and safe here with the rest of the wizarding youth.”

“If things are so bad, why did the Ministry hold such an event? Why didn’t th-

“Didn’t you notice how small the crowd was kept to?” McGonagall interrupted. “There were far larger places to hold the tournament. Many of the Regionals were held in larger venues. The atrium was the size the Ministry felt certain they could secure. The picnic was only held on the condition that nothing go wrong at the tournament. Many in the Wizengamot wanted the very public picnic canceled outright but doing so would have revealed how worried the Ministry really is, so it was not.” She gazed at Ginny for many seconds. “I am only not expelling you because I owe old loyalty to your parents and feel obliged to protect you as long as possible.” She sighed. “To that end, the only punishment I can see is one where you are compelled to volunteer to help clean up and organize the school for a month after classes end. You need not live here during that time, unless you wish to. All of this is dependent upon obtaining

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your parents' agreement, but I expect they will."

"What?" Ginny uttered, trying to take that in. She had felt nothing but pity when Harry was stuck here over the summer while the rest of them were home. "No, I wouldn't want to live here." Her gaze dashed over the objects in the room, disliking them all suddenly. "Can't I just be expelled?"

"No. Go back to your tower; I believe your evening detention begins shortly."

Ginny huffed and turned to stalk out, but stopped to hear McGonagall add. "Look at it this way, Ms. Weasley: you can still take your N.E.W.T.s."

Ginny closed her eyes and in the interests of demonstrating some discipline, didn't swear, even under her breath.



Harry opened the letter from Ginny that arrived that evening. It was a long letter for her, both sides of two full pages, but apparently she had needed to rant. Harry had to stop and reread twice the part where she offhandedly mentioned that McGonagall had kept Snape from consulting on her punishment on the argument that he was biased. Once Harry was sure of what he read, he chuckled.

Harry wrote out a long reply saying that he sympathized deeply with the notion of being stuck at school after everyone else had left, but insisted that it would go faster than she thought. He wrote:

*Ten years from now I don't think you'll regret sneaking off to the tournament even if it means an extra month of Hogwarts. The trophy will always remind you of why it was worth it and heck, there's no reason Hogwarts shouldn't be as happy to see you go as it was for your brothers. It allows you to sit for your N.E.W.T.s as I'm sure Minerva intended and it's only 30 days. The teachers are much more relaxed once the students are gone so it won't be as bad as you think. Just make certain now that you can get the days off you need for the Auror testing and STUDY HARD – the tests are a bear, worse than the N.E.W.T.s.*

*P.S. Minerva probably thought Severus would be biased simply because you probably handed Slytherin the cup and he owes you for it.*

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After sending the Hogwart's owl back with Ginny's letter Harry leisurely got ready for bed, prodded the fire one last time, and crawled under the duvet. Sleep didn't come though and gradually the fresh orange flickers on the ceiling from the hearth faded to a slate grey so flat it seemed the ceiling had disappeared into the far distance.

Hours later, the prophecy circling in his mind like a vicious animal, Harry lit his bedside lamp and read instead of attempting to sleep.

Fortunately, training the next day was all review during drills and, though tired, Harry had no difficulty keeping up, even when Rodgers called him to the front to demonstrate on him. Maybe it was Harry's foggy brain, but Rodgers didn't seem utterly disgusted with him today. Harry would have puzzled on this, but he couldn't concentrate on two things at once, so he just put it aside and hoped it continued.

"Did you pay Ron?" Harry asked Aaron when they were packing up at the end of the day.

"Sure did," Aaron replied. "Found him at the picnic, thank god, I almost had an epileptic fit from the jitters caused by the spell by the time I located him." He hefted his shoulder bag. "Usually I win those bets I put a seal on, so serves me right I suppose," he added with a laugh. "Glad it's over, though?" he asked Harry.

Rodgers, who was straightening his notes in front, stopped and looked up to hear the answer to this as well.

"Yeah," Harry admitted, although his worries about everyone being angry about his judging had long since been overshadowed by other larger concerns. He wondered now why he had been so concerned before when all he had to do was be fair and no one could remain upset for long.

Rodgers dug through his things and pulled out a copy of the Prophet, folded it to the back page and stepped over to hand it to Harry. "Skeeter thinks you must have known who Vogle really was."

Harry stared at the back page gossip column. "She's a nutter. I had no idea."

Rodgers simply shrugged and stepped out, leaving Harry in the dark about why his trainer had pointed out the column.

That night didn't go much better for Harry. Again the persistent greyness of his unlit room felt as though it might suffocate him. He petted Kali until she fell asleep and placed her gently back in her cage in the hopes that it would help him sleep; instead it made him feel so utterly exhausted that it drove him into a state of jittery alertness. He pulled out a one-inch thick volume entitled *Obscure Ministry of Magic Regulations involving Charmed Objects and Homemade Spell Invention*, his last resort to sleep. It eventually worked; he woke an hour later with the page stuck to his face and the lamp low due to the wick curling to black and needing adjustment. He put the book aside and lay back, hoping to fall back to sleep. He didn't. Instead,

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memories he hadn't perused in years swirled through his mind.

Harry remembered the battle at the Department of Mysteries and more starkly than previously, remembered his friends' injuries and their outright dumb luck. He remembered all of it, disjointed and out of order with Dumbledore's sad and affectionate countenance overlaying it all.

The last prophecy required over eighteen years to run its course looped through Harry's tired mind. The last one took only one night followed closely on its heels. Only the one born into prophecy is equal... is equal...

Harry didn't sleep at all again the rest of the night and the next day required well-timed Pepper-Ups to remain equal another day of training. Fortunately it was a relatively easy day of drills and quizzing and discussion of common regulations that all shared ninety percent of their wording with the other seven hundreds they had already reviewed. Harry was rubbing his eyes and slowly getting his things together after everyone else had departed when Rodgers said, in his far snidest tone for the week, "You aren't holding a week-long party to celebrate DV-Day, are you, Potter?"

Harry straightened and pretended to be alert. "No sir. Regulations just make me sleepy." As Harry stood there under his trainer's scrutiny, facing another long night, he wished Rodgers knew about the prophecy. But Snape had strongly suggested Harry not tell anyone at the Ministry. Harry was starting to think that wasn't the best plan.

Hermione stopped by the house while Harry poked at his dinner; it was almost as though she knew he needed company. Rather than discuss the prophecy, they discussed Ginny, with Harry getting to share the news about her punishment, which a letter just that day from Ginny had depressingly stated that her parents had indeed agreed to the arrangement because her mother was desperate that she finish school and sit for her N.E.W.T.s.

" 'Just look at Ron,' Mrs. Weasley apparently told Ginny when Minerva had them visit for a conference about it," Harry said to Hermione and they both had a chuckle.

"I think Ginny would rather end up anything but like Ron: training Trolls and keeping the Goblins happy. But Ron is better at that than I would have expected," Hermione opined as they ate more of the cake that Winky had provided soon after Hermione arrived.

After a long silence Hermione asked, "How are you doing, Harry?"

"Not as good as I would have thought. I thought I'd still be used to this... pressure. The Ministry hasn't been told and now I think they should. I think I'd feel less suffocated if they did." He thought further, imagined awkward meetings with Bones to discuss what was expected of him. "Though, maybe not," he then added.

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"Maybe it will get resolved quickly this time," Hermione optimistically offered.

"Then there'll just be another one after it," Harry grumbled.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Harry, don't think like that."

It was getting late and Harry's eyes tried to close on their own. "I need to get to sleep," he said. It was the most optimistic thing he had said all evening.

Again though, he catnapped for an hour and then found himself awake, with the remains of a very bizarre dream haunting his dim bedroom. In the dream he was at the Demise of Voldemort Day party, sitting around a table occupied by Bellatrix Lestrange, the Malfoy family, Avery, MacNair and a few hidden, hooded others. All of them sat still and silent as the party went on around them, eyeing Harry as though waiting for him to slip up and make a mistake.

Harry rubbed his eyes and forehead and turned up his lamp. The room was cold. He padded across the floor and added three logs to the hearth without bothering to stir the coals first, so all they did was smolder thick black smoke, some of which billowed into the room. He pulled out the most boring of regulations manuals again and, curled up on his side under the duvet, forced himself to read it starting from the random page where the book fell open.

He dozed lightly again, but woke shortly after, thinking he should exhaust himself, perhaps with a long flight. But the destination he thought of was the warehouse in the Docklands because he was curious to look around again. Going anywhere else didn't hold any purpose.

As he lay there with the lamp sputtering, the door to his room swung silently open, rather than with its usual faint squeak. Harry had his wand in his hand before the shadow in the doorway said, "You are up."

Harry put his wand down and released the breath he had taken. "Yeah."

Snape stepped in and looked down at him from beside the bed. Harry couldn't read his expression in the oblique sputtering light.

"I wish..." Harry started to say before cutting himself off and biting his lip.

"I do not think there is any point in wishing," Snape pointed out.

"No," Harry agreed. Snape reached into his pocket and pulled out a small vial, prompting Harry to say, "I don't want it."

"You need to sleep."

"How did you know I wasn't?" Harry challenged.

"I asked Winky."

"Oh," Harry murmured. Snape had set the vial down on the night stand. Harry eyed it. "I don't want to not wake up if I need to."

Snape didn't move to pick up the vial again. Instead he sat down on the edge of the bed and hesitated before asking, "Do you need to speak of things?"



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“What’s to say?” Harry retorted. “I’m on the hook again. Me. Why me?” He was angry all of a sudden, which he would have sworn he hadn’t been a moment before.

“Perhaps because you bear the burden better than others.” Then more solemnly: “I do not know why you are chosen.”

“So I should be rubbish at taking care of it so it doesn’t happen again,” Harry grumbled.

“I don’t think you have that option.”

“‘Dark hordes.’ How do you know it isn’t me releasing the dark hordes?” he taunted, finding it easy to use Snape as an outlet for his anger.

“I don’t,” Snape replied easily, unflappable.

Snape’s calm for once didn’t incense Harry further; instead, he fell into a brooding silence. In the morning he wouldn’t feel so cheated; he was certain that this was just exhaustion making him weak. “I have to sleep,” he said, curling up and pulling the duvet up snugly to his ear.

A hand stroked his hair back, making Harry squeeze his eyes more tightly closed. He asked, voice muffled by the covers, “Should I just hunt Merton down and get it over with?”

The hand returned for another pass, surprising Harry, although his fingers tugged hard on his hair as he spoke. “Albus always appeared content to let events play out. Infuriating really. His instinct would have been to wait until circumstances are aligned properly, believing that you would know when the time was right. I hope you do recognize the moment, should you chose that route.”

Thinking about it everything at once was only making things worse. Harry rubbed his forehead and asked Snape to turn the lamp down. He then said, “I’ll get used to the idea. Right now I just want to do something about it. Inaction is killing me. I hate waiting for the right moment. I’m not a Hogwarts student anymore... not a child; I should be able to do things my way this time.”

Snape’s hand rested on his shoulder, muted by the thick covers. “The prophecy is a conjunction of events, just like the stars and planets form in the sky. You may not be equal to the task until that time.”

After a pause, Harry accused from under the duvet, “You’ve been reading up, haven’t you? From books Trelawney probably takes to bed.”

“Yes,” Snape admitted.

“You don’t believe any of that,” Harry accused.

“I don’t know,” Snape honestly admitted. “But I have seen you overcome very poor odds and I am not unhopeful.”

Harry snickered. “You’re such an optimist.”

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Snape sat back and said, “No reason to get insulting”, although his lips were faintly curled.

Harry awoke when the morning sun filled his room. He had slept soundly after Snape had departed and although he was a bit groggy, he felt significantly better. He even arrived early for training, and curious what might be going on, wandered down to the Auror’s office.

“What’s all this?” Harry asked of the very tall stack of files on Rogan’s desk.

“Research,” Rogan said, paging through a file before setting it on another knee-high pile on the floor.

“Looking for Merton?” he asked because they were alone.

Rogan smiled. “Give you an inch, Harry,” was his only reply.

Tonks came in then carrying more files and greeted him warmly. “Ready to work, Harry?” she asked.

“ ‘Course.”

“That’s good,” She replied while paging through her own stack of files. “Especially since you are on real duty tomorrow.”

“I am?” Harry asked in quick excitement.

“Your sense of cursed objects is being put to use, so real field work for you.”

“Brilliant,” Harry said happily, needing more than ever to be doing something useful.

“Don’t be eager,” she admonished him. “Be careful.”

Training seemed to take forever that day: the discussions were even longer and more boring than previously, the regulation numbers and conditions blurring from previous days. Finally Harry was released. He immediately went to find Ron, too chipper to go home and study.

Harry came home from a much-needed carefree evening at the pub and fell into bed. The notion of meaningful action calmed him enough to put him to sleep almost immediately and he woke feeling ready to conquer any dark wizard stupid enough to cross his path that day. Dressed and at the Ministry early in an unprecedented second day in a row, Harry found a small conference going on in the break room.

Mad-Eye Moody’s magical eye swung over to Harry as he entered and the room fell silent. “Potter, come on in,” he invited in a tone that sounded the opposite of the words.

Harry, who had been hesitating in the doorway, joined the group around the small table. Tonks was there as well as the oldest Auror, Whitley, Rodgers, and Mr. Weasley, plus some staff from the Magical Reversal Squad.

Rodgers said, “We’ve arranged enough protection to give Merton’s place a thorough going over. Several Aurors have visited it at night, alone, being careful not to

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be seen by the neighbors, or to set off any traps. We're going in as a group this time... going to comb the whole place from top to bottom.

Harry stiffened, thinking that this was an opportunity to look for the objects Draco wanted back. Not necessarily to give them to Draco right away. First he would take a very long look at them. Maybe have Hermione take a very long look at them as well – and Bill too, if he were willing.

Rodgers was still talking. “Remember, we aren't just looking for the unusual, we're looking for what might be missing as well. He hasn't been back, as far as we can tell, to fetch anything. We left a few traps of our own that haven't been triggered. And on that note, no Apparating in or out from inside the perimeter – only by foot, understood?”

Everyone nodded, so he said, “We need clues to where Merton might be now. We have a pretty good idea what he is doing, but we think he must have help and we'd like to know who that is as well, so we want to look for the usual things: old post, datebooks, etc. We've looked before but we've come up empty so far, so they may be hidden if they're there.”

Harry's trainer turned to him. “Potter here is good at spotting cursed objects and seems to have a special antipathy for Merton's toys. I want you to look for anything, anything at all, that sets you off the same way, got it?” Harry nodded. “Alastor will also be looking for things along that line. We want to be in and out as fast as possible and the place is big. Magical Reversal will be helping us blanket the neighborhood to make the surrounding Muggles unaware of our activity, but there is always a chance for exposure so let's minimize it. Alastor is in charge of the operation, so all decisions to withdraw fall on him. Any questions?”

Harry shook his head and worked to keep his excitement at bay.

The Aurors who had previously patrolled the area didn't need assistance, but Harry had to have Tonks Apparate him. As little as he minded having her hold his hand, he wished it wasn't for something so childish feeling.

“Everyone be careful,” Mad-Eye said as they approached the very ordinary front door with a little curved window in the top middle. “No telling what might try to lop a limb off in a house like this.”

They moved as a group into the narrow entryway, until Mad-Eye gestured for a few people to go right and some to go straight, ending the traffic jam.

Harry wandered off down a side hallway lined with windows that looked into the neighbor's garden. As he walked, he looked up and down and carefully at the wall, just in case. He even checked the floor for loose boards with his toes.

At the end through a door, he found a sitting room that resembled a shop on Diagon Alley it was so crammed with objects. There were no fewer than ten lamps

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just in this one room, a very tall one in the shape of a stork that followed him with its head as he moved about, making him worry that there could be a monitor somewhere where Merton could watch him. Harry eyed it closely, but it didn't feel exceptionally magical and its eyes were of the same brass as the rest of it. He decided to ignore it for now and instead went over to the largest cabinet along a wall of them, peering at each shelf while checking for a gold inkwell or a seal. Merton seemed to own one frilly specimen of just about everything but nothing that matched Draco's description. Many of the objects felt cursed but none significantly so he moved on to the next cabinet.

At the end of the line, he pondered the room again. On the far wall, a portrait hung, its subject absent. Suspicious, Harry began to cross the crowded room toward it.

Before the stove and its very full wood bin, sat a small overstuffed chair, and against its seat, blocking the path, rested a silver cane, or strangely, half a cane, lengthwise. Harry tripped over this on his way by, or perhaps, as he wondered darkly when it clattered to the floor, it had tripped him up. Since there had been talk of setting additional traps for Merton here, Harry didn't want to leave the room other than exactly as he had found it. So, without forethought, he picked it up to set it back precisely as he had first seen it.

Harry stared in confusion at the thing he was holding in his hand. It was all silver and shaped like a cane, but it was flattened along on one side. It was also very heavy, as though it were solid metal. It occupied a most unusual room full of all kinds of old, twisted and curious things. In the distance footsteps could be heard and low conversation. Someone stuck their head in the room, pulled it back and then leaned in, mouth agape.

"Harry?!" a woman with bright pink hair done up in a Mohawk uttered in shock.

Harry stared at her, looked around the room, and asked, "How do you know my name?"

The woman saw the cane. In a low voice of dismay, she said, "I told you not to touch anything. Why are you holding that?" she demanded, almost frantic.

Harry, used to being yelled at just like this, set the cane down quickly against the chair beside him. The woman stepped closer and stared down at him, hands on hips. "The effect didn't go away," she lamented and then leaned over to glare at the cane in consternation, careful not to touch it.

Harry hazarded another question even though his previous one had gone unanswered. "Where am I?" He had just minutes before been hiding in his cousin Dudley's cupboard to avoid him and his friends who had bored of their other games and had begun to plot various things they could do to Harry.

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Another figure came to the door, a black man with very short hair wearing a long cloak. "This room clear?" This new person glanced at Harry and his expression went horrified. "Tonks, what's this then?"

The woman turned her head. "He picked that up. Had it in his hand."

"Harry!" the man chastised forcefully. Harry backed up a step, and would have tripped over about a dozen things sitting on the floor had the woman not pulled him back forward by his oversized t-shirt.

The woman called Tonks, said, "We'll have to take it with us. Get a sample bag, will ya?"

"Reggie said, 'exactly as we found it'," the man argued.

"We don't have any choice. Harry didn't revert when he put it down. We'll have to figure out how it works." Using Harry's shirt, which Tonks still held, she dragged him from the room, down a long corridor, around a corner, and out the door. Harry, for lack of a good reason to resist, followed along. They walked out into the cool air to the end of the drive and started down the road. Harry glanced back at the ordinary house and the street and didn't recognize where they were. Cloaked figures stood in the yards of each of the houses, sticks held up before them like short swords, reminding Harry of something... something very dim and frightening.

The woman stopped and her sharp voice broke his chain of horrific, dreamlike memory. "I'd yell you silly if I thought you had any notion of what you've done," she said angrily.

"Sorry," Harry offered automatically.

She took his arm and the strange neighborhood and its strange figures disappeared. Air hit Harry's ears with a bang! and they appeared in a wood-paneled corridor with lamps flickering along it high along the wall. The woman immediately dragged him by the arm to the first room, tugged out a chair before a desk in a room full of desks, and said with a forceful wave of a finger, "STAY!"

Harry shrunk down a bit at this. Somehow she didn't look like she would normally be mean. Harry sighed and watched a paper airplane turn in the door and land smoothly on the next desk over. He started to stand up to investigate, but then remembered the last insistent command and sat back again. This grew increasingly difficult as various interesting things happened, such as files ruffling themselves, and a glass lump upon another desk glowing brightly as though it were spinning inside. Someone ran by and his footsteps could be heard running away.

Tonks returned. She sat down and started writing furiously with a quill on a piece of parchment. Harry couldn't see what she was writing since her hand mostly blocked the view. She was shaking her head and muttering a lot though.

"Where am I?" Harry asked again.

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The woman closed her eyes, looking to be on the verge of a real blow up, or perhaps a collapse. Harry thought he should not have asked. Quietly, she said, "This is the Ministry of Magic."

"The what?" Harry couldn't help blurting. He had never heard of that. Of all the Ministries his Uncle Vernon frequently complained about, Harry was pretty certain he would have remembered that one.

"You've never heard of it because we don't want anyone to know about it."

"Is your name really Tonks?" Harry asked. It was an odd sort of name.

"Yes." She blotted the paper with haste and ran off, her footsteps echoing as well.

Harry sighed. This was better than running from his cousin, he had to admit, especially since his ribs still hurt badly from the day before when Dudley and his friend had caught him. On the other hand, all the strange goings on in this place were a little alarming. A man stopped in the corridor and stared at Harry. He was a lean Indian with thick hair down to his collar. He looked one way down the corridor and then the other and then back at Harry. Harry figured that this man also knew who he was.

"May I inquire what has happened?" the man asked in an accent. When Harry shrugged, he said, "Ah, that is not far-fetched that you are not knowing."

"I'm in big trouble," Harry offered. "I think."

"Oh yes," the man said, eyes glittering a bit. "I imagine you are. My name is Vishnu, by the way."

"Hi, I'm Harry."

"I am knowing this," the man said, now definitely smiling. "How old are you, Harry?"

"Nine. Nine and a half," Harry quickly amended. The paperclips beside him on the desk were dancing. Harry leaned a bit away from them, quite certain that wasn't normal paperclip behavior.

"They are just magical," Vineet explained. "Don't you have your wand? Ah, it is there on the desk."

He came over and handed a long wooden pointed stick to Harry. It was highly polished and worn around the handle as though used a lot. Harry felt a rush of something as he held it, as though a breeze were filling him with possibility.

"Ah yes. That is yours for certain. Shall I show you a spell?" At Harry's vigorous nod, the man came and crouched beside him. "Wingardium Leviosa," the man said while waving the wand. A quill on the next desk rose into the air. He demonstrated the hand movement several times until Harry had it down and then corrected his pronunciation. Harry put it all together but nothing happened.

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“You are losing the proper swish when you speak,” Vineet explained. “Try the motions a few more times without speaking.”

Well over ten minutes of patient help passed; so patient Harry really wondered about this man and who he was. No one had ever spent this much time with him on anything, not even a teacher at school. But Harry finally got the feather to jump in the air.

“Did you do that?” Harry demanded.

“No, no. I am doing nothing. It is your doing only,” the man insisted kindly. He looked Harry up and down. “You are too small for your clothes; they must not have changed with you.”

Harry looked down at his grey t-shirt and the rolled up cuffs on his trousers. “These are my clothes. Well, they were my cousin’s before. He’s a bit bigger than me.”

“He must be. And this spell must be very strong to bring you with your clothes.” Vineet straightened up then and gave Harry a soft look.

“How do I know you?” Harry asked.

“You are forgetting much, but I am assuming it is safe to tell you-”

“Vishnu,” Tonks said, rushing back in. “I see you’ve met Harry.”

Vineet smiled more. “Yes. I am having an advantage for the first time...”

“I have to send an owl through the Floo to Hogwarts. I wish I had any kind of advantage.” She propped her fists on her hips and considered Harry at length. “I wish he’d just revert and save an awful lot of trouble.”

“What has happened?” Vineet asked.

“He picked up a cursed or charmed – we’re not even sure which – object at Merton’s place. I found him like this. He seemed well enough so we didn’t bother with Mungo’s, which we’d prefer to avoid anyway, but Severus is going to kill me when he sees him.”

Harry’s brow furrowed as he tried to follow what Tonks was saying. It was similar to the code Vernon and Petunia used, but Tonks didn’t seem to be trying to lock Harry out of the conversation.

Tonks teased her companion, “Feel like babysitting? Then we could just hide him until this is straightened out. I was down in Mysteries trying to move them along. I had to leave before I did something permanent to Percy.”

“Nandi would not be unwilling...” Vineet said, “And it is the weekend.”

“Tempting,” Tonks said, tapping her fingers on her elbow. “But if Severus ever found out... and he is very good at finding things out.”

Vineet straightened as though less willing to pursue his offer. “Ah, there is that.”

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Tonks sighed. "Well, there's nothing for it." She stomped to the desk and wrote out another message, more carefully this time, that Harry could almost read, if he could have understood the unusual words. Then she disappeared again.

"I'm in trouble, aren't I?" Harry asked the Indian.

Vineet smiled lightly, which eased Harry's worries. "It will be straightened out," he assured Harry.

Tonks returned and, to Harry's disappointment, sent Vineet off on an errand. She sat down at her desk and opened the fluttering paper airplanes with nervous motions, even dropping one on the floor. "As soon as I get a reply, I'll take you home," she said.

"Oh," Harry said sadly. "Can you come in and explain? My aunt and uncle are going to be furious that I've gone missing. Maybe they'll listen to you." Harry looked her now green-spiked hair over and thought again that maybe they wouldn't, but it was the best chance he had.

Tonks shoved the pile of parchments aside and said, "You don't live with your aunt and uncle anymore."

Harry, who had just been at his relatives' house, wondered about this sudden reassignment. "Where am I going?"

"Harry," Tonks said, sounding less patient. "You are eighteen. Well, you are supposed to be eighteen. Almost nineteen. Nine years have passed since the last things you remember right now." She looked through her desk drawer. "Drat, I don't have any photographs here. Just trust me. You've been adopted and you live with your new father, although he is teaching and lives at the school during the school year."

Harry studied her small eyes and pert nose, looking for a clue to the truth. "I've been adopted?" Harry couldn't imagine that. From what his relatives always said, he wasn't the most desirable material for offspring.

"Yes," Tonks confirmed. "By a man named Severus Snape." Tonks wasn't working anymore, had pushed her work aside in fact, and was now giving Harry her full attention.

This was another very odd name. Harry went on with, "Is he nice?"

"Er..." she hesitated awkwardly. "That isn't exactly the right word..."

Harry's heart fell out of his chest after feeling queerly swelled up. "He's cruel?"

Tonks grew more nervous. "He's a little hard to summarize."

Sadly, Harry asked, "Can I go home with Vishnu instead?"

"Harry," Tonks sharply chastised him. "No, you can't. Severus is your father now and that's where you live. Luckily it's Friday so he only needs to find a substitute for the rest of the day, I expect." Harry's disappointment apparently made her soften



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her tone, because she took his arm and said, “He takes very good care of you, really. He’s not at all like your aunt and uncle...” Here she paused as though needing to recover from that statement. “And I can’t count how many times you’ve told me how happy you are to have him as your dad.”

Harry sat, resigned, until an owl came fluttering in carrying a letter. When it landed, it scattered ashes onto the desk. Tonks opened the letter with nervous motions. “Forty-five minutes he’ll be home. He has Remus to substitute, apparently. I told him it wasn’t a total emergency... I hope he views it that way when he sees you.”

Author’s Notes: Ginny’s surprise win – Wow, finally a controversial chapter. Made it a long way into the sequel without one, I realized upon reading the reviews. Clearly playing it much too safe with this story. I’ll keep that in mind as it continues. Bwa hah hah hah.

In an unstructured fight, I think Ginny would have lost easily. The format of alternative spelling gives creativity a chance to trump professional knowledge. For example, I’d expect Rodgers or Snape to cast three spells to her one easily if there were no limit. In an overly fair fight such as this, superior complex blocking maxs out as an asset – the nasty spells the ultrablocks work against aren’t going to be cast anyway. So, dark alley fighting with no scruples, I’d probably give it to Snape, but Rodgers would be a close second, and only because I think he’s been trained to fight fair, to his detriment.

Would Rodgers beat Harry? Yes, I think so, if only because he’s been studying Harry’s every weakness for the last year and Harry doesn’t have the advantage of surviving six older, highly creative brothers like Ginny does.

Harry vs. Ginny? Hm... I might have to work that in somewhere... I’d give the psychological advantage to Harry.

Harry + Ginny? In case Harry’s comment that Ginny feels like a sister doesn’t make it clear enough that he has no girlfriend interest in her, let me lay it down again: the story is not going Harry/Ginny. I’ve just felt lately in need of developing another strong female character that wasn’t an OC, because boy are they lacking in this universe. Also discovered another lacking in my outlining: by total scenes, Ginny isn’t in there much but putting her scenes so close together boosts their importance (and them being “starring” scenes doesn’t help) especially for people who find that she grates on their nerves. I feel sad for you – book 7 is going to hurt. I do appreciate the sentiment that the story is perhaps still worth reading further. As you can see, things have taken a very interesting turn for our main characters...

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



# HOME IS NOT A PLACE

Harry sat as quietly as possible while Tonks worked at her desk. A balding man with bright red hair came in and gave Harry a very amused expression.

“Arthur,” Tonks said, and gazed up at him in concern. “Oh good, you aren’t going to yell at me.”

Arthur stood with his arms crossed, leaning on the door frame. “Not unless it’s permanent. How are you, Harry?”

Faced with this most recent unknown person who apparently knew him, Harry replied easily, “All right, sir.”

“Need anything?”

Harry shook his head. A paper airplane veered around Arthur and looped fast around Harry, who grabbed it out of the air without thinking and handed it to Tonks.

“Good catch,” Tonks said and the two adults shared a look.

“Is he going home?” Arthur asked Tonks.

“In about thirty minutes.”

Since the new man looked the kindest yet, Harry asked him, “Am I really eighteen?”

“Oh yes,” he replied. “I have a photograph down in my office... if you want to come have a look?”

Harry jumped up and followed the man’s faded blue robes – or perhaps they had once been black – down to the end and around the corner. At a small room with just a desk and one file cabinet, the man stopped and took out an album. He flipped through it to nearly the end and held it out for Harry. Harry stared at a moving

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photograph of four teenagers, two with the same bright red hair as Arthur, one a girl with flowing brown hair, and one that must be him, since he had glasses and the same scar.

Arthur was saying, "That's my son and daughter, friends of yours, and another girl named Hermione." The girl, Hermione, was holding the two boys hard around the neck, nearly pulling them forward, but they were all laughing happily. It was some kind of unreal fantasy brought to photographic life.

Arthur waited until Harry took his thumb and forefinger off the album before flipping to another photograph, an older one where Harry could recognize himself much more starkly. In this one a very, very large bearded man in rough clothing was bending close to get into the photograph. Arthur again found a new page. In this one, someone who looked like Harry was standing with a auburn-haired woman and they were arm and arm.

"Is that me?" Harry asked.

"That's your mum and dad," Arthur explained. "But you are the image of James, all right."

Harry stopped breathing; he had never seen a photograph of his parents, much less a moving one. They looked happy but it was muted by something, worry perhaps. Feeling dizzy, Harry took a deep breath. This man, Arthur, seemed unbelievably sensitive to Harry's distress. He gently put the album away in a drawer, which necessitated putting back some additional things that jumped out of it when it was opened, such as a kerchief and gloves.

"I have to get to a meeting, so I'll take you back to Tonks."

Back at the cubicle office, where Arthur urged Harry inside, Tonks said, "Sure you don't want to take him home?"

Arthur laughed and gave this a moment's consideration. "Trouble is Molly'd never let him out of her grasp again."

In the ensuing pause Harry said to Tonks, "He had a photograph of my mum and dad."

"Tonks didn't tell you what really happened to them?" Arthur asked and then despite offering this easily, seemed reluctant to explain further.

Harry who had always sensed something deeply mysterious about this issue and had met with only vitriol when he brought it up at home, sharply asked, "What happened to them?"

Arthur said, "My, I see that quick temper of yours is not a recent acquisition. Your parents were killed by a dark wizard named Voldemort, who tried to kill you too, but only gave you that scar." He touched Harry's forehead with a forefinger, and Harry instinctively covered it.

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Well, Harry thought, if that were true, his aunt and uncle certainly wouldn't have told anyone. He wasn't sure he believed it, but he didn't say anything, just met the red-haired man's gentle eyes. Arthur said, "I wish it weren't true, Harry." He clapped his hands then and rubbed them together. "I expect we'll be seeing you next week, back to your old self."

"Such an optimist," Tonks teased.

With confidence Arthur explained, "You said the cane was in the middle of the room. If the spell were too strong, it wouldn't have been left lying out."

"Unless it were a trap," Tonks offered.

"Strangest one I've heard of," Arthur countered and gave a little wave before disappearing around the door frame.

"He's nice," Harry said.

"He is," Tonks agreed. "Almost too nice. I'm going back down to the Department of Mysteries, see if they've learned anything about that thing. Sit down," she ordered, and Harry obeyed.

Moments later, yet another person arrived and immediately took Tonk's chair. "Hello," this man said. He seemed less trustworthy to Harry for some reason. "You don't remember me, I see, I'm Aaron. We're in training together here."

He held out his hand, which Harry shook. "Training?"

"Yeah," Aaron said, propping his feet up on the desk. "Auror training."

"What's an Auror?" Harry asked.

Aaron leaned back to relax, hands behind his head. "A dark wizard hunter, of course."

"You're having me on," Harry criticized.

Aaron lost his laid-back posture when he started to laugh. And when he stopped, he continued to snort occasionally. "Harry, you are the foremost dark wizard hunter."

Yet another figure darkened the doorway to the offices with his cloaked self. "So, it's true. Potter..." he muttered disdainfully and shook his head.

Aaron leaned toward Harry and whispered, "This is your boss."

Harry, who had no notion of having a boss beyond his relatives, greeted this one with: "Sir."

This man shook his head again in an air of dismissive tragedy. "Tonks sending him home?" he asked Aaron.

"Yup. Snape is meeting her there shortly. I'm just playing nanny until then," Aaron explained casually.

"Ah," the mustached man said airily, "Snape doesn't eat children anymore, does he?"

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Harry looked quickly to Aaron to see the reply to this. Aaron was chuckling. "Not in a few years... unless he's gotten better at hiding it."

Feeling that he didn't like this Aaron bloke much, Harry asked, "You know my new dad?"

"Oh, yeah, pretty well in fact. I went to the school where he teaches; had him for seven years as a head-of-house."

"Is he mean?" Harry asked, really needing to know. The man in the doorway snorted.

Aaron thoughtfully echoed, "Is... he... mean? When I was in school that wouldn't have covered it. Heartless, might have covered it. Cruel. Vicious. Heartless, no I used that already. But of course," Aaron said, waving his hand with aplomb, "He liked us. We were in his house. Students like you, who were in Gryffindor... Snape hated the students from Gryffindor."

Harry didn't know whom to believe. The man in the doorway looked far too amused and Aaron gave no sign that he was lying.

Seeing Harry's expression, Aaron said, "I think Snape likes you now though."

"I would say," the man in the doorway uttered snidely, "You are the only thing keeping him out of prison."

Harry disliked that man more all of a sudden. To Aaron Harry asked, "Is that true?"

Aaron looked befuddled in an almost comic manner. He straightened his spine and replied, "I don't know." He glanced at the man in the doorway. "Maybe. It's not impossible. I like Professor Snape though. If you're on his good side, he's a very good ally. Just don't get on his bad side... he knows an awful lot of dark magic."

"Dark magic?" Harry asked in alarm, but Tonks had returned so he didn't get a response.

"See ya later, Harry," Aaron said chummily as if he had not just withered Harry's future to something, if possible, glummer than the prospect of the Dursley's.

Tonks said to the man in the doorway, "I'll be back, hopefully in fifteen. If not, I'm being flayed."

"Get Mr. Weasley to drop him off," Aaron suggested.

"He's in a meeting and I'd have to fear Severus hunting me down if I don't just face him now." She sounded honestly worried about that, which only reinforced everything Aaron had said. Tonks took a cloak down off a coat rack and hooked it around Harry's neck and then pulled the hood over his head and as far forward as it would go. "Keep that there," she ordered, making Harry drop the hand he had brought up to adjust it so he could see something other than a small tunnel and the floor. His hand was taken up and with a heavy heart Harry let himself be led away.

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The lift ride was a clanging and banging affair and then they were in a large open area, where Harry lifted his head and looked around as much as possible between Tonks' repeated yankings of his hood forward. They passed a fountain and then faced a fiery hearth, one of a long row of them. Tonks crouched before him and said, "I'm going to take you with me, just in case." She steered him close to the heat of the flames and tossed something onto the logs that burned pure green. With her arms she swept Harry forward and shouted something about a shrew and then they were spinning in near darkness.

Harry took a tight hold of the woman's robes and closed his eyes as rushing air assaulted his ears. He opened them after half a minute and watched as brick, and stone, and cement rushed by interspersed with flaming and glowing hearths. They were spinning dizzily, and Harry worried he might lose his glasses, but he didn't want to let go of his escort even with one hand.

They landed with a slap on a cement slab. Tonks led the way out, ducking under the mantel. Harry looked around the darkly paneled room. There was a window on the right and on the far wall a high shelf held strange bottles. A figure all in black swept into the room from the door to the left and glared at the two of them.

"Severus," Tonks breathed.

Dismay crossed the angular features of the man and his unkempt hair tossed about as he shook his head. "Your note didn't exaggerate at all," he said to Tonks.

"'Fraid not," she admitted.

The man circled the table like a predator to better see Harry. With his long black cloak and prominent hooked nose Harry thought he looked more than a bit like a giant raven. The man's eyes narrowed and Harry had the oddest notion that the man somehow knew he had come up with that unflattering imagery. Tonks gave a reluctant Harry a push toward the large table that dominated the room.

"I know I promised to keep an eye on him, but I can't stop him doing really stupid things."

The man pinched the bridge of his nose as though he had a headache. "And the object responsible?"

"Department of Mysteries has it," Tonks explained. Harry inched his way over to the other side of the table where he felt safer. On the sideboard behind him, post was scattered, some of it was even addressed to him, which was a first in his life. He fingered it with a swelling heart. A photograph of himself with two of the people from the other photograph was there as well. It helped a lot to see it there.

Conversation stopped and Harry turned. A small creature with ears that ended in long drooped points had come in bearing a tray with biscuits and a glass of milk. It set this down, curtsied in its tea towel and departed. Harry forgot the elf quickly

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but the plate of chocolate biscuits, in a room that also didn't contain Dudley, held his full attention.

The conversation about spell reversal and curse negation continued as Harry inched forward and took the first chair at the table. Slowly, stomach complaining, he took the milk and sipped that. No one said anything or looked his way. Harry took a biscuit and intended to nibble it, but instead gorged it down. He reached for another, thinking that he might get to like this place. His hand was halted by a sharp voice.

"If you are that hungry, we should have an early dinner, rather than excessive biscuits."

Harry removed his hand from the vicinity of the platter and returned to his milk. Rather than satiate his hunger, the biscuit had defined the hollow of his stomach all the more clearly. He had only gotten toast for breakfast and because he had been hiding from Dudley and his friends, he had missed lunch. The scent of the biscuits, about twelve of them, Harry guessed, was torment.

Tonks approached and gave him a one-armed hug, "I'll stop by tomorrow when there's news. Behave yourself." With another flash of green fire, she was sucked, spinning, up the chimney. Harry blinked at that, certain he had never heard of that working outside of the realm of Christmas.

The man stood considering Harry. Harry considered him back. The only sound was the tick of a clock in the next room. Snape said, "I'll go see that Winky is preparing dinner."

Harry almost took a biscuit in his absence but expected that he wouldn't get away with it, that perhaps some magical trick would give him away and he feared what kind of magical punishment would be forthcoming. He finished his milk and sat trying to fathom what the objects on the mantel were for. None of them resembled torture devices, he was relieved to note. Other than the windmill, which turned in the brown painting on the far wall, nothing in the room was terribly, horribly out of the ordinary.

The man returned and took up a seat across from Harry. "Not much sense in yelling at you, is there?" he asked smartly.

Harry cleared his throat, "Everyone else said that today too."

Snape shook his head, which caused his stringy hair to obscure more of his face.

Harry needed to find some footing here. He had been left with this man by a mix of people who marginally seemed to care what happened to him and some who found dark, mocking amusement in the prospect. "Tonks said that you adopted me?" Even as he voiced it, it sounded absurd and he wished he hadn't spoken.

"Yes," came the wry reply.

Harry swallowed hard, not sure what answer he had been hoping for.

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“Do you wish to examine the paperwork?” came the snide follow up.

“I guess,” Harry said.

The man stood without warning after examining Harry’s gaze extensively with that disturbingly close attention. With a swish of his robes he was gone but he returned presently and held out a rolled up parchment.

Harry awkwardly unrolled it. It was long with miles of small print and lines that had been filled in with his name and Snape’s name. At the very bottom were some signatures. The first few lines were reassuring, going on in the manner of: henceforth shall be responsible for all welfare, health, and long-term educational/vocational requirements of adoptee. Harry let the parchment roll itself up again like an uncoiled spring and handed it back. Snape set it aside with his long, fine-boned hand.

Harry had only ever daydreamed of his parents suddenly coming for him to take him from the Dursley’s, not adoption, but if he had imagined adoption, this would not have entered his imagining. He shifted in his chair under that black scrutiny and felt something in his pocket bump the chair. Remembering his wand with a spark of happiness, Harry pulled it out. “I learned a spell,” he said.

“Really?” Snape crossed his arms doubtfully. “Let’s see.”

Harry, after three tries because he was nervous, got the silver pepper grinder to hover over the table. It drifted there on its own axis before suddenly falling with a loud bang! and a scattering of loose peppercorns. “Sorry,” Harry immediately said, hurrying to set the thing upright.

“No matter; it is a rather heavy object for a beginner.” Snape said. “One of your worst enemies sent that for Christmas.”

Harry picked it up and looked it over. “It didn’t break,” he pointed out before rethinking the assertion about enemies sending Christmas gifts.

“I don’t think it can be broken.” The man now had a wand in his hand as well. “Shall I show you another?” With a quick flick and another strange utterance that sounded like Elphaskrasi, the peppermill suddenly had pink polka dots.

“You’re a wizard too?” Harry asked, stunned by how many there seemed to be all of a sudden.

“Of course,” Snape sneered lightly. “You would prefer to be adopted by a Muggle?”

“What’s a Muggle?”

This question made the man rethink a moment. More calmly, he said, “It is a non-magical person.”

At that moment plates and platters of food materialized on the table, clad in a sheen of sparkles. Harry sat back in surprise, not believing it could be real until the



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odor of roast chicken hit his stomach, making it twist painfully. He clasped his hands between his knees to wait his turn.

“Go ahead,” Snape said.

Harry never got to serve himself first. Ever. He hesitantly reached for the serving spoon in the potatoes and once he started, rushed to give himself a chicken wing as well so he wasn't holding up the meal.

Harry had never eaten better food. The potatoes tasted like cream and the chicken fell off the bone. Harry quickly nibbled his piece clean to the tiny wingbones where the feathers attached. He then began eying the platter, which was still heaped with the rest of a chicken and there was no Dudley or Uncle Vernon to be satiated. One wing was all Harry ever was given though when his aunt cooked chicken. He slowly ate his potatoes and wondered if he could have more chicken.

“Do you want another piece?” came the sharp question, and for a moment, Harry dealt with the notion that he had annoyed his new dad by NOT helping himself to seconds.

“Er...” Harry glanced down at the wing bone sitting forlornly on his plate. There really wasn't so much as a molecule of meat left on it so he couldn't claim he wasn't finished with it. “Can I?” he asked.

“Of course. I cannot possibly eat all that,” the man said, still sharp as a whip.

Harry had somehow angered his new parent without trying. More to the point, by doing exactly as he knew he was supposed to. Confused, Harry said, “No, I'm all right.” Which was true; he was more full than he usually was after dinner.

This did not work to negate the anger, however. Snape turned his head, angled and sideways, like a raptor might and said, “You are as thin as that tiny bone you have gnawed raw that now sits before you.”

Harry didn't know what to say to that. The tone was clearly a challenge demanding a response, but Harry was only growing more confused by these mixed signals.

Snape huffed ominously, the way Vernon did before everything got the worst it could. But instead of turning red and becoming verbally violent, the man's entire attitude transformed and he mutely shook his head. With awkward patience Snape softly said, “Harry, take as much as you like to eat.” He threw his napkin down on the table and sat back. “I am quite finished, in fact.” He watched Harry gingerly take a thigh off the plate. As Harry gratefully ate it down, amazed at how much meat such small bones could hold, the man stood and took a bottle of dark liquid off the shelf and poured himself a serving. He failed to put the bottle back away, and instead made a point of keeping it close in reach.

After a second piece of chicken Harry was very full, as full as he had ever been in his life. His stomach hurt, which he didn't know was possible and made him think

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Dudley's must hurt after every meal and sometimes after his snacks.

Snape said, "We'll have to find something to occupy you. I have grading to do for tomorrow that I did not wish to foist off on my replacement, who is sometimes too forgiving of half-correct responses."

"Do you have a television?"

"No," came the dry reply.

"No television?" Harry asked in disbelief; he thought everyone did.

Snape waved at the oil lamps on the walls and table. "There isn't electricity. Nor do I wish to have a television. There is a library, perhaps we can find something there for you to read."

He took his drink and led the way across a two-story hall and into the far room, which was lined floor to ceiling, all around, with books. Snape said, "These are yours over here, although most of them you will probably not find interesting at this stage in your magical career."

"Magical career?" Harry echoed.

Snape waved him off and said, "Should you need anything. I'll be in the drawing room."

Harry sat on the rug before the shelf and pulled down each of the books and flipped through them. He finally found a book with lots of dragon pictures and very amusing stories of bad encounters with dragons. This book he sat back with and quickly forgot where he was, although he skipped over a lot of words he didn't know.

Harry's head nodded for the third time. He put the book away and went out to the main hall. On the left were stairs leading down a half a flight. Harry went that way and found the kitchen. The creature that had brought the biscuits earlier gave him a curtsy. "Master."

"Do you know where the toilet is?" Harry asked.

The elf nodded, making its ears flap. "Next door down this corridor, Master."

"Thanks."

As he washed up, Harry stared at himself in a mirror that had lost half of its silvering. The tile in the bath was sparkling clean but around the edges of things most of them were cracked and the grout chipped away. His Aunt Petunia would have run screaming from this place. Harry relished the realization that that gave him some protection from her. He yawned, exhausted and wondering where he could sleep. He checked the rest of this lower corridor. The large cupboard across from the toilet had only kitchen supplies in it, not anything that resembled a bed.

Growing more weary by the second, Harry roamed around the main hall following the light from the far room. Inside the drawing room, Snape worked at a tall stack of parchments. He didn't notice Harry in the doorway.

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“Please, sir,” Harry began, really not wishing to risk interrupting, but seeing no choice. The dark, very dark, eyes came up and fell on him with that intensity Harry was not used to. “Where do I sleep?”

The intensity vanished as Snape stood. “In your room.” An eye blink later, he passed Harry with a gliding stride. “Come.”

Harry followed up the steps to the first floor balcony. At the last door Snape stopped and gestured for Harry to enter. Harry went into the dark room a few tentative steps before the lamps came up bright on their own. Snape, wand out, passed Harry and went to the wardrobe.

“You’ll have to wear an oversized pair of pyjamas I believe.” He took out a pyjama top and handed that to Harry, who couldn’t believe how soft it was.

Harry looked around at the four poster bed with its detailed carving on the posts, the trunks stacked in the corner, the animal cages. “This is my room?”

“Yes.”

Harry wandered the perimeter and stopped at the cages. One was empty but the other contained something furry and violet curled up in a pile of rags. Harry touched the wire bars, trying to get a better look. The creature lifted its head and blinked at him sleepily. Harry reached for the cage door but was restrained by a hand.

“To bed instead. Her sleepiness gives away yours.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, but he had to finish exploring the room first. The man waited by the door, watching, so Harry didn’t try to open either of the huge trunks. Instead, he went over to the bed and looked in the drawer of the night stand and then on the shelf. He spied a photo album very much like the one the nice red-haired man had shown him. Pulling this out brought Snape back over and Harry started to put it back away.

“Go ahead,” Snape said. “I thought perhaps you would like to know who was in the photographs.”

The first page was obvious. “That’s my parents,” Harry announced. “Mr. Weasley had a photo of them too, but I thought my dad was me.”

“You do look just like him.”

Harry stopped and looked up sharply. “You knew my mum and dad?” When Snape replied affirmative, an undefined tension relaxed inside Harry. “You were friends with them?” he asked, trying to figure out why, if his parents had friends still alive, he was still left at the Dursley’s who clearly were not friends of his parents.

“Not exactly,” Snape admitted wryly. “Your father and I did not get along well.”

“Oh,” Harry responded, thinking that may explain it, which also made him feel oddly better. “Were they magical?” Harry suddenly thought to ask. “Or... what’d you call it... Muggles?”

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“They were very magical,” Snape confirmed.

“No one ever told me,” Harry lamented in a mutter, flipping now to pages showing his older self with the same friends as the other photographs. “I have these two friends,” Harry announced happily.

Snape made a snorting sound that made Harry look up sharply on the verge of hurt. “You have more friends than you can possibly count,” Snape explained.

Harry glanced back down at the album and a photograph showing himself sitting around a thick wooden table in a library, he looked displeased at having the picture taken and kept shading his face from the flash bulb. The table was full of other students, all dressed in the same uniform. “I don’t have any friends; Dudley beats up anyone who talks to me.”

“Your cousin would not survive three seconds with you anymore,” Snape assured him. “And that is assuming you were feeling generous toward him.” He moved to the door. “Do not have the lamp lit too much longer.”

Left alone, Harry finished slowly flipping through the pages before he changed into the pyjama top, of which he needed to fold up the sleeves three times over, unable to imagine fitting in it, but apparently it was his. He settled into the huge soft bed and his eyes wanted to close, but he held them open to look around the big room filled with all kinds of things... all his. With care, Harry turned down the lamp and willingly let his eyes close this time.

Around midnight, Snape slipped in to check on his young charge. Mussed hair peaked out from under the duvet above where Harry’s small self barely formed a tall wrinkle at the top of the bed, barely reaching the middle. For one breathless moment, Snape imagined Dumbledore attempting to guide this small life through prophesized events that even in hindsight loomed overwhelmingly. He wondered how the old wizard had managed it and thought that perhaps, he had underestimated Dumbledore’s power, or at least his wisdom; he had certainly underestimated his resistance to stress. The very notion filled Snape with cold dread.

The cold knot tightened Snape’s insides painfully. If Harry were not transformed back, he himself would be in precisely the same position, for which he was sorely lacking in both power and wisdom. He could not accept that daunting future; it refused to take hold in his mind. His Harry, powerful both magically and physically, would return to fulfill the prophecy. He must.



Ginny awoke with a jerk and grappled for her watch and her wand. Shrouded by the thick drapes, she used a Lumos Charm to read the time: ten after four. She

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tossed the watch back down beside her pillow so as to not have to set it down loudly on the wooden night stand and potentially wake her roommates.

As she buried her face in her pillow again, Professor Trelawney floated up before her mind's eyes, speaking in that awful voice. Ginny groaned and willed her away until she realized that she was remembering the very beginning of the Prophecy, the part she thought she hadn't heard but apparently had just forgotten.

With a huff she rolled over and assumed it could wait two hours until what a reasonable person would consider morning.

She didn't fall back to sleep, however, despite steeping herself in reliving the recent dueling win, usually a sure-fire way of lifting her mood. At six in the morning, she dressed in silence and went out of the dormitory. She considered informing Professor Snape, but then remembered that he had been absent from dinner and maybe had gone home for the weekend. Ginny wished she could go home for the weekend, especially to Harry's house.

As she expected, Headmistress McGonagall was awake. She sat with her glasses on her nose, reading from a yellowed tome propped up on her desk. "Ms. Weasley, this must be a record," she said.

"I remembered the beginning of the prophecy," Ginny explained.

McGonagall clasped her hands over the vellum pages before her and appeared extra attentive as she lowered her head to look over her spectacles. "It is good that you did, sometimes these little details matter."

Ginny shrugged. "I think we're better off without the beginning part this time," she stated tiredly.

After a long pause McGonagall prompted, "What is it, Ms. Weasley?"

Ginny took a deep breath, "'Few will escape the blood and chaos of the darkness, bound, sought and released.' "

McGonagall's eyes closed momentarily. "Well, that is a jolly thought for this morning."

Ginny put her hands in her pockets to quell the nerves making them fidget. "Maybe the Ministry should be told," she suggested quietly.

McGonagall nodded. "Very selectively though. I'll discuss it with Severus... and Harry," she added in an awkward manner. She then appeared mysteriously befuddled for just an instant.

"Do you want me to go inform him, ma'am? I notice that you don't both like to be absent." She asked this in what she thought was an admirably professional tone.

McGonagall shook her head. "No, I will take care of it." She almost appeared to reconsider, then waved Ginny off.

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Morning came for Harry. He awoke thinking that he had had a very nice dream about having his own room and a good dinner, but when he opened his eyes to the sunlight, he realized it had not been a dream. He quickly dressed in his own baggy trousers and a clean t-shirt from the wardrobe that reached below his knees, and went downstairs.

The man from the night before, the strange dark-eyed one who had adoption papers saying he was now Harry's father, was at the dining room table drinking coffee and reading a strange newspaper. A white owl sat on the back of the chair opposite. It bobbed its head at Harry's approach.

"Would you like breakfast?" Snape asked.

Harry stopped just inside the doorway. "Shall I go make it?" he asked.

The sharp edge came back then, "Heavens no. Take a seat... the elf will bring it."

Harry wished he could avoid annoying this man, but it was impossible. He moved warily over to his chair. The owl tilted its head endearingly and clacked its beak.

"That is your owl," Snape informed him. "Her name is Hedwig."

"Where was she last night?" Harry asked, carefully pulling out the chair so as to not upset the bird's perch.

"Hunting, picking up your post from your friends at Hogwarts."

Breakfast arrived before Harry could get fully acquainted with this pet. The plate that appeared before him had two rashers of bacon and two pieces of toast and two eggs. Harry looked over at the identical plate before Snape. He sensed now that making a point about the food was a mistake, so he dove into eating without asking if this was all for him.

Another owl arrived at the end of breakfast, carrying a letter. Snape read it and bunched it up. "Still no progress on reversing the charm upon you. And they do believe it is a charm, rather than a curse."

"What will happen then? Will I go back to the Dursley's?" Harry asked.

"You will go back to being your eighteen-year-old self," Snape replied.

"Oh," Harry said, thinking that didn't sound so bad. In the photographs he had looked big enough to fend off anyone.

"What to do with you today, though," Snape muttered. "What do nine-year-old wizards like to do?"

Harry had no appropriate suggestions and hoped the question was merely thinking aloud.

"The weather is a bit warmer today. I think I know what we can do." He stood and Harry followed quickly, curious to see.

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The man went to the front entryway and took two brooms out of a cupboard there. “Not your usual one, but perhaps that is just as well.” He handed a broom to Harry, who studied it in confusion. It wasn’t an ordinary broom though, it had a logo on the end of the handle and it was highly polished. Snape also gave him a cloak and a pair of gloves, although they were both far too large.

“Come,” Snape said and led the way through the house and out the back to an overgrown garden. “You were reputed to be a natural at this at eleven, so I expect you already are at nine and a half. Do like this. Set the broom on the ground, hold your hand out over it, and say ‘up!’ ”

Harry did as he was told and nearly let go after catching the broom as it jumped up into his grasp and hovered there, alive and willing.

“Up for a little flight?” Snape asked with what could have been snide, but Harry thought instead that it meant they shared an inside joke.

“Sure,” Harry replied eagerly.

Snape dropped his broom and said “Up!” before it could hit the ground, a slick looking move. “Oh, and one more thing.” He took out his wand and tapped Harry on top of his head. Cold liquid ran over Harry’s head and neck, making him rub at it to no avail. “Get on like this, lift the handle slightly to increase your height. Very good,” he praised Harry, who had lifted to a steady hover seven feet from the ground, a bright smile ruling his face, making it ache. Snape mounted as well and sped off toward the low clouds, and Harry instinctively leaned forward to make his broom follow.

Everything about flying on a broomstick felt inherently obvious and instinctive. He zipped side to side, testing the steering before catching up to the man.

“Having fun?” Snape asked.

“This is wonderful,” Harry shouted, feeling his stomach flip at the view of the spring green ground far below. But he was free, at home, freshly liberated; everything before this had been imprisonment in an alien country.

Snape slowed and stopped. The cold breeze blew fiercely in their faces, so he turned his back into it and Harry did the same, knocked off balance by the maneuver, but recovering with a quick hand of help. “Where shall we go?” Snape asked.

“Can we get ice cream?” Harry asked.

“You wish to have ice cream?” Snape asked, sounding snide again.

Harry swallowed nervously, afraid that he had crossed the line, certain that he would never know where the lines were with this man.

“If you wish.” Snape conceded and turned slowly on his broom. “What town looks likely to you to hold an ice cream shop?” he asked.

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Harry looked keenly around them. A larger town sat at the horizon in a small valley along a canal. He pointed his oversized glove that way. Snape gestured that he should lead, and Harry eagerly did so.

Before they were halfway there – farther than it seemed at the outset – Harry’s hands were growing cold inside his fur gloves. A wisp of very low cloud passed by, moistening his cloak even more than it already was. Below them a road snaked through greening fields dotted with sheep. It wasn’t real, Harry’s sensible mind suddenly asserted. He was dreaming. By sitting back Harry slowed without trying. He was on a shiny black broomstick, flying over the countryside. It wasn’t real.

The man flew close beside him. “All right, Harry?”

Harry couldn’t believe the man was real either. Any second now he was going to wake from this dream or he was going to fall. Harry gripped the highly polished wood before him as tightly as his half-numb hands could manage through the ungainly oversized gloves. He was dangerously high in the air and brooms couldn’t really fly. But despite his screaming instincts, he wasn’t falling; the broom didn’t need his faith to continue hovering, even five hundred feet above the earth.

“Harry?” Snape prompted more sharply. Harry reached out for the man, and got gathered up as soon as the world careened wildly. “One hand always on the broomstick – difficult to steer without that,” Snape corrected, forcefully planted Harry’s right hand on his broom. The world leveled out, but Snape’s arm was still fast around him. “I think this is perhaps too much too soon.”

Harry was breathing normally now and he anchored himself by watching the cars snaking along the road below them. Flying on a broomstick was feeling real again, as real as the warmth of an adoptive father wrapped around him. The broom hadn’t failed him, even though he had failed it. Experimentally, he leaned a little left and they both turned.

“Let’s get you home, Harry.”

“No,” Harry countered. “I want ice cream.”

“You do? You are dead certain that you are about to fall and you want ice cream?” Snape asked facetiously, but he gradually released Harry to fly on his own. Harry took it as a test and did the best he could, even though his arms felt quaky as well as cold.

“It will be warmer on the ground. Come.” Snape led the way this time, cloak billowing, checking back frequently to see that Harry followed. Harry for one was angry at himself for faltering at his first taste of real freedom. He wouldn’t do that again, no matter how certain he was of falling.

They landed behind a shed on a small football pitch. Snape tapped each of them on the head, set their brooms up against the wall and tapped them as well, and then



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led Harry away. It was considerably warmer on the ground; halfway to the nearby road, Harry had to toss his heavy cloak off of his shoulders. Down a small slope and across the road stood a chinese restaurant and beside it an ice cream shop. Three boys of about fourteen were already enjoying treats on the pavement before it.

Harry followed past them, pausing to roll his worn right cuff up, which he was walking on, as usual. Snape waited by the window for him. The boys were whispering, but Harry was used to comments about oversized clothes and ignored them. When he reached him, Snape said, "Perhaps we should get you some clothes that fit."

Harry, to whom it had been made abundantly clear that new clothes were not appropriate somehow, said, "These are all right. Can I have double chocolate?"

While Harry's treat was being prepared, Snape reached into his pocket and pulled out large shiny gold coins. He put these quickly away and tried a different pocket, which contained ordinary, dull, pound coins. "What's the other?" Harry asked.

"I'll explain later," Snape dismissed the question, paid, and handed Harry his treat along with a stack of serviettes.

They sat at the small plastic table beside the window. The other boys had moved on and the two of them were alone. Snape considered the small version of his adopted son with a practiced eye as the boy vigorously ate his treat. So involved in eating, he was, that he remained unaware of Snape's attention. The brief sunlight swept through accompanied by a cool wind and Harry pulled his bulky cloak tighter with his free hand. A wave of protective instinct washed through Snape, sitting there at a Muggle table in an entirely Muggle village.

This Harry he could protect, unlike his own independent Harry with his own duties and his own grown-up predilection for trouble. Voldemort was gone; could this new trouble possibly be worse, Snape wondered. And if he tried to protect his older Harry with the kind of forthright confidence he felt certain he could bring to bear upon this Harry, would that work? Or would his Harry thrash immediately against the necessary limits placed upon him?

If Snape kept Harry this size, he could protect him much easier – a tempting, if not irrational, notion. But the prophecy would either be void or had better have a lengthy timeline to fulfillment for Harry to get prepared. Snape found himself unable to assume Harry's decrease in age could be part of the expectations of the prophecy. He would get his own Harry back and this would just be an opportunity to better understand the son he had taken in.

Harry paused in his voracious eating and sighed as though it were hard work, this eating.

"Thanks for the ice cream," Harry said. It was delicious... and all his. The only other time Harry got any was when Dudley overturned his bowl, upset that it only

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had four scoops instead of five. Harry had turned it back over and eaten it anyway because no one told him not to. "You're not having anything?" he asked, seeing Snape empty handed. "Do you want some of this?"

"I am quite all right. Thank you."

Harry finished his treat as slowly as he could while watching the boys kick a football around on the pitch. He wished he were as big as they were. "Am I as tall as them now?" he asked.

Snape, required a second to take the question in, apparently his thoughts were elsewhere. He glanced over his shoulder at the impromptu match going on and said, "You are very near as tall as I am."

"I can't be," Harry argued, but then had to lick a large drip that threatened his already sticky hand. "You're really tall."

"You truly are. You have grown enormously from where you are now."

"Then I could beat anyone up," he asserted.

"You don't require height for that; your wand is quite sufficient. Finish your ice cream, it is melting."

Harry guessed this was a signal that the topic should be dropped and thought perhaps with a little practice that he could find the lines around this man.

They returned to the broomsticks, Snape, instead of handing Harry his, used a charm to lock them together and hovered them as one. "Fly with me this time; the tryptophan is making you sleepy already."

"The what?" Harry asked, but he had to admit that he was feeling a little groggy on top of full to bursting.

Snape lifted him onto the broom before him and tapped him on the head. "A compound prevalent in milk and chocolate that makes you tired and a bit happy." He stashed his wand away and steered them directly upward into the wind. The boys on the pitch grew smaller and smaller until they were no more than insects.

"I am pretty happy," Harry said, leaning into the cloak-shrouded strength behind him. Despite being a little sad that he wasn't flying himself, Harry didn't complain; this riding along in warmth was fine too. Snape's arm held him fast and he had no concern this time about falling, even when they skirted the grey clouds. A gust of wind struck them and they turned with it and the arm around Harry tightened and didn't let up until they were hovering down into the back garden of the house.

Snape didn't release Harry immediately when they landed; in fact, he held him tight enough to restrict his breathing before he finally set him on his feet, and Harry, for the first time that he could remember, felt what it was like to be cherished. The man gave no outward sign of this as he broke the brooms apart and led the way inside, but Harry was certain of it. He was also certain, despite their short time together,

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that this man did not give up such emotion easily, and that only made it strike Harry harder.

Harry took his gloves and cloak off and handed them up to be put away in the front hall cupboard. Snape then instructed him to follow to the drawing room where a measuring tape was dug out and used upon him with cold efficiency. Snape then picked up a quill and jotted down the numbers. "I'll owl a shop for some basic clothes for you so you do not have to look as though you shrunk and your clothes did not." He said this in a mocking tone, but Harry felt its sharp edge slide off him without harm.

The pink-haired lady from the Ministry came during the afternoon with apologies. Harry listened from the doorway to the drawing room as she and his new father spoke about technical magical things. Tonks was reassuring Snape. "We've figured out that Merton must have been using the cane to chop wood and do other chores. He's up there in years and the cane was sitting right before the full wood bin, all cut with an ax that was right out back, which would have been a lot of work for someone his age. He must have owned the cane long enough to know what it did and how to reverse the charm. For all we know it's been in the family for generations. He could have written himself a note with a To-Do list, read it, did the chores, and changed back. Probably used it for all kinds of tasks that would be easier for someone younger. So if he went back and forth easily..."

Snape sat back in his desk chair and steepled his fingers. "That implies that his magic is not very good, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess it does," she admitted. "Pathetic to be having so much trouble with him, in that case."

Snape said, "He is presumably getting help from someone more powerful."

"We've figured that out, but we don't even know who inside the Ministry is helping him, let alone outside." She considered Harry as he hung in the doorway. "We'll get this straightened out, Harry," she assured him.

"I don't think he is in any hurry," Snape commented.

Harry, wishing for a television for the hundredth time, carried a stack of books with lots of pictures up to his room to read until it was time to sleep. It was quiet here without Dudley and his uncle yelling and stomping up and down the stairs over his head. The elf snuck in, startling Harry, but it mostly ignored him and went to the hearth to lay on a fire. Harry liked having a fire in his room. Even Dudley with his two bedrooms didn't have a hearth in either one. He would probably just try to burn his toys in it if he did.

Harry cracked open a book entitled Encyclopedia Albion Wizard Annual 1980. It had a lot of pictures and Harry could turn the pages slowly and pretend they were

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little televisions. Ten pages with around eight photographs each were devoted just to something called the Quidditch World Cup and Harry, since he had spent the morning on a broomstick, found this intensely intriguing, considering that he knew nothing about the sport. He enjoyed being alone for real rather than alone with lots of loud people around, pointedly ignoring him.

When a rushing sound like the hearth flaring sounded, Harry jumped up and bounded to the stairs, almost tripping on his much too big dressing gown as he tried to put it on. At the bottom of the stairs Snape was pointing at him with a fierce look instructing him to stay put and presumably out of sight.

A man's voice could be heard. "Minerva sent me... wants to talk to you." The two of them stepped into the hall and Snape glanced up but didn't give Harry, who had inched back forward, any further instructions.

The other man, who had a generous head of greying brown hair, a pointed chin and slightly pointed nose, looked up and said, "Well, look at that. Harry, how are you?" he asked with kindness.

Harry tentatively stepped down until he was at eye level with the two of them. Snape said, "I must go for a few minutes. Remus here will look after you."

"Who are you?" Harry asked the man.

"Remus J. Lupin," he said, holding out his hand. "An old friend of your father's."

Snape stopped in the doorway to the dining room long enough to say. "He's a much better candidate to tell you stories about your parents."

They settled into the drawing room after the Floo flare sounded, and Winky brought tea in almost immediately. "Ah, thank you," Lupin said to her. Harry accepted a cup as well and blew over it.

"Did you know my mum too?" Harry asked.

"Yes, Harry, I did. The finest person I've ever met," he said with feeling.

"My aunt gets mad when I ask about her," Harry lamented. Lupin gave him a wry smile. Harry went on, "But I have a new dad now, and he's pretty nice."

Lupin nearly spilled his tea. He shook his head and didn't respond, even when Harry prompted, "What's wrong?"

Lupin grinned crookedly and finally said, "Nothing is wrong, Harry. Most people don't use the word 'nice' with regard to Severus, is all."

"Well, he isn't sickly nice like my aunts are with Dudley, all kissy facing and hugging... ick."

Lupin sipped his tea. "Well, you are in the right place, Harry."

Snape returned a short while later, and immediately escorted Harry up to bed. Harry wasn't ready for bed so he circled the room as he did the night before. The violet, bat-like creature stirred from grooming itself as Harry reached up to release

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the latch on the cage door. Before he could untwist the wire holding the latch secure, the creature hissed at him, revealing rows of needle-like teeth.

Snape was there beside him in an instant. “Do not open it. That is strange... she doesn’t seem to know you.” That deep scrutiny turned on Harry for a long moment before Snape moved to cover the cage with a towel. “To sleep with you then,” he said abruptly, and Harry thought he was talking to the animal, but his gaze came back around to Harry.

Snape stalked to the door, turning back with a sharp look to be certain Harry obeyed. His brow was furrowed and he seemed mildly disturbed by something, but Harry assumed it must have been something from his meeting the way Vernon got angry at work, rather than anything Harry himself had done. Harry, still delaying, said, “Remus was nice. He told me about my dad playing Quidditch and my mum being really good at schoolworks.”

Snape’s his eyes seemed to be focused a bit farther away than where Harry was standing. He stated coldly, “Remus is a werewolf. Fortunately you met him on an evening when the moon isn’t full.” While Harry stood with eyes wide, Snape shook himself and said sternly, “I am quite certain I told you to get into bed.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, and hurried up to the wardrobe to find his oversized pyjama top.

Despite what Harry would have ranked as one of the best days he could remember, that night didn’t pass as blissfully as the previous one. He snapped awake with a nightmare, one he had sometimes, with lots of green flashing light, but this time instead of the reassuring close walls of his cupboard, he found himself in a large room that in the disturbed moments after waking, felt far too vast, as though he might float away and be lost.

Harry told himself that it was just a dream, stilled his breath, and listened for any sound of footsteps. The last thing in the world he wanted was to hear the dreadful approach of an adult woken by his nightmare, followed by pounding on the door rebuking him even though it wasn’t Harry’s fault he sometimes had bad dreams.

Harry fluffed his pillow, hugged it, and closed his eyes. His dreams returned almost immediately. He heard a horrible vicious, almost triumphant, laughter and a man shouting in a panic before getting cut off suddenly with a queer gurgle. Harry swallowed hard and tried to understand what he had been in his nightmare. Usually when he heard voices with the green light it was a woman.

Across the room his brightly colored pet moved frantically in its cage and Harry flinched as footfalls clearly approached outside his door. The door creaked open and Harry closed his eyes, pretending to sleep.

“Harry?” Snape prompted. He didn’t sound angry. “Are you having a night-

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mare?” Harry couldn’t bear to reply and admit it. “I asked you a question,” came then, far less yielding.

“Yep,” Harry admitted quietly. When his new father approached the bed, Harry said, “Sorry I woke you.”

“You should not be. I wish to know when your sleep is disturbed.” He sat on the bed; Harry felt it tilt in a dip at the edge. “Did you have nightmares last night as well that I did not know about?”

“No.”

“What is in your nightmare?” Snape asked. When Harry didn’t reply, Snape asked, “Are there shadows?”

Harry rubbed his eyes and then his forehead. “Shadows? No.”

“If there ever are shadows in your dreams, come to me immediately. Do you understand?” Snape’s tone had taken on an ultra hard edge.

“All right.”

Snape rested a hand on Harry’s shoulder, startling him. It was removed quickly. “If you need me, you may come down to my room, although I expect you will not do so. I unfortunately left the monitor I could have used for you at Hogwarts. Perhaps I will fetch it tomorrow.”

“Am I going to still be here tomorrow night?” Harry asked.

“The Department of Mysteries, who is charged with determining how to reverse this charm upon you, is not the most competently led part of the Ministry of Magic, and that is saying rather a lot. You wish to return to normal already?”

The question was asked with such neutrality that Harry felt there must be something more to it. No one asked a question without caring so little about the answer, or seeming to. Harry replied, “I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“You are biding your time,” Snape pointed out gently. “You need not have any cares.”

Harry scratched his head and gazed into the fire burning warm across the room. “This is better than the Dursley’s though. Loads better.”

Snape stood. “I should hope that even I could improve upon that. If you have nightmares again I can bring you a potion to make them go away.”

Harry shrugged. “They just happen sometimes.”

Snape examined him closely, but not for as long as usual, before saying goodnight again and departing, leaving the door widely ajar, presumably to better hear if Harry’s sleep was disturbed. Harry rested his head back on his pillow and wondered why he had spent so much time at the Dursley’s if there were places like this to be living instead.

## HOME IS NOT A PLACE

Author's Notes: Wow, I continue to be unable to predict reader reaction. I'm officially giving up trying. (That sounds familiar...) This is all too much fun; it ought to be illegal or something.

I have to respond here to a careful reader who posted anonymously: Harry is not the Avatar. Vineet was speaking in generalities, although he may, and probably does, have someone in mind. That stated, understand that in my stories what absolute story truth is and what the characters believe don't have to match up. It's more interesting if they don't, I think, with each character having their own worldview and assumptions, none of which are in sync with any other character's, nor in sync with any absolute truth artificial or real. btw, if one of the characters ends up with my worldview, that is my definition of Mary Sue.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



# POSTAGE DUE

Nymphadora Tonks waved her wand at the plain black door before her. It refused to open. She waved again and pushed harder still with no luck. Turning around, she took in the large circular room with its shiny floor. “I know it was two to the left after the spin last time. Percy probably changed it just to annoy me,” she muttered under her breath. The blue flames in the branched holder between the doors flickered as she shifted past to try the next door, still with no effect.

“Looking for someone?” a snide voice came from behind her. Percy, arms crossed, stood outside the door directly behind. “You aren’t supposed to be poking around without an escort, Nymphadora”

“Why did you change the spin then?” Tonks complained. “And don’t call me that.” Stalked over to stand before him, she said, “What is taking so long with that cane?”

Percy tilted his nose up. “It’s a very rare device despite its ordinary appearance. We have been forced to experiment and that takes rather a long while.”

Tonks put her hands on her hips. “The reversing initiator can’t be that hard to work out, Percy.” She cut by him and went into the laboratory. “Where’s Fudge?”

“Out, unexpectedly.”

Tonks turned slowly, one brow raised. “Did himself in with it, did he?” she grinned broadly. “That’s rich.” She stalked past glowing tanks and steel strapped cabinets with locks the size of dinner plates. Percy hurried along behind her. “Where’s Oggie?”

“Here,” a voice said from around a corner.



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Tonks followed the voice around the corner despite Percy's objections. The cane sat on a long bench before a pegboard wall with all manner of tools. Near at hand hung a row of gloves in a wide variety of materials; a rack of wands in every conceivable wood and even a few metals; farther up were reams of wire, clamps, and for the frustrated worker, hammers and chisels. The cane glistened with a fresh polishing as it sat within the folds of a black velvet cloth. A young man stood nearby, looking shy and sheepish.

"Who's this?" Tonks asked.

Ogden explained, "That's Pontypool – did himself in yesterday and now he handles the experiments because the cane only works once on any given person." Ogden held up a thick notebook with all manner of gestures, spells, wand tap sequences and passwords written upon it. Most were crossed out.

"You all right there Blyth?" Tonks asked the stunned looking man of around sixteen waiting patiently beside the table. Now that she looked him over he did seem to be wearing rather outdated robes for someone his age.

"Yes, ma'am," Pontypool replied, eyes still wide.

Ogden said, "We keep him in Muggle cokes and crisps and he cooperates all right."

"So, still no news?" Tonks asked with dread.

"Lucky for you up there your little wonderkid isn't the only one who's hexed himself now," Ogden said.

"That's reassuring," Tonks muttered.

Percy, who stood in silhouette before a large glowing tank, broke in with, "Tell her she cannot come in without an escort. That's the rule."

Ogden and Tonks turned to him. The brains floating behind Percy were clearly congregating on the far side, bumping into one another. Tonks said, "What's with that, Percy... the Tank of the Ancients doesn't like you?"

Ogden snorted. "No, they don't."

Percy's mouth twisted and he glanced behind himself with disdain before turning his nose up and stalking away. Tonks grinned at getting rid of him so easily.

"Wish they didn't like me," Ogden muttered quietly. "Wife hates it when I come home reeking of formaldehyde and complaining about the invention of flying broomsticks."

The two of them stared at the cane and Tonks said, "Please, let us know when you learn anything. And don't let your break from Fudge go to your head," she added before departing. At the door out she backed up and around to the work area and sheepishly asked, "It's spin and then second on the right from straight behind?"



## CHAPTER TWENTY

The next morning Harry was a little sleepy at breakfast and when something loudly struck the window glass behind him, he spilled his juice. "Sorry," he quickly said as the pool flowed off the table and onto him when he turned around to see what had hit the window.

The expected blowup did not occur; Snape merely went to the window to let in a ruffled old owl that in turn dropped a letter into the spilled juice before flapping clumsily off again.

"That was Errol, your best friend's family owl," Snape explained, waving his wand to remove the juice from the table, although the letter and Harry remained damp with it.

Harry carefully opened the soaked letter and read the sloppy handwriting with great effort. Some of the words he could not make out, nor could he comprehend the message beyond Ron complaining that his sister, Ginny, had not spent any of her prize money because she could not decide what to spend it on. That she had their mum come into the bank and open a vault for her and insisted that Ron come with her to put Ginny's money away, which he thought was just an excuse to rub it in.

"I don't understand this," Harry said, holding the letter out and plucking at his cold, sticky clothing.

"Finish your breakfast and then you can clean up."

Harry dropped the letter to the table by the corner, still thrilled to have letters, but it stressed him that he couldn't reply.

After breakfast, in the steamy bathroom with its old chipped tile, Harry stripped off his orange juice soiled clothes and would have hung them on the hooks, but couldn't reach the hooks. It occurred to him that if he had his wand with him, he could have hovered them up to the hooks. He dropped them on the floor instead, hoping the elf would do what she seemed to always do: pick them up without comment.

Harry washed slowly, careful not to rub the face cloth too hard over the bruises on his ribs, which had turned an alarming dark blue, and in spots, almost black. He could ignore the discomfort easily in the context of not having to worry about running away from his brutish cousin here, or perhaps ever again. Harry slowly squeezed out the bundled-up flannel as he tried to accept that notion. The worn bath tiles with their outdated pattern screamed the absence of his Aunt Petunia and the absolute quiet of the house screamed the absence of everyone else. It was almost eerie.

Figuring that no one was going to yell at him to get moving out of the bath, Harry twisted the gaudy silver handle of the tub and let in more hot water so he could more easily wash his hair.

When the tub had cooled a third time, Harry finally got out. He towel dried his unruly hair, which left it sticking up in all directions like well-trodden grass, then

## POSTAGE DUE

stood on tiptoe to peer into the half fogged mirror and try to push it down, but it had no interest in obeying. The state of his hair hadn't been mentioned and the man's hair wasn't exactly well-kempt, so with pleasure, Harry toweled it some more and left it like that.

A knock sounded on the door and it opened immediately. Harry quickly bundled up in the thick white softness of the towel from drying his hair. He wanted to hide his bruises more than the rest of him, but modesty made for good cover.

Snape gave him one of those penetrating looks before holding up a brown paper wrapped bundle. "Your clothes arrived rather fortuitously."

Harry stepped forward to take them, tripped on the long towel and had to right himself using the battered white cabinet that shielded the hot water pipes. Snape helped right him as well, suspicion edging his expression and movements.

"Thanks," Harry said, and accepted the package with difficulty given that one hand was already dedicated to gathering and holding the towel around himself. He backed up to sit upon the footstool where he could open the bundle on the floor. The string around the bundle was knotted and re-knotted. "Do you have a knife?" Harry asked.

"Better than that; I have a wand," Snape said and aimed a flick at the bundle, which popped it neatly open.

Harry looked down at the rust colored pullover and small stack of starched shirts and two pairs of jeans still dark blue and stiff – the first new clothes he had ever possessed. They went along with a lot of other firsts in the last two days. Harry looked up at the man who, with his predatory features and flinty eyes, appeared unlikely to be responsible for such a positive change in Harry's life.

"Thanks," Harry said again.

Snape, with one last narrow-eyed look, departed.

Dressed, Harry emerged and found Snape in the dining room reading the newspaper. "They fit," Harry said, indicating his clothes.

"Good," Snape stated and returned to his reading, but as Harry moved to step around the table, Snape reached out and grabbed Harry by the shoulder and marched him backward. He locked his eyes on Harry's and said, "I assume those bruises are not from flying yesterday – they look too old."

Harry felt frighteningly transparent; he didn't think there was any way the man could have seen. "No," he said, wondering how his new father seemed to know everything. "My cousin..."

Harry's shoulder was released. "Ah," Snape uttered and then added with a point of his long finger, "If anyone ever harms you, you will tell me... immediately." His tone spoke of retribution beyond Harry's imaginings, of protectiveness beyond his

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previous experience.

“Dudley did,” Harry pointed out, thinking that he would rather enjoy seeing a wizard terrify his bully cousin and reduce him to the kind of blubbering he normally only faked to get his own way.

“About ten years too late for this transgression,” Snape commented as he returned to reading again.

Harry pictured Dudley halfway to looking like his uncle. “He must be really big now,” he said, alarmed.

“He cannot harm you,” Snape assured him casually. “When I went to get your papers signed, he hid behind your aunt, which was quite a trick from someone his size.”

Harry grinned at the image conjured up by that and, as he pulled out the heavy chair opposite Snape, he noticed the remaining pile of unopened post addressed to him. Stacking it neatly before him at the table, Harry began systematically opening each one and reading them even though he could understand very little of them. “Who’s this?” Harry asked regarding one letter that looked normal, with the kind of postage the letters arriving at the Dursley’s always had.

Snape glanced at the letter just an instant and, with his nose back in the paper, replied, “That is your cousin.”

“My cousin?” Harry returned in disbelief bordering on elation.

“Muggle young woman, nice enough... if you like that sort of thing,” Snape muttered.

Harry read the letter. “She wants to come over for a visit? Can I invite her?”

“As long as it is next weekend, you may invite whomever you wish. You may wish to make a list on the side, however.”

“Do you have something to write a letter on?” Harry asked plaintively, thinking he should invite everyone who has sent him post. Snape snapped his wand out of his pocket and writing supplies zipped in from the hall, stopped just before Harry and finally drifted to a gentle rest on the table. “That’s awfully lazy, isn’t it?” Harry asked but he unscrewed the inkwell eagerly.

After writing out one line, he stopped and said, “My handwriting’s not so terrific.”

“It isn’t terribly so at eighteen either,” Snape stated wryly, but he leaned forward and said, “But that is slightly worse than your cousin may be expecting.” When Harry’s face fell, Snape reached out with his wand to tap Harry’s quill with, “Munditcriptum.” As he stashed his wand back away, he said, “That should take care of it.”

Harry smiled as he started a new version of the letter and found the words flowing out quite nicely. “Thanks. I want to invite my friends from the photograph too.”

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“I’ll help you with their addresses. You will have to use your owl for letters to them.”

“And that nice man who was friends with my dad,” Harry continued and waited for a verdict on that.

“Your party.”

A scratching at the window indicated an owl had arrived. Snape fetched the letter it carried, opened it and read it thoughtfully. “Hopefully that will keep you occupied for a while. I have to take care of something,” he said distractedly, and headed for the drawing room.

Harry was hoping for another ride on a broomstick, but he didn’t ask since it seemed too much to ask for. When his letters were finished and labeled but not addressed, he wandered around the house to pass the time, poking in the cellar until the elf came and asked if he were looking for something in particular. Then he went up to the first floor, noticing that there were rooms on the other side too. Harry walked around the balcony to the opposite side and carefully opened the first door.

Unlike the rest of the house, this room was dusty and it tickled Harry nose. Inside, spare household things were stored, such as a few ugly paintings, a door, battered trunks, and more books. The room felt icy, making Harry rub his arms vigorously to get rid of the chill. On shelves to the left sat some interesting things: a skull with a candle stub on top of it, string, chalk sticks, more half burned candles. In the right hand battered bookcase, books were stashed more randomly than in the library downstairs. Harry pulled one out and just barely read the title before *Dark Mastery: A Gyde* squirmed out of his grip, fell to the floor and lay still.

Books didn’t usually do that in Harry’s experience. He let that one be and pulled out the next: *C3 – Crucio Comparable Curses*. This one didn’t resist, so he peeled it open and flipped through diagrams showing wand movements and drawings of a contorted man in extreme pain; the same baldheaded example victim over and over every time. Harry closed that one and put it on top of the previous one on the floor, which didn’t resist its companion. Tilting his head, Harry read a few more spines and found *Horryfic Hexxes*, *Vocational Vexing*, and *War & Pieces: Torture Techniques of the Goblins*.

Harry’s fingers had gone numb in the cold of the room, so he retreated, closing the door quietly because he was starting to get a sense that he shouldn’t have been in there to begin with. Voices sounded from the dining room and Harry could see the bottom half of another set of robes. He crept around the balcony and silently down the stairs. Snape was saying, “You must not tell anyone.”

A woman’s voice said, “Severus, of course I won’t, if I knew what – ”

Harry had leaned into view, curious about the female voice. A plain-featured,

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brown-haired woman stood in mauve robes before the hearth. "Harry!?" she exclaimed in a tone of amused concern and immediately approached. "What happened to you?" She was laughing now.

"Picked up a powerfully charmed object for which the reversal is still being worked out," Snape supplied.

"You are a darling," the woman cooed, petting Harry's hair back to his stunned annoyance. When she stopped, he pushed his hair back forward. She turned to Snape and asked doubtfully, "How have you been faring with him?"

Snape crossed his arms and raised himself up. "Well enough," he replied crossly.

"You should have owled sooner," she insisted and then to Harry's complete surprise, picked him up and hitched him on her hip. "Wow, you are a wisp of a thing. How old are you?"

"A tad small for his age," Snape confirmed.

Harry liked seeing the room from this height and he was quickly liking the woman despite her automatic domination. "Just two hours?" the woman asked Snape. "We'll find something to do."

"That is all I need I expect. I will owl if it is more. It is a rather difficult meeting Minerva arranged that cannot be put off."

"Can we go to a film?" Harry asked, thinking of what he most often saw Dudley get to do but never did himself.

Snape answered before the woman. "No one can recognize him."

The woman let Harry slide to the floor as she laughed. "Yep, that would cause quite an uproar, wouldn't it? Sure you don't want to play games here?"

"There are no games here," Harry complained. "And no tellie."

She laughed again. "We can go to the cinema if you like." She was petting his hair again, but it didn't annoy him so much this time. "Edinburgh? London? York? Where would you like to go?"

Harry blinked at her, that wasn't an expected set of options.

Snape stepped closer. "Candide," he said firmly, "Be very careful with him."

"Severus, unlike you, I have two nephews, though not quite this old. He's just a kid. And I'll keep him among the Muggles, just in case."

"And out of the Floo Network, if at all possible, in case of misdirection."

"Well, that leaves out London, and there are too many wizarding folk in York. How about Manchester? That's completely Muggle."

"Can we really go to a film?"

She winked. "'Course, that's an excellent way to spend a Sunday afternoon, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know," Harry pointed out. "I've never been to one."

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“No?” Candide asked, sounding confused.

Snape stated dryly, “If you want to earn his undying affection, simply take him out for ice cream.”

Harry’s attention shifted quickly. “Can I really have ice cream again?” he asked, deeply absorbed in the notion.

“I will see you back here later,” Snape said, and headed for the dining room and the usual rush of air indicated he had departed.

Harry tugged his jumper down straight, thrilled at the notion of looking normal out in public for once. “I have my own room now,” he said to Candide, needing to share that with someone.

She led him to the front entrance and opened the wardrobe. “That’s great. Let’s get a cloak and some gloves. Did you have to share a room before?” She asked idly as she handed down the fur-lined gloves Harry had worn the day before. He slipped the gloves on and started to use his teeth to tighten the ties at the wrist. “Here, let me do that,” Candide said and Harry held out his hands. Without the ties the gloves would immediately flop off.

“I didn’t have a room at all before,” Harry explained.

Candide hooked his cloak on him as well, since the gloves made his hands almost useless. “Where did you sleep?” she asked curiously. “In the attic or something?”

“In the cupboard under the stairs,” Harry explained. “Having a room is much better.”

Candide gazed at him oddly. “What miserable people your aunt and uncle must be,” she asserted.

Harry, startled by how fiercely she said this, countered, “But they took me in when no one else would. There wasn’t anyone to care for me. Where would I have lived, I – ?”

“That’s a lie,” Candide snapped, fiercer still. “All kinds of people would have taken you in. You’re famous after all.”

Harry stared at her in the oblique, shafted light from the window panes in the door. “What?”

Candide looked taken aback and swallowed hard. “Not sure why no one told you that,” she muttered. “But you are. Famous for sending off the dark wizard who tried to kill you as baby.” Harry rubbed his scar, prompting her to say, “Yes, that dark wizard. He and his followers were destroying anyone who stood in their way. It was a terrible time, and you put an end to it. Well, for a while anyway. Then you put a final end to it just two years ago. The anniversary was just last week, in fact.”

Harry gazed at her, trying to comprehend all that.

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She smiled over her adamance. "Come on, let's get to the Odeon and see what's showing; I know a little closed up shop we can Apparate into, just off Curry Mile."

When they returned, with Harry in an odd daze from both too much ice cream and the dramatic darkness of the cinema, Snape was already there.

"Meeting go all right?" Candide asked Snape. Harry took a seat opposite his new dad at the table. "You looked a bit grim before," she said, apparently feeling further explanation was in order.

Speaking softly, Snape said, "I may need to tell you what is happening..." Here he glanced at Harry, slouched across from him. "But later."

Harry was thinking about the film, remembering all of the motion and music as though it had become a part of him and still carried him along.

"We had fun. What'd you think of the film, Harry?" Candide asked.

Harry's brow furrowed and he said after a pained pause, "He didn't belong anywhere. He didn't belong in the world he grew up in nor in the other world."

"What did you take him to see?" Snape asked, sitting forward suddenly in concern.

"A Tarzan cartoon," Candide replied with a shrug.

"Oh." And then in a tone that implied Snape realized he was forgetting his manners said, "Thank you for looking after him." He sat back again and pondered Harry. "Why don't you stay for dinner?" he asked her without actually looking up.

Candide smiled the way Harry expected he had when ice cream was offered and moved around to the chair beside Harry. "Thanks. I'd love to."

Small talk passed between the adults as they waited for dinner to appear. Harry looked between the two of them as they discussed some tournament and him, but not things he remembered doing. It was comfortable there at the table with the two of them, the fire, and with nothing expected of him, nor anyone rushing to criticize him at every opportunity.

Candide eventually asked as though teasing, "So, how long is he staying this way again? You'll have to enroll him at Hogwarts soon."

"The Ministry is searching literally everywhere for references to similar objects. Two staff in the Department of Mysteries have also accidentally halved their age, although they refuse to say who. So more staff have been called in and more care is being taken, which slows things significantly." They both looked at Harry. Snape said, "They have the utmost confidence in reversing the Charm, so I expect soon."

After dinner the adults returned to boring conversation, so Harry took himself to his room and, curious about Candide's comments, looked through the Wizard Annual he had been reading for an entry on himself. There wasn't one. But of course, he realized, this was the year that he was born. He picked up the next one by date and turned to "H" but there was only Habatious, Rudulph followed by Hartwick,



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Humphrey. His heart sank, mostly at the thought that she had been putting him on. She had sounded so serious, in a wholly adult way. Of course, Harry then thought, they are organized by last name. Harry flipped hurriedly to Potter and stared at the otherwise ordinary letters of his name in bold print at the very left hand edge of the column.

Potter, Harry – Born July 31, 1980; Son of Potter, James and Potter née Evans, Lily; Celebrated for the destruction of He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named by some unknown luck or force. The Dark Lord appeared at the Potter residence the night of October the 31st of this year intent upon destroying a wizard and witch who had been working hard to cause the evil wizard’s own downfall. After dispatching Mr. and Mrs. Potter the Dark Lord turned his wand upon boy Potter with a Killing Curse only to apparently have it rebound upon himself. The infant was left with only a distinctive lightning bolt scar upon his forehead and was otherwise completely unharmed.

Harry read and reread the entry. No one knew him, he had always believed. But he had been wrong. Did his aunt and uncle know about this, Harry wondered. They never said or implied a thing, although they grew awfully upset at Harry’s questions so perhaps they did know.

Harry looked up “Killing Curse” in each of the Annuals but it wasn’t to be found. He then looked up “Dark Lord” which took two tries because he started under “L”.

Dark Lord AKA He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named; AKA You-Know-Who – See entry Volde\_\_\_

Harry remembered that Mr. Weasley had said the evil wizard’s name was Voldemort. He wondered why he had so many nicknames. But he looked up the other entry.

Volde\_\_\_ AKA He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named; AKA You-Know-Who; AKA Dark Lord – At seemingly the height of his power and influence Volde\_\_\_ was defeated this year by a small child, whom he failed to kill. How exactly this was accomplished is uncertain, but the wizarding world will be celebrating this event for many years.

Harry quickly pulled the 1980 Annual back out again and looked up the same entry.

Volde\_\_\_ AKA He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named; AKA You-Know-Who; AKA Dark Lord – This dark wizard and the shadowy organization of dark followers continues to plague the wizarding world. The pessimists who have warned that his power would only grow in the face of Ministry apathy were correct and this year we reaped the misfortune of not acting sooner to quell his power and corrupting influence. The number of missing, mysteriously dead, and Obliviated reached epidemic proportions and now it is unclear how the power of Volde\_\_\_ and his devoted Death Eaters can be negated.

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Harry quickly looked up Death Eater in the same edition. This time correctly looking under “D” the first go.

Death Eater – Loyal followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named (See Volde\_\_\_); Their numbers are considered to be growing, but could be as few as fifty or as many as a hundred and fifty. These true servants are Marked by the Dark Lord himself with the Dark Mark – a skull with a snake emerging from its mouth – upon their inner left arm. He can then summon these close followers at will and those that disobey are punished with great agony through this Mark.

The 1981 edition entry also reflected the change in Voldemort’s status:

Death Eater – Loyal followers of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named (See Volde\_\_\_); The Ministry of Magic continues its pursuit of the Death Eaters in the wake of their leader’s unexpected apparent demise. Many suspected Death Eaters claim to have been under an Imperio when they committed atrocities. Some have been given lenient sentences in return for cooperation in identifying and locating more powerful colleagues. Despite the Aurors best efforts, some are expected to disappear undetected.

Harry paged slowly forward in that volume, stopping at Diggle, Daedalus to read about his arrest for attracting Muggle attention to a wizarding celebration of Voldemort’s destruction, then Fernworth, Yolanda, arrested for illegal dragon breeding, then at Flume, Abrosius, for opening a chocolate shop and giving away two thousand pounds of chocolate to the first two-hundred customers. The thought made Harry’s mouth water.

The pictures that weren’t of Quidditch didn’t change enough to make them interesting for long. Harry stopped at Goyle, Benedict and read how he convinced the Wizengamot that he was falsely accused of being a Death Eater and released on the theory that he was too thick to be a threat and certainly Voldemort would have killed him in annoyance had he really been that close to the dark wizard. Harry gave the very unintelligent picture of Goyle a close look to see if he could judge whether the man was really evil. The image of Goyle scratched his head and looked about himself in confusion as he held a numbered placard before himself upside-down. Harry turned the page.

Snape awoke to an unusual noise. He peered at the glass dome of the monitor, but it was still, too still in fact as though it had nothing to grab hold of. The noise grew slightly louder and now definitely sounded like crying. Alarm cut through the remaining sleep clinging to his thoughts, and he rose, pausing only long enough to tug his dressing gown from the bed post.

On the balcony he spied Harry at the far dead end huddled against the spirals of wrought iron that held up the railing. At the sight of Snape his crying hesitated and he turned his head into the unyielding bars as though to hide.

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“Harry what is the matter? Are you having a nightmare?” Snape stepped through the yellow light pouring from Harry’s room and back into the dimness beyond it and crouched before the boy. Harry definitely shrunk away from him this time, so Snape held off approaching any closer. He looked around, back at the room; the monitor should have gone off if Harry had been experiencing a nightmare. One of the Wizard Annuals lay in the doorway, open, face down.

Harry’s small voice brought his apparently unwelcome attention back that way. “You were one of them,” he accused in a voice that held barely enough strength to be audible.

Snape considered him before standing to pick up the book, the nearly complete set of which had been a Christmas present to Harry from the neighbor. He opened it to the page that formed the source of the folds caused by the book resting on its face after being dropped. Kabbage, Harriet, Kaputnik Kats, Karkarov, Igor... Snape glanced at the entry; it mentioned a rumor – a fairly accurate rumor – as to why Karkarov had been released into freedom after Moody’s long hunt for him. Methodically, Snape unfolded the creased pages and closed the thin, stiff-covered book. He considered the curled up Harry, who to his credit held his gaze.

“You killed my mum and dad,” Harry said, finding his voice.

“Hardly,” Snape returned. “Voldemort did that.”

“But you were helping him.”

Snape let the book swing at his side. “This is far too complicated to explain.”

Harry turned his head away as his face scrunched up in grief. Snape said, “You believe yourself betrayed, do you?” he asked coldly. He hadn’t meant to use that tone, but the man he had been the last few days, the last few years even, had fled him, leaving behind only the hard core of him. “I had forgotten how much your meddling got you into trouble at this age,” he added, feeling exasperated, but sounding annoyed.

Harry sniffled and didn’t look at him. Snape closed his eyes a long breath. That other version of him was here somewhere; he refused to believe it existed only as a reflection of Harry’s grace and expectation.

Calmly, finding his way through a double minefield, Snape said, “I did not kill your parents.”

Harry, sounding difficult, said, “You said you didn’t like my father.”

“True, and I would admit to appreciating a chance to get even with him, but I would not have killed him.”

A silence ensued, and through it Harry’s green eyes flickered in the dim light as he thought things over. Snape crouched again to get down to Harry’s level, at a distance he judged would not be threatening.

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Harry rubbed his runny nose on his sleeve and said, "But you were one of Voldemort's loyal followers. You were helping him."

"I made a mistake," Snape explained. "One I regretted and suffered with for twenty years. But this is all too complicated."

"Adults always say that," Harry snapped, sounding the most hurt yet.

Snape sighed silently and cracked open the book, found that it was too dark and rather than use a Lumos, which might alarm Harry if he had not seen it before, Accioed the oil lamp from inside the room and set it beside him. It had the downside, though, of also illuminating Harry's tragic and tearstained face.

"Did you read Dumbledore's entry?" Snape asked easily. Harry looked as though he didn't want to respond, just to be difficult, but he eventually shook his head.

"'Dumbledore comma Albus Percival Wulfric Brian,'" Snape began. "'Organized a shadow organization known as the Order of the Phoenix to counter He-Who-Shall-Voldemort's rise to power. Dumbledore politically fought the Ministry itself at times to get official action taken to counter the Dark Rise and is credited with rooting out Death Eaters from within the Ministry's ranks. Upon the Dark Lord's demise, he refused to accept a nomination to Minister of Magic and instead remains Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.'" "

Snape held the book out to point at the picture of a smiling wizard stroking a long flowing white beard, and even though Harry looked beyond willing to listen, said, "This man – a very powerful wizard, one of the most powerful, in fact – was my mentor. I went to him when I realized my error and began assisting him from the inside of Voldemort's organization."

Harry didn't respond and his hard expression with deeply furrowed brow didn't relax. His eyes screamed hurt and anger.

Impatience and a deeper uncertainty took hold of Snape again and he said more sternly, "You believe yourself betrayed when you are not. You think your older self didn't know I had been a Death Eater when he agreed to the adoption?"

Harry blinked rapidly. "He knew?" he asked, aghast.

"Of course he knew," Snape closed the book with a snap. "Of course he knew," he repeated, more relieved at getting through. "I don't mean to sound like your aunt and uncle again, but it is very difficult to explain this in terms you will understand." At least Harry's fear had ebbed, but he still hung onto the iron bars, his chin resting on his extended arm. "Please return to your bed, Harry; it is cold here on the floor."

Harry's lips pursed and he considered moving; Snape could see it in his eyes when he glanced his way before turning his head awkwardly against his own arm again.

Snape's feet were complaining about his crouching. He shifted to kneel on one knee, using the railing for balance. He looked down at the book before tossing it

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aside and sighing loudly. He said, "I didn't mean for you to be hurt." And at Harry's suspicious expression, he firmly added, "Not that I was trying to hide anything from you. But there are things you have to have lived through to understand. Not that I would wish those events on you simply to bring you to understanding. Many were painfully devastating for you." With a lighter tone and a wave of his hand, Snape said, "Makes this seem like nothing, really."

Harry still didn't move. Snape had decided that getting him back into his bed was his sole goal and that tomorrow, or at worst the day after, he would have his Harry back and this would all be canceled out.

"Do you wish me to owl Candide to come?" Snape had been grateful that Harry's distress at his background was not on display to someone who so recently had accepted it herself, but now he found Harry's care more critical. "She would return, I'm certain, even at this hour."

Harry shook his head.

"You are certain?"

Another head shake was followed immediately by a confused nod. "I'm certain," he muttered to clarify.

Snape sat back against the bars of the railing and to let his aching feet get a break. If Harry refused to move then he could not either. A long silence ensued broken only by Harry's sniffing.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Snape said. "I cannot possibly explain in a way that will remove the betrayal you are feeling, and I regret that it has broken into this little holiday you were having – a chance to experience a bit of the childhood you deserved to have had all along."

Harry tugged at the edge of his oversized pyjama top and didn't respond.

"All I can say is that as much as I disliked your father I did not wish him and your mother dead."

Harry didn't look up, just continued to tug at the slightly worn blue and white striped flannel.

"But the past is the past and cannot be changed as much as one might wish otherwise. And in the present, which is the only thing we can control, I love you as much as I could if you were a son of my own."

Harry's hand froze before it dropped to the floor. He looked around at the dark hall, the lamp, seeming to avoid looking directly at Snape. Seeing his opportunity, Snape rose and said, "Back to bed, Harry," in as normal a voice as possible.

Harry hesitated just a second before standing and, head low, slipped past Snape, went to his bed, and crawled completely under the duvet. Snape released a tight breath and returned to his own room, leaving the lamp behind on the balcony where

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it illuminated the pathway between them. He sat on the edge of his bed and stared out at the dark maroon planking and the traces of light edging the black iron bars supporting the railing.

Snape waited a long time, but there was no sound. The only reassurance in the room was the gentle wave of light in the glass dome of the monitor, indicating someone was within range of the other half of it. Still in his dressing gown, Snape lay down on his side and waited for the inevitable.

The glass dome vibrating resonantly against the night stand made Snape's eyes snap open. When he made the balcony, he heard Harry's half shout of distress, which seemed to peel his ribs open in the area around his heart.

Harry was in the throes of the worst nightmare Snape had ever witnessed. He made distressed, half spoken noises and his thin arms tossed fitfully, occasionally catching on the duvet and his head canted at an alarming angle when he did lie still. Kali fussed in her cage creating off-key music on the wire bars as she climbed in circles.

"Harry," Snape said loudly, resorting to shaking him only when his name didn't work.

Harry jarred awake with a quick inhale and after taking in his surroundings, rolled away from Snape and curled up.

"Any shadows?" Snape asked.

The delay was lengthy, but Harry finally shook his head.

"Will you tell me about your nightmare?" When Harry didn't respond to this, Snape prodded, "Does it involve green light?"

Harry's head jerked halfway back to looking at Snape.

Snape said, "Of course I know what your nightmares may be."

Harry curled up and faced away from him again. Voice muffled by the duvet, he said, "Someone's dying."

"In your dream?"

Harry's head nodded as indicated by the hair sticking out from under the cover.

Snape reassuringly said, "I would not let anyone harm you, Harry. You have nothing to fear."

"You know a lot of bad magic," Harry said a little peevishly.

"Yes," Snape confirmed. "And I wouldn't hesitate to use it to protect you."

Harry didn't respond except to adjust the edge of the duvet to make himself more comfortable.

"It is almost morning," Snape said. "If you have another nightmare, perhaps you should just rise for the day. I have a potion I could give you, but it will make sleep too long at this point."

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To that, Harry didn't respond at all. Snape finally took himself back to his own room and this time, tried to catch a few minutes of sleep.

Morning light was pouring into the room when Harry next awoke. His face was tacky with the residue of crying and he felt thirsty and shaky as though he were far too hungry. After dressing quickly in his own, oversized clothes, he tiptoed down to the last bedroom and peeked in. Snape lay sleeping in his dressing gown, half wrapped in the duvet. He looked to be out quite solidly; enough that Harry considered trying to flee the house. But he had no where to go. His cousin Dudley must be the size of his uncle now and Harry wouldn't survive living with him for long, he was certain. And as emotionally confused as things were here, they were much better than anything he knew before. His aunt and uncle certainly never used the word love in reference to him although it flowed out easily enough where Dudley was concerned.

Downstairs in the dining room, the elf was laying on a fire in the hearth. She curtsied and said, "Good morning, Master Harry."

Harry blinked at her and the stark reminder she provided, that he was no longer at the bottom of the household chain of obedience and chores. "Good morning," Harry said.

"Master wish for breakfast now?"

Harry was famished. "Yup, thanks."

The elf disappeared in a sparkle. Harry took a seat and stared at the wood of the table. He considered getting a book, but decided he had had enough of books for the time being. Looking around he spotted the burgeoning pile of letters addressed to him on the sideboard. He perused them a bit before getting an idea. He had seen his adopted father with bundles of letters in the drawing room and Harry wondered what was in them. They were stored in the bottom left drawers of his desk.

On silent bare feet, ears straining for any noise, Harry crept down to the drawing room. The room felt foreign to him, from the faint smoke residue of the lamps to the unfamiliar scent of its usual occupant. At the desk, he bit his lower lip as he tugged open the bottom drawer. Inside were several bundles, but one of them had his signature on the face at the bottom of a letter, visible around the black ribbon used as a tie. Harry snatched this up and very carefully closed the drawer again.

Back in the dining room his breakfast had arrived, complete with metal cover to keep it warm. Harry had to admit that this place did have certain concrete amenities, but the cut of betrayal from what he had learned last night still bled and he pushed the plate away despite the wondrous odor it filled the room with.

The first letter Harry unfolded talked about spells he had been learning and contained many words he didn't know. He turned it over and scanned it. It was signed Yours, Harry. The words mocked Harry's current pain. Biting both lips now

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he flipped each letter to the closing, stopping only when he found one that read Your loyal adopted son, Harry. For an instant Harry wanted nothing more than to throw them into the fire. But as a person who owned almost nothing and certainly wasn't used to having stashes of letters from people who clearly cared about him, he couldn't bring himself to do it. Instead, he read the letter.

Halfway through it, without realizing, Harry pulled his plate closer, opened the lid and began nibbling on the toast. The realization that his new father wrestled with guilt over his past neutralized Harry's pain marginally. His aunt and uncle certainly never felt guilty or apologized for anything and clearly their treatment of him deserved a bit of guilt.

Even though it was reluctant to lie flat, Harry placed the letter before him on the table and propped his chin in the backs of his pressed-flat hands. He could recognize his own voice in the letter even though it was pleading for Snape to give up his guilt or to make amends if he couldn't do so.

Guilt doesn't pay anyone back or restore anyone to life, his older self had written. It made rational sense but Harry's pain wasn't amenable to the rational. He didn't see any way he could forgive that much. Obviously his older self had lost track of his priorities. Moving quickly, Harry bundled the letters back up and snuck them quickly back to their previous spot.

When Snape came in later, Harry had to eat more of his breakfast as cover for keeping his head down, which he instinctively felt he needed to do to hide what he had been doing. He flipped through his own letters and with a jolt realized a few of them were missing and must have been bundled up with the others. One of his old ones to Snape was also mixed in this other pile. He casually shifted it to the bottom. All of the parchment was yellowed, even the new sheets, so it didn't stand out. Fortunately, it was one of the Yours, Harry letters rather than those with more poignant closures.

Snape didn't speak, even after his breakfast was finished. He opened the odd newspaper wide and read, giving Harry almost no attention. It wasn't until he had finished the paper and had it refolded neatly that he pinned his eyes on Harry who fixed him with a difficult expression in return.

"I don't suppose you would like to learn chess?" Snape asked.

Harry lifted one shoulder, giving no ground.

Snape sat back, arms crossed, and matched Harry's expression. "I don't anticipate this situation continuing much longer, but I will point out, just in case, that should you need anything, you must ask. Winky will anticipate your hunger and thirst but I am not skilled at anticipating what else you might require."

"True that it doesn't look like you get to the clothing shops often," Harry com-



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mented. “Or the barber’s.”

Snape tilted his head and his eyes widened. “Haven’t heard much of that tongue, have we? To your credit, I guess, that you are able to overcome sappy gratitude so fast; keeps it from clouding your mind.”

Harry crossed his arms as well and pushed back on the table leg to rock his chair back, a shouting offense in the Dursley household. “At least I’m not an evil dark wizard,” he retorted.

“Not yet anyway,” Snape mildly replied.

Harry swallowed. “What does that mean?”

Airily, Snape replied, “Only that you recently learned how to cross into the underworld and can command the grotesque creatures – demons shall we say – that dwell there.”

Harry’s brow twisted up. “I don’t believe you.”

“You haven’t seen them invade a room when you have lost control. I have.”

Harry tried to take that in. He had no sense of the man lying. “So what’s your point?”

“My point,” Snape smoothly replied, “is that a lily-livered white wizard would have dumped you on the street long ago what with your channeling Voldemort’s emotions and plans – hence your nightmares of him killing – let alone your mage-like skills with the plane where demonic creatures reside.” Snape relaxed a bit smugly, Harry thought, and added, “Look at it this way: I can’t possibly hold any of that against you. And as to the former, I am intimately familiar, unfortunately, with Voldemort and truly understand what he has put you through. There is no one else who could.” He appeared to rethink that, “Well, there is that little friend of yours, Ginny, who may understand, given that Voldemort took her over and forced her to do all manner of vile things such as kill all the roosters and write messages in their blood and set a deadly Basilisk on her school chums, but you don’t give her much of a chance beyond friendship.”

Harry shook himself as he tried to take in that diatribe. Finally, he said, “You’re just like my aunt and uncle, trying to make me feel grateful you took me in. They were lying too.”

Harry scored with that one; he could plainly see the man’s shift in attitude away from smugness. “I do not mean to be like your aunt and uncle. What an appalling thought,” Snape added after sipping his coffee.

Harry couldn’t help his lips curling slightly upward.

“Well,” Snape said, sitting forward. “We need to get through the day. I can certainly owl Candide, who I am positive would be willing to take a day off to spend it with you.”

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“She your girlfriend?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Snape said, lips pursed.

“I don’t need her; she’s too clingy. She needs to have kids of her own, you know,” Harry pointed out, sounding authoritative.

“That’s none of your concern.”

“Right,” Harry taunted. “I’m just your first son. My opinion wouldn’t matter.”

Snape rolled his eyes and countered, “Your opinion has already been registered in the matter along the lines of I am chicken not to marry her, which may logically lead to your first point, of which your older self may have an interest, but certainly wouldn’t have any say.”

Harry put his chair down with a clunk. “Touchy,” he mocked.

Snape rubbed his forehead. “How about we go to the zoo?”

Harry froze and in a more amenable voice asked, “The zoo?”

Much later, upon their return, Harry shook his arm loose from Snape’s grip and strode back to the dining room. He had given too much ground on the trip despite what had felt like an inexhaustible reserve of stubbornness. He was also a bit peeved that he hadn’t got ice cream. Not that he had asked, but when they passed the ice cream vendor, Harry was certain his adoptive father would offer, but he hadn’t; he had simply glanced at the picture of the various chocolate covered delights and strode on. This had confused Harry and now he sat with his chin on his hand, looking glum.

Snape checked the post that had arrived in their absence and asked, “Something the matter?”

Harry wriggled a bit before responding. “I didn’t get ice cream.”

“You didn’t say you wanted any,” Snape replied smoothly.

“I always want it; you know that,” Harry retorted. “Dudley always gets ice cream when he’s upset, and toys,” he added sulkily.

Snape glared at him over the envelope held up before him. “And had I offered it, it would have seemed to you merely a sorry attempt to buy your emotions.” Snape leaned closer, almost menacingly. “I am not your aunt and uncle, nor will I ever be. You and I are a family for reasons of loyalty, caring, and mutual understanding, not bribery. Believe me that it is sadly ironic that I understand that and you do not.”

Harry frowned more and put his head down on his arm. He wanted the man as his father back again, but not really. These opposing feelings were splitting him down the middle, he could even feel the pull tugging on his insides.

“Harry,” Snape said, sounding caring, then apparently gave up with, “Never mind.”

“What?” Harry demanded.

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Snape stacked the new post with the old and said, “You are making me fear that you, my old you, has merely decided that I am the best he could get for a family and forgives me everything solely based on that notion.”

Harry traced the deep wood grain of the table with his finger. “You’re better than the Dursleys,” he admitted.

Snape gazed down at him and said, “I think at one time I would have been pleased enough with that. Or perhaps not.” He picked up the post and struck the envelopes against his palm. “I did not adopt you to hurt you. Quite the opposite,” he added quietly before departing the room.

### Author’s Notes:

Yes, Yes, I got Lily’s hair color wrong. General space-out that I have a clear image in my head and I don’t think to check the lexicon as a result and DARK RED? Heck, I don’t remember even knowing that in order to forget and double heck! that puts her smack dab in the Black Family Tree doesn’t it? I’ll be obsessing on that notion for a few weeks...

And I’m glad Junior Harry comes across well. Just to clarify: Harry is not time travelling, the spell just makes an exact duplicate of a person at halfway to where they are now and plunks that down in place of them, warts and all. Strictly halving his age didn’t seem any more powerful than the youth potion Lucius used in Resonance, so I consciously made it different from that more simple effect.

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# HEARTH AND HOME

Harry perused his photo album at the dining room table, expending many comments on the photographs of his parents. Snape was disappointingly unflappable, however, as he worked at meticulously writing out a small stack of highly decorated forms.

“I bet they were really happy together,” Harry opined, watching James reach under his and Lily’s linked arms to tickle her. She pulled away with a giggle.

Harry fell silent as this latest gibe failed to spur a negative reaction. His comments were making him sad so, instead, he asked, “Why didn’t you like my dad?”

Snape’s quill stopped arcing over the paper and he looked up. “He was my Dudley, you might say.”

Harry swallowed. Suspicious, he said, “But he wasn’t any bigger than you.”

Quill still frozen, Snape responded, “His magic was much stronger than mine, even though I worked very hard to improve mine to have a chance against him and his many friends.” He seemed to be trying to remain unflappable, but his jaw tightened revealingly, making his statement seem all the more true.

Harry frowned and turned back to the album, silent now.

A blast of green flame preceded Tonks’ arrival in the hearth. She brushed herself off while holding a large black velvet sack out of the way. She said, “Blasted thing refuses to Disapparate... hello Severus, Harry”

Snape stood slowly. “You have it?”

Her eyes flitted to Harry and back to Snape. “Yep.” She pulled a slip of parchment out of her pocket, after checking most all of her pockets twice. “The instructions are here.” When Snape took the slip to examine it, Tonks invited brightly, “Come here,

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Harry.”

Snape held up a hand. “Leave the object here. I’ll send Harry along.”

Befuddled, Tonks stared at him, but shrugged and handed over the long inky black velvet bundle. “See you in a bit, Harry.” With that and a wink at him, she Disapparated.

Snape laid the cane, still in its sack, on the table and studied the note awhile longer. It was a small note, so Harry assumed he was stalling, which was fine with Harry, who had found his gut was all knotted up.

Snape rubbed his chin and said, “Interesting impact this object has.” He lowered the note and looked Harry in the eye. “Simple principle: halving one’s age. One wouldn’t think much of that beyond the obvious power of youth by choice.” He lowered his head back to the parchment and re-met Harry’s gaze through the strands of his hair. “But it has left us with a dilemma.” Frowning, he set down Tonks’ note and carefully slid the velvet off the cane, finally laying the silver length of it down on the wood with his hand carefully protected. He tossed the velvet aside and after considering the cleaved cane, said softly, “I cannot by rights make you do this.”

Harry took that in. “You’d let me stay this way?” he asked. “Even though I hate you?”

Snape didn’t flinch as expected at those words, but his lips pursed harder. Harry stood up to take a better look at the cane. The picture of his older self seemed to watch from the photograph along with his two friends. “I don’t belong here,” Harry said. “Don’t you want the other me back?”

“Of course I do. He is my son and you are not, or perhaps more accurately, you refuse to be.” Snape exhaled audibly. “But reversing the charm means that you cease to exist as you are.”

Harry gave him a disturbed look and picked up the cane to examine it closely. “All those complicated books in the room there... he understands those?”

“Yes. Most all of them.”

Harry thought aloud: “It wouldn’t be fair to him not to come back. He has all those friends and I don’t; they wouldn’t want me.” He reached for the note, despite the raw instinctive fear coursing through him. Tiny diagrams were drawn on the yellowed paper, showing cartoon hands doing things with the cane. Harry carefully put the note down on the edge of the table where he could see it and rested the cane upside-down on the stone floor as the first diagram indicated. He hesitated though. A glance at Snape showed him wearing a grim expression. “What’s wrong?” Harry demanded, beginning to feel numb as though the fear had taken him over, sucking his own will dry. “Don’t you want me-as-your-son back?”

Snape’s troubled expression didn’t flicker. “Of course. I need not make amends

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with him”

“I don’t know why not,” Harry commented. He turned from the black gaze and adjusted the note to see it better. His breath wouldn’t come freely, as though he faced stepping off a cliff.

Snape’s low, soft tone interrupted Harry’s thoughts. “It is a kind of death. That is why, although it is only equitable for you to do this, I cannot insist you do.”

Harry, determined by that to prove something, if only that he was bigger than this man, tapped the cane twice on the curved handle, spun it twice one way and then back the other. He bit his lip and hesitated just an instant, during which he pictured the tall young man from the photographs in the album – the one who truly deserved to be in his place. The cane handle rapped sharply twice on the hard floor.

Harry, tall and wearing his usual clothes and cloak, appeared with a faint whoosh. He stared at the cane in his hand and then glanced in surprise around the unexpected scene of the dining room. “What am I doing here?” he asked.

Sharply, Snape said, while pointing with his lean finger, “Put the cane in the sack.”

Harry scooped the evidence sack off the chair beside him and slid the cane into it. As he tugged on the drawstrings, he said, “I was out in the field...”

“That was three days ago,” Snape pointed out snidely.

Harry blinked and stared. “Three days? How could that be?” He gestured with the evidence sack. “Did this thing bring me home? But... three days?”

Snape angled his head and appeared more dismayed. “You are due back at the Ministry. I said I would send you.”

“But... what happened?” Harry demanded, gesturing with the wrapped cane.

Snape crossed his arms and said, “What did you think half a cane would do? Not exactly hiding its inherent purpose.”

Befuddled, Harry considered the long black sack in his hand and tried to come up with an answer. After a long pause in which his mouth twisted, he decided not to guess. “Er, I don’t know.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “It cut your age in half,” he stated.

“It what?!”

“Ms. Tonks was most disappointed in you, I believe,” Snape added and appeared to be tracking the impact that statement had on Harry.

Harry frowned but avoided flinching. “I’ve been... NINE for the last three days?”

“Yes,” Snape snidely replied. “And you are expected back at the Ministry, since it is not quite the end of the day on Monday.”

“Bloody... all right.” He rubbed his forehead where a headache teased and moved toward the hearth.

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Snape held his hand up. "There is something I should warn you about though, before you go."

Harry, mind already cast ahead to the Auror's office and what he might face there, turned and dropped his hand from his head.

Snape said, "The Ministry has been informed of the prophecy."

"Good," Harry uttered in relief and at Snape's surprised look, explained, "I was starting to think it would be for the better. What prompted it... my being a child?"

"Not precisely. There was little doubt you would return to normal quick enough. No, the impetus was Ms. Weasley remembering the beginning of it, which she recited as: Few will escape the blood and chaos of darkness bound, sought... etc."

"Blood and chaos?" Harry echoed, distraught. "And few will escape. Wonderful. So who at the Ministry knows, or has it been published in the Prophet already?"

"The Prophet is so far unaware. Minerva and I informed Madam Bones, Arthur Weasley and Cornelius Fudge."

"Fudge! Why'd you tell that waste of space?"

"As you are perhaps aware," Snape began as though lecturing. "He is head of the department that records these things for safe keeping in case the person the prophecy pertains to is not known."

Harry remembered the room full of shelves of glass prophecies. "Oh, right. So what did the Ministry think?"

"They are rather alarmed by the implication that the current minor difficulties they are having promise to elevate to such a level. I am not certain they believe it possible."

"I'm not certain I believe it possible," Harry said.

Snape made a shushing gesture. "Well, off with you. They will start to wonder what the difficulty is." Harry took down the Floo powder but before he tossed it in, Snape said, "There is only an hour left in your day... do try not to get into trouble again already."

Harry shot him a glowering look. "I will. Thank you." Clutching the gritty powder, he turned and said forcefully, "I get through weeks of field shadowing without incident... getting complimented on my performance, even, and I mess up once, er... twice, and now you assume that is all I'm going to do." He felt a bit hurt.

"It was a rather significant mistake caused by an affinity for Muggle habits."

"That makes me better in the field normally, by the way," Harry argued. "I don't reach for my wand in the middle of a curry shop when I slop a bit on my shirt."

Harry, having made his point, he thought, moved to toss the Floo powder in, but Snape interrupted yet again with: "Just one more thing... How did you know the cane would refuse to Apparate?"

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Harry froze, and then glanced at the handful of Floo powder he clutched on one side and the evidence sack on the other. "I don't know." He hadn't even considered Apparating. "Bloody... I have to go." This time he did toss the powder onto the flames.

At the Ministry, Harry walked unmolested across the Atrium but when he reached the lift, the grins and winks began along with the thinly veiled teasing. "You sure grow fast, Harry," Someone from Games commented when they stepped onto the lift behind him. Everyone, it seemed, felt the need to get a poke at him before he made it to the Auror's office.

"Well, Mr. Potter," Rodgers said when Harry stepped into the workout room after dropping the cane off with Shackbolt. "You survived your little trip down memory lane, did you? Take a seat."

Harry tried not to blush, but it didn't work. His fellows were definitely enjoying his discomfort, although Kerry Ann tried to suppress her grin.

Rodgers went on: "We were just doing a quick review of incarceration procedure. Originally I was going to do one on field work procedure, but thought it best for us to wait for your glowing return."

Harry glanced up at Kerry Ann beside him only reluctantly. "Poor Harry," she whispered, teasing. Vineet turned around and gave him an oddly affectionate look. Aaron simply muttered, "At least it isn't me in trouble this time."

"Also, in case I need to remind those of you who don't own a calendar on top of not owning a watch. We are fast approaching your next review exams. They will be scheduled for next week Tuesday. Potter, can you remain eighteen that long?"

When the mercifully short hour ended, Rodgers said, "Potter, stay after," as the others were packing up their things. Harry had not brought his things so he stood, trying to figure out what to do with his hands, finally settling on picking lint off of his cloak.

The door closed on Kerry Ann, who gave Harry a sympathetic nod. Harry could hear them chatting happily as they headed down the corridor to the lifts. Rodgers appeared grim as he closed his notes and waved them into his leather satchel before sitting on the front edge of his small table.

"We have a problem, Potter," he said, making his wand vibrate by flicking it with this thumb.

"I'm sorry sir, I..."

"You're sorry to have been named in a prophecy?" Rodgers interjected. "Did you send away to be named in one through some service I'm not aware of?"

"Oh. No sir; didn't realize that was the topic."

Rodgers returned to flicking the end of his wand nervously. "This is the difficulty



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– even barring your recent spate of cock-ups – we don’t exactly wish to put you in the kind of harm’s way necessary to give you the opportunity to fulfill the prophecy. And we certainly would like you to do so as quickly as possible.”

“But...” Harry began. “The blood and chaos hasn’t occurred yet. The dark hordes haven’t... well I don’t think they’ve been released.” At Rodgers blank expression, Harry explained, “Those have to happen first.”

“Do they?” Rodgers blurted.

“I’m rather certain,” Harry reluctantly admitted.

Rodgers’ wand flicked rapidly. “As much as I hate to say this, I think I have to defer to you on this. Goodness knows I’d hate to stand in your way.”

Harry thought this must be a taunt. But when Harry found Rodgers’ eyes, they looked deadly serious.

“I don’t like this, Potter,” Rodgers said. “I’m not even going to pretend to like it. I can’t believe you are just standing there so casually... that you’ve known about this without letting on.”

Harry felt a little humbled. “I’m used to it, sir.” More lightly, Harry added, “And this one doesn’t mention my dying. It’s not so bad from that perspective.”

“Right.” Rodgers flicked his wand a few seconds more and stood straight. “Arthur wants a talk with you as well.” At the door he said, “There’s traditionally a lot of blood and chaos at the first Puddlemere United match. Why don’t we just invite Merton to it and you can dispatch him afterwards?”

Harry laughed and finding relief in his normally vitriolic trainer’s humor, said soberly, “If you wish to set it up, sir, I’m willing to do my part.”

Rodgers still didn’t open the door to the training room, just rested his hand on the latch. “I take that back. Let’s hope Merton doesn’t come to that match. Any combination of one of those weapons and a large crowd makes me very nervous.”

When Harry knocked on Mr. Weasley’s door, it opened by itself to reveal Arthur Weasley, comb-over skewed, closing his files and putting them in neat stack.

“Harry. Come in. Have a seat.” He sounded doleful, which affected Harry more than expected.

Harry sat in the guest chair and quickly shifted it out of the way as the door closed itself again.

“Most unfortunate, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said, folding his hands in his lap. “I thought we were past all this... prophecies, Voldemort, that sort of thing.”

“Apparently not,” Harry conceded, feeling stronger now in the face of Mr. Weasley’s overtly sad demeanor.

“I don’t want to hold you back from your destiny, Harry, when the time comes. But...” He held up a finger. “It isn’t here yet. And until it is, you are just another

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apprentice, one that is on probation, no less.”

“You’re playing Dumbledore this time ‘round?” Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley stared at him. “Far be it for me to even attempt it. How is Severus holding up? He was his usual clammed up self at the meeting Minerva arranged. Looked like he wanted nothing more than to toss Fudge from the room.”

Harry’s lips curled. “He was right angry with me just now over the cane incident. I must have been a regular delinquent to cope with at nine and a half.”

“What!?” Mr. Weasley blurted. “He tell you that?”

“No,” Harry replied, pushing back onto the desk the unopened paper airplanes that had taken flight into his lap. “But I heard it often enough from my relatives.”

Mr. Weasley stared at him some more. “Tonks told me Severus was practically doting on you.” Harry dropped his head and stared doubtfully back at Mr. Weasley, prompting him to add, “Honest. Took you out for ice creams, broom flights, etc.”

“The zoo?” Harry asked, almost mockingly dubious.

“I didn’t hear all the details. Only I’m quite certain you were not the monstrous burden you’ve implied. Tonks, when she returned after leaving the cane behind, joked that Severus may try to hide it and leave you as you were.”

“Not a chance,” Harry said disparagingly.

“Hm, well you would know better, I would assume. But back to our original topic: I want you to know that if you feel the time has come, Harry...” Here he wagged a finger at Harry. “And you think we are unaware... you can come to me and tell me that. In those words, exactly, ‘the time has come.’ Got that? I need to know when to give you leeway.” His finger waved more sharply with the next words. “But you aren’t getting it before then. And in the meantime very few people have been told. The general public isn’t to know until it is absolutely necessary.”



At home, Harry found a note from Snape on the table, which was a good thing because when he began opening his post and found people writing him about coming to his upcoming dinner party, he would otherwise have been rather confused. Hermione’s rambling letter made him shake his head at Snape simply allowing him, at nine years old, to send out invitations. Although, Harry had to admit, at that age he would have been quite thrilled to have friends to invite, let alone send post to.

Unlike the letter from Hermione, who did not know that his last letter had come from a rather different version of himself, the letter from Lupin was highly teasing in its tone. But he was more than willing to come to the party, was quite in need of a break from the castle, in fact.

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Harry chuckled at himself as he put the day's post aside and started in on the older pile that his younger self had opened. Oddly, at the bottom of the pile, he found a letter he had sent to Snape almost half a year before. Harry looked it over and shrugged while dropping it on Snape's desk in the drawing room. Before he stepped away, a colorful paper tucked into the blotter corner caught his eye. It had an icon of an ark on it and when he tugged it out, found that it was a ticket to the Chester Zoo, stamped just the day before.

A bit embarrassed, Harry carefully tucked the ticket back exactly as it had been and stepped out of the drawing room – out of surroundings that carried too heavy a sense of his guardian.

Harry was deeply absorbed in reviewing when the fire crackled loudly. He glanced over and found Snape's head floating there. "Wotcher," Harry uttered in surprise.

"Thought I would just check to see that you were still remaining out of trouble."

Harry set his quill down hard. "Thank you very much; I'm still not in trouble yet. Our one year reviews are early so they can assess the incoming applicants based on how well we do. So I'm too busy to get into trouble. Go away before I toss an extra log on you. Why are you there instead of coming through anyway?"

"I am at my own hearth which is warded to disallow transit. I am leery of leaving my house in Remus' care for any longer and Minerva hinted at that as well, although he seems to have done surprisingly well."

"Tell Minerva I'm very sorry I messed up." Harry rested his cheek on his palm and gave Snape a long and tilted looking over. "Knees getting tired yet?" he asked innocently.

"Yes, in fact, they are. Do stay out of trouble." Snape's head disappeared and yellow flame closed in where his visage had floated.



Merton's eyes were gleeful as he gingerly inspected a large elongated bulbous vessel. "Wonderful... absolutely wonderful... and only two days," he whispered reverently.

Lockhart sat nearby with a glazed expression. He hadn't spoken since the last spell had been executed on him. Merton leaned close into Lockhart's face, causing the man and his wild blonde hair to lean away, which at least indicated he knew what was happening around him. Debjit would not have got so close; he hovered near the doorway. It was warm in their borrowed building now during most all the day, almost hot during the afternoons, so there was no reason to congregate in the small workroom.

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Merton grinned in pleasure. "All my wonderful plans no longer need be on hold." He set the vessel down on a heavy shelf and said, "We'll see how long that one lasts and make several more to have a regular stock. Fill this shelf and we can announce to the Ministry that we have arrived."

Svaha spoke something low to Debjit to urge him to move out of the doorway to allow her to carry in the tea. She placed a fresh cup before Lockhart and left the tray behind from which Merton poured his own after giving up admiring the first addition to his new collection.

Lockhart picked up the teacup and sat tracing its shape slowly and meticulously with his fingertips. Svaha ignored him and began sorting through the crate of freshly-fired ceramics to find the most symmetric one.



Harry knocked on Pamela's door. The wind in Godric's Hollow was brisk as it always seemed to be, forcing Harry to pull his cloak together with one hand while he waited.

Pamela opened the door, saying, "Harry! You can Apparate in directly, you know."

"I've never been in your house," Harry said as he stepped in. "I can't unless I've seen it."

She led him into the small sitting room and said, "I'll be just a moment more," before she stepped away, adjusting an earring.

Harry glanced around the room while he waited. A photograph of Patricia and her children was on a table beside the couch. Harry kept expecting it to move, but it refused, making Harry wonder if there were a charm to make a Muggle picture seem magical, if only temporarily.

"All right, how do I look?" Pamela asked, stepping out of the bedroom and presenting herself.

"You look like you," Harry said.

"You're a charmer, Harry," Pamela teased.

"Did I say the wrong thing?" Harry asked, glad this didn't come up so much anymore, although the reason it didn't come up in itself wasn't so wonderful.

She laughed gaily. "No, not at all." She collected her handbag and stepped over to Harry. "I'm a little nervous... my first magical party."

"It will be fine, just some friends of mine." Harry took her arm. "Thanks for agreeing to come early." A second later they were in the main hall.

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Pamela stepped around the room, looking up and down. “Old place you have here.”

“It’s Severus’ really,” Harry explained. “Would you like something to drink?”

“He’s not coming, is he? You didn’t make it sound like he was in your invitation.”

“No,” Harry answered, not wanting to think too hard about how that invitation may have read. But Pamela didn’t say anything more about it and soon other guests began arriving, all eager to meet Harry’s distant cousin.

Hermione was explaining what the inside of the Ministry of Magic looked like when Winky stepped up and curtsied. Pamela started at her strange sight, fixating on her spotted and nearly bald head framed by her grotesque ears.

Hermione giggled before patting her arm. “House-elves are harmless,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s... yeah,” Pamela sheepishly said. “Everyone looks so... normal; I forgot where I was, I think.” She squinted at Winky and asked, “Is that a tea-towel?”

“Would mistress like something?” Winky asked with a bow of her head that made her ears flap.

“I’ll have a butterbeer,” Hermione said, and with a glance at Pamela said, “Bring two.”

Winky disappeared. Pamela, now wearing a determined expression, tapped Harry on the shoulder. “Harry, you make your elf wear a tea-towel?”

Harry spun and said, “She wants to wear a tea-towel.” To Pamela’s doubtful and chiding look, he said, “You are talking to the house-elf rights expert there, Hermione. She’ll back me up on that. Winky could wear whatever she wants; we don’t tell her what to wear, but the magic surrounding them doesn’t work if they wear actual clothing. And if they’re given any they are compelled to leave the household. It breaks the magical bond to their master.”

Hermione said reassuringly, “I know it seems a little disturbing. But Winky has it good here, compared to most elves. Go and talk to her, if you want. The kitchen is just down there.”

Hermione pointed and Pamela said, “No, I’ll trust you on that.”

Laughing, Hermione said, “She doesn’t bite, really. Many magical things do, but not Winky.”

Winky returned with their butterbeers and executed another curtsy but added a wink at Pamela before moving to ask the next people over what they might like.

Hermione nudged Pamela. “She likes you.”

An hour later, Harry finally successfully urged his guests to move to the dining room. Hermione had filled the main hall with couches and after that, no one wanted to move. Harry was going to have Pamela sit beside him, but she had already taken

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up a chair at the other end beside Neville and across from Lupin. Ron was the only one to bring a date, Lavender of all people.

“She came into the bank and when she saw me, insisted I escort her to her vault. I get a lot of that now,” Ron stated proudly. “It didn’t used to be my duty, but I do more and more of it and the Goblins don’t sneer anymore, just ring me to the floor if someone asks.”

Tonks arrived late with a bang! which echoed around the main hall before stepping into the dining room. “Hello, Harry, everyone, sorry I was tied up. Oh, and you saved me a seat, Harry, thanks.” She took the empty seat to Harry’s right, which he had originally saved for Pamela.

“ ‘Course,” Harry assured her, happy to pretend he had, he would have if he’d known she wouldn’t think it too forward.

After everyone settled in, Lupin said, “I received such a touching letter from Harry, did anyone else?”

Harry, who had just raised his mug to take a gulp, gave Lupin a sharp look over the rim of it.

“I thought...” Hermione began and then laughed lightly, “That maybe you were drunk when you wrote your letter to me. But the handwriting was so nice, so I wasn’t sure.”

Tonks was snorting into her own mug. “Poor Harry.”

“I was stinking drunk. Used a charm, or something, to hide it,” Harry quickly said.

Tonks asked, “You’d rather people thought that?”

“Yes,” Harry firmly stated. “And dinner should be arriving shortly.” Harry leaned to stare into the hall in the direction of the kitchen. “Any moment now.”

“You weren’t drunk?” Hermione queried in confusion.

“I heard what happened,” Neville said with a smirk. “Well, I heard something, but didn’t know it was true until now.”

No dinner arrived to distract Harry’s guests and now they were interrogating Neville who was greatly enjoying it.

“All right,” Harry announced, tossing down his napkin. “I was nine when I wrote you out the invitations. If the handwriting looked great, I have no idea why that was.”

Silence fell until Hermione queried, “Nine... years old?”

“Yes,” Harry breathed, exasperated. “I was nine years old when I invited you all here. I don’t remember, so it’s a bloody good thing a few of you wrote back or... well, Winky probably would have made dinner anyway.”

“He was an absolute doll,” Tonks said.

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Harry rolled his eyes. "Please don't."

"But you were," she insisted, teasing affectionately, and suddenly Harry thought maybe that didn't pain him SO bad.

Dinner arrived then but it only delayed Harry's having to tell the whole story.

"Are there photographs?" Hermione asked. "I would have liked to have seen Harry at that-" She stopped upon seeing Harry's annoyed expression.

"What did Snape do?" Ron asked, glancing between Harry and Tonks.

"He did fine," Tonks supplied. "Don't you think, Remus? Remus came and baby-sat briefly I hear."

The entire table, excepting Harry, who was staring into his pea soup, turned to Lupin with great interest. "Harry just wanted to know about his parents. Severus told him I'd be better suited to tell him about them."

"Well, that's the truth," Hermione uttered. "But I want to be owled next time you cut your age in half, Harry." She sounded thoroughly hurt.

"Why?" Harry asked in dismay. "And not if I have any say in it."

"You don't remember a thing?" Ron asked.

When Harry shook his head, Lupin asked with an innocent tone, "Not the broom flights, the ice creams, the zoo?"

Harry studied him an instant before asking, "Are you getting even with Severus over something?"

This made the whole table laugh and finally the topic changed over to the impending Quidditch season.

Down at the far end of the table from Harry, Pamela was taking a third long look at the guest across from her. He didn't look terribly old, but he had prominent crinkles around his eyes when he laughed and a soft way of talking that made her think he was someone who tried to tread lightly on the people around him. He was by far the oldest male at the party and therefore the most interesting and Pamela had maneuvered to sit across from him particularly after eying him during drinks in the hall.

"So, Remus, you work at Hogwarts?" Pamela asked when a lull presented an opportunity.

The man's grey-blue eyes came her way as he responded, "Yes, at the moment."

"Oh, where do you usually work?" she asked to keep the conversation going.

He clearly grew uncomfortable, but replied, "Whatever comes along."

Pamela wanted to say I know lots of people who get by like that but sensed that it would only add to the discomfort and it explained his patched clothing as more than some grunge fashion statement. "Is that where you met Harry?"

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Lupin smiled broadly as though reminiscing. “No, I knew Harry when he was quite small. Met you once, in fact, in Godric’s Hollow, many, many years ago.”

“You’re an old friend of James and Lily’s then?” she asked.

Odd, he seemed to frown although he smiled more. “Very old friend,” he answered, voice even softer.

That undercurrent was interesting. “Very sad, what happened to them. We didn’t know what really happened until Harry happened to drop in one day. Well, my mum did, but she never told anyone.”

He took a sip of the amber liquid that he was drinking instead of mead. “That was good of her. She might have been Obliviated if she had.”

Pamela froze. “She might have been what?” she asked, uncertain if she wanted to hear the answer.

“Not as bad as it sounds. It’s a kind of memory charm to make people forget something that they shouldn’t know. It doesn’t actually make them forget, just blocks the memory from them so they cannot access it unless a more powerful wizard manages to cancel it. The Ministry needs to do it quite often to Muggles when there is trouble.”

“Good thing there isn’t trouble right now,” Pamela said.

Lupin tilted his head to the side. “There is always a little bit of trouble,” he said mildly and added a teasing smile as though to not worry her. “And what do you do?”

She tossed her head. “I’m a receptionist at a dentist’s in Chesley. It’s a bit of a drive but the people there are nice and they take a lot of holidays which means I get a lot of time off too, when I can go on holiday with my sister and her family.”

She wasn’t entirely sure he was listening, as his gaze frequently focused at a distance before coming back, but he said with a quirky smile, “Any sign of her children being magical?”

“No,” Pamela said a little forcefully. “And my sister can’t decide if she’s hopeful or terrified one of them might be.” She laughed. “Severus making one of them invisible the last visit didn’t help any.”

Lupin laughed as well and asked in clear disbelief, “He did what?”



Harry dutifully arrived for his field work the following evening. The shift was to run until four in the morning, so he had slept in as long as Kali would allow him to. Her frantic cage circling started eventually and he couldn’t get her to calm down even when he brought her back to sleep with him. That had worried Harry a bit, but he had checked several times throughout the day that the Dark Plane was closed off



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or at least quiet and all seemed well. He took care of everything around the house; Pamela had lost one of her gloves on the floor and he had sent Hedwig off with it; the post that looked important he bundled to send off to Hogwarts. Getting all this done left Harry looking forward to an open Sunday.

Harry stood inside the door to the Auror's office, not wanting to interrupt Shackbolt. Tonks stepped in wearing thigh-high white leather boots and a pink skirt that matched her floppy hair. "Ready to go?" she asked.

Harry kept himself very level and cool as he replied. "Sure." He looked her up and down and gestured at himself. "Should I change?"

Tonks waved her wand at him and he suddenly wore black denims, chunky heeled black shoes and a black leather jacket. His hair felt odd too, off of his face and indeed it now swept back and felt slick. "What do I look like?" Harry asked.

"Rather amusing," Shackbolt contributed from across the room.

"You look great," Tonks assured him, took his arm, and the Auror's office disappeared. A cat screeched as they arrived in an alley between stone buildings and when they stepped out onto the pavement, Harry recognized where they were.

"York?" he asked.

"Yep, I want to talk to some people." She took off down the pavement, and Harry, feeling exceptionally tall and slightly awkward in his shoes, followed. At a pub called the Friar's Mistress, Tonks stopped and said, "Try to act like Harry Potter, all right?"

Harry watched her tug open the heavy battered door. "What does that mean?" he asked, but she was already inside and he didn't get a reply. He stopped just long enough to read the small brass sign on the door that read No football colors inside. Tonks was halfway across the crowded room, but Harry easily tracked her pink hair. He squared his shoulders under the assumption that at the very least, she meant for him to appear confident. Nearly half the patrons were magical. Harry could feel this but it was confirmed by the wide-eyed expressions of most anyone who looked his way as he passed.

Tonks had hitched her hip on a bar stool when Harry caught up to her, so he stood beside her since there were no more open ones. She was speaking to the barman about the last time he had seen certain people and by the end of the conversation, Harry was thinking that he should start disguising himself when he went to the pub, given how much attention the barman apparently paid to everyone's comings and goings.

Tonks pushed a mead over to Harry. "Have one so we don't look like we just came in for questions. Put a drop of this in it." She slipped him a tiny vial with skilled sleight of hand. Harry waited two sips before adding it, so it would look even less suspicious, not just because he thought he could use a drink with the prospect of eight hours of pub hopping with Tonks looming before him – especially Tonks in

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that outfit. He held his mug up before his mouth and peered down at her, suddenly wondering if she were teasing him intentionally. But no, she seemed utterly unaware of the effect her clothing had on anyone around her.

Harry sighed and set his mead down, less interested in drinking it now that its alcohol was neutralized. A nicely dressed woman Harry thought looked familiar from years ago at Hogwarts, but whose name he could not recall, sauntered slowly by, eyeing him before glancing at Tonks and then taking on a vaguely defeated air.

Tonks was scanning the room with a practiced eye. "Harry, do you recognize the man standing under the elk head by the wall?"

Harry did as he had been taught. He didn't look over right away. He rubbed his eye, shifted his weight as though his legs were tired and used that as an excuse to turn his body enough to see. "No," he said and then after a second glance said, "I take that back. He plays Beater for Falmouth. Not a nice bloke." Harry recognized another Falcon with him. "The team captain is over there too."

"Thanks," Tonks said. "He looked familiar in a bad way and they have rather a compliment of brooding yet fawning companions."

"Must have been in Slytherin," Harry quipped, pleased that it made her laugh.

Tonks swirled her drink. "So, did Severus survive losing to Ginny at dueling?"

"You know, he seems to have, but it worries me in an odd way, as though he's plotting something and that's why he's behaving so pleasantly about it."

Tonks sipped her drink in silence. The crowd fell quiet as an exciting football play happened on the television. Finally she said, "I wouldn't want to find out the hard way that Severus was plotting about me. Have you warned Ginny?"

"Huh?" Harry asked, looking back at her from the television hanging beside the door linking the two halves of the establishment. "No. She can take care of herself."

"Against Severus?"

"Sure," Harry answered absently as he watched a man trying hard to catch up to a long high kick before the whole play came to a stop with a groan as offside was called. Harry observed, "The offside rule seems intended to make certain that this game never gets very exciting."

"You're on duty, Harry."

Harry drew his eyes away from the action and looked around. "Right. Sorry."

"Let's stand over there, see if we can overhear anything interesting." Tonks led the way across the room, a few feet down from the mounted, glassy-eyed elk head.

They hung there in the crowd by the wall, chatting occasionally, but mostly listening as they pretended to drink. Tonks often had to stand close when people crossed the room and the crowd pressed in to make room. If someone had asked Harry whether he would have enjoyed pretending to be on a date with Tonks, he

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would have immediately answered yes. But standing there with their bodies brushing close when necessary, he was thinking that would have been mistaken. He moved to the side next time an opening appeared to do so, to give them more space.

“And who is this?” a voice nearby asked.

Harry turned and found himself facing Gregor, the Falmouth captain. The man’s flinty eyes went up and down his body and he said, “Didn’t know you were a poof, Potter.”

Harry, who didn’t feel quite himself in these clothes, still thought that a bit rich, but no responses seemed likely to keep him out of trouble. “What’s it to you?” he asked but as he did, Tonks had shifted in close, giving Gregor a sharp look.

“E’s got a bird,” One of the others said. “Or what certainly looks like a bird to me.”

Gregor turned to Tonks. “Wouldn’t you rather be with a real man, luv?” he asked her with thick insinuation.

Oh Merlin, Harry thought, let’s not start that. He rolled his eyes at Gregor mockingly.

A woman dressed all in demin who was hanging at the other edge of the group’s fringe said, “ ‘e’s goin’ to wipe the floor with you, Gregor.”

This immediately drew Gregor’s attention that way, where the woman’s unfortunate date looked to be pretending he wasn’t. “What did you say?”

“I’m only sayin’ it fer your own good.”

Harry wasn’t entirely displeased by the support, but it was only urging Gregor to higher levels of stupidity. He turned back to Tonks and him and said suavely, “Come on, luv. No one’s been disappointed by me yet. Got ‘em lining up.”

Harry was glad he hadn’t eaten yet this evening. But when Gregor added, “This bloke can’t even dress himself decently,” Harry gave Tonks a reinforcing look of see?

Tonks said innocently, “Go out with a man who can’t win a match without fixing the Bludgers?”

Gregor’s countenance shifted. His smile inverted and his eyes darkened. He even felt nasty at a level that unnerved Harry, who slipped his wand into his hand, which was easy since Tonks was right up against him, blocking the view. He waited for a signal though, reminding himself that he wasn’t in the lead here.

Gregor moved him into the lead by reaching for Tonks. Harry, without thought bodily moved into the way and the two of them ended up chest to chest with Harry’s wand jammed into Gregor’s solar plexus.

“Don’t be stupid,” Harry stated calmly. In truth, his heart was hammering away as though the episode was triggering some unexpected instinct in him.

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“Gregor,” the man Harry recognized as the teammate, said, “drop it or you’ll be in front of the Wizengamot again a little too soon.”

“He should drop it,” Harry said “Or he’s going to end up in St. Mungo’s a little too soon.” Gregor and the other man started at that. Harry added, “Yes, that’s my wand.” and then more snarkily, “What did you think it was?”

A flash pan went off then, startling everyone.

“Well, well,” a familiar voice said. “What do we have here?” Skeeter wove her way through the crowd with expert ease.

Harry turned aside with an oath, which garnered a darkly amused glance from Gregor. The rest of the group faded and Harry realized that Tonks was gone. He didn’t glance around for her, realizing just in time that he shouldn’t.

Skeeter came right up to Harry. “Getting into a little tussle here, Harry?” she asked.

“No,” Harry replied, “just having a friendly little discussion about proposed changes in the Quidditch rules for this season.” Harry glanced at Gregor’s intent expression and added, “Rules that this man’s team necessitated, I believe.”

Skeeter leaned in. “You’re getting better at this, Harry... takes all the fun out of it. Perhaps I should have waited just thirty seconds more, but the two of you did look so darling, facing off like a pair of bucks in the springtime.”

“Please don’t talk like you write,” Harry falsely pleaded in disgust.

Skeeter had turned to Gregor, but she turned back, long fingers pressed into her chest as though insulted. “My column is the most read section of the Prophet, I’ll have you know. I can make or break many, many people, as Gregor here is well aware. Just because you are out of reach, now, Mr. Potter, doesn’t mean you will be forever. Do keep that in mind.”

She pointedly turned her back on Harry and began interviewing Gregor about what had been happening, the incident, as she began referring to it. Harry slipped out of the crowd and found Tonks, now dressed as a boarding school Muggle, complete with knee length pleated skirt and blue woolen crested jacket.

“Let’s go,” she whispered and they slipped easily out the back, while everyone was watching the interview.

“Sorry about that,” Harry said, trying not to think of what tomorrow’s paper was going to say.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Tonks said, “except block my aim for a capping, which I was looking forward to, but that I’d’ve had to answer for.”

“What were you going to hit him with?” Harry asked, curious what might have worked in that close crowd.

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“I was prepping a Boltage; it can be explained away as a Taser if there are Muggles about.”

They exited the back alley and walked a while through the cool night air. “There’s another pub I’d like to stop at,” Tonks said after a while.

“All right,” Harry said, trying not to sigh.

The second place had far fewer magical people in it and they were all clustered in the back where the hearth was burning to counteract the open door to the small courtyard. Laughter poured in from outside where the patrons had apparently been imbibing for a while.

They took a small table and Tonks surreptitiously touched her ear with her wand and sat in silence, looking at Harry, but listening in to the conversations beside them. Whenever loud laughter would start up, she would have to cover her ear with a wince. Harry, for his part, grew irked that his drinks all had the kick removed from them. He didn’t serve much purpose on this shadowing, really, and he had far too much time for his mind to wander where it shouldn’t.

As a distraction he watched the couples at the bar; the closest ones were literally hanging on one another. But a man in a far booth was sitting alone, brooding, and Harry realized that at this distance, he couldn’t tell if the man were magical or not. Of all the people in the room, he certainly seemed the most suspicious, although he may simply have had a bad day rather than be sitting there plotting. Harry thought that if the man looked up at him that Harry might try a little Legilimency on him.

Before he could, his attention was pulled back to his companion when she asked, “Ready for your one-year review?” in an ordinary, friendly, concerned voice, as though she had dropped the official, on-duty one all of a sudden.

“I think so,” Harry replied.

“While you were young, I kept thinking you’d get to skip it, despite everyone’s joking about bringing you in to see how you’d do anyway.” She peered at him and said, “You look much older now in comparison.”

Harry swallowed – nervous about what a nine-year-old version of himself might have said to her – and changed the subject. “Do I get Moody again?”

“It’s supposed to be random who you get,” Tonks pointed out. “But in your case, Moody insists.”

“I imagine he does,” Harry commented.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tonks asked.

“Nothing,” Harry quickly said.

“You know something I don’t know?” she asked.

“Yes,” Harry replied, unable to lie.

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She eyed Harry thoughtfully as she drank down half of her glass of ale in one go. “I thought he was up to something. Whose dirty work is he doing? Not Arthur’s.”

“I’m not supposed to know. You’ll have to guess... which isn’t particularly hard.” This topic was a good one, Harry thought. It was focusing his mind nicely off of her close proximity.

“Yeah, I can guess.” She frowned. “I hate it when they lose faith in you. They should know better by now.” She stated this with touching vehemence, reminding Harry about the prophecy. She hadn’t been mentioned by Mr. Weasley as one of the people who had been told. Harry felt inclined to simply tell her, but he wasn’t supposed to. This conundrum set his loyalties against one another which he deeply disliked.

The pub’s closing forced them back onto the street and Tonks said, “Let’s go to a wizard pub, then. I’m still hoping to run into some people.”

It had rained while they were inside and the roads were now black and quiet except that their footsteps slapped loudly now. Around the corner when they were alone, Tonks stopped and faced Harry, who was growing weary of the long night already.

“I get the sense this duty is getting to you,” she said.

Harry shook himself more alert and said, “It’s all right.”

“You just seemed bothered by pretending to be on a date.”

Harry dropped his gaze to his big black shoes. “I am a little,” he admitted because he desperately wanted to admit it.

“Sorry. Do you want to only shadow Kingsley or Tristan from now on?”

“No,” Harry answered immediately, not allowing himself to think about it. “I...” but he didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t exactly hiding his discomfort, but he hadn’t really wanted her to notice, or had he? “Let’s just go to this other place.”

She gave him a sad smile and with one glance back to see that he was certain of his answer, led the way.

Author’s Notes:

I made up an eye color for Lupin. I was desperate.

Firing up the boiler on the angst train next chapter. Whoo whooooo! All aboard...

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



# DUELING LOYALTIES

Harry took his seat with his fellows on Monday morning. Rodgers looked up at him, pulled a copy of the Prophet from his stack of parchments, folded it backwards to reveal the back page, and slid it over the top of the book Harry had just placed before him on his desk. Harry glanced down at the photograph of him and Gregor facing off – the one he had avoided looking at the previous morning when it was delivered. Harry’s fellows gave him grins as he shifted the paper up to better see it. The picture was zoomed in close, so Tonks was not even in the periphery; he and Gregor were shoving each other a bit, and Harry’s wand was clearly poking the other man in the ribs. Harry winced and held the paper out to his trainer to take back.

“You were on duty at the time, were you not?” Rodgers asked.

“Yes, sir,” Harry admitted.

“Did he pull his wand on you?”

Harry thought that over. The events were not so clear today, nor was the point of it all. “No.”

“Have a good reason for pulling your wand?”

“He’s a nasty bloke and he tried to grab Tonks,” Harry explained calmly, not at all like a protective boyfriend might say it, he thought.

Rodgers turned the paper around to study it. “Tonks can take care of herself, I’m quite certain,” he mocked mildly.

“Yes, sir,” Harry repeated, not wanting to use the excuse that he had kept Tonks out of trouble.

“Better you in the photograph than Tonks, I suppose,” Rodgers muttered as

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though assuming that exact thing. After that, he dropped the subject and banished the newspaper. Back at the front of the room he began, “Tomorrow is your one-year review testing. Everyone should be here – as they were today – on time, if not early.”

“We were all here early to see Harry after that photograph in the newspaper yesterday,” Aaron supplied, making Harry close his eyes.

“Well, tomorrow you have an even better reason,” Rodgers stated dryly.

At home, Harry had a letter from his guardian waiting, along with a small pile of what appeared to be fan mail; although one was a howler from a Falmouth fan complaining about how unfair everyone was to his team and now with Harry Potter being so mean, it was just the final straw. Harry carefully uncovered his ears after the red envelope dissolved into a curl of black ash. Most of the other letters, replete with exclamation marks, were along the lines of: Gregor deserved it, and why didn’t Harry hit him with a Crucio anyway, hadn’t he ever seen him on the pitch?

Harry stacked the letters away and opened the one from Severus, who seemed overly concerned that Harry was staying out of trouble, given that he had already tried to initiate a bar fight with a known thug. Sighing yet again that day, he wrote out a reply that opened with how he regretted the pub incident but mostly talked about how very ready he felt for his one-year review; although, now that he thought about it while chewing on his quill, there were some subjects he had only read in a hurry when he had to catch up after being in Finland.

Harry put the letter aside and went to get his books. They formed rather a large stack on the table and unlike his Hogwarts courses he didn’t have a good, organized outline of what was supposed to have been covered. A kind of cold dread seeped into Harry. The stack, which was taller than him when he was sitting, sat in silent challenge, too late to conquer. Harry took the top book down and flipped through it, thinking that at least he could remind himself of the subjects for tomorrow, if not memorize a few new things.

The next morning, Harry rose feeling refreshed. He had unexpectedly found a new bottle of sleeping potion in his night stand drawer and put a sip of it to good use. At the Ministry his fellows were sleepily taking their seats, until Rodgers swept in and said, “Push them to the side.” With groans they stood up and did as instructed while Rodgers explained, “The lot of you complained last time about not doing your best at counters after three hours of written exams, so we’re changing the order around. If you think you are better with a wand than a quill, that’s fine by me.”

They went to the locker room to change into their workout suits, since none of them wanted their robes messed up. Harry tugged his now familiar fuzzy one-piece straight. It had faded to a flat grey and the Auror’s patch had threads hanging loose on it, especially the gold threads. Maybe they would be issued new ones for year two.



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Maybe something that didn't resemble a t-shirt that had got it in its head to become a set of plus fours at the bottom.

Harry swung his wand at his side and followed Aaron and Vineet back to the workout room to wait for the examiners. Kerry Ann came in just after Tonks did.

"Kalendula, you've drawn Tonks and you're first," Rodgers explained. Harry and his fellows backed up as far as possible, all the way to the wall, to watch. While Kerry Ann positioned herself, it felt to Harry as though someone should be officiating these duels. "The two pre-defined counters are a combined dome and crystalline chrysanthemum and a super-modulated titan. A moderate blasting curse will be provided for you to time it against. Then you will be required to wrap up your examiner with a tendon-chain binding, and it must hold for thirty seconds."

Aaron groaned at that, since all of them could jinx his away well within that time. "He picked that one just because I have trouble with it, I bet," he grumbled.

Vineet, appearing relaxed with his arms crossed, said, "But that would mean he is doing Harry a favor."

"Hm, true," Aaron said, agreeing with the unlikelihood of that. He turned to Harry while Rodgers explained the limits on the three free-form attacks the examiner was allowed to use. "Would you rather do the spell casting or the written first?"

"It doesn't matter," Harry said. He was feeling confident again about the written test, if only because he had spent half of his waking life the last two months with a book in front of him.

They quieted to watch as Tonks cast a blasting curse at Kerry Ann, which was easily blocked. Rodgers made a note on a small tablet in his hand and nodded that Tonks could cast the second curse.

Kerry Ann did well against everything except a swirling blinding screamer that they had not covered yet. It required three tries for Kerry Ann to cancel it out and it was possible that it had faded on its own. Rodgers made a note without comment and gestured that she was finished.

"Wish I drew Tonks," Aaron muttered. "I bet I have Moody this time."

"Nope," Harry said. "I do."

"How do you know?" Aaron asked.

"I just do," Harry said, stepping up as his name was called. Moody entered just then as though he had been waiting outside the door for that moment. Harry took up the same position Kerry Ann had – near the corner of the room, but leaving space for a block to expand.

The first two blasting curses were easily handled, and Harry began to feel that he may make it this time. After all, he had been hoping for this moment and his chance

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to prove that he was good at this, if not get even for the bruises he took home last December.

Harry, at Rodgers' nod, cast a tendon binding, but Moody canceled it on the second try and only his deliberation made the spell hold for ten seconds. Harry frowned, he had hoped it would hold longer and wished to ask for a second try as his ego prodded him that he wasn't using this opportunity very effectively.

Next, Harry had to demonstrate his ability to counter the unexpected. Both of Moody's eyes were drilling into Harry's own as the old Auror shouted, "Koukooken!" and three spinning arched blades swooped out of his wand. It looked and sounded like a Weasley twins kind of spell. Harry used a Titan, but the flashing arcs just bounced off and wheeled to attack again, but now they were spread out and would arrive at disparate moments. Harry knocked one away from himself with an air canon, but the other two were approaching from opposite sides. He should have used a rubber shield in the first place to catch all of them while they were together, but it was too late and he was still slow at casting that block and may not have had time. The two closer blades bounced off his modulated block and the third was approaching at the fastest yet. Harry began to sweat.

A blasting curse sent the singleton away again as the two opposing ones closed in again. Harry stepped back just as they were to strike, tossing a close-range titan before himself for safety. The two exploded in stabbing light as they struck, and Harry blinked hard to see where the third had gone. He didn't have time to locate it as it came in low and knocked his right leg out from under him. The feel of the cold metal passing hard over his flesh made him assume he had been cut deeply, but a quick glance down at his leg as he stood up showed only that his workout suit had been snagged.

Moody canceled the remainder of the spell with the growl, "It very well could have cut. You're lucky I dulled it."

Harry resisted examining his leg again and held his wand at the ready. Rodgers said, "You aren't supposed to use damaging spells, Alastor," before giving a nod for the next spell.

Moody grunted as though he wished to debate that, and Harry stilled himself to await the next spell. There was no incantation, but there was an awful lot of light. Beams of white scattered all around out of Moody's wand before coalescing into a flat wall that swung around like a giant cricket bat. Harry used a chrysanthemum block to no effect and the beam struck him. He was on his knees and the beam was coming around again. Disoriented and seeing spots of darkness in his vision, Harry tried a rubber block, but when the beam passed by again, it froze where the spells met and exploded, knocking into Harry, who was just rising off his right knee.

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Harry opened his eyes only to have the normal room lighting stab painfully into his brain. He was flat on his face on the floor, with his cheek pressed hard against the cool, highly polished wood. Rodgers' voice asked if he was all right from a crouched position beside him. Harry thought, I'm alive, I must be. But somehow he couldn't get his mouth to work in order to speak it.

"I said, 'no damaging spells'," Rodgers snapped, presumably at Moody. "What the devil was that?"

Harry managed to move a hand to push himself up while Moody explained that Harry handled it about as badly as he could have and the damage came from his counter backfiring. Harry thought that it seemed like a setup to chose a spell that would interact badly with the block they had most recently learned.

"I'm all right," Harry insisted as he got to his knees. He said this despite the excessive weight Rodgers was supporting under his arm, but he refused to stay down.

"Right," Rodgers mocked, but when he let go, Harry managed to balance.

Harry's vision was still off, his arm ached where he had fallen and most annoyingly, his toes were tingling. "I'll try the last spell," he said, because Moody was being sent off.

"What?" Rodgers said from beside the other Auror.

Harry was contemplating how awful his grade was going to be as well as certain he could counter this last spell, damn it. "I have a third spell for my test," he insisted. His fellows even started to argue otherwise, but Moody had a smile, crooked even considering that his smiles always came out crooked.

"Potter says he's fine... overconfident as always." Moody cast the third unannounced spell without waiting for Rodgers' signal. A black dot, which at first Harry thought was a disturbance on his vision, expanded from Moody's wand until it encompassed Harry, shielding his view of the room and leaving him in a tunnel where there was nothing behind and only a sparkle of light ahead of him. There was utter silence within the spell. Harry hesitated, trying hard to approach this one more thoughtfully than the others where he had gone on instinct, to his detriment.

The tunnel began to oscillate, swinging in a circle and closing in. It was stronger than Harry and forced him to bend down as it pressed in. Harry, for lack of good ideas, went with instinct. He raised his wand over his head – because that was one of the few directions that kept the others in the room safe – and sliced with a cutting curse. The tunnel buckled and light poured into the gap before the oscillation became a thrashing that tossed Harry to the ceiling where only his Quidditch-born reaction saved his head, but sacrificed his shoulder. The sound of the desks cracking against the wall from the blast followed right after. Freed of the spell when it exploded, Harry plummeted to the floor, surprised to find his landing softened.

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Harry glanced up at Moody in surprise but his wand was aimed at the floor. Rodgers, Kerry Ann and Vineet all had cast something to break Harry's fall or soften his landing and Aaron looked as though he wished he had been quick enough to cast something too. The spells were waved away and Harry sat up and immediately regretted it. Rodgers approached again and tugged Harry to his feet. Harry wanted a chair, really, not his feet, but he fought the overwhelming need to rest.

"Down to the dispensary. Kalendula, you take him," Rodgers ordered. Kerry Ann approached despite Harry's denial that he needed a healer.

Moody said, " 'E's not overconfident anymore, is 'e?"

Rodgers said to Moody, "If I have any say in it, that's the last interim apprentice exam you are helping with."

Harry stalled in the doorway to see Moody's reaction to that. Moody said, "You can't protect them from everything." Then to Harry, he said, "You've still got a lot to learn, Potter. Remember that."

"Come on, Harry," Kerry Ann urged when Harry hesitated while searching for a response.

Harry stalked to the lifts as best he could while needing help balancing. The lifts seemed very far away from the workout room all of a sudden. When they did reach it, the lurching of it made his stomach nearly rebel.

"Are you going to make it?" Kerry Ann asked. "I can just take you to Mungo's."

"No," Harry said, imagining the scene his appearance would cause in the waiting room at the wizard hospital.

In the dispensary, Harry sat heavily in an overstuffed chair that tried to swallow him, which meant he was not going to get out of it without assistance. Kerry Ann fetched the Healer, a pasty-faced young man who had played Chaser for Ravenclaw when Harry was a second year. At least he healed Harry's shoulder quick enough without him even needing to move from his cushioned spot. For his spell-disturbed nerves, the Healer poured a concoction of potions together, added a tumbler of Pimms to it and handed it over.

Harry sniffed it and, despite the burn it caused his eyes, downed it under the assumption that he couldn't feel much worse. And indeed five minutes later Harry did feel better: he felt numb, pretty much all over.

When Harry stirred from deep within the overstuffed chair, Kerry Ann said, "We should get back."

Harry tried to sit forward to heave himself up, but it was impossible. He held out a hand for assistance and the much lighter Kerry Ann hauled hard to pull him to his feet.

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In the lift, Harry realized that he had three hours of written examination coming up and he could barely feel his fingers. “Shit,” he muttered.

“You should have let me take you to Mungo’s,” Kerry Ann pointed out as they stepped out. “Good excuse to reschedule the rest of the examination.”

Harry had been looking forward too keenly to getting this out of the way to imagine putting it off. Concentrating hard, he followed Kerry Ann into the training room where Vineet and Aaron were sitting at their desks, waiting. The other two desks were already arranged and Harry fell gratefully into the closest one.

“Surviving, Potter?” Rodgers asked.

Harry shrugged. He wasn’t going to ask for anything from this man. The test parchment was slid over his desk, hanging halfway to the floor as the scroll unfurled. Harry looked around in a panic for a quill, and found Kerry Ann holding out a never-out quill for him.

“Thanks,” Harry said, checking that she had another before starting.

Harry, with regulations freshest in his mind, scrolled through and answered all of those first. The curse-related ones he did next, but as he was writing out the last of those answers, his thoughts began to drag. The clock showed that nearly an hour had passed. Harry rubbed his eyes and went back to figure out question one which was about filing procedure, which for some reason, he honestly couldn’t remember the details of. The rules were posted on the wall of the filing room and memorizing them, as a result of their easy access, had not held much purpose. Harry skipped to the next blank question.

“Potter,” Rodgers prodded sharply an hour later. Harry had only meant to rest his eyes and fortunately only five minutes had passed since he had put his head down on his arm.

Harry pushed his hair back, rubbed his forehead where he was getting a throbbing headache and went back again to question one. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize the pegboard in the file room. It reluctantly came into focus. Labeling procedure was on the parchment on the right. Harry needed to know what the dual color codes meant as well as the archive and disposal timelines. He could almost see it in his mind and hoped that Rodgers didn’t prod him again, given that he was upright. Harry felt hot and then cold and the file room in his mind suddenly didn’t contain anything but piles of junk. He opened his eyes. Rodgers had left the room and Kerry Ann worked diligently beside him.

Cripes, Harry thought; he wasn’t going to score any better this time around. This bothered him rather a lot, given how many times over the last half year he had told himself that he would do better. Giving up on question one, Harry began rereading his other answers, fixing some alarming errors he spotted in his answers to the potions

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questions. Getting those wrong would really be the end.

Harry turned in his examination parchment, ate his lunch without tasting it, and forced his eyes to remain open throughout a lecture on suspect background interviews. Rodgers didn't keep them after 3:00 p.m. much to Harry's relief.

Harry took the Floo home, turning down his fellow's invitation to go to a pub. They gave him sympathetic looks before he turned to join a queue at the first hearth, not trusting himself to Apparate home after the day he had had.

At home, Harry tossed his cloak down on the hall floor, climbed the stairs, and fell into bed. Evening turned into night and Harry slept through Hedwig coming to his window. She finally gave up and went hunting, leaving the letter on the doorstep.



Ginny Weasley led Winthrop, a first-year Gryffindor, back to the tower from the furthest darkest fifth floor corridor where he had been trapped in a wardrobe by mischievous students that the boy refused to name. His sniveling had at least ceased by the time they made it back to where the lamps flared brightly. Ginny would be the one to have heard his pounding, of course, not Heather, the new Prefect.

"Ms. Weasley," a deep, slippery voice said behind them just before they reached the staircases.

Ginny stopped and turned. "Professor." Snape strode up to them and stopped abruptly, making his robes swish. Beside her, Winthrop edged closer as though for protection.

"It is after-hours, Ms. Weasley, is it not?" Snape asked.

"I'm taking care of one of my house students who was locked in a wardrobe by some of your students. I'm not out for my health, if that's what you mean." Ginny wasn't certain which students actually were responsible, but Slytherin seemed a good bet. Snape's eyes bored into Winthrop's for a long breath before flicking back up to Ginny's.

"Nevertheless," Snape said. "You no longer have the cover of being a Prefect, which you were so fond of using previously. Mr. Winthrop, go up to your tower and next time do not take rumors of treasures of sweets so seriously."

Winthrop scampered off, his footfalls fading into the distance. Ginny began, "I can't exactly be punished anymore than I—"

Snape ignored her and swung around, commanding, "This way, Ms. Weasley."

She followed him down to the Defense classroom where the lamps were already burning. "Good evening, Ms. Weasley," Lupin said from behind them, beside the door as they entered, startling Ginny.

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“Up there.” Snape pointed to the far end of the platform. When she hesitated, he sneered, “Or would you prefer to do this in front of the class?”

“Do what?”

“Up!” Snape ordered, long finger still pointed. Ginny slunk over and Snape stepped up to the other end.

“What are we doing?” Ginny asked, getting an alarming inkling.

Snape replied silkily, “We are having a rematch.”

“We’re what?!” Ginny exclaimed and then promptly broke into hysterics, bending over her arm she laughed so hard. Lupin had moved to stand beside the platform at the halfway point. “You’re judging?” she asked him between guffaws.

“I have been unwillingly drafted as judge, yes,” Lupin replied, smiling lightly, perhaps at her amusement.

Ginny wiped her eyes on her sleeve and sniffled, still laughing occasionally. “I suppose that ‘no out-of-class dueling’ rule doesn’t count if you’re the deputy headmaster.” She cleared her throat and tried to be serious. “Or are you going to give me additional detention when we’re through? Or only if I win?” This made her laugh again which necessitated drying her eyes again.

“I waited until you broke the rules, Ms. Weasley,” Snape stated.

“Right,” Ginny returned. She cleared her throat and pushed her shoulders back. “I guess I can’t very easily get out of this.”

Snape raised his wand with the precision of an orchestra conductor and twice the concentration. “We can dispense with that silly pacing off and go with a count.”

“No,” Ginny argued, but then remembered to appeal to the judge. “That gives him too much time to Legilimize me. I want the paced count.”

Lupin hitched his hands behind his back and rocked up on the balls of his feet. “I have to side with Ginny on this one.”

Snape rolled his eyes and tossed his wand hand in annoyance. “All right,” he growled and came to the center. “I should have known to expect such decisions when I asked you to judge.”

Lupin pleasantly said, “I’m the only staff member who would have agreed to it, I’m quite certain.”

Darkly, Snape muttered, “You are far too agreeable, Remus.” He faced off with Ginny, who was having a hard time taking this seriously enough despite sheer panic looming just beyond her stifled hysterics.

They turned back to back, wands raised upon Lupin’s gesture to do so. “Do I get anything if I win?” Ginny asked.

Snape hesitated. “I’ll take a week off of your summer detention.”

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“Really? Well, that’s worth trying for.” Just as Lupin began counting and Snape took a long step, Ginny asked, “You can really do that?”

Snape aborted his pacing and returned to his former spot, back turned. “YES. Now duel. You certainly are reluctant for someone willing to practice illicitly not to mention sneak off school grounds in order to do so.”

“All right, all right.”

They paced off and turned inward, casting simultaneously, producing a grand shower of flaming spheres. Snape lowered his wand. “What did you counter that with?” he asked.

“Like I’d tell you,” Ginny retorted, wand still up. George had shown her the flaming water-demon spell under the promise that she only use it in an emergency.

As Snape re-raised his wand, Lupin said, “I’ll give you another count to three.”

On three, Ginny raised a block and deflected the incoming blinding spell. She wanted a free shot and now she had one. Snape’s eyes were drilling into hers, though. “Ugh,” she said, staring down at the floor to think of a different spell and casting a blasting curse, only as she raised her eyes. This was blocked far too easily, she should have thought of something better. Another exchange of low level jinxes were easily blocked, letting Ginny relax. She tossed out the torpedo spell that Harry had shown the D.A. when he visited, but this was dispensed with even easier and with the sneer, “I invented that spell.”

“Oops,” Ginny uttered and then swallowed hard since now it was Snape’s turn. He waited several breaths before spinning the tip of his wand around with the incantation, “Fluctexarmus!” A comet of orange energy circled around Ginny, undeterred by anything she tried against it. She leapt back but it turned fast and swept the wand out of her hand and dropped it on the floor behind Lupin.

Ginny’s shoulders fell, but she held in the damn that threatened to sneak out of her lips. Lupin pleasantly quipped, “Well, that was quite well matched.”

“Best two out of three?” Ginny asked her professor innocently.

Snape rolled his eyes and stalked off.



As the night grew its darkest, Harry finally woke up. He sniffled and scrubbed the grit from his eyes. An odd dream had woken him. In it, he was staring into a darkened house window and in the reflection he could see fire surrounding him, but when he turned to look about himself, there was nothing but a quiet road winding through rows of boxy houses. The flames burned strong though in the reflection, as if well fed.



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Hungry and in need of a bath, Harry shed his clothes for his dressing gown and went downstairs into the cold air of the quiet house. He drank tea and did that day's readings at a calm, leisurely pace that almost made him consider getting up early all of the time. With thoughts turned painfully to what his exam results were going to be from yesterday, Harry Apparated into the Ministry.

The first thing Rodgers said when he walked in gave him a reprieve. In responding to an apparent question from Kerry Ann, Rodgers was saying, "You'll get your results next week, I think. Things are too busy to score them right now." He gave Harry a sharp eying as he took the desk beside Kerry Ann's. "Better, Potter?" he asked pointedly.

"Mostly," Harry replied, hoping to leave enough doubt that he wouldn't be used for difficult demonstrations that day.

Vineet arrived presently and then they waited for Aaron, who was five minutes late. But even after they were all present, Rodgers continued to page through his own notes in silence, rather than begin. The door opened and Mr. Weasley leaned his head in and gestured for Rodgers to start. The apprentices grew curious at this, but as soon as Rodgers began speaking they fell to their official manuals.

"Let's start with the reading review today. Who can tell me the correct procedure for filing a follow-up complaint regarding a haunted property?" His eyes scanned their faces before stopping on Harry's with as flat an expression as he had ever used. "Potter... can you?"

Harry put his hand on his book but didn't need to open it since he had read this not an hour before. "We have to use a translucent grey form so that it gets routed properly to the Paranormal office. As with most repeated complaints where we think the original complaint wasn't handled properly, we add a note in our own open case log to arrange for someone to verify in a few weeks' time that the other department did indeed follow through."

Rodgers hesitated before saying, "Correct."

In the middle of discussing filing procedures and evidence exhibit logging the door opened again. Mr. Weasley said, "Harry," and stepped back to wait for Harry to join him. Harry did so after closing the Fastidious Filing Manual that he had open before him. Something about Mr. Weasley's sober attitude made him not ask any questions, just follow as they turned left at the end of the corridor, rather than right toward Mr. Weasley's office. They passed the ventilation shaft and the owl cages and went all the way down to the end beyond two inexplicable jogs in the corridor. Harry had not been down here since his original tour when he started almost a year ago. This area held the interrogation rooms.

Tonks stood holding a metal-clad door open. It was Mr. Weasley who said, "In

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here, Harry, and give me your wand.”

Harry’s heart tried very hard to speed up, taking a disturbing stuttering start at it. He calmed it as he entered with the firm belief that nothing was amiss, nor could possibly ever be the very amiss implied by what was happening. Inside the bare room sat a single stool, bolted to the floor with plates larger than that on their practice dummy. Fudge and Moody stood beside the wide door, looking somber and reminding Harry of the open investigation the Department of Mysteries had on him since his return from Finland. But he had not had any difficulties, recently anyway, with the Dark Plane, so he should be safe on that account, he believed. Harry handed Mr. Weasley his wand, handle first. His heart again tried to race at the loss of it.

Mr. Weasley said, “Have a seat, Harry,” in a more normal voice and Harry obeyed, calmed again although his muscles tingled as if they themselves were alarmed and readying for flight. The fairy lights floating at the ceiling congregated above Harry, placing him in a column of light which made the faces around him harder to discern. Harry wanted to ask something, but couldn’t even come up with a decent question, given how unexpected his circumstances were.

Moody flicked his cloak off of his left shoulder and stalked past Harry’s knees. “Couldn’t resist a little revenge, could you, Potter?” he asked in a knowing tone.

“What?” Harry managed.

Moody stalked back to the right. Harry glanced at the other occupants of the room. Tonks had her eyes on the floor. Mr. Weasley watched Moody. Fudge looked avid and hungry. Moody went on, “Last week brought it all back, didn’t it? All those years added up, didn’t they? And after doing poorly on your year-end exams you had to take it out on someone...”

“What?” Harry asked again, but the way no one heeded his voice, it was as though he hadn’t spoken. Harry’s mind began racing now, but it couldn’t latch onto even an unreasonable possible explanation for what was happening.

Moody plowed on, “Did you really think the Ministry would just let it go? That you are owed that much?”

“What are you talking about?” Harry demanded.

Mr. Weasley said, “Alastor is asking the questions, Harry.”

Harry closed his jaw, which had fallen open. Was he dreaming? Harry wondered. This disconnect with his notions of all of these people definitely felt dreamlike. He rubbed his forehead where the headache that had been teasing at him now blossomed into a pounding spike. “I don’t know what he is asking me,” Harry insisted, sounding more desperate than he wished. This couldn’t be real.

Moody leaned close. “What do you think you are owed?” he asked slowly, his magical eye trained unwaveringly on Harry.

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Harry stared at him, unable to come up with a response that wasn't a question itself, especially one that included 'bloody hell.' "Nothing," Harry finally replied, exasperated.

Mr. Weasley stepped up beside Moody. "This isn't working, Alastor."

Moody, after a faint snarl at Mr. Weasley, stalked over to the wall to glower at Harry from beside Fudge. Harry found himself on the verge of quoting some of the choice things Moody had said about Fudge in the past. He bit his lip instead, certain that it would not help even as satisfied as it would make him feel.

Mr. Weasley said, "Harry, where were you last night?"

Finally. "At home."

Mr. Weasley put one hand on Harry's shoulder and leaned close. "Anyone there with you?"

"My house-elf," Harry replied.

"Anyone else?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry's heart was sticking to a higher rhythm now. "No."

Mr. Weasley straightened, put his hands behind his back and paced a bit. "But you weren't there to receive your post at around 10:30 p.m.," he commented gently. He gestured at Tonks, who held out a letter. Hermione's handwriting was clearly visible on it. Mr. Weasley held it up for Harry to see it. "It was undelivered on your front step. Ms. Granger states that she sent it around 7:10 p.m."

Harry's hands were trying to shake, so he gripped the stool seat all the harder. "I was asleep. I must-"

Mr. Weasley interrupted him. "Last night, Harry, someone, using a firestarting spell, burned down Number Four, Privet Drive."

Harry nearly fell off the narrow stool he was sitting on despite clutching it fiercely. "Was anyone hurt?" he asked when he processed that notion properly.

As he should have expected, no one answered this question. Mr. Weasley asked, "Who do you think lives at Number Four, Privet Drive, Harry?"

Harry thought he would prefer Moody's interrogation since Harry wondered why Mr. Weasley would ask him such a stupid question. "The Dursleys," Harry replied.

Mr. Weasley shook his head. Moody supplied, "Moved out six months ago."

Harry deflated. That stupid question was a test and he had failed it miserably. "You think - ?" Harry began to ask in higher alarm, but Mr. Weasley holding up his hand for silence, made him close his mouth.

"No one besides your house-elf was there with you last night?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Winky is always there. She knows I was home," Harry insisted.

"Inadmissible," Fudge grunted; the first thing he had said.

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“What does he mean?” Harry asked, forgetting again that he wasn’t supposed to ask anything and wincing inwardly when he remembered too late.

Mr. Weasley rubbed his face. “He means that your house-elf cannot be a witness for you since the binding spell makes them capable of deception in their master’s interest.”

“I’m not bound to Winky,” Harry said.

The room seemed to freeze. “You aren’t?” Mr. Weasley prompted with interest.

“No. I didn’t want to do the spell. She’s only bound to Severus.”

Mr. Weasley gave Moody a sharp look. “Fetch Winky, Alastor.”

While they waited, questions ballooned inside of Harry, frantic to get out. He sat silently though, suffering.

Moody returned into the tense silence. He had Winky by the back of her tea-towel and she was using her long fingers to pry his open. He shook her to get her to stop.

“Leave her alone,” Harry demanded angrily.

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley held out his hand and said in a tone that was half threat but of the fatherly kind. “This would not be a good time to lose your temper.”

Harry’s anger, now loosed, was finding a lot of targets. He glared at each person in turn, even Tonks, who still stared at her feet, wand pointed at the floor.

“Tell him not to manhandle Winky, then. She hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Crouch’s old elf,” Fudge said, insinuatingly. “Interesting... very interesting...” Harry couldn’t discern his features in the shadowy corner by the door.

Moody lorded over Winky and asked, “Your Master order you to watch over Potter here... like you used to for Barty Jr.?” Winky rubbed her hands rapidly over each other and blinked up at Moody before glancing nervously at Harry. Moody impatiently demanded, “Did he?”

“Winky watch over Harry Potter, yes. Master wishes this. Winky good elf,” the last came out sadly uncertain.

“And was Harry Potter at home last night?” Moody demanded.

“Yes,” Winky replied.

“What time did he come home?”

Winky shook her head and twisted her hands together. “Winky no tell time.”

Harry swallowed a noise of exasperation. Fortunately, Moody was familiar with this. He asked, “Was it still light out when Potter returned home?”

“Yes.”

“Was he there until it was completely dark?” Another nod. “Did he leave... AT ALL... before it became light again?”

“No,” Winky replied, sounding small.

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Harry released the breath he had been holding. "You don't really think I'd try to hurt my aunt and uncle...?"

"Harry," Mr. Weasley warned sharply. Harry had never seen him truly angry, now realized that he really didn't wish to, and that he may be about to.

Tonks had finally raised her eyes, looking between Winky and Harry and actually meeting Harry's eyes. "The evidence is rather damning, Harry," she said.

"What evidence?" Harry returned. "I want Severus here," he then said, feeling fear welling behind his anger now that words like 'inadmissible' and 'evidence' were being tossed about.

Mr. Weasley grabbed Harry's shoulder for an instant. "You are too old to insist he be here," he explained, oddly in a tone intended for someone much younger. "We may have made an exception when you were seventeen, but not now."

"I want a solicitor then," Harry said.

"That you may have," Mr. Weasley said and stepped back as though waiting.

"Have one lined up do you?" Moody offered.

"I don't know one, but Hermione could probably recommend one." Harry looked around at all of them. "I just want someone here on my side," he insisted, not managing to keep his voice from sounding bleak.

This statement caused a visible reaction in both Tonks and Mr. Weasley, who said, "Harry, if the truth is on your side, you have no concerns here."

Harry rubbed his stabbing head and let some of the tension out of his shoulders. He was wishing he had stayed in Finland.

"Do you want a solicitor, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I want to hear what the evidence is," Harry retorted.

Mr. Weasley withdrew Harry's wand from his robe pocket and held it up. "A phoenix-core wand has some unique properties; one of which is its firestarting spell. Did you know that, Harry?"

Harry winced inwardly at Mr. Weasley's frown when he replied honestly, "No."

Mr. Weasley said, "A phoenix-core wand leaves a distinctive feather pattern in the ash of the fire it starts. You might even see it in the carbon black in the wax of a candle you lit. Never noticed it, eh?"

Harry shook his head.

Mr. Weasley appeared disappointed.

"Check his wand," Fudge muttered from his shadowy corner.

"That can be fooled," Moody muttered. "I've made my wand forget spells."

"We'll assume for the moment that Harry has not progressed as far as you," Mr. Weasley stated and didn't see Moody's dubious expression because he was pulling out his own wand and aiming the tips together. "Prior Incantato," Mr. Weasley incanted

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

and Harry's wand spilled forth a hazy version of the teapot he had reheated that morning, a curl of steam issuing from its ghostly spout. Mr. Weasley repeated the spell and Harry's Pack spell to clean up the library at home followed, ghostly books flying around the bare interrogation room. Again and again the spell was repeated, backing lengthily through Harry's previous day's testing and the night before. Harry had had no idea that he used magic so often at home.

They all waited as another day was backed through after Moody insisted Harry could have somehow recreated all of those numerous blocks from drill practice Monday.

"Spell's not on here," Mr. Weasley said.

"Maybe he owns a second wand of the same core," Fudge suggested. "Did you check with Ollivanders?" This last was directed at Moody.

"I asked how many wands of that type there were. He said he rarely sold more than one a decade, so I doubt there are more than 12 or so roving about in use. You have another wand, Potter?" Moody asked while leaning close so his magic eye filled Harry's vision.

"No."

In the ensuing silence Harry tried another question of his own. "What happened? Was anyone hurt?"

Mr. Weasley replied, "Only slightly, fortunately. Young couple that lives there now jumped out a rear first story window onto some overgrown shrubbery." Staring fixedly at Harry, he asked, "Did you burn down the Dursley house, Harry?"

You have to effing ask that? Harry nearly snapped in disbelief. "No," he replied, anger barely in check.

"We're having a very difficult time, you see, coming up with anyone else who would have," Mr. Weasley stated.

Harry's mind, which had been spinning aimlessly, latched unexpectedly onto Mr. Weasley's previous statement. "Someone's trying to frame me," he insisted. "Someone who, unlike myself, wouldn't have known that the Dursleys would never let the shrubs get overgrown. Honestly, if I were going to attack the Dursleys I'd make certain it was them at home and I'd have known it wasn't in that case."

Mr. Weasley and Fudge shared a look and Tonks for the first time, brightened slightly. "A setup is certainly a possibility," Mr. Weasley said with strange care, but it still let Harry relax marginally that he had said it at all. Harry glanced around the stark interrogation room and felt anger returning, full force. He clamped his jaw tight to keep himself from speaking. Mr. Weasley held Harry's wand out to him. "I think we are done for now."

Moody made a noise of disgust, prompting Mr. Weasley to say. "There isn't

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enough evidence to hold him, Alastor.” Harry accepted his wand, forcing his movements to be fluid rather than violent to express the hot anger searing his limbs.

Harry followed Mr. Weasley back to the workout room. The trip felt like a mile, during which Harry barely managed to avoid snapping out a variety of vicious comments about them not trusting him; all of which, he was certain, were a bad idea. At the door to the workout room Mr. Weasley said to Rodgers in an awkward attempt at nonchalance, “Here’s Harry back.”

Harry took his seat. His vision was going strange with his anger, as though a black veil were flashing in the wind in front of his face. It took him a few seconds to realize that Kerry Ann had spoken his name in concern. He didn’t know if she had asked anything, just had a sense of her speaking. Drawing on a well of good attitude that somehow hadn’t run dry, Harry managed, “It’s nothing.”

Rodgers gave Harry a long looking over before returning to their review of the filing manual.

Harry didn’t eat anything at lunch; he couldn’t face idle, pointless conversation. He sat alone in the workout room, nursing his headache. His much needed solitude was interrupted by Mr. Weasley, who pulled the desk before Harry’s around to face him. With his hands clasped on the desktop, he said, “As Tonks said, Harry, the situation does appear quite damning on the face of it.”

Harry swallowed hard as a small, disloyal part of his mind tried to agree. Mr. Weasley gave him a lot of time to reply but finally decided Harry was not going to. “The Prophet has not noticed the Muggle articles about the fire, I expect because the address is no longer on the wizard registry. I believe, Harry, that it is in your best interest that they not find out. I’ve managed to keep the investigation secret so far. Alastor and Cornelius are amendable to that for their own reasons: for one thing it allows them to keep control of the investigation.”

“They really think I did it?” Harry demanded angrily and then bit his lip for the twentieth time that morning; to his own ears he sounded peevish, like Draco Malfoy. The translucent black curtain fluttered before his vision again. The gateway to the Dark Plane must be wide open. Harry felt around him, felt the queer hunger of the creatures waiting just beyond the barrier. He made himself release some of the poisonous anger filling him like an electric current, even though it threatened to take his forbearance with it.

Mr. Weasley said, “You need to keep this to yourself, Harry. The investigation is coded blue, and you have learned what that means, I assume.”

Harry nodded. “Explicit permission must be obtained from the lead investigator to release any information.”

“That includes Severus, Harry.”

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Harry's brow furrowed. He hadn't thought ahead to going home, but if he had, firing an owl off to his guardian would have been the very first thing he would have done. "I understand," Harry said, hating to say it.

Mr. Weasley stood. "Keep it in line, Harry. I expect Alastor will be keeping an eye on you."

"I didn't do anything," Harry insisted. "Don't you believe me?"

"My belief doesn't help anything, Harry," he replied vaguely before he opened the door and departed.

During drills, Harry was hopelessly distracted. He couldn't generate a dome-crystalline block at all and ended up flat on the floor many times as a result. The last time, he nearly blacked out completely, and as Rodgers used a water spritzing spell on his face to wake him up, Harry thought he was back in the Triwizard tournament, passing out because his gills had faded and he couldn't breathe.

"Take a break, Potter," Rodgers snapped.

Harry scrambled to his feet, nearly fell as his vision went bad again, but found his desk and clung to its solidity. His fellows were gazing at him in alarm but they eventually went on with their drills.

At the end of the day, Harry departed before anyone could ask him a question that he couldn't answer. The house was eerily silent when he arrived home. Rubbing his bruised arm, Harry went to his room and lay on his bed staring at the ceiling, ignoring for nearly an hour Kali's frantic clawing at her cage to get out.

Harry finally rose, wondering as he did why he had lain there so long, doing nothing. Kali climbed onto his shoulders and circled manically.

"Sorry," Harry said to her, knowing his own distress was possessing her. He held her in the crook of his arm and petted her, even though she struggled against it.

Harry paced the house, thinking he should find his friends and then nixing that idea when he considered the torment of not being able to share his troubles with them, especially in the face of what he knew would be painful assurances of help on Hermione's part. Thinking of his friends gave him the energy to open his post. A Muggle letter from Pamela peaked his interest, so he opened that one first. In it she again lamented that he did not have a telephone as she badly needed to talk to him.

Harry put the letter down and Disapparated to her house. Pamela had just come in and was putting her keys and purse away. "Harry, what timing," she said brightly and then seemed to take in his emotional state in one quick glance, "Is everything all right?"

"Things have become a little complicated at the Ministry. But it's all right," he lied, and not very well, he thought.

"Well, I don't want to bother you if you have other things to worry about..."



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“No, really. I need the distraction,” Harry insisted.

“I’d ring you if you only had a phone so you wouldn’t have to come all this way.”

“It’s not a problem, really,” Harry insisted.

Pamela took her own post out of a holder by the door. “So I borrowed your owl to send a letter to Remus... I left my glove, hoping you would send her.”

Harry blinked at that. “Clever of you.”

“But, I got back a response that makes me very curious about some things.” She unfolded a letter and looked it over before sighing. “I tried to be plain about hoping to see him again, but he doesn’t seem to get it...”

“You what?” Harry said. “Oh,” he then said he accepted that “You’ve only met him once,” he felt compelled to point out.

“Haven’t you ever liked someone the first time you laid eyes on them?” she asked.

“Er, maybe,” Harry said.

She folded up the letter. “I wondered, for example, is Remus gay?”

“Not that I know of,” Harry said.

“He has no girlfriend now?”

“Not that I know of,” Harry repeated.

“Then, he has some serious skeleton rattling in his cupboard, right?”

“He has... sorta,” Harry admitted, thinking that revelations of such things should come from the source.

She gazed at him without blinking before asking, “The kind Severus apparently has?”

“Not at all,” Harry said in relief at her good question. “No, nothing like that.”

“So, unlike Severus, you wouldn’t mind if I dated Remus?”

Harry struggled for a second. “If he agreed to it... I think... that’d be fine.” Harry hesitated again before asking, “You have a thing for wizards?”

She smiled a little crookedly and tilted her head side to side. “Yeah, I guess.” Shyly, she asked, “Can I borrow Hedwig again?”

Back at home, after delivering his owl to his cousin despite Hedwig’s dislike of Apparition, Harry felt even more alone and worries about the Ministry began to press in again. He forced himself to review the Ministry’s official Magic Manual of Moneytracking. Expense reports were so far from his purview of care that he actually laughed upon opening the booklet, which was bound with a used shoe lace as though in a demonstration of cost-savings.

Before he went to bed, he sat petting Kali and considering how he might send a message to Snape. The Eye’s Only spell would certainly work to keep Moody from reading it upon intercepting it, unless his magic eye could see through it. But even if Harry thought he could obscure his message, anything he might say would draw

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his guardian here, which would give it away. Even if Harry insisted Snape not come home, he had little faith his guardian would honor that if he thought he was needed. Harry curled up on his bed in his clothes while clutching his pet, and fell asleep.

The next day of training went only slightly better than the previous day's. Dark dreams full of confusion and blood had haunted Harry's night, and he had actually spiked his morning coffee with Pepper-up to wake himself. Harry again tried to skip lunch. Kerry Ann stayed behind in the workout room, ignoring Rodgers sharp glance as he departed.

"Harry, what's the matter?"

"I'm not allowed to talk about it," Harry explained.

"Is everything all right?" she asked in clear concern, sounding like Hermione would have had Harry given her the chance to see his state.

"No, but there isn't anything you can do, so don't worry about it."

"I have extra pasta in my lunch if you didn't bring one," she offered.

Harry didn't want her concern; it was tearing his walls down and he badly needed them. "I brought a lunch, thanks," he said dismissively.

She took the hint and started for the door. "If I can do anything, Harry, let me know."

That evening during dinner, which Harry knew he needed to more than pick at, but could barely manage to eat more than three bites, an owl arrived at the window – a Ministry owl. Harry accepted the letter and watched it glide away.

Inside was a summons to a hearing the following evening before the Wizengamot to review the facts of the incident at the Dursley's former house. Harry dropped the letter before him on the table and stared at its neatly handwritten lines of text. The phrase Muggle residence situated at Number Four, Privet Drive stared out at him. If the Dursley's had sent him a notice that they had moved, he wouldn't have answered that critical question wrong. But they probably didn't want him to know where they lived. Probably felt safer for his ignorance.

He was allowed a solicitor; he wondered if he needed one. The evidence was on his side; he didn't want to appear anything but confident of his innocence. Although, he was going to have to get by this ache of betrayal if he was going to continue to function. Not trusting him to take action when he thought it necessary was one thing. Not trusting that he wouldn't attack a Muggle house in the middle of the night, even if his aunt and uncle still lived there, was another thing entirely. It made his insides knot queasily to consider it.

Harry paced. He stared at the bottle of liquor before dismissing that way of eliminating his stress. He needed to talk to someone, desperately. But there was only one person he could talk to.

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Harry took the Floo to the Burrow and stepped out to find Mr. and Mrs. Weasley sitting at their oversized table, having tea.

“Harry!” Molly Weasley said in warm greeting, even getting up to give him a hug.

“Good evening, Mrs. Weasley.” To the figure still hunched over the Daily Prophet, Harry said, “I need to talk to you, sir.”

“Harry,” Molly said, pushing his hair back from his ear. “is everything all right?”

“Not really, but I can’t explain.” Harry watched Mr. Weasley, his thin hair mussed and standing up on top of his head, giving him a red aura in the lamplight. His posture was not reassuring, and Harry dearly needed reassurance at that moment. “Can I talk to you, sir?”

Mr. Weasley hesitated replying. When he did, he said, “I’m not sure what there is to say, Harry.” He turned the page of the Prophet, leaving Harry dumbfounded.

“Arthur,” Molly said, shocked. “You won’t speak to Harry?”

Mr. Weasley looked up, and Harry did what he had been resisting the last two days because he thought it improper – he read Mr. Weasley’s eyes. In them he found conflicting instinct, old memories of a much smaller version of Harry seemingly always in some difficulty or another, as well as fear of his strange new powers, a lingering doubt about the events at the Dursley’s, and overriding any of his normal kindheartedness, a desire to remain aloof enough to do his job properly. Mr. Weasley was flinching from any threat that would break down that resolve.

Molly was speaking. “Shall I leave you alone then?”

“No, I’ll go,” Harry said.

“Harry,” Molly said in confusion. “Arthur,” she sharply said, turning to her husband. Harry started toward the Floo before realizing he didn’t need it. He Disapparated on the spot with only an inkling of where he wished to go.

Harry arrived behind the block of flats where Hermione lived. He blinked at the stone wall in confusion since he hadn’t fully decided to come here. He strode out onto the pavement with purpose; Hermione would understand that he needed to talk without actually being able to say anything, her job dealt with that all of the time.

When his friend opened the door, she had a broad smile on her face, and it took Harry a moment to realize she was expecting someone else. But she insisted he come in and have a seat at the table. She was in the midst of setting the table and continued doing that, adding a plate before Harry to make three placesettings.

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Harry insisted.

“Harry, I’ve seen that look, what’s going on?”

“I can’t say. But I’ve had the worst week in a very long time, maybe ever.” He glanced over the nice placesettings, the candles on the table. Hermione held a plate before her like a shield.

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“You can’t talk about any of it?” she prompted, her gold hair clip glittering in the candlelight. She put the plate down on the counter and looked at him in concern.

“If I said I might need a solicitor, could you give me a name?”

“For business at the Ministry? Civil or criminal?”

“Criminal,” Harry admitted.

“Harry, are you in trouble?” she asked.

“Not as a result of anything I’ve done. Let’s put it that way.” He adjusted the shiny plate before him, white as snow, and wished he were still in Finland. He wondered idly if he could Apparate all the way there.

Hermione pulled out a sheet of paper and, with a decorative peacock quill, jotted a name on it along with an address. Without speaking, she handed it over.

“Thanks,” Harry said, pocketing it. His head pounded, so he rubbed his temple.

“Do you need something for a headache? I have some Muggle medicine that works great.” She didn’t wait for a reply before fetching it and a glass of water.

Harry gratefully downed the little white pills. He wanted to tell her everything. He needed a sympathetic ear more than anything else in the world at that moment, even more than the headache medicine.

A knock sounded on the door. Hermione jerked to attention and went to answer it. Harry stood as well and found himself faced with Vineet when the door was opened, temporarily jarring Harry from his own concerns. Vineet nodded his head at Harry, who was deciding that he really should depart before his faith in the world skewed even more dangerously. Vineet stepped aside and Nandi followed him inside, making Harry nearly blush in embarrassment over his assumptions. Harry greeted them both and said he needed to go.

Hermione said, “Harry, please stay for dinner; there is plenty of food.”

“Thanks really, but I have to think about some things.”

She watched him depart with sad eyes. Vineet, still with his cloak on, followed him into the corridor and shut the door behind him. His dark brown eyes gazed at Harry with unnatural intensity. “You are in some difficulty with the Ministry, I think,” he stated.

“Yeah, but I think it will be all right. I haven’t felt this helpless, though, since offing Voldemort and I really hate it.”

Vineet considered him before saying, “I am here because of you, not because of the Ministry of Magic. This means my loyalty is first to you.”

Harry would previously have found this pronouncement a bit unsettling but in his current state of needing allies, he found it reassuring. “Thanks, Vineet. I appreciate that.”

## DUELING LOYALTIES

As Harry stepped away, saying that he would see his fellow apprentice the next day, Vineet said, "You may call on me anytime."

"Have a nice dinner, Vineet," Harry said and waved casually, pretending everything was all right long enough to turn away.

Out on the pavement, the wind had picked up, tossing Harry's cloak about. A figure immediately stepped up beside him, walking with him.

"Not very attentive of you, Harry," Molly Weasley criticized him. "You need to be more careful; I could have been anyone."

"Lot on my mind, but you're right," Harry said. "What are you doing here?"

They resumed walking as she said, "I'm here to apologize for my husband, who since his promotion has been turning into someone I don't recognize all of the time."

"I think he's just trying to do his job," Harry said, finding a defensive argument easier than expected.

Author's Notes: Amber? As an eyecolor? Well, there is a consensus at least on the golden brown (and delicious) but the lexicon says "unknown" and I didn't look beyond that. Originally, I imagined a purebred malamute with one brown eye and one blue one and I thought, well, if that were the case it HAD to have been mentioned in canon and I couldn't get away with that even as tempting of a doggie characteristic that it is and how symbolic... Amber (that sounds terribly fanon all by itself, I confess) doesn't fit for me. Too warm somehow. Lupin is so... separate I guess but always wishing otherwise that a warm color seems too... outward. I don't know, something. He wears his warmth in his personality when the situation allows for it, not automatically. All this mental debate and it will never come up again, I'm sure.

Snape as cardboard. The trouble for me is that if I show too much inside his head – which I'm guessing is the problem since he is five or six dimensional for me – he loses his mystery, which is a significant chunk of his appeal. It's like that haunted house on the corner that fascinates you utterly until you finally step into on some sunny day on a dare and discover that the worst it has to offer is rotting floorboards. Your comment is interesting because I would have predicted the opposite criticism to occur: that Harry is a foil to show glimpses of inner Snape and to force growth on his resisting personality. Ah, well, I don't believe I can do any better with Snape, except to run him through an even worse ringer to see what kind of playdoh creature comes out the other side, and it just so happens that I'm sizing him up for one right now...

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Harry's already been measured...

Keep in mind that I like happy endings but I firmly believe that they only matter if they seem horribly unlikely halfway or even 9/10ths of the way there.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



# THE HEARING

Harry arrived at the Ministry early on Friday and waited alone in the Auror's break room for his time to report to the hearing. Mr. Weasley came in, leaned over the table, and said, "I know this may sound like a brokered recording—"

"Broken record," Harry corrected without thinking.

"One of those, but you must, **MUST** keep your temper. Cornelius knows it's your weakness and he is going to try to use it."

Quietly, Harry asked, "What does he have against me?" Harry held off on asking Mr. Weasley the same thing. After all, his department head was only treating him the same as anyone, and that's what Harry had insisted he wanted.

Mr. Weasley straightened and took one of the stale biscuits from the foil pan someone had left behind in the center of the table; it snapped into a shower of crumbs when he bit through it. "You remind him of the past, of past failures. He thinks you weren't on his side when you should have been."

"He wasn't on my side when he should have been," Harry countered glumly.

Mr. Weasley took another bite, generating fewer crumbs this time. He wiped his mouth as he said, "I expected that his assignment to review the procedures of the Department of Magical Transportation would keep him occupied for his first six months, but he's given all of the workload to Percy."

"What?" Harry blurted, finding himself stunned at this revelation. At Mr. Weasley's curious, chewing-stalled expression, Harry explained, "Half the time I step into the Floo network, I get directed to the wrong hearth. Don't you?"

"Not more so than I used to," Mr. Weasley said, appearing concerned. "I'll ask

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Percy about it next family dinner.”

“No, don’t bother,” Harry quickly said, standing up to head down to the hearing room a few minutes early in the hopes of getting it all over with a bit earlier.

“You’ll do fine, Harry,” Mr. Weasley reassured him as he brushed crumbs from his robe front. “The truth always wins in the end.”

Harry hesitated at the door thinking he wished to argue with that, but he let it go instead because he was feeling better about his prospects. Although he was still too stung to reveal this confidence, even if Mr. Weasley were just trying to do his job. As he stepped into the lift, Harry considered that everyone was just trying to do their job... as they saw it, anyway. With a clunk the lift started moving. Harry’s only job right now was staying out of trouble and he wasn’t making a very good show of it. Relax, be confident, Harry told himself as he stepped out and made his way through witches and wizards busy with their own tasks.

Outside the heavy wooden door to the hearing room, Harry waited to be called inside. He was ten minutes early, which gave him enough time to half-wish he had owed the solicitor. Perhaps it wouldn’t have looked too suspicious to have one. As he pondered this, a small, old wizard came to the door and gestured for him to enter. Harry sat in one of the petitioner chairs that faced the tiered seats, grateful that this wasn’t Courtroom Ten, just the usual meeting room. Taking in the room, Harry noticed McGonagall’s alarm as she took in his presence between quick glances at the paperwork before her.

Fudge stepped down the far stair to the floor, and when he passed, Moody materialized from the wall, where Harry had not noticed him standing before.

Fudge began, “On the night of May the 25th of this year a magical spell was used to incinerate a Muggle residence located at Number Four, Privet Drive. This residence is noteworthy as the former home of one Vernon Dursley and one Petunia Dursley, who have, as of six months previous, relocated to a home in the area of Finchley. Mr. Potter, did you know your relatives had moved?” He asked this as though savoring the question.

“No, sir,” Harry replied.

“Amazing, your pseudo-parents of seventeen years did not see fit to notify you that they had changed homes?”

“No, sir,” Harry replied, still levelly and with easy confidence. He wished McGonagall didn’t still look quite so alarmed.

“Is it safe to say that you did not get along with your relatives, that in fact many outright brawls broke out between your relatives and yourself starting...” Here he consulted a sheet of paper, making Harry wonder if it were an official record or just his own notes. “Starting in 1989 but growing in violence significantly after you began



## THE HEARING

your studies at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?"

Harry thought over his years of being manhandled by his uncle. "I wouldn't have defined them as brawls," Harry said.

"Well, then, give us a word for them."

"Well, I guess I'd call it overly strict punishment," Harry countered.

"But violent, wouldn't you say?"

"Physical," Harry corrected.

"Whatever you wish to call it," Fudge said dismissively. "Isn't it safe to say that they were frightened of you?"

Harry wished he had a solicitor to deal with Fudge for him. Minister Bones interjected, "Are you going somewhere with this questioning, Cornelius?"

"I'm establishing motive, madam," Fudge said with a little bow. "Mr. Potter, when was the last time you saw your relatives?"

"Um, my birthday, last year. They were at the same restaurant."

Seeming oddly pleased, Fudge rearranged his notes and said, "Yes, the waiter states that your uncle refused at first to sit near you, referred to you and your companions as 'freaks'. That didn't bother you, Mr. Potter."

"They've always hated wizards. It was nothing new."

"And here they were, ruining your birthday. It would not be incorrect to state that you do not like them... would it not?"

Harry replayed that sentence in his head as he glumly considered in silence that they had ruined every birthday so far. "As you probably have statements of mine to support," Harry said, indicating the large stack in Fudge's hand, "I'm not particularly fond of them, no."

Fudge leaned forward and like a trap closing, said, "Hate them enough to hurt them? The way you blew up your aunt when she insulted you?"

"No. And she hadn't insulted me, she insulted my mum and dad." Temper, Harry, he thought to himself and made his shoulders relax.

The evidence was presented as a long reading of the interrogation transcript. The only interesting moment was when Moody demonstrated that he could indeed remove a spell from his wand. Harry tried to watch how he did it, but he turned his back to Harry as he worked the spell – using another wand of the same length and wood, essentially transferring the memory of the spell to the other wand.

"Of course, Mr. Potter, our star Auror apprentice and known quick study of spells would have no difficulty with such a spell, even as complicated as it is," Fudge stated airily as the demonstration concluded.

McGonagall interrupted. "May we review the section of the transcript where Harry asserts that had he wished to attack his relatives he would have checked that

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it was they who were home?"

Fudge read it again, he had mumbled over those sections the first time.

"So the shrubs were overgrown?" she confirmed. "Harry you would have noticed that, would you not?"

"I trimmed those shrubs every two weeks, every summer as long as I lived there. I would have noticed. The Order of the Phoenix once fooled my relatives to get them out of the house by telling them they had won the All England Best-Kept Suburban Lawn Competition. They would never let things go while they were living there."

Bones flipped through the parchments before her. "Well, I agree with Mr. Fudge only on one point, and that is that there is no other likely motivation for this crime. Harry do you know of any other witch or wizard who would do this?"

When his focus relaxed, the flickering torches lining the walls appeared as a floating, glowing plane bisecting the large room into a top and bottom half. The ridiculous answer Voldemort popped into his head. Frowning at the notion that they would surely have him locked up for his own protection if he said that, Harry instead said, "No madam. Not beyond framing me."

Minister Bones asked point blank, "Mr. Potter, did you burn down your relative's former house?"

"No, madam."

"That, and the evidence, is good enough for me. I move that this investigation against Mr. Potter be terminated... all in favor?"



At home, still reeling from his sudden release from suspicion, Harry encountered a pacing Snape in the dining room. Pacing and angry.

"Why didn't you inform me?" Snape demanded, hair askew more than usual.

"They told me not to. Specifically," Harry explained. At Snape's look of derisive disbelief, Harry said, "Made it a test even that I not tell you. I had to obey given how much trouble I'm already in. If they'd intercepted the owl... If you had come in response to an owl..."

Snape shook his head, and as though lecturing, said, "Harry, from now on if you send me an owl that begins with the phrase 'training went well' I will assume you are in trouble. If you follow with the phrase with 'but I need to work on my blocks,' I will not come home, but will send you a coded owl, one you will have to read between the lines of, metaphorically. In such situations, magically hidden writing only attracts more suspicion. You will simply have to decode the double meanings and reply in kind. Do you understand me?" he demanded.

## THE HEARING

“Yes,” Harry replied. “I should have tried to send you an owl, I suppose, but I was a little out of kilter after the interrogation and I wasn’t sure where to turn.”

Snape grabbed a hold of the front of Harry’s robes and tugged him so that their noses nearly bumped. “You. Can. Always. Turn. To. Me,” he stated almost viciously, and Harry realized with no little shock that he had truly hurt his guardian by not telling him what was happening.

“I’m sorry. I knew you’d come if the situation got worse. I didn’t doubt that. But Mr. Weasley said I could rely on the truth.”

Snape had almost let go of Harry’s robe, but he re-gripped it as he said, “Arthur Weasley is a dangerously over-optimistic man. How he survived the dark times, I have never fully determined, expect to believe that the Death Eaters never found him potentially dangerous enough to really eliminate.” He released Harry then, and Harry shook his clothes out while rubbing his forehead.

“I’m finding out who trusts me and who doesn’t,” Harry said shakily. “Even Mr. Weasley had his doubts,” he admitted and felt the world shift dangerously under his feet with that admission. “How can I count on these people when things get worse?” he asked, distraught now that he had Snape to talk to.

Snape stepped closer and unexpectedly put one arm around Harry, who stared over Snape’s shoulder out into the hall in surprise before saying, “I can’t exactly take care of the prophecy if I’m in Azkaban for something I didn’t do.”

Snape’s voice, very close to Harry’s ear said, “That will not happen,” in a tone that implied a large number of laws would end up broken if need be.

Harry didn’t want to thank him for that pledge as much as he was grateful for it. This will all pass, and things will go back to normal, Harry insisted to himself, thinking that in the end more people at the Ministry supported him than not, which was better than most of the past. He was grateful enough for that to feel he could not let them down.

Snape patted him on the shoulder blade and released him, averting his gaze. Harry asked, “What should I do about Moody... and Fudge?”

“I do not think there is anything you can do. Moody is not the most well-balanced individual and he is tenacious once he believes he is on the trail of something. The Department of Mysteries itself operates with very little oversight, is my understanding. Remaining out of their way entirely would be wisest. I will, however, suggest that Minerva bring the Order back together, although her alarm at finding you on the Wizengamot agenda may already have convinced her to do so.” He looked Harry over as though grading his state of mind. “Do you have any idea who did attack the Dursley’s old house?”

Harry froze again on that question. He swallowed and said, “Merton is the obvious

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

answer, but you know it's really stupid, during the hearing I wanted to say 'Voldemort' when they asked me that." Harry laughed lightly then. "He always wanted to get at me." At Snape's dubious expression, Harry admitted, "I didn't answer that way; I said I didn't know."

"You may have caused a panic, had you done so," Snape stated wryly. "Voldemort would not have left anyone alive," he added darkly. "But someone does seem desirous of getting you out of the way, although they are never straightforward about it, are they?"

"You mean, why don't they just jump me in a dark alley?"

"Precisely. It implies that they are certain they cannot best you in a fair fight, which unfortunately leaves us with most of Wizardom as a possibility."

Harry chuckled lightly at that as he assumed Snape intended, given the odd glitter in his eye, belying his snide tone.

Snape said, "I must get back. I will re-ward my Floo to accept Hedwig... or even Kali... in transit. And I will return tomorrow evening to check on you." Then as nasty as Harry had ever heard him speak, Snape said, "DO NOT leave me in the dark if anything happens. I don't care who tells you to keep it a secret. I trust you are clever enough to couch your words in an open letter to communicate most anything to me. There are a great number of things that only you and I know. Use them."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. "Thanks." As Snape took the powder canister down, Harry said, "Not sure what I'd do without you."

Despite having given Harry a hug not a minute before, this statement seemed to make him uncomfortable. "Be very careful, Harry. I would quote Mr. Moody, but cannot bring myself to do so." And with a toss of powder, he was gone.



It was not a Hogsmeade weekend for the students, so Snape strode alone along the rutted path to the neighboring wizard village. The grass beyond the Hogwarts lawn had not been mown yet this spring and it caught at his robes as he walked. The tea shop was quiet when he entered and Candide stood to greet him when he opened the door. Snape sat across from her, glancing at the elderly couple leaning over a far table.

"Thank you for meeting me on such short notice," Snape said.

"It's no problem," she assured him. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and leaned forward to pour tea for him.

Snape didn't touch his. Instead he clasped his hands before him and said, "I need a favor from you."

## THE HEARING

“Course,” she said, sounding surprised but not displeased.

Snape glanced around the quiet shop again and stood. “Let’s talk elsewhere. I do not wish to be overheard.” He pulled a handful of Knuts from his coin purse and tossed them on the table. She stood, hitched her cloak back on and followed him out.

At High Street, Snape paused to look in both directions. “Come,” he said, leading the way toward the lake. But rather than follow the path to the gate, he cut through the longer grass and into the forest. When Candide hesitated, he came back and took her by the hand to lead her through the brush at the edge, only releasing her when they reached the deeper trees where few plants grew among the gnarled roots of the broad, straight trees.

“Severus, is this really a good idea?” she asked.

Snape had taken out his wand when he dropped her hand and now turned in a circle as they walked. “This is the safest place to talk.”

They walked farther, following a gradual rise. Hoofbeats approaching brought them to a halt and Candide moved to stand very close to Snape’s side. A female centaur skidded to a halt and gazed down at them, tail flicking, eyes flashing.

“You are not welcome here,” she said.

“Tough,” Snape stated, holding his wand at the ready though not aimed. “We will be taking a little walk this fine afternoon whether you like it or not.”

The centaur’s front hoof pawed the soft ground. She sneered lightly and said, “Take your walk in the direction of the Booming One then.” She pointed off to her left.

“Booming One,” Snape echoed, trying to puzzle that out. “All right,” he agreed, and took Candide’s hand to lead her that way.

When they were out of earshot of the centaur, Candide asked, “What’s the Booming One?”

“You will see,” Snape assured her.

“Is this secrecy really necessary enough to be strolling in the Forbidden Forest?” she asked, prompting him to turn in another predatory circle to check around them.

“Yes.”

They approached what appeared to be a small hill in a clearing, but when the hill shifted and stood up, Candide came to a sudden stop. Snape turned to urge her to follow. “Is that a giant?” she asked, stunned.

“Yes. Come.” He spoke casually, and with a shake of her head, Candide did approach, although clearly only on Snape’s assurance.

A boom! accompanied the giant stepping in their direction. He leaned down and sniffed. “Perfessor?” he asked.

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“Yes, Grawp,” Snape said casually, stepping around the giant’s massive muddied foot and over to a fallen tree, one of many that formed a circle like a fence around the clearing. It clearly had been forcibly hauled up by the roots at one point. “You don’t mind if we drop in for a visit, do you?” Snape asked pleasantly as he took a seat with a flick of his robes.

Candide skirted quickly around the obstacle of Grawp’s foot and joined him. “Well, this is unexpected.”

“But very safe,” Snape said under his breath. “He smells anyone approaching, cloaked or not.”

Grawp sat down with a thundering crash. Snape ignored this and said to Candide, “I have a difficult favor to ask of you.”

“You’ve never asked for a favor before,” she said. “I expect that all favors are difficult for you.”

He gave her a pained half smile in response. “I need you to move in.”

“Move in? To your house?” When he nodded, she facetiously asked, “Harry needs looking after even though he’s eighteen again?”

“Harry requires an alibi. Looking after is secondary.”

“What does he-”

Candide was interrupted by Grawp’s booming voice, “Tea?” he asked, blowing their hair about.

The two of them looked up at this offer. “Sure,” Candide said. “Thanks.” Grawp pulled a small tree over, snapped it in two and those pieces in two, and then piled them neatly on his fire, where a cauldron the size of a minibus hung on a pole. It took her a minute to get back to her previous question. “What does Harry say about this?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“Ah.” They watched Grawp uncover a crate of tea leaves, the scent wafted over from 30 yards away. “Harry needs an alibi, you say.”

“Someone is trying to take Harry out. They have attempted an ambush and abduction previously and this week they attempted to frame him for a crime. If someone were living with him, it would have helped immensely to have had a human to give evidence that he indeed was home when the crime was committed. As it was he got off on the word of a house-elf, which is unusual.” He brushed her arm awkwardly. “On the other hand things are getting dangerous in general.”

“They are?” she asked, displaying clear doubt.

“The Ministry is hiding a great deal,” Snape stated. “Something you should not repeat, by the way.”

“No one would believe me.”

## THE HEARING

Snape went on. “There are two views on dangerous situations. One is that the skilled people who usually attract danger make for poor companions; the other is that the skilled people know how to handle danger when it does come along. This is the difficult part for me since I do not know which will be safest for you. My divided loyalties between Hogwarts and Harry notwithstanding, I could leave school now and keep an eye on him full-time. But he would not accept that, I am certain.” He paused to watch Grawp dipping a gunny sack full of tea into his cauldron. “On the other hand, I believe he would accept my telling him that you were in need of better accommodations – which you are, I have seen your flat – and that I had invited you to move in.”

Candide’s eyes went wide. “Move in,” she echoed again.

More quietly Snape replied, “Yes.”

The ground pounded as Grawp approached and plunked down a massive wooden vat that sloshed gallons of tea onto the ground before settling. Grawp, with enormous care, held out two soiled teacups on the tip of one finger. Snape accepted them and began cleaning them with his cloak. The giant looked around wistfully. “Grawp hope little friend come today.”

Snape froze at that. “Little friend?” he asked.

“Grawp’s little friend,” the giant rumbled in what probably constituted a whisper.

Snape gave up puzzling that and handed a relatively clean cup to Candide, who after a moment’s deliberation, dipped it into the vat of tea beside them. Snape did the same with his cup and took a sip. He made a not-bad face and took another sip.

“Are you amenable to the idea?” Snape asked her.

“Yes,” she answered immediately.

“Thank you for that. There are a few things you need to know, in that case.”

She widened her eyes and then laughed nervously. “All right, I’m listening.”

“Harry was sent to Finland to control his opening a gateway to the underworld. When he loses control he can unleash some rather loathsome creatures into our plane of existence.”

Candide gave him a bemused look. “You’re trying to scare me off, are you?”

“No, I simply cannot let you enter into this without you fully understanding it. Harry is safe most all of the time, but do realize that there is the potential for considerable chaos.” He sipped his tea and dipped his cup again into the vat. “The other thing, which you must absolutely keep to yourself...” He looked up at Grawp who was staring wistfully off into the distance, letting his vat of tea billow steam clouds into the air before him. “Grawp, is anyone nearby... anyone at all?”

Grawp shook his head.

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“Your tea is getting cold,” Snape pointed out to him. Returning to Candide, as Grawp hefted his tea and sipped loudly, Snape said, “There has been another prophecy spoken. This one has rather a lot of grim prediction but in the end lays the responsibility for ending the evil firmly upon Harry’s shoulders.” He recited the prophecy for her.

“And poor Harry has that hanging over him?” she uttered.

“I was tempted to leave him nine to save him from it, in fact,” Snape joked grimly. “Are you still willing?”

She set her teacup down in a wide groove in the bark between them. “Severus, I’d love to move in permanently.”

Grawp stood up and moved to the next downed tree that formed the circle around his clearing. There, he bent down and began painstakingly plucking clover blossoms with his ungainly oversized hands.

Snape bristled and said, “I don’t think you know enough about me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you otherwise would not have such notions,” he stated, sounding cold and unyielding in stark contrast to a moment before.

She sighed and shook some fallen twigs off of her robes. “Well, if I’m going to move in with you, you have to come have dinner with my parents.”

“Now you are trying to scare me off,” Snape accused.

“Really, Severus, I have to mollify them.”

Snape closed his eyes. “I was hoping you could move in tomorrow.”

“What! That fast.”

“Yes. I do not at all like leaving Harry alone. The term cannot end soon enough. If you wish to move out again when it does, you may do so... so perhaps you do not need to inform your parents,” he suggested, sounding strategic.

“You’re just trying to get out of it.”

“Correct,” Snape returned sharply.

“Well, I’ll do it for Harry,” she conceded.

“Thank you,” Snape said quietly.

A loud hiss of Grawp shushing them, interrupted. He was picking up the pile of minute blossoms he had collected. Candide gasped and pointed slowly behind Snape. Also with slow movements, Snape turned just as Grawp took as careful a step as he could, which still shook the nearby leaves in a green cacophony. A Unicorn, silver and lithe, poised for flight, stood at the edge of the clearing, dappled in sunlight. Grawp bent to offer it the tiny blossoms clinging to his fingertips like dust. The unicorn had no concern for the giant, but eyed Snape and Candide with tense caution. Neither of them moved and a half a minute ticked by where only the wind shifted their robes.



## THE HEARING

Finally the unicorn reached out to nuzzle a few of the blossoms. “Nice little friend,” Grawp cooed, sounding like a train rumbling words in the distance.

The unicorn quickly took the rest of the blossoms and then loped a few yards away before turning and standing in silhouette, long horn blending in with the branches behind it.

Candide released her breath. “Wow, I’ve never seen a unicorn before.”

Snape stood and tossed his robes straight. “I will be seeing Harry this evening and I’ll tell him that you are moving in. When can you do so?”

She stood also, eyes not straying long from the mystical creature hovering in the trees. “If I’m not staying long, I only need to pack a trunk.”

“Pack two so it looks convincing.”

Candide propped her fists on her hips. “Someday Severus, why don’t you just tell me everything you’re afraid to and let me decide. You’re just hiding behind that excuse.”

Snape considered that before turning to depart without replying. She caught up to his longer stride and stepped in front of him. A breeze blew dead leaves around their robes as Candide stared him down. Her fierce look didn’t hold, however, her face pinched and she reached around his waist to hug him.



Harry sat reading in the deathly still house. Even Kali didn’t make a sound as she lay curled up on the chair beside his, not wanting to sit in his lap for some reason. The Floo flared and a familiar, and very welcome, figure stood straight at the end of the table.

“Hey, Severus,” Harry greeted him.

“Come back to Hogwarts with me for a few hours,” Snape said.

“Hogwarts? You promise not to make me stay?” Harry asked.

“As tempting as that is, I do promise.”

Harry closed his books and stacked them neatly. “All right, I want to speak to Remus anyway. Let me just put Kali away.” Kali fussed and tried to bite Harry, but he was faster and had her bundled tight to take upstairs.

“Hold on,” Snape said sharply. “She doesn’t know you?” he asked in concern.

“She’s been antsy lately. She slept with me last night but she has been in a snit today. Why?” Harry asked, struggling to hold her.

Snape’s brow furrowed. “She didn’t like you at all at nine years old, which I didn’t expect. Blood is blood and she is bonded to you by it so it should not have

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mattered.” He bent to study her as she clawed at Harry’s grip. “Give her to me,” he said.

“You sure?” Harry asked but handed her over. Surprisingly she climbed willingly into the crook of Snape’s arm. “What’s this?” Harry complained. “She likes you better now?”

“Apparently,” Snape said, studying her as she sniffed him. “I’ll put her away for you.”

When Snape came back down, Harry said, “Well, it has been a week of sorting out who’s on my side. Turns out my pet isn’t.”

“I didn’t see you being cruel to her as a child, so I cannot explain it.”

“I don’t think I would have been. I hated when Dudley tormented things that couldn’t fight back... like me for instance.”

Snape patted him on the shoulder with a weak smile. “I have some things to show you but I don’t want to do it here.” He nodded at the hearth and took down the powder.

They reappeared in the headmistress’ tower. The hearth was down to embers and the office’s occupant was in an overstuffed chair reading a large tome that floated before her. Upon seeing them, she waved the book to float aside and stood, showing her age as she straightened. “Harry dear, good to see you.”

“Professor,” Harry returned.

Snape had moved to the door but before Harry could follow, she asked, “How are you doing?” not in a casual way, but as though she expected an answer.

Harry shrugged. “Surviving, Professor.”

She grasped his arm, “First meeting of the revitalized Order of the Phoenix is tomorrow... think you can make it?”

Harry tried not to smile. “Where are you meeting?”

“Upstairs at the Hogs Head. Just ask for The Library at the bar. Eight o’clock sharp. You are certainly old enough to join and...” She glanced at Snape. “And you are the only one with all the information we need to catch up.” Harry visibly hesitated at that, prompting her to add, “I understand there are some things you cannot say. Everyone else will understand that too.”

She was still holding his arm. Harry said, “I’ll be there. But if I come, Moody will follow. Do you want him to know about it?”

“He is a member, although I have not sent him a notice of the meeting. If he finds out we have brought the Order back together, so be it... let it serve as notice to him.” Her voice was hard-edged at the end, but she released Harry’s arm. “I’ve held you up long enough.” She waved him off in the direction of the door.

## THE HEARING

Snape led the way not to the Defense classroom, but to the Transfiguration one. He unwarded the door and then after stepping in, warded it behind him. "It is too obvious to meet in my classroom, or even the Room of Requirement." Harry thought Snape too comfortable with making paranoid accommodations to his routine. Snape walked about the room, waving tables aside to make a larger space. "I want to show you some spells and I want to speak to you about something important."

Harry was just glad for Snape's company and would have been amenable to pickling rat's brains if that was what was wanted of him. "Sure."

Snape stepped to the center of the classroom and slipped cleanly into lecture mode. "There is a class of spells known as fogging charms. Have you heard of them?"

"Just mentioned in the legal code as strictly regulated," Harry said. "We haven't been shown any."

"No surprise," Snape stated. "If I were the Ministry, I'd hold off showing you until you were a full Auror. Nevertheless, I'm showing you now."

The trust this spoke of made Harry's chest ache. He stepped over to about ten feet in front of his guardian and stood attentively.

Snape began, "Most of these are quite tricky. I am not expecting that even you will get them all this evening. I will keep bringing you back until you do, Remus can take care of the grading those evenings... give everyone Es for all I care."

Harry grinned but it faded quickly.

Snape clasped his hands before him, empty hand around his wand hand. "When things get very bad, it helps to have decided ahead of time where you will draw the line in what magic you are willing to do. Some of these spells are not only regulated, they fall within the realm of the dark arts."

Harry chewed on his lips and watched as Snape demonstrated a basic Apparition fogging barrier. Snape said, "I want you to practice without casting the spell. The wand motion is most critical and any botched attempt at the spell will immediately attract attention from the magical misuse people, in the department adjoining yours, who monitor such things. Although here at Hogwarts they mostly ignore our rampant rogue spelling."

Harry worked on the motion, Snape guiding him through it repeatedly with such patience Harry never imagined from him. Harry finally could repeat the motion to Snape's satisfaction. "Try it just once," Snape commanded.

Harry held his wand over his head and pushing power through his wand in gradually increasing amounts – just as he'd been instructed – he executed the spell. Snape's expression was hard to read. "Did I get it?" Harry asked.

"Yes," he replied, and Harry now realized Snape was displaying relief, which looked remarkably like dismay on him.

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They did three more spells although Harry successfully managed only one more, an owl Obsfucation spell that Harry immediately dubbed “Owlfucation”. This learning by not doing reminded Harry of Umbridge in a twisted way. Maybe that’s how she learned all her dark magic, he thought suspiciously.

“We’ll work on the others again Monday, and I’ll have to decide what else I am showing you.”

“Were any of those dark magic?” Harry asked. None of them had seemed to be.

“No,” Snape replied and the topic felt closed, so Harry didn’t pry at it.

In the corridor, Harry said, “I want to talk to Remus for a minute.”

Snape led the way to Lupin’s office and knocked for Harry. The door swung open to reveal Lupin, reading a small book by the light of the lamps burning brightly on his desk.

“Hey, Remus,” Harry said. “Can I have a word?”

Lupin glanced between the two of them. “Certainly, Harry. Come in.”

Snape said, “Come to my office when you are finished,” and shut the door as he departed. Harry wandered over to the desk, not sure how to begin. There weren’t any letters lying out to strike up a conversation on that topic. “Pamela told me she’s sent you a few owls,” Harry dove right in and said.

Maybe there was no good way to approach this. Lupin grew strangely wary immediately. He shut the book before him and wrapped his hand around it. Harry went on, “She just wanted to know why your reply was... not taking the hint.” Harry shook himself; he was truly awful at this.

Lupin had gathered his wits, however and stood up, filing the book he had in his hand; probably because it gave him something to do. “Did she send you here?”

“No,” Harry denied quickly, not thinking of that misinterpretation. “I’m here on my own. Look, I’m rubbish at this, but I get the sense she really likes you. And I think you should give her a chance, but heck it’s none of my bloody business.”

Lupin rubbed his neck and bent his head back. “I’ll confess I never considered dating a Muggle.”

“It’s my mum’s family,” Harry heard himself arguing. “There’s intermittent magic there.”

Lupin smiled the wryest smile Harry had ever seen on him. “True.”

Harry held back on the arguments he might have used with Snape and had to think of new ones. To stall, he said, “This came as a surprise to me too. She has something for wizards.” He shook his head. “Otherwise I doubt she would have dated Severus.”

Lupin dropped the book he had just pulled out. “What did you say?” he blurted. He stooped to pick up the book and said, “Did you just say she dated Severus?”

## THE HEARING

Harry couldn't quite read beyond Lupin's aghast tone. "Yeah."

Lupin appeared utterly appalled, which Harry thought a little much. Lupin said, "I guess someone could make that kind of error in judgment once."

"Mmm, twice," Harry corrected.

Lupin set the book down on the desk and placed his hand upon it with the other on his hip. "Pamela, this quaint little Muggle who reminds me far too much of your mother, dated Severus... twice?"

"Yes." And then: "You think she looks like my mum?"

"Not so much looks like her." He paced a bit as he explained, "Gestures like her, uses the same turns of phrase, has the same low respect for authority."

"You got all that from one party?" Harry asked. He propped his own hands on his hips. "You had your eye on her too," he accused.

Lupin rolled his eyes and tossed his right hand. "Not in any kind of realistic manner," he stated dismissively.

"Well, why not?" Harry asked.

Lupin rolled his lips into his teeth while he looked for an answer. "Why doesn't she date Severus any longer?" he asked instead of answering.

"I'm not sure I should say precisely. See, trouble is if Severus explains too much of his past... I'm not sure the Evan's will accept it all and..." Harry bogged down.

"Severus gave her up for you?" Lupin asked evenly, the way one might when asking for directions from the middle of a mine field.

"Maybe," Harry admitted, pained a bit by it. "But I pointed out to him that he has a perfectly good girlfriend already--"

"He what?" Lupin asked.

Harry scratched his head. "Maybe forget I said that. I haven't seen them together much at all lately."

Lupin shook his head, appearing befuddled. "So, Pamela didn't come to her senses and break it off with Severus herself?"

"No."

"Well, that speaks volumes about her tolerance, I suppose."

"Why don't you owl her, set up a date."

Lupin swallowed and idly flipped open the book before him. "Tomorrow is the full moon."

"Next weekend then. You'll be better by then."

Lupin shrugged, seemingly drawn deeply into himself. Harry clamped his jaw together, but couldn't hold back; his week had been too stressful to bother with other people's weaknesses. "Remus, honestly," he began, drawing his former teacher's eyes up sharply. "I don't think she would care that you're a werewolf. I certainly don't

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care.” And Harry would have censored the last, but he had no energy to. “My mum never cared, did she?”

Lupin was now eyeing Harry as though wondering where he had come from. Harry swallowed. “I had a rough week. If you’re coming to the Order meeting tomorrow, you can hear all about it. It’s a few hours before sunset.”

“Minerva was serious?” he asked in surprise. “I wasn’t certain she was.”

“She was. I should go see Severus and get home,” Harry said. “Hope you do all right tomorrow night, if I don’t see you.”

“I’ve been properly potioned by Severus; it will be all right,” he said quietly.

Harry departed and headed down one floor to Snape’s office, which was open, oddly enough. “Close it and spell it,” Snape stated from beside the bookshelf, when Harry entered. As Harry spell-sealed the door a blue line burned its way from its frame to all corners of the room before fading.

Harry stared at the door, wishing things hadn’t grown this bad again. He turned and Snape gestured at the visitor’s chair while saying, “You will want to be sitting for what I have to tell you.”

Harry dropped into the chair and sighed loudly, prompting Snape to say, “You are not in Azkaban, there is still hope.”

“Is that your slogan for times like this?” Harry asked.

“It’s as good as any,” Snape countered. “But there is something personal I need to discuss with you.”

Harry pulled his head back at these rather unexpected words and listened closely.

Snape paced once before sitting at his desk. “Candide, as you probably don’t know, lives in a rather ramshackle little bed-sit above the apothecary’s on Diagon Alley. No amount of... silencing charms overcomes the foot traffic and the nearness of Leaky Cauldron. Her lease is up,” Snape went on, and Harry thought his voice sounded false somehow, but why would he lie about that? Harry listened though without comment as Snape said, “So I have invited her to move in and, after some deliberation, she had agreed.”

Harry blinked a few times in shock. “Move in... to the house?”

“Yes,” Snape replied in that mild manner that implied through its lack of force that his mind was already fixed.

“This is a surprise,” Harry said. “I didn’t even know... course, you don’t keep me filled in really.” Harry scratched his head vigorously. He wasn’t unamenable to a housemate; it was really much too quiet at home. He shrugged. “It’s your house.” He straightened his hair and rubbed his forehead. “When-?”

“Tomorrow.”

Harry expressed more shock. “That’s quick.”

## THE HEARING

"It is the end of the month," Snape stated, slipping into his talking-to-a-first-year tone.

"I guess it is." Harry moved to stand up, thinking he should mull this over a beer and, after the whole thing started to make sense, organize some things around the house. "Did you warn her...?"

"Yes," Snape replied, now clearly losing patience.

"All right," Harry said, giving up. "Your girlfriend, fiancée... whatever."

Snape had the tiniest of smiles on his lips when Harry turned at the door and pulled out his wand to cancel the spell on it. "What? Now you're keen on that notion? There's no understanding you," he complained.

Snape's smile didn't flicker. He simply said, "I will see you tomorrow."

"Yeah," Harry said, still getting his mind around the notion that Snape had apparently asked a woman to move in. As Harry walked down to the gargoyles, he thought maybe he should have asked if they'd set a date. All the world had lost its mind this week, clearly.



Sunday afternoon, Harry sat disquietly, trying to reread the manual of filing procedures before starting in on a much more interesting looking book entitled *Curse Carriers*. He wasn't certain exactly what time Candide would arrive and between waiting for her and waiting for evening, and the Order meeting, he could not relax. Also teasing repeatedly at the back of his mind was the sense that he had missed something during the time he was nine, something with regard to Candide, at the very least, and other things he could only wonder at.

Rubbing his hair back, Harry gave up the first book in favor of the second, thinking that he would just read a chapter of the second and go back to the first one. Concentrating was difficult; the Ministry's distrust of him sat like a wall between himself and motivation.

It was 4:00 before the Floo announced a visitor with a rush of air. "Hello, Harry," Candide said, brushing ash from her hair and directing her trunk out onto the floor. She looked a little haggard but she smiled broadly.

Harry for his part felt awkward with her arrival. "Need any help?" he asked, to cover.

She almost said 'no' but then said, "If you could be a doll and take this one up, I'll fetch the other."

Harry agreed and she disappeared again. With a flick of his wand, Harry hovered the beaten old trunk up the stairs and into the first door where he settled it onto

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

the floor in the middle of the room. The room didn't seem to care, even as much as Snape's personality clung to it. Harry thought it would be more appropriate if some latent charm spewed the trunk back out the door. But it sat quietly, untouched by magic in any way.

The sound of the Floo drew him back downstairs before he could contemplate the strangeness of the situation any longer.

Candide took the second trunk up herself and Harry settled back before his book. When she appeared a half hour later and sat at the table across from him, he asked if she wanted tea. As she nodded it appeared on the table.

"I'm going to like this house-elf thing," she said with relish. Her hair was pulled back with a flowered kerchief and she had a smudge of ash on her round chin. Harry thought that she looked about as unlikely a mate for his guardian as he would have imagined. After sipping her tea, she became a bit more serious and said, "I don't want to get in your way, Harry."

"Er," Harry began. "You can't... it's your house too."

She smiled wryly. "Thanks, I appreciate that."

Harry's book suddenly didn't seem so interesting anymore, even given that he was almost to the section on cursing liquids, which he had previously thought was impossible. The tea made him warm and relaxed. "So, did I miss something last weekend?"

"What do you mean?" she asked between sips. It was a stall; Harry could tell.

"Severus has been behaving a little bit strangely since then." He didn't want to say, inviting you to move in, for one thing, and he didn't want to point out that he had received an unexpected hug. "It's hard to pinpoint," he said instead.

"He was very protective of you," Candide stated.

Harry turned his teacup one way and then the other by the handle. He would have appreciated some protectiveness at nine; he could starkly remember having no one on his side. But Harry couldn't imagine what he would have thought of Snape with his brooding appearance and threatening posture.

"Did we get along all right, then?" Harry asked.

"You don't remember anything?" When he shook his head, she said, "When Severus had an important meeting with Minerva and some people from the Ministry..."

"To tell them about the prophecy," Harry stated.

"Possibly," she said. "I took you to a film."

"You did?" Harry said, laughing. "What'd we see?"

She shrugged. "The only kids film showing at right time was Tarzan." When Harry's brow furrowed as he imagined that, she said, "You enjoyed it."



## THE HEARING

Harry blushed lightly, finding himself embarrassed suddenly.

Candide went on, "You kept bubbling over with telling me about learning how to fly and getting ice cream. You must really love ice creams," she added, teasing. "Also about how nice it was not to have to hide from your cousin, who must have been quite a monster." At Harry's nod, she said, "Severus said your ribs were bruised by him so it was good I turned down your asking to stop at the playground."

"I was?" Harry asked, trying to remember that happening, which would pinpoint exactly which moment he would have appeared from. "I got better at running away from him, later."

"No repelling magic?" she asked, pouring herself more tea.

Harry shook his head thoughtfully. "Worked on my uncle, but not my cousin for some reason."

"Bugger that. You could get even now," she said easily as though commiserating.

Harry paused and with difficulty swallowed the sip of tea he held in his mouth. Suddenly, he imagined she was not who she appeared to be, that perhaps she was someone in disguise here to interrogate him further.

In honest apology upon seeing his face, she said, "I'm sorry, Harry; I don't mean to bring up difficult topics." Rambling as she explained, she said, "At nine, you didn't seem so disturbed by it, so I didn't think..."

"It's not that," Harry quickly said. "I was just thinking of something." When the opportunity arose, he found her eyes. There was nothing but sympathy in them, competing with the excitement of moving in and an ache that perhaps she was expecting too much of Snape. Relaxing, Harry said, "It's all right, really. I don't want you to feel like you can't talk about things. I had a very tough week and some things are still occurring to me."

She smiled lightly, not quite believing him, Harry could see. He asked, "Severus told you what happened?"

"Sketchy outline, yes."

"The ministry accused me of burning down my aunt and uncle's old house. Said I had plenty of motivation for doing it." Harry poured himself more tea even though he didn't want any more. "I didn't even know they'd moved. It was the perfect setup."

She sat stunned. "Someone framed you for attacking Muggles?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Things are not very quiet around here, even though it usually is quiet in this house," he corrected. "Sure you want to move in?" he jested.

"Yes, of course," she uttered, voice hardened.

"And he told you about the prophecy?" Harry asked, thinking perhaps Snape had skipped that, given that she actually was here.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Yes,” she assured him. “He pointed out that when trouble arrives it is often safest around those who know how to handle it.” She dropped her gaze and peered into her cup. “I think he’s worried about me, actually.”

Harry drew one difficult breath and then another. Snape had asked her to move in for protection, for Harry to protect her, if not himself, when the school year ended. Of all the responsibilities Harry had been handed recently, this one startled him. No wonder Snape was teaching him restricted spells now.

“I need to get back to my studies,” Harry said, gesturing at his book.

She smiled. “And I can finish unpacking.” She stood and departed in a swish of mauve. Harry was going to have to get used to that color. Nothing else in the house was that color.

That evening, Candide came down for dinner, still marveling in rambling conversation that Winky did everything and would continue to do so indefinitely. Harry had grown very used to having a house-elf and thought Candide was overdoing her commentary regarding it.

“I have to go out at 8:00,” Harry explained. “I don’t know what time I’ll be back.” An awkward pause followed before Harry added. “I have training tomorrow, so not too late.”

She cut into her pork chop with the comment, “No real issue of mine, Harry, if you are tired at training.”



Minerva McGonagall, carrying a silver tray with an assortment of old and odd potion bottles, knocked upon the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts office. The door opened to admit her and within she found Lupin, hands deep in his cardigan pockets standing beside the desk in conversation with Snape.

“Oh, good,” McGonagall said. “You are both here.” She took the tray to the desk and placed it carefully beside the neat array of inkwells. “A cabinet in my office finally opened after years of fighting the charms upon it and inside I found these,” she explained to Snape. “Thought you should take a look at them.”

Snape lifted a stone jar which was sealed with a stone lid and a waxed rag. He placed it back on the tray without opening it. “Don’t trust your Potions Master, Minerva?” he asked mildly.

McGonagall flicked her robes straight. “It isn’t a matter of trust. It is a matter of your understanding Albus better than Gertie ever could. I had this odd notion that the cabinet had opened because I had rejuvenated the Order, but given the collection of positively ancient containers, within, I think that just a coincidence.”

## THE HEARING

Lupin leaned down to peer into a warped frosted glass bottle that swirled orange. He then shot Snape a look that said, better you than me.

“On that topic,” McGonagall said, “as much as I would like all of us to attend this evening, it just isn’t workable. And you will be incapable, Remus, late this evening. Professor Sinistra tells me you have until half past eleven.”

“Unless we hold the meeting here,” Snape pointed out.

McGonagall shook her head. “I do not wish to entangle the school in this more than necessary. Hogsmeade is close enough that two of us can attend.” She looked between the two of them. “I think, though, that Harry may wish to see you there, Severus. And I can fill you in, Remus, when you are feeling up to it.”

Lupin nodded, chagrined. “I am at a point in my life when it feels like there is only a week between full moons.”

“Severus and I should head down early, Remus. If you could mind the school from my office, that would be appreciated,” McGonagall said.

At Lupin’s nod, she shook her cloak over her shoulders. Severus picked up the tray and placed it inside his dangerous ingredient cabinet – which he immediately respelled closed again – before collecting his own cloak.



Harry stepped beneath the crooked Hogs Head sign swinging in the wind and closed the door firmly behind him after entering. A few patrons slouched with cloak hoods pulled forward to hide their faces. Harry was just stepping up to the bar when a rosy-cheeked witch came upon him and hooked her arm through his. Upon recognizing Hestia Jones, he allowed her to lead him to the back stairs. By the time they reached the end of the narrow crooked first floor corridor, she was even redder from blushing.

“So good to see you, Harry,” she said chummily, patting his hand before releasing him.

“Good to see you here too,” Harry said, glancing around the room. Mundungus leaned close to Sturgis Podmore and spoke to him as though trying to sell him something stashed inside his cloak. More people stood around the perimeter, chatting. A figure in a violet top hat capered in and slapped Harry on the back.

“Harry, my boy, well, not much of a boy anymore are you?” Dadelus Diggle said gamely while shaking Harry’s hand. “Enjoyed the DV-Day festivities... I really did. Splendid, really.”

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Harry turned and found Headmistress McGonagall sweeping into the room in her usual emerald cloak. Snape stepped in behind her, removing his gloves. He caught Harry's eye and stepped his way.

"Ah, Severus," Diggle said, sounding vaguely uncertain.

Snape greeted him perfunctorily and with his head gestured for Harry to step away with him. "Candide's move-in went smoothly enough?"

Harry shrugged. "Yep. Fine." He wanted to add something along the lines of hoping he could live up to Snape's expectations regarding protecting her, but he didn't want to sound less than confident and McGonagall was bringing the meeting to order. Hagrid interrupted when he ducked in the low doorway with no little effort. Harry gave him a wave and took a seat on the arm of a moldy couch and let Snape have the remaining spot on it beside a silver haired man with nearly matching eyes. The door opened again as McGonagall was welcoming everyone, and a familiar, shaven-head black man slipped inside.

"Ah, Kingsley," McGonagall greeted him warmly.

It warmed Harry as well to see one of his colleagues at the meeting. He moved to stand beside Harry, saying, "I'm here for Tonks and Arthur. Bit too busy for us all to get away." He patted Harry on the shoulder; something he would not have done at the Ministry.

The meeting had already accomplished one thing for Harry, it firmly reinforced that he had rather a large number of allies. When it came time for Harry to fill in what was happening at the Ministry, Shackbolt's presence became clearer: he covered Harry's part, which avoided Harry accidentally saying anything he shouldn't. Harry was a bit surprised when Shackbolt told them all about Merton, including how dangerous he potentially could be with his spelling devices.

"So," Shackbolt said, slipping his cream-colored cloak off in the rapidly heating room and draping it over the couch behind Harry. "We need help finding this man who is causing Harry such difficulty." He glanced at Mundungus, "Haven't done business lately with someone who fits that description?"

Mundungus shook his stubbled chin. "Sounds like a good customer though. Let me know when you find him." The room chuckled.

Podmore asked, "So, why haven't we heard of this bloke before now?"

"He's only attacked us Aurors so far. And we suspect it requires a lengthy time to manufacture one of these guns of his."

"With special attention to Harry, sounds like," Hagrid said, sounding vaguely incensed. "You just let us know what you need of us... right?" He insisted.

"Sounds like he needs more character witnesses," Mundungus stated sagely. Putting his thumbs in his antique waistcoat, he put on airs and said, "Oy, right, constable,

## THE HEARING

I was wit' 'Arry yesterday evenin'. Oh, yeah, and evein' before... eh? What day d'ya say?"

Even Harry laughed that time, while beside him Shacklebolt positively cringed.

McGonagall cut through the tittering with, "To answer Hagrid we have no precise directive at this time beyond keeping your eyes and ears open for the man Kingsley described. Mostly we are here this evening because I thought it best to get you all together in case you were needed later. Everyone should dust off their old secure methods of communication and perhaps send a practice message or two through the network."

The meeting turned into an impromptu party after that. Harry stepped over to McGonagall when she swung her cloak back on. With a nod of her head, she pulled him away from the group standing around her. "You are perhaps wondering why we failed to recite the prophecy," she said. At Harry's nod, she frowned. "Severus and I promised to leave wide dissemination of it to the Ministry itself."

Harry gestured at the room. "But Shacklebolt told them about Merton."

Her voice dropped lower. "A rogue wizard playing at tormenting the Aurors is nothing compared to that prophecy."

"They are one in the same," Harry insisted quickly, because she was gesturing for Snape to join her.

"We actually don't know that, Harry," she pointed out firmly.

The notion that two completely different troubles were looming, made Harry blanch, which drew a sharp glance of concern from his guardian. "It's nothing," Harry insisted, feeling the good will from the meeting canceling out too rapidly.

Snape unexpectedly grabbed his arm and said, "Owl me with any news."

"All right," Harry agreed.

They departed then and Harry wandered over to Hagrid, who was discussing troll subspecies with Bill Weasley. Bill looked up at Harry and said, "I'm like Kingsley – instructed to report back to the family."

Harry nodded and gave half an ear to their conversation about the variance in troll weapon choice, which Bill argued was regional, while Hagrid argued it would depend on the size of the troll. Harry's mind quickly fled the warm room with its crooked grey walls and settled somewhere between wondering what Merton was doing and wondering what he had missed while he was nine.



The next morning, Harry headed into the Ministry very, very early. He left a note on the table for Candide so she wouldn't wonder where he was. He found he didn't

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

mind at all coordinating his day's schedule with another person and he even felt a little unfortunate to miss her at breakfast.

The offices were quiet between the night shift and the day one. Harry hunted around and found Rodgers in the file room. His trainer gave him an ordinary look that was followed immediately by a sharper one.

"Can I talk to you, sir?" Harry asked. Upon waking that morning, he had realized that his primary stress came from uncertainty about who was on his side and who wasn't. Unexpectedly, Rodgers' reaction to hearing the prophecy made Harry think he could be on his side, despite his previous provocations.

"Sure, Potter." Rodgers turned the file he had pulled upside down and took a seat on the tightly packed files of an open file drawer, gesturing that Harry pull up the nearby footstool.

Harry did so, clasping his hands between his knees because they were cold. "I need to know who believes me, and perhaps you won't say if you do, but I thought I would ask anyway."

Rodgers' rubbed his full mustache one way and then the other before patting it into place. "For the most part, I can't imagine you'd do something so stupid. I saw the transcript from the Wizengamot and I think the evidence is on your side." When he paused, Harry looked up at him, trying very hard to keep raw hope out of his eyes. "On the other hand, I've seen your temper at full burn and I've seen that overcome any better sense in all kinds of people. I've seen you master spells rather expeditiously, so I can't put covering your tracks past you, either."

"I didn't do it," Harry said into the gap that appeared when Rodgers fell silent.

"I'll confess I'm leaning toward believing you, Potter. Certainly Madam Bones has faith in you and your old headmistress. You probably don't need my belief."

Harry sighed and rubbed his nose at the document mustiness of the room. "I remember last time how important it was to know who I could rely on. I'm afraid things are going to get very bad before they get better and everyone person is going to matter a lot."

Rodgers leaned back against the file cabinet, causing it to groan more in the way a mountain troll might rather than the way an ordinary piece of wooden furniture would. He put his foot up on the drawer face, and asked, "Ever imagine yourself attacking your aunt and uncle? Maybe you were sleep walking."

Harry replied, "When I was younger, but the threat of getting kicked out of Hogwarts kept me in line, except for accidents like blowing up my aunt, who wasn't really my aunt." Harry rubbed the brass label holder on the drawer beside him, Ackerly to Aedipus. "I honestly don't even think about them anymore. I have a home where I'm wanted, why dwell on it. And you know," Harry said more sharply,

## THE HEARING

“Mad-Eye said my turning myself nine must have brought it all back, but I don’t remember anything from that. Fudge de-aged himself too, he should know firsthand that I don’t have any memory of it.”

Rodgers didn’t appear to have a response to that. Harry stood and pushed the stool back under the sign that he couldn’t remember the contents of during his examination. He stared at it, still not memorizing it. “Thanks for talking to me sir,” he said and turned away.

“Potter,” Rodgers said, stalling Harry at the door. “You didn’t really do it, did you?”

“No sir,” Harry replied.

“Hm,” Rodgers muttered. “Watch your back then. Someone clearly is after you.”

Harry turned with his hand on the latch. “Yeah,” he agreed. If I could just get a shot at them in the daylight, he thought with determination.

### Author’s Notes:

Wednesday OR Thursday posting. Not JUST Wednesday. I’m in Palm Springs (goddess knows why, really, I’m still piecing together how this happened) and the network is really dodgy at this little hotel. And I was out hiking in the desert all day yesterday near Mecca (which looks strikingly like Mexico) so I wasn’t around anyway. This is why I need two days option. SHEESH. Oh, and those of you in the angst-must-be-followed-quickly-by-resolution crowd: scenes got shifted around and now 24 is safe too. All of you who can’t stand to wait for plot resolution should wait on 25 until mid-May when the story is all finished and posted.

Wow, the number of people who think Harry should quit amazes me. He is just not the quitting type and isn’t in the Auror’s program as a favor to the Ministry; he wants to be there. If he let a few people who dislike him force him out of doing what he wants to do (i.e., learn lots of dangerous cool magic and be in on the action when it happens) then I would think the forbearance he’s demonstrated over the last 8 years must have utterly abandoned him. Harry is used to having enemies. He is never not going to have enemies and/or people overreacting to him, no matter how nice a guy he is (see: Dumbledore, for an example).

Vineet’s age – I’d say he’s in the 21-22 range.

Ginny again. You are all making me feel sorry for her... and she isn’t even real. Some stuff, including her development, is partially prep for story 3 (should it come into existence), partially prep for later scenes in this story,

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

but mostly I needed a more major character at Hogwarts to work on Snape and I thought I'd have some fun with that character at the same time. Cheer up, Lupin has now taken over her job as Snape's foil for a while so she will be backgrounded. Mary Sue? sheesh. That hurts. Keep complaining about her and you might just see more of her... hah. So there.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



# THE WATCHERS

At home, after sharing an early evening pint with his fellows, Harry encountered Candide sipping tea in the dining room. At first he felt mixed emotions about not having his usual absolute peace but by the time he put his things away and assembled his readings, he was grateful for the company.

Harry stacked the three books he needed to read from that evening beside his teacup and saucer, and cracked open the first one: the filing manual.

“That looks to be exciting reading,” Candide commented, glancing at the spine.

Harry licked sugar off his knuckle from his saucer and said, “The admissions test was off the mark; what they should have tested us on was tolerance for filling out three-foot forms and precision scribing of letters for writing file labels.”

“Sounds like my day,” she joked.

“Do your file drawers get deadly if you don’t put a dot in a nought on a new label?” Harry challenged teasingly.

“I’ve never tried that. I had a teacher who became virulent over that long before I met a cabinet that might.”

Harry grew curious then and asked. “So where did you learn wizard accounting. They certainly don’t teach it at Hogwarts.”

She shook her head emphatically. “No, they certainly don’t. I took Runes and Arithmancy and everything even close. Took courses ahead of my year, even, and then left after my O.W.L.s to go to a public school in Canterbury where they teach wizard accounting, taxation, and what Muggles call paralegals but in wizardom are more astutely called Lawlackeys. “

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“I think that’s what my friend Hermione is doing now,” Harry commented.

“Without going to school for it?”

“She’s quite smart, so she didn’t need to,” Harry pointed out.

“Then she is going to become very bored very quickly.”

Harry scratched his head. “I think she already is.”

“You learned a little bit extra about the law last week,” she said easily.

Harry put his head back in his book. “Yeah,” he acknowledged drearily and Candide dropped the conversation.

Knowing that Rodgers trusted him, or almost trusted him, made studying much more pleasant for Harry than it would have been otherwise, and despite the dry topic of his book, he felt a renewed determination not to let his trainer down. This held through thirty pages of cross-indexing formatting rules.

The evening edition of the Prophet arrived and Candide opened it just as Harry was opening *Accursed Aid* to a page about negating swelling curses using leach charms. He glanced up and forgot about leaches when he saw a picture of himself facing off with Gregor on the back page held up across from him.

“What’s this?” Harry blurted, thinking it odd that photograph was printed yet again.

“What?” Candide asked, but handed over the paper when Harry reached for it.

Harry laid the paper out and looked at the three narrow photographs spliced together in the Gossip Section. A photograph of himself at the Tri-Wizard Tournament was sandwiched between the Gregor one and another of him playing Seeker, looking very small indeed, as he raced a Slytherin Beater around the Hogwarts pitch. The caption below this triptych read: *Attention-hungry Potter at it again.*

“Damn her,” Harry said.

Candide turned the paper around when Harry released it. “I thought she’d taken a liking to you,” she commented. “What happened?”

“I insulted her,” Harry admitted, figuring that must be the reason.

“You what?” Candide blurted. “What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking she was annoying me,” Harry said, sounding vaguely uncertain now. He had let his mouth go at that moment in the pub and perhaps he shouldn’t have. Among his friends it would have been a harmless gibe.

“Harry,” Candide lectured, “you don’t want this woman as an enemy.”

Harry rolled his eyes and pushed the paper farther away.

“Really, Harry. I think you need to put a stop to this now. Write a letter of apology to her.”

“What?” Harry exclaimed. “Why?”

“Do you want me to compose something for you? What did you say to her?”

## THE WATCHERS

Harry gave her a glare but she was impervious to glares, apparently, which wasn't too much of a surprise. He more pointedly propped his book up in front of himself. "She said something sappy and I suggested she not talk the way she wrote." Candide gave him a stern look, prompting Harry to ask, "You learn that look from Severus?" a little sharply.

This elicited a bout of chuckling from her. "I really think you should nip this now," she said when she sobered.

"Why bother?" Harry asked.

"You're really asking me that?" Candide said. "You don't see this is just the beginning."

Harry tried to study a diagram of a leach charm wand motion. "I'm more popular than her. She'll stop."

Candide rubbed her head. Harry could tell she was exasperated, but she didn't speak for many minutes. Finally, she said, "If you swallow a little bit of pride now, you can avoid a huge battle later." When Harry didn't respond, she added, "Do you really want to fight this out with her when she owns the entire back page of the biggest wizard newspaper in Britain?"

"You're making too much of this," Harry criticized. "Skeeter'll get a bunch of angry mail, and it'll stop on its own."

Candide reopened the paper to page two and said, "I do hope you're right."

Tuesday, they were given their examination results. Harry looked over the half-sized parchment with its scoring summaries. He had been given overly generous partial credit for three of the spells he hadn't really succeeded on and somehow that made him even more angry at himself. Seven out of twelve possible points was actually worse than his previous six out of ten. Despite the sting the numbers caused, he resisted crinkling the parchment up. Beside him, he could see that Vineet didn't have a perfect score either, but a ten out of twelve. That made Harry feel a little better. On the written part, Harry had a score of ninety-two. He would have done better, he was certain, if he hadn't been beaten up in the first round and given a strange potion complete with Pimms chaser. Even his field work evaluation was down to eighteen out of twenty.

Harry carefully folded up the results and stashed them in his bag. No one ever said this was going to be easy, he reminded himself. But he did not look forward to sharing the results with his guardian. Harry thought that he might just wait until Snape asked; hopefully he would be too busy to.

That night, Harry had another odd dream where he was lying on the floor unable to move. He woke chilled and clammy, forced to stumble to the hearth where only a small fire burned in the warmer weather. He added wood and ignited it with a

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spell to a blissful blaze. As he watched the flames snapping, he hesitated putting his wand away, remembering the odd dream he had had the night of the Privet Drive fire. Crouched on the edge of the hearthstone, Harry slowly pieced together the evidence timeline and estimated that his dream had occurred around the same time as the fire must have started. He rubbed his arms, which were prickling with cold despite the blasting heat, and wondered what the dream had meant. In it, the house hadn't been burning, the world around him had been. It wasn't as though he had dreamed the actual events, which made him feel a little better about it.

Using the poker, Harry pulled a cold, blackened wood stub out of the corner of the hearth onto the stone and ignited it with his wand. The spell made the black glow red from its core and a blue crown began dancing around its edges. Quickly it was consumed and, careful not to exhale and disturb the ash, he leaned close and inspected its remains in the red light. Sure enough, the ash displayed a delicate, curved feather imprint on it with the hint of part of another beside it. Opting for comfort despite the chill in his limbs, Harry stood on stiff legs and returned to his bed.



The next evening during dinner, Snape's owl arrived with letters for each of them. In Harry's, Snape instructed him to visit Hogwarts that evening to further discuss what they had discussed previously; code, Harry assumed, for more training in fogging spells. Harry refolded the letter and watched Candide reading hers, which was much longer. She flipped the parchment over to read the end of it, which was closed with a somewhat more embellished signature than his own letter. Harry grinned to himself at the notion of someone softening Snape up at all.

Candide folded the letter and stashed it in her robe pocket. Her brow didn't un-furrow immediately, however, so Harry asked, "Everything all right?"

"Yes, fine," she replied easily.

"Do you wish to visit Hogwarts with me this evening?"

"Perhaps." But then her face fell. "Hm, but what will McGonagall say?"

"We can Floo into Hogsmeade and walk over rather than use her office," Harry offered. "I know the spells for the castle doors."

Candide raised her brow. "You do? Who showed you those?"

"Your original Head of House," Harry said, "Rowena Ravenclaw."

Candide gave him a doubtful expression that had a definite underlayment of real belief that he could be serious. "You speak with her often?"

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Harry grinned mischievously, toying with the idolization he suspected still lingered. "I can't help it she decided to talk to me and no one else for nine-hundred years." She stared at him. Harry said, grinning, "But, what it means is I can open the doors if they're locked so we don't have to use the headmistress' Floo if we don't want to."

"All right," she said warily. "I'd like to join you."

Candide fell quiet the rest of the evening until it was time to leave. Harry considered that she was perhaps too sensitive, but he brought her cloak from the entrance hall cupboard as a kind of offering.

"Thanks, Harry," she said, hooking it on.

She remained quietly introspective as they walked through Hogsmeade and when they reached the lake path, Harry said, "I can try to show you Ravenclaw's book if you like."

"What book?" she asked.

"Ravenclaw pulled together all the notes from the school's construction," Harry explained, gesturing at the hulk before them, rising up out of the trees with its windows just beginning to glow. "She sealed them in a stone binding so that Salazar Slytherin couldn't get to them again, because he had used them to build the Chamber of Secrets so he could pass on his notions about the school only being for purebloods."

"And this book is still there?" Candide asked curiously.

"Yes. No one could touch it. It battered anyone who tried." Harry leapt over a particularly muddy spot and waited for Candide, who had walked the long way around. "It opened for me for some reason though. Which is silly, really; I wasn't even in her house."

"It knows you're different, Harry," she commented.

They reached the castle doors, which were unlocked. Harry gestured for her to lead the way in. The students lingering in the Entrance Hall paused in their doings and said hello. At the top of the stairs, pounding footsteps drew their attention backwards where Ginny and her friends were charging out of the Great Hall and up to them.

"Hey, Harry," they said in warm greeting and Ginny asked, "Going up to visit Professor Snape?"

"Yep." Harry replied.

The others finished their hellos and went back to their studies, but Ginny followed along. When they were clear of the others, she pulled Harry's arm and said, "Guess what Professor Snape did?" she asked.

"I don't know," Harry replied, taking a quick glance at Candide, who was looking most interested in this gossip.

"Set me up for a rematch the other night. No warning," she complained.

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“He did?” Harry asked, “Who won?”

Ginny rolled her eyes and they resumed walking. “Oh, he did. Surprise is my only chance and it was on his side this time.” She appeared to notice Candide suddenly. “Hi, Ginny Weasley,” she said while holding out her hand.

Candide introduced herself and said in pleased recognition, “You won the dueling tournament, right? In disguise.”

“Yup,” Ginny said, sounding bored with the recognition.

“That was brilliant. Surprised the blazes out of everyone,” Candide said.

As they reached the top of the second floor staircase, Ginny glanced at Harry and then Candide. Harry leaned close and said, “We’re visiting Severus. Candide has moved in, so we came together.”

Ginny gazed at Harry, not comprehending. “Moved in?” Harry nodded with a knowing look and Ginny cottoned on. “Really?” she verified. “I... wouldn’t have thought that possible.” She gave Candide a smile. “I haven’t anything on you in the surprise department.” She stared at Candide a moment longer, still taking things in before turning to Harry and saying, “That torpedo spell... you could have warned me Professor Snape invented it.”

Harry laughed. “What? You tried to use it on him?”

“Yes,” Ginny stated emphatically. “Stupidly thought maybe he hadn’t seen it before.” She glanced between them as they had reached the Defense office door. “Well, I better go. See you, Harry. Nice to meet you, Ms. Breakstone.”

When Ginny’s head had bobbed out of view around the corner, Candide said, “I think she fancies you.”

“I know she fancies me,” Harry stated and knocked on the door.

Snape was surprised to see both of them there in the corridor. “We thought we’d both visit,” Harry explained. “If you want, I’ll go chat with Lupin.”

“Remus is not here,” Snape stated, forestalling Harry’s departure.

“No?” Harry asked.

Snape gestured for them to enter his office. When the door closed, he said, “He is still recovering from the last full moon and decided to remove himself from the castle to do so.”

Harry, who had leapt to the assumption that he had a date with his cousin, said, “Oh.”

Snape glanced between the two of them and asked a bit awkwardly, “How are things at the house?”

“Fine,” Harry said. Candide nodded that she agreed with this assessment.

“Did you receive your one-year review results?” Snape asked.

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“Yeah,” Harry admitted, downcast, which generated a sharp look of disapproval. Candide appeared to be considering excusing herself, so Harry said. “I’ll go wander the castle while you two talk. I’ll be back.” He escaped out the door before anyone could suggest otherwise.

Harry wandered the corridors, greeting students – some startled to see him – as he went. At the staircases, he started upward and at the fourth floor found himself drawn to the library. As he closed the door behind him, Madam Pince said, “Nearly closing time.”

“Sorry,” Harry said. “I just wanted to have another look at Ravenclaw’s book.”

Pince looked over from the books she was directing back to their shelves with a conductor’s sort of motion and recognized him. “Oh, Mr. Potter. Of course, go right ahead. Please lock the door when you leave.”

The gate squeaked plaintively as Harry let himself into the restricted section. The room hung in stillness same as last time, and inside the wall grate where the book was kept there wasn’t nearly as much dust. He tugged out the book, which he had not finished reading previously, having stopped when he reached the foundation spells. He pulled over a stool and paged slowly forward, remembering the contents easily despite not having to worry about being tested on them. Long minutes of perusing ticked by before he reached his previous stopping point. The book gave no rattle or shudder to hint that it disliked his pace.

Beyond the foundation spells were artesian spring charms, wood knot removal spells, carpet repair and flying charms, which the diagrams demonstrated as useful for hoisting bricks or roof tiles to upper floors. Harry paused to study those a long while, rehearsing the complicated motions. The incantations were too long to memorize, however, going on in minute writing for three quarters of a page. Harry read each word, though, to ensure the book would let him pass farther.

The next pages, were written on heavy, rough parchment and they smelt of smoke. Harry squinted at the diagrams, which were done in unfamiliar notations in shining ink that had not faded, unlike the rest of the notes, which in places were a pale brown. Jet black angry strokes drawn with a wide nib outlined diagrams on a remarkably detailed illustration of a stone floor drawn with an ultra-fine nib. It appeared to be some kind of fire and electricity spell but the long notation across the bottom read: Bayn to any who do not be-long with’n the castle. They shal bee sunk into the helfire of their mynds. The domesday spel wil on’ly release when the v’ry last enemy is re-moved.

Harry pondered this and then glanced at the clock and discovered that three quarters of an hour had passed. He quickly shut the book with a boom! and, with a grunt at its weight, stashed it away in its personal cupboard. He jogged back to

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Snape's office and knocked.

"Nice of you to join us, Potter," Snape said, clearly rebuking Harry for disappearing for so long. "Catching up with your little friends, I assume?"

"I was in the library," Harry insisted. "Sorry."

Candide let herself out, giving Harry a little wink as she departed. She wasn't disappointed that he had taken so long returning.

Snape swished by with the words, "Come along then. I have much to do this evening when we have got through this."

In the Defense classroom, Harry mastered the other two spells: a magical tent that could hide the spells within it for a minute or so as long as they were not too powerful, and a doorway hiding spell, that Harry argued didn't need to be regulated, really.

"It is illegal because it was previously popular for Muggle-baiting," Snape explained. "And since it fogs itself, the Ministry cannot detect it, even in a Muggle building that should not otherwise have any permanent magic within it." Snape clasped his hands together before him and considered Harry before saying, "Given your ease picking up such things, I do not understand why your review scores are not higher."

Harry frowned and hesitated explaining since it would just sound the whinging excuse. "I just didn't do any better... that's all," he said instead. When Snape glared at this, Harry went on with, "I won't do better until Moody isn't doing my spell examination."

"Or until you can beat him," Snape pointed out smartly. "What were your scores?"

Harry drew in a deep breath and told him, wincing as he did so.

"At least you have not actually flunked out of the program, correct?" Snape asked.

"No," Harry agreed, pained by the ongoing disapproving tone. "I'd have to do much worse for that to happen." More darkly, he added, "Attacking Muggles for example."

"As someone else apparently realizes," Snape stated insinuatingly. A silence descended until Snape broke it by saying, "There are two other spells I'd like to show you. They are dark magic spells, so use them at your discretion, obviously. One is a magic-twisting spell. It can be used to mask a curse to make it appear to be a charm."

"Why would one do that?" Harry asked.

"Generally hiding cursed things or perhaps creating a trap. Imagine a bracelet that is actually a cursed shackle. Twist its magic to make it appear charmed even to



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a skilled wizard and you have rather an effective trap.” Snape strode purposefully to a wardrobe in the corner and dug out one of the marble blocks used for class demonstrations. He returned and placed it on a desk. Speaking to himself, while tapping the block with his wand, he said, “Something minor. Perhaps Excususbludger! And then the twisting spell.” Snape proceeded, using arced lines, to draw overlapping triangles around the block where it sat.

Something caught the corner of Harry’s eye and he glanced around the floor, but there was nothing there. Snape was speaking again. “Attempt a curse detection spell on it.”

Snape stepped back to give Harry room, and again, something caught Harry’s eye, as though there were candles floating on the ceiling casting odd shadows rather than the lamps lining the walls, spreading diffuse light. Harry approached the desk. He didn’t need a detection charm, the block sitting there felt fetid and unhealthy. “It isn’t masked for me,” he said. But he lifted his wand and against better instinct, tapped it with a curse detection spell, which sparkled negative. “Interesting,” Harry said. He was thinking that the curse felt worse than the dark magic twisting spell layered over it.

Snape approached again. “But you can still tell?” When Harry nodded, Snape used a different curse detection spell which also came out clear. “That is useful that you can still discern the curse.”

Harry asked, “Is that really all it takes to create a Bludger?” as he reached out and touched the block to annoy it. Touching it required overcoming strong instinct to avoid it, which Harry wanted to prove to himself he could do. The block snapped into the air directly at him and he caught it and forced it down onto the table where it thrashed under the weight of his hand.

“Not a Bludger interesting enough for the pitch... that requires a dozen spells.” Snape canceled the curse and the block became still. “Let me show you the twisting spell again,” Snape said, recursing the block with a boiling blister curse this time. But as he repeated the triangles, explaining the pattern as he went, Harry again had the sense that something was moving on the floor. This time he could make out faint tendrils of shadow, hungrily reaching for or seeking something that was on their side of the plane of the floor. Harry traced the shadowy rivulets as they began to converge around Snape.

Harry grabbed Snape’s wrist, mid-spell. Immediately, the tendrils appeared to lose their focus and drifted more randomly. Snape gazed sharply at him before also glancing at the floor in alarm. “Harry?” he finally prompted.

“Don’t do that spell,” Harry said. He swallowed and muttered, thinking aloud: “It’s like there’s a barrier.” The tendrils couldn’t seem to break through for some

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reason. They were almost undetectable now, sinking away downward the way the giant squid's limbs did when the stale buns tossed by the students ran out. "Don't do that," he repeated, feeling it critical to accent that point even though he was realizing how very oddly he was behaving.

He released Snape's wrist and tried to explain himself in the face of rather intent scrutiny. "Something hungry is attracted by that spell."

Snape glanced at the floor again and said, "All dark magic feeds something hungry, I believe. One loses a bit of oneself each time one performs such magic. That is why it is so very dangerous."

Harry swallowed hard and rubbed his arms for warmth.

Snape went on. "I have to admit that I haven't heard of anyone actually seeing that happening."

Harry gestured at the floor, justifying interfering. "It was coming for you. Although something was in the way..."

"The castle's own magic, I expect," Snape suggested. He canceled the curse on the marble block and carried it back to the wardrobe, where he put it away. Stroking his wand, he said, "I'll admit I have previously observed that most dark arts work far better outside of this castle."

Harry asked, "You used to do a lot of it, didn't you?" When Snape nodded, Harry glanced at the floor where the tendrils had been and suppressed a shudder at what kind of unfettered feeding those things would be getting in that case.

Snape broke into his musings, saying softly, "One does lose oneself. And to make it worse, it first takes the part of you that would most care for the loss."

"Don't do those spells anymore," Harry insisted. "When's the last time you did one?" Remembering, he quickly said, "You had to do one to find me when I flew off and crashed." Harry felt bitter at himself over that now.

"I used one also to follow Ms. Weasley when she flew off after you." At Harry sharp look, Snape explained, "I used an Apparition tunneling spell... the other spell I was going to show you this evening. It is often useful to follow someone who has Apparated away. But perhaps I will not demonstrate it." He stepped to the nearest desk and said, "I can write it out for you in case of emergency. If you wish."

The way Snape stated the offer, it sounded like a test. Harry imagined a matter of life or death. One spell wouldn't matter so much in that case, he considered; although other instincts in him insisted otherwise. "All right. I probably won't use it, but it does sound useful."

"Come to my office and I'll diagram it for you. It is fairly complicated."

Harry followed back to the office, glad to feel that the floor felt normal behind his guardian. As he sat and watched Snape writing with a tall, black quill, he wondered

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how much of himself Snape had lost permanently. It seemed possible that excessive dark magic and not some natural personality quirk was the reason Snape didn't seem to be quite... complete.

Harry Occluded his musings as Snape finished up and handed the long parchment over. Harry stared at the first diagram of five towers of energy that looked eerily familiar from earlier just that evening.

"What are these?" Harry asked.

Lecturing, Snape said, "They are spell columns. Foci for large amounts of spell energy. One cannot generate enough spell energy all at once for the casting to succeed, so one forms those columns to temporarily store enough energy to execute the spell."

"Are they dark magic themselves?" Harry asked, studying the diagrams that demonstrated how to create them.

Snape interlocked his fingers on his desk and replied, "I only know of a few spells that use them and they are all dark magic spells, but I do not know about the columns themselves. At one time I tried to utilize them to boost the power of other spells, but without any effect beyond copious dangerous spell backlash."

Harry grinned at Snape's dry tone. He folded up the parchment, saying, "You would have been your own worst student... you do know that."

Snape's lips twitched into a faint smile. "Albus frequently pointed that out, yes. Thank you for dredging it up in his absence." He pulled his grade books over from the corner of his desk. His hair fell forward as he flipped the first one open. "Everything is indeed all right at home?"

"Yes, it's fine," Harry said. "Kind of nice to not come home to an empty house." Glancing at Snape's obscured face, he said, "I should leave you to it then, but I wondered: did McGonagall tell you about Moody's demonstration during my hearing?"

Snape hesitated. "You are going to ask me if I know how to remove a spell from a wand?"

"Yep."

Another pause. "Do you wish me to show you?"

"No. I don't expect to need know how," Harry pointed out, then said, "Thanks for the lessons." He wanted to plead yet again for Snape to restrain from any dark magic, but he resisted, afraid he may sound childish repeating himself. "Quidditch this weekend, big match. Guess I'll see you then."

Snape nodded. When Harry reached the door, Snape said in an overly pleasant voice, "Slytherin is far overdue for the house cup."

"We'll see," Harry said, unwilling to give up on his former house team, even if it were lacking its captain.

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Thursday after training, Harry again had a letter from Pamela, and this time it included an invitation to dinner due to her 'frequently bothering him'. Harry left a note for Candide and Apparated to Pamela's sitting room.

"Right on time, Harry," she said in welcome, and collected up her jacket and purse. "Let's go down to the Godric Arms... I'll buy."

Harry walked along beside her in the breeze, which at least was no longer bitterly cold. She made small talk until they sat down with their pints of ale in an empty corner of the pub. As he sipped, Harry noticed that mixed in with a row of cricket bats hung along the beam above them, was something that looked suspiciously like a Quidditch bat. He was puzzling that when Pamela began to speak, drawing his attention that way.

"So, I'm sure you know why I need to talk to you again... I have another question."

"Why didn't you just ask Remus the question?" Harry cut in.

"I'm not a good letter writer, Harry. I can't judge handwriting the way I can judge a person sitting right in front of me, or even over the telephone when I can hear things that are different from what someone is saying." She swigged a gulp of her drink and asked, "So how well do you know Remus?"

Harry shrugged. "Fairly well, but not in excessively personal detail."

"I even asked my mum what she knew about him." She shook her head. "I can't get him out of my head."

"What'd your mum say?" Harry asked.

"She remembered him as shy, not much else. A bit of a hanger-on with James, I think she said."

"Hm," Harry uttered, swigging his own ale, despite the pile of reading looming at home.

She flipped her Old Peculiar coaster over repeatedly with her fingers and said, "He actually said he'd like to go out sometime but he has health issues at the moment. So now I wonder, does he have AIDS?"

Harry propped his chin on his hand and swallowed a sigh. "No."

"Hep C?"

"What's that?" Harry asked.

"I'll take that as a 'no'," she said. "Why is this such an issue then?"

Harry did sigh. "It's an issue because magical people make a big deal out of it. He almost didn't get to go to school even." Harry stopped there upon seeing her deeply furrowed brow. "Ah, hell, I honestly don't think you are going to care, but it isn't

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my place to tell you and you don't have a chance of guessing. So give it up and ask him."

Pamela fell silent a long while before asking, "So it is catching?"

Harry closed his eyes. "Why don't I just go fetch Lupin here so he can tell you himself."

Face bright, she said, "You'd do that?"

"He isn't at school; he's apparently at home. I think teaching's been a bit much for him," Harry said aloud thinking how increasingly worn Lupin had appeared over the term.

"You know where he lives?"

"You have his post, right?" Harry held out his hand and she dug a letter, one of several, out of her purse and deliberated which to hand over. "I just need the envelope," he said, trying to not sound annoyed.

Harry stepped out of the pub and walked around the back and across the carpark to the trees. He wished he could Apparate silently yet again and took himself to one of several alleys in Brixton that he had learned from his Auror field work. He didn't have a map, so he walked along a narrow pavement where the traffic rushed by very close, to ask at the first tobacconists where he might find the address.

With the directions firmly memorized, Harry headed out again into the noisy street, wishing Muggles had better silencing charms for their cars. Over the ten minutes it took him to walk to the proper road and number, Harry plotted out what he was going to say without much faith in what he was coming up with. By the time he stood before the correct door in an overly aromatic, narrow corridor that had the bulb missing from its light so it was in near darkness, he hoped that this matchmaking worked.

Lupin answered after a few seconds' delay. He had his wand out, although he held it behind him. "Harry?" he queried in surprise and then backed up to invite him in. The two small rooms of the flat were crowded with trunks and cabinets, halving the actual living space.

Harry found a rare open spot to stand on the worn Indian rug and said, "I'm here to take you out for drinks."

"Are you?" Lupin asked doubtfully.

"Yes," Harry insisted, now finding the proper tactic had entered his mind on its own. "See, I'm being driven positively mad by this woman who will not leave me alone until she has every last blasted thing explained to her." Lupin appeared strangely amused by that, prompting Harry to say, "Get your cloak... let's go."

Lupin brushed his hair back with his hand and inspected the cardigan he had on. "You look fine. Godric's Hollow is hardly the height of fashion."

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This gave Lupin pause and he said, "Haven't been there in a very long time."

Harry handed Lupin his cloak from the stand by the door, and took his arm after he had swung the cloak around his shoulders. "Long overdue, then," Harry said, and a moment later they were in the trees behind the Godric Arms.

They stepped inside and made their way in to the corner where Pamela sat talking with the next table over. Harry hoped that was the same pint as when he had departed and not the end of a second one. Pamela's eyes brightened considerably upon seeing them.

"Remus," she said warmly and they shook hands. Lupin slid into the booth, but when Harry hesitated, Pamela tugged on his arm. "Oh, no you don't. Wizards are positively Victorian – you can chaperone."

Harry slid into the seat beside Lupin and tugged his very warm drink over to himself. "I'll get us both fresh ones," he said to Lupin and stood back up to go to the bar. When he returned, the two of them were chatting amiably and Harry considered that they looked pretty good together.

During a lull in the conversation, Harry nudged Lupin and pointed up at the ceiling beam. "What does that look like to you?" he asked.

Lupin's face broke into a smile. "Same thing I'm sure it does to you. Haven't you seen the Snitch commemorative plaque in the square?"

"The what?" Harry asked, his memory teasing him unsuccessfully about something like that.

"I'll show you later." He elbowed Harry. "Come on, I've seen you myself with your nose buried in a copy of Quidditch Through the Ages."

He and Pamela returned to talking when Harry's memory kicked in. He tugged on Lupin's sleeve, saying, "That's right! The Snitch was invented here, wasn't it?" After a glance between them, he sobered and said, "Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt." But they both laughed.

"What is this he's on about?" Pamela asked.

"Wizard sport," Lupin explained, shaking his head.

Pamela said into her drink. "Young men and sports are impossible." She set her drink down firmly. The hum of conversation around them formed a kind of safe barrier to their conversation. "Harry, would you order us some chips or something?"

"Sure," Harry said, and slid out of the booth.

Lupin keenly watched him cross the now-bustling pub to wait at the bar.

"What's that look for?" Pamela asked.

Lupin shook his head. "He's been getting into a great deal of trouble lately."

"Harry has?" she asked in disbelief. "He's such a sweet kid."

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“Not so much that kind. The kind that finds him. He doesn’t know it but he is under guard most all the time now, although I suspect this evening he accidentally shook off his assigned watch.”

“You’re guarding Harry?” she asked as Lupin continued to observe Harry waiting his turn to order at the bar.

“I am at the moment,” Lupin said easily. “I was out of commission this week, so I don’t know the schedule of whom it should be.”

“I got the sense that Harry was better at magic than most of you,” Pamela said quietly.

“Oh, he is. Could take most of us on all at once. Mostly we are eyes to sound the alarm or in case a witness is needed. It is a routine we did years ago for him as well.” He swirled the last of his ale around in his mug. “Sometimes it feels like things rarely ever change.”

Harry returned, ending their thread of conversation and in the interest of picking a new topic, apparently, Pamela said, “So, you seem nice enough, Remus. Why don’t we go out some time?”

“Aren’t we out now?” Lupin asked, sounding teasingly put-upon. Gesturing at Harry, he said, “You sent the single most famous wizard in the world to fetch me. I’ve got the sense that you’re serious.”

One heavy meal and a pint each later, they strolled to the deserted square at the heart of tiny Godric’s Hollow. Pamela had her arm linked through Lupin’s, making Harry think it was time to make his exit.

“Over here, Harry,” Lupin said, gesturing at the back of a cement pillar that held a sign designating the large tree before them as having been planted two hundred years before in honor of a visit by William Pitt the Younger. Harry studied the pillar but did not see anything special. Lupin glanced around them carefully, peering into the shadows even, before pulling out his wand and tapping the pillar with *Reveluso*.

A sparkle started on the face of the concrete which then burned brighter and split into two dots that drew a rectangular outline that then filled in with an ordinary brass plaque. The sparkle faded and Harry, by the streetlight, could see that the plaque held the image of a Snitch. Excitedly, Harry said, “There’s a photograph of my father in front of this!”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Lupin said, almost sounding tired of the topic. Harry leaned in to read the words: Here the Snitch was invented August the twenty-first thirteen hundred and sixty-nine by the foremost metal charmer Bowman Wright. Lupin said, “He claimed Wright was an ancestor, but I think he just liked to think so because he wanted to play Seeker.”

After a minute more the plaque faded back to invisible with one last little sparkle.

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“Thanks for showing me that,” Harry said. “I’d wondered where that photograph was taken.”

“So much magic everywhere,” Pamela marveled. “You just never know what you might find if you look in the right place.” She re-hooked her arm through Lupin’s and said, “I want to see some more spells.”

Harry and Lupin both laughed. Lupin said, “Not laughing at you. Just imagine if someone said, ‘I would like to see you switch the electric lights on and off again.’”

“Oh, come on... it isn’t like that at all,” Pamela complained.

“Yes, it is,” Lupin insisted.

Pamela rolled her eyes and tugged him toward the bench. “So tell me about something other than magic.”

Harry followed, thinking his time to exit had perhaps passed and that he was now overdue. Pamela said, “Come on, Harry, it’s a beautiful night. Sit down.”

“I have readings to do, and I think I’m in the way,” he commented as he sat on the end of the cold cement bench.

“No, you aren’t,” she said, sounding as though the ale was doing half the talking. “You’re our moral support.”

“How’s that?” Harry asked. But he sat quietly for many minutes while they talked. They sounded already like they knew each other well. Harry finally stood again. “I’m sorry. I really have a long list of readings assigned today and I hate to admit that my review tests didn’t go as well as they should have, so I must get to it.” The two of them looked up at him and he realized that Pamela may have been right, given the slightly haunted look in Lupin’s eyes and the uncertain one in Pamela’s.

Harry sighed. The air was still. The surrounding shops and houses shuttered. This place felt heavy with history both wide and personal. “Look,” Harry said. “It isn’t a big deal. Remus, just tell her. My continued apprenticeship as an Auror is starting to depend on it,” he teased. “You two could talk all night and not get to it.”

Lupin frowned lightly and patted his hands on his legs. Harry thought that perhaps he underestimated how many friends Lupin had lost exactly this way. Lupin smiled lightly the next instant, as he recovered himself, and said to Pamela, “I’m a werewolf.”

Pamela stared at him. Glanced at Harry. Stared at Lupin again. “Truly?” When Lupin nodded sadly, she said, “That’s really interesting.” After a pause she tried, “You look normal.” She looked to Harry for help. “What does that mean, exactly?”

“You haven’t seen any films with werewolves in them?” Harry asked. Even he had a few times when Dudley insisted on staying up late when his friends were staying over.

“Yeah, tons, at the cinema kid’s club. But that’s not... real, is it?”



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Harry glanced at Lupin, who was studying his hands. "Not really far off. It's only a full moon thing," Harry qualified quickly, realizing more starkly now why Lupin would not go through this explanation without good reason. If it were making him this uncomfortable...

Pamela, eyebrows high on her head looked Lupin over. "Fur, claws, the whole thing?"

"Murderous madness," Lupin added sadly.

Harry nodded. Pamela considered Lupin again. Her brow had lowered and she was beginning to look almost... intrigued. Harry shook his head ever so slightly. "I really need to go. Lovely evening. See you both later, I'm sure," he said, stepping away to look for a closer space to Disapparate from.

Lupin stood and followed him. "Harry," he said. Harry stopped and when Lupin caught up, he asked, "Did you leave a note at home?"

"Yes," Harry said, thinking that an odd question.

"Good. That's all." Lupin started back to the bench.

"Why do you ask?" Harry demanded. But Lupin simply waved. Harry wound his way between two houses and to the copse of trees bordering the village. He arrived in his main hall a moment later, followed by what could have been an echo, but it was just a little too far removed from his own arrival and it sounded as though it came from outside.

Harry growled and stalked into the dining room. Candide, in pyjamas and a dressing gown, sat drinking cocoa. "You're much later than your note said."

"Did someone come in here?" Harry asked, seeing his note still out on the table, but shifted to the middle.

She shook her head. "No."

They were guarding him again, Harry thought. That's what Lupin was referring to: his shaking his guard. But that was silly. He was an Auror apprentice; they couldn't very well follow him on duty. But... he thought again, he was usually with Tonks or Shackbolt then. They were Order members too. Harry stepped slowly into the hall and then back to the dining room where he quietly said, "Don't be alarmed by anything I'm about to do."

"What are you about to do?" Candide asked warily over her the rim of her cocoa.

"I'm not sure yet," Harry said in a low voice. "I'm still thinking. If my barrier spells were better I'd trap them in. I wonder who it is."

"Who who is?" Candide asked, glancing slowly around to look out the window at the darkness beyond.

"Watching the house. Watching me. Like I'm a child or something," he said in growing anger. He was alarming Candide now, so he stashed he wand in his back

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

pocket to think. A moment later another pop! sounded from farther away, almost inaudibly, and Harry decided the person must have departed. He ran a barrier check spell on the property but didn't see anything red flaring out in the darkness of the garden. He sat down opposite Candide and drummed his fingers. "I can take care of myself," he griped. "Boy, that makes me angry."

Still wary, Candide said, "Have you done your readings?"

"Ah, shit," Harry said, and stood to fetch his books.



"Would you like a cuppa before you Apparate away?" Pamela asked Lupin as they sat in the ever-growing gloom of the square.

Lupin smiled faintly. "I would, actually."

She stood and closed her jacket tighter against the cooling air. "Come along then. You can see my little house." As they walked out of the square down a road lit only faintly by distant lamps and house windows, she said, "Harry said that you weren't at Hogwarts tonight..."

Lupin explained, "The full moon was just last weekend and I require nearly a week to recover."

She squinted at him sideways. "You look hairless."

"Not recover in that way. It is just draining, the transformation is, that is," he stated clumsily.

At her house, she plugged in the electric teakettle and sat down across from him in the sitting room. "It's good that they give you that much time off," she stated conversationally.

"Yes, it is. Headmistress McGonagall is remarkably understanding. Fights the board on my behalf regularly, I suspect, although she believes now that it distracts them from other things, to her advantage. Even Severus displays a modicum of understanding, which he hasn't in the past."

"Hasn't he?" she asked over her shoulder as she stood to tend the boiling water.

"No, last time he worked very hard to have me removed."

Pamela stuck her head back in the doorway. "Did he?" she asked sharply.

"He's all right now," he assured her, and she disappeared again into the tiny kitchen. "He had his reasons... not the least of which is a rather tangled past we share."

She carried a tray in with tea and small cakes. "Are all wizards as damaged as you three?" she asked.

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He chuckled lightly as he accepted a cup and saucer. “Most are not quite as damaged as us. I don’t think, anyway.”

“But Severus is not trying to have you removed now?” she asked, sounding as though she strongly desired to have this straight.

“No, no, he’s fine now. Astounding, but Harry seems to have taught him a modest glimmer of compassion.” He dropped a sugar cube into his cup with a clink. “I would not have thought it possible previously.” He thought further and smiled. “Although, Severus is rather awkward about it.”

She carefully sipped her hot tea. “That would make it endearing, even.”

Lupin shook his head. “I really wouldn’t know about that.”



Groggy the next morning from his late night reading and a strange dream where he was searching a dank cellar full of glittering jeweled things for something he dearly needed, Harry was not prepared to face the back of the Daily Prophet at breakfast. “What!” Harry snapped.

From behind the paper, Candide said, “I wondered what you would make of that.” Calmly, she folded the paper backwards and handed it to him.

With a pained expression Harry read the gossip headline Star Auror Not So Much So. The article went to say that Harry had cumulatively scored the lowest of his fellows on his one-year auror review. Skeeter went on to suggest – with lots of high-minded sounding words – that perhaps Harry was not deserving of having his rather expensive apprenticeship paid for by the Ministry.

“Don’t say, ‘I told you so’,” Harry grumbled, rubbing his forehead and suddenly wishing to go back to sleep.

“I wasn’t going to. I didn’t imagine she could dredge up something that damaging that quickly. Or did she make it up?”

Harry pushed the paper back. “No, it’s true. I’d have done better on the written, but I got beaten up by this semi-retired Auror, Mad-Eye Moody, during my spell testing and ended up being given some potion concoction by the Ministry Healer. I couldn’t quite get through the test after that without a short nap in the middle of it.”

She covered her mouth. “Sorry,” she said, trying not to giggle. “It’s not really funny,” she argued, apparently with herself.

But Harry was laughing lightly too at the humor of it. “Frickin’ hero of wizardry... right.”

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“You are,” she said sharply, and as with most people this caught her by surprise, or her sitting there with him caught her by surprise, or something even more complicated than that. “They’re forgetting already,” she said knowingly.

Harry shrugged lightly. “I wanted them to... or so I always thought.” He pulled the paper back and studied the old photograph accompanying the article – one taken right when they had all started training almost a year ago. They already looked much younger then. “I wanted to have a normal life for once.”

“Why did you decide to be an Auror then?” Candide asked in disbelief.

Her chastising tone made him generate confidence to go with his reply, “Well, I thought I’d be bored doing anything else. The fact that some people don’t want me there makes me even more determined to stay.” She fastened a raised brow look of consternation upon him, prompting him to say, “You look like Severus again.” Which made them both chuckle.

“He didn’t seem real pleased to hear your scores,” she commented.

“No, he wasn’t. He hasn’t grown any less exacting. At all.”

“Why should he?” she asked.

“Spoken like a true Ravenclaw,” Harry muttered.

### Author’s Notes:

Well, the main reason Harry can’t quit, of course, is it ruins my story...

Candide has brown hair. Pretty sure about that.

Order members. Realize that this is the Order as snapshotted at the end of book 5 and that it never really officially incorporated people like Hermione or Ron as a result. I’m sure if they are needed they’ll be called in. I’m in fact positive of that.

Reminder: Last chance to bail. was nothing compared to what is coming up. Oh, and 25 might be late because I’m still working on 26 and trust me, you don’t want the delay to occur between 25 and 26.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



# CRIMSON REGRET

June was by far the best weather for Quidditch at Hogwarts. The cloudless sky backdropped the colorful stadium, tipped with stands full of eager fans who were wearing and waving maroon or green.

Harry sat between Ron and Hermione on a bench that had more space than the previous match due to the thinner clothes needed in the warmer weather. Beside Lavender, who was with Ron again, sat Vineet with Nandi, whose hand he held tightly. Nandi asked for another clarification of the rules, which Ron was happy to fill in. Harry had the oddest sense that Hermione was intentionally keeping her gaze forward and he thought that perhaps he should talk to her the very next time the opportunity arose.

The teams took flight and circled. The Slytherin Beaters looked even larger than the previous match and they eyed the smaller Gryffindors with malice as they flew by them, jackets flapping. The Gryffindors were shouting last minute instructions to each other and pointing, clearly lacking leadership but not lacking competitive spirit. The Slytherin Beaters closed ranks around their Seeker, who was wearing her silvered, wrap-around sunglasses today, which were sparking curious conversation around the stands.

The teams continued circling as Madam Hooch directed the Ravenclaw Beaters to place the trunk of balls in the center of the pitch. The grass expanse cleared of extra personnel and Madam Hooch blew her whistle to attract the teams' attention. The teams dodged dangerously and tauntingly around each other to swing into position, and then hovered in the breeze, waiting.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“Severus?” Lupin queried upon entering Snape’s office. He had entered because he could hear his colleague inside and Snape had strangely not responded to his repeated knock. The door had only been sealed with two layers of closure spell, which Lupin waved off. Snape stood by the last tall window, staring out. The closest window stood open, allowing the sound of the crowd to drift into the office. As he crossed the room, Lupin hesitated upon noticing that the one student desk in the room had been badly bent by something – most likely the heavy stone Pensieve that lay on its rim resting up against a bookshelf. Rounded beads of pearlish silver, like glowing mercury, lay scattered around it.

Lupin bent to upright the bowl; it scraped loudly on the stone floor as he set it right. Snape didn’t move, so Lupin also used a cleanup spell to return the memories to the cradle of the Pensieve. He left it on the floor and stood, not wishing to intrude more than that, but compelled to at least organize that much to help sort things out, if possible.

“Severus?” Lupin prodded again at the stone-like figure. The crowd roared out on the lawn, indicating that the teams had come out. Lupin approached the desk and noticed a screw-top jar lying on its side beside the tray of old potion bottles McGonagall had brought down the previous weekend. “These are the potions from Albus, aren’t they?” he asked.

Snape’s lip twitched into a sneer. “Bloody Dr. Frankenstein,” Snape muttered.

Lupin puzzled that. “Albus you mean?”

Snape did not clearly respond. He said, “Pieced what he wanted together and pretended it was human.” His eyes dropped then; the first real movement he had made.

Lupin glanced back at the Pensieve. “Was one of Albus’ old memories in there?”

Snape again stated the nonsensical. “The truth. That is all the old fool cared about... thought it had some kind of power.”

Lupin considered looking into the Pensieve but instead asked, “What was in the memories, Severus?”

Snape snorted. “I stupidly thought perhaps it related to the ingredients. Do you know what they are? Look at the label on the stone jar.”

Lupin moved quickly to find the jar in question. “Flamel,” he read off. “These are Nicolas Flamel’s ingredients. That means...”

“Presumably,” Snape muttered. He turned then, displaying his dark countenance full on.

“Severus, what’s wrong?” Lupin demanded more sternly.

## CRIMSON REGRET

“Everything.” Snape picked up a cylindrical jar made of heavy masonry. As though far away, he said hopelessly, “A few of these are nearly inert with age, but they are perhaps salvageable for a very small stone.”

“You’re going to Alchemize a Philosopher’s Stone?” Lupin asked in surprise.

Snape held up a bottle of something clear and tilted it through a circle as though checking the viscosity. “Do you know the original story of the Philosopher’s Stone?” he asked. When Lupin shook his head, Snape said, “A kindly old wizard, long of beard and tall of hat, comes to see the king and he tells him that he can create a magic stone that not only grants nearly eternal life, it can transfigure lead into gold.” Snape placed the bottle back on the tray and turned the tray around a few times as though looking for something in particular. “The king gives the wizard riches and then more riches with which to fund the production of the Stone, but it is all a lie... in the end the old wizard is nothing but a common thief in disguise.”

“You are making no sense, Severus,” Lupin criticized.

Snape’s eyes narrowed to slits as he glared at him with a look unlike any Lupin had seen on him in several years. A knock sounded on the door and Lupin turned sharply. Ginny Weasley stood there.

“Professor, I was wondering...” she began.

Lupin swooped to her and herded her out of the room. She glanced back but stepped willingly into the corridor. Lupin closed the door to Snape’s office and ignored her questions about what she might do for her detention because she needed a distraction from thinking about the match she was required to miss. The open window at the end of the corridor inspired her to flinch with its continued sporting venue noises.

“Go fetch Harry,” Lupin said.

“What?”

“Something is bothering Professor Snape and I can’t get anything straight out of him.”

“I’m not supposed-” Ginny began.

Lupin sharply interrupted. “It doesn’t bloody well matter if you’re banned from the match. Go fetch Harry... I expect he is in the visitors’ section.”

Ginny closed her mouth at his unusually forceful words. She stepped to the window and, leaning on the sill, transformed into a hawk and leapt into the updraft.

In the cheering visitor’s section, a large bird of prey swept down and grabbed hold of Harry’s cloaked shoulder. He turned with a jerk and immediately relaxed upon seeing that it was a red-tailed hawk. “Shove aside, Ron; make some space,” Harry insisted.

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Ginny appeared between them, holding both of their shoulders to stabilize herself from reappearing sideways. “Whoa,” she breathed, gazing across the pitch. “Gryffindor’s up thirty to zero already?!”

“They’re playing inspired Quidditch, I think,” Harry observed.

“Or the twins really did... never mind.” She leaned close to Harry and said, “Professor Lupin said to fetch you. Something is irking Professor Snape.”

“Maybe it’s being down by thirty,” Ron commented, apparently overhearing.

Harry tried to read Ginny’s expression. “What’s going on?” he asked her.

“I honestly don’t know, Harry. I’m just the messenger.”

To his friends Harry said, “I have to go.” He followed Ginny as she climbed up the row of seats above them and leapt over the rear railing, transforming as she fell. Harry did the same, heart pumping in the second of free-fall before his wings came into being, caught the air, and directed him forward in a surge.

Ginny drifted in bird form nearly all the way to the castle doors, so Harry did the same, overtaking her in the last twenty feet and pulling up hard before putting his heavy claws into the lawn. Transformed back to himself, he mounted the stone steps and entered the dim entrance hall.

“He’s in his office,” Ginny supplied when Harry turned to her with a questioning expression.

At the top of the second floor staircase stood Lupin, apparently waiting. “Why don’t you ask Professor Trelawney what you can do for detention, Ms. Weasley; she rarely goes to the matches.” He said this without looking directly at Ginny.

“Oh, thanks,” Ginny snipped a bit sarcastically and shuffled off.

Given Lupin’s expression, Harry held off on expressing his opinion on Ginny’s assignment. “What’s going on?” he asked instead.

“I don’t know. Severus is in a dark and mysterious funk about something,” he said quietly as though afraid of being overheard. “He’s nonsensical, going on about Dumbledore’s obsession with truth and his playing Dr. Frankenstein and-”

“What?” Harry blurted, but he didn’t wait for an answer. Now thoroughly concerned, he headed for Snape’s office.

Harry opened the door without knocking and found Snape staring down at a tray full of strange potions on his desk. “What are those?” Harry asked, seeing hazards in anything out of place. He glanced around carefully before closing the door behind him and heading to the desk across from Snape.

Snape replied, “They are the ingredients of immortality, should one wish to torment oneself with more of a life than one would normally suffer through.”

“Severus, what’s going on?” Harry asked. “Lupin said you were ranting about Dumbledore.”



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Snape's gaze remained distant as he said, "I lied to you."

Harry pursed his lips before quipping, "Lupin also mentioned that you were being nonsensical." The sound of the match called Harry's attention back down the room where he spotted the Pensieve on the floor beside a half-destroyed desk. Thinking it a better clue than the old potions, he went over to it and peered down into the small pool of ethereal liquid drifting lazily in the bottom of it.

"Go ahead," Snape snarled, giving Harry a start.

"What is it?" Harry demanded.

Snape had lifted an orange bottle from the tray. "Rare liquid amber," he stated as though wishing potions was the only topic. He set the bottle down hard and said, "A memory," like one betrayed. "A memory Albus took from me." With that pronouncement he began to pace behind his desk. "Thought he could make me something I wasn't by taking me apart like one of his bloody magical contraptions."

Harry, unbalanced by seeing this now-unfamiliar disturbed side of Snape, asked carefully, "When was this?"

Stopping to glare at Harry, he replied, "When I refused to adopt you."

Harry tried to swallow when his mouth went dry. "Oh," he muttered, feeling dark dread settling upon him, hard enough to make breathing difficult.

Tossing his arm which made his wide sleeve wave wildly, Snape went on. "Idiot should have just thrown it away. Blasted slave to the truth. Why keep it?" he asked no one in particular.

"Dumbledore did like the truth," Harry said in a commiserate tone.

Snape came to a scuffing stop on the stone floor and gesturing at the Pensieve, said, "Go ahead! What are you waiting for? You certainly never shied away from one of those in the past."

Harry considered refusing. "Severus," he said, placatingly. Snape spun away with a huff of disgust and paced again, stopping before a cabinet of odds and ends, and Harry for a moment believed that Snape was considering tossing its contents across the room. Snape's shoulders fell and he instead sat between the tallest bookcases, on top of the step stool used to reach the upper shelves. He looked defeated; himself shelved in the narrow space.

"Why are you tormenting me?" Snape asked dejectedly. "Just get it over with."

Harry knelt on the floor and pulled out his wand. "Why your sudden commitment to the truth?" he asked, stalling.

"Because everyone knows, I now realize. I was the only one made to forget." Then after a pause. "Manipulative bastard."

Harry, who could remember thinking similarly about the old wizard, but had long since decided he had done all right, stared into the iridescent pool before him. But if

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Dumbledore had manipulated Snape that much, well... Harry disturbed the surface with his wand, setting up a clockwise flow that raised the level of the sparse liquid at the edges. Glimpses of Dumbledore and Voldemort flickered by in many disparate scenes connected by a twisting web of pearlish strands. Harry leaned in farther, his chest sick with dread, but seeing no alternative.

Harry walked along the corridor he had just walked down the weekend before on the way to the Order meeting, but this time he was following a figure in a hooded cloak, moving stealthily. The figure stopped at one door and listened before moving in ghost-like silence to the next and listening there. Starting when voices were heard within, the figure tugged his hood back to listen better and Harry recognized a much younger version of Snape, with fuller hair and smooth, sallow skin. Harry listened too, trying to piece together what was being discussed. A clearer voice rang out, one that made Harry quiver when he recognized Trelawney's voice discussing her great-great-grandmother. When her voice suddenly went hoarse and her pronouncement nearly filled the corridor, Harry pulled his head back out of the Pensieve. He stared fixedly at the cabinets behind the desk without really seeing them.

When he found his voice, he said, "You overheard the prophecy."

Snape didn't respond. Harry turned his stare on him from inside a personal pool of numbness. He felt nothing. He was drifting somewhere else even though his body was clearly in Snape's office. Grabbing hold of the next thought that occurred to him, he said, "You told Voldemort." With that, heat seeped in, burning the numbness away like an acid. Harry forced himself to breathe. He bit his lip hard. He wanted nothing more than to throw the Pensieve across the room, but clearly that had already been done.

Harry realized that he was gripping his wand, which was growing damp with his own perspiration. He almost put it away on automatic, but then didn't. He wanted to hold it.

"What did you do?" he asked rhetorically, finding the pathways of suspicion easy to follow. "Run off to your master in glee at the thought of your reward."

"No," Snape answered. He crossed his arms and said cockily, "I never do, and never did, anything without due deliberation. And besides, I had to hide from Dumbledore."

Harry laughed viciously at that thought, prompting Snape to say, "Thought you'd like that."

Harry stood up off his knees, again needing to resist tossing the Pensieve against the wall in the vain hope that the solid stone of it would shatter. He felt as though he were bleeding to death and that any moment he would collapse from loss of blood. Again, he forced himself to breathe past the betrayal tightening his chest. The burning

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inside was becoming an unleashed living thing snaking through his limbs, devouring him from the inside.

The sound of cheering wafted in on a breeze and Harry raised his wand in his left hand and threw a too-powerful charm at the window to close it. The window banged hard, deformed, and three of the panes shattered, letting the next cheer float in as well. Angry beyond reason, Harry changed hands and waved a *Reparo* at the bottom opening and then another above it. He hesitated, though, before casting the third because he was noticing now the grey oddness of the first two sheets of new glass. Too angry to care long, he lifted his hand to cast the third, but Snape restrained his wrist.

Harry didn't fight him, he felt too weak to. He swallowed, forced himself to breath, and watched Snape step over to the window to peer at the odd grey glass. It wasn't just grey; wraiths twisted inside of it. Harry blinked, distracted from his anger enough to squint at the panes. Snape waved a repair at the top open light and the crowd noise quieted. He then cast series of breaking curses at the grey panes, none of which had the slightest effect on them. He jabbed his wand handle into one even, but the window merely rattled, the glass unbreakable.

Harry decided that he didn't care if he had left Snape with something annoying to take care of. He turned away, swallowed the urge to scream or kick the *Pensieve*, and stalked toward the door a little drunkenly.

"Harry," Snape said, causing him to hesitate.

Harry didn't want to listen, deliberate thought had fled him. He spun and demanded, "What's the matter with you? Leave me the hell alone." He wanted to accuse him of all kinds of things, such as killing his parents in order to get him, but even in his current state, that sounded absurd. The betrayal flailing inside him urged him to strike out with something though, to transfer the pain, if possible. "I hope Voldemort tortured you a few times; you deserved it." He waved his hand at the *Pensieve* at Snape's feet. "Got any memories of that I can watch; I'd like that."

Snape's only response to that was rubbing his forehead.

At the door Harry paused to say, "You're right, Dumbledore was a manipulative bastard. And an idiot to boot."

The corridor was silent. Harry wished not for the first time, that he could just Apparate himself away directly. Torn between going down to McGonagall's office, which was much closer, and walking, or even flying, to Hogsmeade, Harry didn't move immediately. The door to the office opened and Snape stopped in the doorway upon seeing Harry still standing there. Harry raised his wand and pointed it at him.

"So help me," he murmured, feeling deep down satisfaction in knowing Snape believed Harry could best him. "Leave me alone."

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Snape didn't react, simply remained frozen where he had stopped. Harry, the pain and writhing in his core spiking to nearly intolerable, stalked off in the direction of the staircases. Out on the lawn, with no memory of his journey out of the castle, he glanced in the direction of the pitch when it came into view, wishing he were still in the crowd, still naïve.

Harry was still moving on a strange automatic instinct when he reached home. The house was blessedly empty, which meant that Harry could wander his room to pack a trunk without being disturbed. Halfway through tossing things into it, however, he sat on the bed and stared into the trunk's depths. He was supposed to protect Candide, not run away. And back at the Quidditch match, his friends were probably wondering where he had gone off to. It would be much easier to pretend this didn't matter, and for long minutes he stared at the floor trying to make it so. But he couldn't. The betrayal of it cleaved him down the center to the point where if he let his control slip at all that violence would result. If Snape had pushed him at the end just a little bit more, Harry would have unhesitatingly hit him with a curse, just to keep him away.

The room screamed the lie of the last two years at him so much that he could not bear to stay. He tossed open the wardrobe and used a pack spell on his shoes. The shoes zipped to the trunk but in their wake they left inky black wraiths that only dissipated slowly from the air. The shoes themselves looked all right when he picked them back up out of the trunk. Harry, more determined than confusingly alarmed, dumped his spare jeans and shirts in by hand and closed the lid. Trying to hover the trunk created the same bizarre effect of leaving square black outlines floating in the air and when Harry let the trunk settle beside the door, he caught a whiff of dry rotted earth. Sitting on the trunk, Harry tried to pull himself together. From her cage, Kali hissed at him.

"You can stay," Harry said to her. "I don't care." And with that, he hefted the trunk by hand and carried it down the stairs. Physical training at the Ministry had made it an easy task, even though it was his largest trunk. But at the hearth, he again had second thoughts about what he was doing. He decided that what he was doing was getting some space to think clearly, which he desperately needed. If Snape was so worried about Candide, he could move her into Hogwarts.

Harry was sitting on Hermione's couch, his feet up on his trunk, when Hermione came in.

"Harry! Here you are. Everyone's looking everywhere for you. It was only Lupin insisting that you and Professor Snape must have had a row that kept us from calling the Ministry and reporting you missing."

"Sorry," Harry said, only vaguely sorry in reality because from the depths of what

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he was feeling he could not dredge up significant concern.

Hermione, in her fashion, appeared to read all of this in his response. She sat down on the trunk, facing him, and asked, "What happened?"

Harry told her everything about what he had discovered in Snape's office about the prophecy.

"Merlin," Hermione muttered.

"Did you know?" Harry asked, voice half-hardened against another potential betrayal. "Did you know it was Severus who had overheard the original prophecy?"

"No." She held up her hand. "Well, I suspected it once. But Voldemort was gone and it didn't seem to matter. Something McGonagall said when I was helping her set up the first party the night you destroyed Voldemort made me wonder."

"No wonder she seemed so surprised that I'd agreed to the adoption," Harry said.

Hermione rested her elbows on her knees. "You forgave Professor Snape rather a lot, Harry. Not that much of a stretch to assume you'd forgive him that too."

"Yes, it is," Harry snarled. "He killed my parents."

"Voldemort killed your parents," Hermione corrected him.

Harry sat forward. "Whose side are you on?"

"Yours, of-

Harry interrupted her. "Or are you on the side of Dumbledore's effing truth?" He couldn't sit still, so he rose to pace, making Crookshanks hiss at him from his bed on the bookshelf. Harry eyed the half-Kneazle to make it back down and indeed it turned in a circle and curled up facing the back of the shelf.

"Harry," Hermione said calmly. "Sit down. I'll make some tea. I am of course on your side. Everyone is. Sit down," she repeated when Harry remained standing in the middle of the room.

She filled the teapot and set it in the middle of the table. When she returned with cauldron cakes she was surprised to find the pot still cold. Harry said, "Sorry, didn't feel like heating it." In truth, he was worried how the spell would really turn out and couldn't bring himself to try it. Remembering how odd his magic had been when he had moved his things around, not to mention the strange grey glass, made Harry's arms go numb with fear and the snaking pain seemed to feed on it, making it worse.

She gazed at him with an dubious expression but tapped the teapot with a simple heating charm. She munched on a cake saying, "Wish I had some chocolate. You can stay here if you like. I'm assuming that's why you have your trunk with you."

"Thanks," Harry said, feeling better at her invitation, well enough to unwrap a cake for himself.

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“I need to owl people to tell them where you are, Harry. Everyone was worried.” She didn’t move though. She asked, “All right?” with unusual care.

“Yeah. Go ahead.”



Snape numbly stared out the window for long minutes before focusing on the strange glass Harry’s repair spell had set into the leading. Dark shadowy things alternately swam and crept inside the glass, or more correctly just beyond the glass, as though it were a window onto another world. Swallowing hard, Snape tapped on the glass with the tip of his wand. One of the wraiths jerked as he did this, although it may have been coincidental. If it were a window onto the Dark Plane, he should get rid of it. If it were something else, something even stranger and less understood, then he truly needed to be rid of it.

Thoughts of demons drew Snape to his hazardous ingredient cabinet, still ajar from his earlier investigation of the tray of potions left behind by Dumbledore. From the back of the bottom shelf he extracted a small sandalwood box. He had not opened it since returning with it the evening Harry had given it to him for his birthday. Inside, amongst the fine glass powder, were a few larger shards, still with shiny silver backing. The clusters of iridescent rainbows shimmering in the pebbles of glass hinted at their power to attract and redirect energy. Kuromakyo – a mirror a demon has peered into without breaking it – and, ironically, then ground into a powder for easy use. With deft fingers accustomed to fine, persnickety ingredients Snape plucked out the largest of the tiny cleaved shards between his fingers and held it in the sunlight. Glaring metallic rainbows scattered from the tiny chip as he examined it before carefully rotating it to align the silvering parallel to the wraith-filled window pane. A long ten minutes ticked by, punctuated by the distant noises from the pitch where the crowd sounded as though it were losing energy. Finally, one of the indiscernible charcoal black forms twisted violently when a rainbow struck it. The figure halted, expanded as though approaching rapidly from a great distance and then the window shattered, leaving behind tiny shards that sizzled and dissolved until only fine sand remained. Snape brushed the sand out of the window, calmly repaired the empty pane properly, and then patiently held the shard of Kuromakyo up to the second grey window.

After the second window was properly in place and the last traces of sand Expunged away, Snape systematically re-shelved all of the rare potions and ingredients. If he had stopped to think of whom they had belonged to, he may have shattered them all and regretted it later, if not immediately.

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Cabinet locked and spelled closed, Snape continued to clutch his wand as he left his office. Singlemindedly, he strode down the corridor and around the corner to the alcove where a stone gargoyle slept. “Darjeeling,” Snape snarled at the crouching figure, making it immediately raise its head and move aside. The helical staircase beyond turned ponderously; Snape stepped doggedly up as it turned.

At the top, the door was latched but opened with the simplest of cancelation spells. Snape stalked into the empty office – which still held traces of the calming aura of its previous occupant – and aimed his wand at the painting of said headmaster.

“You bastard,” Snape said, wand wavering as he considered simply burning the canvas through to the wall.

The painting blinked at him and stroked its beard. “I take it something is the matter, Severus,” the image observed mildly.

“You were a doddering old fool at the end. Why couldn’t you, for just once, leave well enough alone?” Snape demanded.

The other surrounding paintings were waking up and inching to the outer edges of their frames. “Now, now, Severus, I almost always left well enough alone, many more times than I should have in hindsight. You know that.”

Snape was breathing heavily as he faced the avatar of his former mentor with nothing but all-consuming anger. “I should reduce you to ashes,” he threatened.

“I suspect that that will accomplish nothing,” Dumbledore commented in a helpful tone.

Snape snarled, animal-like, and lowered his wand. He trembled momentarily with the effort of controlling the pain and fury inside him that sought an outlet, any outlet.

“I failed your last test... your last task. You set me up to fail it. You made me into something I was not,” he said through clenched teeth.

The image of Dumbledore steepled its fingers. “I did that a very long time ago, Severus. Anything recent is incidental.”

“Not this,” he snapped back. Snape clutched his head before pacing away and leaning on the desk. “You do not know what Harry has become... how much danger he is in... how much help he needs.” He turned a glare back to the painting. “And now I cannot give it!” he shouted. “Why did you give him to me just to take him away again?”

The painting fell thoughtful, or seemed to, and as aggravatingly as the real Dumbledore – could not be Legilimized. Snape said, more quietly, “You truly cannot understand what he has become. He has bizarre powers I cannot find in any books...” Snape froze and re-raised his wand, almost mechanically. “You know what you did, don’t you?” Snape demanded rhetorically in a low voice. “That damn hat told him he would be great if he were in Slytherin. He chose otherwise and you put him in

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Slytherin in the end anyway.”

Snape leaned against the desk and bowed slightly, dropping his wand hand into his other hand and clutching it desperately. “Did I turn him into that?” he asked the empty room.

The door to the office opened and McGonagall stepped in followed by Lupin. “Everything all right, Severus?” she asked.

Snape gestured with his wand as he explained, “I was just having a little chat here with doddering old Albus.”

She removed her gloves while giving Dumbledore’s portrait a curious glance. “What is happening? Ms. Granger came up to me in search of Harry, who apparently disappeared after coming to speak to you.”

Snape said dismally, “He is off somewhere; I don’t know where.”

McGonagall took that in and asked, “Did you two have a fight?”

Snape pointed or more accurately aimed his wand at Dumbledore. “Only with him. Him and his bloody manipulation. Bending me to his will was one thing, but he’s destroyed Harry this time, using me to do it.”

“What are you talking about?” McGonagall asked sharply.

“I am talking about making me forget it was I who overheard the prophecy that killed the Potters. And then leaving the blasted memory where it could be found.”

The painting said patiently, “The truth is not something to be disposed of lightly, Severus.”

Snape continued to aim at the man’s bright blue eyes. “And Harry’s future is?” he snarled.

“You were the only one who could assure Harry future. If I did something untoward to accomplish that, it would have been worth it.”

McGonagall moved to hang up her cloak. “Well, in that case, we need not contact the Ministry to search for him.”

Snape turned to Lupin. “You knew?” he snapped at him. Lupin nodded. “And you, of course?” he asked McGonagall by half turning his head over his shoulder.

“Yes, Severus. Probably why Albus kept the memory, to sort that out should it come up again.” She took a seat. “Do you even wish to know how the match turned out?” she prodded.

“I don’t care,” Snape muttered, crossing his arms.

“Your House cares dearly and I am certain they will expect you to make an appearance for the party they are assembling for Ms. Zepher.”

Snape didn’t turn around, but he asked, “So they won?”

“Yes, but only by 160 to 140. I honestly think your Chasers were tampered with,” McGonagall said. When this did bring Snape’s gaze around fully, she said, “But since



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the result is as it should be, I expect, and Madam Pomfrey cannot discern any health issues with your team, I may let it drop. But it is up to you.”

“Perhaps I will make some inquiries,” Snape said darkly.

McGonagall said, “The Gryffindors have also lodged a complaint regarding Ms. Zepher’s unregulated, Muggle equipment, which is an easier violation to prove.”

Darkly satisfied, Snape said, “Point out to them that they were a present from Harry Potter and I believe that will shut them up.”

McGonagall nodded, mildly amused. “And on that topic, do you know where Harry may have gone?”

This gave Snape pause, as he was already traveling down the more pleasant path of devising a trap for certain Gryffindor students whom he was most suspicious of. “One of his friends’ I expect, if he is not at home.” The last came out unintentionally faint.

“Well, I asked Ms. Granger to owl if she locates him and, if not, we should contact the Ministry Auror’s office, obviously.”

Snape waited for a bout of dizziness to pass before leaning forward off of the desk. “I will be in my office,” he said, and exited without meeting either of their gazes.



Early that evening, Lupin knocked on the door to Hermione’s flat. Harry sat, obsessively reading a book on introductory criminal law from the shelf rather than one of his assigned books. As Lupin greeted Hermione, Harry taunted from across the room, “You’re an unexpected emissary from a Death Eater.” He felt his face twisting into a pleasing sneer as he said it.

Lupin and Hermione gave each other wide-eyed looks. Lupin clutched his small pointed hat in his hands and stepped into the sitting area, saying, “Yes, Harry, I am.” Hermione gestured for him to take a chair, so Lupin did so. “And to think, Minerva offered to come in my stead and I declined her offer.” He said this pleasantly which bore more sting.

“Why didn’t Professor Snape come?” Hermione asked challengingly.

Lupin appeared uncomfortable a moment before clasping his hat and hands between his knees and saying, “He resisted suggestions that he do so.” He turned to Harry and said, “I can only assume you threatened him because I am quite certain that he would be willing to step in front of a Crucio for you yet does not wish to come speak with you.”

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Hermione gave Harry a dark look, which he ignored, uncaring. Lupin went on, shaking his head, "You have put me in the rather unexpected position of pitying Severus Snape."

"It was all a lie," Harry said, feeling that cleaving pain rending his chest as hard as ever as though the words were a spell.

"But of course," Lupin said. "In which case, we all live lies, Harry."

Harry gave him a glaring look. "That what you came to tell me?" he asked sarcastically. When Hermione rolled her eyes and went to straighten up in the kitchen, Harry prompted, "What?"

"You sound like Malfoy," Hermione explained loudly, so as to be heard.

"Harry," Lupin began as though leading into a lecture, but then he trailed off. "Well, I think you should think about things. Get a little perspective. Mostly I was sent to verify that you were safe and sound, which you clearly are." He stood and, as he turned, put a hand on the chair back. "The only thing I'll mention is an observation of my own and given Severus' and my history I think it carries some weight. I truly do believe that Severus is sorry."

"Sorry for what, exactly?" Harry asked, still clinging to sarcasm.

"There are rather a large number of possibilities, I'll admit," Lupin said. "He's possibly sorry for most all of them."

Harry didn't have a response to that; it wasn't an objectionable assertion as much as he would like to object.

Lupin sighed. "Well, take care, Harry. I'll leave you in Ms. Granger's capable company. And do remember that if you need anything you may always ask me or Minerva."

Harry nodded grudgingly and Lupin departed. Hermione took the seat Lupin had just vacated. "You're thinking, right?" she verified.

"I'm thinking I wish I could start everything over yet again... like I always used to."

Hermione frowned. "I'm sorry for that, Harry." She seemed to want to say more but didn't and eventually they both settled back into their reading.

Later, she asked, "Something you want to do tonight?" which jolted Harry out of his complacency.

"Shit, I have field work tonight." He glanced at the clock and sank back in relief that he had three-quarters of an hour. "Almost forgot," he breathed.

"That will be a good distraction."

Harry stood to open his trunk to find something to wear. "Tonks is not a good distraction," he commented.

"Still holding a candle for her; are you?" Hermione asked.

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“Yeah, what’s it to ya?” Harry came back sharply.

“It’s not good to do that too long, Harry.”

Harry wanted to snap something along the lines of not caring what she thought, but realized it wasn’t true before the words formed. “I can’t help it,” he said instead. “There’s something about her that... still is hard to make less interesting, even when I try to.”

“And does she feel the same?” Hermione asked.

“I have no idea,” Harry returned. “She’s very professional around me.”

“Well, good for her,” Hermione said.

Harry paused in digging through the highly disorganized pile of his possessions and stared at her. “And you?” he pointedly asked. Hermione drew her lips in, so Harry added, “What IS happening between you and my fellow apprentice, Vineet?”

“Vishnu, Harry. Everyone in the world but you calls him Vishnu.”

“Did you have a nice dinner the other evening?” Harry asked in a forced easy tone that still sounded accusing.

“Of course,” she said primly, but something about her tone made Harry think she was still in the same situation he was in. “You’re going to be burning that candle as long as I am,” he stated.

She apparently decided a change in topic was in order. “I’m going to join my office mates at the pub then if you are busy. I’ll see you back here, when?”

“2:00 a.m. or so,” Harry replied, carrying his clothes into her bedroom to change.

Hermione tapped her foot. “I’ll get used to those hours, I’m sure.” More loudly, to be heard through the door, she said, “Be careful, Harry. Don’t let your temper get the better of you in the mood you are in.”

Harry didn’t reply, and when he had changed, he came out looking glum and withdrawn. “Right,” he uttered without any real feeling. He wanted to test his magic, but didn’t want her to see it should it come out dark and strange, so he held off, thinking that rarely did he use any during field work.

In the Auror’s office, it was bustling. Harry stood off to the side, out of the way, while Shackbolt ran in and out to the file room and then the break room to talk to Rodgers. Harry normally would have tried to eavesdrop, but this evening he allowed the hurried and abbreviation-laden conversations to roll by him.

A broad figure shuffled toward him down the corridor with a distinctive and familiar limp. Harry waited until the approaching figure was at the doorway and paused before raising his gaze, which he felt certain held enough enmity to speak for him. Moody grunted doubtfully and shuffled into the back of the office behind the cubical wall, while Harry suppressed his disappointment that the old Auror hadn’t started something that could be escalated into a nice violent spell exchange.

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Tonks eventually came in. “Ready to go?” she asked, collecting her cloak. She took his arm and the next instant they were in the Leaky Cauldron, where a few patrons eyed them curiously. Tonks flipped her cloak off one shoulder, glanced at him, and then immediately asked, “Something wrong, Harry?”

Quietly, Harry answered honestly, “Everything’s wrong.”

This reply caused her to push him up the stairs of the inn to the quiet corridor that led to the rooms. At the landing she said, “What’s up?” in an official tone, although her expression belied real concern.

Harry explained what he had learned about Snape and the old prophecy. He skipped explaining how odd his magic had become since then. Tonks stared at him.

“Dumbledore really did that?” she asked, pained.

“Apparently,” Harry said.

She traced the grain of the wood paneling beside her with her finger. “You know he used to have his hand in everything. When I first started at the Ministry I learned to watch for it – Kingsley would sometimes comment about some action someone took – and I was pretty good at spotting it by the end. But Dumbledore was rarely ever directly involved. He pulled other people’s strings through... almost a kind of blackmail, except it was more like whitemail. He’d just gently remind someone of their own virtuous vision of themselves, or their youthful optimistic view of the world, and of course he knew everyone’s from when they were in school.” She fell thoughtful, staring at the wall, her hair cycling through various shades of pink and orange. “This is a twisted version of that, all right. He kept Severus in line all those years. I never understood how.”

“He didn’t want to be a Death Eater anymore,” Harry heard himself explaining. “But death is normally the only way out.”

Tonks’ orange brows bunched together. “It was more than that. It was something to do with a mistake he made or something he regretted. I could never get a decent guess out of anyone and I never had the guts to ask Dumbledore outright, although I hinted at it enough times.” She finally looked at him. “I’ll admit, Harry, he made me a little nervous.”

Feeling pain anew, Harry said, “I don’t think he’d have considered getting my father killed a mistake.”

“You sure about that?” she asked.

Harry didn’t reply, even though his lip twitched as though an answer were right there.

Tonks gave his arm a hard pat on the arm. “Well, Harry, good training night for you, then.”

“How’s that?” Harry asked, wounded.

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“This will happen all the time. Things are going wrong in your personal life, but you have a shift to do. You put it all aside.” She gestured with her hands as though grabbing something invisible and pushing it away. “You put it aside and you do your job. You have no option; let it interfere and it will get you killed.”

Harry found having an excuse to put his pain aside highly appealing. His heart was sore now as though it continued to receive a battering and it felt like the damage couldn't possibly heal, no matter how long it had to do it.

“Come on, Harry,” Tonks said in an official tone. “We have a call about a theft last night on Knockturn Alley, and then we'll do patrol.”

Harry straightened his back and nodded that he was ready.

They stepped out into the alley, striding with matched purpose. A roof of darkness hung over the alley and the normal sounds echoed louder as though it were a real one. Everything Harry saw assaulted his determination to keep his pain at bay. The Apothecary's reminded him of potions he was given to cure his ills. Flourish and Blotts reminded him of buying textbooks for Potions and Defense class. Even Eeylops reminded him of the first room he had graciously been given to keep his owl in without trouble. By the time they turned at Gringotts and went down a few steps into Knockturn Alley, Harry had to work hard to remind himself why he was there. He copied Tonks and pulled out his wand; the feel of which helped to hold him centered.

Down here, the streetlights were dim and grimy, casting glaring, rather than useful, light across the cobblestones. Hooded shadows shied from their approach. Tonks stopped before a shop with a long sign reading Clipper & Clydewhistle where the ampersand was surrounded by the outline of a sloop as though they might sell ship's tack. The sign had been repainted, but the outlines of the previous letters spelling Borgin & Burkes were still visible beneath the white. Despite the shop's lack of light, Tonks knocked and moments later a candle flickered to life within.

A worn looking man in his thirties unlatched the door and stuck his nose out.

“Aurors,” Tonks whispered.

The man stepped back to let them in, saying, “Didn't think you'd come tonight... if at all.”

The shop still contained many of its previous items, such as the cursed sarcophagus and a row of stuffed blackbirds, which loomed grotesquely in the light of the single candle. Harry's sense of cursedness made him walk on his toes as though ready to jump away. It required immense willpower to follow Tonks as she stepped in farther, and they were completely surrounded by putrefied magic. Her spiked hair haloed her head as though she too were a candle.

“So, are you Clipper or Clyde?” Tonks asked the man as they wove a path to the

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back of the shop.

"I'm Hummus Borgin, nephew of the former proprietor. Clipper and Clydewhistle are my backers. Thought a change in name might be in order." At the rear of the store behind the counter, he indicated a door in the floor that had been tipped upward, jagged-edged by the varying length floor boards making up the cover, which masked its location. The candlelight didn't reach the bottom and the sense of entrapment was acute.

"So what happened?" Tonks asked.

"This was sealed," Borgin said, gesturing so that melted wax from the candle in his hand dropped onto the floor and into the hole. "I'm the only one who knows how to open it. Even my uncle, retired to Spain somewhere, doesn't know how anymore. But I come in to open up this afternoon – don't open early on weekends, you know – and this is open, just like this. Didn't even try to hide that they'd got in." He sounded insulted.

"So what's missing?" Tonks asked.

Now Borgin hesitated and rubbed his hand on his robe as though to dry sweat from his palm. "Here is where it gets difficult for me, you know?" he said, clearly hoping for some understanding of his business. "I do not wish to say, but the value of this thing would not be clear to anyone. It was part of my uncle's personal collection and only he and I know why he kept it."

"So, what is it?" Tonks demanded, clearly losing patience.

Borgin shrugged, "It is just a watch, and a poorly running one at that."

"What did it look like?" Tonks asked and it seemed to Harry that she had interrupted something Borgin was about to add.

"Gold case; gold Albert chain; full hunter." The man shrugged again as though these were meaningless details.

Tonks scratched her head and leaned over to peer into the squarish hole in the floor. Harry said, "I'll go down."

She eyed him thoughtfully and Harry was certain she was about to deny his offer, but instead she gestured for him to use the ladder. As Harry lit his wand with a Lumos – which carried a dark halo that went unnoticed in the dark shop – and stepped backwards into what appeared to be a bottomless pit, he thought perhaps that he was feeling a bit reckless this evening, and he also believed that that was not surprising. By the time his foot hit dirt rather than another rung, his breath had grown rapid in the dank air which had a dry rotted odor not unlike the Dark Plane. Harry shook his wand to renew the Lumos and turned away from the ladder to face three rough stone shelves full of glittering objects.

Harry froze, not breathing. This was his last odd dream, this place. Jarring

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himself from this heart-stopping reverie, he moved to study the shelves and their objects. Oddly, fewer were cursed than those up above. Most appeared to have more intrinsic value, such as a sceptre with a massive ruby mounted in a gold claw. Harry cast a footprint detection spell that sent wisps of ink around him and made the air even more dank. He saw his own footprints and two others, each older than the next. Harry assumed the ones that took the shortest path were the thief's, who had only been looking for one thing, as opposed to the shop owner who would have verified that everything was present. Harry crouched down to renew the spell and study the prints more closely. They were made by shoes with pointed toes and significant heels on them, Harry could see the physical imprints they left beneath the magical ones.

Harry climbed back up the ladder and confronted Borgin. "The robbery was two days ago," he stated, knowing this from his dream, but thinking it could be explained by the footprints too, had he run the right detection spell.

Tonks didn't speak, just waited for Borgin to find a response. Harry tried to Legilimize the man, but he hid his thoughts well.

"I wasn't sure I wished to report it," Borgin said carefully, leaning back away from Harry fractionally.

"Why did you report it at all?" Harry then asked, giving no ground, not even to Tonks.

"I was concerned who the thief might be." He stammered then. "For example... I thought, perhaps, Mr. Burke had escaped, or something of that sort. You know. He would know how to get into the cellar."

He was lying; Harry could tell, but he also made sense. Harry didn't know what tack to follow with, because accusing the man of lying when he made sense would lose him his stronger position.

"We'll check on that," Tonks assured him. "No one else would know?"

"No," Borgin replied, but beads of sweat had formed on his upper lip.

Outside on the street, Tonks asked, "So, you volunteered to go down in the hole why?"

"I felt like being useful," Harry replied, which was partially the truth. Mostly, he had felt reckless and as though a little bout with danger would take his mind off things. "The shoes of the thief were odd, fancy, like a woman's with pointed toes and small heels."

"The thief left footprints?" she asked in shock. "I think someone is just jerking Borgin around. It makes no sense. To have the skill to get into the floor vault but not bother to hide your trail... that's really mad."

They walked to the other end of the winding alley to patrol, and Harry mulled as they went whether he should tell Tonks about his matching dream. He held off

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while he considered whether he perhaps was sleepwalking as Rodgers had suggested. He didn't believe so, but a nagging doubt held him from explaining anything until he could think about it more. He certainly didn't own shoes like that, which was a relief.

As they turned at the crumbling brick wall that dead-ended Knockturn Alley, Harry bumped shoulders with someone. This hooded someone cackled, jerking him to the here-and-now which he had accidentally slipped out of when he really shouldn't have.

"'Tis the Nones of June," the figure crowed in an elderly voice. "Caesar beware the Ides of June," she added, poking Harry in the chest with a long, boney finger. "All of your enemies will be after your blood on that day."

"Harry, come on," Tonks said, because Harry had stopped, rubbing the now-painful spot on his chest. "Harry."

"All right," Harry said, pulling his cloak tight around him. "What day is the Ides?" he asked.

"Fifteenth, thirteenth, something," Tonks replied absently. "Not that it matters... she's just a mad old bat."

"Thirteenth," the crone countered loudly from behind. "Everyone's lucky number..." She trailed off into another cackle.

They patrolled up and down Diagon Alley for an hour before heading off to Devon to walk patrol there. Along a relatively busy road, Tonks stopped and put her pointy nose in the air. "Chips. Let's get some food."

They followed the scent around the corner and ate while sitting in cracked chairs around a battered table in a little shop lit too brightly for their dark-adjusted eyes. Harry at first ate with gusto due to the walking and stress, but his appetite faded quickly and his fifth bite required great effort to swallow. He pushed the plastic basket away with a comment about not being as hungry as he had thought. In truth it was worse than that, and as they departed, he was certain his throat was full of fur and that he was choking on it. Breathing rapidly, he ducked behind the dust bins and was sick.

"Harry, you all right?" Tonks asked in concern.

Harry leaned hard on his hand propped against the brick wall beside him. Disorientation made it impossible to stand straight. "Yeah, hang on," he managed to say levelly. He pulled his wand to clean up his mess and realized that he couldn't, or more accurately: shouldn't. He wondered if he could Apparate home from here, it was a bit farther than from London. "I need to clean up," he explained to her. She had approached and was looking him over with a Lumos.

"I'll come along," she said.



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Harry realized then with a stab that he had been picturing the house in Shrewsthorpe as home and had to amend that. "I don't want to bother Hermione this late... I'm going to have to wake her up later as it is. Can we go to your place?"

At Tonks' nod Harry Disapparated, and Tonks appeared behind him as he bent over the sink in the small all-white toilet which glared as painfully as the chips shop had.

"You want to just call it a night?" Tonks suggested. "Go home and sleep?"

"No, I just need a minute," Harry insisted, certain that he could regain himself if he just tried hard enough. He stepped by her into the main room, sat on the couch, and pressed his fingers into his eyes. Occlude your mind, you know how, played in Harry's mind, unfortunately in Snape's determined and exacting voice. The pain this caused inspired more determination toward blocking all the pain out and moments later he was free, breathing easily, feeling almost himself.

"Better?" Tonks asked when Harry sat back. "Want some tea?" At his nod, she went to the stove. Between spelling cups into a clean state and heating the teapot, she said, "Talk to me a bit, Harry. What's going on?"

"I don't know. I haven't felt this awful..." he trailed off, not wanting to risk his newfound equilibrium casting his mind back that far. "I felt like I was choking on fur or something."

Half a minute later, he complained, "Everything's going wrong." Thinking of Snape's destructive revelation, added, "It's not fair." He immediately moved to Occlude his mind again by tipping his head back and closing his eyes, and Tonks was smart enough not to interfere. She handed him a cup of tea when he lifted his head. The strong fruity scent of it did wonders for his state of mind, as though it were alien to whatever was dogging him. Sensing that she was again going to offer to escort him home, he prepped an insistence for wanting to complete his evening duties, but then considered that he had been lucky so far not to need significant magic and perhaps he should not push his luck.

Harry stood and checked that he had his things, and only then realized he didn't have his coin purse. He checked his pockets again. "My money's gone," Harry said flatly, holding control of himself.

"Oh," Tonks said. "Grizzie must have it... the crone you bumped into. She used to be a pickpocket." Tonks sounded level and casual about this, which Harry was highly grateful for given that she could legitimately scold him. Tonks swigged her tea and huffed comically to get rid of the burn in her mouth. Harry took another long renewing sniff of his before setting the full cup on the counter.

Tonks said, "Leaky Cauldron," and Disapparated. Harry followed and had to catch up as she strode out the back door. The wall was already open and he rushed

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to leap through before it closed again. Harry was grateful for the rapid walking that meant his missing money would be resolved quickly. With some distress he was realizing that his purse constituted almost half his money and that without Snape there wasn't any more. They turned at Knockturn Alley and Tonks nudged Harry to be alert, drawing him out of an alarming realization of how very dependent he had let himself become for nearly everything in his life.

Tonks spelled opened a metal door about halfway down the alley and at the top of a narrow, crooked staircase, knocked on a half-rotted wooden door.

"Coming, coming." The crone opened the door. "Took you long enough," she criticized. She ducked under a low beam holding up the angled, sagging ceiling to move back around to where a table was arrayed with brewing apparati. "I was just fixing my favorite drink. Care to join me?" On the table lay Harry's small leather purse, its drawstring loosened. The crone dropped a Galleon into a bubbling glass of milky liquid. Instantly the liquid turned shining and golden, and she tipped it up and swallowed half of it. Smacking her lips, she said, "Golly, I do miss that."

She grabbed the purse up and tossed it to a surprised Harry. "Here then," she said, the detailed wrinkles in her face accentuated when she taunted, "Training not going so well, I've read. You scored a Needs Improvement on this as well."

Harry looked to Tonks to see if the old woman was serious. Tonks gave Harry a roll of the eyes. "Grisley Teaberg here is simply far too familiar with us from being hauled in so many times." Tonks propped her fists on her hips. "She's looking to get hauled in again," she threatened.

"Eh," the crone waved the threat off. "I insisted on getting paid for my services, is all. Off with you,"

Tonks shook her head and led the way out. At the door Harry turned back. "Since I have paid now, what exactly happens on the thirteenth?"

Grisley raised one long-haired, grizzled eyebrow and said, "I told you already, boy. Out!" She waved her hand and the door slammed in Harry's face.

On the stairs down, Harry asked Tonks, "Can she really foretell? She looks more the Potions type."

Out on the dark, quiet alley, Tonks replied, "She does whatever she can get paid to do." At Harry's insinuating look, lit by the lamp at the corner with Diagon Alley, Tonks laughed and said, "Yes, even that. She's pretty good with potions." As Harry checked the contents of his coin purse to assure himself that only a Galleon was missing, Tonks went on with, "If she stuck to selling beauty potions she could buy Knockturn Alley. She gets jealous too easily to do that though."



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Lupin stood before Snape's desk and looked down at him. Snape sat with his hands interlaced, his knuckles flashing white as he moved his fingers spasmodically. The corridor outside the closed Defense office door was unusually quiet – the students sequestered rather than fomenting trouble, revising heavily as the term drew to a close.

“Severus, can I get anything for you? Dinner, for example?”

Snape ignored him.

Lupin said, “I almost pity you. Although, you're lucky that your inner darkness is kept at bay most of the time. Some of us face it every moon.”

Snape exhaled loudly and admitted in a monotone, “I was gleeful to learn the prophecy – Harry was right. Gleeful to know something only Dumbledore knew.” His chair creaked as he leaned back and apparently needing to explain to someone, said, “But I didn't run off and tell Voldemort. I wanted to know for certain who it might refer to. Although partly this was to be ready with that answer when asked by my master. Partly it was to increase the power that rare knowledge held.” He turned and stared at the candle burning beside the lamp, which had run out of oil. “It was clearly the Longbottoms. Alice Longbottom's continued work as an Auror despite carrying a child was well known.” Snape slapped the desk. “I didn't know the Potters were expecting. No one knew.”

“Did you tell Harry that?” Lupin asked.

Snape shook his head. Condemning himself, he said, “I was gleeful. I was expecting a reward.” He fell silent and the candle sputtered and flickered. “Most of all I was gleeful that Voldemort was not indestructible. ‘The one with the power to vanquish.’ Tormenting though, given how much time one could expect it to take, unless there was some trick to the prophecy as there often is.”

Lupin looked Snape's angular face over in the equally angular light. “So, Voldemort asked you whom you thought it would be referring to... the prophecy that is?”

“Yes. But he either disregarded my opinion or assumed I was misleading him. He began hunting for the Potters soon after, in September or so, to the dismay of his other followers who did not know why he had grown so singularly obsessed.” His lip twitched. “Being the only one who understood made me gleeful as well and it made me a closer confidant of the Dark Lord, which made me safer... ironically. And the Potters hid well, until they were betrayed.”

Snape stared at his interlocked fingers, holding them up in the light to look them over.

“Shall I go speak to Harry again?” Lupin offered.

Snape shook his head. “If he wishes to speak to me, he knows where to find me.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A knock sounded and the door creaked open. Snape squinted across the room into the even dimmer corridor. "Candide?" Snape queried, making Lupin start and quickly go to the door to usher her in before leaving them alone.

After the door clicked closed she said. "Your owl wasn't very detailed... what is going on?"

"Harry moved out," Snape explained.

"He only took a few of his things in that case. There isn't much missing. His little pet seems lonely but won't let me near her."

Snape's eyes widened. "He left his Chimrian behind?"

"The bright violet thing? Yes."

"Feed and water it and bring it to me when you can. I will take care of her. I am surprised he didn't take her."

"I was worried he'd left because of something, well, I was quite certain I hadn't done anything to upset him. We seemed to be getting along jolly well enough..."

"It wasn't you." He said this tiredly and stood up. "I thought I made that clear in the owl I sent."

She followed along the other side of the desk and met him at the end. "You look terrible, Severus."

"I have lost far more than I realized I could possess," he said. "Harry's younger self was right. I do have to answer to my Harry."

He doggedly explained everything to her: about the lost memory, informing Voldemort, Harry's dismay upon learning all of this. He sounded flat as he recited it all as though he grew unfeeling through the retelling.

Candide stroked his arm, trying to elicit something more than a monotone from him. "Let me make sure I understand this... Harry knew before that you joined Voldemort willingly?"

Snape nodded. "He denied the significance of it to himself. I could see him doing it. And his fierce defense of me was symptomatic of this ingrained uncertainty."

"Maybe it's just that you did so much for him... it was worth ignoring," she suggested, sounding additionally meaningful.

Snape's eyes came into focus finally. "You sound sanguine about all of this."

She tapped her fingers on the desktop beside her, bit her lip, and said, "Of the things I expect you did, or fear you did, this one on the face of it is relatively benign. It just had rather larger consequences." His gaze on her didn't waver over the next half minute and she held her side of it.

Snape took the half step forward that separated them. "You can overlook this?"

"It isn't a matter of overlooking. If you regret what you've done, I've already decided I'm prepared to overlook more than this."

## CRIMSON REGRET

Snape's hand reached up and brushed her hair back. "I'll confess that I've grown overly accustomed to having company."

Her eyes flashed with sympathy before she glanced down. "Harry will come around," she said. "He seems like such a good kid."

Snape's hand grazed her shoulder as it dropped. "He's hurting. He does not behave rationally when that is the case. I wonder now that I did not have the sense to throw the memory away and beg for a Memory Charm from one of my colleagues."

She raised her chin again. They were standing about as close as they could be without actually touching. "Why didn't you?"

"Why didn't Albus?" he demanded angrily. "I did not know... I feared the memory had some critical meaning." He hesitated before saying, "Albus Dumbledore was my master for far more years than the Dark Lord, and in many ways he was a much harder master, demanding in more complicated ways and far more difficult to understand on top of it all."

He stepped away, prompting her to say, "If you want me to speak to Harry, I will."

Snape shook his uncombed head. "Leave him be."

"Shall I move out again?" she asked.

"Only if you wish to; although, you may be safer if you do."

"I'll stay. Harry may come back to collect his things." She joined him beside the bookcase where he was staring through the volumes before him. "And your house-elf may get lonely," she added, stroking Snape's back.



Harry's stress at his dependence dogged him the rest of the patrol he insisted he was fit enough to complete. The last thing he wanted was to be babied, especially by Tonks. Although, he did let her escort him to Hermione's place at the end of shift.

In the corridor beside the door to Hermione's flat, Tonks said, "I'll see you on Monday, Harry." She brushed his arm and added, "I'm sorry for what's happened between you and Severus."

"Thanks," Harry said, feeling his walls coming down, which made him hurry her off and get himself inside, out of sight.

Sitting alone on the couch, which he could not safely transform into a bed, Harry felt pain returning despite his best efforts otherwise. Crookshanks jumped down from his perch and blinked at him, irises pulsing larger and smaller in the light of the electric lamp beside the couch. Harry scrubbed his forehead and rested his head in his palms. He needed a memory charm, a huge one. He dearly wanted to stop

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

remembering being cared for, worse yet, by someone who never cared for anyone before and had to put a serious effort into it, which made it impossible to disregard.

Harry tangled his fingers in his hair and tugged. He was losing control to emotion brought on by memories and he was irresponsibly doing it in the flat of his friend who had no idea how very dangerous he could become. Harry raised his head and looked around. Crookshanks had lost interest and now reclined in the center of the floor, paws tucked neatly under his breast. Harry blinked in confusion. He didn't feel as though he were losing control, instead he felt better, despite the aching heart. It was as though this pain of losing his family was different from his previous pain of betrayal, even though they were intertwined. Taking out his wand, he tried a simple hover spell on the book before him on the table. At first it appeared normal, but black ghostly outlines began appearing and Harry could just discern black tendrils reaching for him from the far side of the floor, except here they had no barrier. Crookshanks tore the carpet in his bid to escape into the kitchen and hide under the sink. Harry cancelled the spell and caught the book so it wouldn't strike the table. The inky air drifted slowly away and he wondered with despair what the hell he was going to do.

Author's Notes: 26 just made it to rough draft form, but I will try very hard to have it on time next week.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



# BLEEDING DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Harry stepped into training Monday morning feeling the sharpest disconnect yet from his fellows and his department. No one besides Tonks knew that he had moved out and presently had no family yet again, and this left him feeling lost as he settled into a desk and meticulously arranged his books and quill. As he waited, he couldn't remember how he had tolerated this state previously, even though he could clearly remember being independent much of his life. Fiercely, he tried to put himself into that mindset again.

Trying to behave as though this were an ordinary morning, Harry watched Vineet take the seat beside him. The Indian immediately said, "Nandi was most impressed when you flew away from the match on Saturday. She wished me to tell you that you are most magnificent Pakshiraja." He appeared more nervous then, which Harry had a hard time discerning through his own internal distress.

"What's that?" Harry asked, pushing his own troubles to the side with a burst of curiosity.

"Raja, King of birds," Vineet explained. Then a long pause ensued before he asked, "You have not read of such stories?"

Harry shook his head and pushed his hair out of his left eye, thinking that he should get it cut but immediately then not caring, but then thinking it was going to truly annoy him in a hurry. His reply seemed to disturb Vineet just a bit, but it seemed unimportant to his own troubles, so he didn't ask anything more.

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Kerry Ann came in and slapped Harry on the shoulder. “You’re lucky you weren’t on duty Friday afternoon like Vishnu and I. Ended up stuck in a safehouse outside Devon for most of the afternoon.”

“Kerry Ann does not enjoy idleness,” Vineet sagely opined.

“I don’t either,” Harry admitted. “What was the emergency that called the Aurors away?” he asked, suspicious.

Vineet shrugged and quietly said, “I did not check the log this time.”

“I will when get a cha – ” Harry began.

“I did,” Kerry Ann admitted. “It read: Tip-off RE Rendez.”

“Rendez?” Harry echoed.

“‘Rendezvous’ perhaps,” Vineet suggested.

Rodgers entered then and they dropped the conversation and pulled out their books.

The best part of the day was their real workout time – which was only twice a week now – when Harry could take his poisonous energy out on a set of inanimate weights. Aaron, who was waiting for his turn at the bench press, said, “Are you trying to start a competition today?”

“No,” Harry replied, wishing he had not been distracted from adding an extra four lifts to his set of eight.

“Good,” Aaron returned. “Because I feel too lazy for one.”

Limbs rubbery from excessive work, spirit numbed by physical exhaustion, Harry stood opposite Kerry Ann for drills. It may have been the workout dulling his thoughts or simply denial not allowing him to think ahead, but when he threw an ordinary freezing charm at her to begin their usual sensory attack series, the result startled him as much as his partner. The blue-white of the freezing charm was enveloped in a pocket of jet black that left shadowy wisps floating in the air even after the spell was countered, or countered as well as it could be. Black ice crackled on Kerry Ann’s robes, even after the spell was gone, and Harry had to withhold an instinctive heating charm, badly distressed that he could not help. He approached his fellow, who was stiffening alarmingly with the cold. Rodgers stepped in quickly and countered with a heating charm of his own before he turned on a shaken Harry.

“What was that?” Rodgers demanded.

“I... my magic is a little odd today,” Harry reluctantly and incompletely explained.

Rodgers gave him a disturbed glare that faded quickly when he shook his head. Beside them, Vineet and Aaron had paused, curious about what was happening. “I would say,” Rodgers said. “Never seen a freezing charm quite like that one. If all your spells are like that you should skip drills.”



## BLEEDING DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Harry thought back over his quiet Sunday during which he had held back on nearly all magic, and couldn't assure his trainer that some spells were turning out all right. When he didn't reply, Rodgers said, "Tristan could use some help in the file room... why don't you spend the afternoon there?" As Harry turned the door latch to leave, Rodgers added, "I'm expecting you to have things straight by tomorrow, Potter."

Harry didn't turn around, just nodded and pulled the door closed behind him.

In the file room, Tristan Rogan was sitting on the floor surrounded by teetering stacks of folders. He turned his vaguely childlike face up questioningly at Harry's entrance. "I'm assigned to help you today," Harry explained.

Rogan blinked at him. "Really? Well, I could use it. Pull over a stool or take a seat on the floor... your choice."

Relief that his help was highly desired raised Harry's spirits. He sat on a low stool beside an indicated pile. Rogan said, "We've hit an utter dead end... this is the only time we are in here doing this. So we are looking for any prior references related to magical pottery, overly charmed objects, or anyone with a connection to Merton, even remote. Or anyone with a connection to anyone with a connection to Merton. And here's a current list." He handed over a long parchment containing a messy list of names with arrows and notes.

Harry studied the list in an attempt to memorize it before picking up the first file and paging through it. Fortunately, it was an old one which meant the penmanship was exquisite. The case was one regarding stolen brooms that were later returned to their owner with their braking charms reversed. Harry closed it, knocked it against his leg to straighten the myriad sheets inside it, and set it aside, germinating yet another pile.

Hours later, fingers dry and itchy, Rogan called a stop. Harry had only found one even remotely relevant reference to charmed garden gnomes that could burn the legs of someone who crossed their path. Rogan, at least, got a good laugh out of the discovery, and he transcribed the find onto a long parchment, made a note on a small card, and placed the file on one of his own piles.

Rogan stood and stretched his neck. "I'll have to thank Reggie for sending you to help. Maybe you can help tomorrow too," he suggested, hopefully.

"Maybe," Harry replied, thinking that his magic was unlikely to improve before then.

Later at Hermione's flat, Harry's friend was already home. "Ron wanted to go out for drinks, do you feel up to it?"

"No," Harry said, dropping down onto the couch.

"I didn't tell him you were staying here. I thought you might want to tell him yourself. I was afraid he'd be a little obnoxiously all knowing about how things turned

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

out.”

Harry pulled his backpack closer and looked for a book to distract himself with. He was feeling unpredictably moody, uncertain what the repercussions would be should something irritate him further. “I don’t feel like going out anyway.”

She transfigured the straight-backed chair across from him into a plush armchair and sat back hard into it. “I’m not in the mood for Lavender either, frankly.” She pulled out a fat law book and began paging through the index. “Can you make tea?”

Harry stood and went to the kitchen, filled the teapot, dumped and refilled the leaf-strainer that rested in the rim of it, carried it back to the sitting room where he placed it on the low table before his friend.

Minutes later when she tried to pour from it, she said, “You like cold tea, Harry? Or tea-essenced cold water, I should say.”

“You don’t have an electric kettle,” Harry offered, even knowing he sounded ridiculous.

Hermione gave him a low stare. “You learned so many blocks that you forgot how to do a heating charm?”

Harry stared bleakly at the tea-streaked white teapot that didn’t appear to have received a thorough wash in many rounds of use. “My magic isn’t working right.”

She stared. “Harry, that’s terrible.” She closed her book and set it aside before clasping her hands before her. “How in Merlin’s name are you managing at the Ministry?”

“I spent the day in the file room, but Rodgers, my trainer, didn’t want me doing that tomorrow.”

“Magic can get weak if one is distressed, but I’m never seen that happen to you before.”

“It isn’t weak. It’s just gone weird. Dark,” Harry confessed with a flip of his stomach. “My magic is all Dark magic now.”

“Harry, that’s not possible,” she argued, distress clear in her voice.

Harry angrily pulled out his wand and heated the teapot, around which wraiths flowed and flared. The air filled with the stench of rotting tea. Harry ignored the tendrils rising up toward him easily this time, because he had to make himself care, and the will wasn’t there to accomplish that. The effect didn’t fade for a long time and when it did, Hermione banished the teapot. Harry said, “You can’t see the Things from the underworld that come to feed on that energy.”

Hermione’s eyes were fixed wide open as she said, “And you can?”

“Of course I can,” Harry replied in a difficult tone. “I’ve walked the plane they inhabit.” Thinking aloud, he said, “Although, this is a different path for them.”

## BLEEDING DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Usually they come through at the seam between the floor and the wall. Maybe they can reach for magical energy without actually coming through the interstice.”

Hermione swallowed. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Ginny’s seen them if you don’t believe me.” Harry sat back and crossed his arms.

“I do believe you, Harry. I’m just...” She stood and paced, waving a stack of books aside out of her path so she could pace across a longer space. “Harry... don’t do any magic, I guess,” she lamely said. “I’ll look in the library again for anything that might help. There’s a lot published regarding emotional effects on magical performance.”

Harry rubbed his face and muttered, “I feel like my chest is split in two and my magic is coming out of this gaping wound...” He trailed off because it made him more despairing to describe it.

“Oh, Harry,” she said in pure sympathy. “You look in need of a good night’s sleep, too. Why don’t you take some of this Muggle stuff I’ve got and go to bed?” She urged him to stand by tugging on his hand. “I’ll transform you a bed. No wonder you’ve been sleeping on the couch. Why didn’t you say something?” she chastised gently.



The next day, feeling groggy from the Muggle medicine, but at least lacking haunting wisps of bad dreams, Harry stepped into training and said to Rodgers, “My magic is still not right.”

Kerry Ann and Vineet, who were both early, looked up at this and turned to see Rodgers’ reaction. Rodgers said with an uneasy laugh, “Don’t make me send you down to the Department of Mysteries to figure out what is wrong with you, Potter... I don’t have many other options. A Healer isn’t going to help with what I saw yesterday.”

Harry started to speak but he had no excuses, nor any assurances that he would be better soon. He said nothing.

“Well, Tristan swears to give me his first born if you help him again today. So after review...”

“Thanks,” Harry said sincerely.

As he took his seat, Rodgers said, “You’re lucky you pick things up fast, otherwise I’d tell you to take an extended forced leave.”

After lunch in the file room, the hours passed in blissful, mundane quiet. Harry picked up the three hundredth or so file that he had perused that day and read the name on the label: Debjit Thanakar. Oddly, Harry thought the name strangely familiar, but he did not know from where. A quick glance at the file’s summary sheet

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disproved Harry's first theory: that he had been at Hogwarts. He was much too old, forty-six by the file's information. The file was only three pages long and consisted only of a Muggle copy of an immigration visa overstay report. Harry held the file out. "Why is this one in here?"

Rogan carefully put down the fat, unruly file in his hand and glanced at the one Harry offered. "He's a wizard so we make sure we get a copy of all relevant Muggle documents. Wizards who break Muggle laws will eventually break wizard ones as well."

Harry placed the file on his "done" stack and moved on to the next, wishing he could remember where he had heard that name.



"Harry," Hermione prompted carefully as they sat eating tinned pasta and doing their respective work.

"What?"

"Is Severus really a different person than he was?"

Harry put down his notes and tried to take in her question. It didn't make sense to him. "What?" he repeated.

Hermione put down her fork and folded her hands primly. "What I'm trying to say is, how... in what way is Severus different than he was, say, on Friday before you learned-

"He didn't know it either," Harry cut in sharply. "Now he knows."

"But that just means he wasn't lying to you," Hermione said.

Harry stared beyond the edge of the table where their tall stacks of books fought for dominance and strained the cheap furniture. "I guess," he conceded. It hurt to think about it, and he was already raw and didn't particularly want to rub those aches with further thought.

"Harry," she said in a corrective tone that he was highly familiar with from years spent with her. "I think you have to forgive Professor Snape. You have to get beyond what is bothering you or your magic isn't going to get any better." She said this in a tentative way, as though expecting him to blow up in response.

But Harry couldn't find any anger in himself. He was empty of everything, including anger, and he could feel the hollow core the betrayal had left behind. He had been left alone again. No one was truly loyal to him, it seemed, and that thought drained him of will. "I don't know if I can do that," he answered. Oddly, he was concerned that it somehow might set a bad precedent. That, instead, some kind of

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example should be made of Snape. These thoughts were so nonsensical that Harry pushed them away and promptly forgot them.

Hermione rubbed her brow. "I think you have to try. Everything I read today on distressed magic says you have to eliminate the stress. Your magic could be permanently damaged, even, if this goes on too long, and they say that for people who's magic just gets weak or unpredictable. No one has written a word about people whose magic goes Dark."

Her concern was palpable. Harry tried to imagine forgiving Snape for telling Voldemort the prophecy that led to his parents' death and just couldn't manage it. "I can't do it," he said, thinking with no small ache of everything he was losing with that assertion.

More boldly, Hermione said, "I don't think you have any choice."

"Is that really forgiveness then?" Harry asked, confused.

"It's whatever works, Harry," she stated. "It's not that I don't enjoy having you around, even as mopey as you understandably are, but you have a home."

"I had a home," Harry countered, heart twisting.

"You still do; I'm quite certain."

Suspicious now, Harry demanded, "You've got an owl from Severus, haven't you?"

Angry, Hermione plucked at her robe-front in a gesture of hurt and said, "No, I haven't. This is just Hermione talking, all right?" She dropped her head. "Sorry," she whispered. "This is killing me, is all." Apparently seeing Harry's surprised look, she said, "I've been trying to be equitable to your side of things, but including what this is doing to your magic, I can't just sit on the sideline and let you self-destruct." She dropped her shoulders and the official sounding tone, and went on with, "I saw how happy you were..."

Harry stood suddenly and paced away.

"I'm sorry," she apologized again. "But I have to say this. You have to forgive this too, along with everything else you apparently managed to already."

Harry turned back in her direction but kept his gaze on the floor. The emptiness inside him had shifted into a less painful state where he was glad someone else had made a decision for him. You have no choice, echoed in his head. That feeling was alien to what had been possessing him just minutes before. He felt liberated, oddly enough, by losing all of his options. Or perhaps by the acceptance of it. Whatever it was, he could think clearly now.

Hermione quietly said, "Why don't you at least go talk to Professor Snape? Try, Harry, please." She was pleading with him and the emotion in her voice also seemed to free him, untangle him.

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“Okay,” Harry muttered, preserving his pride by sounding unhelpful. Although actually, feeling himself instead made him hopeful for the first time that day. “I guess I should go... now,” he said, trying to imagine himself overcoming his betrayed hurt enough to even carry on a conversation with Snape. You have no choice, played again in his mind and he took out his Floo powder and moved to the small hearth, nearly hidden by Hermione’s crowded bookshelves.

In Hogsmeade it was much cooler. Harry walked along the high street and watched the castle appear between the ramshackle buildings. Recent rain had rendered the castle dark and aged except for a few lights glowing high in the towers. At the edge of the village, Harry transformed and took flight, mostly because he needed to move, and flying was a good excuse to do so.

Harry flew over the grey, choppy lake, gaining altitude at the lawn, and spiraled up to clear the wall on the south side. He spread his wings flat and wide, and leaned into a sweeping turn around the inner towers. The tall windows of the Great Hall glowed merrily, indicating the dining hour. The windows’ bright colors rendered the damp grey stone all the darker in the dwindling light. Low candlelight flickered in the window of Snape’s office. Harry turned, leaned back, and came to a hard stop on the window ledge.

A large, bat-like figure flapped violently to a stop outside Snape’s office window before transforming into the outline of a cloaked man. The window, which had blown open from the gust of artificial breeze, rotated to a stop against the stone framing and the figure stepped down inside with lithe movements. Snape lowered his wand when Harry turned to him.

Harry reached back and closed the window, noticing as he did so that the strange grey panes of glass were gone. He rotated the brass latch to lock securely and stepped into the large space before the desk, head down, biting his lip. The pain was rising up again, bringing with it a disturbing dual betrayal that made his shoulders tighten and hunch. His fingers tried to curl into claws. How dare Snape? he wondered with strange sharpness; although, he immediately wondered why he expected Snape to obey him.

Harry cradled his forehead on his palm, elbow propped on his other arm which was wrapped tightly around his middle. Inside himself, he tried to find that sense of hopefulness again. He tried to hold in his mind the sum total of the last two years, but the good feelings were too slippery to hold for long. Harry closed his eyes and thought of all the small things Snape had done; those hurt less to remember. His gut shied away from the task, given how much worse it made the betrayal bleed. But it was the only path to finding his rational self, so he forced himself to do it.

Snape remained silent and unmoving as Harry worked through all of this, not even

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rustling his robes. Harry's shoulders fell as he recovered himself again. "Why did you do it?" he asked, sounding bleak.

There was a slight pause before Snape replied, "There were many reasons." He stepped out to stand beside his desk, arms hanging at his sides. He didn't appear haughty or angry, or much at all like himself; he reminded Harry vaguely of Mr. Weasley.

"I thought you were helping Dumbledore," Harry snapped, and felt a stab of disgust at the name.

"I was serving two masters... you will recall."

Harry considered that. He glanced back at the window, curiously drawn to knowing how it had been repaired, but anger turned him back to the topic at hand. "You didn't care about betraying my parents?" he asked, unable to keep the hurt from his voice.

"I did not betray them so directly," Snape retorted, showing some spirit. "I was certain, certain, that the prophecy pertained to the Longbottoms."

Harry cut him off. "So, it would be all right to set them up to be killed?"

Speaking slowly and propping one hand on his desk, Snape said, "They were constantly throwing themselves into Voldemort's path. Hunted him down at every possible opportunity. I honestly believe there came a time that the Dark Lord began to avoid them due to the sheer annoyance they caused him. Sending Voldemort after them was saving them the trouble of finding him themselves."

Harry stared at him, prompting Snape to add, "They were Aurors, Potter, it was their job to battle him. I did not consider in the least that I was signing their death warrant by telling the Dark Lord about the prophecy."

"But he didn't think it was them," Harry said.

"No," Snape admitted. "Not for a moment. And I certainly could not dissuade him otherwise." He waved one hand dismissively. "Perhaps the defying count for your parents was precisely three and for the Longbottoms, something closer to thirty. I do not know. "

"Did you really try to dissuade Voldemort otherwise? You hated my dad."

"Yes, I did hate him," Snape agreed firmly as though tired of the accusation. Then he grimaced and admitted, "But I would not have wanted to harm your mother." His tone was so odd that Harry gaped at him, drawing forth a sharp, "It wasn't like that." Snape sighed and tapped the desk nervously. "I think that Remus and I had one thing in common at that time: we both held your mother up as a reason to retain some faith in humanity."

Snape dropped his gaze and they both fell silent. Pained in a new way, Harry looked around the room for a distraction. "How did you repair the window?"

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“With the Kuromakyo you gave me. I found a piece large enough to the purpose. If you show a demon its reflection, something must shatter, and the Kuromakyo already had proven that it would not.”

Harry hit his fists together a few times to gear himself up to confess, “All my magic has become like that.” Snape’s head was already bowed, but he closed his eyes. “Hermione thought...” Harry began, but he couldn’t go on. His thoughts were circling too fast to land on the word “forgive”. Although perhaps there was nothing to forgive except bad circumstance. He tried to want to believe that. Replaying what Snape had told him, Harry asked, “Why didn’t Dumbledore stop you?”

Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose before replying, “He did not wish to.”

“What do you mean?” Harry demanded, thinking that the dumbest response he could imagine.

Snape’s shoulders squared slightly, though he still rubbed at his nose. “I saved him the sin of it. Although, I did not know it until much, much later.” Harry glared at him, not comprehending. Snape finally said with a sneer, “Have you forgotten the previous prophecy already?”

“No of cour-”

“ ‘Mark him as his equal’ ” Snape stated as though speaking to a dim first-year. “The prophecy isn’t valid if Voldemort doesn’t know it.” Harry gaped at him as Snape added, “And believe me, as much as I hated your father but wished your mother no harm... I do not regret making the prophecy valid. I was enslaved to two disparate masters and had very little time for anyone’s interests but my own.”

Harry stared at the nearest bookshelf. None of this had occurred to him. “So you don’t think Dumbledore tried to stop you?”

“I think it was the beginning of him allowing events to play out on their own, in general. Otherwise, he was as guilty as I was.”

Harry jerked his head to look out the window, trying to latch onto anything that would give him some stability. He pulled out his wand and stared at it, needing to, but not wanting to, try a spell because he dearly feared how it may turn out. After struggling for a minute he dropped his hand to his side.

Snape said, “I’m sorry, Harry.”

“For what?” Harry snapped back.

“For hurting you. I certainly did not intend that.”

Harry breathed deeply, grasping for control, and lifted his wand hand again. Everything would work out all right if he could just get his magic back; he felt certain of that, desperately certain. Snape had risked worse than death, he had risked becoming a shade for him, Harry reminded himself. That had to be worth something, and that was on top of many other things, small and large. Harry missed having a family, a



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home, being anchored. The pain of betrayal was also still fresh though, countering his desire to forgive and re-embrace what he had before.

“I don’t have any choice but to forgive you,” Harry said, still staring at his wand. The windows had darkened and the single candle on the desk glittered on the wand’s varnish.

“I don’t think forgiveness is something one can be coerced into, truly,” Snape provided levelly, sounding as though he wished to be helpful.

“Then what am I going to do?” Harry asked.

“There is a version of you separate from me, I am certain. I have seen more of it of late. You simply must find it.”

“Easy for you to say,” Harry said, goading himself to try a spell, and still not daring.

“Easy?” Snape echoed, mockingly. “Harry, watching you suffer is worse than a Crucio. Just because I chose to not burden you with it...” He turned away and grimaced again.

Harry stared at Snape’s stark profile, outlined by the candlelight and framed by his disarrayed hair. He couldn’t find hate in himself anymore. All emotion in him had been neutralized. He breathed once, twice, still nothing. Harry shook a Lumos out of his wand. It glowed blue, lighting the center of the room. Moving it side to side didn’t bring out any odd black halos. Canceling the spell, he dropped his wand hand, feeling relieved rather than triumphant.

“Is your magic back to normal?” Snape asked.

“Seems to be,” Harry conceded.

“That is good.”

“Don’t need any more guilt?” Harry prodded, still feeling vicious and willing to strike out.

Snape did not react except to say, “I would say.”

Harry put his wand away in his pocket. “I’m sorry I ran out on Candide,” he said, glad to get that off his chest to keep it from gnawing at him now that they had moved on to other things. It wasn’t like him to do that. “You asked me to protect her and I abandoned that duty. I shouldn’t have...”

“You need not apologize for that,” Snape said with droll tones. “She was there to keep an eye on you, not the other way around.”

“What?”

“Not that I did not trust you to protect her, should it be necessary. But you have no reason to feel you shirked your duty.” At Harry’s continued dismayed glare, Snape said, “Come now, Potter, you were in need of an alibi should anything else happen.

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I would have been remiss in not assuring you of one. I was quite certain you would not move into Hogwarts, whether I ordered you to, or not.”

“No, I wouldn’t have.” Harry, peeved still, stalked to the window. “I’ll move home anyway, if that’s all right.”

“It is, of course, all right,” Snape stated, voice oddly wavering again.

Harry stared out at the gloom beyond the window. So many things needed to be said, but his ego was getting in the way of them as was the fear that examining what had happened would bring the Darkness back again. Another long silence descended, oppressive.

“I should go,” Harry finally said.

“Do be careful,” Snape said.

Harry half nodded, half shrugged, before unlatching the window. The cool night air drifted in, refreshing. Without another word, Harry went out, leaping before transforming and enjoying the deathly plummet before slowing with wild flapping, barely clearing the roof of the west wing of the castle before he gained height.

Harry flew along the railroad tracks, veering side to side in violent turns. He landed in the center of the railroad bridge and balanced on a wooden tie between the rails before transforming back to himself. The long bridge was hollow and spindly and he could see all the way down to the bright, thin snake of river at the bottom. The valley lay before him, foggy and indeterminate, lit by the last glow of the sun. As the light waned, the bridge hung over nothingness. Harry had things to be doing and remembering them all clearly now, he Disapparated.

“How did it go?” Hermione asked when Harry appeared in the flat.

“All right.”

She exhaled loudly. “That’s good.” She put her books aside and stood. “And your magic?”

“Better.”

“I’m really glad for you, Harry. Must not have been too hard, then.”

Harry chewed his lips a moment. “I should pack up.”

“I’ll help.”

They worked together to locate all of Harry’s far-flung possessions which had migrated around the flat. “I can always come get things later, if I’ve missed anything. I need to get home,” Harry said, surveying his open trunk, hands on his hips.

Hermione stepped over, rose up on her toes, and gave him a hug that grew firmer rather than releasing immediately. “Take care.” Backing up finally and dabbing her eye, she said, “I should have hid a few things so you’d have to come back for them.”

Harry flipped the trunk lid closed with his foot and waved a latching spell at it. Hermione said, “It’s good your magic is all right again.”

## BLEEDING DARKNESS AND LIGHT

Considering his wand, Harry said, "It is. I'd be sunk without it." He stashed the wand away and veered his mind to other things, worried he could break his magic again by dwelling on painful thoughts. He bent to lift one handle of the trunk and picked up Hedwig's cage. "Thanks for letting me stay."

After another hug, he was standing in the main hall at home. Footsteps sounded upstairs and Candide came to the railing. "Harry!" she said brightly. "Good to see you."

Harry ducked his head, vaguely embarrassed, and hovered his trunk to follow him up the stairs. He didn't know what Snape had told her. As he passed, she asked softly, "Everything all right, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, glad that with that simple question, he no longer needed to explain. His room appeared starkly empty with no cages in it. "Where's Kali?" Harry asked Candide, who had drifted down the balcony, following him.

"Severus said he had given her to Hagrid to look after."

"Oh," Harry said, relieved. "She may be happier there." He put Hedwig's cage on its stand and moved to cover it, since Hedwig immediately tucked her head under her wing. "You're not supposed to sleep during the night," he said to her just before dropping the towel edge. He shook his head and decided that nothing was going to be straight.

He turned to Candide, still standing in the doorway. "Sorry I ran off."

She smiled lightly. "Not like I didn't too, once." She pulled her dressing gown tight and crossed her arms. "But you have a little more invested than I."

This comment made Harry's mind swirl through the last two years here. It still felt dangerous to do that, so he cleared his thoughts and moved to unpack.

"I'll see you at breakfast," Candide said, and went back down the corridor.

The next morning, Harry sat heavily in the seat across from Candide. He was looking forward to demonstrating to his trainer that his magic was working, but that was the only bright spot ahead in his day. He hadn't slept well, despite returning to his own bed, and he wished his heavy head could be back on his pillow.

Candide gave him a weak smile, appearing concerned about him. She seemed to know enough not to ask how he was, and instead asked him what time he would be home from training.

"As early as I can," Harry said. "No pub for me tonight. I'll have to fetch Kali this evening too." He scratched his head and then propped it on his hand because it was too heavy to hold up.

"Your training isn't really dangerous every day, is it?" Candide asked.

"No. Why?"

"You don't look fit for anything dangerous," she opined as she refilled her tea cup.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“No. I’m not.” He considered that he could use some more sleeping potion. The small bottle that mysteriously had appeared, he had already finished off. He didn’t feel like requesting any more, however. Maybe more of those Muggle pills Hermione had given him would be a good alternative. They had helped a little.

Harry pushed his plate away, half eaten, and headed into the Ministry early. He found Rodgers in the Auror’s office, writing out a report. He scratched out the remainder of a line and put the quill down to give Harry his full attention.

“My magic is better today,” Harry said.

Rodgers appeared vaguely doubtful, but he said, “That’s good. Figure out what was going on?” When Harry shrugged in response, Rodgers slipped the report into a folder and stood. “Let’s go try it out.”

Using the practice dummy, Harry demonstrated a heating charm and a freezing charm followed by a blasting curse that he kept very light so as to demonstrate his control. Rodgers rubbed his chin and patted his mustache. “Looks good,” he uttered and quit the room, leaving Harry alone with a slowly swinging, crookedly jointed figure of a man hanging from a substantial hook on the top of his head.

Drills uplifted Harry’s spirits, and by the end of the day, he was feeling confident at holding his magic true, even under duress. He passed up the inevitable pub invitation, and took the Floo to Hogsmeade directly from the Ministry.

Low clouds followed him up the lawn and around to Hagrid’s cottage. When he knocked on the door a scrambling and breaking noise sounded and with a sharp whack!, a green spike came through the door, splitting the heavy wood, before retracting.

“Hagrid?” Harry called out. There was no response. He leapt over the split-rail fence surrounding the recently plowed pumpkin patch and tried to peer in the window, but it had been boarded over with rather heavy nails. “What’s he keeping in there now?” Harry breathed aloud as he circled around to the other window, which was also barred. Harry tapped his finger on his wand, glanced back at the castle to see if anyone was looking and hit the cottage’s door with an Alohomora.

The door clicked open and swung slightly in the breeze on its squeaky hinges. Harry held his wand out before him and leaned to the side to better peer in the crack without getting too close. Pregnant seconds of stillness passed before the door slammed open with a startling bang! and Harry had to rely on instinct to cast a binding curse at the creature that leapt out at him. Chitinous limbs sprawled into the dirt at his feet as the beast fell, limbs tangled.

Harry took a step back and looked the green and red animal over, jumping when it fluttered a moment, almost freeing itself. He added a second binding and leaned in closer to examine what appeared to be a giant hairy bug with doubly long front and

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back legs and sharp notched hooks on its feet.

“Hiya Harry, see you’ve met Willy,” Hagrid’s voice boomed from the corner of the castle as he came around. “Isn’t he a beaut?” he asked proudly.

“What is it?” Harry asked, when Hagrid came aside him and propped his broad hands on his hips.

“Tis a Pranticore, that is.”

“Right,” Harry said, putting his wand away.

“A male. Fully grown. Rare,” Hagrid went on as he picked up the six legged insect that, stretched out, was longer than Harry was tall. Hagrid tossed it over his shoulder and carried it into the cottage. “The males, well, they don’t usually avoid getting eaten, ya see.”

“Right,” Harry said again. Inside, Kali’s cage was hanging from the ceiling. “I came for my Chimrian.”

“Ah, yer dear little pet,” Hagrid said, taking the cage down and gingerly handed it to Harry. Kali raised her head and considered him and thankfully didn’t hiss. “Drop o’ tea?” Hagrid offered.

“Just a small one,” Harry said. He stepped over the Pranticore that, despite being no longer bound by the faded binding spell, was flopped limply on the floor, its strange half-human head with its rows and rows of pointed teeth resting on Hagrid’s boot. It’s black eyes stared up worshipfully at its master. Harry sat on the foot stool by the low fire and placed Kali’s cage beside him.

“Where’s Fang?” he asked. “And Fawkes?”

“Professor Sprout has Fawkes for the moment...”

“Not McGonagall?”

Hagrid shook his great, hairy head. “Does’na take to Professor McGonagall much.”

“Really?” Harry asked, stirring the coals around the log Hagrid had just added. “And Fang?”

“He’s, uh, around somewhere. Doesn’t like Willy too much, ya see.”

Upon returning home after tea, Harry suffered a twinge as he arrived in the dining room. The dark paneled walls with their row of decorative potion bottles on a high, narrow shelf brought recent tangled events back to him without his will. He put his head down and strode upstairs to put his pet away, and then to the library to arrange his books, thinking only of his studies.

Minutes later the Floo sounded and Snape stepped across the main hall. Harry closed the book on sight deception spells that he had just opened and stood up from the lounge.

“How is your magic?” Snape came right out and asked.

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“Fine,” Harry replied.

Some of the tension left Snape’s shoulders. “That is good.”

Harry sat back down and fingered the closed book to distract himself. He rubbed his eyes and forehead, prompting Snape to ask, “Are you not sleeping well? Are you having nightmares?”

Harry shrugged.

“What is in them?” Snape demanded levelly.

Harry dropped the hand still rubbing his right eye and gave up on being difficult since his dreams were worrying him. “Last night I dreamed... that I was tied up on the floor with something like the Torq Rothschild used on me. A longer version of that.” Harry flinched as he remembered. “Someone else is there and I know they’re terrified of me. They scuffle around at the edge of the room, trying to stay as far away as possible.” The dream became clearer as he allowed himself to dwell on it. “I want to get at that person, badly. Do really awful things to them...” Harry shook his head and rubbed his forehead again. “It kept me awake most of the night.” Harry also remembered that, somewhere else in the room, something was banging inside a wooden box as though trying to escape.

“I would have brought you more potion had you asked.”

Harry shrugged yet again, making Snape straighten in annoyance or distress; it wasn’t clear which.

“Everything is all right with Candide?” Snape asked, changing the subject.

Harry nodded.

Snape considered him a long minute, during which Harry picked up his spell book and held it on his lap, unopened, as though to show that he had things he needed to be doing. Snape finally said, “Your dream concerns me... but it could be merely symbolic of your recent struggles with dark magic.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, tapping the book impatiently.

“If your dream changes tonight, I want you to owl me,” Snape said. When Harry didn’t respond, he said more sternly, “Harry?”

“Yeah, all right.”

An awkward moment passed before Snape stepped to the door where he turned and began to ask something but then stopped. Harry prompted, “What?” rather sharply.

“You wouldn’t know anything about something the Weasley twins may have done preceding the last Quidditch match; would you?” When Harry shook his head, Snape said, “Thought we were finished with those two,” rather disgustedly.

With that, Snape did leave. After the Floo sounded, Harry was glad to be alone so he could clear his mind in order to concentrate on his readings.

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Friday morning arrived and Harry leisurely came downstairs late. He had slept well enough on the Muggle pills and felt pretty good. Candide had long since departed so he was alone to swear at the back page of the Prophet and the headline that read, Shocking Muggle-Baiting Affair at the Ministry: Boy Hero's Troubles Covered Up. Harry read only the first three lines before wincing and tossing the paper into the fire. He wondered when the owls would start arriving, surprised they already hadn't.

Standing, he went to the window and opened it. Outside on the damp ground a pile of letters lay, including two burned-out howlers. An owl approached, one Harry didn't recognize. It swerved at the last moment as though repelled, before flying high and dropping the letter it carried near the current pile. Some kind of barrier had apparently been raised to prevent post from being delivered inside. Candide must have raised it. Smiling lightly at the favor, Harry hovered the pile inside and onto the hearthstone to dry, or simply be hovered onto the flames, should he decide that was best.

With a groan he returned to his chair. One of the envelopes had familiar handwriting, so Harry scooped it up and read the letter from Hermione. It was apparently from before the Prophet was printed because all it mentioned were wishes that Harry's magic was still normal and that he had accepted things with Snape. He refolded the letter slowly, thinking that he wasn't really certain if he had accepted things with his adoptive father. He had perhaps merely accepted that he had to accept them, which wasn't quite the same thing. It seemed adulthood promised a lot of situations like that, just to get through some days. He wrote Hermione a reply and in a fit of defiance, sent an owl to Ron suggesting they go out to the Leaky Cauldron that evening. He didn't feel like hiding and he was hoping to run into Rita Skeeter if at all possible.

Harry was still catching up on his letters to his far flung friends – a task that given the pile of hate mail lying in a half-dried pile by the fire, suddenly took on great importance – when the Floo went greenish and a face appeared.

“Harry?” the visage of Kerry Ann asked, looking about. She spotted him and gave a smile. “Thank goodness you're here. I have a gigantic favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

“My third cousin, twice removed, is coming through London on the way to Glasgow for the afternoon. He's French, and based on the photograph my mother has, rather hot. And my aunt swears he is just my type, so I truly, really, very much would like to be a part of his afternoon tour of London. I asked Tonks and she said it

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would be all right if we switched field work days, so I could take tomorrow instead... Please?" she pleaded. "You'll get a shift with Tonks this way..."

"At one?" Harry asked, noting that it was already half past twelve.

"Yes." Her hands appeared, pressed together placatingly under her chin beside a brightly glowing coal at the bottom of the fire. "I know it's not much warning... I wasn't as keen to ask a favor of Vishnu, but mum thought I should start with him. I was even ready to lie and say that my mother was going to arrange a marriage for me with this cousin, or something, assuming he'd feel obligated to help with that, but he's already on today's shift."

Harry chuckled. "Sure."

"You'll do it?" she asked, sounding almost childishly thrilled.

"Yeah. I'll take tomorrow off and the shift today ends in time for me to meet my friends tonight."

Kerry Ann turned away so only her hair hung in the low flames. The faint sounds echoing from the hearth were of an argument. She turned back and explained, "My mum is yelling at me for asking Harry Potter for a favor."

"I don't mind," Harry insisted.

"I tell her all the time how completely normal you are." She turned aside again, while Harry blinked at that unexpected assertion. Her face rotated back toward him again and she said, "She doesn't believe a word they print in the Prophet about you, she wants me to tell you. And she already sent a howler to them to complain."

"Tell her thanks. And I should go get ready for shift. Have a good visit."

She blew him a kiss and disappeared.

Harry set his pile of letters aside neatly, new stacked on top of old to await his owl's return. He was thinking that Candide probably didn't want to come home and sit at a messy table all evening. This thought led to him jotting down a note to her about his change of schedule.

Harry arrived at the Ministry just in time by Apparating straight into the end of the corridor. Rogan stopped outside the office door and said, "That was a good idea."

"What was?"

"Coming straight here."

"I didn't want to be late," Harry explained.

"You probably also didn't want to deal with the small mob in the atrium."

Harry stared at him. "For me?"

"Don't you receive the newspaper?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Yeah. But I'll admit I didn't read the whole article." Rogan tilted his head side to side, his neat brown hair didn't budge at all when he



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did this. Harry asked, “Who’s Skeeter’s source, anyway?”

Rogan rubbed his chin. “Good question. Arthur may have a guess. I don’t listen to the rumor mill much.” He gestured for Harry to enter the office before him. Tonks stood and said, “Shall we patrol the Isle of Man today, keep it quiet?”

Rogan laughed. Harry said, “I don’t care where we go. I didn’t do anything wrong and anyone wants to say otherwise will have to say it to my face.”

“We’re supposed to patrol inner London. Lots of magical folks about...”

“That’s fine,” Harry insisted.

Rodgers appeared in the doorway with Vineet in tow and handed him off to Rogan. Tonks shrugged her bony shoulders and tossed on her cloak. “Well, we’ll see you around Holborn,” she said to her colleague.

The two of them reappeared in an alleyway and Tonks released Harry’s wrist. “I’ve been here,” he informed her as a kind of complaint about being ferried automatically.

“Next time I’ll ask,” Tonks said, striding around a metal fire escape to head out to the road. At the next corner, she said, “The Prophet hasn’t let up on you. Skeeter really knows how to hold a grudge.”

Harry jogged to catch up when she turned. “Did you think I insulted her that badly?”

Tonks’ Mohawk flopped slightly she shook her head. “No, but my ego isn’t as large as hers.”

“I’m glad for that,” Harry said. “And, unfortunately, it’s not as though she has to make up stuff about me.”

“No, unfortunately not.”

“Candide suggested I apologize last week before it got so bad, but I didn’t listen.”

“I don’t think that would have helped.” Tonks stopped outside an ordinary-looking building and peered up at one of the upper windows. Harry shaded his eyes, and could see an owl perched on an upper sill. By the time he looked down, Tonks had spelled open the lock and stepped inside. Harry rushed to follow, holding back on asking who lived here.

At the first floor landing, Tonks halted, making the floor squeak under the moldy carpeting. Brow furrowed, she pulled her small blackboard out of her pocket and held it so it would catch the light from the curtained window at the end of the landing. She shook her head.

“What is it?” Harry asked in a whisper.

“It’s going to be another bloody false alarm, but...” She took up Harry’s wrist and the landing disappeared.

“Uf, not again,” Harry grumbled even as Tonks disappeared again with a pop! Vineet was already standing by the windows, moving his head up and down to see out

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through the warped old glass of the safehouse pub. Harry pulled out his blackboard and stared at it, wishing it would tell him what was going on. It was blank. With a groan, he dropped onto the couch – which emitted a puff of dust as he did so – and tossed the blackboard aside in frustration. The dust tickled his nose, so he stood and wandered over to the stairs. Below, the sounds of clinking silver and muted conversation could be heard. “It’d be one thing if we could actually get service up here,” he complained. “Last time we got to go to the Ministry,” he continued to grumble while circling the room.

Vineet glanced over his shoulder at him. “Last time we were closer. Be grateful we are not in an abandoned yarn factory as Kerry Ann and I were last week.”

“What difference does it make if you are Apparating?” Harry grumbled, feeling impatient already. He paced back so as to not smell the food.

“The path one takes during Apparation does matter if things are very unsafe. I can quote you the rule if you wish. You were given this same booklet on our first day.”

Harry considered the dusty couch, feeling too antsy to sit. “Oh that.”

“You did not read this important rule booklet?” Vineet asked, sounding ready to be disappointed in Harry.

“I looked at it. I didn’t, however, memorize it,” Harry argued, then dampened his annoyance because he didn’t intend to aim it at his friend, who was only pointing out the obvious. He sat on the arm of the couch and said, “So, how are things with you? We don’t get to talk much.”

Vineet crossed his arms and replied, “They are going well enough.”

“Nandi adjusting to London?”

“The warmer weather has helped this, yes.”

Harry scratched his nose and asked, “One year’s over... glad you came to train here?” As Harry voiced this question, he felt it echoing inside himself as though looking for an answer there.

Vineet considered this at length, although to Harry it felt as though Vineet considered him more than the question. “Yes. I have learned a great deal, both from Mr. Rodgers and from my cohort.”

“Doing what you think you should be doing then?” Harry went on, feeling the questions rolling out of him without will.

“I do not know yet. But I can be patient.” He turned back to the distorted window.

Harry stared at the rounded bricks and crumbling mortar that made up the chimneys rising up through this floor to go to the roof. “It’s been harder lately, but I think I’m doing the right thing.”

## BLEEDING DARKNESS AND LIGHT

“Your fate is written on your forehead,” Vineet stated.

Harry rubbed his scar and gave his friend an odd look. Vineet turned with a chagrined expression and said, “It is just a saying. I was not realizing that it was literal in this case before I spoke.”

“Ah,” Harry said, and began a long sigh, but caught it in his throat as an oily breath brushed by him and a grotesque aversion swept through him. He raised his wand and shouted for Vineet to do the same. A flash of blue spell met Harry’s Chrysanthemum lock with an impact that knocked him backward off of the couch arm. He hadn’t intended to spell anything; the block had flowed out his arm and wand without conscious thought. Drawing in a difficult breath because the blow had knocked into his chest hard enough to compress the air out of it, he looked frantically around for his fellow. Another blast and another subconscious spell rose from his wand to meet it. Harry barely had time to note that this spell came from a different direction than the first because he had located Vineet, lying in a heap under the window. Harry threw up another block when that one failed and leapt around the corner of the couch to where his fellow was struggling to rise from the floor.

Another dagger of blue shot out at them, meeting Harry’s fading block, which in desperation, he renewed with the kind of straining effort he previously only needed to survive Rodgers’ forceful spells. “Vineet!” Harry shouted as he crouched beside him. The last strike had spun the Indian around by the legs which were outside the block’s protection. Harry glanced around the room, looking for a target. He had counted three directions of assault so far.

Another poisonous sense of cursedness made Harry put up the same block with everything he had as two blasts struck out and the air buffeted them as they went on. Harry’s wand arm went dead and numb, but he managed to hold out until the attack ceased, while trying to gather Vineet in closer as the other managed to sit up. Blood was dripping onto Harry’s blue jeans and he risked a glance down to see it was leaking from Vineet’s mouth.

Breathing heavily, Harry said, “Grab hold, I’ll get us out.”

“No!” Vineet gasped. “Barrier,” he insisted, sounding panicked. Speaking made the blood foam in his mouth, worrying Harry with how very badly he may be injured.

Harry scanned desperately around them looking fiercely for anything to hit. “The Ministry barrier doesn’t keep us from Apparating,” Harry argued, fear rising with the notion of being trapped.

“Not the Ministry barrier,” Vineet whispered. He sounded weak, as though he were about to faint.

Another oily breath and wave of evil sense and Harry, tears filling his eyes from the aching effort, spelled another block with every last ounce of power he had. With

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

the corner of the wall to support the block, they didn't blow back so hard but it still bumped them around and Vineet let out a sound of distress. When the attack ceased, Harry tried to catch his breath and couldn't seem to. On a whim, he spelled a tar ball in the direction the last burst had come from, aiming at what must be an invisible one of those ceramic weapons. The spell hit the wall harmlessly, leaving a black patch.

"You're good at barriers... can you open a hole?" Harry asked desperately, while spelling another blob that only half hit the wall, as though it might have found some invisible mark in the air.

Vineet placed a shaky hand flat on the floor and closed his eyes. He was swaying even with Harry's arm supporting him. After a long breath, he gasped, "Now!" Harry grabbed fast and scrunched them both down rather than cast the block he was readying. A blast of blue and yellow reached its deadly fingers toward them as Harry clutched his friend tightly, and then they were on the floor of ward 3 at St. Mungos.

The rows of patient beds and visitors fell silent and wide eyes all fixed on them sprawled there on the worn and stained wood. A figure in lime robes ran past them and a breath later many returned. Jittery and numb to his bones with exhaustion, Harry barely registered what was happening, only that he felt grateful that someone was taking Vineet away on a hovered stretcher to help him. Someone pulled Harry to his feet, spelling him with something that made a white flare emerge from his chest. "I'm all right," Harry insisted, not wanting any distraction from his friend. An arm under his propelled him out and down the corridor following the stretcher. They entered a small room where Harry gratefully sat on a stool in the corner and rested heavily against the wall, his body still tingling as though he had rolled bareskinned in nettles. In the middle of the room they were stripping Vineet and forcing blood replenisher into him.

Harry winced when he saw the deeply dented left side of Vineet's ribs, Shankwell was giving quick, confident orders to the four witches and wizards assisting him. Harry let that voice balm his panic. "He all right?" Shankwell demanded and it required some time on Harry's part to decide that the Healer was referring to him. The man who had led Harry here, and who was now setting up a large pan of steaming herbal liquid with what looked like a distended animal bladder floating in it, replied. "Says he is. Basic health indicator says he is."

They disregarded Harry after that and he slipped into a stupor where he focused solely on willing Vineet to be all right. Harry watched his friend's shallow, labored breathing and made himself relax enough to find that sense of blood Radiance that Per's lesson had given him. Harry's own breath faltered as he sensed Vineet's radiance leaking everywhere. Harry swallowed and fought his panic. Cold binding, he chanted

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in his mind, imagining packing Vineet's supine body in it, relieved beyond measure when he felt the wild leakage slow significantly. Harry half closed his eyes and held the Staunching that way while the Healers worked.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



# INVASIVE DARKNESS

Headmistress McGonagall's sharp footsteps halted outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. She swung the door open, and without preamble called Snape out into the hallway. Snape, instantly alert due to this unusual behavior, set his students to reading a chapter rather than practical practice they had been engaged in, and strode quickly out the door. McGonagall was already walking away down the corridor and he had to jog to catch up. When he did so, she said in a hushed whisper, "Merton has made his move." She stopped before the gargoyles and added, "He has attacked the Auror apprentices." Snape's face flattened into a stillness that previously she would have taken to mean he did not care, not that in reality he cared too much.

Her next words had to be forced out; they felt like an unforgivable curse. McGonagall said to her unnaturally still colleague, "Merton set a trap at a Ministry safehouse. It is now in ruins and... Harry and his fellow apprentice are missing." Missing, that was the word used in the message from the Ministry. It had a twisted hope to it. More steady, she commanded, "Go and see what is going on. Bones has been mincing about this threat and I want to know what we are facing. Do you know where the Hannover Arms was? The Order used it occasionally as well."

Snape seemed to shake himself awake. "Yes."

"Take the Floo from my office, then. Go." Her voice grew harder and that seemed to pull Snape together. He was up the stairs and gone in a flash of black cloak.

The scream of Muggle emergency sirens and dazzling lights led Snape from the alleyway where he had appeared after Apparating from the Leaky Cauldron, which

## INVASIVE DARKNESS

had been abuzz with rumors and a few arguments over what was actually happening. Snape had ignored all of it.

Out on the glass-strewn road Snape needed an Obsfucation Charm to slip beyond the barrier of lime-yellow vested police and tape. In the middle of the street he stopped to avoid being run into by a man dragging a hose that resembled a long snake. There was little solid left of the building except the bulk of the chimneys. Steam rose from the sparse blackened remains that hung like charred teeth from the remains of the framing.

A policewoman wandered close to where the outer wall would have stood. Her bubblegum pink hair was stuffed almost completely inside her hat. Snape moved to follow her and she turned as he approached, despite the charm hiding him. "Severus," she whispered. Two other police in long coats passed close and they remained silent until the Muggle personnel were far enough away. Tonks nodded her head that Snape should follow her and they walked around to the side of a shiny flashing truck. Oily water flowed around the tires. On the other side of the block, an ambulance slammed its doors and sped away, siren bouncing off the buildings in chorus with itself.

Tonks said, "There's no sign of them, but I arrived too late to see everyone they pulled out. Rodgers is at the hospital now checking, but he hasn't signaled yet." Gesturing with her hand, she explained, "Given the way the wood on the first floor was consumed so quickly, there must have been a magical barrier holding in the spell. Which is good on one hand, since no one on the street was hurt and the people on the ground floor got a little time." She reached into her pocket and pulled out two little chalkboards, one blackened. She put the unscathed one back away and scrubbed at the soot on her hand.

"Are you certain Harry was there?" Snape asked, trying to find something solid to grab hold of in the hollow of his chest.

"Yes. I dropped him myself just minutes before and Rogan said he'd dropped Vishnu." With real anger she said, "Merton's been working us a long time. False alarms and merry chases. He used it to work out our procedures. Knew exactly where to decoy us to get us to leave them here when we got called away." She angrily slapped her blackened hand against her dark Muggle uniform and handed over the charred tablet. "It's Harry's," she quietly said. "I used a charm to pull everything magical out. Three of Merton's devices were in there too but one was shattered completely to bits." She kept her eyes down and said with difficulty, "I'm sorry, Severus. We were trying to keep them safe..."

Snape turned the miniature chalkboard over in his hand. The wood was completely carbonized but the slate was unmarred. With a pained expression Tonks

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pulled her tablet back out and stared at it. “They’re at Mungo’s,” she uttered breathily.



Vineet began to show marked improvement and the Healers were not behaving so rushed and edgy. Harry sat back and began wondering if he were forgetting something, like checking in with the Ministry. Not finding his tablet in his pocket, he gave up on that for the moment and watched with only a few wincing as they sealed the muscle and skin over Vineet’s freshly straightened ribs. Harry sighed with relief when Shankwell declared Vineet’s lung filled with air rather than blood, and stepped away to use a washing spell on his hands. Harry glanced around for Vineet’s clothing to look for his tablet. Skelegro was forced on Vineet to his dismayed expression, which made Harry grin painfully. When the crowd around the table cleared, Harry tugged Vineet’s cloak from under it and located his fellow’s tablet quickly enough. A broad question mark plaintively filled it.

Moving quickly and with no little regret at having neglected the very procedures that had been drummed into them the last month, Harry erased what was there and drew “M+”, the code used on the log for the wizard hospital.

Harry watched Vineet settle against the table as though released from most of his discomfort. Harry too let the tension in his shoulders ease, up to the point where he still worried that he should do something about contacting the Auror’s office more concretely. But before he could decide whether he should Apparate to the Ministry to report in person, the door to the room swung open and a rather wild-looking Rodgers burst in. His eyes took in Vineet lying there, the bloody bladder now in a pan of pink water, the Healers, and finally, with unusual relief... Harry, sitting unharmed in the corner of the room.

“Why didn’t you chalk in sooner?” Rodgers chastised him when he found his voice.

Harry, finding his normal self now that Vineet was okay, said, “I... didn’t have my slate, and I didn’t think to check for Vineet’s.”

“Yeah, we found yours,” Rodgers stated grimly as though Harry were in trouble.

Harry’s eyes went to Vineet, who was breathing normally and was getting bandaged with wide white strips of cloth around his middle, loads of it, as though he were a mummy. “Sorry,” Harry said. “I wasn’t thinking, I guess.” Now that everything was all right, his lapse seemed inept, even as busy with Staunching as he had been, something he did not wish to explain.



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“How long does he need to be here?” Rodgers asked Shankwell, referring to Vineet, who had closed his eyes and looked as though he wanted nothing more than to sleep.

“Days, most likely.”

“Days?” Rodgers retorted in surprise.

With anger in his voice Shankwell said, “If you had seen him when he came in, you wouldn’t wonder.” He turned to one of the others. “Take him to Ward Six. See that he gets only liquids for the day.”

Harry followed Rodgers out when he was instructed to by means of a sharp nod of his trainer’s head. Rodgers grabbed Harry by the upper arm when he got the chance. “And you’re all right?” he demanded.

“Yeah,” Harry replied. His wand arm was lead heavy and prickly from blocking but he could ignore that.

“Harry!” A voice came from down the corridor. They both turned to find Tonks and Snape approaching.

Harry started badly. “Severus?” he uttered, surprised that he was here rather than Hogwarts. Snape’s eyes had an odd look in them that Harry couldn’t decipher; he had a good chance to too, because Snape strode up close to look him over.

“You are unharmed?” Snape asked, voice oddly wavering.

“Yeah,” Harry said confidently, worried more than he wished to be about what might be going on behind Snape’s black eyes. “I’m fine.” Although it was close, he considered, with a speeding up of his heart. “What are you doing here?” he then asked Snape. Rodgers meanwhile was insisting that they head back to the Ministry, muttering about debriefings in a dark manner as though Harry were indeed in some trouble. Harry ignored him, having decided that he had done what he could, when he could.

Snape replied, “Minerva received a message and sent me to see what was happening. The message said you were missing so, naturally, I came looking for you.” His voice was level now, almost formal, but he appeared vaguely unhinged. Rodgers’ grim expression on the other hand brought back Harry’s old annoying feelings of not knowing what was going on.

Back at the Ministry atrium, Rodgers tried to send Snape off by saying that Harry’s debriefing was the business only of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for the moment. Harry for an instant believed Snape had turned into Kali, his pet Chimrian. Snape’s cloak jerked wide as he turned to confront the Auror trainer full on with prominent nose forward and eyes blazing. Rodgers actually took a stunned step backward and didn’t even try to match him. Snape backed down only slightly as he stated succinctly, “I am here as the appointed agent of a senior member

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of the Wizengamot, tasked specifically with determining exactly what is happening here. Unless you have assigned these events as secret even to the Wizengamot, then you cannot keep me out.”

Harry remained silent; he was sort of hoping to not have to tell this story in front of Snape. Rodgers actually growled, but he led the way through the golden gate at the end of the atrium, assisting Snape in checking in by bullying the man at the counter into weighing Snape’s wand before those waiting in line and not allowing him to ask any questions, just hand over a badge. A few witches and wizards gave Harry suspicious looks, which he ignored as best he could. His ears burned though as the word “Muggle-baiter” drifted from a group of witches.

In the tearoom, Harry told his story while a dictation quill jotted it down. Wishing that he could just write it himself in silence, he described what had happened as neutrally as possible. He went along uninterrupted until Mr. Weasley popped his head in, looked Harry up and down, and muttered, “Good, at least I can assure the Minister that you are here,” before dashing away again.

Rodgers, who was reviewing the dictation, asked with keen interest. “You believe you managed to hit it with a tar ball charm?”

“Yeah,”

Rodgers rubbed his face. “I wonder if that’s why it exploded,” he commented thoughtfully.

“What?” Harry asked in shock. “We got out before...” He paused, remembering the approaching wall of blue and yellow just as they departed. “It blew up?” he echoed.

“Quite,” Rodgers said, “There is nothing left of the Hannover Arms.”

Harry glanced around the faces at the table to look for confirmation of this. Snape, sitting with his arms crossed, gaze very far away, confirmed it by being so. “Did anyone get hurt?” Harry asked, remembering the noises from below just before.

Rodgers stood suddenly and picked up the parchment from the dictation quill, which poked around at the table top twice before falling flat. “Several Muggles,” he replied.

Harry’s heart sank. Defensively, he said, “I didn’t know it would do that if I hit it with a tar ball. I wouldn’t have done that otherwise. I... I just couldn’t block another hit. I didn’t know,” he insisted bleakly.

“No one knows if that’s what happened,” Tonks said from the doorway. She stepped in carrying a large lacquer box, inside of which was the remains of the devices. There was no tar apparent on them, but most of the pieces were too blackened to be absolutely certain.

“You said though that he was trying to avoid Muggle involvement,” Harry heard

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himself arguing, although it was cutting him inside. “That he didn’t want to attract Muggle attention.”

Rodgers considered him before pointing out, “Everyone is expected to recover from what I could glean while looking for you two. No one is accusing you of making a mistake, Harry.”

Harry relaxed marginally. His trainer, of all people, wouldn’t say that if it weren’t true.

“Best one we’ve got,” Tonks said, prodding a whole elongated ceramic bulb with only one broken edge.

“Let’s hear the rest of what happened,” Rodgers said.

Harry explained how Vineet insisted they could not Apparate out. Across the table, Snape, who otherwise had not reacted, stiffened as though feeling the stress of that moment. But, Harry went on to explain, Vineet had opened a gateway in the barrier and Harry had Apparated them both to hospital.

“You did good, Harry,” Tonks stated after the dictation quill came to a halt.

“How... how is the explosion being explained?” Harry asked.

“Gas leak,” Rodgers stated grimly, while collecting up the parchments on the table. “Good general excuse that works most of the time.”

The Aurors picked up their reports and retreated, leaving Harry and Snape sitting alone. Snape said, “Perhaps you should move into Hogwarts given that Merton has put such serious effort into trying to kill you.”

Harry sat straight. “It wasn’t me... I wasn’t supposed to be on duty. Kerry Ann called right before to trade, said a relative was visiting from France.” Harry imagined his two fellows in the upper room of the pub, unaware and un-warned of the danger. They would have been killed, he was certain. Trapped and spelled until they were pulverized. “It was a good thing,” Harry breathed, feeling a sort of post-panic. Snape crossed his arms and gave him a dubious look, making Harry say, “I can feel those things. No one else can. Mad-Eye can see them, at least, but Kerry Ann and Vineet would have been sitting ducks.” Harry stood. “I should go back to Mungos to see how Vineet is doing.”

Snape stood also and blocked Harry’s way to the door. He still appeared rattled and as though he wished to say something. Eventually, he stepped aside and said, “Do continue to be careful.”

Harry nodded. Snape followed him out, so Harry took the lift to the atrium since Snape needed to use a hearth. At the gates, which were now half-closed, a crowd had gathered and a few people were shouting at Nick, the guard, who wasn’t really up to guarding under such circumstances and cowered a bit behind the counter. When Harry stepped up to the open gate, the crowd quieted somewhat and a familiar voice

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shouted his name.

Harry searched the tightly-packed mass of robed people for Kerry Ann. He didn't have to look long, she forced her way through and erupted forward to hug him. "Thank goodness you're all right. Where's Vishnu?"

Harry leaned into her ear to whisper, "Mungos." so the very curious crowd couldn't hear.

Nick found his voice to chastise them. "Now, then, clear the gateway, go on."

A path opened, and as they headed toward the fountain with Snape following, a middle-aged portly witch and a tall man in foreign robes struggled through the crowd to join them. The witch gave Harry a tearful hug, and Kerry Ann explained, "She thinks I'd have bought it if you hadn't changed shifts with me."

"That's all right," Harry said, waiting for the long string of thanks to end and his release to happen on its own. "I'm going to see Vineet," he informed his fellow.

"Is he in a ward? Can we come?"

"Yeah," Harry said, even though he was thinking that hearing Vineet's side of the story would not help Kerry Ann's mother calm down... at all. He turned to the tall, lean gentleman, who must be the cousin and Kerry Ann broke in with, "Oh, Harry, this is Ambroise." And as they shook hands, Kerry Ann made a quick face of overdone delight, just to communicate her excitement over him. The next moment though, she was behaving with calm aplomb and inviting him to borrow her Floo powder as though he were nearly a stranger.

Harry smiled lightly, dearly needing to so and he was still grinning when they arrived in the hospital waiting room. That is, until he spotted Rita Skeeter. The whole room turned to watch as the reporter gave a little cry of hungry delight and clicked her way over to Harry in her high heels.

"Well, looky looky, the man of the hour. Mr. Potter, what did happen this afternoon?" she asked, quickly getting her quill poised over her writing tablet. Beside her, her photographer was struggling to reload film into his camera, but the crank appeared to be jammed.

"This morning you accused me of being a Muggle-baiter, so I can't imagine you would really want a story from me," Harry said. "In fact, you shouldn't believe anything I say."

Skeeter pasted on a fake smile. "This is different," she said.

"How so?" Harry asked.

"Well..." she said, dabbing the point of her quill on her tongue and then scribbling on the pad. Her manner shifted to one more calculating. "It doesn't have to be different, does it? Muggle building burns down... Harry Potter somehow involved. Did you get interrogated this time, too?"

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“Who told you about the last time?” Harry asked in a low voice.

She smiled, feeling her position strengthen, apparently. “My sources are my secret,” she said sweetly.

Harry stepped around her, nearly running into Snape beside him. “Then my day is my secret,” he mocked. But her long-nailed hand grabbed a hold of his arm and restrained him from departing. Harry turned and used a mild shocking crowd-control charm on her hand to make her let go. “Don’t do that,” he said threateningly. He had nothing but anger behind his control and found that letting it out selectively felt rather good.

She gave him a weak smile. Her photographer raised his camera, having finally loaded the new film. Skeeter pushed the camera back down while giving Harry a wary looking over as though reassessing him. Harry caught a glimpse of her thoughts and stepped closer. “You print those things about me and you know they aren’t true.” He leaned in even closer and whispered, eyes narrowed, “But what if they were?”

Snape tapped Harry on the shoulder. Harry backed off, happy with the disturbed thoughts he was leaving the reporter with. Kerry Ann and her mother and guest were waiting nearby and followed to the welcome desk. “I do hope you told that nasty lady off,” Kerry Ann’s mother loudly announced.

“I think so,” Harry said, feeling better than he had in days, focused and in control. Beside him, Snape shook his head and appeared grim. “I don’t give a damn what she thinks,” Harry explained.

“You should,” Snape returned in sharp anger.

His parental tone cut through Harry’s darkly positive attitude. Had he really just insinuated to Skeeter that he had burned down the Dursley house? “Something’s going odd with me,” Harry admitted, thinking of his recent unpredictably vacillating thoughts and moods.

Snape’s disturbed look was interrupted by their arrival at the lifts.

Up in the ward, they found Vineet in the farthest bed, alone. “Where’s Nandi?” Harry asked, expecting her to be here.

“Hermione is fetching her,” Vineet explained. “I am hoping she has not seen the news.”

“Ah,” Harry uttered before proceeding to introduce everyone. The ward’s floating lamps congregated overhead as he did so.

Kerry Ann approached the head of the bed and rested a hand on Vineet’s shoulder. “You look good. The photographs of the pub were pretty scary.”

“I am having Harry to thank for being here.”

“I am having you to thank too,” Harry countered. “I can’t open a barrier gateway. I don’t have a block good enough to survive an explosion like that. I’d have been

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caught in it.”

Vineet laid his head back and said, “I am glad you do not feel I was a burden.”

“What? No, of course not,” Harry insisted.

Kerry Ann patted Vineet and said, “Look at Harry there. Didn’t even bend his glasses.”

Harry straightened them and said, “I’m used to protecting them while I’m being attacked, I guess.”

Kerry Ann’s mother sniffled. “I wish my little girl didn’t have such dangerous aspirations.”

Ambrose on the other hand was giving Kerry Ann a rather interested look, perhaps inspired by this assessment. “These are your colleagues?” he asked.

“Uh, one more. Aaron. Not sure where he is.” She hesitated. “Hopefully, he’s all right.”

“But, Harry Potter and the others?” he asked, sounding as though he wished have this straight. “And you can keep up with such company?” he then asked when the previous question was confirmed.

Harry laughed. “Kerry Ann always beats me out on evaluations,” he easily explained, happy to help her resumé.

Kerry Ann said, “So does Vishnu though, and he’s flat on his back right now.”

“You shouted a warning,” Vineet said to Harry. “But I was too slow. I do not know what you saw, because I did not perceive anything.”

The patient sounded tired, so Kerry Ann and company made their departure, and some of the lamps drifted back to the center of the ceiling. Snape said, “I must report to Minerva, but I will see you at home.” It was very nearly a threat. Harry didn’t dare raise his eyes, just nodded.

Alone with his fellow, Harry pulled over a chair from between two other beds, nodding hello to the other beds’ occupants when they greeted him as though he were there to visit everyone in the ward. He took a seat and watched Vineet’s dark brown eyes roam over the ceiling.

“I’m sure Hermione and Nandi will get here soon,” Harry said, hoping Vineet stayed awake that long.

“You were correct,” Vineet said after a pause.

“I was?” Harry returned, wondering about what may be happening at the Ministry, but pulling himself back to the current conversation.

“It is not reasonable to tie oneself to someone selected for a caste or name before one has assured oneself that there is not a perfect person out there already, somewhere.”

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Harry rubbed his hair and gave his friend a sad look. “And here I was beginning to believe you were right,” he said, trying for lightness and failing. “I’m assuming we’re discussing Hermione.”

Vineet nodded. “She is very smart. I have not met anyone more well-read.”

“True,” Harry said, glancing at the door, glad that Vineet was in a bed as far from it as possible so as to give them some warning.

“But, it is more than that,” Vineet murmured as though thinking aloud. Harry closed his eyes and tried to take this in along with everything else. Vineet went on, “I greatly envy you all of the years you must have been friends.”

“We were kids, getting chased by Voldemort and his Death Eaters. It wasn’t... well, it was all right, in the end. Mostly. I’d be dead without her. Many times over.” Harry sighed. “But she is off fetching Nandi for you...”

Vineet turned his gaze back to the ceiling. “I thought having her as a friend would be sufficient. She is a very conscientious friend and helps Nandi a great deal. But it is worse and now cannot be undone. I wonder often now if I could have come sooner to work on my studies. I may have gone to Hogwarts...” He shook his head, sounding almost dreamy, but in a painfully way.

This kind of regret and wishing how things could be different if something small in the past had changed was far too familiar to Harry. “You want someone you can’t have and they’re too close by... join the club.”

Vineet raised his head from the pillow to look at him better. The door to the ward opened and Hermione and Nandi arrived. Nandi took up a position beside her husband and rested a cupped hand on his shoulder. Hermione remained on the far side of Harry, gripping his shoulder and then just the fabric of his robes. His friend was definitely having the harder time with this, making even him wish that things were different.

Vineet and Nandi were speaking in their own language. Harry stood and said to Hermione, “I have to get back to the Ministry and then home, where I think I’m going to get chewed out, although for what, I’m not sure.” He wanted her to interpret this as a question as to whether she needed him to stay.

Hermione’s brow furrowed in concern about him before she said, “I’ll make sure Nandi gets home when visiting hours are over.” Which Harry interpreted as her saying she was all right.

Vineet’s eyes were closed when Harry turned to make his goodbye. He made it to Nandi instead.

Back in the Auror’s office a discussion was going on. “Where did he get three of those things at once? According the Mystery the magic in them should dissipate rapidly if not used.” Rodgers was speaking in clear dismay. “Hey, Potter,” he said

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upon seeing Harry enter the doorway. The room turned to look at him: Mr. Weasley, Tonks, Rogan, Shackbolt, and the old wizard, Whitley. Only Moody was missing.

“Am I needed for anything?” Harry asked.

Rodgers turned in his chair and said, “We had a question for you, in fact. You stated that the only warning you received that the vessels were there was your sense of cursedness.”

Harry nodded. “That’s right. It was really strong. The worst I’ve ever felt.”

“You’re certain they weren’t there all along? That was the only warning? No noise? No pop?”

Harry shook his head. “Oh, there was a slight breeze, maybe,” he said, remembering the slowed down sequence from when his mind slipped into overdrive.

Rodgers gave the others a meaningful look. “That implies a portkey to me. Which should have been reported in the log in Transportation as unauthorized.”

Tonks said, “I checked. Nothing into London was in the log.”

Rodgers shook his head, appearing frustrated. Mr. Weasley approached and put an arm around Harry. “Good to see you unharmed, Harry. Very good. We have your transcript, and that was the only detail we wondered about. You can go on home.”

Harry gave the mix of gazes another glance before waving and stepping into the corridor to Disapparate.

After he was gone, Tonks said with emotion, “We were really blasted lucky today. Bones finally going to make an announcement?”

Mr Weasley said, “She will tomorrow. Doesn’t have any choice now, not with Muggles injured and Ministry property destroyed.”

Rogan sat back, rocking his chair onto two legs. “Hopefully she can calm everyone. It’s just a magical spelling device. Things could be much worse.”

“Things are going to get much worse,” Mr. Weasley pointed out, and proceeded to fill in the rest of the Aurors about the prophecy.

Clearly rattled, so that the front legs of his chair smacked the floor, Rogan said, “So, we got bloody damn lucky today. Our once and future savior could have been wiped out easily by those things.”

Mr. Weasley went to the door. “Harry’s amazingly resilient... and lucky. Everyone needs to understand that despite being merely a first-year apprentice, he may need to be given more freedom to command a bad situation than you are willing to give him. Just don’t do it before it’s time.”

Rogan gave a dubious laugh. “And we’ll know that, how?”

“Just do the best you can,” Mr. Weasley tried a little lamely.



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“He gets this look about him,” Tonks said. “As though he’s completely absorbed in what is happening. That’s the sign I would use.”



Back home in the dining room, Harry found Candide and Snape waiting for him, Candide with her hand on the Daily Prophet with its giant picture of the smoldering pub and the headline: Suspicious Explosion and Fyre at Ministry Safe-House. “Harry,” she greeted him with terribly strong emotion.

Snape stood stiffly with arms crossed. After a pause he said, “I need to speak with Harry alone.”

As Candide passed Harry on her way out, she ran a hand over his arm. “Glad you’re all right.”

“Yeah. I’m fine,” Harry replied a bit clipped.

Snape waited until the door upstairs closed. He paced once and stopped, arms still crossed. “What you said to Rita Skeeter was most unlike you.”

“No it wasn’t.”

Snape considered him pointedly and Harry Occluded his mind on instinct. Snape said, “If it were just one... unwise comment to a reporter, who already prints unflattering material about you on a twice-weekly schedule, I would let it go. But it is many other things as well.”

Harry crossed his arms too and put his chin out, ready to argue against anything. Snape was treading on thin ice as far as he was concerned.

A long pause ensued as though they were battling on some nonverbal level. Snape asked levelly, “Your magic is still all right?”

“Fine,” Harry replied. “Witness that I’m still here.”

“Yes,” Snape agreed, clearly struck hard by being reminded of that, and Harry tried not to let his mouth twitch into a smile. Snape went on, “I do not wish to ever repeat that experience. Whether you reject me or not... I am still your father. I have come too far to be otherwise.” He seemed to closely monitor the after-effects of this statement.

Harry blinked a few times, feeling guilty and slightly undone. He didn’t have a response.

Snape, voice back to level, slowly said, “The revelation that I informed my master of the prophecy could not have come at a worse time.”

“Is there ever a good time for that?” Harry asked sarcastically, now angry.

“I told you what happened,” Snape said, almost arrogantly, looking away as though the conversation was beneath him.

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Harry's shoulder's clenched. "You told me only that you betrayed everything," he hissed. "You tell me one thing but you do another." Harry rode on a rush of fury now. "I don't know why..." Harry began. He was going to say he didn't know why he ever trusted Snape, but he didn't really mean it, did he?

"What were you going to say?" Snape challenged.

"Nothing," Harry said, wondering where these thoughts were coming from. Looking at Snape now made that dual sense of betrayal rise up again. "Your master. Right. Like you were ever loyal to anything."

Snape pulled his wand up, aimed at Harry's chest. Harry had not noticed that Snape even had it in his hand. Harry reached automatically for his own, but it wasn't in his pocket. Snape lifted his other hand, far out of reach, to show Harry that he had his wand too. Harry took a step back and almost hit his head on the corner of the mantel. The wall was directly behind him.

"Don't know what to do, do you?" Snape asked, oddly interested rather than threatening. Harry couldn't even shake his head he was so befuddled and now his back was against the wall. Snape said, "That would be symptomatic." And then he cast a *Mutusorum* at Harry, who froze, helpless.

Snape let out a breath. "Sorry about that. But I want to check you for a few things without your fighting me as you would be wont to do if my fear is correct." Harry, wishing dearly that he were free to strike out, stared out, unmoving, as Snape leaned in close. "What am I doing?" he asked as though reading the question from Harry's eyes. "I am checking you for an *Imperius* curse. Which isn't terribly reliable, but I must give it a try given your recent behavior." He tapped Harry on the forehead with the tip of his wand and cast something, speaking casually as he went. "You are displaying a disturbingly split personality and since you were out of observation for rather a long time after you left the Quidditch match, it seems possible that someone could have got a hold of you."

Snape frowned, considering things, and went to the window and tapped the sill to check the perimeter spells. Nothing flashed outside. He stepped purposefully back to Harry. "You see," he lectured, "a remote *Imperius* must be quite powerful and even then, it rarely keeps hold all of the time. It should be detectable." He tapped Harry on the top of the head with another spell. Then after some thought, tapped him on each shoulder.

He huffed. "No sign of one, however." He tipped Harry's chin up and looked into each eye, back and forth. "Even your pupils are fine; the curse can constrict them." Frowning to himself, he cast the cancellation spell at Harry, and caught him as he fell.

Harry propped his stunned feet under himself while Snape helped lift him to

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upright. Snape didn't release him immediately, however. "Sorry, Harry," he said. "I thought it likely given your behavior of late."

Part of Harry wanted to push away out of the embrace, but he didn't move. His heart felt as frozen as his body had been moments before.

"What were you going to say to me?" Snape asked.

Speaking into his guardian's shoulder, Harry said, "I was going to say that I wondered how I ever trusted you."

Snape huffed a laugh through his nose and propped Harry straight, but held onto his shoulders as though he may need help balancing. "Can I have my wand back?" Harry asked, not sure he was going to get it. He wanted to test his magic and needed it to do so.

Snape held it out, handle first. "Do try to keep better track of it."

Harry, warm wand in hand, felt a rush of warmth at Snape's trust. "I do. I didn't expect you to take it."

"Expect ANYONE to take it. These are difficult times," Snape stated harshly, watching Harry try a Lumos that, for an instant, flickered with a black halo. Harry shook it the spell out and tried again with his mind cleared and filled only with that warmth of trust. The spell came out fine the second time.

"All right?" Snape asked.

"Yeah," Harry answered in a difficult tone. "You were baiting me," he accused.

"Yes," Snape admitted. "I needed to see your reaction up close. I wish I knew what was happening to you." When Harry simply stared at his wand and didn't reply, Snape went on. "It seems more than just the injury of my revelation. More even than the Dark Plane impinging on you. Any more dreams?"

Harry shook his head.

"Truly," Snape sharply asked. "No more?"

"I've been taking these Muggle pills to sleep. They may be blocking them."

"Do you have the bottle?"

Harry sighed. "Up in my room. I'll fetch them." He stepped out, but Snape followed.

In his room, Harry picked the bottle up from his night stand and held it out. Snape stared closely at the sideways, microscopic print on the label before setting the bottle back down. "It is merely an antihistamine. I was concerned it was a psychotropic. It should not be blocking your dreams, but it may make you sleepy enough not to wake during them."

Harry shrugged and wandered over to his owl, who was sleeping on top of her cage with her head tucked away. He was feeling empty again, fixed into a limbo state by Snape's assertion that he would always be there no matter what Harry said or

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did. Hedwig fluffed herself when he petted her. Memories of the day, of the attack, washed around him rather than through him, and he scoffed to himself that the old crone had the date wrong.

Snape came over and opened Kali's cage to remove her sleepy form and examine her. "She is losing her fur and has grown quite dull colored," Snape observed.

"She was keeping residence in Hagrid's hut with a six-foot Pranticore. I don't think it was very quiet."

Snape held the Chimrian closer to Harry and she hissed at him. He withdrew her and petted her as she clambered into the crook of his arm. "I can think of no rational reason for her to dislike you. She has no choice, by blood, but to be bonded to you." His hair tossed lightly as he shook his head. "I am going to regret later not understanding this, I'm certain." He stepped to the door, still carrying Harry's pet. "Come down to dinner in an hour," he said, as though everything were normal. More normal, in fact, than it ever really was in their family situation.

Harry lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, vacillating between feeling betrayed still despite trying to forgive Snape, sickened by his lack of action regarding the betrayal, and hoping Vineet was all right. He wished they'd given him something to do at the Ministry so he wasn't left to his own thoughts like this.

An hour later, moving on automatic, Harry went downstairs. Dinner was just being served on a table anchored by two tall off-white candles. Harry took a seat beside Candide and piled his plate with food that he had no appetite for. Kali slept, draped unexpectedly over Snape's shoulder. Small talk passed between Snape and Candide as they ate, while Harry picked at his food, strangely pained by this family scene which matched any fantasy he may have previously had about having a real family.

Unable to pretend to eat any longer, Harry stood. "Finished already?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded and left for his room, expecting further argument, but not getting any. In his absence Snape said, "Any sign of unbalance from him and I want you to send me an owl by Floo, immediately. My hearth is open for your owl or Harry's."

She asked, confused, "You think Harry's dangerous or something?"

"I don't know what is happening to him. The term is finished on Monday and the Hogwart's Express leaves on Friday after examinations. I expect he will hold together that long until I can return and be here all the time."

"He is nothing but polite to me. And completely normal."

Snape pushed his plate forward an inch. "Then whatever it is, I am drawing it out of him. That is good, I suppose. Or are you just saying that to protect him?"

Nonplussed, she straightened and replied. "I wouldn't lie to you about something

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that important, Severus. If I thought Harry needed help of any kind, I would tell you.”

“My apologies,” he muttered. “Too much is happening and I feel I should see through to what is truly behind his difficulties, but I cannot.” A minute later, he added, “I didn’t expect the bad times to return this quickly. I was prepared for a longer break... a chance to... live a bit.” The last he seemed to toss on as though it were unlike him to say it.

“How long can this go on?” Candide asked, shaken by his statement.

Snape stared into the closest fat candle, at the glow bleeding down through the beeswax. “Last time it went on for decades,” he stated, voice far away.

“Last time, my family remained untouched. No one bothered us. Well, the news was always bad.”

“It is not possible to remain untouched with Harry around.”

Candide laughed and then soberly said, “Poor boy.”

The plates and platters sparkled away. “I wish Dumbledore were here,” Snape stated after another long pause. “And you do not know how painful it is for me to admit that.”

“Why do you want him?” she asked doubtfully, standing to fetch the crystal bottle of fortified wine.

Snape waved her off pouring him any, and said while rubbing his forehead, “I fear he is slipping into dark wizardry, in a manner I cannot comprehend, let alone stop. I need Dumbledore’s advice. I am tempted to send Harry back to Finland, just on the off chance the Shaman there can help him again.”

“At least it would be summer this time,” Candide offered. She sipped from her tumbler. “I’d go with him, if you wanted me to. You said that you seem to bring the worst out of him. That is, if you don’t wish to send him alone.”

Snape took a sip of her tumbler. “I appreciate your willingness to assist with this overwhelming responsibility I have taken on.”

She grinned wryly. “Children are a massive responsibility, even when they aren’t Harry Potter.”



The next morning, Harry went straight to St. Mungos, where he found Aaron keeping Nandi and Vineet company. Aaron stood to give Harry a hard slap on the arm. “Hero of the hour looking unaffected,” he said gamely, as though introducing him to a crowd.

“How are you, Vineet?” Harry asked.

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“Improving,” the Indian replied and gestured at the empty chair beside him. Harry accepted it, feeling light all of a sudden, as though the air in the room were fresher, or his chest less constricted.

They talked all morning. Other visitors came and went. Just before lunchtime, Mr. Weasley stepped into the ward. “Ah, there you are, Harry. I’ve come to fetch you.”

Harry stood and faced him, resisting just barely a sharp comment about Mr. Weasley’s poor sense of loyalty. Alarmed, Harry turned away and rubbed his head.

“You all right, Harry?” Mr. Weasley asked in concern.

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “I think I just need some lunch.” Which was half the truth; he had skipped breakfast and only had a touch of dinner the night before.

“Well, we’ll stop and get you some at the Burrow before I take you to talk to the Minister. Come on.”

“Bones wants to see me?” Harry asked, focusing hard on Mr. Weasley’s voice of concern, which was stabilizing him.

When they were out of the ward, Mr. Weasley took Harry’s elbow. “Insists upon it. That’s why I was sent to fetch you. But I can pretend it took a little bit longer to find you. This was the first place I checked. Molly’d be thrilled to see you.”

Harry sat in the sunny main room of the Burrow, eating a slightly dry but still tasty beef sandwich. His appetite returned fiercely as Mrs. Weasley doted on him, bringing him a pitcher of pumpkin juice and making sure the food was just right.

Near the end of the meal, Mr. Weasley said, “Remus said you had a bit of a falling out with Severus.”

“Yeah,” Harry admitted, suddenly not hungry and in fact, slightly nauseous. “But it’s all right now.”

“Is it?” Mr. Weasley asked doubtfully.

It has to be, Harry thought to himself. I have no choice. When he didn’t reply, but stared at his plate, he missed Mrs. Weasley signaling to her husband to drop the topic.

“Well, they’ll send out the whole squad hunting for us if we don’t get there soon,” Mr. Weasley said, standing up.

Harry followed him back into the Ministry, by Floo this time. As Mr. Weasley held out the household canister of powder, he explained, “New security procedures. No Apparating directly into the Ministry. ‘Cept they will probably open an area at the far side of the Atrium because it will be too long a wait in the Floo network otherwise and people will start getting misdirected. It will be chaos.”

Harry stopped a moment upon hearing that word, but he shook it off and tossed the powder onto the small fire.

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At the counter there were five staff doing check-in, just as there had been before the DV-Day festivities. Harry was waved through, but Mr. Weasley got held up for extra questions. Harry waited beside the gate, amused, while his boss, in fact the Law Enforcement Department Head, located his identification and displayed it with a huff.

Up on the first floor, Harry led the way into the Minister's office. Belinda sat at the desk, writing out a letter in a slow, neat hand. She looked up at Harry and gave no outward reaction to his presence. "The Minister is waiting for you," she said to Mr. Weasley. Harry wanted to stall and ask how Belinda was, but Mr. Weasley had a hold of his arm and was steering him around her desk and into the next office.

Minister Bones' office contained the trappings of power: fine carved furniture, lamps with attractive stained glass, dark, built-in bookshelves. She gestured for Harry to take a seat in a fine red chair with an exceptionally tall back that wrapped around its occupant. "I'll send Harry down to you when I'm finished," Bones stated pointedly.

Arthur hesitated, but nodded and on the way past Harry, leaned down to whisper, "Temper," in his ear. Harry held back on rolling his eyes. As if he were stupid enough to let anything slip to this woman, who wasn't Fudge, but wasn't really so different – attracted to power and hence manipulatable through that addiction. Harry found these revelations interesting and useful, so he let them flow, wished for more of them, in fact. Amelia Bones moved around her desk to her chair. She was wearing a cream-color polyester Muggle suit today and it made an annoying noise as she walked. She sat in her chair and fixed a smile on as she peered at Harry.

"Our little hiatus from trouble does seem to have ended. I'm very pleased you came out of that scuffle unharmed, Mr. Potter, Harry," she amended with an even more friendly smile. Harry nodded, unable to bring himself to smile in return. He was too distracted by memorizing the office, its layout, the relative distances between things, where certain things might be stored. It wasn't the kind of thing he was usually interested in, but today he was. Bones was still talking. "Your fellow apprentice is expected to recover as well. We were very lucky. I was wondering though, if you would join me in speaking to the press."

Harry bristled at the notion, picturing himself in the spotlight made him shirk instinctively. "Do you really think that's a good idea?" he asked smoothly. "After all, the prophecy isn't widely known and I would like to remain less of a target." This excuse rolled out without forethought, but on review, it sounded pretty good.

She gave this due consideration and a quick read of her eyes showed her weighing her immediate position against future assets. "You are of course correct. Perhaps it would not be wise."

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Harry had to avoid smiling this time. He stood, slowly so as to not be rude about it. “If that’s all Minister. I believe I should check in with the Auror’s office...” To his own ears he sounded deferential, not realizing before how very manipulative that attitude could be.

She smiled and nodded. “But of course, Mr. Potter. I am relieved to see you falling into your role in our organization so well. And to see you bearing up under the pressure you must be under.”

Harry nodded, a kind of bow, and she waved him out. As the heavy oak door, cursed in some strange way, closed behind him, Harry considered how very easy to fool they all were. Eager pawns, all of them.

Down in the Auror’s office, Harry’s strange confidence was shaken by encountering Tonks at her desk. Hesitating in the doorway, Harry worried suddenly what she would think of what had been going through his mind. He didn’t expect she would approve. Her eyes lifted to his. Her hair was the usual pink today and stood up neatly, a sign that she wasn’t completely stressed by events. Harry wished he could run his fingers through it and that thought alone made him feel as though the wind had been knocked out of him.

“You all right, Harry?” she asked in clear concern.

“Yeah. Just thi- remembering something.” He felt small now in contrast to a moment before when he felt he ruled the whole place. He rubbed his eyes. Tonks grabbed his arm, which sent emotional electricity through him.

“Are you sure you didn’t get hurt yesterday? Here, sit down.” She guided him to a chair as he rubbed his face and eyes another round, trying to find a balance in his mind that was impossible to sustain. He felt like himself now, but where the heck had he gone in the Minister’s office? Tonks leaned close, close enough to smell her shampoo and asked, “Want me to take you to the Ministry Healer?”

Harry lifted his head. “No. Really. I’m fine. Tomorrow’s the Ides,” he suddenly remembered. “She had the day wrong.”

Tonks laughed. “Guess she did,” she agreed, patting Harry on the shoulder. After she went back to her desk that spot on his shoulder continued to feel warm and tingly, and Harry continued to feel like himself.

Rogan came in then and sat down heavily in his chair. “Bloody Control of Magical Creatures.”

“What’s that?” Tonks asked him.

“Like I have time for this, but Rodgers asked me to get things together for the apprentice applicant testing. I went ‘round to various departments to check on the whereabouts of the materials we used last time and I’m getting the runaround on things that should be simple.”



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“They asking for forms that don’t exist again?”

Rogan laughed and shook his head. “I’ll try again on Monday when the people I need to talk to are actually here. Stupid me thought I get it out of the way today.” He looked at Harry, still sitting against the wall behind Tonks’ chair. Harry hadn’t wanted to leave, felt in fact as though he were clinging to her aura somehow and if he moved, he would lose himself again. “Need something to do, Potter? There are more files...” Rogan suggested.

Harry considered that. He could survive that, he thought.

Around dinner time, Rogan told Harry to go home. Stiff in the neck and with myriad paper cuts, Harry did so. Candide greeted him warmly when he arrived. His things put away, he took a seat across from her and picked up the newspaper. Candide said, “At least they’re too busy to dig up dirt on you.”

“That’s an upside I hadn’t considered,” Harry said.

After a quiet dinner, during which Harry failed to notice the extra looks he was getting, Harry pulled out his assigned readings and lost himself in them. He wished he had Kali to sit in his lap, but she had no interest in coming out of her cage. She tried to bite him when he tried to pet her. “What’s the matter?” he had asked her, truly wishing she could reply. She seemed to know something he didn’t.

Harry slept fitfully that night but rose with a jolt the next morning as though more wide awake than normal. Jittery as though he had too much to do in too short a time, Harry did his readings for a few hours before visiting his fellow at the hospital. Vineet was sitting up and looking much more himself.

Harry was very glad to see him well and energetic. “Are you getting out today?” he asked.

“I am endeavoring to arrange that,” Vineet replied.

“Where’s Nandi?” Harry asked. “She must be pleased.”

“Hermione has taken her to the park for a walk. Thought she needed a break from this dull room.”

Harry glanced around at the dark panelling with its mysterious streaks. “Probably did.” He pulled over a chair and asked, “You all right?” referring to Hermione.

Vineet rubbed his arm with his hand, one of the few nervous gestures Harry had ever seen him use. “I do not know.” Harry thought that was all he was going to say and was fishing for something meaningful to offer, when Vineet added, “I cannot live with myself if I take what I want. But I also feel I cannot live like this.”

“Maybe it will wear off with time,” Harry suggested. “If you’ve never been in love before, maybe you don’t realize that it doesn’t really last that long.”

Vineet gave him a dark look. “Why use it as a criteria then to chose a mate?” he asked in sharp challenge.

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“We’re back to this again?” Harry asked. “Sometimes it lasts... I’m trying to make you feel better, here, not make grand philosophical statements.”

Vineet stared at his interlocked fingers. “Your advice is most meaningful to me,” he said.

“Love is the wrong topic to take my advice on. How’s that for advice?”

Harry sat back and the conversation ended, which was just as well, since the ladies returned shortly after. Hermione seemed very glad to see Harry and insisted he tell her that he was fine. Harry lied to her and told her he was doing better, which made her smile faintly, which reminded him of manipulation and the ease of it, but somehow in her and Vineet’s presence those darker musings did not take hold.

Harry returned home for dinner again, assuming he was expected. If Vineet was released, Hermione insisted she could help with him with moving home. That insistence jolted him with the notion that she knew his fellow apprentice better than he did.

Candide asked Harry how his day had been. Harry didn’t feel much like talking but he told her the latest about his two friends’ impossible attraction and she frowned, appropriately pained.

“I never understood arranged marriages,” Candide said.

“But you’d be married now if your family practiced it,” Harry pointed out.

She laughed. “True. Can’t argue that.” She sat back and sighed. “So what’s the latest on your cousin and Remus?”

“I got a letter from Pamela yesterday, but it was mostly in support of me versus Rita Skeeter. Apparently somehow she’s been getting copies of the Daily Prophet. Until the school year is over, I don’t think Remus can leave the castle. Not with Severus leaving so often.”

Pleasant conversation and a day of relative control let Harry fall asleep without any little Muggle pills.



Very late in evening, at the summons of McGonagall’s curt silver message, Snape appeared in her office and closed the door when she gestured that he do so. Cornelius Fudge paced nervously between her desk and the hearth. He glowered at Snape upon completing his latest circuit.

“Have a seat, Severus,” McGonagall invited. Her tone was one of grace under pressure. Between that and Fudge’s presence, Snape had little interest in sitting, but he did so when the headmistress continued to indicate the visitor’s chair by holding out her hand in its direction.

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This cued Fudge to stalk over in the manner of a paunchy predator. “Professor, good of you to join us,” he stated, hinting at sarcasm.

“I will deal with this, Cornelius,” McGonagall said. She strode out from behind her desk to peer down at Snape from closer range.

“The same way you’ve been dealing with him all along? You and Albus both, I might add,” Fudge criticized, crossing his arms over his belly and glowering additionally. His next question was directed at Snape. “How long did you think you could hide?”

Snape was distracted from Legilimizing the man by his colleague saying, “I will not defer to you on this, Cornelius. I have vouched for Severus in the past and will continue to do so. He has my complete trust.”

Looking at her, Snape did not find this entirely true. Perhaps she merely wished to believe she could completely trust him. He waited for her to speak something useful, tenser than he wished to be. Her composing was interrupted by Fudge. “Goodness, woman, how can you imagine he has remained silent except to hide the truth.”

This comment did appear to get through to McGonagall. She pressed her fingertips into her forehead. Without lifting her head, she said, “Severus, I must ask you to show me your forearm.”

Snape gazed at her before tugging up his sleeve and turning his arm over with a confident gesture. It was, of course, unmarred. Fudge had stepped closer to peer at it and now licked his fingers and rubbed them hard over Snape’s skin. Snape bristled at this but didn’t withdraw his arm. “And you were expecting what?” Snape queried.

McGonagall explained, “The Ministry has been getting reports from Azkaban over the last few days of the Death Eaters behaving oddly and today they discovered that their Marks are darkening. Slightly, but still perceptibly.”

“To the last one of them,” Fudge added.

Snape stared at him, his thoughts caught in their own less-immediate circuit where recent inexplicable observations about Harry were taking on new meaning and shape.

McGonagall said, “Severus would not hide such a thing.”

“Hmf,” Fudge grunted, appearing unconvinced. He uncrossed his arms and fished in his pocket for a folded penknife. “I need to return. I suppose just as well the Aurors were too busy to accompany me. Get bloody annoyed when I can’t prove anything.” He flipped open the blade on the knife, turned it around in his hand to take hold of it, and disappeared.

McGonagall leaned back against the front of her desk. “I cannot figure that man out,” she said uneasily, as though realizing Snape had seen through her less-than-complete confidence. “He was so certain of the reports from Azkaban, but they seem erroneous in view of your own unaffected arm.”

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Her words drew Snape back to the present. “My Mark may no longer be active,” he said. “It doesn’t survive death.”

“What?” she asked, sounding alarmed.

“Harry has not seen me in his mind as Voldemort’s servant since I fought entering the veil after my encounter with Avery.”

Her head tilted as curiosity pushed in before her alarm. “You are no longer Voldemort’s servant?” When Snape shook his head, she said, “I did not realize that.” Her spine straightened then. “But that means the reports from Azkaban may be true...”

Her statement of distress narrated Snape’s inner vision at that moment, which was a recent memory of Harry, rubbing his scar... repeatedly. Snape stood. “I must see Harry.” He went to the mantel and took down her powder canister.

“I’m afraid that isn’t going to work.”

Snape spun on her. “I must go, Minerva. Remus is in fine shape, and-”

“It isn’t that. The Floo network has been shut down for security due to the reports from Azkaban.”

“They what?!” Snape asked.

“That is why Cornelius used a portkey.”

Snape felt boxed in and began pacing. “I really must go.”

“You may borrow my portkey...”

Snape considered her offer while pausing on his toes in the doorway of the office. “No, you may need it.” He strode down the staircase with her voice following him, saying, “But even with Remus, please do return if you can manage it.”

Broom fetched from his wardrobe, Snape tossed open his office window and flew out into the night. At the railroad bridge, he landed and attempted to Disapparate to the house, but he was knocked back by a barrier and nearly tripped over the metal rails behind him catching his balance. Why was there a barrier on the house, he wondered in increasing alarm. He picked as an alternative the dark end of the small railway platform in Shrewsthorpe, but again was knocked back, although this time as though striking something rubbery.

He then visualized the village where he and a nine-year-old Harry had stopped for ice cream. Snape didn’t even know the name of it. He managed to arrive there, and immediately leapt onto his broom.



A nightmare woke Harry not long after he drifted off. Confused by the darkness of his room, he took a moment to catch his breath. Kali was frantic in her cage. Harry

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stumbled from his bed and opened her cage door. She hissed and in the darkness he could see her take a swipe at him with her needle-like claws. “What’s wrong?” Harry asked, dismayed. Outside, misty rain had covered the window, filtering out the view. Harry left the cage open so Kali could get out rather than risk her injuring herself in her panic.

He fell back into bed and pummeled his pillow into a comfortable lump before dropping his head back on it. Moments later he jumped; every muscle in his body twitched. He was surrounded by shadows. Breathing rapidly, he stared into the grey air of his room, not comprehending his startling inner vision. He closed his eyes and with effort, got his mind to drift, confirming the relentless approach and circling of at least a dozen death eaters.

Harry grasped his wand from under his pillow, clumsy in grabbing it the adrenaline was pouring so violently into his veins. He Disapparated for Candide’s room and fell to his knees on the hard floor of his own room instead. Barrier, Harry’s mind told him as he crawled to the door with leaden limbs while he recovered from the shock. He then dashed down the balcony for the far door as quickly as possible. Slipping inside he hissed, “Candy, get up. Get a robe on, get your wand.”

“What?”

“Now,” Harry snapped. He ran the intrusion detection spell and it fluttered all kinds of colors, clearly tampered with.

She pulled on her dressing gown and approached him, sounding doubtful, “Harry, what’s happening?”

“Wand,” Harry ordered with a snap and she rushed back to the night stand to fetch it. “Get over here close to me so I can get you inside my blocks.”

She obeyed but whispered, “Why don’t we just Disapparate.”

“Barrier, don’t try it. It’ll knock you out.” Harry sensed that she believed he had lost it, but he had no time for her disbelief. The door shattered in the next instant and Harry barely got a Titan block up to keep them protected from the wood shards that launched from it. Candide frantically clutched the back of Harry’s pyjamas. At least now she had no doubts. Harry sent a barrage of attack spells through the opening and ducked back behind the stone wall to assess.

“Who is it?”

“Everyone,” Harry replied. “Every Death Eater who survived, I think. How are your attack spells?” he asked between blocking and casting out the remains of the door.

“What?”

“What do you have?”

“Harry, I’m an accountant.”

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“You must have something. Anything. Pranks from school or something you used on your siblings. You must have something.”

A breeze indicated a portkey and Harry, with a powerful jerk of his arm, traded places with Candide and put up a block against the Blasting Curse that emitted from the wand of the figure that had just arrived in the room. Over his shoulder Harry snarled. “Use anything you’ve got on the stairs, whether you see anyone or not.”

He was vaguely aware, as he battled the figure before him, of her casting a shoelace knotting hex but the sound of someone tumbling down the stairs followed. Harry stood up and threw a wind charm at his opponent to knock his hood off. Bright blonde hair tumbled out. “Figures,” Harry said. “Malfoy, it would be you invading my house. Again.”

A spell exchange passed followed quickly by another, both canceling out. Harry cursed; he had to win fast, his back was not protected well.

Malfoy smiled maliciously, his cold eyes glowing. “I’m going to win this time, Potter. I’ve so dreamed about this moment.” He threw another Blasting Curse, which Harry at least could handle easily. “I’ve plotted every last ounce of torture I’m going to use on you,” Malfoy went on. Harry cast back a chain binding and quickly the Alibappa that he hoped Malfoy didn’t know. It knocked Malfoy back, but something threw Candide into Harry’s back at that moment and he had to use the gap to catch her.

“Winky!” Harry shouted. “I need a diversion, now!” Down the hallway a door opened and a screeching could be heard. A small ball of fur flew past into the face of the attacker at the top of the stairs. In the corner of the room, Malfoy was standing upright. Harry cast another Alibappa at him, but he countered this one in some way Harry had never seen, with a spike curse that continued to appear jutting out from the point of his wand. He cocked his arm though to throw it at Harry, and Harry grabbed Candide and dragged her around the corner out onto the balcony, where screaming was accompanying Kali’s work on the stairs. The main hall held a swarm of black robed figures.

“Keep hold of me no matter what!” Harry commanded and ran toward the stone wall at the dead end of the balcony.

“Harry?!” Candide asked in alarm as the wall approached.

Harry held out his wand and struck the wall with a demolition spell from Ravenclaw’s book. The stones fell away in a circle six feet around. Grabbing Candide with both hands, Harry ran headlong through the hole and took flight with mad flapping and a sharp turn. Spells followed them out, lighting the trees and the road.

Harry flew as though possessed, dipping low between hedges and walls, pushing the strength of his wings to the limit with his burden. Several fields away, Harry

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fluttered to a stop and crouched low behind a waist-high stone wall. Candide gasped when put down and didn't regain her feet. Harry used one hand to help her up, while scanning the surroundings, wand at ready. The strong smell of a hearth fire drifted on the damp wind and Harry stood a little straighter to see over the trees. A column of flames, starting low but growing, clearly had hold of the roof of the house.

Candide, breathless, leaned over the wall. "Stay down," Harry said. "I'm not sure they didn't see where we landed. I'm hoping they didn't." He wished he were alone. He would go back right now and start picking them off as they exited the burning house. When several minutes passed, Harry released the breath he had been holding. "You all right?" he asked her. She sat with her arms wrapped around her knees in a kind of self-hug.

"Yeah," she said. "Little more excitement than I have most evenings."

"Little more than I have too," Harry quipped. "Usually the Death Eaters invade in smaller numbers." He smiled then, relieved enough to have escaped to be able to joke about it. The blare of a Muggle fire siren brought his thoughts back to the house.

"Damn. I hope they're gone." The trucks were approaching quickly along the main road and the alternating blare grew louder. Harry couldn't stand by and hope the firemen didn't get attacked just for fun, just because the Death Eaters didn't catch their intended quarry. "I have to go check this out. Don't move," he ordered her. "Well," he amended, "if you're in danger, obviously, Apparate away. The barrier probably doesn't reach this far. Harry ran a quick detection spell. "No. I don't see anything here. Although I'm not very good at that spell. Gotta go."

Harry transformed back into his Animagus form and flew in closer until he could step up to the side wall of their garden from the neighboring garden, which was much larger than theirs. The neighbors were out on their back patio watching the firemen drag hoses onto their property. Harry held his wand in his sleeve with just the point between his fingers. There was no sign of any hooded figures around or in the house from what he could see in the window. And he could see well inside with the flames burning so well.

Harry circled the wall, listening to the hiss of steam as the water struck the flames. He hoped Kali and Winky were out. The barrier shouldn't have stopped Winky from leaving, or so he hoped, and Kali could have followed him out. A drift of smoke stung Harry's eyes and he had to veer around three firemen running up to the house.

"Anyone inside? this group asked the others.

"No!" Harry shouted, thinking it best they not encounter the spell books and spilled potions. "We're out. We're okay."

"What happened?" a portly fellow wearing less respirative gear asked.

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“I don’t know,” Harry said, seeing the hole in the wall from the corner of his eye. “It was like an explosion or something. We ran out rather than figure it out.”

“Just as well,” the man said and went back to giving instructions to the men with the hoses.

Harry continued his circling, still fearful a few Death Eaters remained hopeful to take out a few Muggles. When he came back around to the neighbor’s back garden, via a gate he used an unlock charm on since no one was looking, he spied a new figure in black walking slowly along the side wall, trying to see into the house. It was Snape and Harry had never seen such a look on his face; it was one on the brink of devastation.

“Severus!” Harry called out from the far end of the garden. Firemen were manning hoses in between them and noise of their work and the pumps out on the road was too high to communicate. Snape’s head snapped around though, as if he had picked up a drift of the shout. Harry headed over to him hurriedly, sidestepping coiled hoses. Snape searched for him through the many people occupying the garden with an expression of fear, as though false hope might kill him.

“Severus!” Harry called again from closer and this time Snape’s gaze found him. His eyes closed a moment and then he surged forward and met Harry just beside the stone path leading to the neighbors’ back door. He grabbed Harry up in a hug fiercer than any Mrs. Weasley had ever delivered, dropping his broom to do so.

He pushed Harry to arm’s length just as quickly as he had grabbed him up. “Where’s Candide?” he asked.

Harry gestured over his shoulder. “I took her to safety. But we should go get her; I had to leave her alone to check that it was safe here for... well...” He gestured at the copious Muggle personnel and led Snape around the neighbor’s wall. Even though many people were out gawking at the fire, they safely took off on the broomstick, just behind their backs.

Harry held onto Snape from behind and pointed where he should go. They landed just beside Candide, who sat, hunched over, on the wall. She stood and accepted the second fierce hug of the evening. This one lasted longer.

“You are all right?” Snape demanded.

After a pause Candide nodded and whispered something in Snape’s ear. Thinking to give them some space, Harry took a few steps away to stand on tiptoe upon the low wall to watch the grey steam billowing from the house, only a faint orange glow emanated from the cloud’s center. Harry was too far away to overhear Snape say, “You are bleeding,” in alarm to Candide while examining his hand. Her reply of, “He carried me off in that giant bird form of his. His claws got me... but don’t let on. I don’t want him to know,” also was too low to carry to his ears.



## INVASIVE DARKNESS

Figures Apparated in just beside them and Snape and Harry both had their wands out instantly, but relaxed upon seeing the Weasley twins and Ron standing there, each holding a broomstick in one hand, their wands out in the other. Harry jumped down and greeted them.

“Everyone all right?” one of the twins breathlessly asked as he set down what might have been a prison box, except that it was circular and pinstriped, like a fancy hat box. A bit of robe stuck out of the lid. “This is the only one we caught,” he said disgustedly. “Thought a barrier on the village would snare us a few more of them.”

“You put the barrier up?” Harry demanded.

“Not on your house, mate,” Ron said. “We arrived just before the firemen. Dad sent us when the Muggle call was overheard with your address.”

“Your dad sent you?” Harry asked in shock, looking between the three of them. As he tried to find a followup question, Ron said, “There wasn’t anyone else to send. We’d gone in to help out and he refused to let us until this call.”

“Rest of the Aurors and all of Magical Reversal Squad are busy right now. Azkaban’s been emptied,” he explained.

“Tell me about it,” Harry snapped. “Half of them were in our hall. What the devil happened?”

Some hesitation passed through the three of them. In the dimness, highlighted macabrely by a low Lumos charm, it was hard to read their faces. One of the twins finally said, “There was trouble of some kind, but dad wouldn’t say exactly what. They sent Aurors up to help the guards but they didn’t report in.” This twin faded. The other picked up and said, “So they sent two more. Only one of ‘em came back, and just barely. The sea is washing over the island. The place is totally destroyed.”

Harry felt himself breathing, but the air felt stale and unusable. He felt suffocated. “Who didn’t come back?” he asked, fear filling him.

“Well, Moody and... and, Shackbolt were in the second group and Moody didn’t come back, apparently.” They all fell silent. Ron said, “We should take you into the Ministry. We’re not supposed to tell you anything. We just have rumors, really.”

Ron was lying. Stepping closer to him, Harry asked, “Tonks was in the first group, wasn’t she?” He had a hold of the front of Ron’s robes and was shouting. “Wasn’t she?!”

The others surrounded Harry and he threw his arm out to block them. “Harry, mate, calm down. We don’t know what happened yet. We weren’t supposed to tell you anything.” They were all talking at once, and Ron was staring at him fearfully as though he didn’t think Harry would let go before harming him. Harry let go of him, his chest hollow. He rubbed his nose on his sleeve and stalked away. Without

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

much thought, he tried to Apparate to the Ministry and fell to his knees again.

Ron came over and lifted him up. "Can't Apparate in. Security," he admonished him.

"Let's get to the Floo then," Harry said, turning and considering the scene. Remembering the train station Floo node he started that way by stepping over the wall.

"Floo Network's shut down," several voices said at once.

Harry staggered. "What!"

"For security mate," one of the twins said.

"What security is that?" Harry demanded.

"People were getting misdirected and attacked." Ron said. "The Ministry just wants everyone to stay put until they catch everyone who's out."

"There aren't enough Ministry people capable of that," Harry argued. "And if we've lost... three..." His voice faded, pained. He rubbed his forehead, hard. Snape grabbed his arm and pulled it down, staring at him intently. "What?" Harry asked, but Snape didn't explain, just released him.

Grabbing a better hold of the apparently weakening Candide, Snape said, "I need to take her to Hogwarts for Pomfrey to check. Harry, come with me."

"What? I'm going to the Ministry," Harry insisted.

Snape glared at Harry. "You are coming with me, now. You may go to the Ministry after I have had an opportunity to speak with you."

"Severus, I-" Harry began angrily, but Ron nudged him in the back with his elbow. "Better go, mate," Ron said soberly. Harry spun around. One of the twins said, "Yeah, go on. We'll take care of everything here. Your elf, for example."

"And Kali," Harry insisted. "Really, I need to help... need to go-"

"With him," one of the twins and Ron both insisted in unison. If Harry had been forced to put a label on their emotion, it would have been fear, and he had no idea why they were behaving so. Panicked sadness was all Harry was feeling and he could not see past it. Ron handed him his broomstick. "You'll probably need this. Three is a bit much all on one."

Snape said, "I will meet you at the railway bridge." He Disapparated, taking the light of his Lumos spell with him.

Harry spun on the Weasleys. "Go on, Harry," Ron said, sounding like his father. Shooting them a look as though he were disappointed in them, Harry departed too.

Ron swallowed and said, "I couldn't tell him. Some Gryffindor I am."

"Too cruel to tell him Voldemort is apparently back, you mean?" George asked. "If dad was right about the Dark Marks that is."

"No, too cruel to tell him about Tonks," Ron said with a flinch.

## INVASIVE DARKNESS

The twins shared a broom and the three of them took flight toward the dwindling fire.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



# BATTLING CHAOS

The instant Harry arrived in the wooded darkness, Snape took flight again, holding Candide. Harry had to kick Ron's broom into its fastest speed to catch up. The unlit hills appeared flat and dangerous, as though one could crash into them without warning. The tiny square lights of the castle slid into view, floating disembodied against the mountains beyond. Harry followed when Snape spiraled down to land on a square of flat roof beside the hospital wing where a stone railing provided a safe landing place. A door led into the adjoining tower.

Harry followed down the half-flight of stairs and to the door to the hospital wing, surprised when Snape told him to stay outside in the corridor. Snape was only gone a minute before returning. "Candide all right?" Harry asked.

"She'll be fine." Snape trailed off and seemed to change course. "Thank you for seeing to her."

"Sure," Harry said distractedly, mind circling off onto other worries, such as what had happened to Tonks.

Snape pressed his fingers around Harry's arm and steered him to the nearest tall window and its low ledge. "Sit."

Harry glanced behind him in the dim corridor. "Severus, I really have to go."

"Sit," Snape repeated.

Harry gave in. There were too many things he wished were changed right now to fight too long over this small one.

"Look up at me," Snape said. Harry did so. With a broad wave of his arm, Snape spelled the lamps in the corridor up higher. He said, "You have been rubbing your

## BATTLING CHAOS

scar rather a lot of late.”

Harry did so just then, but stopped immediately. “It itches.”

“Just itches?” Snape repeated dubiously. His robes rustled as he put his wand away and propped a hand on his hip.

“Yeah, why?”

Snape hesitated, frowning, before saying, “This other personality you have been exhibiting. I am beginning to believe it is the Dark Lord’s.”

Harry’s face scrunched up in disbelief. “What? Severus, he’s dead.” After a pause, Harry’s eyes narrowed and more mockingly he said, “What, now you aren’t saying his name?”

Snape tipped his head away. “The reason the Aurors went to Azkaban this evening was to investigate reports that the Death Eater’s marks were darkening.”

Harry stared at him. Snape appeared frazzled, but completely, soberly serious. “What about yours?” Harry asked.

Snape shifted his sleeve and held his arm out. “But I do not believe mine is functional.”

Harry lifted his gaze from examining Snape’s forearm and pushed his shoulders back. “That’s good.” He then favored Snape with a relatively soft look. Still grabbing at denying hope, Harry said, “The prophecy didn’t mention Voldemort. My earlier prophecies all did. If he’s really back, why didn’t it?” Harry rubbed his hair back and forth. The edge of the stone was cutting into his legs, so he shifted forward. “Severus,” he nearly pleaded, “I would know.”

“I believe you do know,” Snape stated. “It was you who hypothesized that it was he who attacked the Dursley house.”

Harry stared at the frayed and faded tapestry hanging across from him. “I wasn’t really serious, I don’t think. And Voldemort wouldn’t have left anyone alive.” That reasoning bolstered Harry.

“I cannot explain that part; I admit,” Snape said. “But your odd personality shifts become understandable if you are again tapping into the Dark Lord’s thoughts.”

Harry stared at the threads composing the tapestry’s weave. The greens of the trees were washed out but the reds were still dark. The figures in the image were all stilted, individual, separate. “I have been feeling sort of odd,” Harry admitted. “But...” Thinking over the last few weeks’ events, he asked, “Did Tom Riddle ever work for Borgin & Burkes?”

Snape’s robes fluttered as he changed his posture suddenly. “Yes.”

“Right,” Harry said, thinking that answer unfortunate.

“Why do you ask?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Harry thought over his dream of the shop's vault. "Just wondering... er, did Voldemort have a watch he liked?"

Snape seemed to think this a rather odd question, but he answered with a shrug. "He had one, yes."

Harry blinked into the lamplight. "I wonder where his wand is." He was feeling a rush of determination now, thinking that he should go track down Voldemort's wand. Without meaning to, he had stood up. "Voldemort's wand would have left the feather pattern in the ash at the Dursley's old house."

Snape's voice dropped as he replied, "It would, indeed."

Harry rubbed his hands together. "How can he be back though? And why is he so clumsy at everything?"

Snape crossed his arms and stepped around to face Harry. It was a subtly aggressive move, but Harry made himself not care. Snape stated, "If he released all of his followers from Azkaban, destroying it in the process, that would hardly constitute clumsiness."

Thinking of the footprints – the odd footprints in the old Borgin & Burkes vault – Harry said, "Maybe he just doesn't care if he leaves a trail."

"That would be more plausible," Snape agreed.

Harry turned to look down the corridor, thinking of routes to London. Snape took hold of his upper arm to draw him back. "I do not like letting you go if you have the Dark Lord influencing your thoughts."

"His name is Voldemort," Harry pointed out.

"Is?"

Harry looked away again, pained. "I killed him; he's gone."

Snape released him slowly. "He was very powerful, Harry... and disturbingly clever."

"You don't understand, though. I was released from him." Harry gestured with his arms, wanting to be understood, to convince Snape that he must be mistaken. "That day down in the Entrance Hall, I was released. I had never felt like that before – completely myself."

"And now?"

Harry's shoulders drooped. "I don't feel like myself anymore." His eyes burned with frustration upon admitting that. "What'd that bloody prophecy say again?" Harry stiffened as he recounted the prophecy in his mind. "Hello... 'Dark Hordes will be liberated'... Severus, the prisoners of Azkaban ARE the dark hordes!"

"You sound... pleased about that," Snape accused.

"Well... I mean, it's not a good thing, at all, but... I didn't release them. It wasn't me. I thought it was going to be my fault, but it's not. 'Few will escape it'.

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Well, given the number of prisoners now running rampant, that seems likely.” They looked at each other a long moment. “I really have to go, Severus. I think the Auror’s office may actually give me something useful to do for once. Especially with...” He faded out, hurting horribly. He twisted the pain around and forced it to become determination. He looked Ron’s broom up and down as though judging its ability to speed him to the Ministry or at least beyond the school’s Apparition barrier.

Snape moved his hand to Harry’s shoulder. “I am sorry, Harry.”

These words only made the twisting agony worse. Harry pulled out of reach.

“Do be careful,” Snape said with quiet calm, as though trying to calm Harry.

“I will,” Harry said and strode back to the door behind the tapestry that led to the roof; a door that was not on his map. Before entering the dark stairwell again, he lifted the tapestry out of the way and peered back out at his guardian. “You be careful too,” he said with feeling, thinking that as angry as he had been with the man who had set in motion the events that had killed his parents, Harry still wished for him to be around.

Snape nodded and, after the tapestry swung back to hang straight, stepped back into the hospital wing and down to the last bed on the left where curtains had been set up to surround it. The two students in the wing appeared to have fallen back to sleep. Pomfrey was just finishing up when Snape quietly pulled a chair over beside the bed. The hospital witch tugged the covers up and poured out a half glass of calming draught, which Candide drank too eagerly.

Snape said, “I did warn you that you may be safer elsewhere.”

Candide gave him a look of vague disdain before resting her head back. “You did,” she said a little coldly, and Snape thought perhaps he had taken the wrong tack. He sighed, wishing Pomfrey would retreat out of earshot.

“She’ll be tip-top tomorrow, Professor,” Pomfrey said while finally lifting the tray of unraveled and bloodied bandages, bottles, and tools. Moments later she had disappeared into her office.

It required half a minute for Snape to find his way through his myriad troubling thoughts to say. “I am very grateful that you are all right.”

“Yeah,” she said lightly, “Harry would have been devastated if anything more serious had happened to someone he thought he was keeping an eye on.”

“I wasn’t thinking of that,” Snape said a little smartly. “But you are correct,” he conceded.

Candide relented, saying even more quietly, “Poor boy is probably still trying to rescue his mother.”

“I do hope he is past that,” Snape retorted. A long silent minute ticked by. Snape stood, straightening his chair with undo care. “I must assist in guarding the castle.

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We can speak about this more in the morning.”

“Be careful, Severus.”

“Yes,” he agreed, thinking that her existence in his life made things several times more complicated, although he found he could not bring himself to wish that trouble away. Surely if Arthur and Molly Weasley had coped all of these years, he certainly could.



Harry Apparated to Shrewsthorpe first, just to look things over. The last of the firemen were loading their equipment into the many cupboards lining the sides of their truck. With a hiss of the brakes the truck roared away and the street fell silent except for the trickling of puddles of water draining across the road onto the ground. A few neighbors gathered their families together and faded into the surroundings, except for one woman who stepped gingerly across the wet road.

“Harry, dear,” Elizabeth’s mother greeted him. She wore a grey robe and had her arms crossed around middle as though injured, but Harry assumed it was simply distress. “My husband didn’t want me coming down to look at what was happening until he was certain one of those awful marks wasn’t hovering over the place. I tried to explain to him that those days were long over...”

“Er,” Harry began. “They might not be,” he admitted quietly. “Azkaban’s been emptied and there were no shortage of Death Eaters here this evening.”

Her shiny eyes gaped at him, reflecting the distant street lights. His assertion appeared to have put her in a state of shock. “Oh,” she finally said, and Harry could sense her shift in attitude to one probably more in line with her husband’s, one that shunned magic due to the trouble it brought. She glanced up and down the street nervously. “Well, I best get back,” she said uneasily.

“Yeah,” Harry said, and watched her shuffle off, clearly wearing shoes too large for her; although perhaps not her husband’s, probably her daughter’s.

Someone called to Harry; it was Ron. He was carrying Hedwig’s cage with the owl in it. “Found her circling,” he explained. The bird put her foot up around the wires and chewed a bit as though to get to Harry.

“Thanks. Did you find Kali?”

“Yup, Fred took her to Hermione’s flat. Your house-elf refuses to leave. Maybe you can convince her to go back to Hogwarts.”

“She’s not bonded to me, so she may not listen.” Harry looked the dark bulk of the house over. It was still a house; although it had a blackened hole in the corner of the roof and many of the windows were broken. And there was the little issue of



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the very large hole in the front that Harry had escaped through. But surprisingly, it still resembled a house. The stone walls were untouched beyond Harry's own damage and they never had stood quite straight. The scent of wet charred wood was a tad pervasive, arguing that things would require work to return them to normal.

"I'm going to take a look inside... make sure Winky is set."

Harry used a spell to unlock the padlock that had been added to a board nailed across the door, which had been axed out of service otherwise. Inside, water covered the stone floor of the entryway, but the wood floor of the hall looked dryer and a faint swishing noise drew Harry inside all the way to where Winky stood, mopping.

"Master," she squeaked in greeting.

"Are you going to be all right here?" Harry asked. He circled the hall looking into each of the rooms. The breeze blew in through the broken windows, lightening the scent of wet fire. The ceiling was scorched most in the library, where the shelves and the paper had provided good fuel. But someone had already taken away the undamaged books. This heartened Harry more than he would have expected it to.

"Winky wishes to do her duty," Winky said, wringing out the mop into a wooden bucket.

Harry passed the steps down to the kitchen, which appeared undamaged, making him assume the foodstuffs were also undamaged, leaving Winky with supplies for a while. Harry looked around the broad boards making up the floor. If they dried quickly, perhaps the floor could be salvaged. Harry looked up. He could see the low clouds through the hole in the roof that ran up from where the balcony had burned, giving the fire a path up to the thick beam in the corner, which had suffered greatly. The place was damp and cold and smelt even more than usual of a hearth, but it was still standing. And Harry needed to hunt down the people who had done this.

Determination heated Harry's midsection. "If you need anything, go to Hogwarts," Harry said to Winky.

Winky may have nodded, or perhaps her head had just happened to bob more right then as she worked the long mop handle back and forth.

Outside, one of the twins had returned and was chatting with Ron.

"How are ya', Harry?" he asked.

"All right, I guess. I need to get to the Ministry, though."

"Come along with us then. Bringing you is a great excuse to go back." He winked at Ron. "Use our Quidditch pitch as a destination and we'll pick up George too. We've put a nasty barrier around the house itself."

Harry took Ron's arm and Apparated them both to the field beside the Burrow, which showed like an abstract beacon in the darkness. As they approached, a figure

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came out and shouted something that sounded like “goat-herder.” Fred shouted “sheep’s milk” back and the figure raced over.

“Want to help us escort Harry back to the Ministry?” Fred suggestively asked his twin.

George’s grin was visible even in the low light. “ ‘Course. Charlie’s arrived so Bill’s gone back to Gringott’s for a few hours. Goblins threatened to fire the two o’ you if you didn’t show up for emergency duty.” This last he said to Ron.

Ron appeared grim. “One of us should stay and help guard the Burrow.”

“You stay, Ron,” Fred said. “We’ll go with Harry. As annoyed as Dad was with us two insisting on helping, he seemed most concerned about you.”

“Yeah,” Ron huffed. “Seems to think you two could trick your way out of anything, but Little Ronnie doesn’t have a chance.” He gave Harry a half-hug, patting him hard on the back. “Come back when you get a chance. And message if you need any help.” The last came out with an un-Ron-like insistence.

Fred grabbed a broomstick from the shed and hovered it. Numb and almost uncar- ing, given the heart-emptying news he faced upon arrival, Harry followed reluctantly when the twins launched themselves.

Too soon, they were coming down in an alleyway near the telephone booth en- trance. A crowd surrounded the booth, jostling and arguing. Fred leaned close and said, “The very far corner of the atrium was left outside the Apparition barrier. I’ll see if it’s clear.” He disappeared with a pop that drew heads from the crowd. Harry turned his head away, not wanting to be recognized.

“It’s clear,” George said.

“How do you know?” Harry asked.

“He didn’t come back. ‘Count to five’ is the family rule.” George disappeared and Harry followed.

Wands were aimed at them. Harry elbowed George aside and said, “It’s Harry Potter and company.” The wands lowered.

“He with you?” A burly man Harry didn’t recognize asked as he held Fred down under his boot.

“Yes.”

Fred was allowed to get up. “That’s a dumb rule,” Harry muttered.

“It’s always worked before,” George argued back.

Harry strode to the counter beside the gates and after some arguing they were through. The corridors were darkened for night and normally would be deserted, but tonight they were bustling. The three of them took the lift to two. In the Auror’s office it was busy but somber. Shackbolt stood up as they entered. His right arm was bandaged and his face was scraped extensively on one side.

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“Good to see you, Harry,” he said. “I see you have your own guards,” he added with a touch of lightness.

Beside Harry the twins shifted. “Where’s Dad?” George asked.

“In a meeting,” Shacklebolt replied.

“Who is missing?” Harry asked, not breaking the gaze he had locked on Shacklebolt’s deep brown one.

The twins shifted much more this time. Shacklebolt said, “I saw Mad-Eye go into the drink myself. So he’s listed as dead.” In his eyes Harry could see a storm-battered slab of wet rock where clutching sweeps of water, curling with angry foam, sucked the old Auror away, out of reach of tossed lifeline spells, out of reach of the light of a paltry Lumos charm. Shacklebolt went on. “Before that, Whitley and Tonks had gone up, but not reported in.”

Blackpool, hearing this conversation, came around from one of the farther desks. She appeared to have been crying. “Good to see you’re all right, Potter,” she said.

Harry nodded, dropping his gaze before letting it wander over the desk nearby where a stray hot pink scarf, stuffed into the corner where the desk met the cubicle wall, reminded Harry too forcefully of its former occupant. More people entered, another one with a snuffle. Kerry Ann gave Harry a hug before taking Tonks’ chair beside the door. Munz took the spare chair that usually floated between the three desks in this section. He dropped into it hard and rubbed his shoulder.

“No luck?” Shacklebolt asked.

“We got Vammerpile,” Munz said. “He was at home, smoking a pipe as though he didn’t imagine we’d bother looking for him. No sign... of Avery, though.” He glanced at Harry before finishing this sentence. “Rogan took off to help Reversal in Regent’s Park. Said to tell you.”

“Can I get an assignment?” Harry asked, trying not to sound as though he were demanding one. He wanted to ask about Voldemort’s wand, but figured that he should ask Mr. Weasley.

Shacklebolt glanced at the log, which was busy scratching away without pause. “Arthur will be back presently. When he is, we can all go out as far as I’m concerned.” He gestured with his healthy arm as though not used to using it. “Pick an assignment, but make it an easy one if you really want it.” To Munz, he said, “Why don’t you take the alarm at the Apothecary’s. Came in just twenty minutes ago.” When Kerry Ann stood too, Shacklebolt said, “You can stay. You’re probably going out with Harry.”

Munz went from relaxing to rushing out without hesitation. Kerry Ann retook her seat. Fred said, “So what about us?”

Shacklebolt shrugged, but he looked stubborn, as though ready to deny them another assignment.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Harry looked over the logbook where the recording quill was filling in next Sunday's pages already it was using so much space. The day names had been X-ed out violently enough that the nib had torn the parchment. "Do we have a list of who was in Azkaban?" Harry asked. Shacklebolt held out a scroll. A few names had already been marked off.

"Cross off Vammerpile too, will you please?" Shacklebolt said.

Harry borrowed a quill from Tonks' desk drawer and did so. The list was dauntingly long. "How many?"

"Two-hundred and sixty-four," Shacklebolt recited.

George whistled. Fred said, "We can take on a lot of them easily, you know. Some of those blokes who have been in the klink since the Dementor era can't have much left of their own will."

"That's how Vammerpile was," Kerry Ann said, dabbing her nose with a kerchief. "Didn't have any sense of what to do with himself." Blackpool sniffled too, inspired by seeing Kerry Ann do so.

"Half of them we aren't terribly worried about," Shacklebolt said stiffly. "And a quarter will probably flee the country, which makes them someone else's problem, and at the moment, I'm not feeling too bad about that. Later I will, when it is possible to have the luxury. It's the last quarter that we have to get. They're marked with a star."

Harry was scrolling backwards through the alphabetic list. His thumb stopped of its own accord on Rothschild. "I want this assignment," Harry said.

Shacklebolt squinted at the name. "Take one off the log instead. We haven't starred his because he isn't dangerous without the assistance of magical devices."

"Neither is Merton," Harry retorted.

"Unlike Merton, we don't expect Rothschild to have access to anything in the near future. His family, when notified of his escape, expressed strong assurances that they would not assist him"

Harry lowered the long parchment and turned to the log, waiting for the pen to pause before flipping back to the oldest of the unchecked notices. Break-ins, threats, fights, and reported sightings filled the lines. After the first page, the pen had begun writing smaller, so Harry had to lean closer to read it.

The pen jabbed at Harry's hand to get him to let go of the pages. The book flipped forward and the quill began scratching out a disturbance on a Muggle road in London: Intercepted Muggle wireless report regarding strange fireworks erupting from the top of the Barbican Centre. Police are closing the roads and attempting to do crowd control... Harry read aloud as the pen scratched.

"Go on, the lot of you," Shacklebolt said.

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“Us too?” George asked eagerly.

With a wave of his bandaged arm, Shackbolt said sharply, “All of you. You know an Oblivate, right?” he asked, looking between the twins.

“Yeah,” Fred replied as though reluctant to.

“Good,” Shackbolt said, sitting back down with care. “You’re going to need it; Reversal is all tied up already but I’ll send them a message saying they are needed if anyone frees up.”

The four of them took up their brooms and Disapparated to the darkened Smithfield Market, which Harry and Kerry Ann were familiar with from field work. They strode to the doors with purpose, pausing only to dispense with the locks. Harry felt good, felt as though he were paying tribute to Tonks the only way he could... by putting everything out of the way and doing his job.

Out on the street, a car was burning as were the trees in the center of the roundabout. People were running in both directions but mostly away from the tallest building in the area, where lights and explosions were emanating. Harry grabbed one of the twins by the sleeve. “Approach on foot and Oblivate anyone who seems to have seen too much. Kerry Ann and I will fly up to the tower and take care of whoever is there.

When they arrived at the tower, they found not former prisoners of Azkaban, but instead drunken wizards taking advantage of the chaos to create more. Bound and with the more obnoxious of the two literally gagged, they Disapparated back to the market just before the Muggle police broke through the metal rooftop door. Harry watched over the prisoners while Kerry Ann went out into the mêlée to find the twins.

One of the wizards lying on the floor was laughing in an inebriated manner. “You really Harry Potter?”

Harry thought the man looked familiar but he couldn’t place him. He was probably an older brother of someone Harry had known at Hogwarts. “You really so stupid?” Harry returned rudely. He was in no mood for putting up with him. The wizard shut up and shifted on the floor as though to relieve the strain on his arms. Harry stared into the still darkness of the shuttered market. Squares of grey light came in the sparse windows, which also let in flashes of Muggle emergency lights. As time passed, Harry began thinking how very vulnerable the two prisoners at his feet were. He could do anything to them, and they would probably deserve it for making more trouble on top of the loads of it already happening.

Harry fingered his wand. He swallowed, feeling hungry for the feel of a Crucio, which he had never successfully cast in his life. Despite that, he could taste it in his mouth as though it were a familiar and expected reward. His mouth watered even and his heart rate picked up. It would feel good to torment these two, to make their

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screams join those of the passing sirens.

Harry shook himself. That wasn't him; it was someone else. But Harry was hurting badly enough that he had a hard time caring that these alien thoughts were so black. It would be nice to make someone else hurt as badly as he did. He used his toe to shove the closest wizard onto his back. The man looked as though he had passed out. Harry was just imagining an amusingly jolting wake-up for him when Kerry Ann and the twins reappeared with a bang! of the market doors hitting the inside wall.

The twins took charge of the prisoners; seemed very pleased to do so. Harry was grateful they did, he was shaking too badly to hold his wand without dropping it. He had been mere seconds from striking out with a Forbidden Curse.

Back at the Ministry, Harry desperately fought to get a hold of himself and just managed to by the time they dropped the prisoners in the dungeon. The regular cells for those awaiting trial were filled, so the cellars and even Courtroom Ten had been converted into holding areas.

Back on their floor, they dropped into chairs in the tea room when Arthur insisted that Harry clearly looked in need of some. Harry clutched his teacup before him, letting it burn his fingers and palms. The pain of the heat and his willingness to accept it did wonders for clearing his head. He breathed slowly in and out while the others recounted what had happened for the record. Harry listened to his own breathing more than the story. He was reliving that hungry moment in the market in his own mind with no little alarm. He could clearly remember yearning for the soul cutting feel of a Forbidden Curse, as though he had wanted the tendrils from the Dark Plane to come. Harry imagined that this might complete a circuit of power within him. He would be undefeatable, he considered, if he let the darkness have him as a conduit.

Commotion in the corridor cut their report short. Vineet, Aaron, and Rogan were returning from an assignment in a celebratory mood. "Five at once," Rogan announced, scooping up the list and slashing the names off with a flourish. He sobered quickly upon scanning the remaining list.

Aaron leaned against the wall, rubbing his neck as though he had pulled a muscle. Vineet stood quietly beside him, patient as always.

Mr. Weasley said, "Don't relax anyone; it's right back out with you." He looked over a note parchment and the logbook, back and forth. "Harry you and Aaron take this one. Vishnu, you are taking a break; you are not supposed to be out at all. You can help me field memos." He tore off a strip of the parchment and handed it to Aaron. "Tristan, you take my sons with you on this one..."

Harry collected Aaron with a glance, wishing he were with Vineet instead, whose

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presence in the past had seemed to anchor him. In the corridor, he stopped. “I need to ask Mr. Weasley something,” Harry told his fellow. Back inside the offices, Harry slowly approached, stalling. The others were departing on their mission, leaving Harry, Vineet, and Shackbolt along with Harry’s boss. “Can I speak to you, sir?”

Mr. Weasley appeared surprised to still find Harry there. “Sure, Harry what is it?”

Harry hesitated, but then asked, “What happened to Voldemort’s wand after the Final Battle?”

In the doorway, Aaron dropped his wand and quickly bent to pick it up. Mr. Weasley did not look up from the prisoner list. He said, “It was put in the safekeeping of the Department of Mysteries.”

“And is it still there?” Harry asked.

A long pause opened up, during which no one in the room moved and perhaps they did not even breathe. “No,” Mr. Weasley responded. “It apparently has gone missing.” He spoke as though this ground had been covered in some capacity already.

“Missing...” Harry confirmed, trying not to sound mocking. “Is anything else... missing?”

Mr. Weasley looked up finally, though only at the wall. “That’s a very good question, Harry. I think I’ll go ask.”

As Mr. Weasley stepped around him, Harry closed his eyes, trying to take in the facts that were lining up relentlessly around him. “He can’t be back,” Harry muttered.

“You would know, Harry,” Shackbolt said quietly.

Harry dropped his head and closed his eyes again. His thoughts lately were clearly not all his own and minutes before he had been ready to use a Crucio on a helpless person. “Then I think he’s back,” Harry whispered and jumped when Shackbolt’s uninjured hand banged flat against his desktop.

“Harry,” the Auror said sternly. “Why didn’t you say something? We would believe you.”

“I’m not certain, even now. But something IS wrong.” Harry was pleading, which made Shackbolt back down and drop whatever he was winding up to say next. “Go on with your assignment,” the Auror said tiredly.

The call was for the Leaky Cauldron itself. When they arrived, it was exceedingly quiet. Harry tugged Aaron aside and said, “Look, I have to warn you. I’m not quite myself.”

Aaron turned to him from glancing around the deserted pub, wand out. “And?”

Harry lowered his voice even farther. “I may be partially Voldemort right now.” Harry hated to say that, but not saying it felt even worse. He released Aaron’s sleeve

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which he hadn't realized he was clutching.

Aaron tugged his pastel purple silk sleeve down straight. "Thanks for the warning," he responded uncertainly.

"What I mean is... if you see me doing something that... well, maybe I shouldn't be, don't assume I know what's best," Harry managed.

"If you are assigning me as your moral compass," Aaron said, "you are really in trouble."

"I am really in trouble," Harry echoed, although he felt enormously relieved at having informed his fellow of the situation. They stared at each other while the strange stillness of the wizard pub grew increasingly oppressive. Harry confessed, "On the last assignment I nearly tortured the perpetrators before we brought them back."

"These the hooligans who were setting off spells over Smithfield?" When Harry nodded, Aaron said, "See, I might not see a problem with knocking them around a bit before bringing them in."

"Please, Aaron."

"Yeah, all right. I'll try to think like you and if you seem to not be thinking like you... well, I'll let you know."

"Thank you," Harry said sincerely, enormously relieved.

They both turned and faced the empty pub. Chairs had been overturned and one table as well. No one was around.

"So if you have Voldemort partly in your head and you think he's back, where is he right now?"

Harry hesitated. "I don't know." The sound of ale dripping from a pool of it on a table onto the floor marked the seconds before Harry added, "I don't want to believe he's back, so I haven't tried to figure that out."

"Works for me," Aaron quipped. He then sighed and glanced around, wand lowered. "What the devil was this call about?"

They searched the room and found no one before going upstairs to search the guest rooms. In the last room on the end they found a little old witch who hadn't wanted to leave. She seemed pleased to see them, repeatedly calling them "sweet young boys". She told them that some bad wizards and witches had come and had robbed everyone in the place before sending everyone off. Apparently no one had come back.

"Not as dire as expected," Harry said. Aaron took out a notepad and wrote down the descriptions the old woman gave. Even taking into account her poor eyesight, Harry didn't think it was any of the Death Eaters. While Aaron and the old witch chatted and Aaron, with surprising skill, worked additional clues from the woman's



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faltering memory, Harry closed his eyes and let himself drift. There were Death Eaters nearby all right. Not in the pub, but probably on Diagon Alley. A few scattered others were in the mid-field as though in the city. Most hovered at the periphery. Harry wondered exactly how many there were in total. There were too many in his head to count. Nineteen had survived the battle at Hogwarts, and two more had been arrested at Harry's house shortly thereafter. And then there were Jugson and Avery as well. But some number had been incarcerated from before; the ones who hadn't argued their way out after Voldemort's first apparent downfall.

Aaron was standing up. He patted Harry on the shoulder. "Almost time for breakfast," he said chummily. "I say we raid the kitchen downstairs."

Harry thought his fellow had been joking, but down in the main room Aaron slipped behind the bar and searched around in the charmed cold-boxes under the beer taps. He pulled out four hard-boiled eggs and salt and pepper and set this all up with a questionably clean plate as though it were his place.

Harry cracked an egg and began peeling it as his stomach rumbled. "How are we ever going to catch all of these blokes?" he asked.

"It's only been one night, Harry," Aaron pointed out. "Most of them are pretty dim, it seems."

"If they were really smart, they wouldn't have got caught at all." Harry bit into the egg after rubbing it in the salt sprinkled on the plate. The egg was cold and rubbery but tasty in his hungered state. "We were supposed to have our official ceremony to become second-years this week," he said, thinking how disruptive this all was. "But they seem willing to send us out anyway, which is good."

"They are treating Munz like a full Auror too," Aaron observed.

"Too bad he isn't here." Harry closed his eyes again to verify that the shadows had not moved. "There are a couple of Death Eaters on Diagon Alley; I can feel them."

Aaron dropped the egg he was peeling and looked behind him as though afraid he had been snuck up on. "Want to go get them when we are through here?" he asked sarcastically picking his egg up off the sticky bar and blowing on it.

"I think probably we should have a full Auror with us. We can come back with one." This statement went against Harry's basic instinct for action and he almost wondered if Voldemort weren't somehow influencing him to delay.

"Eat up, then," Aaron said, popping his second egg into his mouth after using a peeling spell on it. As he chewed he put everything away.

Harry pocketed his second egg and the two of them returned to the Ministry.



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Morning sun generously poured in the tall windows, warming the Hogwarts hospital wing. Snape stepped down to where Candide was sitting up, eating breakfast. Aware that he had not done well the night before, and acutely aware of what he needed to say, Snape took her fork away and held her hand before speaking. This did indeed get her attention.

“You are looking well,” he said.

“I’m feeling fine.”

He stroked the dry warmth of her hand. “You must go away from here. Somewhere remote and Muggle.” Snape jerked his head to the side. “Do not think of it now. Pick a different place,” he snapped. “I want you to go and you must not return until I send for you.”

She didn’t speak, just pushed her floating breakfast tray to the side a little roughly.

Snape said, “I cannot let this touch you. This is my past rearing up and I do not want it to involve you.” She started to speak, to say something that sounded like denial, but he cut her off. “Every last one of my living enemies is free right now. Most, if not all, will be seeking revenge, as you have discovered. I don’t intend to let them succeed. If you were untouched before, you can manage it again. You are good in the Muggle world. Go far from here, today, this morning, and disappear into it.”

She kept her head bowed and shook it lightly.

Snape went on in a confessional tone, “I can get through this if I know you are safe. Do this for me.” He stood without looking right at her. She frowned but didn’t argue or shake her head again. After a hesitation he bent and kissed her on the top of the head and then departed.

In the Great Hall, McGonagall was calming the students who had risen early and had gathered there. “It is as the Prefects told you this morning, we are facing a calamitous event in the Wizarding World.” She spied Snape and shook off the students to lead him behind the head table. “The Hogwarts Express has been moved up to Wednesday from Friday.”

“The students are safer here,” Snape argued.

“I know that, and you know that, but all the parents remember is that this is the place the Death Eaters attacked in mass numbers last time. They want their loved ones close where they can keep an eye on them, personally, even if that eye is not nearly as trained in Defense as the staff here at Hogwarts.”

Suze and some other fourth- and fifth-year Slytherins were hovering before the head table and when they caught the pair’s attention, one asked, “Professor, what about our O.W.L.s?”

McGonagall answered, “We have scheduled the written in place of some of your yearly examinations for tomorrow. The practical examinations will have to wait until

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a later time, or they will simply be waived if it is not possible to administer them.” Several of the students appeared gleeful about this, but the rest frowned. McGonagall said, “I will make a formal announcement during breakfast. Go to your table.”

The students moved off. The teachers stood, watching the Hall fill. McGonagall said, “I would keep them all here, like Ms. Weasley, for an extra month if I could. Protect them all... why not?”

Snape didn’t reply. He was thinking that he would even sooner than expected be free to assist in protecting Harry full time.

McGonagall put her hand on her chair back and leaned hard upon it. “Difficult to imagine all of Azkaban emptied.” She shook her head. “If ever there was a time I appreciated having you as a Deputy it is now.”

Dryly, Snape said, “I hope I can live up to that. I expect that I am quite an added risk.”

“Given how you organized things last night with the staff – the guard shifts, the extra trip alarms – despite your own distressing events, I believe you already have lived up to it.”

Snape watched a hex exchange between a Ravenclaw and a Gryffindor. Ginny Weasley was already moving to yank the back of the Gryffindor boy’s robes. “They were all very obvious things to do.”

“That is what makes you so valuable. These things are not so obvious to the rest of us.” She pulled her chair out and took a seat, prompting the students gathered in the hall to do the same. “Things were quiet last night. Let’s hope they remain that way until Wednesday morning.”



They were rushing when they reached the Auror’s office, but there was already more of a commotion than they had expected to cause when they asked for someone to return to Diagon Alley with them. As he stepped into the Auror’s offices Harry came face to face with a very wet, but clearly very alive, Tonks wrapped in three grey blankets and sipping from a steaming mug.

Harry breathed her name almost inaudibly.

Aaron pinched Harry on the arm. “Just checking that she’s real,” he said with a wink.

Mr. Weasley looked up from mixing something from a variety of potion bottles that were arrayed on Shackbolt’s desk. He stopped and traced Harry’s odd gaze to the occupant of the chair before him and cleared his throat. “Tonks here managed to find a door floating in the rough sea and fortunately the current pulled her close

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enough to shore for her to Apparate.” Tonks coughed as though accenting the story. Mr. Weasley went on, “We don’t think Whitley was as lucky.”

Tonks shook her head sadly, making water drip from her drooping Mohawk onto her nose. “I put a block up when I heard something shatter. I was airborne a long time before hitting water. It was a good thing we were in the guard tower and not the dungeon when everything exploded.”

“You should be at St. Mungo’s,” Harry said, stepping closer but not too close. He was trying not to give himself away, unaware that he already had. He took the seat beside her as she hacked roughly again.

Shacklebolt commented, “St. Mungo’s is a nightmare right now... utterly overwhelmed.”

“How about Madam Pomfrey at Hogwarts?” Harry suggested, desperately wanting her to get more help than was currently being provided.

“Harry, I’ll be all right,” Tonks said, shuffling her heavy wraps. “I just need another cup of tea.” She held her mug out with this statement, pointedly then out of the way of the potion Mr. Weasley tried to put in it. Shacklebolt moved to fill it from the teapot.

“Hey there,” Mr. Weasley said, “I can handle it.”

The sound of the log scratching something out drew Harry’s attention that way. He stepped over to give himself space to believe what was happening and to recover from feeling dizzy and so elated he couldn’t feel his feet properly. The log had nearly filled the pages it had been using, including overflowing along the margins in increasingly smaller printing. Tonks was speaking in answer to a question. “The prisoners were already gone as was half the prison. We’d gone up into the remaining tower so we could see the whole island to survey the damage.” She paused to cough for nearly half a minute. When she spoke again, her voice was scratchy and soft. “A few prisoners were on the edge of the far cliff. Some of the really old timers there wouldn’t have the sense to leave if a cruise ship pulled up and offered them froofy drinks with umbrellas in them.”

Harry returned slowly to standing before Tonks, wishing everyone in the room were absent except the two of them. He wanted to hold her with the same kind of yearning he had wanted to use a *Crucio* earlier.

She turned to gaze with angst at the log. “Bloody Merlin, Arthur, I have get out there and deal with some of those.” She tried to toss off the blankets, but everyone moved to hold her down. Harry didn’t move; he was feeling strange again, seeing everyone in the room in two starkly disparate ways as though desire were as dangerous as anger.

“So you didn’t see if their marks were really darkening?” Harry asked from inside

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his strange haze, unaware of how dreamy he sounded.

Tonks shook her head and sat through a drying charm on her hair administered by Fred. “They were gone already. We couldn’t even send a warning back. Everything at the prison had been disabled. What a time to lose two Aurors.” She hacked a few times and said into her hand, “I didn’t think we could ever lose Mad-Eye.”

Mr. Weasley said, “Kingsley tried to throw him a lifeline but missed and another big wave took him out of sight.”

“How did you get back?” Harry asked Shacklebolt.

“He had his own portkey and held onto it tightly,” Mr. Weasley explained with a meaningful glance at Tonks. “Usually portkeys deactivate when you arrive on the island and won’t bring you back unless reauthorized by two guards, but all the barriers were down by that time.”

“I can go out on a call,” Shacklebolt offered, straightening his spine as though to appear less injured.

Mr. Weasley glanced at the Auror’s bandaged arm, comparing it to Tonks’ bent head. “No, I’ll go out. You two manage things here. Harry...” He waved a hand before Harry’s face. “Harry? How did things go at the Cauldron?”

Aaron answered for them and handed over his notebook. Shacklebolt tore off the relevant pages and slid them into one of the folders stacked neatly on his desk. Aaron then added, “But, Harry... well... Harry sensed Death Eaters on Diagon Alley and we thought we should come back and get someone to help us out.”

The room turned to Harry, who found he was even more uncomfortable now with the notion that he had such a strong connection to Voldemort’s followers. Harry closed his eyes, rubbing the left one to remove the grit his long, sleepless night had deposited there. The two shadows were even closer this time. “They’re here at the Ministry now,” he announced, sore nerves jolted.

Mr. Weasley said, “Kingsley, go with them, I’ll send alarms to the other departments. Fetch Munz from the file room and message Rodgers and Blackpool who are out on a call.”

“They didn’t respond when we told them Tonks was back,” Shacklebolt pointed out, standing and tossing his cloak on one-handed. He then turned to Harry, “Lead the way, Champ,” he said. “Where are they?”

Harry tried to sense where the shadows were relative to himself. Down was all he could discern with certainty. “On one of the lower floors. I’m not sure exactly where.”

“After we scoop up these two, we should get a larger group together and take you hunting afield,” Shacklebolt suggested.

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“Sure,” Harry said, but he was looking at Mr. Weasley’s unusually grim expression, wondering why he appeared so.

Everyone headed to the corridor except for Tonks. Mr. Weasley said, “Blackpool, stay here and hold things down with Tonks, just in case they get this far. I don’t want her unprotected.”

“It’s all right,” Tonks countered forcefully and with only one cough. “I can take care of myself.” She grabbed up her wand to demonstrate and required a moment to notice that she was holding it backwards. She peered bleary-eyed at it before turning it around. Blackpool took up a guard’s position just inside the door, wand out.

Mr. Weasley nodded his approval and they took the stairs down several levels, until Harry indicated they should try one. The corridors of the Department of Magical Transportation were busy with witches and wizards dashing about. Mr. Weasley gestured for the group to split up, with half entering the first door to the Floo Network Authority. People stopped what they were doing and turned to stare as the Aurors came through between the desks. Harry hovered in the corridor and closed his eyes. They shadows were still further down. He opened his eyes and found himself staring at Percy Weasley, standing in the doorway of the next set of offices. Percy had a hard, stoic expression rather than his usual pinched and sour one. He stepped inside the doorway, out of view.

Harry called to Mr. Weasley, and pointed at the floor when his boss looked his way. The group was recalled with practiced ease and they went down another level. Magical Games and Sports was eerily quiet in contrast. Mr. Weasley explained, “They’ve all been pulled to help with guard and Reversal duty.” Harry closed his eyes right away this time and again, after some struggling, pointed down. They were getting closer.

A scream accompanied the door to the main floor opening. The group of them rushed forth, pausing only to pick a direction. Everyone standing near the lifts was frozen looking down the corridor the other way, so the group of them ran that way, into the offices and storage areas used by Reception. The sound of shattering furniture accompanied another scream and shouts of alarm. A sense of cursedness washed through Harry, bringing him to a halt just inside the first doorway. A corridor stretched out ahead of them leading left and right at the end of it. A witch ran by, holding her hat on. The wall exploded just behind her.

“It’s one of Merton’s weapons,” Harry said, ducking.

“Blasted,” Mr. Weasley said, but he restrained Harry from joining the group moving carefully forward. “Where are the Death Eaters now?” he asked Harry close to his ear.

“What?” Harry asked in surprise. “Oh.” He closed his eyes but with the sounds

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of shattering things it was hard to concentrate, or not concentrate as the case actually was. “I can’t...” Harry began.

Mr. Weasley said, “I’m worried this is a diversion. Fred! George! Come with me, now!” To Harry he said, “Hold things down here while I check the Minister’s office. There’s no reason to attack Reception.” He took off for the lifts; Fred and George behind him, checking in confusion over their shoulder.

Released, Harry pushed his way to the front beside Shacklebolt just as the device cleared the corner of the corridor. One could tell it had by the arc of the spell running along the wall in their direction, sending the paneling into the air in a long string of flying boards. Harry had a block ready and between his and the Auror’s they barely got jolted. Another shot, and then another lashed out at them, the firing rate picking up as though the thing sensed that there were good targets ahead of it.

“Think we can just burn it out making it shoot at us?” Shacklebolt asked, “... before it reaches the Atrium?”

They all backed up a step as the onslaught continued. The thing didn’t seem to be running low on spell energy. Shacklebolt said, “Aaron, go clear the Atrium. The alarm should have gone off by now, maybe it’s been disabled.” After Aaron dashed away, Shacklebolt said, “Munz, check that casualty.”

Harry risked a glance to the left into the office now directly beside them. Someone in pale blue robes was lying on the floor. “Dead,” Munz said. A second risky glance by Harry showed that the side wall of the office had been blown inward so forcefully that the debris was embedded in the wall opposite, leaving the floor mostly clear.

They took another step backwards and this time the next shot knocked them both onto their knees when another device came around the corner, joining its strike to the first’s. Shacklebolt shouted a warning, and Harry hoped it wasn’t for him to do anything other than pour additional power into his own block, because that was all he could handle. His arm vibrated violently as the attack went on. Just as it started to ease, a wall nearby shattered, sending wood paneling splinters in a shower against their combined blocks.

The dust settled slowly. Harry held up his wand with a quaky and leaden arm. Beside him, Shacklebolt was having trouble righting himself with his injured arm. Harry hauled him to his knees by his cloak and pulled them both backwards to gain a little space between them and the devices.

“Munz!” Shacklebolt shouted. There was no response. They both put another block up and the corridor wall where they had just been bubbled inward and disintegrated.

“There’s a third!” Harry shouted, estimating the angle of that shot to be impossible for the two they already knew about.

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During a moment's lull, Shacklebolt, on his knees with his bad arm tucked at his waist, shoved Harry with his shoulder. "See to Munz."

"You need me to help block..."

"Harry, that's an order," Shacklebolt growled fiercely.

Harry put up a block and used the most recent hole to slip into the office to their left. It and the ones surrounding it were now almost combined into one large debris-dangled space. The air felt oily and slippery despite the dust. The magical window behind the desk had gone dark, and the dimness and haze obscured Harry's vision. A shot went wide of Harry's block as he tossed thin paneling boards aside with his toe to reveal the black robed figure lying just shy of the pale blue ones. Harry crouched, putting up a block as his last one failed. Debris from the floor pummeled it as a shot skirted nearby.

"Harry?" Shacklebolt shouted in question.

"Doesn't look good," Harry replied, considering the still face before him with its just barely slitted eyes. A gash was open across Munz's chest, revealing bright red flesh and white edges of bone. Harry closed his eyes and felt for the radiance he knew must be leaking from him, thinking perhaps he could Staunch it. It was difficult to do while maintaining repeated blocks and with the sounds of further destruction echoing around him. But Harry caught the sense just long enough to feel the last of it leaking away and disappearing with a tiny pop. Harry swallowed and shifted his foot off of a board which was precariously lying across Munz's arm. Seconds ago Munz was just fine and now he was gone. Harry tried to accept that without much success.

"Potter, get back out here or you are going to get pinched!" Shacklebolt's voice sounded weary and much farther away.

"I can go through the other way!" Harry shouted and used his own blasting curse to knock a larger hole between the offices so he could exit close to the lifts and come around to where Shacklebolt and now Rodgers and Kerry Ann were holding up the entrance to the Reception area itself.

"Munz?" Rodgers demanded, sounding thoroughly angry.

Harry shook his head. Rodgers moved to the point position as the next attack wave shot out, shoving Shacklebolt backwards violently. "Get him to safety, Kalendula. Potter, stay with me."

Harry joined his block to Rodgers'. When a break came, Rodgers asked, "Any sign of them slowing?"

"Not sure," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley came up behind them just as they were forced to back up again. He ducked to be certain to be in their block. "Got one of the D.E.. They were attacking the Minister's office all right. Lucky guess, I figured it was either that or



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the dungeons. Fred had to go to Mungo's. How are we down here?"

"Lost Munz," Rodgers stated grimly.

Mr. Weasley's face fell into deep sadness, but at that moment a sound like a teapot shattering was accompanied by the appearance of orange ceramic littering the top of the wood debris.

"So, we can outlast them," Rodgers said. "Arthur, give Harry a break will you, looks like his arm is about to fall off. But STAY CLOSE, Potter. Don't want you getting picked off from the flank like Munz."

Harry bent low behind the two of them, rubbing his throbbing, rubbery arm, which he didn't imagine would ever feel normal again. The sense of cursedness had eased from just the one device disintegrating. "Fred all right?" he asked, badly needing to know.

"Yes, I think so," Mr. Weasley replied during the next lull. The devices had slowed their advance, making Harry hopeful that they could be held here until they were spent. "Said he'd go home and help the others guard the Burrow when he was released. Seemed eager to get out of here, which is fine with me." They blocked in silence a minute until Mr. Weasley added, "I think Bones offering to give them medals of valor sent them off, frankly."

Harry grinned through his sadness as though the force of his amusement was amplified by their bad circumstances. A second device shattered of its own accord.

"One left, I think," Rodgers commented. "I can see, Potter, why you tried a tar ball. Tempting as hell, but we don't want the Ministry to go the way of Azkaban."

"Is that what happened to Azkaban?" Harry asked in surprise.

"We think so," Mr. Weasley replied. "We don't know of anything else with enough power to destroy a whole island." He switched places with Harry and shook his arm out while Harry did the now-easy duty of joint blocking just one device attacking. It was trained straight on them and didn't even graze the wall anymore. "We figure they learned how effective they could be at blowing things up when that one took out the safehouse."

"So, I showed them that," Harry commented grimly.

"They'd have figured it out eventually," Mr. Weasley assured them. "It's not as though you were trying to aid in their researches."

The third device shattered. The three of them stood in its wake, listening for anything else. Listening to the debris settle. Someone moaned.

"Injured... somewhere," Mr. Weasley said, rushing forward. "Let's get everyone out."

Personnel from the other departments helped with clearing out so it only required an hour to fully search and hover out the bodies. Games, it turns out, had all kinds of

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spells for temporary structures, which were put to use propping up collapsing ceilings and walls. In the end they pulled out six bodies and three wounded.

Everyone had been cleared away and Harry sat across from the lifts as magical barrier tape was strung up to block off the offices. Unsafe - Alert -Cursed! - Mind the Tape was printed on it, endlessly repeating, in bright yellow on lime green. Harry rested his head back. He had been told to make sure no one went in while workers from Games strung the tape up. No one seemed to have any interest in going inside, so this was easy duty. But the tape needed to be strung thoroughly across all of the doorways and the holes in the walls facing the lifts, so it was going slowly, given the need to clear debris aside to make room to work.

A flash bulb went off and Harry blinked through the spots in his eyes to ponder the floating camera before him. He stood with more speed than he thought he was capable of given his state and took a swipe at the camera with a netting charm. The camera zipped out of reach before the charm reached it and Harry followed it around the corner to where the Daily Prophet photographer was reaching through the closed gates to catch it. The crowd gathered there stirred upon recognizing Harry.

“Mr. Potter!” Skeeter shouted from beside the photographer, who was hurriedly prising his camera through the bars and looked ready to run off.

Harry walked over, trying hard not to limp. He hadn’t even been aware that he needed to limp before walking this far. Given the expressions on everyone’s faces pressed to the bars, Harry figured himself to be a real sight. He rubbed his hair back to neaten it, only to find it was full of dust and bits of wood. His eye twitched a few times before he rubbed it.

Skeeter said, “Mr. Potter, just one question: Is He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named back?”

The gathered crowd gasped as one and a few people in the back, upon hearing this repeated in a wave of whispers, ran off. Their footsteps could be heard echoing as they headed for the back corner of the Atrium, which must still be open for Apparition.

Harry contemplated the bright purple polish on Skeeter’s nails, the sparkling hair clip holding her bun in place, her jangling bracelets. He wondered where she could find the time to put that all together given how insane everything was. Harry knew he shouldn’t say anything. Every face in the vicinity peered at him with a mixture of horror and fascination, hanging desperately on his answer.

Harry said, “If he were, it would be a moot point right now.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry caught sight of a grey cloak stepping up beside him. He turned. It wasn’t a cloak; it was Tonks, still wrapped in one of the Ministry-issue blankets, the ones with odd colors of scrap randomly woven through them.

## BATTLING CHAOS

“Ms. Tonks!” Skeeter said, even more excited and propping her notebook up through the gate so she could hold it more comfortably given how tightly the crowd behind her was now pressed in. Harry could easily take it away given that it was on his side of the bars. “Ms. Tonks, you were at Azkaban... do grace us with your story of what happened,” Skeeter invited, needing to find an angle where her jaw could also fit through the bars.

“It was destroyed,” Tonks stated as though speaking to an idiot.

“Yes, yes, but your harrowing tale of survival. My readers would so love to hear it. They are so desperate for news.”

Harry was thinking that he would so like to hear it too, but he tugged Tonks away. Skeeter’s last words were echoing ominously in his ears as they stepped up to the third lift in line – the first two’s cages were bent from the attack and wouldn’t move again until they were repaired. Behind them, the barrier taping had been completed and the other personnel were gone.

While the car moved upward, Harry asked, “Bones didn’t get hurt?” In his pocket he found the egg, undamaged. He knocked it on the gate to break it and started peeling it, famished at the thought of food.

“No. She’s pretty mean with a wand herself. Almost got the other attacker singlehandedly and would have if he or she hadn’t had a portkey.”

“What is it with the illicit portkeys?” Harry asked.

“Transportation is claiming that their detection equipment is apparently faulty.”

They stepped out at their level, Harry chewing. “Maybe it was sabotaged,” he suggested, thinking that he had a suspect in mind for that.

Mr. Weasley came around the corner. He gestured with a bandaged hand as he said, “Harry, you’ve been on duty for eighteen hours. Go take a break.”

“Eighteen? What time is it?”

“My boys said that Ms. Granger told them you could stay there when they dropped off your pet. Or you can go to the Burrow, but it isn’t exactly quiet there. I checked; Ms. Granger wisely lives in an unregistered magical flat, so you are probably safe there.”

Harry blinked. He couldn’t measure the worth of that logic right then, his mind outrightly refused to weigh it. “But, I should help hunt for Death Eaters...” Harry began.

“You should rest,” Mr. Weasley repeated kindly. “Only accidents and sloppiness happen in your state. Off with you.”

Harry turned to Tonks as though looking for support. This reminded him how very grateful he was that she was there. That warmth made it easier to give in. “Okay.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“You know not to Disapparate straight there, right?” Tonks asked. “That can be traced.”

Harry nodded, his head lolling with exhaustion as he did so. He Disapparated to an alley a half mile away and had a pleasant evening walk. Less pleasant for the Muggles along the way, who thought he must be some kind of dazed accident victim, but pleasant enough for Harry, so that by the time he arrived at Hermione’s door and survived her extreme hug, he felt queerly hopeful about everything.

She prepped the couch into a bed in short order, heated him a bowl of tinned pasta, which he gobbled quickly, and retreated to her bedroom so he could sleep in peace while she read.

Harry started to lie down but sat back up and padded across to where Kali’s cage hung from a chain in the corner. She was asleep in the bottom of it, huddled in rags that Hermione must have provided because they were colorful and fuzzy, unlike any Harry had. A patch of bare skin showed through on Kali’s haunch; she was losing significant fur now.

In the darkness of the room with the Muggle traffic audible outside the heavily curtained window, Harry whispered to her, “If Voldemort is back, I’ll get rid of him quick enough, I promise.”

Author’s Notes: Well, I keep thinking I’ll get back to weekly posting, but it hasn’t happened yet. We may be on this schedule for the rest of the story...

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



# SKIRMISHES

Harry woke at midnight and lay in his transfigured bed listening to the cars rumble by outside the window of Hermione's flat. Confusing flickers of dreams chased around in his head as he stared at a small light glowing in the kitchen above the stove. He lay still after waking, connecting together what he could of the dreams. Some of them contained flashes of horrified faces, faces which seemed to be terrified primarily by recognition. Closing his eyes, Harry tried to imagine where Voldemort – if he was indeed back – may be right now. But Harry was deeply reluctant to borrow that alternative perspective at that moment, when one of his best friends was sleeping unaware in the next room. And she was asleep; the slice of light that had showed from under her door earlier was now absent.

A faint scratching at the window drew Harry from his inward search for clues. He opened the sash and Franklin hopped inside with a letter clutched in one clawed foot. Harry took the envelope, which was addressed simply Harry, presumably for security in case it was intercepted, and switched on the lamp in the corner farthest from Hermione's bedroom to read it. The hand was neat and flourished more than usual, as though Snape had actually taken care in writing it out, even though it would be surprising if he had found the time to take such care.

*Dear Harry,*

*The front page of the Prophet this evening was both distressing and heartening. Distressing to see such rampant destruction, but heartening*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*to see that you are whole and mostly unharmed despite events that surely must have surrounded you.*

Harry remembered the hovered camera and glanced around for a copy of the evening edition. If Hermione had bought one, she had tossed it away already. Harry thought that he should try harder to keep track of what was getting printed.

*The students are taking their examinations at this moment – one day early. Tomorrow, the fifth- and seventh-years will be given abbreviated O.W.L. and N.E.W.T written exams. It is public knowledge, so it is possible for me to put it in an open letter to you: the Hogwarts Express is now scheduled for Wednesday. After we have deposited our charges with their families I intend to offer my assistance to Arthur in re-apprehending my former associates.*

Harry frowned and sat on the floor in the circle of light below the lamp to finish reading the letter as it was longer than expected. He instinctively did not want Snape helping. He much preferred him to remain out of harm's way, such as at Hogwarts. Harry ached just at the possibility of the revenge people like Malfoy and Avery would seek to exact upon him given the opportunity.

Harry would have to send a letter back that night to be certain of receiving a reply sometime the next day. Franklin sat, fluffed and resting on top of Kali's cage. The cage swung slowly back and forth on its chain, casting a domed, barred shadow along the wall. Snape's owl would probably prefer to rest then take a return trip so soon, but could probably be convinced to go right away.

*I expect that exhortations to be exceptionally careful are unnecessary at this juncture, but I feel obliged to make them in any event. Please, do be careful, Harry. As dearly as many wish revenge upon me, it is insignificant compared to what must certainly be wished upon you. Do not be over-confident and by all means do not take independent action without warrant as you have been wont to do in the past.*

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*I should perhaps temper the previous sentence by adding that you demonstrated judicious care Sunday last, to my great personal relief. You are learning, which is also a relief. There is an end to this, Harry, do keep it in sight, even as things appear their dimmest. Houses can be rebuilt and you and I seem to know how to build lives where little existed before, so we certainly can do so again.*

*I am sounding vaguely like Albus, I believe, so perhaps it is time to close this letter.*

Smiling faintly, Harry slowly folded the parchment. He didn't feel disappointed or angry with Snape right then. He felt worried, daunted by the tasks before him, a little alone, and very much himself. Pushing himself to his feet, he considered that forgiveness was not exactly one of Voldemort's strong points.

Harry really needed to return to the Ministry. He had rested for nearly six hours and felt remarkably alert and only moderately bruised, but he took the time to pen a letter back to his adoptive father.

*I am of course being careful, but I'll admit I'm not worried about myself, but instead about you. I am surrounded by Aurors most all of the time but you have only your fellow teachers to fall back on. They may be mean with a red ink pen and an annoying curse or two, but they are not Aurors. So, it is you who should be ultra-vigilant.*

*We captured a fair number of those who escaped already, so it is seeming more promising than it did a day ago. Even the house appeared more promising when I stopped by on the way to London. Repairable, like many things. But only after everything is safe again. I'll see that it is, I promise. I'm feeling more myself tonight and things are clearer. I think I may be getting the hang of these prophecies.*

Harry went to the window to let Franklin out with his reply and another owl hopped into the room clutching a hastily folded note addressed to Hermione. When Harry tried to take it, the owl nipped him. Harry knocked on her door. Moments

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

later, clad in a fuzzy peach dressing gown, Hermione stood in the doorway squinting up at Harry.

“Owl for you,” Harry said, gesturing at the bird circling the room.

Yawning, Hermione opened the letter. Before she read it, she glanced at Harry’s dressed state. “Going already?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty well rested, so I should go. We lost three Aurors,” he pointed out sadly.

She gave him a hug and then stepped back while rubbing one eye to read her missive. “They want me at the office as well. They’ve had someone break in and rummage for files.”

“Why would someone do that?” Harry asked while locating his cloak amongst the other things of his piled beside his trunk.

“Lots of files of evidence from old criminal cases,” she pointed out. “Well, we both are on duty, it seems.”

“Be careful,” Harry sternly told her.

“Whenever am I not?” she asked sleepily.

Harry started to answer but hesitated, thinking. “I’m sure there was a time. Let me think about that one.” She had gone back into her room and pushed the door partly closed while she dressed. Harry said, “Go to the Burrow if you are done at the office and I’m not back, okay?”

Sounding as though she was pulling a jumper over her head, she replied in a muffled voice, “Harry, really...”

“Hermione, I don’t want to be worrying about you, too.”

Dressed in attire so casual that it would have resulted in her demotion had she shown up that way during the day, she stepped out and said, “I’ll do it to make you feel better, all right?”

She sounded patronizing, but Harry replied sincerely, “Thank you.”

At the Ministry, things were no less busy than they had been when Harry left. The damage to the reception area was the same, except the dust had settled, leaving the gaping holes even blacker than before. The lift before him clanged to a stop and the door unlatched but the gate wouldn’t open without having serious muscle applied to it. Harry tugged it closed again and watched the damaged and debris-ridden area disappear as the lift rose through next floor up.



“Draco,” the unusually emotional voice repeated.



## SKIRMISHES

Draco Malfoy sat in the grand drawing room in the lone overstuffed chair, one that the Ministry had not bothered to take when they confiscated the household's possessions. He didn't look over at the speaker right away, preferring instead to stare at the candle burning on the small table beside him. He wanted to remain unmoved, but was failing. He had heard them enter – not stealthily and not in the way of an invasion, more the way one would if one owned a place. Draco hadn't budged from his seat; not when he heard his mother going into hostess mode; not even to try to better overhear the low murmured conversations. The Ministry had come poking around just hours before and Draco had assured them that he would curse anyone escaped from Azkaban if they had the gall to show up. Now that they had, he felt far more like getting blasted drunk than cursing anyone.

"You are home," Draco finally conceded.

"Better than that," his father breathed, sounding much more himself then, as though anticipating something wonderfully miserable for someone he disliked. "Come, Draco, you must see."

A run of prickles traversed Draco's breast bone, but he haughtily stood and strode over, doing his best to appear bored and dubious that any errand could be worth his time.

His father looked him up and down. "You've grown," he said, returning to his more emotional tone. "I have missed much. But not anymore. Come."

The hall held two large clusters of robed figures, congregating and whispering. Draco had certainly heard that everyone had escaped, but he had not quite realized how many that really meant. He hoped Pansy had the sense to stay in bed and out of the way. At the top of the marble staircase four more figures stood in a tight circle, heads leaned inward. They fell still as Lucius approached, leading his son. Without turning more than a micron, their hooded, group attention zeroed in on him.

"So, little Draco has decided to come out and play with dad's nice friends?" a voice taunted, the voice of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Draco considered snapping back something along the lines of pointing out that she would have more friends, and a husband, and a brother-in-law, if she hadn't killed them all. He remained silent, hoping he looked too stubborn to taunt further.

Lucius swept him past this group and to the last room on the end of the first floor corridor, which led to a keeping room – a long room that ran the length of the house, front to back. Many of the things in here had also been left behind by the Ministry, but they consisted mainly of aggressively posed animal trophies both magical and non- and paintings where the varnish had discolored to the point where the scenes were no longer decipherable.

A fire was burning unseasonably in the hearth at the far end of the room and

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someone with long pointed ears was bending over a chair before the fire. Greyback's presence didn't startle Draco, but he stutter-stepped when he spotted a large snake coiled up in the woven wood carrier, which appeared to have been lined with someone's very expensive cloak.

Draco had no difficulty remembering every single time he had bragged about and supported Voldemort's purpose, but at this moment, he wished for nothing more than to be elsewhere, to wake up from what surely must be a nightmare. Voldemort brought only chaos and difficulty. It was much better, he had decided, to simply sneer at those you thought little of and enjoy your wealth in some decent peace, rather than gamble everything on an idea the world would see fit to fight you on at every step until you had nothing left.

Lucius was pushing on Draco's back, leaving him no choice but to approach. A few feet shy of the arm of the chair, he was shoved to his knees.



"Ah, Harry," Mr. Weasley greeted him when he stepped into the Auror offices. Grief and strain had etched more lines into his face than normal and he had contracted the jitters while Harry had rested, indicating that he had been taking Pepper-Up, or something similar, to stay alert.

"Maybe you need to rest, Mr. Weasley," Harry suggested. At her desk, Tonks nodded vigorously without turning around.

Mr. Weasley ignored this, saying, "Minister wants to see you, Harry. Why don't you go on up?"

"At one in the morning?" Despite his surprise, Harry shrugged. "All right."

Harry used the staircase and emerged down the corridor from the lifts. A tall, balding man stood before the door to the Minister's office suite. Harry pegged him for a Muggle immediately. The man turned as Harry approached and gave Harry a close inspection.

"Mr. Potter," Bones greeted Harry. "Mr. Tivers, this is Harry Potter. Harry, Mr. Tivers works with the Muggle Prime Minister."

The man showed no interest in shaking hands, making Harry glad he had not offered to. Derisively, the man asked, "This is your 'hope', Madam Minister? The one chosen to eliminate the difficulties you are currently facing?"

"Prophecies are tricky things, Mr. Tivers," Bones said in a much less diplomatic tone. "You don't fully understand how magic plays out in events. Perhaps you cannot ever understand with your background."

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“I understand when I see an entire system of governance relying on a... mere boy, or young man if we wish to be generous.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. This close, he could detect the man’s Muggleness like a tasteless paste on his tongue. He tried not to wish him away in a permanent manner on the assumption that he would never have wished that in the past, no matter how rude the man was.

Bones stood her small frame straighter. “If you wish to assist, Mr. Tivers, in apprehending our law-breakers, by all means do so.”

Tivers’ lip pulled into a sneer. “We have lost quite a number of police already, Madam. You know quite well that we must rely on you to take care of things.”

“Then let us get back to it, shall we?” she asked lightly which only made it stronger. “Mr. Potter, this way.”

Harry glanced back before they stepped out of sight. The man, Tivers, was furious, which made his rough complexion all the more creased. He appeared to glance around for a chance to vent his anger. For just an instant, Harry caught a glimpse of faint tread-like tendrils reaching up towards the man.

Harry stopped and Bones turned to see why. Tivers’ gaze snapped suspiciously to Harry, who said, “I’ve handled worse, sir. With less help.” Harry truly wished to reassure the man, to calm his anger, which was running high enough to damage him, apparently. It worked, partly; the man shook his head in defeated disgust and stalked off.

The office suite was empty, so Bones sat down on the couch in the reception area of the office. She did this heavily as though bodily exhausted. “Give me a little faith, Harry, I am in need of some.”

Harry, who had been idly expecting a pep talk to be delivered at him, found himself trying to create one instead. The truth would not suffice; informing her that he had Voldemort in his head giving him a new perspective on things would not bring her any optimism. He tried instead to project calm confidence. He sat on the couch opposite and clasped his hands over his midsection. “I can find all of the Death Eaters, Minister,” he stated and then felt compelled to qualify that with, “I can sense them... where they are.”

“Arthur said that you gave the warning about the attack.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harry admitted, still calm, still in control.

With her elbow propped unceremoniously on the armrest beside her, she rubbed her eyes. “I thought I was inheriting a relatively easy job from Cornelius. Now I find myself appalled that I understand some of his poorest decisions.”

“I think Voldemort is back, ma’am,” Harry stated.

She closed her eyes a long, pained moment. “Arthur relayed that already, but it

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is still difficult to hear. It would be one thing if he were back and had NO followers available, rather than ALL of them.”

“You have no guards,” Harry pointed out, glancing at the open doorway with its burn marks from the recent battle that took place here.

“Can’t afford them, given the need for personnel outside. I’m half-hoping someone does show up again so I can take them out personally.” She had her wand in her hand in an eye-blink, pulled from her long, folded-over sleeve. She wore a nice, but outdated, robe today, rather than her usual polyester.

A knock sounded on the door frame, and a man Harry didn’t recognize bowed his head and stepped in. This man was a wizard, which Harry could tell even though he also wore an even fancier Muggle suit than the last visitor. His black hair was slicked back with something shiny and just the curls on the top front stood up, lending his otherwise dapper appearance a cartoonish edge.

“Excuse, me,” the man said in heavily accented English, “I am looking for zee Minister for Magic...”

“That’s me,” Bones said, pushing herself to her feet. Harry’s mind boggled at the lack of security.

“Ah, good,” the man said, relieved. “My name is Rémy Roumaine. I have been sent by my government in response to your communique of...” Here the man consulted a letter. “June zee fourteenth.” His eyes found Harry and he froze. “Is zat ‘Arry Potter?” The man stepped in, seeming to mince despite his grace. “Mister Potter, I am most ‘onored, most ‘onored.” He held out his hand. Harry stood and accepted it, thinking this man can’t be real, but sensing no ill will in him.

The man went on, “My daughter will be boiling with jealousy when I inform ‘er I have met you,” he said. He glanced back at the Minister. “Ah, but I am forgetting,” he said while hitting himself on the forehead. He rummaged in his fancy small pockets and pulled out a scroll, sealed with red wax. “My government, of course, offers its assist-anze. This is the official communique and documents.”

Bones’ expression changed, making Harry assume that she had figured out what this was all about. She said in clear relief, “Your help is most welcome.” She pulled a seal out of her breast pocket, fixed with a chain like a pocket watch might have. She whispered something to it and pressed it to the seal on the scroll. The wax flashed away and the parchment unravelled.

Harry wasn’t told to leave, so he stood quietly, curious. Bones read the missive. “How’s your French, Harry?” she asked, sounding serious.

“I don’t have any.”

“Pity.”

“I can trans-late,” the man eagerly said. Pointing at various places on the scroll, he

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said, "We are offering the use of L'île de Cachot Méfait until the time at which you can replace your own Az-ka-ban." He paused to give Harry a grin, which reminded Harry that people used to do that to him all of the time, but at some point had stopped, for the most part. The man went on, "It is oh-est of île Jersey, well protected and warded. Cachot Méfait is the rare Channel Island that belongs to us." Here the man winked as though this was a good joke.

Bones said, "Mr. Roumaine, come in and have a seat. You have my heartfelt gratitude, I must say. Harry has a few minutes, I believe, before he must return to his duties. She waved her wand and the teapot in the corner emptied and refilled itself and immediately began steaming.

Roumaine did seem most pleased to be seated across from Harry. "You must be quite bizzy, Mr. Potter, correct?"

"Yes," Harry admitted. He was thinking that now that he was invited to stay that he really should get going. "What is this île de...?" he asked, figuring he might as well ask.

"It is our wizard prison. It was constructed in 1789, so it is..." He waved his arm fancifully. "Ovair-sized."

Harry accepted a cup of tea and sipped it gratefully. He was not used to this kind of schedule and the tea reminded him that he was supposed be alert despite the position of the hands on the clock. "So you are going to let us use it for our prisoners?"

"That is the offer, yes. Thank you for the tea," he said to Madam Bones. "Ah, yes! But here are the portkeys. Just two. You can get more there if you fill in some papers-work." He handed over two golden bracelets, each with a charm in the shape of a fleur de lis.

Bones appeared quite relieved. This was much more of a pep talk than Harry could have managed. "Go and fetch Arthur, will you, Harry?"

She handed him the portkeys as he passed her. "And keep those safe."

Harry stopped and stared at the glittering jewelry in his hand. "Yes, ma'am," Harry said, calming his heart at the notion of such responsibility, especially given that the dark wizard who had probably released the last batch of prisoners had a tendency to knock around inside Harry's head. Harry exhaled hard when he reached the corridor and fairly ran down the stairs.

Mr. Weasley wasn't in his office. Harry found him in the tea room, talking to Shackbolt, Rodgers, and Kerry Ann, all of whom's postures were sagging. "Madam Bones needs to see you, Mr. Weasley. Said to keep these safe." Harry held out the charms.

Everyone stared at them in puzzlement. "May I ask what they are?" Mr. Weasley

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asked.

“Portkeys to the île de Cachot Médait,” Harry attempted, poorly.

Rodgers reacted strongest. “Really?”

“A representative from the French Ministry of Magic brought them.” At this, Harry stopped. He had left Madam Bones alone with a complete stranger. He really did need a longer break, it seemed, to get his better judgment back in working order.

Mr. Weasley departed quickly – leaving one portkey with Rodgers – which relieved Harry’s immediate worries.

Kerry Ann was grinning, peering at the charm Rodgers held up. “Ambrose came through. I asked if he knew anyone he could owl to expedite getting us help.”

Rodgers turned his sharp gaze on her. “So, we have you to thank for this, Ms. Kalendula?”

“I try.” She grinned more although it had a grim edge, and then frowned. “Rats, this means I owe Ambrose a bottle of Burgundy.”

“Has he gone back to France?” Harry asked, finding it an amazing luxury to bother wondering about such trifles.

“No, he’s helping keep an eye on the house. After what happened to you, he insisted.” She shook her head. “The guy is unreal. Too perfect.”

“I thought you liked him?” Harry chided.

“I’d like him better if I knew what was wrong with him.”

“How’s that?” Rodgers prompted as he tucked the chain into his pocket after securing it to his watch fob.

“Something must be wrong with him and until I know what it is... it’s going to make me crazy.”

Harry thought she looked forgivably cute as she said this, but Rodgers said, “Ms. Kalendula, you are reminding me why my first two marriages turned out so poorly.” While Kerry Ann frowned comically, he added, “Potter, you look ready for an assignment, let’s get you one.”

Harry and Rogan were assigned to hunt for Death Eaters in London. This involved Apparating somewhere and trying to sense if any were nearby. Only three seemed to be in the immediate locale. They picked one to narrow in on and Apparated repeatedly and walked back and forth along St. Leonard’s Road in an attempt to get a fix. In the end they narrowed the possibilities down to a few blocks, but Harry could not discern anything more specific.

“Sorry, sir,” Harry said as they stood on a boarded up corner with Rogan peering up at the dark windows of the nearest building.

“That’s all right, Potter.” Rogan said easily. He sounded tired as well, and reluctant to face anything serious.

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Harry used an Alohomora on the nearest street-level door and stepped inside. He was too frustrated to stand still. Inside was a quiet corridor and staircase. Harry closed his eyes and drifted. He was not in the right building.

“It helps when they are thinking about me,” Harry pointed out as he slipped back out past Rogan, who was leaning jauntily against the door jamb. “Then I see them much more clearly. They must have something else on their mind. Most all of them are farther away now.” This both relieved and worried Harry. He would prefer to know what they were up to. “How many of them are there out?” Harry asked. “I can’t quite count them.”

“Twenty-eight.”

Harry glanced up at the building. “If we pulled the files, we could find what address correlates nearby to one of them.”

“I suspect Arthur will send us out on a more urgent call instead. Let’s go; I need some excitement to wake up.”

They Disapparated back to the Ministry. Vineet was assigned the task of looking through the files and Harry was sent back out with Rogan to investigate an owl that had come from a witch complaining that her son-in-law, who was supposed to be in prison, thank you very much, was living in her cellar.

This turned out to be an easy call, with nasty language getting thrown at them rather than spells. The paperwork was dispensed with quickly, and in the Ministry dungeon it was quieter since prisoners were already being ferried to the French prison.

The door to courtroom ten swung closed and latched. Rogan rubbed his head and swayed a little.

“Maybe you should take a break,” Harry suggested.

“Good idea,” Rogan said. “I think Arthur set up some beds in the training room, in fact.”

Back in the empty Auror’s office, Harry watched the log being written out. It wasn’t writing quite as fast as before, but it still didn’t pause much. Mr. Weasley stepped in with his sons in tow. “Dad, come on, everything is fine at the Burrow. Bill and Charlie are keeping an eye on things,” one of the twins pleaded. Harry nodded hello to Ron, whom he was glad to see.

The other twin said, “Told you we should have made Ron stay home. Dad won’t let him go out.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Much excitement?” he asked Harry.

“Too much. It’s getting better though.”

Mr. Weasley handed Harry a slip of parchment. “This one’s yours.”

Harry looked down at the writing, which went: Neighbors report strange goings-on in Terrance residence, Appledown.

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“You’ve been there, correct?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“Yes,” Harry said, thinking of his date with Tara. Harry glanced at the three Weasley brothers arrayed around their father. “Can I take them?”

“Go ahead. No one will be freed up for a while. Do you want Vishnu as well?”

Harry was tempted, but said, “No, he’s still recovering and maybe he can find that Death Eater.”

As they assembled to depart, Mr. Weasley said, “I’ll send someone as backup as soon as possible.”

“I can take care of it, sir,” Harry said with confidence, thinking that he had waited a long time for a chance to get even again. His memory of Snape getting even for him, by giving the little git a poisonous bite to the leg, left a small grin on Harry’s face as they Apparated into Appledown. Harry brought Ron first before both of them went back for the other two, once Ron knew where to go.

Because of the noise they had to arrive a quarter mile away. The street lamps provided ample light for their walk, even with most of the houses dark. Thoughts of revenge were giving Harry that hungry feeling again. The twins started to cross the road, but Harry tugged on Ron’s arm to hold him on the pavement.

“They can scope it out; I need to talk to you.”

Ron turned his attention to Harry, and in the cone of light from the street lamp, Harry noticed for the first time ever that Ron needed a shave. It made his friend seem years older than he had just moments before.

Harry quickly said, “It’s like this: I have Voldemort in my head again.”

“Big surprise, you always did,” Ron pointed out jokingly.

“This is serious,” Harry said, not wanting to argue about this.

“I am being serious,” Ron retorted, still not really sounding it. “You were a hazard for years. Why do you think Dumbledore kept you in the dark all the time?”

Harry stared at Ron’s half-lit face, reexamining old, nearly extinct memories from an adult perspective. “This feels worse,” Harry said. “I want to torture people now. I want revenge. I’ve even been strategizing like him.”

“Maybe you’re more like him now,” Ron pointed out. “You were a kid before.”

Harry fell into stillness, thinking over Ron’s straightforward point of view. Only the leaves rustled overhead. The twins were waiting at the end of the block. They looked to be checking for wards. “I hadn’t thought of it that way,” Harry said. “I just don’t want to hurt anybody.”

“We’ll make sure you don’t, Harry,” Ron said reassuringly, taking Harry by the arm this time to steer him into the road.

Relieved to have people around who understood his situation with such ease, Harry led the way to where the twins stood, speaking in whispers. One of them had



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an extendable eyeball in, the eyeball end, he tossed repeatedly in his hand.

“Doesn’t that make you dizzy?” Ron asked in disbelief.

“Nope,” came the reply.

“Makes me dizzy watching you,” Ron complained. “Let’s go,” he said in disgust. “Oh, Harry should lead, since he can actually arrest people.”

“Can I?” Harry asked.

“Can’t you?” Ron asked in surprise. “Well, don’t tell the escapees that,” he said stridently. Behind them, the twins sniggered.

At the Terrance house, Harry called for a halt. The windows were all dark as were those of both neighbors.

“Should we knock on the neighbor’s door and ask for more information?” Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. He gestured for the eyeballed twin to circle around. “Good luck, George,” the other one said.

The three of them waited. Harry closed his eyes to check that no Death Eaters were close by.

“Wake up,” Ron nudged him.

“I am,” Harry insisted. He then blinked. The sky had grown lighter just as they were standing there. “Jeez, morning already.”

“Yup.”

Their scout returned, looking sober. “Back room, far corner.”

“How can you tell?” Ron asked.

“Unless the Terrances favor sharing a room and sleeping on the floor... seems something’s up.”

Anger filled Harry before he could get it in check. He gripped his wand tighter and considered the silent house. “Lay down some barriers so they can’t get away,” Harry ordered. The twins jumped to this task without hesitation. Ron remained beside Harry and handled anchoring the newly forming barrier to the pavement.

“You’re better at this than I am,” Harry said to him.

“We do these all of the time at the bank. I do them in my sleep and sometimes can’t leave my room in the morning.” Harry nearly broke out laughing. “Yeah,” Ron huffed in a whisper, “you would think that was funny.”

“Now what?” Ron asked when the twins returned.

“Go to the back,” Harry said to one of the twins. “Block anyone from leaving that way. I plan to send them running if I can,” he added with a certain satisfaction. “I’ll take the other two of you in with me. Fred, I want you to head down the main hallway to-”

“That’s me. You assigned me to the back,” Fred pointed out.

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Harry waved him off. "George: hallway. There is a servants' staircase to the left at the end."

"You've been here before, I take it?"

"Ex-girlfriend," Ron supplied.

"Oh," Fred said, "this is going to be fun."

"If I whistle I need a distraction in a hurry," Harry said.

"You've come to the right place," George said, patting his bulging left pocket with tender care. Fred ran off for the back of the house.

"Good. Ready?" Harry put his wand in his teeth and took each of their arms. He zeroed in hard on the sitting room as he remembered it, not wanting to have an Apparition accident given that he was taking two other people with him, which was not recommended. George and Ron tapped their wands against each other's as though for luck and Harry scrunched them all down.

They arrived with a very loud pop!, loud enough that the vase on the mantelpiece vibrated in the wake of it. At first there was no reaction and Harry hurriedly took the opportunity to direct Ron to crouch across the main corridor, in the dining room doorway. That way they could cover each other no matter who went first. Pounding footsteps vibrated overhead as they got themselves set. Whoever approached, he wasn't taking the invasion lightly. A ball of orange light rolled down the stairs, sizzling the runner until it met the front door where it exploded.

Harry could see Ron's wide eyes across the hall from him, could see him considering that perhaps he was in over his head. But he looked at Harry expectantly, waiting for instructions. Harry, keeping his body well behind the door frame, reached out with his wand in his left hand and cast a respectable blasting curse at the movement he detected at the top of the stairs.

"Oof!" someone muttered up above.

"Cover me," Harry ordered Ron, and fixating perhaps too much on the vision of Tara kept prisoner, made a headlong dash up the stairs. He got hit with something at the top and it was a good thing he had been low and fast, otherwise he would have blown backward all the way to the ground floor. Harry rolled into the nearest doorway. Spells were exchanged. Harry strained his trembling neck around and saw that Ron was lying flat on the stairs with just his wand hand lying on the landing and his head peaking over the top riser.

Everything fell quiet. Ron lifted his head higher with care. Harry twisted painfully and put his wand in a position to cover him. A figure lay in the corridor.

"Kenny, you moron," someone hissed from the a few doorways down. A head appeared and both Ron and Harry hit it simultaneously, knocking the person into the far side of the door frame where he fell to the floor.

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A woman's voice could be heard then. "I've got a wand on them. Unless you want them fried I suggest you leave nice and quiet like."

Harry's eyes narrowed and he pushed himself to his knees on tingling arms. "How many are there?" Ron whispered in annoyance. Harry shook his head.

"You hear me?" the voice, quivering with anger demanded.

"Rick?" Harry shouted, figuring him to not be doing the dirty work if he could help it.

"Potter," a low, fierce voice came back. "The man who sent me to Azkaban," he said in a kind of chant. He sounded much changed.

Harry stood up in the center of the corridor holding his wand before him. "Hoping to get even?" Harry asked. The tingling pain from getting hit was making Harry's mind swim, he felt like someone else. "Wouldn't you like revenge?" he asked with an almost sensual tone.

"Harry?" Ron whispered in concern from where he kneeled on the staircase.

Harry ignored his friend. "Come on, Ricky Rothy. I'm waiting for you. Just standing here," he taunted. "You'll regret not taking revenge," he added in a low tone. The dark corridor, which was indeed long, seemed to stretch forever ahead of Harry. Somewhere ahead of him a rival was going to appear; Harry willed it to be so. He had a Crucio ready; it made his fingers tingle in anticipation where they touched the warm wood of his wand. Below him, whiplike tendrils were seeking him like blind tentacles. An instant from now, Harry would be invincible. Nothing would be able to touch him.

A figure stepped out of the doorway two rooms down. Harry raised his wand. A sharp whistle sounded. What happened after that was a little difficult for Harry to follow because he was knocked down bodily from behind and the corridor lit up with streamers and colorful flashing lights as though they had suddenly Apparated into the center of a very crazy nightclub.

Harry raised his head. Ron had his foot on him, holding him down. Harry shoved it aside and sat up. The corridor was now decorated for a party, by someone with very garish taste. A row of sparkling mirror balls spun just below the corridor ceiling. Ron stood in the doorway, glancing into the corridor with care.

"Got 'im," one of the twins said. "Tried to Apparate away, poor devil." Despite his words, the Weasley brother did not sound the least sympathetic.

"What about the woman in the room?" Harry asked, voice hoarse. He tried to step by Ron, but Ron grabbed his cloak.

"Try anything serious and I'm taking that wand away from you," Ron snapped.

Harry stared at him in surprise. Lit only by the street light leaking in from the window, Ron appeared twice his age with the stern expression he had.

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The other twin bounded up the servant's staircase. One of them said, "Someone appears to have knocked the old witch over the head with a spittoon."

Harry turned away from Ron and, holding his wand pointed at the floor, approached the bedroom. One of the twins was helping Tara to her feet, even though she didn't look quite ready to stand. Her mother insisted on taking the chair before the dresser. Mr. Terrance, curled on the floor, wasn't moving.

"Dad... check my dad," Tara said in great distress.

Harry stood in the doorway, feeling disconnected and fearful that he might start reconnecting with things the wrong way again. Someone lit an oil lamp and they all blinked at the brightness. The Weasleys were helping Mr. Terrance sit up. He had a deep cut over his eye.

"Take him to the Muggle casualty," one of the twins was saying. "Mungo's is overloaded."

Mr. Terrance nodded and Mrs. Terrance shakily went to fetch her handbag.

"Harry?" Tara prompted after her dad waved her off. She stood up and came over to him. "You all right?" she asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, shaken out of his strange state by the twisted nature of her asking that of him. "Just had a long night, but you must have too. Your neighbors reported something."

"The Muggle police came to the door but Rick and his companion escapees threatened us if we made any noise. That's when dad got hit over the head, in fact."

Harry looked her over. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, they just wanted a place to hide out. Rick was obnoxious to us all, but really not any more than normal." She looked herself over as though checking her outfit. "I should drive dad; I think Mum's in too much of a state. Not like I'm not..." She tossed her hands a bit girlishly and, with a stained frown, departed. Harry watched her step downstairs.

"Don't Apparate until we've removed the barriers," Ron said to Mr. Terrance. "Better go tell the others," he said in alarm and rushed downstairs as well.

Harry himself should have thought of that. Perhaps he wasn't fit to be out here. Perhaps he should be in the file room with Vineet.

Harry joined Ron by the door where he watched Tara pulling the car around to the front of the house. "How did you know?" Harry asked his friend. He felt sick and trembling remembering that moment.

Ron turned to him after checking up and down the street. "Your voice sounded really odd, Harry. You didn't sound at all like yourself."

"I wasn't," Harry whispered. Tara left the car running and got out of it, moving jerkily as though intensely nervous. Inside the house, the twins were hovering Mr.

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Terrance down the stairs. They paused at the open door.

“Clear?” one of the twins asked. Ron nodded and they sailed the casualty out.

When the others were well away, Harry said, “I have to kill Voldemort soon, before I lose myself to him.”

“Killing him quick would make everyone happy, Harry. We can throw another big party,” he promised.

“Be serious, Ron.”

“I can’t be for long,” he pointed out as he pulled the front door closed behind them. “I’m a Weasley.”

Back inside the house, the streamers lining the first floor corridor like crazed spider-webs rustled in the breeze of the spinning mirror balls.



Breakfast at Malfoy Manor was a sparse affair as the larder had already been well-raided. MacNair was arguing with Lucius over just that and whether it was safe to send one of the house-elves for supplies.

“Iony is my most loyal elf,” Lucius insisted angrily. “She will be no problem.”

“I can go with her... if you like,” Draco suggested, tossing down his stale slice of hard bread that even the mice had not bothered to eat. He tried to sound annoyed and as though it was troublesome to even offer.

“No,” his father said slowly. “You will stay here. The elf can go.” He turned to his wife. “Narcissa, order Iony to visit no fewer than six different shops to collect what we need in small quantities. No sense bringing on suspicions unnecessarily.”

Draco sat back with his arms crossed. Pansy had argued but agreed to stay in their bedroom and Draco himself had laid down a barrier on the room’s door. Even he couldn’t get back in without Pansy releasing the spell.

MacNair stalked off. Lucius took the chair beside Draco’s with exceptional slowness as though he wished to avoid disturbing a poisonous snake on the seat of it.

“I wish to speak with you, Draco, but it is difficult to be alone with such a crowd at the manor. Lord knows great-grandfather believed he had built this place large enough for any party...” He stared at his nails and then interlocked his hands with great care. Sternly, he said, “The issue is this: I wish for you to express your loyalty more strongly with our Lord.”

“With that... thing?” Draco uttered.

His father’s head tilted and a more dangerous look entered his eyes. “That... is the Dark Lord, my master, that you are... degrading so thoughtlessly, Draco. He has

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asked about you this morning and I want you to speak to him. Remind him of things, shall we say, such as his previous intention to give you a mark.”

Draco resisted letting his arms twitch as though to avoid having them shackled; he didn't want to reveal that much to his father.

“I bet he doesn't remember,” Draco said.

“He will if you remind him,” Lucius stated, sounding confident and therefore much less angry. “He had simply been waiting for you to deserve it.”

“I mean,” Draco stated with clear enunciation, “I doubt he remembers how to give anyone a mark.”

This one got through to his father at the level he had hoped the previous insult would. His father appeared wary. Lucius pursed his lips and glanced at the high double doors to the dining room as though hearing someone approach. In a lower voice he said, “We have been offered a third chance to recover our past glory and to return wizardom to its rightful place in people's minds: one of fear.” He clenched his hand into a fist and held it up before himself.

“I'm all for that, father,” Draco said with a tired attitude. He needed to distract his father. “But you need a leader. What you have is a figurehead... at best.”

Lucius sat straight. His jaw worked a moment. “A very wise observation, son.” His jaw worked some more and he stared off through the nearest wall. “Very wise,” he whispered, eyes narrowing, lips curling.



Back at the Ministry, an owl had delivered a letter from Snape. Harry sat down with a tart and coffee in the tearoom to read it. As he unsealed the envelope, he wished his guardian was there beside him right then, wished it dearly. Harry needed someone to keep a much more suspicious eye on him. Ron had been sent away to the Burrow again, despite his loud protestations and Harry's assurances that he had performed just fine. Something about the burn holes in Ron's cloak and his singed hair had changed Mr. Weasley's mind about letting him assist at the Ministry.

“Keep an eye on Harry, then,” Ron had said sharply to his father.

Mr. Weasley had looked Harry's untouched self over and said, “We always do, Ron.”

“No, I mean really keep an eye on him,” Ron had insisted before departing. He gave Harry a last meaningful glare before departing, shoulders slumped. He had left it up to Harry to better explain things to Mr. Weasley, which Harry was reluctant to do; he was tired of explaining. He wanted Snape nearby, who didn't need to have anything explained to him.

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*Dear Harry,*

*Things have been quiet here, which leads me to believe one of two things: either they are planning more carefully than expected, or they have bigger plans that require more organization – plans that are bigger than merely attacking this school. I am tempted to believe the latter, but we are prepared here for anything, certainly well enough prepared for only one more night.*

*The students are eager to return home where they assume they will not be prisoners. A strict curfew does seem to have a disproportionate effect on their little states of mind.*

*Your previous message was more optimistic than expected. I do hope your control is truly as good as you have implied.*

Harry thought over his previous message; it seemed ages since he had sent it, rather than simply late the previous night. Harry took up a pen, dipped it, and poised it over the parchment before him. He didn't want to overly concern Snape. Tomorrow evening when the Hogwarts Express arrived, Harry could tell him what he needed to know. As badly as Harry wished for him to be here, he did not want to risk drawing him away from his Hogwarts duties.

People here are looking out for me in many ways, Harry wrote as a roundabout way of explaining. Do not concern yourself with me right now. I'll see you soon enough.

Harry sealed the letter, feeling as though he had forgiven Snape more than he realized before, but he was fearful of examining that too closely lest he trigger one of his states if that horrid sense of disloyalty took hold of him. Forcing himself to feel nothing, Harry posted his letter with one of the department owls and stepped into the Auror's office.

Shacklebolt was perusing the list of escapees. Harry read the list over his shoulder. It contained rather a large number of cross-outs, narrowing the remaining names, which highlighted the fact that they had been far less successful at finding the Death Eaters.

"Did anyone check Malfoy Manor?" Harry asked.

"Last night. Did so myself. Deadly quiet. Just Malfoy Jr. in all his sneering glory and his little mum and wife. Even let me speak to the house-elves alone."

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“Hm,” Harry said, thinking that had seemed a likely place for the Death Eaters to congregate.

“Go wake Rogan and take this call,” Shackbolt said, jotting down the information and handing it to Harry.

Harry spent the day helping with easy assignments until a message came in that Vineet had uncovered the address of one of the Death Eater’s cousins in the area of Poplar where Harry had sensed a shadow earlier. Out on the pavement before the address – two buildings away from where they had given up searching the last time – Rogan yawned, rubbed his eyes and said, “Go on in, Potter. I’ll watch the door.”

Harry stared at the Auror. “Are you sure, sir?”

“I apparently didn’t get enough of a nap,” Rogan said with a little laugh. “You’re better off without me as a drag. Go on. It’s just Treddleson, an old-timer. Shouldn’t give you much trouble. Isn’t even hanging around with the others.”

Harry considered that and shrugged. “I’ll be right back, then,” he said, not certain how to argue with the Auror assigned to order him around. Rogan had always given Harry rather more leeway than the others, and the man clearly was worn thin.

Harry stepped inside. The electric lights were out – were missing their bulbs, in fact. A rat scurried away down the unfurnished corridor that led to the stairs. After he checked that the shadow in his mind was indeed very close, Harry concentrated on keeping control of himself. He absolutely could not lose control with no one here to bail him out.

Silencing the stairs before him, Harry made it to the second floor where the address indicated flat 13. Harry rolled his eyes at that as he pondered the door. There wasn’t any sound. There were procedures for these sorts of things, and Harry thought he should probably use them. Stretching his neck, he took up a position to the right of the door and holding his wand over his shoulder, fired an unlocking charm followed by a blasting curse. The door swung open and smacked against the wall. Nothing moved after that. No sound of Apparition came, either. Harry had been pondering using the spell Snape had written down for him, should he need it. He hadn’t been keen on using it, given its properties, especially not to track someone so minor.

Long seconds passed. Harry put up a block and slipped around the door, wand held before him. He put his back to the wall where it would support his block. A large man in a tattered and stained vest stood on the far side of the room with his beefy hands on his hips.

“Right mess ya’ made. Coulda knocked.”

Harry risked a long blink to look around for shadows. The man before him didn’t seem to be what he saw in his head. “Where is he?”

The cousin nodded his head behind him. “Not much left of ‘im, ya know.”



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Harry pushed away from the wall. "I'm sure," he said, thinking about Sirius' state when he had escaped. Harry stepped around the man while keeping his wand aimed at him.

"He'll be honored it's you's come pick 'im up."

"Right," Harry added, checking the first room, which was empty, pretty much of everything, including furniture. In the only other room sat a late middle-aged man who appeared to be repairing a split wand by winding sewing thread tightly around it. He didn't look up when Harry appeared in the doorway.

"Let's go," Harry said.

"Didn'a think anyone'd bother with me... for a while at lees." He held up his wand and Harry stiffened, considering spells. But Treddleson quickly dropped the wand, saying, "It'll prolly jus' blow up on me." With a groan he pushed to his feet. He was a large man like his cousin, although his heavy flesh hung loosely around him as though he had been deflated.

" 'Arry Potter hisself; look a' that," he marveled while looking Harry up and down.

"Let's go," Harry repeated, gesturing at the door with his free hand.

"Don' even wanna see my mark? Be certain ya' got yerself the right man?"

"No, I'm certain," Harry said confidently – too confidently, since it allowed that other self to leach in. He knew it had begun to invade, given the sense of absolute power he began to feel on top of ordinary confidence.

Treddleson turned and considered Harry. "You know too much. Jus' like that snake o' his, I'll wager."

Some more rational part of Harry's mind shook the alien part loose upon hearing that.

"Never cared for that beast," Treddleson muttered as he lumbered out the door ahead of Harry. "Gave me the willies the way 'e knew e'rything she did. They way 'e guarded her, like 'e guarded that broken watch. Both of 'em a chain around 'is neck. Where ya' takin' me anyway?"

"You'll see," Harry said, thinking of Kali, thinking of the Borgin & Burkes vault, thinking of too many things all at once so that by the time Rogan took charge of the prisoner, Harry was very grateful the man hadn't taken advantage of his distracted state.

Back at the Ministry, Harry jotted out a report as a means of obtaining a brief respite from duty. He found that official phrasing could hide and consolidate rather a lot of facts. Potential phrases were floating ready in his head from the hundreds of old files he had read last week. Suspect found at address of blood relative. No magical boundaries were encountered. Suspect offered little to no resistance to arrest.

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Harry filled in the rest of the form quickly and pushed it aside. His eyes were heavy and his stomach empty. He rested his head on his arm for just a moment to gather enough strength to check the tearoom for a snack.

Someone shook Harry by the shoulder, waking him. “Go take a break, Potter.” Shacklebolt said. “There’s an open bed in the training room.”

Harry stood shakily and nodded. Shacklebolt sat down in his place. That was another reason he wanted Harry off: Harry had borrowed his desk. In the training room, he was surprised to find Rogan asleep in one of the other beds, but he disregarded it and crawled into the farthest bed from the door and promptly dropped off.

A fire crackled despite the warmth of the room. Harry looked around in confusion, trying to remember where he was. He felt as though he had repeatedly needed to do this, to his extreme annoyance. In a basket near his feet, sitting half across the hearthstone, Nagini lay, tightly coiled. This sight gave him immense relief. He tapped into her alert and straightforward mind to anchor himself. His followers were nearby, he sensed. This too put his mind at ease.

This confused Harry, who did not think that the presence of twenty-odd Death Eaters should be any kind of reassurance. Dizziness washed through him. A dual vision of seeing a low view of the fire, presumably out of Nagini’s eyes and seeing Nagini on the floor below him, made him feel sick. He wanted to let go of either or both visions, but he was fettered to them and, like a snared bird, fluttered madly and helplessly in his mind to get away.

Someone leaned close. Someone else snarled in a victorious tone. Harry twisted violently; he was being shaken by the shoulder and again suffered dual distressing visions. “Greyback?” Harry uttered, trying to cope with seeing the half-transformed werewolf so close that Harry could count each of his crooked and broken canine whiskers.

“No, just Kingsley,” Shacklebolt said, further warping Harry’s reality. The Auror turned his head and said to someone else, “Tristan, fetch Arthur.” He turned back to Harry and shook him again as Harry continued to writhe, trying to free himself.

“Let me go,” Harry pleaded, brushing away at the air.

“Harry, it’s Kingsley,” the Auror insisted. Moments later another figure sat on the bed. “Thinks I’m Greyback. Bad nightmare, but it isn’t letting him go.”

Mr. Weasley leaned close. “Harry?” he queried in concern, brushing Harry’s damp fringe back. This gesture did more for Harry than any struggle could and his viewpoint shrunk to his own with a glimmer of a second. “What’s happening to you?” Mr. Weasley asked.

“I’m seeing out of his eyes,” Harry explained, falling lax since physical struggle was

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only fatiguing him. "Let me go, damn you," Harry growled, angry enough his eyes began to water. Anger was a mistake: Greyback came sharply back into focus. Harry could hear him speaking: "Master, would you like some dinner or some brandy?" he asked, sounding as though he may force the second upon him. The scent of stew rose up and Harry's stomach growled. Oddly, his hunger seemed to be what prompted the hand that wasn't his own to reach out for the bowl.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley prompted, sounding stern and a bit frantic. "What would Severus be doing right now?"

Harry concentrated hard to get beyond the vision crowding his mind so that he could dredge up the answer to that. "He'd tell me to Occlude my mind."

Mr. Weasley grabbed Harry's shoulders with renewed ferocity. "Harry, Occlude your mind," he ordered. "Now."

"Is'n so easy," Harry slurred. He was losing strength; Nagini's view of the world was overlaying his vision again. But Snape's sharp voice came back to him, almost as though he were right there: You know how, Potter. "True," Harry murmured. "You taught me."

Thinking about Snape's many lessons, feeling the swirl of confusing and conflicting emotions his adoptive father generated in him, brought Harry back wholly to the Ministry. He sat up and bent halfway over. No one moved.

"All right, there, Harry?" Mr. Weasley tentatively asked. When Harry nodded, Shacklebolt said, "You were seeing out of Voldemort's eyes? Where was he?"

Harry thought back to the vision, carefully though, not wishing to truly return. "Small room. Dark. Ugly. Dark paintings on the walls." He shook his head. "I don't know where he was. Greyback was there and Nagini, that's all I know."

Mr. Weasley stood and gestured at Shacklebolt, but Harry didn't catch it. Harry swung his feet to the floor but remained on the bed, waiting for his strength to return. Shacklebolt said, "Just rest a minute, Harry. Bad nightmare or whatever, you don't need to get up right away."

Harry nodded. Presently, Mr. Weasley returned, carrying Harry's cloak. He gestured for Harry to stand and with little will of his own, Harry did so. His cloak was hooked around his neck. "To the Burrow with you, Harry. Kingsley, you take him. Perhaps collect Ms. Granger to help keep an eye on him."

Harry looked between the two of them, feeling wounded. "I just need a little rest..." he began to argue.

"You are being relieved of duty, Harry," Mr. Weasley said gently. When Harry's face fell, he added, "You were correct that Nagini is missing, so this was not just a nightmare. We cannot have you around where He-Who-Shall... Voldemort, may overhear something, or worse yet, make you do something regrettable."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"I'm fine. I just lost control while I was sleeping," Harry argued. His gaze caught Rogan's alarmed one from where he sat on the far bed, wand out. Shackbolt and Mr. Weasley shared a look that made Harry wonder if they were suspecting even worse of him. "All right," Harry conceded. "You'll get Hermione?" Harry confirmed, finding hope in that notion.

"Yes," Shackbolt assured him.

"I'm fine, really," Harry said again. Indeed, he was feeling very much himself now. He felt his wand in his pocket and just for a show of his state of mind, held it out, handle-first, to Shackbolt.

"I don't need it, Harry. You can keep it." He took Harry's wrist after putting a sticky charm on his hand as though he were a suspect, and a moment later they were in the field behind the Burrow.

Low cloud cover filtered the late evening light, making the way hard to discern. As they picked their way through the uneven tufts of long dead grass from the previous autumn, figures approached and demanded they identify themselves.

"It's Kingsley and Harry."

One figure of three approached closer, a Lumos making his wand glow. It was Bill. "Sure enough. You all right, Harry?"

"He needs some rest and little watching over. Arthur sent him here."

Bill's attitude grew very gracious. "'Course. Come along."

Harry was installed in Ron's bedroom in a second bed moved in just for him. Neville, who had been sitting at the kitchen table with Mrs. Weasley and his grandmother, joined the parade escorting Harry, all of whom put the rickety staircase to its worst test in years.

Harry wished for nothing more than to be left alone. He sat down on the bed and tried to think of poignant emotional things that would keep Voldemort at bay. Ron shooed everyone out except Shackbolt, who said, "He's having too much difficulty with a certain Dark Wizard. I'm going to fetch Ms. Granger to help keep an eye on him."

"Ah," Ron said, rather non-committally.

Harry said, "I want her here."

Ron capitulated quickly. "'Course, Harry. Sorry. What about Professor Snape?"

"He's helping escort the Hogwarts Express tomorrow," Harry said, by way of dissuading them from considering him. He wanted him near so badly that he felt an aversion to his actual presence. One part of Harry couldn't bear to disappoint him. Another still felt the sting of the truth of his betrayal. Yet another was scared to death that he may get angry at Snape for some reason and channel Voldemort's expected fury at him.

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“I’ll see if I can get Transportation to give me a portkey to fetch him,” Shackbolt said, and Harry felt distinct relief that the decision had been taken away from him. “Get a little rest, Harry. I think that will help you more than anything.”

Harry lay back and watched Ron take out a set of pyjamas, which he set down across Harry’s shin, saying, “Guess I should feel better now that they won’t let you help either.”

“You are helping, Ron. Keep me together long enough to finish this damn prophecy off, please.”

Ron frowned and his brow furrowed severely. “Get into those and get some sleep, Harry. It’s nine already. When’s the last time you slept?”

“Midnight. I woke up at midnight.” Harry sat up and began shucking his clothing in exchange for the worn and exceedingly soft sleepwear of Ron’s. They were tight around the hips and shoulders but not excessively long in the arms and legs as Harry had expected. Dressed, he dropped sideways onto the pillow with a huff. “I can’t take care of the prophecy from the Burrow,” he complained, setting his glasses on the corner of the desk. “Your dad said he’d give me the leeway I needed to do so. Looks like he’s changed his mind.”

“Go to sleep, Harry,” Ron said flatly from where he had taken a seat at his small desk.

Author’s Notes: Too much prepping for 2 months of summer travel... couldn’t quite get this in under the wire.

## CHAPTER THIRTY



# DARK HOSTAGE

Harry didn't sleep; he didn't dare to do so. He closed his eyes and pretended to until a knock came on the door to Ron's room. Hermione entered and Harry sat up during the whispering, which halted when they noticed he was awake.

"Harry, how are you?" Hermione asked with great feeling. "I told Kingsley Shacklebolt that you have been fine the last few days, and that I would know if you were truly in that much difficulty."

"Thanks," Harry said, grateful for her support. He slipped on his glasses and looked her frazzled self over while thinking that he probably appeared similarly.

She sat on the edge of the bed. "So you had this dream...?" she prompted in that way of hers.

"It wasn't a dream; I don't think," Harry said. "I have been getting glimpses of what Voldemort has been doing, but I wasn't certain that it was him until now, but it's been going on for a while." Harry told her about his dreams of the Dursley fire and the Borgin & Burkes vault. She sat with her brow low, mind working furiously. "Oh, and there was this thing Draco said that I didn't pay much attention to until this comment of Treddleson's."

"Who's that?" Ron asked. He had turned his desk chair around to sit in it backwards and was resting his chin on the chair back. He had to lift his head to talk, but set it back down immediately.

"He was an old Death Eater I apprehended today. One of the one's from the first war that never got out 'til now. He said that Voldemort strangely protected that old broken watch that he stole from the vault. Draco wanted some similar things back

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that Merton had purchased from his mother because he was afraid his father would find out they had been sold. Things that stored power, according to him: an inkwell and a seal. And this was back when there wasn't any expectation that Lucius would be escaping. Draco really was scared of his father's reaction should he find them gone, so they must have been more important than they appeared, just like the watch." Harry glanced around the room, at the Quidditch posters. The corners of some of them were peeling off the wall, making the figures on them twist awkwardly as they flew about. "There's something to all of this, but I don't know what it is," Harry said in frustration.

"Have you seen these objects?" Hermione asked. She didn't sound terribly optimistic that she could help with understanding things, more as though she was asking by rote.

Harry shook his head. "No. I don't remember the watch clearly from the dream when he stole it. Borgin said it wasn't anything special, really." He rubbed his eyes, and admitted something that scared him. "This last dream was different. I was caught inside of it. Before, I was just observing as though Voldemort didn't know I was there. This time he had a hold of me somehow. I don't know how he did that. I was stuck half-way between him and Nagini."

Harry's friends glanced at each other. "You've always had this connection, Harry. It's probably the same one."

Harry pulled the duvet up and slid down under it for comfort. "I have to kill him. I have to kill him soon."

Hermione said to Ron, "I'm going back to my flat for a few books. See what I can find."

"There are books here too, you know," Ron pointed out, sounding insulted.

Harry closed his eyes without bothering to remove his glasses and the lamplight lowered before Ron settled onto his bed. When Harry opened his eyes, he found that Ron had his wand out and was tapping it on his leg. "Do you want mine?" Harry asked.

"Your what?"

"My wand." Harry reached for his wand and tossed it to his friend. "I don't want you to think I might hurt you."

"It's not that," Ron assured him, although it didn't sound terribly truthful. He put Harry's wand on the corner of the desk nearer to himself. "I'll toss it to you if you need it. Promise."

Harry stared at the cracked and peeling ceiling of Ron's room. He wished that he only had the Dark Plane to worry about. Before, he couldn't have fathomed that things could grow to be so much worse.

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Hermione returned and took up a position at the other end of Ron's bed. A stack of heavy books formed between the two of them as she finished paging through them. Harry finally took his glasses off and closed his eyes again, trying to drift without actually falling asleep. This had the unfortunate side-effect of revealing all of the shadows to him as though he had stepped inside of a gathering of them. Harry pondered why he could see them at all, something he had not wondered about for a very long time. Just like that snake of his, replayed in Harry's head. Always knew everything she did. Harry's brow furrowed over his closed eyes. He had a feeling that when he figured this out, he was not going to like the resulting revelation very much.

Whispering and page turning kept Harry company for several hours. A light knock on the door preceded Shackbolt's return. Another figure swept in before him and gestured for the others to leave. Hermione frantically marked her pages and scrambled off of the bed. Ron had to be woken, but he groggily departed as well.

"Severus," Harry greeted his guardian with intense gratitude.

Harry's gratitude was acute enough that it appeared to give Snape pause in the middle of Silencing and Imperturbing the door. "Your letters did not give me any warning that you were in such difficulty," he said, sounding less chastening and more undone.

"I was fine," Harry argued. "I just had a bad dream... that probably wasn't one... so they sent me off." Harry rubbed his irritated scar. "I'm trying to figure some things out. And I'm afraid to sleep."

Snape reached into his robe pocket and placed a small bottle with a frosted glass stopper on the corner of the desk. He sat on the edge of the bed and considered Harry. "I brought you something for that; hence the reason for my delay. I concocted that specifically. It will only allow you to repeat a very old dream, which hopefully you can do safely. I fear cutting you off from all dreams, given your extreme need for rest."

"Thanks," Harry said.

Snape's hair fell forward as he dipped his head, deep in thought.

"You should be resting for tomorrow," Harry said.

"I am actually contemplating if it is possible for me to remain."

"McGonagall know that?" Harry asked.

"We were in the midst of final preparations when Kingsley arrived, in fact. Minerva convinced him to return as well to assist, given our lack of highly qualified personnel. It is difficult to protect a train, especially one that is warded in strange ways that we have lost track of, something I have been attempting to research today while proctoring examinations." His eyes roamed over Harry's face. "But enough about the school's plans. How are you doing?"



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"I needed to Occlude my mind quite severely to get free from this dream... or vision, or whatever it was, that I had this evening." Harry explained. Hoping for some insight that would give him hope for next time, he said, "It was like I was snared, or on a lead, and could be dragged into Voldemort's mind and kept there."

"Could you determine where he was?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. "It looked like a small drawing room with old furniture and bad artwork."

"Does not sound familiar; I'm afraid," Snape said. He lifted his chin and with a twitch of his lip, said, "You do seem all right."

"I am," Harry assured him. But then rubbing his hands over one another, he added, "But I'm getting a little scared. I've gotten lucky with avoiding turning into him..." Or something worse, he thought to himself. "But it's getting harder." He took a deep breath.

"You are stronger than him, Harry. I am certain of that," Snape said with confidence.

"You think so?" he asked, finding those words ringing through him.

Snape nodded. "Do not forget how you defeated him the last time."

"I trapped him the last time. He's trying to do the same to me now." Harry flipped his toes around under the duvet for a strained moment. "Why am I so close to him?" he asked.

"You simply are." Snape tilted his head back, revealing his sharp brow from behind his hair. "When he tried to kill you..." he faded out.

"I'm like Nagini," Harry said into the space left by Snape's hesitation.

"What makes you say that?"

"Treddleson said that, when I told him that I didn't need to see his mark, that I knew he was a Death Eater already just by his presence."

"Treddleson." Snape exhaled. "There is a name I have not heard in a very long time. One of the earliest of Voldemort's followers, joined about the same time as Avery. Never seemed quite serious in his worship of Voldemort, despite, or perhaps because of, their personal association. It was as though he joined him out of boredom or something."

"I have a piece of him in me," Harry said. "A piece of Voldemort. So does Nagini." Harry rubbed his scar again. "I don't want to become him," he said fiercely.

"Harry..."

"Promise me you won't let me," Harry demanded in a low tone. He needed to be reassured that the damage he could cause could only go so far.

"I will never abandon you to that fate, anymore than I would abandon you to your other dark powers," Snape assured him. "I will not give up on you, but I will also

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not allow you to betray that which you hold dear. Is that what you need to hear?"

Harry nodded. Prickles chased over his chest and back since he trusted absolutely that Snape understood the implications of what he was promising.

"You should get going," Harry said.

"You will be all right?" Snape asked.

"Yes," Harry said with confidence that he found easier than expected.

Snape stood, shaking his robes straight. Before he could reach the door, partly blocked by the foot of Harry's bed, Harry said, "Severus, I think I've forgiven you."

Snape's glance, which showed his attention to be mostly inward despite the importance of Harry's words, led Harry to say, "You haven't forgiven yourself, have you?"

Snape, head lowered, face in shadow because his back was to the lamp, said, "It is far more complicated than that."

"In what way?" Harry asked, pushing the duvet down to lean forward.

"I cannot change the past, but I do deeply regret hurting you. I feel I may have pushed you into the difficulties you are having now."

Harry puzzled this. "Voldemort is pushing me into this," he said, confused.

Snape turned his head partly, but not completely, in Harry's direction. After a long hesitation, he said, "If he is indeed a separate entity, that is."

Harry's face heated. He jumped up onto his knees on the sagging mattress, his quick movements limited uncomfortably by his narrow, borrowed pyjamas. "You believe I'm Voldemort?" Harry demanded in a horrified whisper.

"I believe nothing. The possibility has entered my mind," Snape countered.

"How could you imag-

Snape spun on him, dark eyes glittering in the lamplight. "You cannot expect me to protect you fully from yourself without considering every possibility." This made Harry close his mouth around his next appalled exclamation. Snape calmed as well. "It has been painful to consider it, but as you said yourself not moments ago, you do have part of him in you."

Harry dropped his gaze, alarm and depression trying to take hold.

"Harry," Snape prompted, and then repeated himself when Harry didn't move except to scrub impatiently at scar. Snape approached and rubbed Harry's upper arms to get him to respond.

Harry said, "Mr. Weasley thinks that too, doesn't he?" His voice sounded lonely to his own ears, which added to the burden on his state of mind. Snape's grip tightened to a painful level, which forced Harry's gaze to meet his.

"Harry, I trust absolutely in what is in your heart..."

"You sound like Dumbledore again," Harry accused.

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“What I mean to say, in more... dry terms...” Snape said with an annoyed tone. “Is that I trust that you do not intend to be dark. Whether you are being disturbed by forces within or without does not really matter.”

“Yes, it does,” Harry argued. “If he’s... out there somewhere... I can kill him again. If he’s in my head, what am I going to do?”

Snape’s hands gripped his arms harder. “He is in your head now. That is my point. Whether he has a physical manifestation or not, does not alter that.” Snape’s hands released him. “You must deal with him inside of your head AND kill him in either case.”

Sounding alone again, Harry asked, “How do I do that?”

“I don’t know,” Snape admitted.

“And if I don’t do that. Does that mean he is going to keep coming back?”

“I don’t know...” Snape faded out and added reluctantly, “But it seems likely.”

Harry dropped back onto his pillow, too exhausted to properly take that in, prompting Snape to sit beside him and reach for the potion. “Drink this.”

Harry tiredly sat back up again and accepted the unstoppered bottle. He stared dismally into the distorted depths of the decorative glass. “You promise?” he asked without looking up.

“Yes, I promise. Drink up or I will feed that to you directly.”

Harry swallowed the potion and handed the bottle back before immediately falling forward into his adoptive father, who put an arm around him, which was the last thing Harry perceived before morpheus took him.



Ginny Weasley trudged up the turning staircase. At the top, the door was open but the occupants of the office: the Headmistress and Professors Lupin, Vector, Cawley, and Flitwick, turned to her in surprise.

“What can I do for you, Ms. Weasley. I am quite certain I changed the password.” Her hands were on her hips and she sounded miffed.

“Only took three guesses, ma’am,” Ginny explained, “to figure out the new one.”

“I changed to an entirely new theme,” McGonagall pointed out, sounding extra annoyed about being thwarted.

“Coffee is not much of a theme change from tea, Professor,” Ginny pointed out, not caring about this and wanting to move on to her real topic. “I want to know if I can travel with the Hogwarts Express tomorrow.”

“You are to stay here, Ms. Weasley. I thought that was quite clear.”

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“I know that I have to stay here, but can’t I come back? My friends will all be on the train tomorrow. It’s all of our last ride and... and I want to help keep an eye on everyone.”

McGonagall sat down and opened the drawer of her desk. “You will remain here, Ms. Weasley. I have assured your parents that you will be here, safe and sound.”

“Is anyone else going to be here?” Ginny asked, doubtful about their preparations.

McGonagall pulled open a different drawer and rummaged a bit. “Hagrid will be guarding the grounds. Professor Sprout will be guarding the rare and dangerous plants in the greenhouses. We considered simply destroying them, but do not have the heart to. Of course, Mr. Filch will be here.”

“Wonderful,” Ginny uttered too quietly to be overheard.

McGonagall found what she was looking for and came around the desk. “Since you will be the only student left at the school for rest of the school year, you may have this.” She held out a badge that read Head Girl.

Ginny peered at it dubiously, but accepted and pocketed it. She wasn’t going to be bought off so easily. “Where’s Professor Snape?”

“On an errand,” McGonagall replied, moving back around to her chair. The other professors gathered closer as though they all wished to return to their planning. A map of Scotland lay out on the desk, heavily stained and annotated.

“Harry all right?” Ginny asked.

“What makes you think his errand involved Mr. Potter?” McGonagall asked flatly.

“It’s the only thing that would draw him away at a time like this,” Ginny pointed out.

“Go back to your tower Ms. Weasley.”

Ginny sighed and, fingering the badge in her pocket, strolled slowly back to the staircases. You always have options, she thought decisively. The worst that could happen to her if she got caught was that they would make her stay here for yet another month’s detention. If they all survived long enough to enforce it, she would worry about it then.



Harry woke with the sun streaming over him from high in the sky. He blinked at the grey duvet cover and unfamiliar room and sat up. Across from him, Hermione sat on Ron’s bed, which had been neatly made. She was reading from a thin book propped on her bent knees.

“Harry, you’re finally awake,” she said.

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Harry nodded. His limbs felt leaden as though he had slept too long. His wand wasn't lying on the desk where he had last seen it. He glanced around but didn't want to cause suspicion by asking where it was. Instead, he watched her with strange interest. He studied the fine, delicate edge of her jaw just above where her jugular vein pulsed. The soft curve of her neck, delicate as well, and remarkably fragile. Harry stood still, suspended by the stalemate within him. Appalled, frantic and determined all at once, although none of this showed on the outside.

Hermione glanced up again when he didn't move. "Harry?" she prompted and lifted her wand from the bed beside her. When Harry still didn't move, she said, "Sit back down," in a wavering voice that tried to sound commanding. "Harry."

Harry turned his head to look back at the bed that he had already forgotten was there. He was feeling bizarrely elated and expectant about something.

"Harry, so help me, I'm going to toss you back onto it if you don't move."

Her fear was getting through to both halves of him, feeding queer pleasure to the dark half but giving his true self clearer determination. He sat down on the bed and looked around as though he couldn't remember the objects in the room. They didn't match the other room he could see, which he now perceived to be larger than he had previously thought. It was just narrow, but quite long. All of the tall drapes along one wall were pulled closed making it feel cave-like.

Hermione bit her lip and pushed her book aside. "I found something in this old book of Mrs. Weasley's but I want to tell it to you, not Voldemort."

Harry glanced around, wondering again where his wand was. He should be able to feel it, he thought, he could feel everything else that belonged to him.

Hermione kept talking. "I think we let you sleep too long. Professor Snape believed that potion would keep you out of trouble, but maybe it wore off while you slept." After another pause, she asked, "Harry are you in there at all?"

The emotional pain in her voice jolted him out of his inner terror, which was a good part of what was holding him prisoner. His shoulder jerked and he blinked rapidly. "Yeah, I'm here." Severe chills made his limbs painful. He rubbed his arms. Only one room now filled his vision. "Don't... drop your guard again," he said, horrified at what his other self had apparently been contemplating.

The door opened and Ron stepped in, carrying more books. "Harry's awake," he said, cheerfully.

"Harry and company are awake, yes," Hermione stated grimly.

"I think it's just me now," Harry said.

Ron glanced between the two of them and lost his cheerfulness. "Have a book to read, then."

Harry accepted the dusty, leather-covered volume and asked, "What time is it?"

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“Almost ten.” Hermione supplied, which explained the bright sun. “I found something, though, if you want to discuss it.”

“Sure,” Harry said. Snape’s voice telling him that he was stronger than this was replaying in his mind, bolstering him. He had to be stronger than this; it wasn’t a matter of choice. Both of his friends stared wide-eyed at him. Hermione moved first.

“This book...” She held it up so that the gold lettering *Fiendish Wizards of the First Half of the Second Millennium* was visible to Harry. “... has a description of a wizard by the name of Septimus. He terrified Naples in the eleventh century. According to this book, he came back from the dead three times before being killed for good. By that time he had scores of worshippers who thought it was some kind of Roman God or something.” She sounded derisive. After flipping back and forth between the pages, she said, “Ah, yeah, here. Says here he had stored part of himself in a brass censer. He tore his soul in half with some kind of dark spell and stored half of it away.” She held up the book that showed someone with something resembling spiky cotton balled on the end of a wand, held up in front of his chest. “They think he killed his father as part of the spell.” She looked up at Harry. “What if Voldemort did that?”

“You mean the things Malfoy was supposed to keep safe? You think they were so that Voldemort could always come back?” Harry said, sounding distracted because he was thinking. “Like Riddle’s diary... that had part of him in it too before I destroyed it. Like Nagini.” After a pause, he added more quietly, “Like me.”

Ron and Hermione glanced at each other. Ron said, “We don’t know that, Harry. What else does it say?” he prompted Hermione.

Hermione reluctantly went on, “It says... the only way they could kill Septimus was by destroying the censer in a *Caeruleus Fire*, which is a magical fire that is especially hot. When they melted it down the normal way, it didn’t seem to destroy its magical properties. They called it a *Crux Horridus*, or ‘dreadful cross’ because the censer had been taken from a church.”

They sat in their respective, deep silences until Ron stood up. “Harry could probably use some breakfast. Can’t face Horcruxes on an empty stomach. Come on.”

In the kitchen, Molly Weasley and Mrs. Longbottom were chatting amiably. “Harry dear,” Mrs. Weasley said in affectionate greeting. “You don’t look any less grim this morning it seems.”

Barely aware of what he was doing, Harry took a seat, which made his borrowed pyjamas bind. Ron asked, “Is there a bit of breakfast for Harry?”

“Of course.” As she assembled things, she said, “A nice young lady came to check how you were early this morning, Harry...”

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“Who?” Hermione asked for him before he could get around to it.

“Hm, didn’t catch her name. Attractive young lady, tall, with shoulder-length brown hair.”

“Kerry Ann?” Harry asked, wishing he could be at the Ministry to help. Moody’s and Whitley’s memorials were supposed to be today, although they would be small and short in the interest of security. Perhaps Harry would be allowed to return for Munz’s, whenever that may be. Harry’s mood darkened at the thought.

“She said her name was Kerry Ann,” Grandmother Longbottom said. She was folding the newspaper casually and slowly but then moving to sit upon it.

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “What’s with that?”

No one moved. Hermione was biting her lip. “You don’t want to see it, Harry.”

Ron appeared angry. “Ought to know who talks to that woman by now. Registered Animagus or not, she sure gets around.” Hermione elbowed him.

“What’s Skeeter printed this time?” Harry asked.

Hermione took the paper from Mrs. Longbottom and held it out to Harry. “There’s nothing for it,” she argued to Ron’s appalled expression. “Harry can handle it,” she stated with the kind of certainty that implies the speaker intends it to be true by invocation.

Harry unfolded the paper. Wizard Hero Suspected of Dark Wizardry the headline read. Relieved of Duty at the Ministry’s Most Dire Time, was printed slightly smaller just below that. “Who does talk to her?” Harry asked, keeping his emotions at bay by feeling numb only. The photograph was one of him from the DV-Day festivities. He looked displeased and he was gesturing with his wand, but it was just careful selection of the specific photograph from what must have been hundreds taken that day. He had been happy that day, nothing like this photo.

He folded the paper without bothering to read more. Mrs. Weasley set a plate before him containing four rashers of bacon and a tall stack of toast.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “Everyone else is gone?”

“They’re helping escort the Hogwarts Express,” Mrs. Weasley said.

Harry was glad to hear that. “Ginny’s not coming home, though,” he said, remembering her last letter in which she seemed to think that given the situation, her detention should have been altered. Instead, the situation seemed to have hardened everyone into doing just as they had intended to previously.

“No,” Molly said, sitting down at his left elbow with her mug of tea before her. “I’m glad she will be safe at the castle. The girl gets ideas in her head, let me tell you.”

“She wants to be an Auror,” Harry stated. Mrs. Weasley spit out her tea, which Harry ignored, saying, “She ought to have ideas. They’re what keeps you alive when

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things get bad.”

“Arthur said nothing of this,” Molly said, turning red in her cheeks and forehead.

“He doesn’t know,” Harry said. “Reginald Rodgers accepted her application to take the tests.” Harry felt a pure and clean kind of anger seep through him. His own anger, bouyed by his own personal history of frustration. “She won the dueling tournament, why shouldn’t she be able to apply for an apprenticeship?”

“She even beat out Professor Snape,” Ron pointed out.

This caught his mother’s attention. “Did you know about her applying?”

Ron shook his head rapidly. “No.”

Molly’s attention came back Harry’s way. “You’ve been encouraging her in this,” she accused.

“I heard about it from Tonks, but I think Ginny should do as she likes,” Harry said, turning to his plate, which was growing cold.

“She’s not your only daughter,” Molly said with a hint of deeper hurt.

Harry glanced at Ron, who appeared quite pained. “I don’t have any daughters,” Harry pointed out.

“That he knows of,” Ron tossed out as a tease. Harry shot him a dismayed look in return.

“So, you haven’t been encouraging her?” Molly asked, sounding saddened.

“My trainer apparently has been. Take it up with him.”

Mrs. Weasley appeared determined to do just that. “Girl cannot stay out of trouble,” she complained.



The object of their musings was, at that moment, sitting in the rear compartment of the second to last car of the Hogwarts Express. She had applied a minor disguise of changing her hair to blonde, which made the Professors and her brothers glance over her as they strode up and down the train. This worked as long as Ginny turned her face away in time, and her friends signaled well in advance of her needing to do so.

Three hours had past. They had eaten their fill from the cart and now lounged lazily in their seats in the manner of people with nothing much to do for the day.

The sun made the landscape more interesting than usual, and Ginny leaned against the window and stared out. She did this until something about the rhythm of the train changed. It was as though they were going up a steep hill, even though the terrain had flattened out into low rolling hills where the track was on a path laid out perfectly flat. When her brothers ran by towards the front of the train, Ginny



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followed. She slapped her Head Girl badge on her chest and pulled out her wand. Her brothers stopped before the next interlink between the carriages and leaned out to peer ahead.

Bill started upon seeing his sister there. “Charlie, Ginny’s here,” he said, as though telling on her.

“So?” Charlie said. He glanced at his sister. “If you avoid telling mum, that’d be good.” He leaned out again. “What’s going on up there? I should have brought a dragon along. McGonagall wasn’t keen on the idea but now I really need one to actually get up there since Apparition’s out.

Ginny squeezed in between them to lean out as well. The train was definitely slowing. It rounded a broad bend and the great scarlet engine and coal tender curved to the left before slipping beyond the trees. The huffs of steam slowed as the train did. The track straightened out again and their view ahead grew less useful.

“Wonder what’s up with the engine?” Bill asked.

Fred and Neville came through the interconnect. “George’s extendable eye says no one is driving. Hi, Ginny.” They all tried to lean out at once. Fred said to Ginny, “Better not let the teachers see you; they’re coming this way.”

“I don’t plan to.” She jumped up onto the carriage window and leapt away as a hawk. A few hard flaps later, the train extended snake-like beneath her as she veered side to side to fly slow yet stay aloft. She dove down into the rear of the engine and regained her real form. The small compartment was empty except for the two coal-dust-blackened house-elves that cowered in the rear. The air smelt of grease and hot metal.

“Where’s the engineer?” Ginny demanded.

The elf on the left put a soot-stained arm over her head as though Ginny might attack her. Ginny rolled her eyes and looked out of the scratched and dingy window that offered a view forward along the big cylinder of the boiler. One had to step to the other window to see out the front on the other side. The space between the windows held assorted levers and dials attached to long pipes coming out of the floor. The controls were ad hoc and oddly fanciful. Some of the levers were painted red, dissuading one from using them. The nearest gauge read Brake Vacuum, which made very little sense. The only dial that did make sense, the speedometer, was slowly falling to zero.

“How do you drive this thing?” Ginny asked aloud.

“Master not allow us to touch anything,” one of the elves offered piteously.

“Where did Master go?” Ginny demanded. The elves cowered more. The track snaked gently and began to rise. They slowed more and finally came to a stop before rolling gently backward fifty yards. Ginny wondered if she should pull the lever

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marked brake, but the train came to a reluctant stop on its own.

The surrounding forest below the tracks lay in silence. No towns or any habitation were visible. The crunch of boots on gravel sounded, approaching the engine, followed by the electric arc of a spell and someone swearing. Ginny Obsfucated herself and peered out toward the rear. Professors Lupin, Cawley, and Vector were jumping between the coal tender and the first carriage for protection. A spell arc sizzled on the other side. Ginny peered out that way and saw hooded figures emerging from the trees. They emerged in twos and threes, spread far apart to make them impossible to hit all at once. Ginny looked out the first side and sure enough, there were twenty more, many more than there were total in escaped Death Eaters. They either had recruited quickly or were using Dopplegangers.

Ginny scanned to try to spot the duplicates but could not, given that they all looked more or less alike in their hooded black robes. The engineer was pushed forward into view, easy to spot in his broad, pin-striped overalls and tiny matching cap.

The teachers leapt back onto the open platform of the first of the passenger carriages. McGonagall stood, propping open the door to the inside with her foot.

“Couldn’t get to the engine,” Lupin said.

“No matter,” McGonagall said grimly, “We know where the engineer is now. All of you down!” She shouted behind her at the students, who were creeping out of their compartments to peer out the side windows. They slunk back with worried expressions. The carriage rocked as a spell struck it and a window shattered. A few students screamed.

“That will keep them down,” Vector said.

A voice called out from the trees, “We have what you want. We are prepared to make a trade.”

“We don’t deal with the likes of you, Malfoy,” McGonagall muttered, but a searing spell took out the platform rail and sliced open the coal tender, letting coal dust leach onto the ground. “That will burn easily, won’t it?” she asked no one in particular.

“Explosive, in fact, if there is enough of it,” Snape pointed out from behind her. “All of you,” he said loudly to the students. “Out of this car and into the next. Leave your things behind,” he snarled to one Hufflepuff in particular who stopped to gather her things. “GO!”

A mad scramble ensued. Snape rushed ahead to the next coupling and vestibule and found Bill and Charlie Weasley there, making their way forward as well as Shacklebolt, who was counting the figures on each side of the train. “A couple I am certain are Dopplegangers, but it is- Severus?”

“Protect the exodus from this car,” he commanded and strode back into the first

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car.

Shacklebolt took up a defensive position on one side of the vestibule at the open window; the Weasley brothers did the same on the other side. Professor Greer elbowed one of the twins aside and gamely returned fire when it came their way. Fred muttered something to his brother along the lines of the teachers being tougher than he remembered.

Snape strode up and down, assuring himself that the carriage had emptied. Pointed hats and sweets were spilled onto the floor. He flipped a first-year Transfiguration book out of his way with his toe.

McGonagall, still standing in the doorway nearest the tender said, "I tried to send an alarm by silver message, but I do not think it has got through."

The train rocked again, metal groaning. A voice shouted, "You have one of two choices. Either we get even by destroying the train, but that is messy and some of our allies' children are on board. Or you give us what we want."

"Which would be?" McGonagall breathed in annoyance.

Snape gave her a derisive glance as Malfoy's voice called out, "Give us our traitor and we will let the train go."

Lupin and one of the Weasley twins joined them on the platform, looking ready to do battle without compromise. Professor Greer came up behind him with a remarkably similar expression. McGonagall's face compressed in anger, but she appeared less hopeful. Snape stared out at the figures holding the engineer. The tall one on the left would be Malfoy and the other, MacNair most likely. His knowledgeable eyes scanned the assembled. The thin, narrow-shouldered one twenty feet to the right: Bellatrix and to her left... Avery, most likely. Another blast rang out and glass shattered across the compartment behind them.

Snape stepped out so that he was visible on the platform. The lead figure lowered his wand marginally. "Well, Severus. Good of you to join us."

Snape took a step toward the mangled gate. "Severus, what are you doing?" McGonagall asked, grabbing his arm. "If anything happens to you, Harry will not forgive me."

"I am doing what Harry would be doing if he were here," Snape pointed out smartly. Her grip loosened.

"We are not going to wait patiently." Malfoy gestured with his voluminous sleeve and Bellatrix let loose a spell aimed low that made the carriages screech as though alive and under torture.

Snape took another small step even though McGonagall still had a grip on the fabric of his cuff.

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“If we can hold out, reinforcements will arrive,” Lupin whispered harshly. “Kingsley messaged for them... but couldn’t give them an exact location.”

Malfoy shouted, “The next shot will render the train immovable.” He held up his hand as though ready to give the signal.

“Give me your bracelet,” Snape uttered under his breath. McGonagall moved quickly. Warm metal pressed into Snape’s palm just seconds later. Moving with casual stealth, he tried to slip it on, but it was much too small. He dropped it into his pocket instead. “Warn Richard away, obviously, as soon as you can,” Snape said, thinking ahead now with alarm to the portkey being used by the wrong person.

“I already sent him to his sister’s,” McGonagall said as she followed Snape down the metal steps to the gravel bed of the tracks. Snape stepped forward a few yards, wand up. Lupin followed as well, before Snape waved him back. Lupin appeared grim and almost blameful; Snape got a glimpse of his thoughts, which were for how very distressed Harry would be to learn of what was happening.

Snape turned to face his former colleagues. “Release him,” he ordered, meaning the engineer.

The man was pushed forward a few feet where he stumbled before climbing the slope a few feet. He was caught with a tether spell a few steps farther and fell forward onto his beefy pink hands.

“Lower your wand, or he progresses no farther,” Malfoy said.

From the engine, Ginny painfully watched the delicate dance of the exchange. She counted the Death Eaters on each side of the tracks yet again, wishing she could be certain which were real. She sent a narrow Pea Shooter spell at one she was certain had not moved, but it flinched and looked about for someone to retaliate at.

The exchange moved closer to completion. The round-bellied engineer shuffled forward farther, almost even with Professor Snape, and Professor Snape lowered his wand to point at the ground. The engineer stepped forward again. McGonagall and Lupin stood at the edge of the gravel bed of the track, looking grave. Professor Greer stepped down beside them, looking dangerous. Ginny half-wished she could see her really let loose on this lot.

From her angle, Ginny spotted a hooded figure shifting sideways behind another so as to not be seen. Moving, it appeared to her, to get in position for a clear shot at the engineer as soon as he was beyond the cluster of Death Eaters. The figures stepped forward again and the engineer looked ready to bolt for safety. Ginny launched herself out of the window, dropping like a rock and landing hard on her just-tranfigured feet at the engineer’s back, wand out with a block just as the Cutting Curse lanced out.

Spells were exchanged in very close quarters and Professor Snape lost his wand to a Whip Charm because he could not raise it in time. Ginny pushed her charge

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toward the engine compartment. Snape's rapier-sharp features turned to her. She had made her choice, the only one she could really live with, but she still hated it. "Harry's going to kill me," she said to him. His strangely level, black-eyed look was going to haunt her for a very long time, she feared.

McGonagall and Lupin joined her in protecting the engineer as he hauled his bulk up into the compartment. "Let's get this train moving, Mr. Stillingfleet," she said.

Moments later, steam hissed as levers were moved. The red handle under the window was turned all the way clockwise. The doors to the firehole irised open and flames could be heard roaring deep inside. The elves shoveled coal in and the doors snapped closed. McGonagall was asking where Flitwick was, since he was supposed to be guarding the engine. The engineer grunted something negative and grim sounding.

Beside the train, a spell lashed out and Snape fell. Ginny leapt down from the engine as it began to slide forward but at that moment, the robed figures disappeared. Their Doppelgangers faded more slowly, but seconds later the clearing between the tracks and the forest was deserted.

"Ms. Weasley!" McGonagall shouted as the black metal monstrosity pulled away.

"Ginny!" Someone in the next carriage called out. It sounded like one of her brothers. "Ginny come on!" The voice grew farther away as the wall of the carriages rushed by behind her, ever faster. Ginny took flight and landed easily on the platform of the second carriage, between Bill and Shackbolt. She reluctantly turned back into herself, finding her bird form to be a desired escape right at that moment. They all appeared very grim. Fred and George said, "Come on, help us patrol and check for injuries; we don't know anyone's names."

"Someone should tell Harry," Ginny insisted.

"McGonagall slipped Snape her portkey," George said. "And Harry's at the Burrow, relieved of duty because he can't keep You-Know-Who out of his head well enough anymore."

Ginny stared at him. "I thought the Prophet was lying."

Shackbolt shook his head. "Maybe shouldn't stress him until we're sure Snape doesn't get away," George went on. "Come on. Help us with patrol."

Ginny followed her brothers; her shoulders slumped and heart frustrated.



Harry sat in the sunny dining room of the Burrow, his friends across the table from him. Ron was bent over his wizard chess set, contemplating his next move. His fallen pieces lay at his elbow, twitching occasionally.

"Sure you aren't throwing the match?" Harry asked.

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“I haven’t played in a long time,” Ron insisted in an annoyed enough tone that Harry believed him.

Harry wondered what was happening at the Ministry. He wondered where Voldemort was. Sitting still when he knew he was running out of time grew increasingly difficult for him as the morning wore on. Mrs. Weasley began making lunch and asked Ron to run out to the green grocers. The chirp of the birds and the wind rustling in the trees emanating from the open door made Harry wish things were different and that he could enjoy the beautiful day just for itself.

Harry pulled the chess board closer. The bishop turned and used his long sword to swat at his fingers as though he were trying to cheat. Harry bent over the board so Hermione wouldn’t notice when he closed his eyes and held them that way. The shadows in his mind were nearly all together and nearly all distant. Some stragglers still floated about, but there was a definite higher concentration of them now.

Harry opened his eyes and stared at the bishop, who was now crossing his arms, broadsword dangling confidently in his tiny fingers. His heavy brow was raised in suspicion, which Harry could discern given his close proximity. Harry shifted his hand toward the board and the chessman expertly grabbed his sword tightly and poked the back of Harry’s hand, right on the scar Umbridge had given him. Harry thought this a bit insolent. That emotion gave him a glimpse of something very unexpected. Harry jerked his hand away before it could get poked again and the vision faded as he took this action. Harry blinked at the sunlight glittering off of the shiny white and black pieces as they shifted as though impatient for the game to continue.

Harry wanted to deny what he thought he had seen. It brought up old, scarred pain from Sirius and for many breaths that was all Harry could think about: the pain of being fooled and paying dearly for it. But his adult mind took over and made him rethink the vision his younger self tried to dismiss: the very familiar profile, half hidden in poorly-kempt shoulder-length hair, struggling to rise from the floor.

Had he really seen Snape in Voldemort’s vision or was it someone similar in appearance? Was he simply being fooled the same as last time? Harry tilted his head back to rest on the hard wood of the chair back. He was terrified of closing his eyes again and knowing for certain, because literally anything could rise in him if it were. Harry had no idea what would happen to him if he were faced for certain with losing Snape that way.

Harry had to risk it, though; he had no choice. Across from him, Hermione’s sunlit hair fell about her bent head. Her face held such an intense look of concentration, focused on her book, that he assumed she would not notice him for several minutes.

Harry closed his eyes and very carefully let the vision in again. Holding his terror

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at bay as he did so was one of the most difficult things he had ever done. But he had to hide it, or Voldemort would have him.



Severus Snape regained consciousness and pushed himself to his knees only to be dropped again by a Crucio that made him writhe in an irrational effort to escape his own body. He gasped for air in its wake and stared at the complicated pattern in the faded rug beneath his hands as he gathered his wits, grateful that he had not cried out.

“Master,” Lucius Malfoy’s saccharine-laden voice dribbled. “We have brought the traitor who aided your last downfall.”

The robed figures surrounding Snape parted at this. Snape starred in confusion at the sparkling, lemon-yellow-bright patent leather shoes that approached, apparently aided by Greyback, who wore no shoes since no one manufactured shoes for half-clawed feet.

Malfoy grabbed Snape by the hair and tossed him forward. “Are you bowing to your Lord and master, Severus?” he demanded with sick glee.

Snape raised his gaze while simultaneously feeling for the bracelet in his pocket with his elbow so as to not give away what he was doing. He blinked in surprise and lost himself at the sight before him.

“Lockhart?” Snape uttered in bewilderment. The man’s trademark golden locks had thinned considerably, leaving merely a grim halo around his freckled bald head. His eyes, however, were unmistakably red and slitted.

Slowly and dreamily the bizarre figure stated, “He has a portkey in his pocket.”

Snape ducked his head too late and cringed. A blasting curse knocked him to the floor before he could reach into his pocket for one chance at using the key. By the time he again floated up to consciousness, Malfoy was dangling the bracelet before him. He sat back in a worn overstuffed chair and flipped the golden hoop around his index finger.

“You would have needed a wand to use it in any event,” Malfoy pointed out as a taunt. “A poor hope, at best.” He started to pocket it, but instead tossed it to Bellatrix who was standing across from him. “See that Headmistress McGonagall deeply regrets assisting our disloyal subject, would you? That appeared to be her house I visited.”

Bellatrix smiled and slipped the bracelet onto her wrist, admiring it in a mocking girlish fashion.

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Malfoy crossed his legs and said, "I am so terribly disappointed you have not attempted to Apparate, Severus. I laid the barriers myself and they are my most dreadful to date."

Snape pushed himself a little straighter, saying, "As though I could have forgotten how you did things..."

"True," Malfoy cooed. "Yet another reason to take you into our circle as fast as possible."

Snape stared at the figure in the other chair; the one gazing raptly at the fire. "How...?" he asked.

"How was our glorious Lord returned to us?" Malfoy finished for him. This got the other chair's occupant's attention. Voldemort né Lockhart turned slowly to stare at Snape instead. Snape carefully Occluded his mind this time, still greatly pained by his earlier lapse that had lost him the portkey.

Malfoy tugged on the servant's bell beside the hearth using a spell so that he would not have to bother standing to reach. An elf appeared a moment later, bowing repeatedly.

"Bring me my pipe," Malfoy ordered, and as the elf disappeared, he aimed a hex at the creature with a laugh. "We have an inept wizard by the name of Maudant Merton to thank for that, according to his associate, whom we have been attempting to recruit as he seems the pathetically subservient type. Merton himself escaped our grasp with the help of a surprisingly vicious second associate. During their bumbling about with spells they could not comprehend, they used prior possessions of our Dark Lord's – that should not have fallen into their hands, but it was fortuitous that they did – to recreate him thusly."

Voldemort still stared at Snape. Snape had the very odd sense that the Dark Lord was trying to remember him.

Malfoy went on, "I should not be so harsh with them as they did have the good luck to stumble upon the means of creating an entirely new kind of cursed object, the stash of which we have made good use of."

"We must create more," the red-eyed visage beside him said. "I know how."

"Uh, yes. Yes, of course, Master."

Snape looked between them. "You have promoted yourself, Lucius. What do MacNair and Avery think of that?"

The elf reappeared with a freshly lit pipe. It presented it with a bow and promptly disappeared again. "They are out taking care of a little necessary task. There is much to be done." He puffed vigorously.

"Yes, you look terribly busy," Snape offered with clear sarcasm.



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Malfoy's wand came up and although Snape tried to leap to the side, the Crucio caught him and all he could do for the subsequent minute was claw at his chest and resist screaming. When the curse let up, Malfoy said, "Your death is going to be exceedingly slow, I promise you. It will be days after you are crying and pleading for it. Days after you offer up that awful boy you call your son. I look forward to it, I must say."

"That will never happen," Snape whispered, clearly determined. The curse fell again.



Broom-riding witches and wizards swooped down upon the Hogwarts Express. From where she bent over a second-year Slytherin with a bad cut over his eye, Ginny turned to watch them pace the train just beyond the windows. The boy didn't trust a mere fellow student to heal it, so she was applying a plaster to it. A rush of excitement swept through the carriage at the sight outside.

Ginny hurried to finish and joined the teachers and other guards in the first carriage just as the train came to a brake-squealing halt. McGonagall stepped into the carriage from the front just as Ginny did from the rear. Her brothers had been set guarding the doors, and given Ginny's fierce expression, didn't resist her entry.

"We received Kingsley's message," Tonks was saying. She glanced around. "Looks like you tangled with a rather angry someone." The other Ministry witches and wizards with her were from the Beast Division. They sported fire-proof wire-bristle brooms and shackling equipment dangled and clanked on their belts.

"They took Professor Snape," Ginny blurted out.

"We know," Tonks stated. "Kingsley sent that in a followup message."

"Have you heard from Severus?" McGonagall asked.

Tonks shook her head. "Someone should tell Harry," Ginny insisted, more quietly than her last assertion, given that she did not desire to get on Tonks' bad side.

Tonks nodded in sad agreement. To Shackbolt, she said, "Can they spare you if I leave Aldrich and the others with the train?"

McGonagall looked over the motley group of animal control people. One had a baby India Black dragon on her shoulder, albeit muzzled. She said, "They seemed satisfied with what they obtained from us, unfortunately. We can probably spare Kingsley at this point." She gazed pointedly at Ginny. "Ms. Weasley, you will remain here with me."



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Harry stood, unaware that his gaze was decidedly distant.

“Harry?” Hermione demanded. She held her wand out before her and stood also; although she made the poor decision to straighten her chair. Beside her, Grandma Longbottom’s hands were busy knitting and she couldn’t pick up her wand without juggling her needles first.

Mrs. Weasley asked, “What’s the trouble, dear?”

“Harry is... fading again.”

“I’m here,” Harry said. “I have to go. Where is my wand?”

“We’re not supposed to let you have it,” Hermione patiently explained.

“This is me, Hermione, not him,” Harry said. “I need my wand.”

“Harry dear,” Mrs. Weasley said, coming up behind him. “Have a seat, I’ll fix you a little calming tea.”

Harry spun on her and snapped, “Don’t call me ‘Harry dear’ when you are suggesting I let my life be destroyed.”

“It isn’t as bad as all that,” Mrs. Weasley insisted.

Harry balled his fists to keep from doing more with them. “He has Severus. Voldemort does. He’s torturing him right now.”

Hermione said, “Are you certain, Harry? This isn’t like last time, is it?”

Harry slumped slightly. It was remarkably like last time, except Snape’s face wasn’t bloodied the way the vision of Sirius’ had been. He writhed almost exactly the same way, though, and he wasn’t screaming... yet. “I think this is real,” Harry said.

The sound of Apparition could be heard in the distant field. “Let’s see who that is,” Mrs. Weasley insisted, pulling her wand and going to the door. “Looks like Tonks.”

They waited for her approach. To Harry the time passed interminably, giving his emotions plenty of time to gouge his heart out. Just before Tonks reached the door, Harry said, “Please, Hermione.”

“I don’t have it, Harry. I think they failed to tell me where they hid it because they figured I’d probably hand it over to you.”

Harry’s whole body twinged. The door opened. Tonks stepped in, ignoring the greetings. She looked at Harry and said, “Looks like you already know.”

Harry dropped his head. Hermione asked, “So, Voldemort does have Professor Snape?”

“Death Eaters held the Express hostage until he gave himself up. Minerva slipped him her portkey but he must not have been able to use it.” She took a few steps closer. “Harry... do you know where they are? Have you been seeing this?”

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"I've been seeing it, but I don't know where they are. Voldemort doesn't know where he is," Harry said bleakly. "Nagini certainly doesn't know where she is and she's the other one I can see out of."

"If you get any hints, send someone with a message, all right?" Tonks said, tossing her cloak forward over her shoulder in a dismissive manner as though ready to depart again already.

"I can't stay here," Harry insisted in cold horror. "I have to help." Second by second, his whole body was cycling between numbness and painful tingling he was so keyed up. "Tonks, please don't do this to me," he pleaded when she began to put on a resolute face instead of replying.

She came even closer. "Harry, I can't override Arthur's orders. If we don't follow orders the department would be even more chaotic than it already is and we'd be sunk. I promise I'll come get you if we hear anything, all right?"

Harry didn't want to show her any more weakness than he just had done. He didn't nod, but he did retake his seat at the table, where two jagged lines of shiny black chess pieces were arrayed before him. They shifted in anticipation as though noticing his return.

Tonks Disapparated after stepping over to pat him on the shoulder. Mrs. Weasley came over with a teapot that smelled noxiously of valerian root. "I don't want any," Harry snapped angrily. Hermione shook her head quickly at Mrs. Weasley and the teapot was carried back to the counter. The room remained tense.

"Wonder where Ron's got to?" Mrs. Weasley wondered aloud.

"Yeah," Harry said flatly, "and if you knew he was being tortured by Voldemort you'd just stand there, even if you didn't know where it was."

"Harry," Hermione chastised him.

Mrs. Longbottom's knitting needles returned to clicking. "Let the boy rant; it's all he's got and he deserves a bit of room to do it."

Harry fell silent, struggling for all kinds of control.



When Snape next raised his head, the red glowing eyes were very close, close enough to startle him. He jerked against the binding around his wrists. His hands had been bound behind him when Malfoy was called away by other duties and could no longer keep a wand on him directly.

The image of Lockhart rose from the chair and with his nearly bald head tilted curiously, crouched on the floor before Snape. He traced a finger along Snape's jaw.

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"I remember you," he said softly. "I am remembering more. You were very loyal to me..."

"Not anymore," Malfoy snapped from where he convened with three others half-way down the room.

Voldemort went on, relentlessly stuck in the rutted path of memory, it seemed. "You told me about the prophecy. I had suspected you were Dumbledore's man before then." His lip curled in a disgusted sneer.

Snape suffered a moment of extreme gratitude that this information was not news to him. Between the torture and his already dire situation, it may have been his final undoing.

"I am glad I told you," Snape insisted in a snarl, which at least hid his agony. "It led to your demise and it will do so again." He eyed the long wand held before his nose. If his hands weren't bound it would be his, a tormenting thought.

"I have many servants. You are my servant," Voldemort insisted, eyes narrowing.

"I was your servant. I am not any longer," Snape insisted, attracting the attention of the others in the room.

Greyback strode over and pulled Snape's head back by his hair. "You want that I tear his throat out?" he asked, eyes glowing in anticipation.

"No, far too quick," Malfoy said. "He is delusional, perhaps the Crucios are getting to his head." He crouched before Snape. "They don't fade entirely anymore, do they?" he asked. "Soon, they will barely fade at all." He stepped back and struck Snape with another one, just to make the point.

When he cancelled it, he bent over his victim and said, "Say that you are his loyal servant and we will let you rest... for little while at least." Snape didn't respond. He clenched his teeth in fact, which was fortunate since it made it easier too hold in the scream that clawed for release inside him as the next curse cut through him, just as he clawed instinctively for release from his own existence.

"Say it and you will get a rest," Malfoy promised repeatedly, like a maddening parrot, in between curses from him and others. It hadn't let up for rather a long while, although Snape was having difficulty keeping track. It could have been two curses or two hundred. They blurred together in a tangle of tearful agony, punctuated by his attempts to burrow through the rug beneath him.

"I will not," Snape growled. "I am not his servant."

"There no escaping it, Severus," Malfoy growled in return, sounding as though he thought Snape dimwitted.

"I. Have. No. Mark." Snape managed.

The figures in the room who had gathered to watch his breaking all paused at this. Malfoy flipped Snape onto his side with his toe and cancelled the binding on his

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wrists. Snape was certain this revelation was only going to result in more torture, but he did not care. To him it was the ultimate denial of his previous mistakes. Snape's arms were leaden and he could barely sit up. He was manhandled to a sitting position on the rug and his arm jerked hard. Someone gasped when his sleeve was pulled back.

"That is impossible," MacNair said. "How could that be?"

Snape raised his eyes to the speaker and tried to come up with a rejoinder worthy of taking to his grave. "You cannot understand... redemption," he said tiredly over his scratchy throat. His body felt close to giving out and he wryly considered that redemption was about all he had left.

"Make him scream some more, Master," MacNair said eagerly. "He does not break down when Lucius torments him," he criticized, garnering a sharp look from his associate.

Voldemort raised his wand and aimed it at Snape's chest. "He truly betrayed me?" he asked in confusion. A ripple passed through the room. This ground had been covered several times.

"Yes," Malfoy said with continued patience, very much not in his usual nature.

Voldemort still held back. "Why do I not just make him mine again?"

Snape's hands were free right now, so he resisted rubbing his forearm at that comment so as to not attract attention to that fact.

"He must be under your will before he is given a mark," Malfoy explained. "Otherwise he will weaken you rather than adding his strength."

Snape's shoulders tried to slump in relief. It required every last ounce of his will to sit there on his feet without moving, hoping for an opportunity to take away one of the wands carried in loose fingers around him.

"We should kill him then," Voldemort stated in a monotone, "so that he cannot weaken me."

"He cannot weaken you, Master," Malfoy assured him. "If you are weakening, perhaps you should sit..."

Malfoy fussed over his charge as Voldemort murmured. "I would be stronger... where is it... the last crux?"

"He is still asking for that?" Greyback demanded. "You said he had quitted it?"

"He had," Malfoy insisted. "We have them all. Merton used them up. They have been emptied."

Greyback knelt on one oddly jointed knee and said, "Lord, I, Greyback, the most physically powerful of your servants will fetch what you desire. But you must tell me what it is."

There was no response. Voldemort simply muttered quietly to himself, eyes narrow and far away. The others in the room also murmured and shook their heads. Only

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Snape thought he knew what Voldemort referred to. He dropped his gaze to the dreadful diamond pattern woven into the rug, which for the last desperate hours had been his quiet and unchanging companion.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



# BATTLE WOUNDED

“Master,” Lucius Malfoy said, bowing as he followed Voldemort out to the landing with its grand, grey marble railing. “Are you certain you should be moving about so?”

The disturbing visage of Lockhart stopped and said, “Your overbearing care grows tiresome Lucius. If you cease to do my bidding, you will feel my wrath.”

Malfoy stepped back, bowing again, face pained and disturbed. Behind him, Bellatrix hovered, also appearing startled, but then she smiled maliciously at Malfoy. Voldemort stepped boldly to the top of the grand staircase and looked down upon the broad view of the large, empty hall, lit marvelously by the sun, which streamed in through the gauzy curtains. Bellatrix sidled over to her colleague and whispered, “It is almost as though you do not wish our Lord to recover himself, Lucius.”

“That’s not true,” Malfoy replied loudly, but Bellatrix snorted.

A brightly dressed figure emerged silently from a ground floor doorway and began to cross the hall, head bent over a letter.

“Who is that?” Voldemort asked, sounding more his distant and uncertain self. “I have not seen that witch among my followers before.”

Malfoy stepped forward and taking on the attitude of a butler, said, “That is my son’s fiancée, Master.”

Draco appeared from the other side of the landing, also moving in silence. “That is my wife,” he corrected.

Lucius waved his hand dismissively. “Some or another elopement was involved.”

Voice low and vicious, Draco replied, “You were in prison and mother said a big

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party would give her a headache.”

“Where is your mother?” Lucius asked.

Draco’s face took on a cruel grin. “Helping the house-elves, I expect.”

Lucius’ eyes narrowed. Bellatrix took a step back to get out from between the two of them, face cocked in amusement. Voldemort’s voice interrupted their cross-armed standoff. “Bring her up here.”

Draco’s shoulders fell. His father’s cruel grin meant he would get no support there. He strode down the long, wide staircase that curled even wider at the bottom and urged Pansy to follow him up. She nearly stumbled upon seeing who waited at the very top. Lucius was stating grandly, “Ms. Parkinson, you should be honored to finally meet our great Lord. We have been remiss in giving you this opportunity.”

The red-eyed face of Lockhart stared at her intently, framed by his wild, sparse hair. “My followers are not as young and attractive as you... but they once were...” His hand gestured elegantly. “Many, many as lovely as you used to come to see me talk, some would come to my room without an invitation, even.” He stopped abruptly, seeming to try to resolve conflicting memories. He tilted his head oddly, like a lizard might. “I do miss that: the cameras, the adoration.” He reached out a hand to brush an errant lock of black hair that hung loose beside her cheek. “Do you adore me?”

Pansy swayed slightly, looking as though she may have forgotten to breathe. Draco balled his fists and looked ready for a fight, but no one moved until Lucius said, “Master, we have much to do – decisions and strategies to work out.” Voldemort ignored him. Lucius went on, “I’m afraid you are becoming distracted.”

Voldemort tugged on Pansy’s hair. “Lucius adores me in this new, very alive body,” he said, although it sounded mocking. “I’m afraid those who don’t will have to die.”

Draco’s fists rose up and he made a grab that was intercepted by his father, who had his wand at Draco’s throat in the next instant. Voldemort turned stiffly at the disturbance behind him. He took in the scene and said, “Does your son not adore me, Lucius?”

Speaking quickly and silkily, Lucius said, “No, My Lord, he does. He is simply having a bit of trouble with his priorities at the moment.”

Voldemort turned back to Pansy, who swayed dangerously, threatening to collapse backward down the very long staircase. “You seem content to make all of the decisions, Lucius, so you certainly can do so for the next half hour or so while I explore being alive again. As long as you make them in my interest, I will let you live.”

Draco’s eyes watered from the pressure of the wand stabbing into the soft flesh under his chin and he watched helplessly as Voldemort pulled again on the long loose



## BATTLE WOUNDED

lock of Pansy's hair, causing all of it to tumble out of its clasp.



Harry kept trying to find Voldemort in his mind, but he couldn't, no matter how angry or upset he felt about not knowing how Snape fared. It was as though Voldemort was blocking him out now, which meant he must know Harry had been getting in before. Ron had not yet returned and Mrs. Weasley grew more and more nervous, pacing the kitchen and gazing with no little stress out of each of the small dingy windows.

An owl arrived with a quick note written on a sweet wrapper that read: Got waylaid helping Lavender. While sniffing, Mrs. Weasley carefully folded the note and put it into her apron pocket.

Frustrated beyond his control, Harry stood and went around the long table which dominated the kitchen of the Burrow. As he approached, Hermione took up her wand, but she held it low, pointed at the floor.

"I can't stay here," Harry said.

"Do you know where they are?" Hermione honestly asked, not mocking at all. "You keep closing your eyes, but you haven't seemed anything less than grim when you open them again."

"I don't know where they are; I can't get any impressions now. I have to go to the Ministry in case something is happening. I can't stay here."

"Harry they'll come if they know-"

"I don't believe they really will," Harry returned angrily. With that burst of betrayed feeling the long dark room finally came into view again. He didn't want to be distracted by it now, though, so he sent it away easily by feeling terribly, terribly sorry for his adoptive father. That worked remarkably well; trouble was, his emotions were bruised and ached intolerably when used in this manner.

Harry calculated carefully. He took a very small step closer to his friend, saying, "Hermione. You know how terribly important this is to me."

"Harry, we're just trying to do what's best for you." Her shoulders fell in sympathy, as expected. This loosened her other arm muscles as well.

Harry, with the lightening reflexes of a Seeker, snatched the wand from her hand and Disapparated before she could even lean forward to grab for him.

Harry stepped out of the alleyway where he had arrived, despite aiming for the Ministry Atrium. Other witches and wizards were there as well, cursing their own redirection. A few gathered into a small group and whispered to each other angrily.

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Harry rushed to the phone box where a short and round old witch was shouting into the wrong end of the receiver. Others were crowding around the door impatiently. Harry pushed them aside with a Grand Flecture and slipped in. The woman's mouth fell open upon looking up at him, but he ignored her expression and took the receiver away from her. "Harry Potter to see the head of Magical Law Enforcement," he announced.

Something fell into the coin slot as they slipped downward. Harry pulled out two badges, one that read Harry Potter, MLE and the other which read Goodwich Stillingfleet, Question for Helpwitch. Harry handed over her badge and she put it on with a broadly wrinkled smile.

"Thank you, young man. Had the hardest time explaining. Always do." She patted her badge proudly as they slid through the ceiling of the atrium, which teemed with people milling about with a larger knot of them near the security desk. The woman was still talking. "Just want to find my son. Something terrible happened, my neighbor said." She sounded more resolute as she added, "I just wan' to know what happened: good or bad. Can't stand not knowin'."

Harry spent the remainder of the downward journey feeling guilty for being so wrapped up in his own problems followed by a surge of frustration that there were too many people with serious problems to be solved. He pushed aside the doors when the box reached the atrium floor and with enormous willpower, gestured for her to precede him.

"I hope you find out about your son," Harry said.

She nodded, looking less than hopeful. Harry hoped to not catch her pessimism. He rushed to the desk to the side set up for employees so that they would not have to wait in the much longer visitor's queue.

Harry told the clerk his credentials, but the milky-complected, young clerk pondered the long scroll before him, saying, "You are not on the active roster at the moment."

Harry held himself down with immense effort. "Can I be a visitor?"

The man pondered the long queue across the atrium. "Yes," he said, tacitly agreeing to handle it. "Of whom?"

Harry almost said 'Arthur Weasley', but then a more manipulative instinct said, "Tristan Rogan." Rogan had always given Harry more leeway and if Harry had ever needed it...

Rogan came down to meet Harry as expected and led him inside without comment. Back up in the Auror's office Rogan took a seat in an otherwise empty room.

"You're on duty all alone?" Harry asked. Rogan nodded. Piles of Weasley Wizard Weazes Wondrous Wake-up Wonkers wrappers littered his desk. Harry then asked,

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“Where is everyone?”

“Meeting,” Rogan replied around a sweet he had just popped into his mouth. He had a strange casualness about him as though he may not be motivated by anything short of absolute emergency.

Harry had no time to worry about his uneasiness regarding Rogan’s capacity. “Where’s the meeting?”

Rogan lazily gestured upward. “Minister’s office.”

Harry went out the door and to the stairs like a shot. There were guards this time outside the door to Bones’ office suite – two people from the Liaison office. Harry strode confidently between them as though he belonged there. A large table dominated the reception area, and nearly the entirety of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was seated around it, along with many important others. Several heads jerked hard over at Harry’s appearance. Fortunately, Tonks was not present to remind him that he had been specifically told otherwise than to be there.

Bones cleared her throat and said in her diplomatic voice, “Mr. Potter, as much as your presence is desired, I do not think we can risk it at this time.”

Harry stood behind Mr. Weasley’s chair, resisting grabbing hold of it for balance. Across from their Department Head, Shackbolt had slipped his wand into his hand, although he held it casually on the tabletop. That lack of faith did enormous damage to Harry’s control. He wavered for a long moment, making everyone more tense. “I need to be here when you find Voldemort,” he said. Several people flinched. “That’s his name,” Harry pointed out harshly. “Well, it’s the name he gave himself, anyway.” He wavered more at that confusion, desperate not to slip into that other room that kept encroaching at the edges of his vision.

Bones sat straighter in the head seat. “Nevertheless, this meeting cannot continue with you present. And I do think it is in your best interest that it continue. We are closing in, Mr. Potter.”

“I don’t have much time,” Harry said, trying desperately to explain. “They’re wearing him down.” Despite his valiant efforts, the world was now overlaid with another where someone was screaming. Harry’s steps faltered and Aaron, who’s chair he was now passing, reached out to steady him.

Inaction was utterly impossible. “I have to take care of this myself, then,” he said, unaware how far away he sounded.

Bones voice grew firm. “Mr. Potter, you are not allowed to take independent action. You could foil all of the plans-”

Harry’s Disapparating interrupted her. The room broke from its frozen tableau when the the other junior apprentices all stood. They stared at each other, but only Vineet disappeared with a good guess as to where Harry had gone.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Harry strode across Hermione's small flat toward Kali's cage. A plan was forming in his head like a living thing and he gathered it close and nurtured it as though it were his only hope. He stopped before the cage and cleared his mind of everything except his intense need to reach the only father he had ever known before it was too late. He forgot everything that ever made him doubt Snape and reached in for his ragged pet. She sniffed him but didn't fight being lifted out.

A pop! sounded as another person arrived in the flat. Harry looked up sharply at his fellow, saying, "I hope you aren't here to stop me."

Vineet bowed his head and lifted it again. "I offer my unconditional assistance."

Harry petted Kali as she tried to crawl inside his robes. "Thanks. I need it."

"I believe the others would help as well..." Vineet began, lifting his hand behind him as though offering to fetch them.

"I don't trust everyone just now," Harry said. He glanced around the room. "And more people will just get in the way. Let's get out of here before we're followed." He grabbed Vineet's arm and took them to the first place that was remote, easy to defend, and seemed unlikely for them to go.

Vineet caught himself as a gust of wind tried to knock him off his feet. He turned to take in the bay spread out before them and the grey circular fortification of the castle behind them. "Where are we?"

"Falmouth," Harry explained. It was a nice day, but since there was an entire Quidditch stadium hidden nearby, the Muggles were dissuaded from coming this way, just at the edge of the drop-off. Harry, feeling confident that they wouldn't be found here by the Ministry, shook off his cloak, gently wrapped his wand and his pet in it and placed it on the ground. "Get out your wand and guard me. If, when I open my eyes, I don't seem like myself, take every action you can against me. I have to become Voldemort to see where he is. I don't know how long this is going to take."

Vineet's eyes filled with alarm but he nodded and took a quick glance around to check for anyone in the vicinity before holding his wand out before him.

Harry closed his eyes. In the darkened room, the figure on the floor before him wasn't moving and enormous will was required to not feel so much pain that the vision would be lost. Instead, Harry directed his pain into anger and hunger to strike back, which brought the vision in the clearest yet. His other self turned and stepped dismissively away from the contorted heap on the floor.

"Perhaps you should rest, Master," Malfoy was saying.

"I am fine," came the peevish insistence from Harry's lips, but he took the nearby chair anyway and leaned back. The crumpled figure on the floor still had not moved.

Hold steady, Harry coached himself. Don't give yourself away. It's the only chance.

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Malfoy was down on one knee beside Harry's chair. "Do you desire anything, Lord?"

"Tea," Voldemort said. "Where is the young wench with the tea?"

Bellatrix came into view with a pained expression. "Would you like me to fetch you tea, My Lord?" she asked, sounding willing to do just about anything.

Harry found his own pure hatred for her. He wasn't sure if it was that or just Voldemort's orneriness that said, "You are an old hag, Bella. I was certainly not referring to you." Harry's lips tried to curl at her appalled expression. "The lovely wench where is she?"

Malfoy stepped away quickly. Harry wanted to urge Voldemort to look at Snape on the floor to better see his condition. He didn't need to; Snape shifted, drawing Harry's host's attention. A wand lifted in Harry's hand. He ached to beg him not to strike out. Snape lifted his head with effort and opened his pain-filled eyes. They narrowed with defiance as they found Voldemort, lifting Harry's spirits immensely.

Malfoy returned, rushing in the manner of a brow-beaten servant. "Your tea is coming, My Lord." He followed the aim of Voldemort's wand with his eyes. "Ah, our traitor has awakened," he sneered with malice. Snape's eyes didn't waver from glaring at Voldemort. Malfoy went on, "Shall we send a message to the boy hero to lure him into a trap?"

When Voldemort didn't respond, Malfoy grew patronizing. "It is just a suggestion, Master. I simply assumed you would wish to destroy your former nemesis." He gestured at Snape with a sadistic smile. "We have the perfect bait to lure him in." He turned to Snape and asked mockingly, "Or did you not think of that before you handed yourself over without a fight?"

"I could not fight," Snape stated hoarsely, making Harry wish Snape would shut up and ignore the git.

Malfoy stalked over, bent low. "Because you are weak," he said and struck out with a Crucio. Harry tried to shut his eyes, but he could not. He tried to make Voldemort yell stop! but he could not. His vision twisted to seeing Snape from a much lower view that was strangely distorted. Nagini, Harry realized quickly and tried to back out, but he had already been snared again.

Harry could feel the stiff wind and the sun on his body in Falmouth. He tried to use that as an anchor to remain himself, at least partially. Voldemort had used Nagini to trap him last time, he remembered, holding himself from panicking just yet. The sun felt reassuringly warm and, nearby, Vineet waited patiently. If Harry opened his eyes without recovering, everyone would still be safe given how hard his fellow could strike out with an attack. Harry relaxed at that and felt Nagini's grip loosen.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Potter,” Voldemort uttered, low and long.

“Yes, Master. We will get him,” Malfoy said with pleasant reassurance, as though Voldemort were a child.

Snape lifted his head and said, “He will destroy you,” with immense confidence, and some version of Harry swallowed hard.

Voldemort didn’t reply; he was pulling Harry in again, tethering him in parallel with Nagini. Harry struggled, but panic only fed his enemy, so he stopped and waited for a better opportunity to break loose. He and Voldemort stared at Snape who was pushing himself to sit up. He seemed to barely possess the strength required for this movement.

Snape’s shoulders stuck up starkly, too tired to prop his weight up, but his eyes remained defiant. “He will destroy you... same as last time,” he repeated. More tauntingly, he said, “Or don’t you remember...?”

“... Gilderoy.” Snape added slowly, as though savoring the name.

Harry broke free when Voldemort’s thoughts froze. His own thoughts were churning madly, wondering if Snape’s sanity had slipped, but if so, why did Voldemort react so? One part of him wondered if Snape knew Harry was there and that he had needed help. In that case Snape should say where he was. Harry thought himself capable of pulling completely back into himself now, but he could not before learning where Snape was being held. He hovered, hopefully out of reach, the dark room overlaid by the veins in his eyelids, illuminated by the sun.

Frustrated, Harry growled and heard Voldemort growl at the same time. Harry said, “Where are we?” hoping Voldemort would say it too, but the growl must have been a coincidence because the Dark Lord remained silent and Vineet replied uncertainly, “Falmouth. In the case that it is me you are asking.”

Figures shifted elsewhere in the room and urgent whispering followed. Someone approached, unexpectedly in a flowery orange kimono. Tea cups rattled and Harry could just make out Pansy Parkinson shakily setting a tray on the table beside him. Beyond this sunlight-bright vision, at the far end of the room, stood a very pensive Draco Malfoy, watching Pansy’s every movement. He appeared as tortured as Snape.

Harry Occluded his mind with all the force he could muster. He opened his eyes onto the windswept grey water of the bay with its scattering of boats. “I know where they are.”

Vineet lowered his wand. Harry stooped to pick up his cloak-wrapped pet. He unfolded the cloak slowly, sorting out his thoughts as he did so to assure that they were only his own. If he held his thoughts in a state of narrow, forward-moving discipline, Kali didn’t struggle. “Lockhart,” he murmured. “What does Lockhart have to do with this?” Kali climbed into his pocket as though disliking the sunlight.

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“You have a plan?” Vineet asked tentatively.

Harry reached into his pocket and stroked the warm fur curled there. A leathery wing beat against his hand. “Yes, but you aren’t going to like it.”

Vineet held out his dark hand when Harry lifted his own in a grasping pose. Harry took his fellow’s wrist and Apparated them to an empty, gently curving drive surrounded by dark woods. He had arrived here last time by flying according to Snape’s instructions, directly into the space between the barriers surrounding the property and the barriers surrounding the manor itself.

Vineet appeared curious but did not speak, simply waited for guidance. Harry focused only on the core of his thoughts that he knew to be purely himself and pulled his pet from his pocket, petting her repeatedly. “We’re at Malfoy Manor. When we get inside... Voldemort’s mine. You can take out anyone else you feel like.”

Vineet nodded with a small bowing motion.

Harry held his pet up for inspection. “I need to get her through the barriers and inside the manor.”

“We should step closer to them, then,” Vineet suggested. Harry gestured that the Indian should lead.

They crunched along the fine grey gravel to where the first of the many smoke stained chimneys emerged high in the trees bordering the drive. Vineet held up a hand, calling for a halt. “It is right before us.”

Harry bent over the sparsely furred body clutched in his hands, pressing his nose against her quivering form. If he could connect with her the way he connected to Nagini, this would be easier. He tried to imagine himself as her, seeing out of her eyes. For an instant, he managed, but her mind was as fluttery as her wings. Stress also invaded; he was running out of time.

“I know I’m about ask an awful lot of you,” Harry said to his pet. “But I need you to do this. Go to him and behave as you normally do until I get there.” He couldn’t help smiling at the memory of her feisty nature expressing itself in the past. He straightened and said to Vineet, “Can you open a gateway all the way through for her?”

Vineet considered the lonely drive. “I can try, but there are many layers ahead.” He lifted a tentative hand like a mime might to find an invisible wall.

Harry petted his Chimrian again and said, “I’m counting on you, Kali. This is very important.” He held her out to get ready to release her.

Vineet didn’t quite drop his hand, but his posture shifted to a drooping one and he stared at Harry. “Your pet is named how?”

Harry blinked at him, thinking this was really not the time. “Kali,” he repeated.

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Vineet stared at him. He seemed to have transformed into someone else, from patient and obedient into alarmed and challenging, though at a complete loss for words.

Kali was sniffing the wind and stretching her wings. Harry could feel her eagerness to fly after being bundled up and thought these quiet seconds were giving him much-needed space to connect to her, so he let Vineet struggle without pointing out that they were in a serious hurry.

“Do you know who that is?” Vineet asked.

Harry cast his mind back. “Er, goddess of something... destruction or... Hermione named her,” he then pointed out a little defensively.

“She creates worlds and then consumes them. Over and over. This is her age, in fact.”

“It feels like it,” Harry said, thinking how very tired he was of a certain dark wizard repeatedly returning. “How do we break out of that?” he asked, truly wishing to know the answer.

“When the universe finally ends for good and is not recreated. This is the last age.”

The wind rustled the leaves around them. “Right then,” Harry said. “Gateway?” he asked, stressed and a tad sheepishly because he really needed this man’s help but somehow they had drifted far off topic; although for Vineet this seemed to be the topic.

Vineet appeared as one accepting fate and not too happy about it, if only just on principle. He lifted his hand again and closed his eyes. Presently, he opened them a crack and said, “I cannot get through all of them. But a gate is present now through the first few. She must fly as straight as possible.”

Harry stood close and tossed her through the first gateway, or where he assumed it was, floating just before Vineet’s rich brown hand. She wheeled in the breeze and came back to true when Harry urged her to do so with his mind. Electricity stung his arms when she passed through the next ward. There weren’t piles of dead birds everywhere, so perhaps she would go unnoticed. True, fly true, Harry chanted in his head when she banked to the left to counter the wind.

The gravel cut into Harry’s knees when he fell to it. Kali had struck a hard barrier full force. He could feel her clearly now, as a tumbling winged outline carved out of his mind. Bending over, hands clutched over his head to block out everything else, Harry reached out and felt her careening. Through her eyes he could see the ground crookedly rearing up. He forced her to flap, to shift her weight back and spread her rear feet for stability the way his own ungainly Animagus form needed to. The ground filled her vision but she only scraped a paw and lifted off again with a round



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of desperate flapping.

She was doing much better with his help, although it was probably mostly his strength that was creating the improvement. He made her turn at the corner of the manor and fly faster, giving her the extra energy to do so. The front door sailed by with a sparkle of spell energy. She turned again with purpose, driven by Harry. The small kitchen door, used only by the house-elves, stood ajar to ease the heat inside. Kali aimed directly for it.

Inside, the house-elves reacted wildly to the invasion. Most ducked, but one swung the broom it held. Harry wished his pet could breathe fire, but had to settle for dodging instead. The swinging door at the other end was closed. He landed on the flat of it, gripping firmly to the old wood with able claws. The door swung from Kali's momentum. A long, sunlit hall spread before him with an ostentatious sweeping staircase up one end of it. The doors on the ground floor were open and appeared well-lit. Harry made Kali flap upward to land on the banister for a rest. She was breathing heavily, her head moving up and down as she did so. Harry calmed her and listened through her ears. No sounds came from the right but there was murmuring from the left. He gave her a few breaths more break before urging her to take flight again. She glided along the corridor for more of a recovery before turning sharply into the room at the end, a darkened room that appeared much longer through a Chimrian's tiny eyes. On the floor in the middle of the farthest rug, sat Snape, hunched and worn down.

Harry's surge of emotion at his success led Kali to let out a cry that made everyone in the room turn. He could feel her zeroing in on Snape on her own, so he set her loose. Her reactions were better than his when someone spelled a netting charm at her as she careened through the crowd. She dodged expertly and swooped low to take a clawed hold of Snape's chest the way she had of the door.

"What is that?" MacNair demanded over the sound of the room erupting.

Snape's reactions had slowed, but he managed to perceive that Harry's pet was not attacking him in her frantic grab for his robes. She cried out again, piteously, this time. He put his hands on her and then around her, in a crude attempt to protect her from what appeared to be overwhelming odds. Everyone around them had their wand out, aimed.

Harry nearly collapsed flat. His forehead and hands dug in the gravel as he tried to sort out the pain that seemed to be erupting from the center of his skull.

"Harry?" Vineet asked in alarm.

Harry forced his mind closed again with near heroic effort for the second time that day. The task did not seem to get any easier with practice. "I don't know what happened. But he's found her." He pushed himself drunkenly to his knees and then,

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one leg at a time, to his feet. He brushed gravel out of his hair while he stared up the drive, trying to recover. His hands were shaking so he clutched them together firmly while trying to puzzle why Kali was suddenly in so much pain when she didn't get hit by any spells.

Straightening himself, he narrowed his eyes and focused on the trees at the bend in the drive. He tossed his quivering hands to his sides and wished he could see the manor. But he had seen it before and could picture it, which would have to suffice. He needed anger, his own, and only his own, hot consuming anger which required little effort.

Snape bent his head over the quivering form trying to burrow through his robes. He petted her repeatedly trying to calm her. His pain, however, was making her inconsolably frantic. The pain, as Malfoy had promised, continued on long after the curses had faded and now felt as though it would never fade completely. The Chimrian's clear concern for his fate did raise his spirits marginally. Strangely, he wondered whether Dumbledore would have allowed him to have a pet like her when he was a student. She was rather a nice pet. The room and Death Eaters blurred out and he imagined that he was arriving on the train with her instead of his small black owl.

Malfoy stepped close, eyes suspicious. "That... that is Potter's pet. The one that started out as my son's," he said, jarring Snape painfully out of the past. "Master, he has come," Malfoy announced.

Snape stared at him, wondering why he had not figured out himself that Harry must be close if his pet was. At least that meant this would be over soon. He gathered what he could of his dwindling will and clutched Kali tighter. Voldemort was going to die again soon, and he wanted to see that.

Malfoy gestured for some to go to the landing to get in position for an ambush. He then glanced around as though missing someone. Casting away his disturbed expression, he explained, "That is Harry Potter's pet." to the unchanging expression on Lockhart's face.

"I drew him here," Voldemort said. "I need him."

"Odd calling card, though," Malfoy muttered, turning first one way and then another as though unsure which course to take, and to Snape's relief, ignoring the speech of his master.

MacNair stepped close. "He'll try to come up here. Most should stay."

"He cannot Apparate in. Guard the doors." Malfoy gestured at the row of thickly curtained French doors that led outside to the first floor terrace.

The Death Eaters took their positions and the room fell silent.

It was Snape who started first at the noise. Malfoy apparently heard it too and

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glanced at the fire, which was burning low due to inattention.

“No,” Snape uttered in horror. He gauged the distance to the wall from the middle of the rug and decided he could do no better for position. “Harry, don’t,” he whispered, not caring that his alarm was clear to everyone.

The sound of claws scratching on metal came again, louder this time. “What is he doing?” Malfoy demanded, wand lifted to aim between Snape’s eyes after tracing along the wall, looking for a target.

This time a stranger sound came, like bony little limbs clacking together. “He is opening the gates of hell,” Snape said.

Malfoy swung his wand away. “We have driven you into madness; I see,” he quipped with a little laugh and stalked away, over to Voldemort, where he bent down and made solicitous noises.

Kali hissed. It was more than a noise; it involved a heave of her entire tiny body. Spit flew from between her long teeth. Snape loosened his grip on her. “Harry, do not travel farther than you can retreat from,” he whispered. His own agony shrunk before the significance of imminent events and a kind of limbo wrapped itself around him. His first glimpse of Dumbledore floated before him as his rational mind sought the past as a refuge from the chaos and pain of the here and now. In the Great Hall, Dumbledore’s distinctively blue eyes had individually taken in each and every new student huddled in wait for the sorting hat. Snape remembered now with a cold jarring of his heart that his own first reaction to that gaze had been fear.

When the gateway split open, it startled even Snape, who ducked, arms over his head. Glistening, dark bodies poured out of the seam between the floor and the wall as though a living avalanche. Kali became a screeching blur of claw and tooth. Other screams soon joined hers. Malfoy leapt to his master’s defense but the other figures in the room were quickly overwhelmed and toppled.

Harry broke into a run, stopping impatiently at each of the five barriers for a cancellation spell that they had to cooperate on or for a gateway that Vineet alone opened. Harry led the way around to the kitchen door. Inside, he was knocked flat by a spell from one of the meaner looking house-elves. From his position at the base of a butcher’s block, Harry lifted his wand to retaliate, but his wand slipped from his hand and zipped to the elf’s he grinned triumphantly. Vineet moved so quickly, Harry missed half of his movements. The elf took flight into the hanging copper pans from a rather awkward-looking swinging kick that nonetheless appeared well-practiced. Vineet picked Harry’s wand up and handed it to him, hesitating.

“This isn’t yours.”

“No. It’s Hermione’s; let’s go.”

Vineet took on that darkly fateful mode again where he seemed to droop. Harry

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charged past him as he stood faintly shaking his head, and led the way up the grand staircase. At the top, Harry tripped in surprise. A black robe lay splayed open, gnawed half away. Blood soaked the marble floor. A creature with rancid yellow eyes chewed at the bloody corner of the sleeve. It charged at Harry, who backed up while gathering his wits. Vineet stood frozen nearby, one foot poised on the second-to-last step.

Harry had sent the creatures back away, he had believed; although doing that from a distance had felt a little weak. The snarling thing lunged for his foot. Harry snarled back, exuding confidence, and stepped forward into the attack, hand held up, palm out. The creature reeled to the side in a panic and scuttled away on one tentacle and two claws. Harry raised his head and willed it away, it and another that was creeping along the nearby wall. The creatures sunk into the white marble and disappeared.

Vineet was much slower in following this time, but he caught up with Harry at the end of the corridor, where more empty, tattered robes lay scattered. Just in the doorway, a teeth-marked thigh bone stood, half sunk into the floor as though it was being pulled down when the gateway was closed on it. Harry didn't glance back at his fellow this time, just plunged ahead.

His wand was raised, which was the only way he managed to counter the attack that flared from the other end of the room. Malfoy stood near the hearth, bodily guarding someone else. Blood ran heavily from a gash on his cheek. Harry, despite aching to do otherwise, couldn't risk taking his eyes off his enemies to check his guardian's status. Kali's hiss of greeting indicated that she, at least, was all right. Harry stepped forward slowly, trying to judge the figure on the floor out of the corner of his eye. Malfoy threw another curse at him, which Harry countered. Hermione's wand was nearly as good as his own in defense, but Harry doubted it would do as well on attack.

"Protect Severus," Harry whispered when he felt a figure at his shoulder. Vineet moved to obey.

Harry raised his wand and fired a blasting curse for cover. It flared with only half the expected power and was countered with no effort. He had to think like Hermione for her wand to work properly, he considered. The tip felt light and flexible when he waved it. Ollivander's voice describing Harry's mother's wand came back to him: Swishy, nice wand for charm-work. With a clear image of the spell in his mind, Harry cast a bumblebee charm. A giant swarm flowed out of the wand and rushed across the room in an arrow-shaped mass landing on Malfoy's wand and hand despite his waving them away. There were so many, his hand grew to resemble Hagrid's for size. He waved his bee-infested hand violently to shake them off, and he shouted curses

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that sent many falling to the floor like hail, but a second later, his wand was soaring out of the smashed open doorway, borne in the center of the swarm. Harry waved a prison box around him and then stood facing the man who had been in Malfoy's shadow.

"Voldemort," Harry uttered mockingly. "Really?"

The red eyes narrowed, making Harry have to resist scratching his scar. He wondered why it didn't burn instead and hoped that meant this version of his nemesis was too weak to make that happen, but he suspected that somehow it was the opposite... that they were too similar this time as Ron surmised.

Between them, Vineet had lifted Snape to his feet and backed him to the wall, shielding him with his body. Vineet's blocks being what they were, Harry felt touched by this. That shook him loose from being drawn into Voldemort's mind, which had started to happen again without his notice.

"You are the last piece, Harry," Lockhart's visage said.

"You can't have me," Harry insisted and sent a freezing charm at him.

Voldemort cast one of his own to match but the spells didn't cancel as expected. Ice ran up Lockhart's arm and had to be tossed aside in a shower of shards. Sharp red eyes came around to Harry. "You do not have your own wand."

"Nope. Lost it," Harry replied pleasantly. His own arm stung with cold too, but he ignored it. He cast a block as Voldemort's attacking spell came and lanced out with an eel charm this time, aimed only at Voldemort's wand, so that it would not impact him as well. Hermione's wand liked charms. They leapt eagerly from the tip rather than needing to be pushed out with concentrated effort. But charms were not what he would prefer to attack with and he had to struggle with his own instincts to strike out with curses. "Are you sure you're Voldemort?" Harry taunted when the flying eel persisted in pestering his opponent. "You look like Gilderoy Lockhart to me."

Voldemort hesitated less than Harry had hoped. He cast a curse in response and seemed only to have grown angrier. Harry stepped back from the force of the spell. He had been counting on that distraction and now tried to think quickly of something else.

"You doubt who I am?" Voldemort asked in a voice that Harry did not fail to recognize as the Dark Lord's. The next instant the world twisted and Harry stumbled. Cold prickled him over all of his skin and his view shifted disconcertingly to the other end of the room. Voldemort's voice came through the confusion. "You, who are part of me, doubt who I am?"

Harry righted himself and held up his wand. Kali hissed at him. His view was nauseatingly disorienting, but he could still aim if he really tried hard. He struck

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out with another freezing charm, but a flare of fire consumed it. "I may be part of you, but you are NOT part of me," Harry snarled. The violent tugging on his mind allowed him to find the outlines of Voldemort the way Kali's striking the barrier had allowed him to find her in his mind. He straightened, pulling thoughts of sympathy and caring for his friends from his memory, filling his thoughts with them.

Voldemort lifted his chin. "That only goes so far now, Harry. You are no longer the powerfully pure child you were before. You are an adult this time, and you have steeped yourself too long in darkness to wield the sword of light against me." Voldemort's voice dropped and he grinned Lockhart-style, which contrasted bizarrely with his crimson eyes. "I feel the rest of my memories with you this close. You have those... and other skills that I want." He smiled more wickedly and held out his hand invitingly. It was a young hand, well-manicured. "And I will have them as soon as take what is mine..."

"No!" Harry shouted, forcing alarm and his increasing heart rate down. He held his wand out straighter. He was learning to ignore Nagini's view of events with its fish-eye distortion. "I'm stronger than you, you bastard," he insisted, believing it all the way to his thudding heart. Using only his own anger, which had laid resting too long for fear of losing himself, he tossed a rapid string of charms at Voldemort. They were ones from the drills they had practiced day after day in training, and they rolled out without need for his careful attention. "I'm whole, for one thing," Harry mocked, battering himself too as each spell struck his opponent. With each subsequent spell he had to force himself not to shirk from the abuse that was coming full circle back to him.

A Crucio struck out at Harry, dropping him to his knees, but the attack stopped immediately and Harry was free suddenly of the tug on his mind as well. He jumped back to his feet. "Can't take it, can you?" Harry mocked. Voldemort, bent over from the pain of his own curse, raised his wand, looking malicious. "Go ahead," Harry said invitingly, even lowering his wand fractionally. "You will get hit too."

Voldemort hesitated, apparently not one for self-inflicted pain. Harry used that instant to lash out with a whip charm. As it stung his own chest badly enough to suck his breath away, Lockhart's figure doubled over. Harry stepped forward, hitting the helpless figure with a weak blasting curse that nevertheless crumpled him farther. Harry quickly picked himself up from his knees where the pain from the curse had dropped him too and strode forward aggressively.

"You're pathetic," Harry said as he approached. He was furious at the notion that this mere shadow had caused so much disruption, had hurt his friends and family so badly. Voldemort's wand came around to aim up at him, but Harry knocked it away with a Bludger charm that he cast on a crystal ball resting on a narrow side table.

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The crystal cracked the wood paneling before crashing to the floor and splitting open. Voldemort grabbed his injured hand and curled around it, looking much more like Gilderoy Lockhart as he did so.

Harry picked up Voldemort's wand, focusing only on the core of himself, ignoring the pain that had flared in his own hand as though a railroad spike may have gone through it. He stood over his enemy and carefully switched Voldemort's wand for Hermione's in his uninjured left hand and aimed it at Lockhart's chest, which rose and fell rapidly beneath his black robe.

"You've been far too much trouble," Harry uttered angrily. Red eyes opened and turned toward him. Something tugged on his mind again. "You can't have me," Harry said. He bit his lip momentarily. "And this is the last time I suffer through your return," he vowed. A pause ensued during which both of their breathing slowed. Harry was too angry to think and his anger was giving Voldemort a way into him. He let go of some of it to buy time, and wondered how to kill the sorry excuse for a wizard lying helpless before him. There didn't seem to be a way to do it that wouldn't sacrifice himself as well. He could not find the same love-filled Forbidden Curse in himself now. Voldemort was right: it was the product of being a child. Nothing in him was so purely simple now and causing death would be handing himself over to darkness.

The vertical irises of Voldemort's eyes constricted, his chin tilted to the side inhumanly. He was still attempting to grab hold of Harry. "That isn't going to work," Harry promised. He wrapped Lockhart's legs in a binding curse to stall, still uncertain how to proceed. He thought with alarm of how much the dark tendrils would feed on him if he simply murdered Voldemort outright. The heavy scent of the scattered blood-soaked robes surrounding them repelled him too from causing more death.

The only sound in the room was the breeze outside in the trees until Vineet's voice interrupted his musings. "What are you waiting for?"

"I don't want him coming back again," Harry said, sounding less confident than he had felt just seconds ago. What would Dumbledore do? he wondered. Last time, he had left it up to Harry with scant advice as to how to proceed. The burst of annoyance at that thought made the pain in Voldemort's broken hand throb sharply in Harry's own before fading again. "There are worse things than death, Tom," Harry quoted Dumbledore, hoping understanding of that mysterious statement would flow from speaking it.

Something flickered behind Lockhart's red eyes. Harry's own widened as he followed the pathways of knowledge which had just opened like a blossom before him. Voldemort feared death, that's why he had cleaved his soul so many times. Death many times over hung in the room waiting to be drawn upon. "No. Worse than

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

death,” Harry breathed, feeling elated and faintly dizzy at the knowledge that was so clear now. Harry could feel the power to make a Crux Horridus thrumming through his hand and the wand that was the twin of his own. It was so simple what he needed to do, he nearly laughed.

“If I don’t kill you, you can’t come back from the dead,” Harry said, face cracking into a strained smile. Voldemort’s eyes shifted again. “Oh, you think you fear death more than anything else,” Harry added, reading the currents of thought behind the queer eyes. “That isn’t quite true.”

Harry reached down with the wand and circled it slowly as the knowledge urged him. The heaviness of death and the scent of blood, still wet and radiant, gathered in close as the spell built. Lockhart tried to squirm away, but Harry pressed his foot down on his arm and held it there, careful not to lean hard enough to distract himself with new pain. Lockhart was just another vessel like the others into which someone had poured power and it had not yet taken up firm residence. It pulling loose with ease as the spell tugged on it. Sparking white cotton began gathering on the wand Harry held. He backed off, still turning his hand in a circle to keep the spell active; he did not want to remove all of what had been added, that would simply leave him where he had been at the beginning of all of this. Instead, like an adept spinner with a bag of wool, he plucked out just the exact tangled threads he wanted. The ball of faintly crackling blue-white energy rapidly gathered on itself. Harry drew the wand away and held it straight up until all of the trailing sparkles faded. The slippery weight of death in the air had faded, gathered up with the wooly energy, binding it together.

Harry closed his eyes a moment. His heart raced in his ears. He cracked open the gateway to the Dark Plane and threw the glowing cottony ball of power off the wand and into the gap before slamming it closed again. No one moved. Harry half-expected an explosion, but there was no sound, and no more light flickered than was already coming in the damaged French door with its torn curtain.

Harry’s eyes came to rest on Nagini’s unblinking ones staring over the edge of a rope basket in front of the darkened hearth. Harry wasn’t sure what to do with her any more than he quite knew what to do with himself. He turned to his companion, still standing guard before Snape. Worryingly, Snape had slumped to his knees and leaned heavily on the wall behind him. Harry tossed Voldemort’s wand down and stepped over to his adoptive father, horribly grateful that he was alive, that Harry had come in time.

Without straightening his back, Snape raised his chin. His eyes still held the same pain Harry had seen earlier in Voldemort’s vision. Vineet moved to guard Voldemort even though Harry said, “Don’t bother.”



## BATTLE WOUNDED

"I knew you would come," Snape said, but not in his normal voice, in one that wavered uncharacteristically.

Harry plucked Kali out of the way off of Snape's shoulder and pulled him forward with his other arm, pressing his ragged brow into his ribs. "Of course I came," he said lightly. He felt dizzy but intensely relieved to have succeeded. "Had to get rid of the bastard anyway," he added, trying to find some much needed cocky confidence. He felt cut down, reduced, now that everything was calm.

He squeezed Snape's shoulder harder. "You all right?" Harry asked, thinking that Snape did not seem at all himself and in fact felt odd, as though he were repellent. Kali fluttered in Harry's other hand.

"Dumbledore would not let me keep such a familiar," Snape stated, reaching toward Kali.

"What?" Harry queried. He crouched, still holding Snape steady, trying to look him in the eye to judge that strange statement better.

Snape gazed at Kali, fluttering as though she had difficulty perching on Harry's hand. "Too much like Fawkes," he said, sounding very far away.

Harry's blood ran icy. Snape had been tortured too long and seemed to be losing his grip on reality.

"Vishnu," Harry stood and said in alarm, "Can you take care of..." He began to gesture at the blonde figure on the floor, whose dim red eyes were fixed on him.

"You wish me to take Voldemort..." Vineet began hesitantly, clearly startled.

Harry frowned, duty feeling a terribly weighty burden. "I guess I should... be the one to explain." He gestured at Snape. "Severus needs a Healer. Can you take him to Mungo's?"

Vineet moved quickly to support Snape's wavering balance so that Harry could let go of him. Harry said, "See that he gets the Auror's Healer, Shankwell, all right?" Harry dearly hoped the Healer could help him.

Vineet nodded. "I am, of course, remembering him." He helped Snape to his feet, holding most of his weight to keep him there. He turned to Harry with a sharp, almost reprimanding gaze.

Harry found quick annoyance at this. "What's wrong?"

Vineet hesitated, "You summoned the Rakshasas."

"I told you you weren't going to like what I was going to do," Harry pointed out smartly. He was feeling himself more and more by the moment and reveled in his newly safe annoyance.

Vineet stared at him a breath longer before drawing his wand and drawing a slow circle of yellow light around him and his burden. He then put his hand on the wall and closed his eyes. With a pop! they were gone.

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Harry stood in the quiet room staring at the prison box containing Malfoy, the wizard who had reduced his guardian to a state of tenuous sanity. Harry stepped over and kicked the box a few inches, making it topple. Lockhart's red, but no longer glowing eyes, watched him do this.

Kali gave a cry. Harry pulled her in closer and took his first good look at her. Her wings were torn and most of her front left foot was missing. She repeatedly tried to put it down but then had to jerk it up and fuss at it with her mouth. These injuries on top of her previous ragged state left her sorely wretched. Harry petted her tenderly. "You've suffered more than anyone else during all of this, haven't you?" he said to her, feeling aching sympathy for her, sympathy not burdened, layered, or tethered to anyone else's emotion. Her pain bled through to him, ghostly, as though he had wings right now too.

Harry waved a prison box around Lockhart and sighed into the quiet of the room. He thought of Hagrid, whom he suspected would still be at Hogwarts. With new determination he turned away from the boxes and strode out of the broken door and onto the wide terrace. Decorative urns stood at the corners with flowering plants growing out of them. Kali's pleasure at escaping the room made him elated as well and they both deeply breathed in the fresh air. Harry strode to the edge and looked out over the drive splitting the forest. He was presumably still inside the manor's barriers. Kali curled up in the crook of Harry's arm, trusting that he would take care of things or simply happy enough just to have him back. Harry was glad to have himself back too, although he wished he didn't feel so strangely empty, as though his emotions resided alone in a large hall with too much space around them.

He felt a bit jealous of Vineet's ability to open a gateway, peeved almost, and this made him hesitate taking flight. He ought to be able to Apparate away too, barriers or not. Kali's injuries hummed in him, grating on his bones. Terrible to have damaged wings, he thought; nothing could be worse. Hagrid, he thought, he needed to get to Hagrid. He could feel this wish resonating inside of her as well and almost laughed.

"Let's see what we can do," Harry muttered aloud. He closed his eyes and fell through the cracked cement of the terrace and into the Dark Plane. He arrived on his knees with Kali burrowing frantically into his sleeve while snarling. "It's all right," he said to her, maneuvering her into his pocket.

Something howled pitifully in the distance. Claws scabbled nearby, investigating. "I'd have thought you'd be well fed," Harry commented to the noises.

Kali's panic was bleeding into him so he did not have time to walk. Hurrying, he imagined Hagrid's cottage, fixed it clear as a photograph in his mind, but upside-down, and Apparated. He didn't know if that was going to work, hadn't thought of

## BATTLE WOUNDED

trying it before now, but when he opened his eyes he was in a different stretch of grey tufted land. Different scrabbling sounded nearby. Harry turned and found himself facing the wretched werewolf. “Everyone else got something to eat,” Harry said to it, grinning a bit at his own poor joke. “Next time I’ll try to bring you something.” The werewolf sniffed the ground and blinked at him.

Harry grabbed hold of the wiry, trembling bundle in his pocket and fell again. Hagrid’s cottage stood before him. He glanced behind him at the hulking grey castle wall with its looming tower and let out a joyous laugh at having arrived well inside the castle’s infamous barriers.

“Harry?” Hagrid said in confusion from the middle of his pumpkin patch. Harry had not seen him there. He was giving Harry a very odd look.

“Kali’s hurt,” Harry said, pulling his pet out into the light.

As soon as the half-giant got a look at the miserable bundle Harry held up before him, he completely forgot that Harry had appeared out of nowhere, just as Harry intended.

“Ah, le’s have a look at her now.” He carried Kali inside and shifted a small pot of black goo, from the shelf above Fawkes’ perched, onto the fire. “You are a sad little thing,” he cooed to Harry’s pet, despite the fact that she had just sunk her long teeth fully into his pinky finger, quite a feat given that she was not even as large as Hagrid’s pinky.

A minute later, he told Harry to pull the pot off of the fire and with a cotton swab, he dabbed the tarry substance onto her injured foot and along a nasty laceration Harry hadn’t seen that went clear to her ribs. Hagrid then, with surprising grace, considering that he was working with a creature so small compared to his hands, spread her wings out on the table and ran the tar along the torn edges. Spread out like a ruined specimen from some macabre collection, she did not look as though she could ever fly again.

“I’ll have to get Professor Sprout to sew her wings up. I can’t do that kinda work on somethin’ so tiny, but she has the hands for it.” He gathered Kali up as he spoke, almost disregarding Harry in his single-minded concern for a creature put into his care.

Harry held the heavy cottage door open for him since Hagrid was cradling Kali in both massive hands. “If you see Professor McGonagall,” Harry said, “can you give her a message?”

“Ay, she’s here,” Hagrid said as though just remembering something important. “Got all hot un’er the collar with Bones, ‘parrently, after finding Perfessor Flitwick dead. She left the Express to look for him after more help arrived. She’s s’posed to rejoin it, but Pomfrey insisted she rest for an hour.”

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“Good for her, getting mad at Bones,” Harry said, despite a voice that insisted that Bones hadn’t behaved nearly as bad as Fudge. “You lost Professor Flitwick?”

Hagrid nodded and used the corner of his waistcoat to dab his nose. Harry now noticed the rings around his eyes that must have been there before, but Harry himself had been too distracted earlier to notice.

Harry frowned, hoping things were finally turning around for the better; he was tired of losing people. He patted Hagrid’s elbow in sympathy. “Bones is who I have to go deal with right now, in fact. Can you tell Minerva that Voldemort’s taken care of but that Severus is at St. Mungo’s. Can you ask her to go make sure he gets proper care? I sent him with my fellow apprentice, but I think she’ll know better what he needs.”

Hagrid halted, stooped low in his own doorway. He turned to Harry. “You took care o’ He-Who-... already?”

“Yes,” Harry assured him. “But please send Minerva to St. Mungo’s,” Harry repeated, dearly wanting Hagrid to remember that part. “Have Fawkes take her.” Over by the hearth, the bird fluffed himself at the sound of his name.

“Ah, that bird doesna mind anyone,” Hagrid grumbled.

“No?” Harry asked, still holding the door. He turned back to the phoenix. “That’s because you don’t know his secret,” he said in a falsely pleasant voice. Fawkes flapped his wings and gave a squawk.

Hagrid turned and ducked his head back inside the cottage. “Wha’s this?”

Harry stared at the bird. “You never change back, do you? You probably can’t. You’d turn to dust if you did, wouldn’t you?” When Hagrid glanced at Harry in consternation, he explained, “He’s Godric Gryffindor, who has simply stayed in his Animagus form all of these years. One way to live forever, I guess.” The bird tilted its head at them, changing from one sharp angle to another.

Hagrid didn’t speak right away, but he finally said, “That so?”

Harry said, “I have to go. Thank you for taking care of Kali.” With that, Harry disappeared. Hagrid caught the door with his foot and eyed the brightly colored bird across from him, ignoring that Harry had just repeated the supposedly impossible.

Harry stepped through the broken door from the terrace and found Draco Malfoy hovering over the prison box containing his father.

“Not thinking of letting him out, are you?” Harry asked.

Draco started, not having heard Harry come in. His gaze then went a little strange as though something about Harry was additionally unexpected. “No,” Draco said. The box cursed him with language more foul than Harry had ever heard. Draco kicked the box and it fell silent.

“I’m surprised at you, Draco,” Harry said.

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“Get them out of here before I kill them both,” Draco hissed with such vehemence, it gave Harry pause.

“Right-O,” Harry said pleasantly.

Draco lifted his wand to point it at Harry’s face. “If I ever see him again I’m going to come after you in revenge,” he spat.

Harry gently pushed Draco’s hand aside. “I’ll do my best,” he said, unprovoked and very happy to be. Control had been returned to him: he could get angry when he wanted and let things slide when he didn’t; it was wondrous.

Draco eyed him with some suspicion and then stalked away like a man defeated and angry about it.

“You all right, Draco?” Harry asked.

Draco pulled himself around and then upright although his eye twitched. “As soon as they’re gone for good, I can put things back together and then maybe I will be.”

“Speaking of which,” Harry said, turning to the basket by the hearth, which to his relief, still contained Nagini. The snake stared at him. There was nothing inherently evil about her, she simply hosted evil. “Sorry about this,” Harry said, and blasted her out of existence with a fire charm. A secondary explosion of magic followed the initial one, making both of them duck for long, sizzling seconds. Afterward, Harry stared at the glowing, cindered rope that piled in a coil on the hearth. He felt even more acutely empty now.

Draco said, “Why the devil don’t you just kill the Dark Lord too?” He waved his arm at the bloodied robes surrounding him. “Not as though you held back with your little army of nightmares, Potter.”

Harry found himself needing to be understood. “I thought if I didn’t kill him, then he couldn’t come back from the dead.”

Draco’s mouth puckered to the side. “Twisted bit of logic, that. And I have a feeling that from now on you are going to do as you wish.” He turned and stalked away with, “Bloody hell.” On his way out, he kicked a stray skull out of his path, so cleaned by tiny teeth that it gleamed.

Harry watched Draco’s shadow shorten after he turned the corner and then counted the robe remains strewn in this room. There were seven. He and Vineet had seen three on the way up. That made ten. “Damn,” Harry said. That left a lot of them roaming free. Strange to wish for more death, but it was hard not to in this case.



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Hagrid ducked and entered the soothing shade of the plants that crowded greenhouse three. Professor Sprout sat on a tall stool, attacking the roots of a Whiskwire vine with a small hatchet. Chips of metal flew from the hatchet when it hit an especially hard tendril. Professor McGonagall sat nearby, hands folded in her lap, one of them heavily bandaged, looking as though she wanted to be more calm than she was managing. They both greeted Hagrid.

“Ah, Perfessor, I need your fine hands for some sewing, if you can put down yer ax fer a moment.”

Sprout sighed and pushed her work aside. After the workbench was cleared and cleaned, Hagrid spread Kali’s wings out and held her down with great care, suffering only two bites that didn’t even break his thick skin.

McGonagall stared at the animal while Sprout threaded a needle. She blinked and seemed to come out of a trance. “That’s Harry’s pet.”

“Yep,” Hagrid said and then his face contorted. “Oh, yeah, I have message for you.”

“From Harry?” McGonagall asked sharply.

“Yeah,” Hagrid hesitated then, wondering if he should explain other things about Harry. “He said to tell you that You-Know-Who has been taken care of and that Professor Snape was at St. Mungo’s... oh, and would you please see to it that he gets properly taken care of.” Hagrid stared at the glass ceiling above him. “Yeah, that was it.”

McGonagall stood so suddenly, her stool rocked and nearly fell backward. Sprout said, “Minerva, Poppy said an hour.”

“Poppy’s with the train and it’s been a half-hour, I’m going. Have to get my broomstick, though.”

“Do you want Fawkes?” Hagrid asked.

McGonagall stopped and rotated around on her toes. “Will he take me?”

“Yup, he will now.” Hagrid gave a great whistle that shook the panes of glass in the greenhouse, but in a burst of feathers, Fawkes arrived and hovered in the air before them.

“Well, look at that. How in the world...?”

“ ‘arry told me the old bird’s secret,” Hagrid said. Fawkes gave a great squawk. “But I best not pass it on. He’ll take you though.”

McGonagall held out a hand and Fawkes landed on it and preened spasmodically. “How did Harry know?”

Hagrid shrugged. “Have to ask ‘im yerself. But... about Harry...”

“Yes?” McGonagall prompted, preparing to grab onto long tail feathers.

“Nothin’,” Hagrid said and waved her off.

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With another burst, they were gone.



Harry picked up the prisoner boxes and used his new apparition trick to put himself into the alleyway outside the Ministry where he had been redirected last time. It was empty. He stepped out onto the pavement after glancing around for Muggles. Despite the sunshine, the road and pavements were deserted. A prickle started teasing at the back of Harry's neck. He took a deep breath and stepped toward the phone booth, but it had a sign reading *Out of Sorts* hanging in the doorway and it was chained closed with a padlock that sparkled with more than sunlight. Harry slunk back to the alleyway. He instinctively did not want to show off his new skills by putting himself directly inside when security was supposed to be preventing it.

A doorway opened behind him, where he didn't think there had been one before, and Mrs. Stillingfleet stepped out, the woman Harry had ridden down in the booth with last time. She had a large-bellied man with her who was wearing overalls and looking grim.

"Hello," Harry said, stepping over quickly before the brick doorway could close.

"Mr. Potter," the woman said. "Surprising to see you..."

"Is it?" Harry asked, wondering with a small tremor if the Ministry had printed wanted posters for him already. The opening in the brick wall behind her was fast shrinking. "Is that the new way in?" Harry asked, hoping for another convenient change of subject.

"Yep," the man said. He turned and tapped the bricks in a pattern and the wall re-opened.

Harry slipped through, nodding back at them in thanks, although the old woman gave him an alarmed gaze in return. The wall closed again, leaving Harry in darkness. He had the sensation of falling even though his feet stayed on the ground. The world settled and a lamp appeared some distance away. Harry walked toward it. The same pale-skinned young man sat at a small desk in the middle of what seemed to be a large empty space. He looked harried and his hands shook. "Name?" he demanded, voice echoing.

"I was just here," Harry said, "Harry Potter."

"Right," the man said, and began laboriously checking his lists. "Special instructions, it says. Inform Minister for Magic."

"That's exactly where I'm going," Harry assured him. "Straight to her office," he added chummily, trying to get away as fast as possible. He handed over Hermione's

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wand which was weighed and handed back. He realized with sweaty palms that he had left Voldemort's behind at the Malfoy's.

"Well, don't make any stops on the way," the man said. "I don't have an escort for you right now and I have to watch the desk."

The prickles moved from the back of Harry's neck to dance on his chest. "Why was the entrance changed?" Harry asked.

"S damaged," the man replied, "n it needs to be repaired. Only employees let in now anyways. Doorway only 'lows authorized Ministry staff to open it and mos' Departments are closed right now."

Harry glanced back at the blackness behind him. He couldn't make out the bricks in the low light.

"Atrium's that way," the man said, pointing off to his left. He sat down and began making notations in the large logbook that dominated the desk.

Harry stepped into the darkness and tall hidden doors parted before him, revealing a dimly lit atrium. The poor lighting was a blessing; the atrium was in shambles. The gates had been pulled halfway down and hung like a sagging harp behind the reception desk which had been toppled. Parchments were strewn everywhere although it looked as though someone had used a spell to clean up the area around the remains of the desk. The floor was blackened before several of the hearths. The paintings were missing and chunks of gold leafed frame lay against the wall. The statue in the fountain was intact but the cement ring had been smashed and water puddled a large part of the floor.

Harry backed out and returned to the desk. "What happened?"

The man looked up and stared at Harry. "Riots. Public got wind that You-Know-Who was back and had attacked the Hogwart's express and they went mad. They thought the dark mark had been put up over the train, they thought the Minister herself was under an Imperio and had given up the train to appease You-Know-Who." The man's upper lip quivered as he said this. "They were nutters, every last one of 'em."

Harry's arms were growing tired of carrying the prison boxes. He stretched his neck and shifted the weight around on his fingers. "Merlin," he said. He went back to the atrium. The gates had been propped open with a broken broomstick and only two lifts were functional. Harry turned and eyed the still darkened reception area that ironically did not seem nearly as damaged now in comparison to the atrium. Harry thought of stopping at the floor before, but he wasn't in the mood to talk to Mr. Weasley, so he pressed the button for level one and waited while the floors slid by. The quiet Ministry felt like death too and Harry shivered.

The guards on the door to Minister Bones' office did stop him this time. One



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of them held a wand on him while the other went inside to say that he was there. Bones' voice tiredly told them to let Harry in.

Flanked by the guards, Harry stepped into the reception area of the office suite where six staff were working frantically including Percy Weasley. Things were only disorganized here by nature rather than by malice and Harry felt warmer. He set the boxes on the floor at Bones' feet. She stood, hands on hips, seeming in conflict about how to deal with him. Harry said, "Malfoy and Voldemort."

The office broke into panic, all except Belinda, who sat at her desk mutely staring at him.

"You brought Voldemort here, Mr. Potter?" Bones exclaimed. Half of her staff had taken up hiding in her office. The guards also ran off, but Harry suspected it was to fetch reinforcements.

Harry frowned. "I rendered him harmless and brought him here. I thought you'd want to know first-hand what had happened. If you don't, I'll be on my way... I have other things I need to do."

His attitude hardened her alarm into movement. She inspected the boxes and while holding her wand on them, said, "Let's hear your report, Mr. Potter."

Harry found himself faced with explaining exactly what he had done; something he had somehow neglected to foresee. Running footsteps approached and Mr. Weasley, Shacklebolt, and Kerry Ann appeared in the doorway accompanied by the guards. "Harry," Mr. Weasley said in surprise, but he lowered his wand.

"Says he has Voldemort in one of these boxes," Bones stated.

Harry cancelled the box and let Lockhart topple out onto the floor. Six wands were pulled out to aim at him. The crumpled figure raised its head and looked around at the crowd. It was Shacklebolt who broke the stunned silence with, "Gilderoy Lockhart?"

Harry was grateful to be able to tell part of the story without risk to himself. "Merton turned him into Voldemort by emptying the Crux Horridi into him. Voldemort had left them behind to make himself hard to kill. Merton got them from the Malfoys. Nagini, who was another one, I destroyed." Harry wondered with an acute twinge exactly what he was going to do about himself.

"Why did you bring him to the Minister's office?" Shacklebolt asked in disbelief.

"He's harmless now," Harry said, "I made him into a Muggle." Harry was thinking he really needed to move on to St. Mungo's to see how Snape was doing, since his life was on hold until he knew. But everyone stared at him mutely after that statement and he had a bad feeling this was going to take a while.

"No one can make a wizard into a Muggle, Harry," Mr. Weasley said. "Take them to the dungeons," he ordered Shacklebolt and Kerry Ann. With mystified glances

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back at Harry, they obeyed. Mr. Weasley stepped closer to Harry, his eyes moving back and forth between each of Harry's as though seeking something in them. He glanced at Bones and some silent agreement must have passed between them because Mr. Weasley went on, "We're very glad you took care of Voldemort, Harry. Where did you find him?"

"Malfoy Manor."

Mr. Weasley sent a silver message through the floor at that. "Do you want to take a seat, Harry?" Mr. Weasley offered and Harry, with a bad jolt, thought he sounded bizarrely similar to the way Lucius had when speaking to Voldemort.

"No, I need to go to St. Mungo's. Severus is there. They tortured him too long." Harry cut himself off since his eyes were stinging as he spoke and his voice was sure to go next.

Mr. Weasley's attitude shifted. "Of course," he said gently. He glanced at Bones but she didn't contradict him. Everyone seemed to be standing on the edge of something.

Harry resisted sniffing. "I can go?"

"Yes," Mr. Weasley said. Harry had the strangest sense that he was being rewarded for simply asking and nothing more.

Harry headed for the door. He turned back at the last to say, "Draco didn't help them at all, make sure no one is rough with him."

The room stared at him, a little more tensely than Harry thought reasonable. Mr. Weasley said, "Of course, Harry."

As Harry headed down the corridor to the lifts, he wished he could hear the conversation that occurred after he departed. Currents were running beneath everyone's actions that he didn't understand and he keenly needed to. Later, he told himself. He would have time to worry about it later.

### Author's Notes:

Yes, yes, terribly long time since the last update, but I have the next three chapters in draft. Been in forward-writing mode rather than revision mode.

Oh, yeah and the already stressed should wait for 33 to be posted before reading 32

(Author's Note: got cut off before, you may want to go back and read it before continuing)

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



# A BATTLE OF ONE

At the top of the staircase, Draco encountered Pansy, looking her most dangerous. “I want to see,” she insisted.

Draco sighed and gestured that she should precede him. He followed her to the scene of destruction, and stood near the broken door and its warm light, as she prowled the room. Flies circled the torn and bloodied robe nearby.

“Hah,” Pansy scoffed, sounding darkly satisfied.

“I’d have suggested you come in here sooner if I’d known it’d make you feel better,” he said dryly.

She tapped a stray shoe with her slipped toe. The edge of the leather upper had been chewed away. “I take back everything bad I ever said about Potter,” she said with queer glee.

Draco sighed. “Just as well. Doesn’t seem like a good idea to be on his bad side.”

A noise in the corridor brought both of their wands up. Avery and Greyback slinked into the room, Greyback sniffing the air audibly.

“There’s nothing left for you here,” Draco said. “Go away.”

Greyback scoffed. “Where is our Lord?”

“Ministry of Magic, I expect,” Draco replied. “Potter took him and my father away himself. Good of you to run off like you did.”

“I wasn’t here,” Avery pointed out with a sharp glance at Greyback.

“There was nothing to do but run,” Greyback pointed out, holding out a mauled arm covered in blood-matted fur.

“My father did all right,” Draco pointed out with a mix of pride and disgust.

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“What the devil were those things?” Greyback asked in a growl.

“Precisely. Now get out,” Draco said. “As house guests go, you are the pits and with my father gone you are no longer welcome. Besides that, the Ministry is certain to be swarming over this place worse than those things, any moment now.”

Avery and Greyback whispered together and then slunk off with baleful backward glances. Draco tossed his shoulders back and chuckled oddly. “Getting all that?” he asked suggestively to no one in particular.

When there was no response to this query, he turned to an old trophy cup on a high shelf and said, “Don’t think I don’t see you there, Skeeter.”

A second later a colorful insect buzzed through the flies and then expanded to become a colorfully suited reporter, pen already poised. “I do so very much wish that I had my photographer with me,” she said, glancing around as she stepped daintily over a fallen robe in her high-heeled shoes.

“You aren’t welcome, either,” Draco said.

“Potter really do all this?” she asked eagerly, ignoring his statement.

“Yes,” Pansy replied.

“I did it,” Draco said, countering her.

“Liar,” Skeeter retorted. She made a few notes as she scanned the room.

Draco aimed his wand at her. “On three you are going to deeply regret still being here.”

“Oh, come now. I would pay handsomely for an exclusive interview.”

“One,” Draco said.

“You and I have certainly enjoyed a fine working relationship in the past.”

“Two.”

“Oh, all right,” she huffed and disappeared. A small insect flew out of the broken door.

Draco fired an impervious charm at it in her wake. “Miserable leech,” he growled.



McGonagall arrived at St. Mungo’s in the overly crowded waiting room. People stood or sat two-deep along the wall since the benches were full. Cuts, bruises and bashed heads were the most common injuries and two Healer trainees were working the room, trying to clear out the easy cases that they could handle themselves.

“Serves them right for getting out of hand,” McGonagall muttered to herself. “As though we haven’t got enough trouble.”

She weaved her way across the room with difficulty. Having Fawkes on her shoulder to startle people was the only way she made it at all. Many were murmuring in

## A BATTLE OF ONE

frightened tones about Voldemort, and McGonagall realized that she was one of the few who knew he was gone again. She stopped and turned to the old wizard and his slightly less old son she had just cut between, but all she said, was, "Everything's going to be fine."

The older one said, "Didnja read the papers? Potter's gone dark as the Dark Lord... where's that leave us?"

"It will work out. It always does," McGonagall insisted.

He scoffed and waved his hand as though to dismiss her. She plowed away and dodged the desk by saying she had a previous appointment. In Shankwell's treatment room, where she assumed her colleague would be given his injuries, she found Snape. He was lying on the table in the center of the small room and looked to be asleep. A young Indian man stood in the corner as though on guard, although his wand wasn't out. He certainly wasn't in Healer's robes.

McGonagall, thinking she remembered him visiting Hogwarts said, "We have met, correct? You are an apprentice Auror with Harry as I recall?"

"Perhaps I am."

McGonagall had bent over Snape to take a better look at him. Fawkes gripped her shoulder harder when she did so. "You aren't certain about that?"

"I am violating my orders."

McGonagall decided she could sort the Indian out later. "Has the Healer been here?"

"Yes, several times. They are waiting for another to come. The specialist in such things."

"Versa?" McGonagall asked.

"You are knowing such things, yes. As for Professor Snape, he has been potioned into unconsciousness so he is not suffering. They will have to wake him, they warned, when the other Healer arrives."

She stroked Snape's unfeeling arm. "How bad is he?" When Vineet shook his head that he did not know how to answer this, she asked, "Was he talking?"

Vineet replied, "Yes, but not making sense."

"What did he say?"

Vineet recited Snape's words for her. She rubbed her forehead. "Dumbledore and a familiar... that's what he was talking about?" She straightened and lifted Fawkes from her shoulder onto her hand. "Nothing you can do, is there?" she asked the bird. Fawkes tilted his head to look at Snape and then cocked it at her. She turned back to Vineet. "Have you seen Harry, then?"

"Yes, he is being the reason that I am not certain I am still an apprentice."

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“Ah,” she said and then smiled. “If you need a job, come see me. Anyone who sticks with Harry when he needs it, we all owe dearly.”

Vineet pushed away from the wall. “If you are staying here, I would be pleased to return to the Ministry to end my uncertainty and to offer my assistance again if I am allowed.”

McGonagall pulled out her pocket watch and stared at it. The Express was not originally scheduled to arrive for several more hours, although the Ministry had intended to magically accelerate it with some spells usually reserved for the Knight Bus. That would make it difficult to locate again if it hadn’t already arrived. She said, “The Danish Ministry of Magic sent their own witches and wizards to help, many of them came to help guard the train.” She faded out and patted Snape on the shoulder. “Unfortunately, just a little too late for some. But you may go... I will stay. You may find things not quite as bad as expected in the Law Enforcement Department.”

Vineet bowed and disappeared with a pop!

Minutes later, a young Healer came in and forced a neutralizing potion on Snape. He came to consciousness only reluctantly and with a noise of distress. McGonagall had stepped aside to make room, but when the Healer went to the cabinet and began searching for something, she moved in back beside the bed.

“Severus?” she prompted.

Snape relaxed upon finding her there, after tensing as though not certain what he expected upon waking. “Minerva,” he greeted her with a weak voice.

“Ah, well at least you recognize me.”

“With that bird on your arm, I almost did not,” Snape commented, voice clearly pained. He stared at the ceiling and asked, “Where is Harry?”

“I’m not certain, Severus, I’m sorry. He is around, though. He brought his injured pet to Hagrid for care but departed again before I saw him. He left the message that you were here.”

“The Express arrived?” Snape asked.

“It may have. When more reinforcements came, I went back to look for Filius.”

“It did not seem promising.”

“It wasn’t,” she admitted.

Snape closed his eyes. “An enormous amount of blood today.”

She patted his shoulder. “But you seem all right.”

He shook his head without opening his eyes. His brow was deeply furrowed and a thin beading of sweat covered his upper lip. “Harry perhaps is not all right either,” he said, sounding far away and quite grim.

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The door opened and a small, lithe Healer entered, trailing an assistant and a long head of hair. Without any discussion she went to work, rolling Snape onto his side with a spell and tracing her small fingers over the back of his neck. McGonagall stepped back out of the way and watched, hoping Snape was being his usual pessimistic self.

Out in the waiting room, Harry made his way through the crowd that would have parted for him if it had had the sense to. Harry assumed it was his wild appearance that made them stare at him with such befuddlement as he squeezed between people. One young witch with a thick bandage around her head stepped into his path and demanded, “When are you getting rid of You-Know-Who?”

“Voldemort. And I already did,” he snapped while pushing around her.

The room stood still for a second before cheering broke out. The news traveled fast across the crowded room and people began Disapparating, even the untreated.

Harry made his way around the greetingwitch – who was distracted by hugging a patient in celebration – and stepped alone to the lifts.

In the treatment room, he found the Healer bent over Snape, and McGonagall leaning against the wall, looking in need of an overstuffed chair. “Harry,” she said in emotional greeting. Her eyes then grew concerned as she continued to take him in. Harry touched his face, wondering what could be wrong with it. She smiled at him the next instant though, so he combed his hair back with his fingers and leaned on the wall beside her.

“How is he?” he asked her, not wanting to disturb Snape, whose eyes were tightly closed.

“We don’t know yet,” she admitted quietly.

They both watched the Healer work. Occasionally she would have to coax Snape back awake, which he was clearly reluctant to be. He acknowledged Harry with a faint nod. Harry resisted stepping closer, lest he interfere. He remembered his own similar treatment and how much better it made him feel. Perhaps the same could be hoped for in Snape’s case.

“Shouldn’t you be with the Express?” Harry asked when McGonagall sighed.

She nodded. “I was ordered away to rest by Madam Pomfrey, who threatened to tie me to a bed in the dispensary if I didn’t obey, and since she herself went to join the train to help see to the children, I could not secretly rejoin the train and only pretend to rest.”

Harry looked her over. Her shoulders were more stooped than he recalled last time and the lines in her face more extensive. Pomfrey must have been concerned because of her age, he realized, something he hadn’t considered before. Among the Aurors it was the older members primarily who hadn’t survived, so he was glad someone was

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watching out for her. "Sorry about Professor Flitwick," Harry said, drawing himself up out of his own worry.

McGonagall nodded and they stood in silence until she said, "Perhaps I should go. Fawkes may be able to get me directly to the train no matter where it is now." She turned while passing Harry and said, "Hagrid tells me I have you to thank for Fawkes' cooperation."

"Happy to help, Professor."

She smiled at him, although her eyes were still pained. "Take care, Harry. I'll come back to check on Severus after the Express' passengers are all safely off with their families."

Harry nodded and leaned back against the wall after she departed. He realized then that she hadn't mentioned Voldemort, or even asked about him. He wondered if this was more of the usual, well of course Harry destroyed him...

Harry's musings were interrupted by Versa collapsing to the floor, apparently spent. Her assistant calmly scooped her up with a spell and carried her off as though this was not unexpected. Harry approached the bed. Snape turned onto his back, looked up at him, and also narrowed his eyes as though surprised by something, making Harry asked in concern, "What is it?"

Snape replied, "Your eyes."

Harry's blood went icy yet again that day. "What about them?"

"They are noticeably lighter," Snape explained.

Harry glanced around but there was no mirror. "Really? Strange. But how are you?" he asked, deciding his eyes didn't matter right then if they were still green and had not turned red or something.

"Feeling better. We shall see."

"The pain's gone?"

After a hesitation, Snape shook his head. "But how are you?"

"All right. I had a bit of trouble at the Ministry taking in the prisoners. But they let me come here, so I may be okay with them." Harry put his hand on Snape's arm. Something about Snape was still strangely repellent, as if he were a cursed object. Harry swallowed. "Versa was treating you for the after-effects of the Crucios?"

Snape nodded, face fixed in a grim state.

Harry swallowed again. Snape didn't seem much better, although he wasn't speaking in riddles now, at least.

Snape asked, "What did you do to Voldemort?"

"I made him live the thing he dreaded most," Harry said carefully.

"Worse than death?" Snape prompted.



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“Yeah,” Harry said. “For him, the worse thing than death was being a Muggle. So I turned him into one.”

After previous reactions to this statement, Harry was curious what Snape’s may be. He didn’t react, he merely squinted in the direction of the ceiling, deep in thought. “That explains your eyes,” he said.

“How so?”

“That is very powerful magic. Mage sorcery even...” When Harry didn’t respond, Snape asked, “You have never noticed that very old and powerful witches and wizards have very light-colored eyes?”

Harry thought that over. Dumbledore certainly had. So did Ollivander. “I guess.”

“Long exposure to strong magic will do that. Your eyes are now olivine.” Snape slowly lifted a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose, his usual sign of stress. “How did you know how to work the spell?”

Harry replied, “I took the knowledge of the Crux Horridus from Voldemort and modified it. I tossed his power into the Dark Plane, where I hope it will simply be lost.”

Snape had closed his eyes, but he opened them then to study Harry closely. “How are you feeling now?”

“All right. A bit better.” He hesitated in answering any more strongly given that he had a very big decision hanging over him.

“Feel like yourself?” Snape asked factually.

Harry breathed in and out once. “Yeah.”

Snape’s response was interrupted by the Healer arriving. Harry stepped back and let him stand beside the table in his spot. Shankwell said to Snape, “Versa did not believe she succeeded in neutralizing the curse. How do you feel?”

Snape had been rubbing the bridge of his nose, but he let his hand drop to his side. “It is definitely still present.”

Shankwell said, “We are bringing in another Healer from Liverpool. They are just as busy as us, so he cannot come until tomorrow morning. We are simply going to potion you again until then.”

Snape actually shrugged; something Harry could not remember seeing before. He swallowed hard. Another lime-green robed figure came in and waited by Snape’s feet, wand out.

Shankwell went on, “We’ll move you to Ward 41 until then.” He looked up then at Harry for the first time and blinked in surprise. “Mr. Potter.”

“Sir,” Harry said in return.

Snape was hovered out. Harry waited until the door clicked closed again before he asked the Healer, “Is he going to be all right?”

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“We’ll do the best we can,” Shankwell said, sounding over-rehearsed with that phrase. “We haven’t had a patient suffering from such a case of protracted Cruciatus in rather a long while in order to offer much in the way of a meaningful diagnosis.”

Harry reluctantly took this long answer to mean something in the range of “no.” He dropped his gaze and went to the door. He hesitated there, wanting to say more, something along the lines of his deserving that Snape get better, but he couldn’t find the words without finding more pain too, so he went out and down to the ward.

Snape was installed in the first bed on the left. The room erupted in surprise when Harry entered so he pulled the curtain around the bed and sat down in the visitor’s chair. Snape gestured to the witch who had scuttled in that the bottle of potion she carried should be placed on the small table beside him, implying that he wasn’t going to drink it just yet.

“I expect you’ll be taking it soon on your own,” the woman said smartly, before hanging a metal clipboard on the foot of the bed with a clang and departing.

Snape stared at the ceiling and didn’t speak for a long time.

“You don’t seem very hopeful,” Harry said, heart beginning to knot up.

“If there are too many, they do not cease,” Snape said.

“Crucios, you mean?” Harry asked.

Snape nodded. He had drawn into himself in contrast to how he had been just after Versa had finished. Harry rested a hand on Snape’s shoulder, prompting Snape to say, “I do seem to have your forgiveness.”

Harry didn’t feel anything but an ache of fervent hope that seemed to require too much nurturing for comfort. “Yeah,” he said.

Snape closed his dark-ringed eyes again. “It may be worth it then.”

“What?” Harry whispered sharply. “Severus, don’t say that.” He didn’t get a response so he picked up the bottle and sniffed at the contents. It was standard sleeping potion. He dearly wanted to talk to Snape about what he should do with this last chunk of Voldemort he apparently possessed, but it seemed cruel to burden his guardian further. “Take your potion.”

“You do not wish to talk?” Snape asked.

“We can talk when you’re better,” Harry said, stubbornness coming to his rescue. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Snape propped himself on one elbow and accepted the bottle. His hand shaking clearly conveyed his state. Harry took the empty bottle back and watched Snape go limp. Despite the voices in his head reminding him of all the things he should be doing, he sat there for nearly an hour trying not to plan for a future that did not include this man.

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“Merlin!” Tonks exclaimed when faced with a long thighbone sticking straight up out of the floor. Her wand was out and she let it precede her entering the next room, just in case.

Behind her, Aaron was covering his mouth as though to keep his dinner down. Flies buzzed, disturbed by their entrance.

“What the blazes happened in here?” Tonks asked. “Did Harry do this?”

“Explains why Harry won if he did,” Aaron offered from behind his hand. “And it serves most of them right,” he added with a mutter.

“Still,” Tonks vehemently countered as she examined the strange coil of burned rope on the hearth. “What a mess.”

The Ministry photographers took their time recording the room and the house while Aaron stood guard, his robe-front pulled permanently up over his nose. Mr. Weasley stepped into the long room and grimly examined everything with Vineet in tow. “Tell me again what happened,” he said, sounding dubious that he would like the explanation any better the second time.

“Harry summoned the Rakshasas.”

“Which are?”

“Demons.”

“How did he do that? Did you see the spell?”

“There was no spell.”

“But you are certain he did it?”

Vineet nodded somberly. He and Aaron shared a look of worry.

Tonk’s voice came from the doorway. “Found someone to talk to.” She had Draco by the collar, wand pointed at his chest.

“Let him go,” Mr. Weasley said.

“What? Do you know what it took to track him through that trap-laden forest out-”

“I said let him go, Ms. Tonks,” Mr. Weasley said more forcefully.

Tonks huffed and pushed Draco forward. “The press are at the gate too, about twenty of them.”

“The Ministry has become a news sieve,” Mr. Weasley complained.

“It was Rita Skeeter,” Draco supplied after primly straightening his collar. “She has already come and gone.”

“Has she?” Mr. Weasley asked sharply.

Draco shrugged. “The barriers don’t keep out bugs.”

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Mr. Weasley peered around the room again as though appraising it from a new point of view. "That creates a mess of another kind." Hands on hips, he approached Draco. "Did you see what happened?"

"I heard it. Some of these queer creatures were coming down the stairs and the screams were not exactly promising. We ran, my wife and I. My mother is out and has not yet returned and given the Ministry's current invasion, I doubt she will. When I returned to see what had happened, Potter was taking my father and Voldemort away in small trunks. Everything else was as you see it."

"You are being oddly cooperative, Mr. Malfoy," Mr. Weasley observed.

"I want you to leave so I can clean up. How would you like your house to look like this?"

"Fair enough." Mr. Weasley and Tonks shared a long thoughtful glance. "Mr. Wickem, I want you to locate Harry and stay with him until instructed to do otherwise." Aaron dropped his robe down off of his face and stepped out of the room. Mr. Weasley asked Draco, "You wouldn't happen to know who all of these people were, would you?" He bent down over the nearest set of robes that were mostly intact. "Shame they didn't all use the same laundry – then they might have written their names on the collar."

"I'm not certain who, precisely, is here... or not here, shall we say, anymore." Draco spoke languidly and, as a result, now sounded uncooperative, or at least uncaring.

Mr. Weasley waved him off while shaking his head. "Don't go far, Mr. Malfoy." When they were alone, he said to Tonks, "What are we going to do with Harry?"

"What do you mean?" Tonks asked. When Mr. Weasley stared at her, she added, "If he'd been given a little help, it wouldn't have come to this."

"I think you're biased, Ms. Tonks."

"You should be too," she pointed out.



Harry looked up when the curtain sheltering Snape's bed billowed. Aaron slipped inside. "How is he?"

"Not good," Harry heard himself admit.

Aaron frowned, honestly pained. He watched his former Head of House for a minute. "Is he out?"

"Until tomorrow." Harry stood. "I need to find my friends. Make sure everyone is all right."

As he passed Aaron, his fellow asked, "Want company?"

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“Not really,” Harry said, thinking that he really needed space to work some major things out.

“I’m afraid you’re getting it anyway.” When Harry turned to him, Aaron said, “If you want to knock me out with a Brainflumox or something I can say, well, I tried to follow him...”

Harry snorted lightly and led the way out of the ward. A small crowd waited in front of the lifts, but Harry didn’t have the patience to wait too. On the stairs, he said, “I’m going to the Burrow... if no one expects me at the Ministry.”

“Most of the Ministry is at Malfoy Manor right now. Honestly, Harry, if it were me, I’d do some damage control with the boss.” Harry stopped on the third step and turned. Aaron went on. “It looks like the Grim Reaper came through that place.” Aaron held up his hand. “No, I take that back... the Reaper would have taken people whole.”

“What did Mr. Weasley say?”

“Not much. He’s having trouble taking it in. But Malfoy’s been talking.”

“Draco?”

“No... well, Blondeboy too, but he seems to be on your side. Luscious on the other hand is in interrogation spinning you as Public Menace Number 1.”

“I’m all right unless someone gets on my bad side,” Harry muttered as he started down again.

“Harry,” Aaron pointed out, “they say that about all evil wizards.”

At the bottom as Harry pushed open the door to the ground floor, Aaron said, “I don’t owe you any money or anything, do I?”

This made Harry laugh. He was still chuckling when they passed the reception area and the waiting room which fell silent when they appeared. Harry ignored this and headed straight for the exit.

“Didn’t want to just Apparate?” Aaron asked.

“I need time to think,” Harry said. He stood in front of the dusty shop windows that hid the wizard hospital. The Mannequins were wearing sun-faded heavy overcoats despite the warmth of summer. One of them turned to watch him. Harry started walking and Aaron followed.

They walked for ten minutes or so until they stood on a deserted road with only papers blowing along it. Harry took Aaron’s wrist and they popped into the field beside the Burrow.

As they stood in the bowing grass, admiring the concoction that was the Weasley house, Aaron said, “Harry, you told me that you had Voldemort inside you and you wanted me to keep an eye on you... well, even he couldn’t do that much damage.” Harry’s brow lowered in vague distress and he turned to his fellow, prompting Aaron

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to say, "That didn't come out quite right. What I meant was it looks like you kicked Voldie's arse pretty easily, so I don't know what you were worried about."

"He kept taking me over. He wanted to take my magic for his own," Harry said.

"Yeah, now that would be a problem," Aaron agreed. As Harry started toward the house, Aaron asked, "Did you really turn him into a Muggle?"

"Yes," Harry said without turning around or breaking stride.

"Blimey."

When they arrived at the house, Mrs. Weasley was standing outside. Harry greeted her and immediately said, "This is my Ministry escort, Aaron."

To Harry's disappointment, this appeared to make her relax and she gave him a quick hug. The scent of stew wafted out the door behind her like a charm. "Everyone has been very worried about you," she said in the tone of a reprimand.

Inside the door, Hermione stood with her hands on her hips, looking difficult. "Congratulations defeating Voldemort. May I have my wand back?"

"When I get mine," Harry countered immediately, still stinging as well. The two of them faced off there by the door, nose to nose.

"Just give him his wand back," Lavender said from where she hung an arm over the back of the couch.

Ron stood and pulled one of the ugly, dark green vases down from the high shelf that ran along below the ceiling. He pulled Harry's wand out of it, brought it over and, with some embarrassment, held it out.

"Thanks," Harry said, stashing it away. "Had to borrow Voldemort's at one point, you know, because I didn't have it."

Ron flinched, making Harry wish he had not said that. "Sorry," Ron said. "Dad threatened to disown me... and mum..."

Harry considered that Ron living at home was more obedient than Ron living away at school. Ron still hadn't raised his eyes, and Harry was too peeved to give him an out. He remembered that when they were younger they had been on his side more willingly. He had not thought before that being a child was so much simpler, but now it clearly was.

Bill rescued his brother by saying. "You really did him in already, eh? Dad sent us a note as soon as you brought Voldemort in and we didn't think it was real at first. Thought it was a gag by the twins."

Harry didn't reply; he was thinking that he would prefer to be alone to think.

Charlie vehemently said, "After what they did to Flitwick, I hope you got even with a few others."

Harry stepped through them and dropped down onto the couch beside Lavender. "Ten of them plus Malfoy."

## A BATTLE OF ONE

“You were keeping that good o’ count?” Charlie asked. The rest of the room shifted to gather loosely around the couch.

“It was easy to count afterward,” Harry said, ignoring the shared wide-eyed expressions of his audience. “Unfortunately, that leaves a lot of them still out there.”

“Who is still out? Whom did you get?” Bill asked, sitting across from him directly on the low table that creaked under his weight.

“Er, I’m not sure.” Harry hemmed. “I couldn’t tell.”

Bill’s brow pushed very low. “You couldn’t tell who you hit?”

Quietly, Harry answered, “There wasn’t that much left.”

Bill’s mouth worked a moment. “You killed ten of them.”

Charlie dropped on the couch beside Harry at the same time as Lavender looked to be thinking of evacuating. “Impressive. Not even Moody, Merlin-rest-his-spirit, can claim that many.”

Harry didn’t reply. Hermione’s expression from where she stood beside the low table was vaguely pinched. Harry did not care much about Death Eaters right then; he just wished it was more likely that Snape was going to be all right. “I don’t really feel like talking about it.”

“Let’s eat then,” Lavender said.

Harry was terrifically hungry, but not really in the mood to eat. He stood up anyway when he was the last one not at the table and Hermione came back to fetch him. Even Aaron had taken a seat. He gave Harry a sympathetic expression when Harry sat across from him.

Mrs. Weasley engaged Aaron in telling her his life and career history, which Aaron embellished with flair, eventually making even Harry grin. His lighter mood was short-lived. As they were cleaning up after their late dinner the twins arrived with loud announcements about what they had heard on the wizard wireless. “They’re saying that there was a slaughter at Malfoy Manor: blood, guts, bones... everywhere!”

“Harry!” one of them said in surprise upon encountering him there in the kitchen. “Well, congratulations... I guess,” he added quickly. The twins glanced at each other. Harry hovered the dishes to the counter and handed the towel over to Bill, who was sorting the silver. Harry stepped over to the couch where Aaron sat and said, “I want to go back to St. Mungo’s.”

Aaron stood up from where he was playing wizard chess with Ron. “It’s a draw anyway,” he said dismissively to Ron.

One of the twins said, “Hey, Harry, don’t go...” “We want to hear all about it,” the other insisted.

“I have to get back to St. Mungo’s,” Harry explained and immediately Disapparated. Aaron arrived just after him and they walked up the stairs in silence. In Ward

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41, Aaron pulled the curtain around the bed – the hospital staff must have opened it – waving away a child who had shouted Harry’s name and was running toward them.

Harry moved the visitor chair closer to the bed and sat down. His eyes were burning. He felt much worse than he did earlier. Aaron fetched another chair and propped it in the corner, leaned back in it, and closed his eyes, which gave Harry some space.

They sat that way for long minutes. Harry discovered that while he had thought he needed quiet to think, what he really needed was support. As badly as he had needed allies before, they seemed even more critical now, strangely enough. Into this void stepped McGonagall. She came silently through the break in the white curtain and put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. She still had Fawkes on her shoulder, although the bird appeared to be sleeping.

As they talked quietly, Aaron rocked forward in his chair and pulled out his blackboard. “Time to go, Bro,” he said. “Ministry,” he qualified to Harry’s questioning glance.

“I need to go as well,” McGonagall said. “I will accompany you.”

“Thanks,” Harry said.

At the dusky Ministry, Aaron led the way to the lifts while McGonagall tut-tuted in dismay at the disarray.

In the Auror’s offices, which were lit as brightly as ever, Tonks, Shackbolt, and Blackpool stood soberly around Mr. Weasley.

“Hello, Minerva. Have a seat, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said, pulling a chair out with both hands and holding onto it as Harry accepted it. “Minister for Magic wishes to talk to you.” Mr. Weasley still sounded bizarrely solicitous. Harry looked back over his shoulder to gauge him, but he mostly looked tired, not manipulative.

“About what... exactly?” Harry asked.

“I haven’t been told the agenda,” Mr. Weasley admitted. “Nor could I judge her mood, I’m afraid, when I last saw her.”

Harry swallowed a sigh.

McGonagall said, “I am in need of a patch-up with Amelia as well, so I can accompany Harry.”

Mr. Weasley and McGonagall chatted quietly about the riots while Harry waited to be summoned. He found he had a isolated and distant perspective on what was happening around him. None of it mattered in comparison to his guardian’s condition. This left him remarkably calm in light of how very much trouble he could be in. When the time came, McGonagall offered to escort him herself, which she was allowed to do.



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At the door to the Minister's office, the guards accompanied them inside until sent off again. "I certainly can handle Harry," McGonagall scoffed at them. This lightened Harry's mood slightly until he heard a sample of Minister Bones' tone once they reached her office and the door closed.

"Sit down, Mr. Potter."

Harry obeyed and simply waited for her to speak. Exhaustion was catching up with him with swift feet – bad, body-collapsing exhaustion. He had run out of emotion for everything except his adoptive father and out of energy for anything except sitting and waiting.

McGonagall prodded him. "Are you all right?" He apparently had missed something that had been said.

Harry rubbed his forehead. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I was saying," Bones said, "that for having rendered the Dark Lord harmless, you have left us with rather a nasty situation."

"I just wanted Severus out of there," Harry pointed out. "I didn't care about anything else."

"I fear the morning papers, Mr. Potter. The wireless has been bad enough." She shuffled what appeared to be transcripts before her. "I've gone out on a limb and granted a few interviews, even, but it has not helped much." She stared at him as he stared at his fingers. "I want you to hold a press conference tomorrow, perhaps at noon for the evening edition. Things may be calmer then." When Harry didn't speak, she prompted, "Does your silence mean you are agreeing?"

"Sorry, yes, I guess so."

She huffed loudly. "Mr. Potter, Harry, do you realize there are calls for your arrest, given the scene you left behind at Malfoy Manor?"

Harry found his fingers even more interesting, and before he could reply, McGonagall said, "That is a ridiculous suggestion, Amelia, and you know it."

"I have to answer to the members of the Wizengamot who are making such a call. I cannot simply dismiss them. They wish to conduct a Darkness Test on Mr. Potter at the emergency meeting the day after tomorrow."

McGonagall gave Harry a long looking over. She crossed her arms. "He will pass it. But put them off until the next regular meeting. Harry needs a break, his adoptive father's prognosis is not promising and he should be allowed to deal solely with that. And a delay will look better with the press, whom I assume you will be inviting."

"Will I?" Bones asked, startled.

"Harry will pass it and it will ease the current situation. Run him through the test now and it will only appear desperate. Who is requesting the test?" McGonagall asked. Harry was very glad that she was there.

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“You will see soon enough at the emergency meeting,” Bones said, refusing to answer.

“Ogden, I bet; his son does like put ideas into his head,” McGonagall said almost haughtily.

Bones ignored her and leaned forward to say to Harry, “Are you going to be ready for tomorrow?”

Harry shrugged. He didn’t care. This made Bones a bit angry. “I cannot put this off, Mr. Potter. You’ve seen our atrium out there...?”

Harry nodded. “Noon?” he confirmed.

“How about after lunch? Say, half one, or better yet, two,” Bones revised, making a note to herself.

Harry nodded again. That would give him time to check in on how this other Healer from Liverpool was doing and visit with Snape. His heart took a drop on its own as hope swelled and then was squashed again.

Bones speaking interrupted his inner musings, “Are you better, Mr. Potter. You don’t have Voldemort in your head anymore, I assume?”

“No,” Harry replied. Not in my head, he added to himself.

McGonagall escorted Harry back to the Burrow to sleep. It was late when they arrived and only Bill and Ron were still up on guard duty. Ron took Harry to his room. “Mum still wants us on guard given how many Death Eaters are still free.”

Harry closed his eyes. “None of them are too close,” he said.

Ron considered him. “That’s good,” he finally said as though covering nervousness.

Harry did not want to make his oldest friend nervous. “What’s the matter?” Harry demanded in a whisper since the rest of the house was sleeping. “Should I have stayed with Hermione instead?”

“No,” Ron replied sharply. “You can stay here.” He shrugged and avoided meeting Harry’s gaze. “Why wouldn’t you be able to stay here?”

“Look at me,” Harry demanded, finding no well of patience, even for his best friend. Ron looked up at him. “What’s the matter?” Harry asked, but a voice inside his own head told him the answer.

Faced with deciding what he believed, Ron shrugged. “Nothing, Harry. Nothing’s the matter.”

“I’m still the same as I was,” Harry said.

Another shrug. “Yeah, I know. You look different though. The eyes...” Ron explained. “Hermione said... well.”

“What did Hermione say?” Harry asked flatly.

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Ron seemed to have found his footing. His shoulders squared and his whispering voice didn't waver. "She said only raw magic would make you that way. Sorcery... not the stupid Ministry-designed spells the rest of us do."

"I did what I had to do," Harry said. "If I could have avoided it, I would have."

Ron tossed his pillow to its proper place at the head of his bed and then tossed the covers back up as though suddenly caring that his bed had not been made. "That makes the difference, I guess."

Harry sat down on his own bed. "It doesn't make any difference if Severus doesn't get better. Right now it looks like he is going to end up like the Longbottoms." Harry found that he was admitting this to himself for the first time as well. He had to breathe deeply afterward to keep his emotions under control.

"Well," Ron said, "At least you got even for that already."

Harry leaned back on his pillow and said, "I hope the French wizard prison is right miserable place. Otherwise I might not have got even with Malfoy."

"Hopefully, they don't serve French food," Ron commented.

Harry scoffed. He wanted to talk more but his eyes were too heavy. He was asleep, still clothed, moments later.

Harry awoke early when someone stepped down the rickety staircase just on the other side of the thin wall from his pillow. He was glad for this, though. He headed out quietly so as not to disturb Ron. Downstairs, the Weasley parents were having breakfast with Charlie. Harry accepted a nibble, but then said that he needed to go.

"Two o'clock, Harry. Remember," Mr. Weasley said.

"Yeah," Harry said. He seemed to be off-duty. "No training today, I guess."

"Next week we hope to have things in order," Mr. Weasley said between sips of tea.

Harry hesitated departing. He finally just asked, "Am I still in the Auror's program?"

"That's for the Wizengamot to decide," Mr. Weasley informed him.

"Do you still want me in it?" Harry heard himself ask.

"Yes, Harry, we do," Mr. Weasley assured him. He sounded as though he had already thought this over carefully and had prepared that answer.

"If only to keep an eye on me," Harry finished for him. He felt reckless this morning and cared less than normal about what anyone thought.

Mr. Weasley's glance moved between Harry's eyes again. Harry Occluded his mind even though he was quite certain Mr. Weasley didn't have the skill to read his thoughts. "I suppose there is some of that," Mr. Weasley answered with a touch of lightness. "But we also owe you quite a bit of consideration."

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Harry found this explanation lacking, but thought that he should just accept it. "I'm going to St. Mungo's 'til the press conference," he said, but Mr. Weasley held out the paper after Mrs. Weasley bumped him on the arm with it.

"You should see this before you go," he said soberly. "You should know what you are facing."

Harry stepped forward and reluctantly turned the paper around. There was no photograph from inside the Manor, just one from the drive showing the Ministry personnel swarming around the grounds casting spells and taking notes as well as waving the photographer away. The headline read: Dark Lord Defeated but beneath that the second line was: In apparent battle for dark wizardry dominance. The first few lines describing the scene made it clear that Skeeter had been inside Malfoy Manor. Horrific scene of slaughter now greets visitors of this once stately Manor. Bloodied cloaks and robes are strewn with bones bizarrely cleaned to a shine. The cloaks and some objects in the room appear to have been gnawed by thousands of tiny teeth. No expert on dark wizardry could tell this reporter what spell would have produced this outcome. Since even the Dark Lord would not have inflicted this upon his own followers, one can only assume that Harry Potter's actions caused this decimation and destruction when he attacked, on his own, strictly against Ministry authorization. The Wizengamot is assembling to investigate what further actions should be taken with regard to our former Wizard Hero.

Harry gave the paper back. He hoped Skeeter stopped by the hospital so he could have a word. If not, he would certainly see her at the press conference. Mouth set in a line, he nodded goodbye and disappeared.

In the hospital reception area it was still busy, but slightly less so than the day before. The room quieted when he entered with a few people whispering his name to others nearby. He glanced around at the wide eyes following him and then ignored everyone, but held his head high and avoided appearing to skulk. He repeated this in Ward 41, where again the room came to a stop at his entrance.

Healer Shankwell was leaning over Snape and glanced up at Harry. "Healer Hedgepeth is here. We're about to move the patient back to the treatment room where it is quieter."

Chest tight, Harry followed the floating, unconscious Snape out of the room. Whispering broke out as the door swung closed.

Hedgepeth waited in the treatment room with the nursing staff gathered around him. He had his hair slicked high and back on his head like the Muggle Elvis and he had a boyish face to match. He immediately reminded Harry of Lockhart in his mannerisms, especially when he gave a wink to a small blonde who hurried out, apparently supposed to be elsewhere. Harry fought hard not to lose all hope.

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“Well, so this is the patient,” Hedgepeth said in the way of an announcement after Snape was settled onto the narrow table in the center of the room. “You say he was tortured by Voldemort himself?” he asked Shankwell.

Shankwell nodded, mouth in a frown. Harry felt better that it seemed Shankwell was as turned off by Hedgepeth as Harry was. Hedgepeth bent to his patient, turning Snape’s head this way and that, touching his thumb to Snape’s sharp brow. Harry was very glad that his guardian was not conscious for this. He swallowed yet another sigh.

“We are still very busy. Perhaps I will leave you to him,” Shankwell said, and departed with a few other staff, leaving behind two assistants and Harry.

Harry moved in beside the table where Shankwell had been. “Hm,” Hedgepeth muttered, deeply absorbed in what he was doing, which Harry found reassuring. Hedgepeth turned to one of the assistants. “Need him awake now,” he commanded.

With a swallowing charm, potion was forced on Snape. Harry waited with his breath held. He wanted to talk to his guardian, to see him awake, but did not want him in pain. Snape drew in a sharp breath but did not open his eyes. No one moved and Harry lifted his eyes to find Hedgepeth staring at him in befuddlement.

“Harry Potter is here?” Hedgepeth asked no one in particular.

“He’s my father,” Harry explained, gesturing at Snape lying between them.

This did not decrease the befuddlement. “Is he?”

“I want him to get better again,” Harry said.

“That’s a very tall order,” Hedgepeth said, recovering, perhaps because the conversation had moved to the professional. “You do realize that?”

“So was destroying Voldemort... yet again,” Harry pointed out. He sounded threatening, he could hear it and couldn’t quite squelch it.

Fortunately, Hedgepeth’s ego was larger than Harry’s reputation. He said, “So, I hear. All we can do is the best we can, Mr. Potter.” A long lock of his slicked hair fell when he looked down again, making him look even more boyish.

Harry hated that answer, but could think of nothing more to argue about. Snape came awake with a shake of his head. Hedgepeth directed that a stool be brought over for him to sit beside the table. Snape glanced around and found Harry. The pain must have grown worse, because he shook his head again as though to shake some invisible thing off of himself. Hedgepeth moved in and began asking Snape questions such as what day it was and who was Minister for Magic. Snape did not answer with the scorn Harry hoped, he honestly seemed to have to think. Hedgepeth made Snape roll onto his side toward Harry and ran his fingers along the back of his neck the way Versa had. Snape fortunately could not see him shake his head as though startled by what he found.

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Harry assumed he was feeling the curse that Harry could feel still sense also, the one that made Snape feel abhorrent, despite deep emotion to the contrary.

“How long were you tortured? How many Cruciatus curses were used?”

Snape shook his head. Harry replied, “Almost five hours.”

Hedgepeth shook his head again but continued to concentrate on the back of Snape’s neck. “Keep him awake,” he ordered minutes later. “If we can avoid giving him an analeptic it makes it easier to work.”

Harry bent down and shook Snape by the shoulder and called his name. Snape woke back up reluctantly. “You have to stay awake,” Harry said, wishing he didn’t have to. Snape did not deserve to suffer anymore.

Harry pulled the other stool from his corner of the room and parked himself beside the table. He put a hand on Snape’s arm so he could pat it or shake it as necessary.

Out of the blue, Hedgepeth said, “I hear you left a scene fit for a house of horrors behind yesterday.”

“I was rescuing him,” Harry said, indicating Snape.

Hedgepeth did not react. He seemed to be able to work and talk at the same time. “Must mean a lot to you, then. Didn’t know you had a father still alive.”

“I go through them quickly,” Harry stated coldly. Some part of him seemed to think behaving in a vaguely menacing manner was appropriate or might help change things. He knew better, but couldn’t stop himself.

“They brought the remains here to the dungeon morgue for identification. Never seen anything like it.”

“So?” Harry asked sharply.

“Wrong answer,” Snape said from the table.

Harry dropped his gaze, chastised. He squeezed Snape’s wrist. Snape felt less offensive now as though what Hedgepeth was doing was actually working. “Can you make him better?” Harry asked, feeling hopeful for the first time that day.

Hedgepeth didn’t reply right away. He worked in silence for a minute first. “Most people I work on have had three, maybe four curses used upon them by someone not well versed in Unforgivable Curses, just someone angry. Those patients just need to be healed and for the curse to be suppressed. That is remarkably easy, just tedious and lengthy. On the other hand, the person who placed these curses-”

“Persons,” Harry corrected.

“So much the worse,” Hedgepeth said. “The persons who performed this curse knew well how to do it – which speaks of horrific practice – and they didn’t let it fade between casts, which builds it up. It wishes to win. It becomes a force of its own. The victim wants only to escape and the only place to do that is inside their own heads, away from the curse.”

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“Stay awake, Severus,” Harry said when Snape closed his eyes.

For three hours, Hedgepeth worked. He was nearly as exhausted as Versa had been, but he had more physical reserves given his size, so he did not collapse. He set his hands on the table and leaned upon it. “We’ll have to see if that reduction sticks. Then we won’t have to start at the beginning again for the next round.” He staggered out while asking the staff following him if there were pastries around anywhere.

Snape wasn’t quite asleep.

“Feeling any better?” Harry asked.

Snape gave one of those frowning smiles of his, which was answer enough. “How are you?” he asked Harry, changing the topic.

“I have to give a press conference at two this afternoon. Everyone thinks I’m an evil dark wizard.”

“I doubt it is everyone,” Snape corrected him. “But your attitude is not helping.”

“I don’t care anymore,” Harry said.

“You should,” Snape said. His eyes were closed but he was remaining awake.

Silence descended. Footsteps went by in the corridor outside the door. The fairy lights floating near the ceiling shifted around, uncertain where it was best to cast light.

Snape said, “There are things you wish to say. You didn’t say them last time, either.” Fatigue was settling into his voice.

“I don’t want you worrying about me,” Harry said.

Snape scoffed derisively. “Try me anyway,” he said slowly as though mocking Harry’s intelligence.

Harry adjusted the height of the stool lower and leaned on the table. He was glad Snape had not been moved back into the ward so that they could be alone. “What am I going to do with this piece of Voldemort I’m carrying?” he asked. “I destroyed Nagini... but... I don’t really feel like doing that to myself.”

Snape, with a gasp, rolled onto his back. Harry rested a hand on his shoulder. “Harry, do you feel like yourself? I asked you that already, didn’t I?”

“Yes. And I do.”

“Then what is there to do?”

“That’s what I’m asking you.” His voice dropped. “I can’t use the Crux Horridus spell without killing anyone. I was thinking of that.”

Snape grabbed hold of Harry’s robe-front and tugged it down with surprising strength given that he could barely roll from his side to his back. “Don’t you dare attempt that,” he hissed.

“What am I going to do?” Harry asked. “What if you aren’t here to help me?”

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“Ask the Saami wizard what you should do, in that case,” Snape said, voice growing quieter as he spoke. “But do NOT attempt such a horrific spell. If I were well, I would ground you for a year for even suggesting it.”

Harry’s lips curled lightly through his frown. “What do you think I did to Voldemort?”

“That was reversing an unnatural spell someone else had performed. This is quite different. You are whole right now, Harry.” His voice faded farther but he struggled to stick with it.

“But I’ll just be a path back for him again,” Harry argued. “You said yourself that he could keep coming back.”

Snape held up his finger and pointed it in Harry’s direction but he missed because his eyes were tightly closed. “Promise me.”

“Yes, all right,” Harry said in a difficult voice even though he was a bit relieved. He had a terror of attempting the spell, even as desperate as he was to take some action toward ridding himself of Voldemort.

Snape was out after that.

Harry sat beside him for a while, until his stomach growled and the time showed he had just a little while to find something to eat. He did not have much appetite, but he would need his strength for his battle with the press. He stood and out of curiosity, rested his fingers at the base of Snape’s neck, just reachable because his head was turned to the side. He couldn’t feel anything beyond the radiance of him overlaid by the unclean feeling of the curse.

Harry nearly ran Hermione over as he left the ward. She was carrying yellow flowers and dropped her eyes while he steadied her.

“I brought these,” she said. “How’s he doing?”

Harry shrugged.

“Maybe those were a bad idea,” she said, indicating the flowers.

Harry resisted shrugging again. He gestured for her to lead him out of the ward, figuring Snape would prefer fewer people see him in such a state. “I’ll just keep them.”

“Are you going to be all right, Harry?” she asked as they strolled slowly to the lifts.

“I don’t know,” Harry answered honestly. He should not have answered; he felt weaker hearing himself say that.

“I heard you had a press conference,” she said, making conversation. “Glad I caught you beforehand.”

“Yeah. I have to go get ready for it,” Harry said. They both stopped in the middle of the corridor, forcing a staff member to walk around them, rather than



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collide. Harry felt disconnected from his old friend and thought that was because she had not been there this time during the battle and as a result he could not begin to make her understand.

“If you need anything, Harry,” she said. “I’m sorry... I didn’t help you before,” she said, sounding pained. “You were so out of sorts, though, not like now. I’d give you your wand and my wand in a second, now.”

“Yeah, I understand,” Harry said.

She seemed satisfied with that answer and gave him a small wave goodbye. Harry Apparated to the alleyway near the Ministry and this time the desk clerk called an escort for him. Mr. Weasley came himself to lead him inside. The Press were already gathering early and they shouted questions and came across the atrium to surround them.

“Not yet. Not yet,” Mr. Weasley said, pushing the way forward through the gates which had been straightened somewhat. They loomed now when one approached, and swayed precariously after the gate latched. Mr. Weasley took Harry to the Auror’s tea room, chasing the others out of it and closing the door. “Eat something; I heard your stomach growling all the way up here.”

Harry took put the flowers in a water glass and took a sandwich off the cart, which Mr. Weasley paid for by dropping a coin in the tin after the cart rumbled, insisting on payment. Harry took a bite, not tasting what he was eating. Mr. Weasley sat across from him and said, “This is very important, Harry, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

Harry nodded. Not as important as Severus, he thought, but kept that inside.

“When you go down there, you need to be the opposite of how you are being portrayed in the press,” Mr. Weasley went on. “You’re a good kid, Harry. They have you wrong, but it’s been too easy to paint you as the opposite, given events.”

“Even you thought I’d attacked the Dursley’s old house,” Harry pointed out.

“I didn’t imagine Voldemort was back, Harry. There didn’t seem to be any other suspects walking around with a wand like yours.” He seemed honestly contrite, so Harry let it go. “You need to be calm but firm. Don’t waver. Don’t get angry, no matter what is said.”

Harry nodded. “I’m worried about Severus,” he admitted, re-wrapping the uneaten half of his sandwich.

“You need to worry about yourself right now.”

“It’s tough.”

“Harry, the last thing the wizarding world will tolerate is another evil wizard rising up. Take a look around the atrium when you go back down. That’s what people do when fear and anger override their better judgment.”

“I don’t want to tell them the truth,” Harry said.

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“Then don’t. But make up a damn good lie in that case.” Mr. Weasley stood. Harry stared at him, never expecting to hear him to say that. “Time to go, Harry.”

He led him down in the lift and stopped just before the gates. Bones was already at the podium that had been set up near the smashed fountain. There was a lot of press now, forty or more.

“Calm, Harry. Gentile. Harmless,” Mr. Weasley whispered in his ear. “That’s how you must come across.”

When Harry reached the gate, with its squeaking, warped door, he realized that Mr. Weasley was describing Dumbledore. He let his face relax and stepped slowly over to Bones, ignoring the questions being shouted early. Had he really massacred all of the Death Eaters? How many had really been killed? Was the Ministry lying about everything?

“One at a time,” Bones snapped at the gaggle of them. Her guards stood just before the podium and their gestures for quiet did the trick. “As promised... Mr. Potter is here to answer questions.” The roar started up again. “BUT, only if you can behave yourselves,” she shot back and the crowd again fell to muttering. Harry found this amusing somehow, perhaps it was just the strain making any little thing funny. “Harry, choose who you want to ask a question. I’m turning it over to you.” She stepped down off of the small dais that had been placed behind the podium and Harry stepped up. The reporters all had their hands in the air and all appeared far too eager.

Harry’s eyes found Rita Skeeter, who was only raising her feather quill just a little, as though certain Harry would not choose her and she did not want to lose face by trying. “Ah, my favorite reporter,” Harry drawled as though they were playing a chess match instead of playing with Harry’s future. The crowd turned to look at Skeeter; some began to grin. “Ms. Skeeter, you don’t have a question?” he asked in a kind of mystified disbelief, with a calm that required so much effort he felt his breathing becoming difficult. It worked though; others buried their grins and most relaxed and poised their quills.

She required a moment to get over her surprise. “Did you really kill ten Death Eaters at Malfoy Manor?” she asked, tossing her hand out with the question as though she knew she asked the obvious.

“Yes,” Harry said.

She asked, “Why didn’t you just tell the Ministry where they were and let them handle it?”

“That was two questions in a row,” Bones pointed out beside Harry.

“That’s all right,” Harry said easily. “They had my adoptive father captive and were torturing him. I didn’t feel that I could wait to wade through the bureaucracy

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that was being far more careful than I would be.”

When Skeeter started to speak again, to follow up on this “father” issue with a strong point, Harry waved her off. He could read in her eyes what she was going to ask and if things were going to be exposed he needed to expose them himself. “Someone else,” Harry said gently, as though cakes were being dolled out. There was power in that. They expected him to be nervous and defensive and were counting on using it against him. He refused to hand them that weapon. He choose the least offensive looking person he could see, a small man whom Harry found familiar.

“Lovegood with the Quibbler,” the man said. “We were the only magazine to pick up the American Wizard Press article about your new father, which we were roundly accused of fabricating,” he said, clearly insulted. The other reporters muttered and snickered to each other. “Why have you not discussed him more openly here in Britain?”

“Because he is a former Death Eater,” Harry said. This shut them all up. Harry felt like a gambler must when he slides his entire stack of chips onto one number and watches the wheel spin. But he had to frame all of the facts himself to have a chance. He made it look as though he were giving Lovegood time to scratch that out, before adding, still calmly, “He was spy for Dumbledore for many years, so it isn’t quite as bad as it sounds,” he added lightly, as though sharing a secret with a friend.

Skeeter frowned, looking peeved. “And this was sanctioned?” she asked, sounding very annoyed.

“Yes. As I’m sure a thorough reporter like yourself is well aware,” Harry said, trying not to grin. “But it wasn’t your turn, I’m afraid.” He scanned the eager faces again and picked out a dusky-skinned woman with a white scarf wrapped around her head and knotted in the front “Tawil Times, Mr. Potter,” she said in a lilting voice. “We are all quite grateful that you ended this before it spilled over into other wizarding communities. But there is concern that you yourself are the next great dark wizard. How do you respond to this?”

Harry assumed a regretful expression, which was not hard. “I’m not trying to be a dark wizard,” he said, but was interrupted by a man with a Scottish brogue before he could add to that.

“You weren’t just eliminating a rival, then?” the man asked derisively.

Harry feigned being surprised at being interrupted. “I was eliminating an old personal enemy... the one that killed my parents and was working hard at doing the same to my current father. I regret not working within the Ministry to do this, but I couldn’t wait for the kind of deliberate decisions that they must take.”

“Don’t think you overdid it?” the man asked as a follow-up.

“There were a lot of them in relation to me,” Harry said levelly, factually, which

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was getting easier. "I had to even things out."

"So, you'd do it again?" Someone else asked.

Harry took a breath, unclenched his hands from the podium and resisted wiping them on his robes. "I guess I can take you next, but please, some order next time. In answer to that I'd say that I'd not only do it again, I'd do it sooner." He chucked that confession up under "don't waver".

Faces contorted and much scribbling occurred. Harry picked someone else and they addressed Minister Bones: "Do you agree with that? Are you disciplining Mr. Potter?"

"The Wizengamot is deciding that tomorrow at an emergency meeting," she provided.

Skeeter raised her hand quickly. Harry pointed at her. "They want to give you a Darkness Test, are you going to agree?"

"You are at the bottom of the sieve, as usual," Harry quipped, to a few snickers. "But yes, I'll agree to it." Trying to sound demure, he added, "I'd prefer to be trusted outright, but I don't believe I have anything to worry about."

"So, you'd prefer not to take it?" Skeeter asked suggestively, quill poised.

"Wouldn't you?" Harry asked, still letting his voice lilt just enough. He had no idea what the test entailed, but he could only imagine it was unpleasant. Skeeter seemed to agree; she frowned as she wrote. She raised her hand again, but he didn't call on her.

More pointless and repeated questions were asked by others. Harry tenaciously held onto his Dumbledore mask throughout it. Afterward, as they were taking down the podium, Bones said, "Well Harry, you have a career in politics ahead of you, I can tell."

Harry felt the mask still firmly in place and let it answer. "Perhaps." Rather than expressing the alarm and horror he really wanted to. "I have to return to St. Mungo's," he informed her.

At her nod goodbye he Apparated away, leaving her to chat with the reporters. She seemed to bask in their attention, reminding Harry of Fudge.

At the wizard hospital, Versa was working on Snape while Hedgepeth stood nearby. "Ah, there you are. We need you to keep him awake... doesn't seem to want to be."

"Would you?" Harry asked rhetorically, pulling a stool over. He shook Snape's shoulder and his head snapped towards the thin pillow as though pain had shot through him. Harry cringed.

When Versa sunk to the floor some time later, Hedgepeth smoothly took over. Hours later, he too rubbed his own face, shook his head, and departed.

## A BATTLE OF ONE

"It is not working," Snape said when they were alone. He strained to roll onto his back. His head jerked again as though a ghost had slapped him. "It is getting worse."

An assistant came in with a potion. Snape impatiently gestured for her to set it on the nearby cart and then waved her out. She shuffled out, appearing insulted. When the door snapped closed, Snape said, "How did the press conference go?"

"All right. I did better than I thought I could."

"That's good," Snape said, sounding as though he were plotting in his head. He didn't speak again, though.

Harry said, "I pretended I was Dumbledore. He always did a good job of appearing harmless when in actuality he was one of the most powerful around."

Snape reached out blindly and patted Harry's arm. "Wise idea."

"It was sort of Mr. Weasley's, but he left it to me to figure out. I think he raised enough sons to know what he is doing, even if I don't always think he does."

Snape tapped Harry's arm with his knuckles. "He is a good guide, Harry."

"Don't say that," Harry blurted, voice breaking. He bit his lip and wrestled with himself. "I'm not looking for a replacement father."

"But it is true," Snape stated.

"He doesn't trust me like you do. No one does." Harry hadn't considered it before, but now realized how very important that was. It seemed, in fact, to be the very foundation of himself right now.

"Keep behaving like Dumbledore and eventually others will," Snape added, voice the weakest yet.

"You can't give up," Harry said desperately.

Snape replied, "There is nothing but pain in this world now. I held on a very long time... because I knew you would come."

"You can't give up now, then, of all times," Harry argued, hearing a younger child take over his voice. He stood up and found the potion with blurring eyes. "Take this," he said.

Snape began to say something else but stopped and accepted the bottle. He was out seconds later.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



# ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 1

“Remus, I didn’t expect to find you here,” McGonagall said from the doorway of the Defense Against the Dark Arts office.

“I stopped by the Burrow and heard that Severus was not well. I stopped by St. Mungo’s in search of Harry, but didn’t find him.”

“He was instructed by Amelia to hold a press conference. You must have missed him.”

“Severus is seriously hurt. It doesn’t look good,” Lupin said, sorting folders with more purpose than the upcoming long summer break called for.

“So you thought you would come and do his work?” McGonagall queried, simply trying to understand.

“I needed to do something meaningful. That and I had a bad moment during the riots last night. Someone recognized me for a werewolf and I found myself in a duel of sorts with several angry wizards.” He shuddered. “I find the notion of this defensive castle quite reassuring right now.”

“Harry could use your support,” McGonagall said.

Remus raised his head. “Hm.” He stood and closed the files that were open. “I have a better idea.”

He fetched a broom out of the cupboard and said, “I’ll see you later,” before departing out of the window.

Lupin Apparated when it was possible to and then strolled into Godric’s Hollow

## ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 1

using his broomstick as a walking stick. Pamela only worked part-time so she may be home, although he wasn't certain until she opened the door to his knock and immediately gave him a hug.

"If I knew I'd get such a reception, I'd have come sooner," he said as he stepped inside.

"Why haven't you?" she criticized.

"If you only knew," he said, waving away her invitation to sit. "I need you to come cheer Harry up a bit. Severus is in hospital."

"Severus is? What happened? Your letters said something bad was happening and then that you shouldn't write anymore since someone could intercept the owls and that was risky."

"That was true. Voldemort's followers all escaped and then it turned out Voldemort was back, so I didn't want you put at risk. But now Harry is in a bad way with all of this. He rescued Severus, but perhaps too late. I was thinking you may be able to provide some support."

She jumped up and fumbled for her handbag. "Let's go."

He took hold of her hand and led her out to a copse of trees where he hovered the broomstick and helped her on it.

"Well, this is romantic," she said. "Never flown on one of these. I've flown on KLM, but this is really different."

"Apparition can be traced," he explained.

"Things sound bad, Remus," she said as he got on behind her and put his arms around her.

"They are, though hopefully they're improving." He leaned forward and the broom shot through the trees and up the hillside.

A few miles away he landed, took hold of her arm, and the next moment they were in the field beside the Burrow. Inside the house, Pamela was greeted warmly.

"Why don't you stay and I'll fetch Harry from St. Mungo's?" Lupin offered.

"I want to come along," she said, stepping out of the ring of redheads surrounding her.

"They'll let her in with you," Bill said when Lupin made doubtful noises. "Things are crazy over there."

"Well, come along then," Lupin said. "We'll give it a try." He took her to the closest alleyway to the hospital, since taking her in directly would set off an alarm.

At the old shop window he waited for the pavement to clear of others. "This doesn't look much like a hospital," Pamela said.

He stepped closer to her to say, "It's hidden. The road has to clear."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

She stepped closer as well so that they were touching. "I guess I can wait," she said.

"It's good to see you," he admitted.

"You need support too," she suggested, reading his tone correctly.

"I didn't have a good day yesterday either. But nothing like Harry's so I can't complain."

"What happened to you?" she asked, sounding as though it mattered to her.

The road was empty now, but he explained instead of turning to the mannequins, "Wizardom rioted yesterday, on top of everything else."

"Is that why the wizard hospital is inside a closed shop?" she asked.

"No, it always is," he said. "But angry people will do anything and a former student from Hogwarts recognized me as a werewolf. It was one of the worst moments I've had in a while. This was after a harrowing train ride where we couldn't prevent Severus from being abducted by Death Eaters."

Her gaze widened in alarm. She glanced around. "Can we go in now?"

Lupin turned to the mannequin inside the glass. "We are here to see a patient, Severus Snape."

The mannequin looked from one to the other of them before tilting its head and pointing at Pamela. "She has an exemption through Harry Potter, as his cousin," he explained. The dummy's head straightened and it moved its finger for them to come closer.

"Close your eyes," Lupin said and led her through the glass.

It took a while to find the treatment room where Snape had been left alone. The assistant who was finally convinced to lead them there closed the door on his way out. Pamela moved beside the still form on the table and said, "Oh, this is terrible... but where is Harry?"

"I don't know. I doubt he's gone far, though." He sniffed at the empty potion bottle left sitting on the floor beside the bed. "Hm, sleeping potion and something else," he observed.

Pamela straightened from leaning over Snape and asked, "Sleeping potion?" She then stared up at the fairy lights in surprise because they were congregating to help her see better.

Lupin explained, "After what happened to him, he would be in a great deal of pain if he was awake."

"Aren't they treating him? Should we take him to a normal hospital?" she demanded.

"Pamela, a Muggle doctor would not understand that he's been cursed and that



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the curse is continuing to exact its toll upon him. Yes, they are treating him. Everything is being done that can be.”

Her shoulders fell. “Where is... Candide, his girlfriend?”

“No one knows. He sent her away when the trouble started. I don’t even think he knows where she is.”

“Remus, this is terrible. Harry can’t lose another parent.”

Lupin scrubbed his hands together. “There is nothing else anyone can do.”



Harry, at that moment, was striding across Ward 49, approaching the far beds on the left. Mr. Longbottom was curled up under a blanket, with only the top of his mussed hair sticking out. Mrs. Longbottom was in her usual spot, holding her stuffed lion, although it was rather in need of replacement at this point. She didn’t offer it to Harry as she had the previous time he had seen her, when he and Tonks were investigating Lockhart’s disappearance. Perhaps she could not see him because an Obsfucation Charm still clung to him from slipping in behind one of the staff. He had also transformed his robes to lime green to make himself harder to spot as a stranger.

Harry shook his head; if only he had known then how much trouble Lockhart was going to turn out to be. But it wasn’t him, exactly, it was Merton. Harry stood in the quiet ward, thinking idly. He was thinking that things felt unfinished beyond Snape’s injury, and that notion loomed menacingly over him... until he put it aside and concentrated only on what was in front of him.

Harry had come to this ward to see the Longbottoms, who threatened to represent Snape’s future as well. Harry couldn’t imagine it, even as he stood there clearly witnessing it. He ached the strongest yet for Neville all those years, and felt nothing but panic at the notion that he too may be making visits here to someone who barely recognized him. He stepped closer to Alice Longbottom, feeling for the curse. There didn’t seem to be one. Perhaps it had faded over this much time. That carried a small reassurance with it.

Harry reached around to touch the top of her spine, where the Healer did on Snape. She didn’t move, seemed uninterested even. Harry let his focus fade and felt with startling clarity exactly what the trouble was. The radiance of her was hopelessly knotted and tangled. This explained a lot of the Healer talk that had passed between Hedgepeth and Versa about unwinding and unweaving. He could trace the tangle of her as though it were visible, as long as he didn’t concentrate too hard, in which case he could only feel the bones of her spine. He relaxed until he could see again, and

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gave the smallest tug to loosen the least-tangled of the knots. Something similar to a curse rose from this action like heat. Harry Staunched the heat with the same cold he was taught to use for bleeding. The knot relaxed with one less twist in it. Harry stood, listening to his own breathing for over a minute, before trying another.

Time passed; Harry had no idea how much. He had no sense either if anyone else had come into the ward since he had arrived. Surely the Obsfucation Charm had worn off even if his paltry disguise had not. There was nothing beneath his fingers left to unknot that had not become part of a solid mass, which seemed very unwise to touch. He ran his fingers up and down making sure all of the heat was gone and all of the easy tangles had been unwound. Mrs. Longbottom swayed under Harry's hand and, frightened, Harry lowered her to her bed and leaned close, ready to call for an alarm with the large button on the wall. But she seemed only to be sleeping, he discovered with profound relief.

Harry turned and lowered the blanket slightly on Mr. Longbottom. He could feel nothing when he touched him. He truly needed to be awake, just as the Healer had insisted with Snape, and awake was not a state Mr. Longbottom ever seemed to be in. Harry pulled the blanket back over Longbottom's head and could see his own hand shaking. He needed to eat, desperately. Danishes sounded wonderful, and this made him smile crookedly.

In the corridor, he was startled to encounter his cousin Pamela. "Harry!" she exclaimed and gave him a long hug.

"What are you- Oh, Remus. Hello," he said to his former teacher.

"How are you, Harry?" Pamela asked firmly as though expecting him to lie.

"In need of dinner," Harry said. "Shall we get some?" He was keen on eating really well and coming right back to the hospital.

"I'll cook. Take us to my place," she insisted, glancing between them.

Remus took them to the field outside the town adjacent to Godric's Hollow. "I'll come back for you, Harry," he suggested, but Harry transformed into a Gryffylis and tossed his head to say that he would follow. Pamela would have fallen over backward at the sight of him had Lupin not caught her. "He is a vision, isn't he?" he asked, amused.

Pamela found her feet and stepped forward, clearly intrigued. "What is that?"

"Harry. Showing off," Lupin suggested, teasing.

"You sound jealous," Pamela returned gently. She raised up her hand and Harry bent his head down to get a rub on the short fur atop his nose. "Wow, what big eyes you have," she said.

"Better to eat you with," Lupin drawled.

## ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 1

“No, he’s beautiful,” Pamela argued. “Eat you with... sheesh.” She rolled her eyes.

Lupin looked Harry over with a more discerning eye. “Maybe I can manage an Obsfucation Charm strong enough to cover you,” he said, and held out his wand for Harry to bow his head low again to have the charm applied.

As they flew, Pamela pointed out things along the way, excited this time to be flying. “I had a boyfriend once with a motorbike. I thought that was the tops.”

Harry veered away from them around a patch of small trees, thinking that he would have to loan Lupin his motorbike for next time.

Pamela said, “Sometimes I can see Harry, and sometimes I can’t.”

“That’s because you know he is there,” Lupin explained. “Otherwise you wouldn’t see him at all.”

The copse near her house again covered their landing. Harry returned to himself and staggered.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Lupin asked. “You look like I do after transforming.”

“I’m all right,” Harry insisted. “A little short on food and sleep.” He was thinking that Versa’s collapses were not so overdone.

Harry crashed onto the couch and they let him sleep while they cooked. Harry woke to soft conversation and rubbed his eyes. The scent of tomato sauce filled the small house. He longed to rush back to St. Mungo’s but had to eat, he knew. He listened to the two of them making dinner with a small smile before he went into the dining room and leaned on the door jamb to the kitchen.

“Well, have a good sleep?” Pamela asked. She then stopped, holding a steaming bowl of sauce before her. “What happened to your eyes? I thought they looked strange earlier, but I thought it was just the funny lights at that magic hospital.”

Harry frowned and looked down. “It’s a long story,” he said.

“Strange. I didn’t know eyes could change like that,” she said, carrying the bowl past him to the table. “Have a seat.” When they were all seated, she asked Lupin, “Did you know that could happen?” He nodded soberly. “What causes it?”

Harry had insight at that moment into Snape’s difficulty with her curiosity.

“Harry performed magic too powerful for him,” Lupin explained.

“It wasn’t too powerful for me,” Harry argued.

“I don’t think it would have done that to your eyes if it hadn’t been,” Lupin said.

“What did you do?” Pamela asked while passing the serving spoons to Lupin.

“I turned Voldemort into a Muggle.”

“Good idea,” she said after a pause. “Then you can just put him in any jail, right?”

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“Then he can’t come back from the dead again, was more my thinking,” Harry said while pouring sauce onto his pasta.

“He has a habit of doing that?”

“Yes,” Harry replied disgustedly.

Everyone else started eating, but Pamela asked, “Is Severus going to be all right?”

Lupin frowned and moved as though he wished she had not asked that. Harry said, “I hope so.”



After a filling meal where Harry ate thirds for the first time since he was a first-year at school and was trying to keep up with Ron at dinner, he Apparated back to St. Mungo’s from a spot miles and miles away from the village. He was grateful for Lupin’s care that no one learn that wizard activity was happening in the village again. It looked as though Lupin might spend more of the evening there as well, which made Harry feel light-hearted despite everything else.

Back in the treatment room, Hedgepeth was working on Snape again, but he did not look as self-possessed as before. His hair had fallen out of its pompadour and had been flattened on one side as though slept on. He gestured for Harry to take over from Shankwell the task of keeping Snape awake. Hedgepeth gave up soon after, drooping and with the rings below his eyes even more pronounced. He didn’t look at Harry before he departed. Shankwell moved to give Snape more potion, but Harry intercepted him saying, “I want to talk to him a little.”

Shankwell nodded with some sadness and departed. Harry set the potion down beside the wall where no one would see it should they come in. He added a sticking charm to the latch to make it open only with effort. He then bent over his guardian. “Severus, wake up,” Harry said, yet again. Snape was barely aware of what was happening. Heart pounding rapidly, Harry reached around to the back of his neck and instinctively jerked his hand away. The tangle was still forming like a living thing, cursed and miserable. Harry breathed in and out a few times and unfocused his eyes again. He Stunched the curse, slowly and gradually, just in case he could do damage working too hard on such a critical spot. Snape relaxed so much he slipped into sleep and Harry had to shake him awake quite violently.

Harry Stunched more until the curse eased and stopped growing. He then began unwinding and unravelling with immense patience, remembering bending for hours over the small band he had been taught to weave in Finland. This was both harder and easier than with Alice Longbottom. On her, the curse had long since dissipated, but with Snape it would start up again as soon as Harry eased off. But here all of

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the raveling could come apart again; none of it was fused. Harry unwound everything with great care over nearly an hour. He pushed the curse away out of the radiance so it wouldn't re-tangle. This was the most difficult task; the curse was slippery, it felt as though he were trying to push oil down under a layer of water. Harry Staunched the heat of the curse and then pushed the curse itself away. Everything remained as it should for a few moments but the curse began to seep in again as simmering vile heat. Harry cooled it and pushed it away again. Finally, after repeating this until he was shaking, the winding and tangling didn't begin again.

Harry let go. He let Snape fall asleep. He watched him breathing, certain he was dreaming. The lights in the room appeared to have changed color his eyes were so tired. He rubbed them and fetched the potion from the floor, put it in his pocket, and stepped out.

It was night time. The corridor had been dimmed. Harry swayed, threatening to collapse. He Disapparated for Hermione's flat. He must have passed out when he arrived because the next thing he knew Hermione was bending over him with a water spritzing charm.

"Harry, are you all right?" she asked frantically. She was wearing a pink dressing gown and fuzzy pink slippers and seemed like a dream as well, albeit an alcohol-induced one.

"Yeah." He pushed himself to sit up. The electric lights were on and they stung his eyes.

"You had a bottle of sleeping potion in your pocket, but it broke. Doesn't look like you need it though," she commented, sweeping the broken glass away with her wand. "Here, take off your robe so I can clean it properly and so you don't get cut."

Harry stood and clumsily did so.

"Did you get hit with something?" she asked. "Do you need a Healer?"

"I'm fine, really," Harry said, feeling better than he had in a long while, considering his state. He felt hopeful, which was sustenance for his starved spirit. "I just need some sleep. Do you mind?"

She waved her couch into a bed and gestured for him to help himself to it. "Thanks," he said, flopping down. She moved about turning off the lights. "Did you see the evening papers?" Harry asked.

"Yeah," she replied.

"Were they any better than the morning papers?"

"A bit." The last light went off.

"Hmf," Harry said, rolling over to pillow his head on his arm. Crookshanks jumped up on the bed and sniffed his face. "You don't think I'm an evil wizard, do you?" he asked, letting it sound vaguely playful to cover.

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She scoffed from the doorway to her bedroom. “No. I think you lack restraint. But that’s always been the case.”

“Okay,” Harry said, deciding that he really didn’t want to get into it, even though he himself had brought it up.

“Goodnight, Harry.”

Hermione woke him while cooking breakfast seemingly moments later. Harry shakily made it to the table where he downed all the toast. “Have you been eating?” Hermione asked.

“Not enough, I guess.”

She put more toast on. “You’re a wreck, Harry. I hate to ask, but really want to know if Professor Snape is doing any better. How is he?”

“I don’t know. I hope better. They sent a Healer from Liverpool to look him over.” Harry felt this fib flow out of him without effort. He felt defensive, even about this, even with such an old friend. Until he saw Severus healthy he couldn’t bear to assume he really was and he couldn’t admit to his very practical friend what reckless thing he had just tried.

“I hope he gets better, Harry,” she said.

“Thanks,” Harry said. “And thanks for breakfast, I have to go. Be careful still,” he admonished before disappearing.



Snape woke slowly and found Shankwell bending over him. He had been moved back to the ward and the noise of people eating breakfast sounded too normal. He stared up at the healer in a strange daze. It required long moments to figure out what was wrong, and what was wrong was that the pain was gone. It had become part of his core, his entire reality, and now he floundered without it.

When he lifted his head, Shankwell said, “Are you feeling better?” with some surprise.

“Yes,” Snape replied. “Considerably.”

McGonagall stepped in at that moment. “Severus, you are awake,” she said, pleased.

“Yes,” he replied again, unable to come up with more. He sat up with determination, done with lying down for now. He ached everywhere from inactivity.

Shankwell stared at him in surprise. “You are that much better?”

“Yes.” Snape stared at McGonagall. “I am talking like a parrot, however.” He rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Let me fetch Hedgepeth,” Shankwell said, raising his wand to send a message.

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“I am deathly tired of that man,” Snape grumbled.

McGonagall took hold of Snape’s arm. “Are you really feeling better?”

“Yes,” he replied with annoyance. “Why do you keep asking? There have been a tag-team of Healers tormenting me for the last day. Lucky I’m still sane enough to complain about it, I suppose.”

Hedgepeth came in and stared at Snape. “You are feeling better,” he said. It wasn’t a question, so Snape didn’t answer it.

The man stepped around and put his hand on the back of his neck, which made Snape stiffen but he held still for it. “Well,” Hedgepeth said, “That is remarkable.” At Snape’s odd look he quickly added, “But very good. Wasn’t sure how many more rounds we could manage, quite honestly.” He stepped back a few feet and put his hands on his hips, looking vaguely confused.

Snape decided he finally had the luxury of ignoring him. He moved his legs as a test before swinging them to the side. “I am getting out of here,” he grumbled.

“Severus, are you certain?” McGonagall asked in alarm.

“Yes. I cannot take it here any longer,” he said, standing up. Shankwell pulled the curtain so he could get dressed, which he did, clumsily enough that he was grateful no one could see. He was straightening his collar when Harry appeared. His face upon finding him upright cancelled out rather a lot of the previous day’s misery. Harry’s face expressed pure joy and then he bit his lip as though forcing even more of it down.

“You’re all right,” Harry said.

Snape pulled his spine straighter than it really wished to be. “Yes. That’s why I am leaving. Going home.”

“Where are you going to go?” Harry asked.

“Ah,” Snape said as he tossed his former hospital gown aside. “I had forgotten. Perhaps Candide’s flat.”

“You may return to the castle,” McGonagall offered.

“I just got out of the castle for the year.”

“You still have enemies abroad, Severus,” McGonagall warned.

“And they won’t find me if they don’t know where I am.”

“Anything I can do for you?” McGonagall asked.

“Check me out of this place if you would,” Snape said, and held his hand out for Harry to grasp. Harry did so, but didn’t know where to Apparate away to. He took Snape to the stairwell of the accounting firm where Candide worked. The offices were dark either because they were closed or because it was too early for them to have opened. Snape Apparated them the rest of the way, although he sat heavily on the bed when they arrived.

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“Severus, are you certain that you should have left like that?” Harry asked in alarm.

Bent over with his hand propping up his head, Snape replied, “I’ve been horizontal too long is all. I am fine.”

“You look like you need to be again,” Harry pointed out.

Snape glanced around the room. It really was terribly small, even as bedsits go. Harry asked, “What are you looking for?”

“Something to eat.”

Harry made a quick search of the cupboards. “I’ll run down to the Cauldron for some soup; all right? If you haven’t eaten for a while you shouldn’t have anything heavy.”

“Yes, Mother,” Snape said quietly.

“Keep that up and I’ll bring your mother here,” Harry threatened, but he smiled afterward. “I’m very glad you’re better, Severus.”

With a regretful twitch of his lips, Snape said, “I’m sorry I gave up.”

“You didn’t really. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here,” Harry pointed out. They stared at each other until Harry said, “I’ll fetch the soup.”

Harry Apparated down to the end of Knockturn Alley, and then tried to make sure that no one followed him as he walked to the Leaky Cauldron. Perhaps it was his extra paranoia, but he felt uneasy, as though someone did follow. The few early morning denizens of Knockturn watched him warily and he watched them back the same. Finally, he strode out into the sunlight of Diagon, turning repeatedly to check the corner leading to Knockturn, but no one came out before he reached the end. In the Cauldron, things were relatively normal and the guests were breakfasting. Tom slapped his hand on the bar upon recognizing him.

“Harry, Harry,” he said in warm greeting. “What can we do for you?”

“Soup. I need take-away.”

Tom rubbed his head. “I can put a bit of last-night’s on the fire for you.”

“Just put it in a cauldron and I’ll heat it myself.” He waited while Tom ladled soup out. A family by the hearth was watching him as though he were part of routine in a circus, one perhaps involving fire and long sharp knives. “Have a nice breakfast,” Harry said to them upon departing, pretending that he couldn’t see the fascinated worry in them.

Harry half expected Snape to be unconscious when he arrived, but he was still sitting up, looking thoughtful. Harry heated the soup with a charm and put it in a bowl.

“You have your wand back,” Snape observed as he accepted the soup.



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“Yeah, the Weasleys gave it back after Voldemort was taken care of.” This still stung. He turned the single chair backwards and sat close to Snape, resting his chin on the chair back. “I’m really glad you’re better.”

“You said that,” Snape pointed out.

“It’s still true.”

A bird twittered outside on the sill. Snape finished the soup and handed the bowl over to Harry who asked if he wanted seconds. Snape shook his head. Harry rinsed the bowl and watched his guardian rubbing the back of his neck. Harry ached to check if he was really all right, but that would lead to long explanations.

“The Wizengamot are meeting this evening to decide what to do with me,” Harry said, mostly to distract himself. “But you’re all right, so I don’t care what happens.”

Snape stood and stepped over to him. His robes smelt of the freshening charm that the hospital also used on the linens. “Do try to care before you walk into the meeting, if you could.”

“I’ll try,” Harry said. He glanced around. “Maybe I should fetch the chess set in the meantime.”

“The Ministry does not expect you?” Snape asked in disbelief. “You must have duties.”

“I want to keep an eye on you. You don’t even have a wand, do you?” Harry asked.

“Perhaps I will go procure another one from Mr. Ollivander,” Snape said. “Were you truly intending to babysit?” he asked sharply.

“I was thinking about it, yeah,” Harry said.

“Given your skills at detecting Death Eaters, you are much better employed doing that.” Harry closed his eyes a moment, prompting Snape to ask, “Any on Diagon Alley?”

Harry shook his head.

“Well, that is something. Must be in confusion.”

“No one is certain who survived,” Harry pointed out.

“I am. Would you like a list?” he asked.

“Very much so,” Harry said.

Snape’s gaze grew distant. “Bellatrix was absent when the attack started so I suspect she is still around. Greyback leapt out of the window and Avery had been sent away on a task. MacNair is dead for certain.” Snape went on with the list.

“You’re certain Bellatrix escaped?” Harry asked and then remembered. “Oh, yeah, Voldemort insulted her, didn’t he?” he said, thinking aloud. Snape’s narrow look of surprise made Harry say, “I thought you knew I was seeing everything. I thought that was why you distracted Voldemort by using his real name.” When

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Snape shook his head, Harry added, "Well, that explains why you didn't announce where you were so I would know. It wasn't until I saw Pansy that I knew. Thanks for the distraction, even if it was an accident. I needed it."

Snape clenched and rubbed his hands together still deep in thought. "Draco and Pansy survived, I assume?" Snape asked.

"People at the Ministry said they did."

"Good."

Snape sat back down on the bed and stared at the wall. "And you have returned to yourself, it seems."

Harry exhaled, tossing the tea towel he held about as he gestured broadly. "I still have part of Voldemort in me, and I don't want it."

"I don't think you have any choice."

"I can do the spell again," Harry insisted. Snape's eyes rose in a very dark look. Harry added, "I don't want him in me. I don't want him coming back."

"He isn't dead, how can he come back?" Snape retorted.

"I did the spell once, why don't you think I can do it again?"

Snape rubbed his forehead as though he were fighting a serious headache. "Harry, you performed the spell on someone who was not whole to begin with, a human menagerie of sorts. That is not the same."

Harry appeared merely stubborn. Snape said, "If I find you are attempting such a spell, Harry, I will take your wand away and toss you into the lower Hogwarts dungeon for a very long time."

"You can't," Harry retorted, feeling acid pleasure at saying that. "I can Apparate anywhere. Even inside of Hogwarts." When Snape simply stared at him, Harry said, "Want me to prove it? What would you like from your office?"

"A book," Snape said, gesturing at the small shelf above the hearth where a pile of *Witch Weekly* was stacked. "There isn't anything here to read."

Harry disappeared. There was no sound; he simply vanished. He reappeared the same way ten seconds later. It was as though Snape had blinked, rather than Harry exiting, except he held out the latest issue of *Potions Review*, still in its envelope which had Snape's address on it at Hogwarts. Snape straightened and tilted his head back. "How did you do that?"

"I slip into the Dark Plane, Apparate there, and slip out again." Harry was glad to tell someone this; he felt unburdened by doing so.

Snape turned the rough grey envelope over to examine it. "Do not let anyone know that you can do that, Harry. Does anyone know already?" he asked, sounding deeply concerned.

"Hagrid might."

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Snape thought that over. “That may be all right. I may use a memory charm on him though, just in case.” He tore open the envelope and banished the wrapping with a toss of his hand.

“You have to teach me how to do that,” Harry said.

“Allow me to cling to one spell that you do not know,” Snape said gruffly. He set the potions journal aside and said, “Harry, if you attempt the Crux Horridus you will put us all at risk.”

“How so?” Harry asked, still sounding difficult. “Seems like not doing it is the real risk.”

“You must kill someone first, of course or, even if you had a convenient accidental death to utilize for it, you are casually discussing cleaving your soul. You would damage yourself and not know it. You would become the very menace you most fear.” Snape rubbed his hair back and added, “And given your skills, it would be end of wizardom, I believe.”

Harry stared at him, judging his seriousness. He swallowed hard. “So, I’m just stuck with it?”

“You feel whole, correct?” When Harry nodded, Snape added, “Then you are whole, I believe, and you are stuck.” After long seconds, Snape added, “And you promised.”

Harry nodded reluctantly, frowning.

Silence descended until Snape said, “Perhaps you will heat me a bit more of that soup.”

Harry jumped to do that, solicitously handing over a steaming bowl a minute later.

“You are turning into a house-elf again,” Snape criticized, but his eyes held affection. When Harry bit his lip as he turned away, Snape added, “Sorry, you are worn too thin, I see.”

“I thought I was going to lose you when I need you the most,” Harry said, not looking up from bending over the kitchen sink where he had started the dishes with almost an obsessive attitude.

“You should be capable of getting by without me,” Snape said slowly, holding off on eating.

Harry wiped his cheek on the edge of his sleeve with a jerking motion, surprised it had become wet.

“Harry,” Snape said painfully. He set the bowl on the small shelf above the bed and came over to where Harry was putting things away. He tugged on Harry’s arm to get him to stop what he was doing and turn toward him.

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“You should read the papers before thinking I don’t need you anymore. What’s a Darkness Test, anyway?”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “They intend to run one on you?”

“So Minister Bones has warned me. Minerva made her put it off until the next regular meeting of the Wizengamot.”

“There will be time to prepare you, then,” Snape stated confidently. “Keep your soul whole and you will do fine.”

A knock sounded on the door. Harry ran a peep-hole spell and opened the door for McGonagall. She greeted them both. “Still feeling all right, Severus?” she inquired. Fawkes flapped to the coat rack and fluffed himself.

He nodded. “I can keep an eye on Severus if you wish to check in with the Ministry, Harry,” McGonagall said. She sounded as though she wished to speak to Snape alone or wished to rescue Harry’s career, or perhaps some of both.

Harry hung the tea towel back up and Disapparated for the upstairs of the Leaky Cauldron, and then from there to the Ministry alleyway, just to make it harder for him to be traced. Things were reassuringly busier inside the Ministry. He even had to wait in queue at the temporary reception desk.

Back in Candide’s flat, McGonagall said, “I would like Pomfrey to take a look at you, Severus.”

“For what reason?” he demanded, crossing his arms.

“Neither Healer at St. Mungo’s who treated you seems to believe that they did so successfully.”

“They must have, I am here and feeling quite well.”

“I’m wondering if you have slipped into insanity in such a way as to not be recognizable as such.”

“Oh, well, thank you,” he said, truly insulted.

“It will only require a few minutes, Severus.” She stepped to the door and opened it again. The Hogwarts Healerwitch stood in the corridor.

Snape sat when instructed and waited impatiently through an examination. While putting her things away in her black bag, Pomfrey said, “He seems to be quite all right. Underfed as usual and lacking in proper exercise.”

“No sign of a curse disorder?” McGonagall asked.

“Not more than usual,” came the reply, which made Snape roll his eyes.

“If you both don’t mind,” Snape said stiffly, “I would like to get some quiet rest for once, which is surprisingly difficult in hospital.”

“I told Harry I would keep an eye on you,” McGonagall said, shrugging off her cloak and hanging it over the chair. Pomfrey made her departure, leaving them alone to glare at each other.

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With a huff Snape reclined on the bed, arms still crossed. “You wouldn’t by chance have an extra wand on you, would you?” he asked.

“You didn’t get yours back?”

“Perhaps the Ministry has it. Perhaps Draco has found it. I don’t know. I’m not actually certain who took it from me since I was unconscious at the time.” He re-crossed his arms to put the other on top. “I feel quite naked without it,” he admitted.

“Ollivander’s should re-open this week. He cleared out his shop during the riots but promised to reopen as soon as he could.”

Snape rolled his eyes again and shook his head at his poor luck.

“Ah,” McGonagall said, standing suddenly. “Will you be all right alone for two minutes?”

“Yes,” Snape stated forcefully. McGonagall smiled, prompting Snape to ask, “What?” with equal force.

“It is very good to see you in such typical spirits, Severus,” she said, which deflated his annoyance before it could become anger. “I will be right back.” She closed the door. Snape watched it sparkle momentarily from the impervious spell she put on it from the other side.

She was absent slightly longer than two minutes, which gave him time to peruse the Potions journal Harry had brought him. He wasn’t reading though, so much as thinking about how Harry had fetched it.

After she shrugged off her cloak, McGonagall held out two wands. “Try the red one first.”

“Where did you get these?”

“Try it first and I will tell you.”

Snape waved a hover charm at the stack of magazines on the mantelpiece. They hovered well enough, but the charm required two waves to be cancelled out. “Better than nothing, I suppose,” he said, studying the poor workmanship of the wood.

“You are not using it properly,” she said pleasantly. She placed an unlit lamp on the mantelpiece beside the magazines and incanted: “Wingardifacis Leviosa.” The magazines hovered and the lamp lit. She handed the wand back. Snape stared at her strangely. “It is the 3W Mark 2 Ultimate Duelers Wand. Lets you cast two spells at once. Still experimental, however. No guarantees.”

Snape accepted it back and gave it a more positive appraisal. “The trick, I assume is in the incantation in order to avoid hovering the lamp and igniting the magazines, not that there would be any great loss in that.”

Handing over the second one, she said, “You may have that one and here is a normal one that the twins do not believe they have damaged yet while experimenting

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on it. The first one is supposed to allow for simultaneous block and attack during a duel. The twins are apparently keen to outfit all duelers with them in next year's tournament to raise the excitement level."

"And their sales level, I would assume," Snape added dryly. "I will have to thank them... unless they did not realize the wands were for me."

"No, they did," McGonagall assured him. When Snape hummed she said, "The Weasleys are nothing if not forgiving."

He glared at her, holding off on trying another spell. "What? You think I was too hard on them."

"Yes. I do."

Snape shook his head and stared down the length of the wand while aiming it. "Troublemakers, all of them. Except Percy, that is." He snuffed the lamp and made the top Witch Weekly hover up and open to the first page with a Hands-free Reader's Charm. "Hm," he said. "Damn creative of them, though."

McGonagall grinned and took the other seat in the room.

"Now I truly do not need sitting," Snape pointed out.

"I promised Harry," McGonagall repeated.

Snape experimented with the wand a while longer before turning to the journal and trying to ignore his colleague. His head nodded shortly after and the wand slipped from his hand. McGonagall picked it up from the rug and set it on the shelf close by.

McGonagall went to the mantelpiece and took down the top magazine, realizing that even though it was months old, she hadn't had time to read her own copy. The first article discussed hair color, highlighting, and what it implied about a witch's personality. The author insisted that those who were still clinging to the old style of warts on the nose, could trade that in for green highlights as long as they were of sufficiently disturbing green. Her reading of this escapist pointlessness was interrupted by the latch turning. She pleased herself with how rapidly she was up with her wand out, but it was only the flat's owner.

"Headmistress..." Candide began before noticing that she was being shushed. "Severus!" she exclaimed, waking Snape anyway.

"Candide?" He sat up and looked around to get his bearings. "I am quite certain I didn't send for you yet," he criticized, rubbing his head.

She propped her hands on her hips. "Good to see that you are better than the newspapers made you out to be," she said with feeling. When this didn't reduce his annoyed glare, she said, "One: I couldn't figure out how you were going to send for me when you didn't know where I was-" "I have ways," Snape muttered. She went on, talking over him, "And two: it seemed unlikely that you would manage to do so from the ward for the incurably insane." At his derisive look, she pulled out a newspaper

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from her large handbag and held it out. It had been folded all sorts of ways to put an inner article on top. He waved it off. "It says that the Healers expected you to be moved, permanently, to the closed ward by tomorrow."

Snape scratched his ear, accepted the paper, but set it aside, unread.

Candide said, "So, I thought I should come. I tried not to read the papers, but it became too hard to not seek out any information and there were a lot of other magic folk half-hiding the way I was so it was harder to get away than I thought."

McGonagall put her cloak back on. "Perhaps I will leave you two alone." She exited, wearing a small smile.

Candide picked up the journal and newspaper from the bed to set them aside, and sat on the edge close to Snape. "You aren't really unhappy to see me, are you?" He shook his head, and she bent forward to kiss him.

"What was that for?" he asked, but the rancor was absent from his voice.

"For surviving."

"That is usually its own reward," he commented. He leaned back into a reclining position and closed his eyes.

"Are you certain you're all right?" Candide asked in concern.

Without opening his eyes, Snape said, "If another person asks me that I am going to start throwing curses around."

"Sorry," she said affectionately. "Didn't realize anyone else cared enough to ask."

Snape canted one eye open to glare at her but she only smiled mischievously and kissed him again.



Neville Longbottom was let into Ward 49 with very little notice, given how familiar all the staff were with his presence. His parents were as they usually were: his father sleeping and his mother sitting up, staring into the distance beyond the far wall. His mother held out a stick of chewing gum to him.

"Thanks," Neville said. Usually it was only the wrapper that he received. "Sure you don't want it?"

She shook her head. Well, it was barely a shake, more of a sideways nod, but it was a response that made him freeze in surprise. He often spoke to her, but usually received only pointless reactions in return that he couldn't help but string together into something that made sense. Neville put the stick of gum in his pocket. "Uh..." he said, not certain what to say next. "Oh, yeah, Voldemort is gone again. Well, sort of. Harry did something quite startling this time. I thought I should come and tell you though that everything was all right again."

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There was no reaction to this and his heart raced. Maybe it had just been a coincidence. “Maybe the staff already mentioned it,” he muttered.

“My old friend came,” she said. Her voice was scratchy, unused to speech. Neville nearly fainted.

“What? Who?” Neville leaned on the bed and glanced around, but there were no staff just then, the hospital was still very short-handed. He moved closer, half sitting. “Did you just say something?” he finally asked, thinking he must have imagined it.

“So long,” she said, sounding wistful.

“So long since what? I’m sorry I couldn’t visit the last few days. It’s been madness. You’ve been lucky to be in here where it’s quiet.”

After a long pause, she said, “Old friend.”

Neville tugged on his hair with both hands and then made himself relax. It was almost more maddening to have her communicating about things he did not understand than not communicating at all. He said, “Wait here. I’m going to go get the Healer.”

He returned minutes later with Healer Strout. “She was talking,” he was explaining. “Well, sort of. I’m not sure what she was talking about though. Did someone come visit her?”

The Healer shook her head and examined Alice Longbottom. “She seems about the same. Maybe a little more reactive to stimulus.”

“Say something, Mum,” Neville urged.

Healer Strout appeared dubious, but Mrs. Longbottom said, “Nice lady,” while patting the Healer’s arm.

“Well, that is quite extraordinary, especially given how long it has been.” The Healer bent over the chart which rarely got more than small status tick marks on it. “I’ll order a full assessment to see how she is doing.” She hung the chart back up and said, “Talk to your son, he’s waited a long time to speak to you.” She then strode out.

Neville sat across from his mother and said, “Do you remember me?”

Without really looking at him, she patted his arm too and said, “Nice boy.”

“Well, that’s something, I guess,” Neville said quietly. He glanced at his father, but he hadn’t moved. Neville sighed and patted his mother’s hand in return.



Harry made it to the front of the queue at the Ministry temporary reception desk. “Potter, right?” the clerk asked. It was the usual man, not the young one who had been there previously. “You’re on the roster addendum, go on.” He waved Harry



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off. This lightened Harry's mood until he reached the atrium where workers were repairing the fountain, pouring concrete into a magical form. The man running the mixer stared at him in surprise when Harry stopped to watch them work. He elbowed his companion and this man also stared at him, gaze shifting to suspicious. Harry turned and stepped away, encountering a woman hovering stacks of boxes from the dungeons. The boxes were stained as though they had been wet recently. She stepped to the side quickly to let him pass. He wanted to stop and demand to know what she thought he was going to do, but he knew what she had been reading and his attention would only make it worse. What could he say to fix that kind of fear? Even before everything happened, the press had been telling people that he had gone dark and now his defeat of Voldemort could believably be merely his elimination of a rival. It didn't calm most people down to think that, even if things were much better now.

Harry tried not to let his shoulders slump as he waited for the next lift. Three of them were functional now and banging from below indicated that others were being repaired.

The Auror's office was empty except for Tonks, who sat at her desk, writing out a report by bending far over it as though badly nearsighted. Harry suddenly feared her reaction to him would be the same as everyone else's.

"Hi," Harry said quietly.

Tonks glanced up. "Hey, Harry," she said casually.

Harry's heart did a strange little dance of relief.

"Ready for the Wizengamot this evening?" she asked, as though it were merely a Quidditch match he may be playing in, not yet another determination on his future.

"I think so," he replied. He felt as though she had just handed him his future already by treating him as she always did. She kept writing. He liked the way her shoulder arched into her neck the way she sat with her black robes hanging loose behind her, pulled down by the weight of the hood.

She stood and Harry failed to get out of her way even knowing that she would be heading for the file room. "Harry?" she asked in a dubious voice as though thinking him clumsy or distracted.

He was indeed incredibly distracted because he had his hands on her arms and the scent of her was so strong.

She seemed to read his thoughts. "Harry..." she began chastisingly. But he kissed her before she could say more. A breath later she was kissing him back and when footsteps sounded in the corridor, approaching, Harry Apparated them away.

"Harry," she scolded lightly again upon looking around his bedroom. Harry hadn't thought carefully before coming here. The room was unexpectedly cool, damp, and breezy. A blue tarp fluttered over the hole in the roof, making Harry wonder who

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had taken care of that. The room had been emptied of everything except the bed and the wardrobe, which had its own tarp protecting it. Tonks wasn't angry, more resigned to his actions and reluctantly tolerant, which gave Harry a rush.

"They're going to kick me out anyway," Harry said, stepping close again. All he cared about at that instant was that she didn't care what he had done and thought of him exactly as she had before. Her hair cycled to light brown, something he rarely saw short of a disguise.

She tried to cross her arms but he stopped her. "They don't want to kick you out, Harry. Not everyone, anyway. They didn't leave you any choice about what you did."

Harry kissed her again and pushed her back onto the bare mattress of the bed, laying across her. He lifted his head and waited for her to say something. Her eyes dodged away before coming back to his.

"This makes things so much more complicated," she warned.

He ran his fingers through her hair. She still had two small scars at the edge of her hairline from the explosion at Azkaban. He traced those lightly and then kissed them.

"You're not listening to me and you are making this very difficult," she said.

"I don't care," Harry repeated, and it was the absolute truth.

"You've looked so lost lately," she said, brushing his hair back, even though gravity pulled it forward again. "You look like you've found yourself now, though," she said.

"I have," he said, bending to kiss her long neck.

She slapped him on the arm once and then put her arms around him. "Oh, hell," she muttered.



Harry had fallen asleep in a tangle of his cloak and came to awareness only gradually. Tonks was warm and pleasing against him.

"I need to get back to the Ministry," she said. "I didn't technically sign out."

"You've been there non-stop for days. Don't you deserve a break?" he asked.

"Yes. I certainly needed a nap... and other things... but there is always a call that isn't going to get handled if I leave."

He studied her eyes which were violet right then. He felt on hold. He badly needed to know if this was just another one-time.

"What's wrong, Harry?" she asked.

"Can I take you out to dinner tonight?" he asked. "Come over to your place afterward?"

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“Well,” she said, “they can’t afford to fire us as far as I can tell. You have to face the Wizengamot this evening and here you are breaking even more rules.” She sat up and scratched her head. She was amazingly beautiful as she moved to pick up her clothes. “Your timing could be a little better.”

“I needed you,” Harry said even though his pride railed at that statement.

Her shoulders fell and she gave him a look of sympathy. “I noticed,” she said.

“Everyone is scared to death of me,” Harry said, needing understanding more than his pride for another round.

“That sucks, but they’ll get over it. And if they don’t... too bad for them.” She stood to slip on her robe. Her hair straightened up and she looked herself again. “I’ll go back first. You should wait a while before following.” She looked down at herself and shook her robes out. “Might as well not invite disaster right away.”

Harry grinned. She studied his eyes with something different than everyone else did, as though she wanted to understand. “Later, Harry,” she said and then departed.

Harry dressed and hooked on his cloak. The scent of smoke had faded. The house had aired out at least, with all of the broken windows and open holes in the roof. He needed to arrange to get it repaired. He didn’t know where to hire wizards like the ones working in the Ministry today. Not that he wished to invite them over to give an estimate, particularly. Maybe they should hire Muggle workers instead.

He grew bored within a minute of standing in his room to delay departing and took himself to Hagrid’s cottage to check on his pet. Fang the Boarhound and Willy the Pranticore were sitting against opposite walls – Fang on the bed, using Hagrid’s huge pillow as a shield, Willy below the window. They were eyeing each other with low regard. Kali lay curled in a homemade cage hanging from the ceiling. She raised her head when he touched the cage and then stood up, moving each leg carefully. The cage was too small for her to stretch her wings fully so he lifted her out. She flapped and stretched on his hand, wings marred by the black lines of tar and the tiny white threads that bound the membranes back together.

“Maybe you shouldn’t fly for a while,” he said to her. “Maybe that’s why Hagrid put you in that smaller cage. Looks like he made it just for you, in fact.”

She tilted her head at him as though listening. Fuzzy violet fur had already begun to cover her bare spots. He shifted her to his sleeve because she was pricking him with the one claw remaining on her injured front paw. She must be overcompensating and could not avoid doing so.

“If I had a home to take you back to, I’d do so, but I think you should stay here and let Hagrid keep looking after you. Hedwig’s at the Burrow, but I think it is better here for you. All right?” He held her up to the open cage door to see if she was willing to go back inside and she was. He took that as her answer and re-twisted

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the wire holding the cage door closed. He wanted her with him but had to wait. He would come back in a few days and check on her again.

Outside on the lawn, he peered up at the high castle wall. He could just see the tip of Gryffindor tower behind the Headmistress' tower. He Apparated up there to look for Ginny. The common room was empty, the hearth cold. He still had not used up the full half-hour he needed to. He asked the Fat Lady when she had last seen Ginny.

The portrait primped herself hurriedly before replying, "She's assigned to the kitchen today."

"Perfect," Harry said, thinking that he needed lunch anyway.

He was leary of Apparating again within the castle, because he could not risk getting caught doing so. He took the stairs instead, which reminded him of how few staircases were in his life now. By the time he got all the way to the area below the Entrance Hall, he wondered now how he and Ron could have decided so many times that a late-night snack was worth so much effort. He tickled the pear and tugged on the handle. Only a few house-elves were present, but a much taller figure sat among them, casting spells to the elves' delight.

Ginny looked up from the very large spoon she was repairing with a welding charm. "Harry!" The spoon clattered to the table as she jumped up. "How are you? I sent you about a twenty owls, but didn't hear anything back. I've been going nuts!"

"Sorry," Harry said.

She stepped close, looking defeated. "Gosh it's good to see you," she said. "Thank Merlin you're all right."

"I don't have much time for a visit, I'm afraid."

"No one does," she complained. "Headmistress is trying to get Bones to turn the Floo Network back on. Until then I don't expect too many visitors. The papers arrive here only a day late, and I swear the teachers told Peeves to hide them from me when the headlines are too awful. How is Professor Snape?" She asked this last with clear reluctance.

"He's fine now," Harry said.

"Is he? Harry that's wonderful." She gave him the hug then that she seemed to be resisting moments before.

"I'm glad you're here, Ginny. One fewer person to worry about." He took up a scone from a bowl on the next table and nibbled on it.

"Yeah," she uttered, shoulders falling. She went back to the bench where the elves waited, examining random broken metal cookware that waited to be repaired. "So everyone says. From the papers, it didn't seem like you needed any help anyway. Good job though." She sounded down even about that.

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“You’re learning to weld?” Harry asked, changing the topic.

She tossed her arms. “I’m learning all kinds of useless things.”

“That’s not useless,” Harry argued. When she shrugged, appearing more stubborn, Harry asked, “Where’s Dobby?”

“The elves have been helping clean up Hogsmeade after the riots. McGonagall loaned them out. I couldn’t get myself loaned out as well.” She stared at the broken cauldron hook laying before her. “I can’t believe I have another month of this. It’s maddening being here when everything is happening out there.”

“I know,” Harry said, thinking that she was not at all accustomed to being alone, unlike himself, and that must make it harder. “I can come visit more often,” he said.

“When they open the Floo Network. Otherwise it’s a hassle,” she said grimly. Being alone had clearly already taken a toll on her mood.

“Not for me,” Harry said, thinking that if they were alone, he would show her what he could do. “I’ll come. Kali is here and needs visits too. I’ll try to owl, but I don’t really have a home address for owls to easily find me and the Ministry is too chaotic for personal stuff.”

She smile faintly. “Thanks, Harry. Glad you’re all right. Glad you got rid of Voldemort.” The elves around her cringed and one covered its ears. Ginny rolled her eyes. “See what I have for company? Sorry I couldn’t help you. McGonagall assigned Professor Lupin and Professor Greer to guard me the whole rest of the trip on the Express.” She shook her head. “They’re bad enough as teachers when their attention is spread over a whole class...” She put two rusted-out hooks on top of each other and made one new one out of them with a spell that sent sparks up to the cauldrons hanging like bunches of fruit above the table. “You probably have to go,” she said sadly as the new hook glowed red-hot. She hovered it to a cauldron full of water, sending billows of steam to the high ceiling.

“I do,” Harry said, sounding distracted, “but I’ve never seen these spells before.”

At the Ministry, Harry walked around the long way to Mr. Weasley’s office rather than stop at the Auror’s office. Mr. Weasley’s desk had disappeared under tilting piles and rolls of parchment. Paper airplanes were scattered in the corners of the floor, unfolded just enough to read them.

“Harry,” he said when he glanced up.

“Can I get an assignment, sir?” Harry asked. Mr. Weasley rubbed his chin while he thought. Harry added, “I’ve been added back to the roster, I noticed.”

“You have,” he confirmed, not looking up from the memo he was reading. “But I think we should wait until after the Wizengamot meeting this evening.” Harry rubbed his hair back and tapped his toe on the floor, trying to think of an argument. Mr. Weasley asked, “How are you, Harry? I heard Severus is doing better.”

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"I'm all right now, Mr. Weasley," Harry assured him. "It's nice to be all alone in my head again."

"I can imagine," Mr. Weasley said with a tilt of his head. "You did well at the press conference." He picked up a battered quill to add a reply to the bottom of the memo he had opened. He had to write awkwardly high, on top of the stack just before him on the desk, and then he had to hunt for his inkwell, which had been buried. "Hopefully we can manage to resume your training regime soon as well. Losing Munz was quite a blow," he said sadly. "On top of Whitley and Moody."

Harry, who clearly remembered that moment, sighed and thought even more that he should return to his duties. After a minute, he asked, "Can I go out in disguise? I can disguise myself as Aaron or something... No one will know as long as I don't get assigned to the same call as him."

Mr. Weasley finally looked up. "It's those eyes you need to disguise," he said. "Well, ask Shackbolt if he will take you out under those circumstances. We certainly are short-handed."

Harry's face broke into a smile. "Thank you, sir."

Mr. Weasley grinned in response. "Good to see a smile around here for a change."

Harry stopped in the toilet and put on a disguise, beginning with changing his eyes to an ordinary looking brown. This did change his appearance rather radically. He hid his lightning scar with a charm that took three tries because it was actually an anti-wrinkle charm. He paused and dropped his wand hand to his side; his father was staring back at him now. "You think you had troubles," Harry said to his altered reflection.

He quickly finished his face and hair, leaving his body unaltered because he and Aaron were only slightly different in build. Down in the Auror's office, Tonks did a double-take. "What's with this?"

"Mr. Weasley said I MAY be able to go out on an assignment if I disguise myself."

She smiled and stood up to examine his work more closely, making all kinds of tingles race through his body at her nearness. "You need to change your voice too," she said.

Harry tapped his throat with a voice-deepening charm. "Better?" he asked. He was dearly looking forward to this evening. He felt alive twice over standing there with her so close. "Where's Kingsley?" he asked. "I have to get his permission."

The record quill scratching furiously reminded him that he could just check for himself. "He should be around," Tonks said as Harry bent over the logbook, which at least now didn't overflow from one day into the next, even if the pages were dense.

Shackbolt appeared right then. "Tonks take this assignment, will you? Take Aaron there since he's back. Where's Reggie?"

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“That’s not Aaron... it’s Harry,” Tonks explained to Harry’s dismay because he was about to get exactly the partner he wanted.

Shacklebolt turned and stared at Harry. “So it is.” He then appeared dubious.

Harry said, “Can I go out like this? Mr. Weasley said I could if you would take me.”

“Me?” Shacklebolt asked with a touch of dismay. Harry’s elation dropped significantly. “Your determination is appreciated, Harry, but are you even-”

“I’m on the roster,” Harry stated, guessing what what was going to be asked. Shacklebolt’s attitude made Harry realize how dearly he needed to return to normal. His mood was swinging sharply downward now. There was still Tonks that evening, he reminded himself.

“Arthur said that, eh?” Shacklebolt said, perusing the logbook. He frowned, “Since you aren’t Aaron, you don’t know where Reggie is. Hmf.” He picked up the slate tablet and scratched something on it and then waited. Nothing happened so he set it down again. “All right, Potter, I’ll take you with me to look for Reggie and Aaron since they aren’t checking in. Tonks, wake Tristan to take over the office and take this other call.” He swung his cloak on and took Harry’s wrist while holding his wand up with the other. Harry did the same and they Apparated away.

Harry had to rush to follow out of the abandoned shop where they had arrived, hiding his wand inside the edge of his cloak as Shacklebolt did ahead of him. They passed through a crowd on the pavement, not entirely Muggle, Harry realized. He turned his head backwards to look over a group of three men in their late twenties, standing beneath a kabab house sign and wearing slightly less fashionable clothes than the others around them. One of them turned to him but didn’t react, which was a strange change for Harry.

Shacklebolt stopped at the corner and looked each way, scanning the people out in the nice weather. “There were three wizards back there,” Harry said.

“Where?” Shacklebolt asked.

“Under the Lebanese restaurant sign.”

“How do you know?” Shacklebolt asked, sounding doubtful.

“I can just tell,” Harry insisted. “Really.”

Shacklebolt considered this and him before walking back to the group. He used a subtle repelling charm to get the others nearby to decide to move away. The three men looked Shacklebolt’s cloaked self up and down and then glanced at Harry.

“Have you seen anything strange happening around here?” the Auror asked.

“Someone Apparated in over that way,” one of them said quietly. Harry felt very uneasy to be overlooked and unrecognized. He glanced around them, including up at the surrounding windows.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“That was us,” Shacklebolt informed them.

The others shrugged that they had nothing to offer. The first one said, “You an Auror?”

Shacklebolt nodded, he also was looking around and looking frustrated already even though their search had just begun.

“Sweet,” one of the wizards said.

“Stay here... Aaron, and keep an eye on the road.” Shacklebolt stepped down two doorways, used an unlock charm and went inside. It wasn’t the nicest area of town, and Harry was not even certain what city they were in.

“And you?” someone asked Harry.

“I’m in training to be,” Harry explained, scanning the people walking on the pavements and the cars driving by.

“That means you’re in training with Harry Potter, doesn’t it?” the first asked. “Creepy,” another said.

Harry tried to concentrate on keeping watch while he tried to imagine what Aaron would say in his place. “Potter’s okay,” he said, feeling awkward.

“My uncle says they’re going to arrest him tonight at the Wizengamot meeting,” one of the men said. “Everyone’s been talking about it.”

Harry unclenched his teeth, swallowed a sigh, and scanned the road as though he was too busy at that to really care. “Who’s your uncle?” he asked with a casualness that made him quite pleased.

“Ogden. He works at the Ministry in a job he can’t talk about. Very important job. He always knows what’s going on before anyone else does.”

Harry felt as though he was floating beside his own body. “So, you are telling me this so I can warn Harry?” Harry asked with a mocking tone.

“Are you going to?” the man asked, stunned by that notion.

Harry looked up at the building Shacklebolt had entered, wishing the Auror had told him how long to wait before following, wishing he knew more precisely what the assignment was. “He’s a good friend of mine,” Harry said. “We’re all trainees together.”

One of the men said, “They say he’s worse than Voldemort. He killed all those Death Eaters with a spell no one knows.”

Harry shrugged. “So?” he asked snidely and there was no immediate reply.

To Harry’s relief, Shacklebolt returned and gestured for him to follow. He looked concerned. When they were away from the others, he said, “False call it looks like.”

“Again?” Harry asked sharply. “Merton again?” he added in a whisper.

“I don’t know,” Shacklebolt said grimly. “Let’s check the empty buildings in the next few blocks. Something really has the hair on my neck going mad around here.”



## ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 1

“I know what you mean.”

Inside the foyer of the fourth building, Harry closed his eyes and quickly tugged on Shackbolt’s cloak to restrain him from mounting the stairs.

“D.E. nearby,” he whispered.

“How many?” Shackbolt asked. Harry held up two fingers and then nodded toward the door, it felt like the shadows were behind him a block or two away. Outside, Harry stopped again and closed his eyes before leading the way around the corner where a news shop’s racks blocked the way. He didn’t mind hunting Death Eaters, but wished that he was incapable of it.

“I’ll go around back, you go in the front,” Shackbolt ordered when Harry gestured at a narrow, dilapidated building that felt likely.

Harry waited a count of sixty before using an unlock spell on the front door whose only labeling was a series of half-peeled house music stickers. Inside it was much nicer than expected, with sparkling marble floors that were probably house-elf cleaned. He slipped off his shoes to walk silently. The mirror ahead on the right felt cursed; Harry ducked under it and glanced into the first room, which was empty. He turned to go up the stairs but someone came barreling out of the room he had just checked and would have run into Harry if he had not had his wand up and in the way.

“Pickley!” the rotund man shouted and a house-elf appeared between them, knocking Harry with a gust of wind when he raised his hand. This gave the man cover to draw his wand. They exchanged spells once before the house-elf knocked Harry back again into the cursed mirror. Arms reached out of it and began straightening his robes the way an impatient schoolmarm might.

Harry didn’t want to take his wand off of his opponent to strike at the mirror behind him but the mirror had many more arms than he did and he couldn’t shake it off. One of mirror-arms grabbed his wand hand in a vice-like grip that prevented him from aiming, except at the ceiling. The feeling of aversion at the contact made him cringe. He hoped Shackbolt came along very soon.

The short, round wizard cockily strode forward as someone appeared at the top of the landing. “What is all this, Amycus?” the woman grumbled.

“Someone has invaded our house.”

“Oh, the Carrows,” Harry said, recognizing the name.

“You come calling and you do not know upon whom?” the man asked in disbelief.

“Well... that happens,” Harry said to stall. He wasn’t certain with this cursed thing holding onto him if he could successfully drop into the Dark Plane or not, let alone Disapparate.

At the top of the stairs, something or someone silently jerked Alecto backwards into a doorway. Harry avoided staring, instead distracting his captor with a mocking,

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“You don’t know who I am either.”

“Some busybody from the Ministry of Magic, presumably. Blasted inconvenient to have to move again. Rather like this place.” He waved his wand and the hall and corridor were suddenly bare of their fine plaster decorations and marble surfaces, cobwebs hung everywhere. Everything had been an illusion. The elf cowered, backing into the grey and dreary shabby room behind him as though allergic to peeling paint and dust.

“Nicely done,” Harry said. Shacklebolt was creeping down the stairs, wand aimed.

The wizard grinned sloppily. “Generous of you to say. So, who are you?”

Harry’s face grew serious. “Your master’s destroyer,” he stated, knocking his head back hard enough to smash the mirror, which released his wand hand.

Amycus turned to run, collided hard with Shacklebolt, and they both disappeared with a bang!. Harry stood, staring at the spot, wondering if he should attempt the spell to follow. He thought he should check on the other one, which was a good thing because the elf was trying to free his mistress from the binding holding her in a robe-covered lump. She was unconscious so hadn’t taken advantage of the loosening on her bonds. The elf raised its long-fingered hands to strike out and Harry said, “Don’t you dare,” while cracking open the Dark Plane so the elf could feel it.

Pickley screeched horribly and scrambled away to cower again. Harry closed the gateway, rolled Alecto over, grabbed her wrist only to realize that he was still in his socks. This took the rush out of his success at apprehending another Death Eater. More so, he Apparated her to the alleyway leading to the Ministry. He had some difficulty hovering her wide body in while the gateway was open and needed three tries, for which he was glad there were no witnesses, but then he remembered: he did not look like Harry Potter, so it did not matter. As he chuckled to himself he thought that perhaps he should spend more time disguised as his fellow trainee.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



# ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 2

Severus Snape rose from the narrow bed he was sharing. The angle of the sun indicated that several hours had passed. He dressed slowly, testing his body for any sharp pain. There was none; the Healers had done their job, even on the parts of him not in the worst condition.

Dressed, he stared into the mirror on the back of the door to check his appearance.

“What are you doing?” Candide asked, sitting up.

“I am going out.”

“Where?” she asked, gathering the duvet around her and scratching her head.

He looked at her in the mirror, rather than turning. “The Ministry.” He pulled the two wands out of his pocket. He couldn’t tell them apart without looking at them, a design flaw he would have to mention to the Weasley twins. He wondered if they would mind if he put a notch in the handle of one of them.

“You sure you’re fit to be up?”

“Yes. I’ve been much worse. Quite recently, in fact.” He fingered the wands further, the normal one wasn’t actually straight, he would have to remember to hold it so the tip pointed downward, not sideways. “I owe a few people, and I should pay them back. I’ve been given yet another chance to even out my debts and I intend to do that.”

She stumbled out of the bed, tripping over the covers bundled around her. “Where are you going, exactly?”

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“To the Ministry, to help round up my former colleagues.” He slipped the normal wand into his right-hand pocket and the other in his breast pocket. In his reflection, they didn’t show.

“Severus, are you nuts? You just recovered from your last run-in with them. Why would you want to see them again so soon?”

“I’m feeling strangely fearless right now given how much I have survived.”

She propped her hands on her hips. “Oh really? So does that mean you’re not too chicken to agree to marry me?”

In the mirror, his brows went down very low before one went up in annoyance. “You have a one-track mind,” he criticized.

“And so do you, Mr. I-Can’t-Ever-Consider-Myself-Redeemed.”

After this exchange they stared at each other’s reflections. Unfortunately for Snape, the duvet wasn’t covering her very well, so he was weakening without his will. He turned around, which did not help his resolve. “Bloody hell,” he said with little feeling.

“You need help with Harry more than you ever have. Have you been reading the papers?”

“No, but I can imagine.”

“I don’t think you can, Severus. You wouldn’t believe what a few nutters are suggesting. They want to put him away now so he can’t become the next Voldemort.”

“I do not think it will come to that, but if they ever attempt to do so, I will exercise no restraint to prevent it. And I will take him away from here... very far away. Are you prepared for that?”

“I would be fine with that, Severus.”

He held his finger up. “One other thing. You do not understand him; stop assuming you do... it is annoying. But if you can manage that... fine.”

She blinked at him. “Did you just agree?”

“I have to go,” he said, and disappeared.

At the Ministry, he slipped in behind workers carrying sacks of concrete through the opening in the alleyway wall, which had inexplicably been changed to a barn door, presumably to make it appear more reasonable to the Muggle eye. The Muggles going by on the distant pavement paid no heed in any event. The workers dropped the bags with audible groans and moved to hover them instead. Snape offered to help, which was welcomed eagerly.

At the desk, the clerk was arguing with a little old man by shouting into the trumpet he held to his ear. When a barrier tried to stop them, to much grumbling, the construction worker in charge shouted to the clerk to cancel it for them, which he did with only a quick glance in their direction, during which Snape made a point

## ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 2

of being behind the widest of the workers. As they moved on, he shook his head but accepted the oversight.

In the Auror's offices he encountered an Auror slumped at a desk, head resting on his hand. He had assignment sheets spread out before him and was fingering one idly that had been crumpled up and flattened out again.

"And you would be?" Snape asked him sharply.

Rogan looked up. "Tristan Rogan, who the hell are you? You don't have a badge." He started to raise his wand, but Snape was faster, snagging it with a charm and catching it out of the air. This brought some alertness to the man, who made it to his feet with effort.

"Are you alone here?" Snape demanded. The man fumbled in his pocket, prompting Snape to take his small slate board away from him as well before pushing him aside to look over the assignments. The crumpled one was a Death Eater sighting. Snape raised his wand to point it at Rogan's nose. It was almost unnecessary, since the man appeared on the verge of collapse.

Someone stopped in the doorway. "Arthur!" Rogan said. "Stop this man."

"Severus?" Mr. Weasley prompted.

Snape didn't lower his wand. "You left this man in charge in here?" he asked, sounding doubtful.

"Yes. Why?"

Rogan took a step backward and Snape followed, keeping close.

"Severus, really, whatever are you doing holding a wand on one of my Aurors?"

"Something not quite right about this one," Snape said darkly. Rogan had taken another faltering step and now had his back up against the cubicle partition.

"Honestly, Arthur," Rogan pleaded in disbelief.

"Severus, what are you doing?" Mr. Weasley asked more sharply.

Snape grabbed one of Rogan's wrists and said, "Something you should have done rather a while ago, I should think."

Rogan fought him, freeing his hand. He appeared terrified but with a wand hovering beside his cheek he did not attempt to go far. His knees were slowly giving out.

"It's been a long while, hasn't it?" Snape asked. "How many reprieves have you received?"

Rogan's knees bent farther. He lost the last of the defiance he had mustered and his face fell into misery. He shook his head, looking as though he wished to explain but could not.

"Severus?" Mr. Weasley prompted in concern.

Snape took hold of Rogan's wrist again. "Pull up his sleeve."

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Moving as though stunned, Mr. Weasley did so. Tell-tale blue electric lines crawled up down his arms to his fingertips. His head bent and he slid to the floor.

“That’s what Harry had,” Mr. Weasley said.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Snape demanded of the Auror. “Imbecile,” he snapped. “Someone would have helped you, but instead you were traitorous to everyone here.”

“I didn’t do that much of what they asked,” he argued, finding some fierceness in the midst of his collapse. “They said only another Death Eater could remove it. Last meeting they didn’t show.”

“Probably dead,” Snape stated pleasantly. “And as to the other: today is your lucky day, it seems.” To Mr. Weasley, he said, “Put him on the floor.”

“Why are you obeying him?” Rogan complained to Mr. Weasley in a bit of a whine while he was manhandled onto the warped wooden floor in the small space between the cubicles.

“Severus is a very old friend,” Mr. Weasley explained, standing to stretch once Rogan was flat on the floor and looked unable to rise even if released. “I need to sort through these assignments,” he said with some stress. “See what in Merlin’s name has been happening.” He turned to the doorway where Vineet had appeared silently, eyes keenly taking in the scene.

Snape crouched and tugged Rogan’s robe open, revealing a worn singlet underneath. “I need a second for the spell,” he said. “Vishnu, perhaps you could give me a hand.”

Vineet knelt where he was instructed to by a quick hand gesture. He mimicked Snape’s hold on Rogan’s other shoulder. “A Mutushorum, as powerful as you can cast, right on that spot.” Vineet nodded, prompting Snape to say, “No wonder Harry wanted you with him. On three, ready?”

When Rogan fell limp, Vineet said, “He is dead.”

“Just for a minute or so.” Snape tugged Rogan’s sleeve off of his arm and waved the overhead lamps dimmer to see better when the lines finally stopped. Vineet observed everything closely.

After Rogan was revived, Vineet asked, “What has happened to him?”

“He was being blackmailed. Kept alive just enough to make him useful longer. He is a fool,” Snape growled, standing up and stepping over the Auror as he struggled to sit up.

“I didn’t do that much,” Rogan insisted again, ducking.

“Where did you send Reggie?” Mr. Weasley asked, sounding as though he feared the answer.

## ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 2

Rogan sat back against one of the partitions and clumsily pulled his robes together. “Not where it says there,” he admitted quietly. “But Aaron, I sent him to Coventry, told him to wait in a pub there for instructions. I didn’t put him in harm’s way.”

“Who was blackmailing you?” Snape demanded. For a moment he reached down as though to grab the man by the hair, but he balled his hand into a fist instead and held it at his side.

“MacNair... and Lestrangle.”

Mr. Weasley looked quickly through the logbook.

“I will go,” Snape said.

“Are you certain you are up to it?” Mr. Weasley asked.

Snape gave him a smile containing no pleasure. “Yes. Quite. But, you wouldn’t happen to have my wand?”

Mr. Weasley said, “Everything collected from Malfoy Manor is in the evidence archive. Locked away.” When Snape shook his head, Mr. Weasley added, “If it’s there, it will be returned when the investigation is closed.”

“Never mind,” Snape said, gesturing with the normal but bent one that he had.

Mr. Weasley said, “I’ll recall Shackbolt and Harry and send them as well to follow you.”

“They will only get in the way,” Snape warned, thinking that some of the things Bellatrix was fond of arranging, he certainly did not want Harry to see.

“Vishnu is on probation but you aren’t official anyway. Do you want to take him?”

Snape considered the Indian. “His obedience notwithstanding, I will manage better alone. He could end up a hostage, I’m afraid.” To Rogan he demanded, “Did you send Rodgers to North Plaitton or St. Anthony on Abbotwy?”

“Plaitton” Rogan replied, surprised by Snape’s guess.

“How long before she said to send help after him?” he then asked, increasing Rogan’s surprise.

“Another hour from now,” Rogan replied, appearing damned even further by how much Snape knew.

Snape took a deep breath. “I’ll be back,” he said, and disappeared.

“A trap?” Mr. Weasley said sharply. “She was setting up a trap?”

“I guess,” Rogan muttered.

“And were you going to cooperate with that?”

“I wasn’t... I hadn’t figured what I was going to do. I thought Reggie wouldn’t have any trouble with her. I hinted to him...”

Mr. Weasley said, “Vishnu, take him down to one of the interrogation rooms and lock him in.” Vineet tugged the Auror to his feet. As Rogan was led past him, Mr. Weasley added angrily, “I wish I could put you up before the Wizengamot this

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evening, Tristan, rather than Harry. But for now I want you close at hand while we sort this out.”

Rogan lowered his head and allowed Vineet to lead him out of the room.



Snape stopped before a line of half-fallen trees bordering a collapsing canal. He cancelled the alarm spells he found there and proceeded cautiously through the nettles. Bellatrix could be viciously creative with her spells but she tended to be recklessly over-confident with setups that had worked previously. He crossed the trees and a gravel path that meandered to the rusty railroad bridge in the distance. Stacks of grim flats were visible beyond, their windows dark or missing. Ahead of him an old woolen mill stood, its decorative brickwork optimistically contrasting with its decrepit condition.

He circled carefully, peering in the broken-out windows. There was nothing on the ground floor that he could see except for graffiti. Opportunistic trees grew close against the side of the building inside the wrought iron fence. Their branches invaded the missing windows on the upper floors. Snape surveyed this situation before transforming into a snake and spiraling up one of them.

At the window, he hung from a branch and tasted the air with his tongue. Fresh human scent nearly overpowered him. He slipped inside and glided behind a large contraption that still held strands of thread from its many spindly arms draped like giant spider webs. He returned to human form and stepped out into the dusty sunlight.

At the other end of the narrow room, lay Rodgers. Snape approached slowly, wand out, turning around frequently to check behind him. The dust on the floor had been disturbed and then masked again with an reverse-chore charm, which hinted at where traps had been laid, although they could be false clues.

Rodgers had been left in one of Bellatrix’s invented tormenting positions. He rested on a large metal ball on which he had to balance his back or risk touching the cursed floor. He had not heard Snape approach, which was fine since Snape did not want to risk any movement that might spring the secondary traps surrounding them. Only Rodgers’ feet touched the floor on legs bent to give him the best balance. Given how much the Auror’s muscles quivered trying to maintain his position, it was possible Bellatrix had been absent for a while, leaving her victim to strain to survive until rescuers arrived, only to be taken down themselves by other ambushing spells. Without warning of the severity of the situation, even an experienced Auror could fall prey long enough for Bellatrix to descend and cause him or her grave difficulty.



## ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 2

Snape took a few steps to the side to enter Rodgers' line of sight. To his credit, Rodgers' didn't move beyond his eyes, which grew furiously alarmed and hate-filled beyond the pain they already held.

"Show me what she did," Snape whispered, holding the Auror's gaze. When Rodgers' appeared even more distrustful and shifted his gaze away, Snape hissed, "Do you wish to live or not?"

Rodgers' eyes closed for a breath. He opened them again and brought them back to meet Snape's but he appeared stubborn about it. Snape Legilimized him, watching in his memory as Bellatrix laid the traps just in front of where his feet now were.

Snape backed up a half step to gain a little space. He paced slowly to where he estimated the right hand side of the inferno trap to be and drew a spell line from the center of it, out to the plaster wall. Sparkles began draining from it. He did the same on the left. The cursed floor itself was more difficult. He crouched and placed the point of his wand on the half-rotted wood. Nothing happened. He raised it up and placed it down inches closer in.

As he repeated this with great care, Rodgers made a noise of impatience. Snape said, "Do not speak; you will set it off, as I am certain she warned you."

He moved the wand point down on the next board over, looking for the start of the cursed floor. It could only be cancelled from the very edge of it. "Contrary to what you are probably assuming," Snape went on conversationally, "I do not find enjoyment in your suffering... and I am hurrying."

Finally, he found the edge. The curse made his borrowed wand smolder, which he did not care about. He spoke the cancellation, which was a long string of latin on the topic of quieting the spirit of lightning and the hunger for pain. He knew the cancellation because he had years ago seen her practicing and perfecting the spell.

The wand ceased to smoke. He lifted it and said, "It is all clear now."

A long hesitation passed before Rodgers allowed himself to roll to the side. His hands were bound, which Snape assumed was why he did not try to rise immediately as the metal ball rolled away a few feet until it found a large knothole and rocked to a stop. Checking that they were still alone, Snape strode over to the Auror and crouched beside him. Rodgers was trying to hide his face, it appeared, by turning it toward the floor. Snape removed the simple binding charm from his wrists and Rodgers put his hands over his face. His chest heaved once.

"You had better be stronger than that if you are going to continue to train Harry," Snape criticized. "Get up; we must leave quickly."

Rodgers struggled shakily to his feet. As with most people, the moment of rescue generated the largest flood of distress, but Rodgers got a hold of himself quickly and looked around alertly. Snape handed him the normal wand and removed the other

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

from his breast pocket. Rodgers held the burned wand at ready and studied Snape as though he were a mysterious new creature that may yet turn out to be poisonous. A bird twittered and took flight outside in the front. "Stay here," Snape whispered. He slid soundlessly over behind the pillar closest to the stairwell, cast a spell at his feet, and waited.

Rodgers shook himself and held the wand behind him. Snape was impressed that he easily took up an attitude of victimhood, which would make him much better bait. Rodgers sidled over to the high window and looked out, judging the distance to the ground. Bellatrix came into view on the stairs and immediately raised her wand.

"Well, lookie at this. Came just in time, didn't I?" she purred, flipping her cloak with a snap. The metal decorations edging her bodice glittered as she moved.

Rodgers glanced around him as though hoping for escape, then he backed up.

She glanced around as well, even cast a detection spell, but it didn't find her former colleague who had charmed himself to avoid detection by just that spell. "However did you get out of that?" she asked, gesturing at the metal ball sitting alone.

"You aren't as good as you think you are," Rodgers sneered. He swayed slightly despite his emotion and looked about to be sick.

She raised her wand, but Rodgers was faster, hitting her with a Blasting Curse, which sent her binding charm at the leading on the window. It groaned and plaster rained from the wall above it. Rodgers was shaking with fatigue, though, and his next curse only grazed her. She would have hit home with a Crucio in return if Snape had not hit her from behind with another spell, knocking her flat. She rolled over and cast back at him, but he had the Weasley twins experimental wand in his hand and he blocked as well as struck out with a disarming spell. Her wand tumbled away. Rodgers hit her from the other side, making her curl over her midsection.

Rodgers approached her, face contorted in hatred.

"She almost certainly has another wand," Snape stated just before Bellatrix pulled one from her boot and sent a spray of flame first at Rodgers before bringing it around to Snape who easily countered it. Rodgers patted his robe sleeves to stifle them smoldering.

The three of them fell still. "Give it up," Rodgers said.

"If you don't mind," Snape said, "I'd like to take her down, personally."

"You'd like to?" Rodgers snapped in disbelief. "I think I have first dibs."

Bellatrix rolled her eyes and then unexpectedly somersaulted toward the nearest pillar. Both of them lashed out, but Rodgers' prison box blocked Snape's chain binding, so what ended up sitting on the floor was a chain-wrapped box. Snape made a gesture of concession, but Rodgers didn't note it since he had fallen to his knees in exhaustion.

## ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 2

Snape stepped over to him and held out a hand to help him back up.

“Surprised you didn’t bring reinforcements if you weren’t here to help her,” Rodgers said as he accepted the assistance and then hung on for balance. Snape started for the stairs despite this, forcing Rodgers to struggle to stay upright and keep pace.

“I wanted to face her myself,” Snape said. “She was Voldemort’s most loyal servant.” After a few steps he gave in and put Rodgers arm over his shoulder to help him down the staircase with Bellatrix’s box hovered before them. The dueler’s wand did not work very well for hovering and the box kept striking the steps, which Rodgers didn’t comment on. “Also, I am accustomed to working alone and not worrying about anyone else.”

From beside the canal, Snape Apparated Rodgers to St. Mungo’s. Rodgers looked around the hospital cellar and snapped correctively, “The Ministry. Hell, I’ll take myself. No, give me that,” he said, gesturing at the prison box.

“I am quite certain that you require some care,” Snape pointed out.

“You should have just taken us to the Ministry,” Rodgers criticized.

“I thought you should suffer at someone’s hands, given that you did not trust me,” Snape said. “A Healer’s would do.”

Rodgers shot him a look of renewed dislike but it broke down and he laughed a bit. “Ministry,” he repeated. He was handling the box now and he disappeared. Snape followed just in time to slip through the doorway off the alleyway that, of the two of them, only Rodgers could open. At the desk, Rodgers berated the clerk until he gave Snape a badge and then led the way inside and down into the dungeon. In the damp, low-ceilinged corridor leading to the holding cells below Courtroom Ten, he turned over the box and signed some paperwork. His swaying was only noticeable to Snape.

As they headed back to the lifts, Snape said casually, “I usually find it is advisable to sit down before suffering the embarrassment of falling down.”

“I’m not going to fall down,” Rodgers insisted, but he clung to the gates of the lift after they latched and the cage rose with a shudder.

“Reggie,” Mr. Weasley said with feeling upon them stepping into the office. “Did you get her?” Mr. Weasley asked.

Rodgers nodded and dropped hard into the nearest chair. “She’s in the dungeon. Aaron all right? I didn’t see him.”

Mr. Weasley leaned close to look him over. “I sent Harry to fetch him. Tristan hadn’t actually sent him to meet you.”

Rodgers waved him away impatiently. “Tristan fall asleep instead of sending Aaron?”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“Worse than that; I’m afraid,” Mr. Weasley said. “He was having difficulty working entirely for our side.”

Rodgers stared at him. “What?” he breathed as though socked in the stomach.

“Rest a minute and you can go speak with him. Interrogation room one.”

Rodgers drooped, looking his most injured yet.

“Thank you, Severus,” Mr. Weasley said, upon turning to Snape.

Snape crossed his arms. “A sacrifice rescuing him... but I think I will live it down.” Mr. Weasley patted his arm in mock consolation on his way out.

“I won’t,” Rodgers muttered, resting his head in his hand.

After Mr. Weasley departed, Snape said in a low voice. “You can pay me back by treating Harry equitably while continuing to train him.”

Rodgers tenderly rubbed his neck. “I have no problem with keeping Harry on here. We desperately need him.”

“Then we are already even,” Snape stated.



Harry entered the wizard pub called the Dragon’s Deep just three blocks from where he they had apprehended the Carrows. Well, Harry assumed Shackbolt would successfully track down Amycus. He had not yet reported to the Ministry before Harry was sent off again. Something serious was happening when he arrived but he was not given any details, as usual. In fact, he was hurried off almost unceremoniously.

Aaron sat in the corner, watching the Falmouth player, Gregor, and his friends court trouble in the other corner.

Harry sat down beside him at his small table. Aaron gaped at him. “Harry?” At Harry’s wide grin, he asked in distress, “Are you pretending to be me?”

“Yes,” Harry said, grinning. “Haven’t you checked your tablet? You’ve been called back.”

Aaron fumbled for his pocket with a strained expression. “Rats. Yes. Checked it about three-hundred times when I first arrived; then these guys showed up.”

Harry followed his gaze. Aaron’s targets were indeed skulking suspiciously.

“I was hoping to catch them doing something,” Aaron explained.

Harry closed his eyes a long breath. “They aren’t Death Eaters. Let’s go.” When Aaron hesitated, Harry said, “You know where to find them later... just have to look at the Quidditch match schedule.”

Aaron swigged the last of his ale and gave in. “True.”

Back at the Ministry, Harry jerked in surprise as he entered the office, “Severus!” He automatically gave his guardian a hug.

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Snape pushed him away to look him over. “You are masquerading as the twin of Mr. Wickem?”

“Yeah,” Harry admitted.

Snape’s thumb grazed the center of Harry’s forehead where his scar was hidden.

Harry explained. “I wasn’t technically allowed out until after the Wizengamot hearing this evening. Well...” he hesitated, remembering what he had overheard on the street. “If they let me back on duty, that is.” He noticed his trainer slumped miserably nearby. “Are you all right, sir?”

Rodgers raised his head marginally. “Worst day of my life, but... I figure it can only get better from here.”

“We caught the Carrows...” He glanced around the office. “Well, I brought in one of them; Shacklebolt was fetching the other...”

Mr. Weasley came over and steered Harry out of the room by the shoulder. “Speaking of the meeting this evening... let’s get you some dinner and a moment of quiet before you face them, hm?” Snape followed them out and Harry allowed himself to be led to the tea room.

“Where’s Tonks?” he asked.

“Out on assignment,” Mr. Weasley explained.

“Are you sure you should be here, Severus?” Harry asked in concern. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

“I will manage,” Snape stated loftily.

“Severus has been a life-saver today,” Mr. Weasley said. “Perhaps he can see to you while I handle assignments?”

Snape nodded and Mr. Weasley departed hurriedly, tossing, “You are still Mr. Wickem, you realize,” over his shoulder.

Harry had taken a bite of one of the stale sandwiches left from lunch. He removed the disguise spells as he chewed. Snape pointed at his forehead. “You will most likely wish to remind them of that one.”

Harry had forgotten to unhide his scar. He tapped his forehead with his wand and his old scar reappeared. He rubbed it and put his wand away. “Good to see you up, Severus.”

Snape nodded. “I wished to assist, if possible.”

“As long as you’re careful.” Harry finished the sandwich and crumpled up the paper wrapper. “I should be nervous about this hearing, shouldn’t I? Somehow I don’t care.”

“That is your prerogative, but I would strongly recommend, at the very least, pretending that you understand their concerns.”

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“I heard a rumor... when I was in disguise... that they intended to arrest me at the meeting, and I still can’t make myself care.”

Snape straightened his cloak with a shrug. “You are standing in the department that would have to execute that order, and it does not seem as though they would willingly do so. Perhaps that is why you are dangerously sanguine.”

Harry popped the cap off of a jar of pumpkin juice. “I think I can do this,” he insisted between sips. “I just need to behave as Dumbledore would, so I don’t scare anybody. Powerful.. but harmless.” He stared into the empty bottom of the jar with its ring of pale orange liquid. “I could really use an ale.”

Snape took the jar and tossed it into the bin. “Later, when you are finished.”

Harry looked him over. “I’m really glad you’re all right, Severus,” he said with feeling. “I can get through a lot, knowing that.”

“Touching, I’m sure,” Snape said lightly enough not to insult. He glanced at the clock on the wall. “Perhaps you should head down early.”

Harry sat instead and crossed his arms. “No way. Last time I worked myself up until I was too nervous. I don’t like waiting outside that door. Tell me about this Darkness Test in case they decide to run it this meeting despite what Bones said.”

Ten minutes later, Shacklebolt and Tonks appeared. When Harry began asking about Carrow – partly to cover his fierce blush and to think about something appropriate – Shacklebolt waved him off. “We’re your escorts and we have to go right now.”

“Can Severus come?”

Tonks said, “Given that his injuries argue in your favor, and the Wizengamot requested the Healer’s report along with everything else... I don’t think you want them to see how well he is doing.”

“Good advice,” Shacklebolt concurred.

The hearing was held in the usual meeting room, which was brighter than Courtroom Ten and its tiered seats loomed less. Harry took the chair in the front middle of the floor. He rubbed the carved wooden armrests as he sat back. They were notched but also smoothed from years of nervous people sitting right where he was. Tonks and Shacklebolt flanked Harry and stood at attention, wands lowered, but in hand.

Harry took a deep breath and let his eyes trail over the faces peering down at him. Most wore glasses, most were white-haired. Their plum robes made them appear more festive than they ever could be.

Bones started things off. “Mr. Potter, you are here before us again, it seems.” She sounded as though this were a paperwork issue, which let Harry breathe more freely. She certainly was flipping through a thick stack of parchments before her as though looking for a particular one. “We have some questions for you regarding the events of

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the last few days.” She adjusted her monocle and peered at a long parchment before setting it down and letting it unfurl and hang far over the front edge of the table.

“Yes, Minister,” Harry said loudly, because the muttering in the upper tiers bothered him and he wanted to start off sounding cooperative. McGonagall’s gaze was one of the few actively friendly ones.

Bones said, “We have a broader issue of your disobeying your direct superiors, but that is an aside for the moment, amazingly enough.” Harry tried not to let his shoulders fall. “We have reviewed the Department of Magical Law Enforcement reports about the events at Malfoy Manor on June 14, but they are insufficient to determine what exactly we are to do with you, Harry.” She waited to see the result of that statement before continuing on. “We are most interested in learning more about the spell you utilized to render – and I don’t mean that as a pun – ten wanted Death Eaters into little more than bloodied robes and a stray shiny bone or two.”

“It wasn’t a spell, really,” Harry said.

She read from the parchment. “The official report states that you summoned creatures called Rakshasas to dispose of your enemies. I am not personally familiar with these, perhaps you can illuminate us.”

“I thought they were Shetani,” Harry said. “I hadn’t heard of the others before.”

“Shetani, Rakshasas, d’Jinn, Ifrit... from my burning the last drops of my lamp oil last night reading, I have concluded they must all be the same thing. Barring that doing so is in violation of Decree 84 regarding casting of un-approved spells, let alone Decree 13 forbidding conjuring of anything not of this Plane. Summoning such a creature requires rather lengthy preparation of a expert diagrammed node, the use of rather un-seemly sacrifices, long, obscure, and difficult incantations. Months of time would be expected to pass from start to finish. By the timeline in the report, you must have had ten minutes at most.”

Harry’s hands clenched the polished wood armrests. “When I get angry they come very easily, ma’am.”

“Just like that?” she asked doubtfully as the assemblage shifted, whispering to each other.

Harry shrugged. “Yeah.”

She gazed at him, deep in thought. Someone in an upper tier asked, “Can he summon them now, here?”

Bones relayed the question. “Can you, Harry?”

“You want a demonstration?” Harry asked in disbelief.

“No. Harry,” Bones said, sounding vaguely alarmed. “We are merely asking a point of information.”

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“Oh,” Harry sat back again, even though the hard wood was hurting his spine. “Here at the Ministry, it feels like it would be harder to do it. Something about the protective spells.” The assembly let out a collective breath. He wasn’t sure how true this was anymore, given that was strong enough to slip into Hogwarts, but it felt true as he had said it, before he thought twice, so he left it at that.

“But outside the Ministry?” Ogden asked. “You could conjure these beasts at will?”

“I think so,” Harry admitted.

Muttering resumed.

“Let’s play a little game, Harry,” Bones said. “It is Monday and you have been confined to the Weasley residence because you could potentially give away key plans to Voldemort through the connection you share. Your adoptive father has not been abducted...” Harry put himself back in time to that place, dearly wishing what she said had been true. “What are you doing instead of carrying out your own assault on Malfoy Manor?”

“I would have just kept trying to see where they were hiding out. When I found out, I would have told someone who could relay the message to the Auror’s office.”

“And if you had been ordered to remain where you were while others took care of things?”

“Voldemort is my responsibility,” Harry pointed out. “It would have been unwise of the Ministry to keep me away.”

Bones frowned. “Clearly you dispensed with him easily enough, but if you had been so ordered?”

“I don’t know what I would have done. I guess it depends on how bad I thought things would go without me.”

A few members took note of that. A grumbly old voice asked something from behind Bones. “Ah, yes. There has been some interest in what you did to reduce Voldemort to a Muggle, a spell no one, even in this wizened collective, has ever heard of.”

“I changed a spell into another spell.” Harry thought again, remembering that intense moment of knowledge, “No, that’s not quite true. I used a spell Voldemort knew, but I was very selective about what energy I took away. Instead of cutting his soul out, I cut out his magical power.”

The voice grumbled again. “Could you repeat the spell?” Bones asked. “On Mr. Malfoy, say?”

Harry froze in his chair. Beside him Shackbolt shifted uneasily. “It isn’t a very good spell,” Harry explained. “I used the Crux Horridus spell and made it do what



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I wanted and that's a terrible spell. I wouldn't want to do the spell again. Not for that."

"Do you like Mr. Malfoy, Harry?" Bones asked, sounding strangely level, the way Snape did when the question was a trap.

"No. He tortured my father nearly into madness," Harry said, voice unsteady. "He keeps wanting Voldemort to come back. He's tried to kill me many times. I don't like him at all."

More muttering came from the upper seats. "It would be a most appropriate punishment, don't you think?" Bones asked.

"Yes, I suppose," Harry said. He didn't want to seem uncooperative, but his own aversion was winning out easily. He imagined Malfoy's terror stricken face beneath him as he circled the wand to carve out his magic. He could most likely repeat the spell, but for Lucius Malfoy, it felt a worse act than simply killing him. And Harry wondered how he himself would feel afterward. Sick seemed most likely. "I... It's just that the spell... it's not a very good one to perform. Voldemort was different; he wasn't whole. Lucius Malfoy is. Spells like that take a toll on the caster too."

Bones was smiling faintly. "Of course they do, Harry." She glanced meaningfully behind her. "And we will be certain to arrange appropriate punishment for Mr. Malfoy without resorting to such things."

Harry let himself relax and take a deep breath in preparation for the next potentially trap-laden question.

"As to your disobeying orders..."

"I couldn't sit still while my family was being tortured," Harry said, interrupting. Tonks hand landed on his shoulder, presumably to quiet him.

"And if you had it to do over again?" Bones asked sternly.

"I'd disobey them sooner," Harry stated, not wavering in holding her gaze. Tonk's hand gripped tighter.

Bones broke the stare when she flipped through her parchments again. "The Healers support your argument that haste was justified, but there is still a disciplinary issue which I assume your department will handle. If they don't, it may be re-addressed here at a later date." She glanced at Shackbolt as she said this. "As to the other rules violations... you must appreciate our concern, Harry, as to your fitness as an Auror."

It was Harry who dropped his gaze this time. Gathering calm around him as best he could, he explained, "I... wouldn't have done it if I'd had a choice... saw a choice."

Bones sighed loudly. "Given that the prophecy is now dispensed with, we could make an exception for extraordinary fate-willed circumstances..."

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Someone scoffed loudly in annoyance and several began to argue about Harry already being under investigation for dark magic.

“Dispensed with?” Harry heard himself echo, ignoring the other comments. The room quieted and many gazed at him with renewed concern, but Harry went on. “It hasn’t been dispensed with.” He swallowed, part of him thinking his speaking at all was not well thought out. “Merton is still out there. He’s the focus of the prophecy. They conjure allies they cannot control. That’s what the prophecy said.”

“Convenient,” An old wizard three down from Bones cackled. “Your previous investigator is dead and you are still too valuable to be disciplined for crossing the line yet again.”

“I’d hand off this prophecy if I could,” Harry said, sounding more angry than he wished. He straightened in his chair and tried to be serene. How had Dumbledore managed it all those years?

“I’ll address your concerns in a moment, Murgatroid,” Bones said. “Harry, you don’t believe the prophecy has been fulfilled?”

“It doesn’t mention Voldemort, by any name, like all the others,” Harry pointed out. “He’s just part of the unleashed Dark Hordes.” This had been bothering Harry during the brief moments he could think about it and now he finally found his thoughts getting a chance to work themselves out. “He didn’t set this in motion, Maudant Merton did and we haven’t got him yet.”

Minister Bones now appeared alarmed and thoughtful. She stared at Harry. “Mr. Shackbolt, what is the status of this other investigation?”

Shackbolt’s deep voice said, “I think we will have to get you a report in the morning Madam Minister. We obviously have not had much time lately to follow up with our previous cases.”



In the corridor on the way back to the Auror’s offices, Shackbolt said, “A little warning would have been nice, Harry.”

“I didn’t know they assumed the prophecy was finished. I didn’t know anyone did.”

“It’s all right, Harry,” Tonks said. “Witness that you are still free to return to the office. You did fine.”

Harry turned to her in the lift, wishing that they were alone with an overwhelming ache. “Thanks,” he said, thinking volumes more he couldn’t say, but he was going to have to get used to that.

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As soon as they arrived in the offices, Tonks and Shacklebolt were immediately sent off on assignments. Harry was left to recite to Mr. Weasley and Snape how things had gone. “And they didn’t make a decision about me... said they had to debate it further and have the results of the Darkness Test,” he said, finishing. He swallowed a yawn. He had planned to take Tonks out this evening, but it was already late and she wasn’t available. “If you needed Tonks, why did she stay with me?” Harry asked his boss.

“Kingsley and Tonks had to remain and stand guard,” Mr. Weasley explained. “Otherwise they were going to use Courtroom Ten.”

“Oh,” Harry said, grateful, in that case.

A knock sounded on the door frame. Rogan stood there, guarded by Vineet and looking sulky. “He wishes to speak to you,” Vineet informed Mr. Weasley.

“My office then,” Mr. Weasley replied stiffly.

“What’s with Rogan?” Harry asked in alarm. Snape filled him in on what had happened.

“This department’s in trouble,” Harry said.

“I think that is to your benefit,” Snape pointed out.

“I would rather it not be,” Harry said. He rubbed his aching eyes. “Where are you staying?”

“With Candide again.”

Harry’s lips twitched. “Are you?” he asked with a hint of suggestion.

Snape’s brow rose. “Hmf,” he said, sounding dangerous.

“Maybe I’ll see if Hermione will put up with me another night.” He rubbed his head and sighed, “I wish they’d made a decision so I would know.” He glanced around the office. “I guess we’ve been left manning things here. Or I have. Why don’t you go get some rest?” Harry suggested, thinking that if Tonks returned he could stay the night with her. That thought brought him to new levels of nervous alertness. He took glance over the logbook and the assignment slips that were nearby. “Really, Severus, I can handle this.”

“If you insist.”

“I do,” Harry said, letting affection rule his voice. With a small bow Snape disappeared and Harry stared at the spot he had been in, thinking that had been much too easy.

Kerry Ann came in and did a double-take at Harry running things. “Are you allowed back on duty?”

“No,” Harry said. “Or, not sure yet.”

She laughed. “Honestly, they can’t keep you off duty. Things are getting worse here, even as mad as they were before.”

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“You look chipper,” Harry observed.

“I slept like a rock.” She said and muttered something afterward.

“What?”

“I got a nice massage; helped me sleep,” she repeated more clearly.

“Ambroise is still in town then?” Harry asked, crossing his arms and looking down his nose at her playfully.

She flushed. “He is... Wants to know how you are doing, actually,” she added quickly as though as a distraction. “He said to tell you the French Ministry Department of Magie Police would be happy to have you if they send you off from here.”

“Oh. Thanks,” Harry said, realizing there were more possibilities than he had considered before. He mulled things to himself and then asked, “Do they have an apprenticeship, because I need a little more training I think.”

“You’ll have to talk to him, or them; I didn’t ask.” She was smiling as she said this, but then soberly added, “I hope you get to stay, Harry.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh... or maybe we can both transfer to the French Magie Police,” she suggested, eyes bright.

“I could make that a condition of my acceptance,” Harry stated.

This caught her by surprise. “Would you do that, really?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t want to transfer alone.”

She chewed her lip. “What if I asked Ambroise to arrange for an offer for you. Just something you can wave before the Ministry.”

“That’s a great idea. Would he really do that?”

She waved her hand as though to dismiss him and rolled her eyes. “Ambroise worships you.”

Tonks returned and dropped into her chair, hair drooping over her eyes.

“You need a break,” Harry stated firmly.

She stared at her wand hand, which was shaking faintly. “Yeah. Have to finish the report for this call now though. Can never remember anything the next day.”

“I’ll help,” Harry said, sitting down close beside her to arrange quills, report forms and ink. “Talk, I’ll compose,” he said, not realizing how very gentle and protective he sounded.

Kerry Ann punched his shoulder. “Tone it down, Romeo.” Harry looked up at her in surprise, making her add, “Really, that was far too obvious.”

Harry put on a formal tone, put his shoulders back, and said, “I shall transcribe if you describe the events.”

Kerry Ann shook her head. “Still not there.”

“Really?” Harry verified in concern. “Uh oh.”

## ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 2

Harry wrote out Tonks' report after a few restarts where she amended what she remembered due to being too frazzled to describe things well, or in any particular order. As she sat with her head in her hand pondering whether the witch had fired a spell before or after the door to the back had opened, Harry said, "You are too tired to be on duty at all."

"Someone had to take the call, Harry."

"I'd have been happy to take it instead," he pointed out. "You need to rest." He folded away her report in a file folder and put it on the corner of her desk. "Let me take you home," he said, standing up. "Kerry Ann can take over." The two women shared a look, and Tonks Apparated herself and Harry away.

In her flat, she started to straighten up the piles of dishes and crisps wrappers. Harry took her wand away and forced her to sit on the couch. "Let me take care of everything. You rest."

"Thanks, Harry," she said, clearly touched.

"Least I can do."

She fell into her bed ten minutes later, even as Harry was trying to find a place to store the huge strainer in the tiny kitchen. He went in a short while later and touched her shoulder.

"I'm really very tired, Harry," she said.

"I noticed." He didn't leave her alone, though; he began rubbing between her shoulder blades, remembering what Kerry Ann had said. This generated lots of pleasing noises so he moved up to her shoulders. She was alarmingly fine-boned with much less muscle than himself. It made him worry acutely about her even though magic was mostly what she needed in the field. Once unleashed, this protective instinct only grew in him, even as he realized it was going to make things that much harder at the Ministry. Harry shucked his shirt and wrapped himself around her as she slept, no longer tired, but alert for any danger approaching. He monitored the shadows behind his eyes. They were in two groups now, but far away.

The next morning, Tonks had a much more business attitude. She showered and dressed quickly, giving him a peck on the cheek before saying, "Give it a half hour before you show up at the Ministry, especially this early."

In Tonks' absence, Harry sat at her small table, sipping weak tea from the bag's third cup, wishing it were coffee. Tonks had not done any shopping for weeks, so it was lucky there was even that. He had too many things to think about, too many uncertainties. His mind eventually settled on worrying about Mrs. Longbottom. In the quiet light of morning, his actions felt reckless and he hoped he hadn't made a huge mistake. But Snape was all right, so perhaps at least she was the same as before.

Harry put the dishes in a stack, Apparated to St. Mungo's and made his way

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up to the closed ward, where he peered in the window. Mrs. Longbottom was lying down, which concerned Harry. A staff member was working inside on another patient. Harry waited by the door for this person to leave and slipped inside covered by an Obsfucation Charm. He did not bother to change his robes this time since he wasn't staying long.

At the far bed, he bent over Mrs. Longbottom and tried to see if she was all right. There were new notes on the chart at the foot of the bed, but Harry could not decipher them. He went back to studying her sleeping, wondering if he should try to wake her up, just to end his worry. He did not hear the door open, the click was masked by the noise of another patient rocking in her bed.

Neville Longbottom froze in the doorway, wondering who this was leaning over his mother. He stepped over quickly and grabbed the figure's arm to jerk him around.

"Neville," Harry greeted him.

Neville stared at him, at his eyes. "Harry? What are you doing here?" he asked with less force than intended.

"I was just seeing how your mum was," Harry said, glancing back down at her.

Neville said, "Oh." He was befuddled, trying to put things together. Harry had an alien feel to him. His eyes made it seem as though he was seeing farther than anyone else and knew it. Neville swallowed hard and said, "Were you here before?"

Harry hesitated answering, but Alice Longbottom had woken and sat up mechanically. Harry didn't have time to be relieved by this. She smiled at him and said, "James."

"Er, no," Harry said with a laugh. "I'm not James, I'm afraid." She did not seem to understand this, just peered at him happily.

"'Old friend'," Neville quoted. He grabbed Harry's arm again. "You were here before. What did you do?"

Harry was at a loss to explain. He gently peeled Neville's fingers off his arm and said, "I wanted to see what caused, well... Severus was going to end up like your parents because of Voldemort and Malfoy torturing him, and I wanted to see more closely what the result was." He stopped, gauging how that went over. Neville was not the brightest, but his alarm was making him smarter than normal.

"Did you do something," he asked, "to make her talk?"

"Uh, I tried this thing I learned in Finland from the Shaman," Harry explained. He wanted try to say what Dumbledore would, but faced with Neville's strong ingrained reactions, he couldn't think clearly what that might be. "I could see what was wrong, so I thought I could fix it. I did what I could," he heard himself mimicking the Healers.

"You did this? You're not a Healer, Harry."

"I was very careful," Harry insisted.

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“So long,” Alice Longbottom said, interrupting. “No visit.”

“She still thinks you’re your father,” Neville said.

Harry turned to her. “Sorry, I would have come sooner if I’d known you remembered me,” he said graciously to her. He had no trouble pulling Dumbledore around him when talking to her. He tried to hold onto it when he turned back to Neville, who was vacillating between disturbed and wary. “I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone,” Harry said. “I just wanted to help Severus.” Neville didn’t react, so Harry added, “And it helped to see what the curse did. Once I thought I could help a bit, I couldn’t not.”

Neville’s face went through a series of small contortions as he bounced between considering that and glancing at his mother, who was gazing up with a face of childlike innocence. “Ask next time, okay?” Neville said, sounding uncertain.

“If you’d been here, I would have.”

“No one knows,” Neville pointed out in a whisper.

“I kind of prefer it that way,” Harry explained. “Things are mad enough already.”

Neville did not look up again, but sat down facing his mother to hold her hand. She patted his hand in return. Harry thought that the change in her was small, but any improvement would make a big difference to Neville. “Well... thanks, Harry.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.”

“Yeah,” Neville said, still sounding befuddled.

“Has your father been awake?”

Neville glanced over at the thin lump under the covers of the next bed. “Not in years.”

“I’m sorry, Neville,” Harry said, feeling clear in his voice.

Neville shrugged. Harry took his leave, feeling even more so as though he were intruding.

In the waiting area on his way out, Harry overheard someone asking at the desk for Severus Snape. Harry diverted in that direction and found Shazor Snape hounding the greetingwitch to tell him what room his son was in. Harry rescued the woman behind the desk and explained that Severus had been released.

“Has he?” Shazor asked in surprise. He had a two-day-old beard and an equally old newspaper clutched under his arm. He pulled the paper out as though to reference it, but tucked it away again. “Where is he now? I stopped by the house... but it was abandoned.” Like everyone else, he was staring at Harry keenly whenever he looked his way.

“Er, he’s staying with a friend,” Harry explained.

Shazor pulled out the newspaper for real this time. The flow of people went around them standing there in the way beside the desk. “We left for the countryside

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like many others when the trouble started. Gretta's still there in fact. She, uh..." Shazor trailed off.

"Have you heard from Anita?" Harry asked, thinking of Snape's mum.

"No," Shazor replied as though disturbed by the very notion. "Nor would I, normally." He crossed his arms and raised his chin. "If they have heard news of the recent troubles at her place, they'd be smugly snickering about it not being able to touch them." He huffed. "But my son is all right, you say?"

"Yes, he's fine," Harry assured him. Harry considered that Severus himself should explain about Candide. "If I see him, I'll tell him you were looking for him."

At that moment, Severus Snape was eating breakfast across from the woman he now must reclassify in his mind as his fiancée. The domesticity of the scene kept trying to irk him but, given how many similar mornings he had already shared with Harry – with equal legal entanglement – there was no real justification for his ill-ease.

Candide departed in a rush after noticing the time, sparing him from a much-dreaded sappy departing scene. The resulting quiet felt too much so, however. His mind wandered back to the night before, to the nightmares that had dogged him. In them he had relived the terrible, pain-filled moments at Malfoy Manor before his defiance had kicked in, that and his faith in Harry. Brushing off nightmares was easier when no one else witnessed them. He couldn't even be annoyed with Candide over that; her response had merely been to roll to the side and suggest that if he wished to talk, he should wake her. This was almost enough to make him feel annoyed at being too well understood. That would be preferable to the undone feeling he was currently experiencing. He would have to find something to occupy the day with other than these thoughts, that was for certain.

When a knock sounded on the door, he jumped slightly, and then rolled his eyes in annoyance at himself. McGonagall entered.

"Shall I expect a visit every day?" Snape asked, but it held no rancor, making it come out pretty much the opposite of how it was intended.

McGonagall stopped and smiled as though also understanding too much. She perched Fawkes on the empty kitchen towel rack and swung off her cloak. "I was early for a meeting I have with Amelia and thought I'd drop in again to see how you were and to discuss Filius' funeral preparations."

Snape gestured that she should take the one chair at the table while he himself moved to sit on the edge of the bed.

She peered at him and, rather than starting up the topics she just mentioned, asked, "Are you certain you are all right?"

"YES," Snape replied, happy to snap at someone.

"Hm," she muttered doubtfully, but she switched to discussing how they may



## ALLIES & REFLECTIONS, PART 2

arrange a funeral by Saturday – assuming she could convince Bones that the Floo Network could safely be brought back into operation.

“You need to find a replacement for him, as well,” Snape pointed out during a lull.

McGonagall huffed. “Let’s at least mourn him a bit before pushing him aside, Severus.”

Snape bowed slightly, not wanting to argue. “I was not trying to be crass.”

She straightened her robes. “No, I suppose not. I’m still a bit sensitive, perhaps.”

He stood. “I am going to see if Arthur requires assistance again today.”

He sensed her watching him move as he collected together his things. When he was prepared to depart he slid his narrow gaze her way. “What?” he asked sharply despite strong suspicion of the reason she watched him.

“I keep expecting you to relapse,” she admitted.

“I don’t intend to,” he pointed out.

She laughed lightly. “Did you will yourself out of the effects of the Crutiatus?”

Snape stared at the burned, borrowed wand in his hand. “No. Quite the opposite,” he admitted quietly. “I had given up, in fact.”

She swung her cloak back over her shoulders, saying, “Good thing Neville Longbottom didn’t give up on his mother; apparently she’s made a very small but meaningful recovery herself.”

Snape stared at her. “Did she?” He could not comprehend his colleague’s offhanded tone, given the sheer coincidence of what she was saying. “Did the visiting Healer look in on her as well, or something?”

McGonagall shook her head. “They are saying it’s spontaneous. It happens you know. I looked in on her myself, it’s a small thing really. She says a word or two now and then, but she’s not much more than a child.”

Snape’s previously unoccupied mind was churning rapidly now. “Hm,” was all he said.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



# PRISONERS' DILEMMA

At the Ministry, Harry was allowed to man the office and keep track of assignments which he found good to bury himself in. He even took on the annoying task of straightening out the assignment slips with the log for the last few days. This reminded him that it had been tampered with at one point, to lie about where Tonks was. Harry wondered if Rogan had done that, but it was before the Death Eaters were loose. He could not have been blackmailed before then, could he?

Around noon, Rodgers came in with a tray. "Can you bring Tristan some lunch? I'm not sure I can resist smacking him around if I do." At Harry's surprised expression, his trainer amended. "Not really," although he did not sound as though he meant it.

Harry accepted the tray. "Sure," he said.

Harry unlocked the interrogation room, which had been converted into a cell with the addition of a cot and a charmed chamber pot. Rogan lay on the cot, arm and chin drooped over the edge. He did not look up at Harry as he entered. Harry, uncertain how dangerous to assume the Auror may be, set the tray on the floor. "Lunch," he announced. His own stomach growling at the thought.

Rogan shrugged. Harry asked, "Did you modify the logbook?"

"No," Rogan replied. "That's a hassle. I told Arthur that already. The logbook's correct."

"Well, except for the time I saw it had written out that Tonks was out on a call in the Docklands, when she wasn't. That message disappeared."

Rogan sat up slowly, twisting his neck to stretch it. "If you're asking if I did

## PRISONERS' DILEMMA

that, the answer is 'no'." Rogan's eyes had narrowed as though he were thinking. He looked concerned now, making Harry feel he was not as bad as his actions.

"What are they going to do with you?" Harry asked, feeling an odd bit of kinship with the man.

"I don't know," Rogan replied. "Wizengamot meets Sunday. Don't know if they'll put me on the agenda or not."

"I already am," Harry admitted. "Need anything else besides lunch?"

Rogan's mood had definitely improved since Harry had entered. The Auror stooped to pull the tray closer to the cot as though interested in its contents. "No," he replied.

When he returned to the Auror's office, Snape was standing by the logbook, peering over it.

"Severus," Harry said in bright welcome. "They let you keep that badge?" he asked, hoping to distract his guardian from asking where he had spent the night. The badge had printed on it: Evanescent Deputy.

"Yes, apparently. Thought I could assist again today. Minerva is meeting with Madam Bones to argue that the Floo Network should be restored. She wishes to hold Filius' funeral at Hogwarts, but it will difficult to attend if people can not arrive by Floo."

Harry dropped his gaze, remembering the Charms professor and trying with difficulty to imagine him gone. "I'd like to go, when you find out where it will be."

"I am certain it will be announced widely... when the time and place are set." Snape's voice sounded regretful enough that it gave Harry pause.

"Your father was looking for you, by the way," Harry said, intentionally to jolt his guardian out of the unusual demeanor he had fallen into.

"Was he?" Snape asked dryly, recovering a more normal tone.

"I told him I'd tell you," Harry said, dispensing with that duty. "Are you sure you're up to field work?"

"Yes," Snape replied more forcefully, but he patted Harry's arm as though thinking he needed reassurance.

"I just don't want you to get hurt again," Harry began explaining, but Rodgers came in, so he let it drop.

"Oh... Snape," Rodgers greeted him with obvious mixed feelings.

Harry jumped to arrange his trainer's files and made sure the assignment slip from his call was accounted for. Rodgers stopped what he was doing and said, "Good to have you around, Potter."

Harry stopped as well, unseated by this unexpected statement of support. "Thank you, sir," he responded sincerely.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Rodgers gave a little laugh. “You’re all right, really.”

Tonks and Kerry Ann entered, the later combing her hair with her fingers as though she were mildly frazzled. Harry busied himself with the logbook, searching out the entry that corresponded to the assignment slip in his hand, even though he had already found it moments ago. He didn’t have to distract himself long, Rodgers sent Tonks back off to join Blackpool on a stake-out. He settled into his desk, saying, “Have a report due to the Wizengamot this morning. Remind me to yell at Kingsley for not saying that we’d get it to them next week sometime.” He pulled open the drawer and took out an inkwell. “If there’s an emergency, Ms. Kalendula, would you mind going out with your former professor there? We should keep Harry in until the Long Beards make a decision on him.”

Kerry Ann shrugged and gamely said, “As long as I don’t have an exam afterward, no problem.”

“Potter, fetch these files for me,” Rodgers instructed Harry while holding out a slip of parchment with a list of names on it.

Harry took it and headed out, missing the rare look of understanding that passed between his guardian and his trainer.

That evening, Tonks was out in the field when Harry decided he needed a break, especially since he had been given nothing more to do, which was somehow more wearing than having too much work. Blackpool seemed alert; although, she still had moments when her face fell into terrible sadness before getting distracted out of it. Harry said good evening to her with some delicate feeling, trying to communicate that he understood. She simply nodded and waved him off. “You’ll be all right here alone?” he verified.

“Yeah, yeah. You aren’t even supposed to be here.”

He took himself to Hermione’s flat. Hermione was cooking, or more precisely, there was a pot on the stove with a self-stirring spoon circling in it and lovely scents filled the flat. She greeted him in surprise.

“Do you mind if I stay yet again?” Harry asked.

“ ‘Course not. You always can.” She did a quick double-take at the newspapers spread on the table and moved to expunge them.

Harry stopped her before her wand could complete its spell gesture. “That’s all right. I need to read them.”

“You sure?” she asked doubtfully, still holding her wand poised.

Harry nodded and sat on the couch, pulling the papers closer to chose between them. They all looked equally hazardous. One had a headline about Harry’s upcoming Darkness Test. Another entitled: You Were Warned, claimed to recount his entire long history of poor behavior that led unequivocally to his current state.

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Harry sighed, drawing Hermione over from the kitchen. "Sorry," she offered.

Harry shrugged.

She fidgeted with the wooden spoon in her hand. "I've been feeling awful about not being on your side enough either. I just... well... I'm sorry about that too."

"You're on my side, now," Harry pointed out. "You trust me enough to sleep in the same flat with me, Dark Wizard Extraordinaire."

"Course," she said.

"That's all that matters. You think most of Skeeter's readers would?"

She frowned rather than reply. Harry slid down to rest his head on the back of the couch. Exhaustion had caught up with him again. "I need a holiday," he said out of the blue.

"We all do."

After dinner she kept watching the time. "I have a date for drinks tonight."

"You do?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Cousin of someone I work with. Muggle."

Harry thought this sounded like a good thing even though her tone sounded defeatist and perhaps even stubborn.

She added, "I didn't want to start with something as major as dinner out, so I suggested a drink after dinner. And I do need a break, if only for an evening."

"So, how long will you be out?"

She shrugged. "Probably just an hour or two."

"Where is he taking you?"

"Just some... hey, what are you, my mum now?"

"I... just..." Harry straightened, defensive. "I was just thinking that you should be careful."

"Harry, he's a Muggle, if he tried anything, I'd kick his arse."

"I don't mean that," Harry said. "People might guess that you are with me, sort of, and, well, I don't want you put at risk because of that. Lots of people still want to get at me."

"More than usual," she pointed out. She stood and went into her bedroom. "I'll take my chances."

Harry thought that he did not want her to, but she was intelligent enough to make her own choices, and Harry considered that he could probably get her out of most any jam, now.

She put on clothes flashier than he would have expected her to wear and departed. As she pulled the door closed, she appeared annoyed with her errand, making Harry believe she was still pining for his fellow apprentice.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Harry moved to clean up. Crookshanks repeatedly slipped between his legs as he moved around, despite his lifting the cat aside gently with his foot each time. “What is it?” he finally asked the animal. Crookshanks meowed. “Oh,” Harry said, “your dish is empty. If you didn’t feed so much of it to the mice, it wouldn’t be. Hermione’s going to end up with rats in this place if you keep it up.”

Harry dug out the cat food box from the fridge where it was kept to keep the too-clever pet from getting into it. He poured out a bit and pushed the dish out of the way of his walking around. He did most of the clean-up by hand because he needed something concrete to do. Under the toppled box of bread crumbs on the counter, he found the ground meat used in the sauce. It had been out long enough to get tainted with a dark edge. Harry stared at it. He set it aside and rushed to finish the dishes and wash down the table.

The package of ground meat rested on a blue foam plate which was then wrapped with cellophane. He folded it over itself to better carry it and dropped into the Dark Plane.

The grey world with its grey sky felt very familiar now. The odd noises that greeted his arrival didn’t faze him at all. He began walking, looking about for the werewolf. He walked awhile, honestly enjoying the queer stillness of this place where he need not worry about running into Rita Skeeter or anyone else whose reaction he would have to brush off. Harry remembered that last time he had found the werewolf near the inversion spot for Hogwarts. Harry Apparated there and began circling. A double set of footfalls approached and the familiar, mangy and injured creature came into view, half crawling, half walking on all fours.

“I brought you something,” Harry said. He unwrapped the package under the animal’s watchful gaze and set it down before stepping away.

The werewolf approached suspiciously, sniffing. It put a half-paw, half-hand on the package to steady it and gobbled down the raw meat as though famished. It then sniffed out and ate every bit that had escaped, grey dirt and all. After licking its jaw it raised its nose to Harry and stared at him.

“That’s all I brought,” Harry said. The werewolf continued to stare at him. Harry wanted to leave, so he stepped backwards rather than turn his back, in case his treat be viewed as just an appetizer. This attitude of worry about his safety brought many other creatures near, all sounding hungry. Harry halted, growled lightly, and simply Apparated away without much thought to where he should go. He arrived in an abandoned area of landscape with more than its share of twisted metal and drooping tufts of saw-edged grass. He walked a little, just looking around and regaining the sense of superiority that kept the evil creatures here at bay.

Just as he was thinking of heading back to Hermione’s flat, something caught

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his eye. Lying at the base of a tall hillock was a flat drum and beside it a fork of polished antler. Harry picked these up and grew concerned. "Per?" he shouted, his voice absorbed rather than echoing back at him. Harry took the objects and, concentrating hard on the lake shore in Finland, Apparated and slipped back into the sunlight.

The contrast between where he arrived and his memory of that place could not have been greater. The sun hung high in the sky, even this late. The lake rested in blue stillness except for a fish jumping. The hills were green and dotted with yellow and orange flowers as well as the ubiquitous grey exposed stones. But most stark was the buoying warmth that now wrapped softly around him as he stood there taking everything in.

Most of the huts had tendrils of smoke rising from the cages on top of them. Harry walked along and knocked at the one he remembered staying in last time. There was no response. The door to the next one opened and a man Harry didn't recognize peered out before emerging. Harry said, "Per Hossa?"

The man reached for a walking stick and walked away in the other direction. Harry, with a stuttering start, followed.

Up on the ridge overlooking the lake and the hills on the other side, sat Per, smoking a pipe. As soon as he was in view the first man walked away, never speaking a word. Harry approached Per, glad to see him safe and sound.

Per finally noticed Harry's approach and turned his startled gaze to the drum he carried. Harry held it out to him. Per stood slowly and accepted it. He seemed vaguely befuddled.

"Hi," Harry said. "Found that. Thought you might have dropped it." This was a lot of words, Harry knew. And in a language Per knew very little of, but Harry couldn't help speaking them all.

Per took a seat again on a large flat rock and struck the drum lightly at about the pace of a heartbeat. Harry, uncertain if he should stay or leave, fidgeted with his hands in his pockets. Finally, he decided to sit down, but he kept having to remind himself to just sit quietly, which he had lost the instinct for. Per refilled his pipe and lit it without a match with an ease Harry had not seen previously. Harry smiled lightly in lieu of commenting.

After a long wait, twenty minutes perhaps by Harry's internal clock, Per said in awkward English, "You are in trouble."

"Me? Oh, in Britain, you mean. I'll manage."

Another long pause ended with, "Confidence is power."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"Someone came here." Per pointed at the ground at his feet with his pipe stem

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and made a circle with his fingers and held it before his eye. "Look for you. Many questions."

"For me?" Harry thought of Moody. "After I left? What'd you tell him?"

Per's face took on a gruff appearance and he waved his hand as though to ward something off. "No English. No English." Per then laughed.

Harry laughed as well, and his vision blurred strangely the way it did when Per pulled a pocket of the Dark Plane around them. Harry wondered how he did that. This time when Per spoke it came out clearly. "You now hunt dark wizards in herds?"

Harry chuckled. "It's faster that way."

Per tapped his pipe on a rock to empty it. Minutes past and then: "As long as you are not starting your own herd."

Harry shook his head vehemently. "I'm just trying to make sure everyone survives." He remembered Snape's insistence that Harry seek out Per's advice if he himself was incapacitated. Harry would not mind getting the Shaman's advice, but feared it would take a whole day and a night to do it. Thinking he should get back, Harry stood, but was interrupted by Per saying, "You brought my drum to me."

"You didn't mean to leave it there, did you?" Harry asked, only now considering this.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I did not need it anymore."

"Oh, sorry. I can drop it back off on my way home. Didn't realize it was so easy to come for a visit."

"Must be a long walk."

"No, I Apparated... within the Plane."

Per raised a surprised brow but didn't speak about that further. "I keep the drum," he said, tucking it under his arm.

"You sure?"

"It used you to return to me. I should not question that." Then Per said, "Sit," as though uncomfortable that such quick follow-ups were necessary.

Harry did so and Per began beating the drum again. He pulled a ring from his pocket and handed it to Harry who, when signaled to by a head nod, dropped it to bounce on the drum. They both watched it migrate around and finally stall over a stick figure drawing of a woman.

Per gave Harry a dubious look. "You hunt woman," he said.

"Sort of," Harry said.

"Easy life," Per said, setting the drum aside.



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"You mean, that's all I have to do?" Harry doubted this but found an aching hope in him that it could be true.

Per nodded and began to meditatively refill his pipe.

"There are still a lot of Death Eaters out there and another dark wizard I have to catch."

Per shrugged.

"Last time the ring kept landing on the demon and I did have to hunt demons," Harry said and Per nodded. "Woman certainly sounds better," Harry added, hoping finding traction in him.

Per sagely nodded yet again.

The next day, Snape stepped into the Auror's office and gestured for Harry to follow him out. Harry asked for permission from his trainer, who waved him dismissively out. It had been on the quiet side that morning, but that was certain to change by evening, given that it was a Friday.

In the corridor, Snape said, "Let's go to the house; I have a few things to discuss with you."

Harry took his guardian's wrist and took them both to the main hall of the house in Shrewsthorpe. The house was cool and drafty. Snape paced down toward the kitchen and Winky came up to meet him, rubbing her hands together a little nervously.

"Men will be coming next week to begin repairs. You will stay out of sight at all times."

Winky bowed. "Master wish tea?"

"Yes, please, if there is some."

"You hired someone already to fix the house?" Harry asked. He himself had not managed to get past thinking about it needing to be done.

"Yes," Snape replied while pacing the length of the hall to examine the walls and ceiling.

"Do you know who put the tarps up?"

"The insurance company, I assume," Snape said dismissively.

"We have insurance?" Harry asked in surprise. "Wizards have insurance?"

"Certainly," Snape replied. "Through Misfortuna Mutual, a Gringott's holding." He paced to the drawing room and went to his desk and began taking stock of the drawers, talking as he did so. "When I filed the claims paperwork, which listed this residence as being yours as well, they issued me gold on the spot... expeditiously enough."

There wasn't any damage in the drawing room so nothing had been removed. Harry hovered in the doorway, observing. Snape said, "Just seeing what should be stored for the duration in case of curious Muggle fingers." Finally, he closed the

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drawer he was searching through and looked up at Harry. "Sit down," he ordered, in an unexpectedly stern tone.

Harry hesitated just long enough to recover from his surprise. He sat in one of the straight-backed chairs after turning it to face the desk. Snape watched him do this, his face relaxing oddly, as though he were pleased by something. Harry was too busy wondering if somehow Snape had found out about his getting serious with Tonks to pay much heed to this. He waited patiently for Snape to say more, managing not to fidget.

"I learned something interesting yesterday," Snape began. "It seems Alice Longbottom experienced a sudden although minor recovery, strangely around the same time as my own."

Harry pulled his new calm persona around himself and replied, "I heard that too." He was Occluding his mind, so when Snape's eyes bore into his, they got nothing.

Snape straightened the blotter on his desk with his long fingers. More quietly, he said, "I don't remember much from my time in St. Mungo's. The mind has many survival responses to pain. One of them is poor recall." He stared at Harry additionally. "But I do recall your presence."

"They made me keep you awake... which I didn't like doing." Harry spoke as though confessing. The memories were still too raw to easily go over them.

"I ignored the Healers, I think. That is why they assigned you that task." Almost inaudibly, Snape added, "Harder to ignore you." He sat in his chair with deliberately slow movements and leaned back, hands steepled before him. He resumed staring at Harry, who felt a squirm pass through him with some serious fight to get out.

"What do you want me to say?" Harry asked, before more drawn-out moments could distance him additionally from the truth. A loud car went by out on the road beyond the heavily curtained window, the thrumming beat of its radio distorting as it passed.

"Why are you hiding?" Snape asked softly.

Harry shrugged, but realized quickly that that wasn't going to suffice. "There's already too much... I don't know... concern about me. I want to go back to when people stopped noticing me so much."

Snape gave him a doubtful look. "Sometime before you were born, you are saying..."

"No, just before they would look as though they wanted to run away in fear."

"You should not have become an Auror, then."

"I don't think that's the primary problem," Harry argued. "Things happen to me or around me and I have to take care of them no matter what. It's hard to make people understand that."

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Snape said, "It is impossible to make people understand. Do not waste your energy on the attempt." He pressed his steepled fingers to his lips thoughtfully. "So I owe you my life twice over this time," he commented.

"How can you owe me anything, Severus?" Harry asked, exasperated. "I need you around."

Winky appeared with the tea at that moment, bowed, and vanished again. There was only one cup. "Did you want some?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. "What I do want is for you to run me through this Darkness Test. Can you do that? You said there were six spells... do you know them all?"

"Yes." Snape sipped his tea, stood and went to a small trunk in the corner of the room. He crouched and began searching through the bottles within it, hair obscuring his face. "If I don't have everything we need, you may have to fetch it for me... ah, here." He pulled out two small corked vials and pocketed them before re-latching the trunk and putting a Muggle repelling charm on it.

He passed Harry with his swooping stride. "In the hall, perhaps. Bring the chair."

Harry stood and did as instructed. He placed the chair where indicated and sat upon it. Snape moved a few steps away and said, "As I explained before, this is a test of core disposition. That makes it very difficult to fool... unlike other methods of detecting dark wizardry. Some claim to have apparati that will detect dark magic's taint, even years after it has been used. Dumbledore had several, in fact, all of wildly dubious accuracy. The Sorting Hat is far more effective than any of them, but it works more along the principals of the test the Wizengamot intends to give you."

"Yeah, but the Sorting Hat—"

Snape cut him off. "I agree with Minerva: you will not fail this test; it plays straight to your strengths."

"I still want to know what's coming," Harry argued. "I can't fail it; I don't know what will happen to me if I do."

"Nothing permanent will happen to you, I assure you," Snape uttered in the manner of a promise.

Harry sighed and sat on his hands because he didn't want to wave them around. "I don't necessarily feel like moving to Australia."

"South America is also a possibility..." Snape offered with a lightness that implied he was trying to be humorous. "Better than being incarcerated."

"Pitcairn Island would probably take me," Harry tossed out.

Snape approached. "Give me your wand." Harry pulled his hand free long enough to hold his wand out. When he moved to sit on his hand again, Snape said, "You will not be allowed to do the test that way."

"No?"

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“Not by any means.” Snape put a sticking hover charm on the wand and released it to float before Harry. He strode away again with purpose to his movements. “You will be asked to verify... stop sitting on your hands... that you can retrieve the wand and cast a spell with it. Do that now.”

Harry stretched his shoulders, took up the wand up in his hand and cast a Lumos with it.

“Release it to hover again where it is within easy reach.” Snape began pacing, almost agitated, making his robes swing when he turned sharply at the mirror under the staircase. He began to sound like a lecture. “The test most likely will have two parts: the series of six spells that will be cast at you will be done once approximately as you are now. Given your sometimes annoying penchant for self-sacrifice, I do not think you will have any difficulty with that. The second set will be much harder. Who is running the test on you?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t tell me. I’d expect Moody... if he were around to do it.”

“As would I,” Snape muttered. “Hm, perhaps I should have asked Minerva. If the tester dislikes you, that will make it all the more difficult.”

“I imagine,” Harry said. “You said I can’t defend myself.”

“Correct,” Snape replied with an overdone roll of his tongue.

Harry looked down at his wand hovering in the air, bobbing just a little from side to side as though impatient. Harry argued, “This test just shows if you’re a looney or not and can take pain.”

“The first part certainly does. Anyone with sufficient discipline can pass the first part.”

Harry swallowed. “So, what happens in the second part?”

Snape approached while reaching into his pocket. He held up a small violet glass vial. “You will be given a forty-nine percent dose of Veritaserum.”

“Forty-nine percent? Why forty-nine?”

“Enough to weaken you and reduce subterfuge but not enough to eliminate your will entirely. If the dosage eliminates your will, then the test is for nought.”

Harry scratched his head. “Why not just give me a full dose and ask me if I’m a dark wizard?”

Snape propped his fists upon his hips as though seeing an advantage at Harry’s question. Harry had a flashback to the many, many times when he lost house-points just moments after such a gesture. “That is trickier than you realize,” Snape explained. “Everyone’s viewpoint on good and evil is different from everyone else’s.” At Harry’s dubious expression, Snape went on, holding out the small vial. “If you

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gave Lucius Malfoy this serum and asked him if he were doing wrong by plotting to eliminate Muggle-born wizards, what would his truly honest response be?"

"'No'," Harry conceded.

"But," Snape said with the most energy that he had shown since the battle, "if you were to put him in the position you are in and strike him repeatedly with borderline-injurious spells... especially if you yourself or someone he despised did that... what would be his response?"

"He'd strike back."

"Odds on, yes. Especially with a half-dose of serum making it nearly impossible to hide that he yearns to... maybe even without it." Snape approached then and uncorked the vial. "You will be given this by some means that eliminates the possibility that you have not actually swallowed it. This will be accomplished either by putting it on dissolving paper that you must eat or simply dropping it into your mouth. Tip your head back."

Snape counted out thirteen drops as they fell onto Harry's tongue and re-corked the vial. Harry sucked the oily liquid off of his tongue. He felt woozy after the first swallow.

Snape paced away again. "Good for you to experience what a half-dose feels like. In a hundred and fifty seconds it will take effect as fully as it will ever do so."

Snape stood waiting with wand in hand, silhouetted by the excess light coming in through the damaged wall behind him.

"How do you feel?" he asked minutes later.

"A little strange."

"It is unfortunate that we do not know who your tester will be," Snape said. "Although, just as well Moody is not available," he uttered darkly.

"You've had this test before," Harry said. This realization came unexpectedly out of the fog of his thoughts.

"Yes," Snape admitted.

"Moody?" Harry queried with difficulty. It was as though he was not supposed to be curious about anything but could be if he worked hard enough at it.

"Yes," Snape repeated. He was standing more stiffly now, shoulders squared against the light. "Dumbledore did not think it necessary, but Moody insisted anyway... in secret. What he did not realize is that I had inured myself to Veritaserum so a half dose was more like an eighth for me."

"Would you have passed it anyway?" Harry asked.

Snape shifted, tugging his wide sleeves straight. "I do not know. I like to think so. Like you, I was not taking any chances." He tossed his hair back in an unusual gesture and raised his wand. "Remember, do not reach for your wand."

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Harry nodded. He felt as though he were watching a dream from a half-awake state. He waited.

Snape lowered his wand and tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling. "I think I have grown too weak to be of use to you."

"Wha- why?" Harry asked.

Snape shook his head and tossed his wand-burdened hand to the side. "I cannot do this."

Harry stared at him, requiring a bit of serious thought to remember what it was exactly that they were doing. He stood, pushing his wand aside and leaving it to hover beside the chair. Snape shook his head again with more disgust as Harry approached. "It is too much..." Snape began, but trailed off. "Ridiculous to be so weak," he insisted to no one in particular.

"You aren't weak, Severus," Harry argued.

Snape stared at Harry and then beyond him, at the empty chair. "I cannot even make myself do it if I remember that it is for your own good," he uttered in disdain. Snape continued to stare beyond Harry. He spoke only when Harry prompted him with his name. "I don't recognize myself," Snape said.

"Maybe it's too much like what happened to you," Harry suggested. He might have censored that if he had possessed the ability.

Snape frowned in reply. His posture had shifted. His shoulders were now slumped and he looked reduced and beaten down a bit. Harry gave him a hug.

Snape said dryly, "Clearly, I need to give you the antidote." He freed his arm to fetch the other vial from his pocket. "Drink a sip of this," he said, holding it up before Harry, who was resting his head on his shoulder. Snape sounded amused rather than commanding.

Harry put his fingers around the tiny bottle that was almost too small to grip reliably. "You aren't weak, though, Severus. You know that's the truth." He sipped the potion, mostly because he wanted to feel like himself again without the cottony veil of the potion obscuring his senses and willpower.

Harry straightened as the recovery potion washed through him and handed the vial back.

"I am sorry," Snape muttered. He frowned and tossed his head in self-recrimination.

"It's all right, Severus," Harry insisted. "I'd rather you not be the kind of person who could hurt someone, even if you thought it for the right reasons. And like you said, I don't hate you, so it wouldn't be the same anyway."

Snape nodded, but his head remained bowed. "True," he conceded. He handed Harry his wand, and carried the chair back to the undamaged drawing room.

## PRISONERS' DILEMMA

"I'm glad I know now what a half dose of Veritaserum feels like," Harry said, sounding upbeat. "I think I could tell a lie with just that much."

"You most likely could," Snape responded. "More difficult is to moderate your temper when it has been riled by something." He held up a finger. "Remember that," he commanded, recovering some of his earlier sternness.

"Yeah... keep my temper."

"Be prepared for the worse possible tester you can imagine."

"Fudge."

Snape began hovering the contents of his desk drawers into a trunk. "That is the worst you can imagine?"

"I'm assuming they wouldn't allow Malfoy... or Bellatrix to run it," Harry pointed out. He watched Snape as he packed things up. He still seemed reduced and his shoulders curled too far forward. This was the first time ever that he had failed to do what needed to be done, no matter how distasteful. Harry was having second thoughts about whether that was as acceptable as he had insisted just moments before. "We need a holiday," Harry said. This was instead of asking Snape if he wanted to try again, which he had almost done, but did not want to reveal his doubts or risk facing Snape's new weakness again. Harry's guts went icy; what if he had somehow changed his guardian when he suppressed the curse? That would not be terribly far-fetched given that he had wielded magic he had little practice with, to solve a condition he only loosely understood.

Into this cold fear, Snape said, "There is something else I should inform you of..."

"Yes?" Harry prompted, making himself breathe levelly. He could not imagine what was coming next and hoped it was something typically Snape-ish to ease his concerns.

"I have agreed to marry Candide."

Snape did not look up from the papers he was examining, but he commented, "That is a most unusually befuddled expression you are wearing."

"That's... that's great. I was... just wondering if you were all right," Harry managed to say.

Snape put the papers down with a sharp rustle. "I have been yelling at people who ask me that, especially repeatedly."

Harry dropped the issue. Snape was alive, as sane as ever, and well enough. Harry certainly could not reverse what he had done; if indeed he had changed something fundamental about his guardian.



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Harry rang the bell at Vineet's flat in Greenwich. The Indian wasn't supposed to be on duty that day, but most of the Aurors wished to attend Professor Flitwick's funeral and Harry had been sent to ask him if he was willing to cover. Harry had an ulterior motive as well: he had not had a good chance to talk to his fellow trainee since events at Malfoy Manor. Vineet had not held back on anything he had told Mr. Weasley, but Harry had not expected him to, either. It would have hinted at his thinking, at least, if he had.

The door opened and Vineet stood holding it. Behind him stood Nandi, who began to ask who it was. Her expression shifted upon seeing Harry there.

"What is he doing here?" Nandi asked sharply.

Harry closed his mouth around the greeting he was going to give. He glanced between the two of them. Nandi appeared challenging, Vineet tense.

"Sorry," Harry said, "didn't mean to intrude."

Vineet opened the door wider. "You are not intruding," he intoned.

Harry clearly saw the invitation of the door, but did not feel he should cross the threshold. "I was just sent to see if you were willing to fill in this afternoon... during the funeral."

"A funeral?" Nandi interjected. "For all those wizards you killed?"

Harry sensed that responding was not going to get him anywhere given the mocking tone, but the silence was worse. "For Professor Flitwick," Harry said.

"Aren't they holding funerals for the others?" she asked, sounding coy.

Harry hadn't considered that. "I suppose," he replied. "They were Death Eaters. They killed Professor Flitwick, in fact," Harry pointed out, finding his bearings, and a sharper edge for his voice. He glanced at Vineet, who seemed suspended there, holding the door. "Perhaps I should go," Harry said, truly apologizing. "I'm sorry to have disturbed you both."

Vineet bowed his head and Harry departed. Harry was still distressed by the encounter when he reached the Auror's offices.

"I don't think Vishnu's available," Harry said to his boss.

"That's why he followed you here?" Mr. Weasley asked, amused.

Harry turned and found Vineet standing behind him. "Oh."

"I would be happy to watch the office, if needed," he said to Mr. Weasley. "Please give my regards to Headmistress McGonagall and the other teachers when you go."

"Thank you, young man," Mr. Weasley said, and patted the Indian on the shoulder on his way out.

Vineet turned and said to Harry, "You are using my usual name now." His eyes were as intense as Harry had ever seen them.



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"Well... you said that's what you preferred." Harry shrugged. "And after you helped me..." Truth was, Harry was not entirely certain why he had changed how he addressed his friend. It just felt entirely appropriate to do so, especially given that he had previously been using his formal name mostly as a way to get under the inscrutable man's skin.

Vineet exhaled hard – Harry could see it in his chest – and turned to sit at Rogan's desk. Like many mysteriously minor things, this seemed to have much more meaning for his friend than Harry could understand.

"I'm sorry about the scene with Nandi," Harry said. "I didn't realize... I wouldn't have come, if I'd known."

Vineet froze when Harry brought this topic up, his hand poised, hovering, over a closed file folder. After a space, he said, "She is angry with me for not stopping you."

"I'm glad you didn't," Harry said, trying not to experience latent panic at how badly things could have gone in that case.

"She knows now that I fully had the magical power to do so. I told her I unconditionally assisted you," Vineet said, strangely level. "She does not understand."

"It's hard for people to understand if they aren't there," Harry said. "You don't regret helping me, do you?"

"I am here in England because of you. Because of your story, which showed me that fate is something to be faced full on, even if one is dwarfed by it."

Harry ran his hand over the cubicle partition. "That isn't actually an answer."

Vineet still sat facing a closed file folder, but now his hand was clenched. The paperclips, which had started inching toward his hand, backed to the rear edge of the desk. "I entered into your service intending not to regret doing so."

"Well, that's closer to an answer," Harry said. "I do very much appreciate what you did. All I wanted to do was rescue my father, and I only saw one way to do that."

"A noble cause," Vineet stated, and finally opened the cover of the file.



Harry entered the Great Hall and stepped to the front where the teachers were gathered. The noise generated by awareness of his entrance passed like a wave through the assembled, quieting them before shifting them to whispering. Professor McGonagall's broad smile of greeting, despite her red-ringed eyes, pushed most all of it away.

"Lots of people here already," Harry observed.

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“They are celebrating being able to travel by Floo again, I think,” she said, putting a green-clad arm around him. “And how are you?” she asked directly in his ear. “Ready for tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Harry replied. Snape was speaking with Hagrid and Firenze, and Harry caught his eye as he said this.

McGonagall said, “We have a seat here for you, with the teachers. Filius would be most honored to have you sit with us. Took a liking to you from the start... because you were so small, I believe.” She winked.

Harry found a smile, partly in remembering how thrilled he was to be at this school, especially in the very beginning. McGonagall patted his back and turned to Professor Sprout. Snape approached.

“Ignoring the crowd is best, I think,” he said.

Harry shook out his dress robes and pulled a piece of lint off his sleeve as he responded, “What crowd?” He did seem to be the center of attention of many who were pointing and standing on tip toe.

“Precisely,” Snape intoned teasingly.

As he brushed down his robes, Harry felt something in his pocket and pulled out a thick disk, slightly larger than a Galleon. Dusty memories fluttered to life and he remembered that the last time he had worn these robes, one of the twins had tried to bribe him by slipping him something that he had had to stash quickly away. Harry peered at the grey, waxy disk and tried to read the writing scratched into the surface. Monster Mush, it appeared to say, although the fancy cursive was difficult to read. Mystified, Harry slipped it back into his pocket.

Snape’s gaze shifted from eying the crowd to looking over the coffin at the very front of the room. It was white and propped up on two gold-painted Corinthian columns. A Ravenclaw banner covered the middle third of it. Somberly, Snape gestured that Harry should choose a seat, since McGonagall was mounting the dais to begin.

As Harry sat listening, he considered how many funerals he had missed. This one would have to stand in for some of the others, especially the ones for his colleagues: Munz, Whitley, and Moody. McGonagall, voice a bit weak, spoke of Flitwick’s background as a champion dueler and how in his first years he frequently challenged the other staff and even some of the students to duel. She spoke of his dedication and patience with teaching, which grew out of that desire to groom students for an art that was no longer practiced, leaving charms the only safe outlet for his dueling passion. Harry, who remembered the Charms professor only with affection, wished he had known half of these things about him while he was alive.

Harry followed the flow of the eulogy for a while but found himself remember-

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ing Nandi's accusations. There are no perfect answers, he thought, wishing he had thought to say that to her at the time. Someone a few rows back was sniffing. McGonagall began to recite from a poem, and Harry pulled himself back to the present.

The thoughtless World to majesty may bow, Exalt the brave, and idolise success;  
But more to Innocence their safety owe Than Power and Genius e'er conspired to  
bless.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power, And all that beauty, all that wealth  
e'er gave, Awaits alike the inevitable hour. The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Can storied urn or animated bust Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?  
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust, Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of  
Death?

And thou, who, mindful of the unhonoured Dead, Dost in these notes their artless  
tale relate, By night and lonely contemplation led To linger in the lonely walks of  
Fate,

The headmistress sat down into the contemplative silence. Hagrid stood and  
shuffled over beside the podium, which he dwarfed and did not bother to stand  
behind. As he blew his nose in prelude to speaking, Harry glanced at his guardian  
beside him; he was somber and looked equally far away as Harry had been. On his  
other side, Lupin appeared more openly grim.

Several more teachers stood to speak in turn, including Flitwick's granddaughter,  
who was about the same stature as her older relative. The Great Hall grew warm  
with the crowd and the intermittent summer sun. People fanned themselves with  
their hats or copies of the Daily Prophet. Antigone Flitwick finished and took her  
seat and the ceremony drew to a quiet close.

Ginny found Harry as soon as the crowd began filing out. "You'll stay for a while,  
right?" she asked, sounding terribly hopeful. "Neville said he would, and Ron, and  
some others."

"Sure," Harry said. He was not technically allowed on duty, anyway. "Let me  
just tell Shackbolt in case... they are expecting something of me." Harry made this  
offhanded statement because he had spotted Skeeter within hearing range. Her chin  
went up and her lips pursed. Harry looked away, trying to project serenity.

Five of them stayed late, keeping Ginny company and having an impromptu party  
in the Gryffindor common room. Harry lit a small fire despite the heat because  
he found the common room lacked something without it, especially once the sky  
darkened. He sat on the rug with his back resting against the side of an overstuffed  
chair and watched the flames, trying to decide whether he had actually changed Snape  
somehow when he had healed him. Certainly Snape had changed significantly before  
then, but something felt different about him now. It was as though he had been filled

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in and had his sharpest edges rounded off. Snape had done the impossible and agreed to marry his girlfriend on top of making peace with Rodgers – a story Harry could not get out of either one of them. Harry wondered now if he had somehow healed more than the damage from the recent Cruciatus curses, that he had also healed the damage from Snape's early use of dark magic. This thought eased his heart, as that would not constitute too much intrusion into his guardian's life.

Ginny's sharp laugh and voice cut into Harry's thoughts: "You guess food; I guess they're off snogging somewhere."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron's not much of a snogger. It's definitely the kitchens that have him."

"What's this?" Harry asked.

Ginny replied, "Ron and Lavender aren't back from getting extra bedding so you guys can stay the night."

Harry glanced around the common room. The curtains were blowing steadily as the high tower caught the night breeze. He vaguely remembered Ron departing... but that was rather a long time ago. "They're still gone?" he asked.

The three of them fell silent. "You looked like you were lost in the Forbidden Forest there, Harry," Hermione said. Neville's eyes were wide and round as he stared worrisomely at him. He had not spoken to Harry all evening except in direct response to a question.

Harry stood. His bum was sore from the hard floor. "I was just thinking about things."

"Figured that," Ginny teased. "That's why we didn't want to disturb you."

"Why didn't you just ask Dobby to bring more bedding?" Harry asked.

"Dobby only answers to you, Harry," Ginny pointed out. "I've tried to get him to answer to me regularly, but he doesn't like to. He gets grumpy and then I get only oat porridge for breakfast."

"Dobby!" Harry shouted into the cooling air of the tower. There was no response. Harry called again. The hairs on his arms began to prickle. He considered Apparating to the kitchens, but decided against showing all three of them that he could do that. "Hermione, want to come with me to look for them?"

Ginny moved to stand as well. Harry waved her back. "Stay here. Get your broom out in case you need to get out the window."

Ginny put her hands on her hips. "I can fly, Harry, I don't need a broom. And the teachers took it away anyway."

"You can't carry Neville as a bird," he pointed out. "They took your broomstick... my broomstick?"

"Yeah."

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Harry shook his head. "We'll be back. We'll silver message if we find them."

Ginny's voice called them back, "You know, the twins are hanging out in the castle tonight too. They didn't want anyone to know. Have something they've been dying to do for years and only now have the stuff for it."

"We'll watch for them too," Harry said.

Hermione was still talkative in the corridor. "Ron's probably helping the twins," she said cheerfully. At the staircases, Harry held up his hand for silence. "Harry?" she prompted, sounding worried.

"I may just be overly jumpy, but something doesn't feel right." He started down. At the next landing he stopped, thinking he should just Apparate. The paintings all watched him curiously, so he sped up instead. The castle stretched on much larger than expected in the quiet darkness. At the third floor, Harry considered walking around and down to Snape's office to see if he was there. Some of the teachers had decided to stay late after the funeral as well, although the castle was so quiet now, it felt as though no one was there at all.

They were only halfway to the kitchens at this point. Harry urged Hermione off the third floor landing and into the nearest classroom. "Stay here. And please don't tell anyone what I'm about to do."

Her mouth had opened on a question, but Harry was gone. He arrived in the long, main kitchen, which was deserted. The hearths were cold, a small knife lay abandoned on the floor beneath one of the long tables where someone had been chopping carrots. Harry wondered if the elves had all been sent off to assist elsewhere. But surely some of them were needed today. Ron certainly would not have found this particular kitchen to be much of a lure. The only food in the room was the unwashed carrots and a leg of what looked to be bison, hanging to age in the corner.

Harry returned to his friend, who gaped at him in shock. "Wow. How the hell did you do that? You don't even make a sound." She sounded jealous.

"You really don't want to know," Harry said, scenting the musty air of the Dark Plane clinging to his clothing when he arrived. "Unlike regular Apparition, I don't know if I can take anyone with me. I've never tried that before. I'm kind of afraid to try. But Severus said to not tell anyone I could do that."

"Yeah, I can imagine," she cryptically agreed.

"There's no one in the kitchens. So, which cupboard was Ron's favorite snogging one?" Harry teased, moving to the door.

Hermione rolled her eyes.

Back in the Gryffindor common room, Ginny quickly grew tired of waiting. She paced to the portrait hole. "Think something's going on?" she asked Neville.

"Harry said to stay here," Neville pointed out.

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“Harry’s not my keeper,” Ginny retorted. “If I’m going to be a prisoner in this place, I’m going to be a prisoner of more than Gryffindor Tower.”

Neville just frowned at her.

“Coming with me?” she asked, pushing the portrait aside.

Neville shook his head.

Author’s Notes: The excerpts of poetry are from Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (various versions)

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



# CASTLE ROOK

Ginny took the stairs two at a time, seeing no one, not even a ghost. At the first floor, she thought she heard something to her right. “Harry? Ron?” she called out, getting no response. She hesitated calling for her other brothers by name in case a teacher may overhear. Ginny pulled her wand, stepped off the landing, up two stone steps, through a heavy door, and into the narrow, darkened corridor. At the end, shadows lengthened as a door at the bend swung gently as though in the breeze, its hinges creaking faintly.

Ginny had spent the last week growing accustomed to an empty castle as home. This was most likely what made her bold enough to step to the end of the dim corridor to investigate. At the corner, the runner rug had been oddly shifted to the left and piled up against the stone wall so that it resembled half a giant decorative bow. A heavy stone statue also rested on its side, blown in the same direction. On the floor in between these two things lay something difficult to recognize in the low light. It bore a faint likeness to a human form, except one lengthened to the point of being peeled apart and it was haloed by a black shiny pool. A piteous howl went up. It was Mrs. Norris, crouched beside the crude old boot lying at one end of the disturbing remains.

The door at the end of the corridor slammed closed and Ginny raised her wand and put up the block of her life which, given that she was still thrown hard into the wall beside her, perhaps was the only thing that saved her life. As she fought falling to her knees and the fireworks that had erupted into the darkness of her vision from her head striking the stone, she realized with an oath, that she had walked into a

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trap.

Her next block had time to fully form before the rush of the second curse arrived, so she had a chance to send a blasting curse of her own in its wake. A curtain rod clattered to the floor somewhere in the distance and someone grunted. Ginny sent another after that one, feeling heat rising from her core and a growing detachment to what was happening around her. She blocked to her right down the corridor where she had entered, just as a flash of something appeared there. The cutting curse shredded the rug piled at her feet, but otherwise flowed around her. Mrs. Norris hissed and howled. Ginny felt liberated as she cleanly followed her block with her own vicious cutting curse and then ducked behind the corner to avoid the next attack from the other direction. The spell wash prickled her arm painfully. She should have put a block up anyway.

“You could take down one of them,” she hissed at the cat, tired of its plaintive caterwauling that did nothing except break into her concentration.

Mrs. Norris’s glowing eyes spun away and moments later a human gave loose a plaintive howl of his own. Ginny snorted as she countered and attacked yet again as though the flow of the battle were as natural as flying.

“Did you hear something?” Hermione asked as he and Harry stepped into the corridor.

“Sounds like a ghost,” Harry commented, regarding the echoing, inhuman howl filtering up to them.

Hermione grabbed Harry’s arm and looked both ways down the corridor. Harry already had his wand out, but he raised it then, freeing himself. Hermione pulled her wand back out too. “I don’t like this, Harry.”

“The castle should be safe,” Harry said. “The Ministry secured it additionally for the funeral, in fact. I could try taking you out of here, if you want.”

“What... abandon the others?” she demanded.

“Just a suggestion,” Harry said as they started toward the armory, vaguely in the direction the howl had come from. He did not want to tell her that he thought she was not up to a serious fight; they had too much history of fighting together for him to find the words. “Stay close, all right?”

The double doors to the armory stood open and moonlight filtered into the corridor. Harry let his wand lead him into the room, but it was deserted. A third of the way along what was really a wide corridor, a creak brought his wand around. One of the suits of armor had taken a step forward.

“Harry!” Hermione gave a sharp tug on his robe. Something whistled through the air over Harry’s lowered head. The battle ax that had nearly missed him was caught by a suit of armor on the other side and thrown at them again. Harry hit it



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with a blasting curse and turned to face the suit on the other side. Hermione threw a rusting charm at another, slowing it.

“Back up!” Harry shouted, pushing her bodily toward the doors where they had entered. A clatter brought his wand over that way. The suit he had shattered apart had reassembled and approached again, dented but unhindered. “Blast!” Harry muttered. He used a netting charm this time on the nearest one that was swinging its sword a little too close for comfort. Again the pieces, with a great flutter, freed themselves and re-assembled.

“We need Ginny and her welding charms,” Harry muttered, mentally kicking himself for not having her teach them to him on the spot; his stupid pride had been in the way. They were almost to the doors, which gave them a wall to back against for better defense as well as an escape route down the side corridor. “Send a silver message to McGonagall’s tower,” Harry ordered her. “I’ll hold them off. And Severus too, just in case he’s in his office.”

Harry needed a Titan block to ward off the next battle ax that was thrown their way. His whole arm rang with the vibration of the strike. The ax fell to the floor, only to zip back to its owner, who, along with half a dozen other suits of armor were fighting their way out the double doors toward the two of them. Hermione sent off the messages and Harry yelled, “Run!” and cast a netting charm wide enough to cover the door for the precious seconds they needed to get away. He could hear it being rended as they turned the bend and reached the open staircases, where they paused.

A voice from above called out: “Have you seen Ginny?”

Noises could be heard everywhere now. Ominous noises. Hermione yelled back, “No, isn’t she with you?”

“No,” Neville called out sheepishly.

Harry closed his eyes despite the danger approaching. Ten or so shadows hovered close, menacing. Harry swore.

“Have you seen Ron?” Hermione yelled upward.

“No.”

Hermione began running downstairs. Harry grabbed her robes and pulled her upward instead, ignoring the sword that embedded itself in the step just in front of them, thrown from the corridor. “Run, Neville!” Harry shouted. “Get in a defensible position and stay there!” At the next floor up, Harry dragged his companion down the widest corridor.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“The library.”

“Harry...” she said breathlessly as they rounded a corner. “You sound like me!”

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Harry slammed the door of the library closed and headed quickly for the Restricted Section. “Stay back,” he said in warning when she followed. “Guard the door.”

Hermione stopped and stood watching him. “The door, Hermione,” Harry repeated as he went to the far wall to retrieve Ravenclaw’s book.

“What are you doing, Harry?” Hermione asked. He could hear her casting something. Hopefully it was something with enough power to buy him enough time.

Harry turned the thick and varied pages of massive volume, glancing over each, refreshing his mind with each spell and each plan he found. “Just guard the door!” Harry shouted. He tried to speed up, but the book rattled, threatening to slam closed and make him start again. Sweat dripped down Harry’s ribs inside his shirt as he passed pages of the spells that were supposed to be protecting the grounds. He longed to just Apparate away and make sure Snape was all right, and McGonagall, and Hagrid, and Ginny, and Ron, and any other teachers left in the castle. He could not rescue everyone in time, he was certain. This was going to have to do.



Remus Lupin heard an odd scratching at the door to his office. Just as when Snape was direly injured, Flitwick’s funeral made him want to do nothing more than throw himself into work. Teaching was not something he had ever intended to do when he was younger, it was not a calling for him like for the others, but working on teaching felt like the only way to fight down the helplessness that overcame him when something tragic happened to one of his colleagues.

Lupin opened the door, but the corridor was empty. He started to pull it shut, but something forcefully restrained it. Lupin had his wand out just as the leering figure of so many of his nightmares stepped into the light from the reading lamp. Lupin cast a blasting curse, but it wasn’t enough to halt the oversized half-werewolf as he leapt inside. They scuffled on the floor. Lupin got in another grazing shot, even though his wrist was grabbed up and pressed to the floor. His wand hand was lifted by a powerful arm and slammed down. Something cracked, making him cry out. He held desperately onto the wand still, but could not tilt it to aim.

Greyback laughed in a canine manner, oversized tongue lolling and his breath heating Lupin’s face. The fatefulness of his dilemma made Lupin give in. His arms went slack.

“What? No fight? What kind of werewolf are you?” Greyback mocked. “You take all the fun out of it.”

“Good,” Lupin uttered, half-laughing out of stress.

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“You’re a pathetic excuse for a wizard,” Greyback said, and snapped his jaws threateningly.

“You aren’t even a man,” Lupin mocked. He displayed a sneer of his own and gave his attacker a hard knee to the groin. Greyback flung himself aside in an attempt to curl over his middle. Lupin grabbed up his wand in his uninjured hand but as he brought it around a powerful jaw closed around it. For an interminable moment, Lupin was paralyzed by the horror of recollection, but then he jammed his fingers into Greyback’s eyes as hard as he could with his broken wrist.

One floor below, Snape pushed his chair back and stood, the silver message still dissolving in his hand. The floor above him creaked as though something heavy had fallen. His wand raised in that direction out of natural reaction. Moving rapidly, he waved the protective charm off the potions cabinet and grabbed out two bottles stored as far from each other as possible. With the bottle necks hooked between the fingers of one hand, he slipped quickly around the visitor’s chair to stand beside his office door. He took a deep breath followed by another.

Had the silver message come from anyone other than Hermione Granger, he would not be assuming the worst. Anyone else, even Harry perhaps, he may have believed them to be exaggerating the behavior of the castle’s armor. What would he do if he were invading a castle? He would recruit the objects within it to his cause, and he could only assume his former associates would act the same. If he were wrong, he would simply have to replace the potions and apologize to Mr. Filch for having to clean up the mess.

The next breath he held in tightly. He cracked the office door open just far enough to toss the bottles out into the corridor before slamming it closed again. A spell struck the door, but Snape had propped his foot against it, which kept it from flying fully open again. Yellow vapor snaked in before he could slam it closed again, its touch caused his heavy sleeve to curl and smoke. He shook his arm to dissipate it. He continued to hold his breath and began to count slowly to thirty.



The glass in the door to the library shattered. “Harry!” Hermione shouted.

Harry glanced up to see that she was hovering a table onto its side and hurrying to get behind it. Harry was carrying the heavy, stone-bound book on one straining arm while building up energy in two spell columns as the diagram indicated. The notes did not give instructions on how to do this, so Harry was enormously grateful that Snape had once explained how while showing him more powerful magicks. The

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power foci stood as glowing blue columns of heatless flame. He paced between them and began the long incantation. “Lacrimablius incurcio psychrucio incurcius...”

“Harry, what the hell are you doing?” Hermione demanded. “And it’s most likely psychrucio; what you said is nonsense otherwise.”

Harry repeated that the whole phrase and continued on, thinking that Salazar Slytherin should have learned to spell. The door to the library splintered and a rush of flame could be heard followed by billows of steam, which Harry assumed was from Hermione’s water charm. More flames could be heard following this exchange.

“Harry!” Hermione pleaded. “I don’t know what you’re doing and I can’t...” Another explosion of flame filled the air. The scent of burning paper followed closely. “... hold them off.”

“Just half a minute more!” Harry shouted and finished the last line, “... aegrescere laquetomorphos,” while circling the wand around his head like a lasso.

The spell columns erupted into a rippling network of lines that crawled rapidly over the walls before sinking in and making the stones glow. Their effect could be seen out of the window spreading over the adjoining wing of the castle. The room fell silent.

Hermione stood with a groan and spritzed the smoldering books lying on a nearby table. The overturned table she had been using as a shield was blackened and also leaching smoke. “I couldn’t hear all of that spell, but it sounded awful. All shall be trapped in a nightmare of madness. What was that?”

Harry pushed the debris of the door aside with his foot. “It was labeled as the Doomsday Spell. I’m pretty sure it’s of Slytherin’s making.”

“You cast a spell Salazar Slytherin left behind in an old book?!” Hermione demanded, aghast.

Harry gestured at the two Death Eaters squirming on the floor of the corridor, wands cast aside, hands grasping their heads, faces contorted in horror. “Yes,” he replied. “It affects only the castle’s enemies, those who don’t belong within. It will lift when every last one of them is removed. I didn’t see any other way of helping everyone at once. There are a dozen or so Death Eaters here.”

“There are what?” she blurted. “Why didn’t you say?”

“Because I didn’t want to panic you,” Harry calmly replied, striding away. “We should check on everyone. Find Ron and Lavender.”

Severus Snape made the stone gargoyle at a run just as it leapt out of the way on its own. The walls nearby were scarred by recent spells. Two figures lay nearby, thrashing in small jerks. Snape Accioed their wands and held his wand aimed at them, even though they seemed thoroughly incapacitated.

“Severus, thank goodness,” McGonagall said. “I received the strangest message

## CASTLE ROOK

from Ms. Granger about the armor coming to life. Fawkes refused to take me to the spot – pecked me even. Dumbledore’s portrait insisted we stay put in the tower where it was safest, used some reverse password on the gargoyle to keep us in.” She huffed angrily and then noticed the figures on the floor. Richard and Professor Sprout stepped cautiously out behind her, brought down by the turning staircase.

“What is happening? Are the walls glowing, do you think?” Richard asked as he reached out a hand, but pulled it back before touching the stone.

“I don’t know quite what is happening,” Snape said, relaxing his aim on the enemy slightly. “But I fully expect that when we locate Harry, we will find out.”

“Your sleeve is burnt,” McGonagall said in concern.

“Battle with Avery,” Snape stated. “One I won this time. Fortunately, I also received a message, which gave me just enough warning.”

Harry came running. “You’re all right,” he said in relief. “Headmistress? Professors?” He glanced at Richard, surprised to see him still in the castle. As the other’s nodded, he stared at Harry with the same alarm as previously. Harry ignored him, since McGonagall presumably could take care of him.

“Yes, Harry, we’re fine. What... exactly did you do?” McGonagall asked, gesturing at the figures lying nearby.

“Trapped in a horror of their minds, or some such,” Harry tossed out casually. He went over and tossed their hoods aside. “Dolohov and Jugson, look at that,” he said happily. “There are about twelve of them here in the castle.” He paced back to the others. “Can’t count them in my head when there are that many. We may have got the lot of them,” he said with satisfaction, smiling.

“You may have got the lot of them,” Snape corrected.

Harry’s smile faded quickly. “But we need to check on everyone. Did you check on Remus?”

“I admit I came to check on Minerva first.”

Harry started to run off again. Snape’s voice shouting after him slowed his pace. “How long are we safe?”

“It will only release when the very last enemy is removed from the castle,” Harry quoted.

They watched his figure dwindle down the corridor and turn on fleet feet. “Your main job overseeing Harry continues to be as interesting as ever, Severus.”

“It is all right,” Snape said. “I do think he is going to be all right, now. If things would calm down I could catch up to where his power is. It grows by leaps and bounds as he needs it. I think if he did not need it, its growth would slow.” He dropped his wand hand, deciding that the Death Eaters were truly no threat. “But we should contact the Ministry and search the castle.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

"I'll go down to the Great Hall. Don't have the Floo in my office yet. Didn't expect to need it," she grumbled. "Better bring Poppy in, too."

Snape followed in the direction Harry had departed. He would start with who he knew to be present and then begin a floor-by-floor search. Presumably the Ministry would assist with that when they arrived.

He approached the Fat Lady's portrait, which was empty. He found her hiding two portraits away. "It is safe now, and I have the password," he stated, finding patience somewhere, knowing that brusqueness did not always work with this fictitious woman. The Fat Lady picked up her skirts and tip-toed back to her own portrait, looking around for danger all the while.

"Someone dark and mysterious came. He didn't have the password."

"Very good," Snape said. "Periwinkle."

The portrait flipped open and a freezing charm came rolling out, making the portrait hole crackle and steam with ice. It did not seem like a Death Eater kind of spell. "Who is there?" Snape queried, shaking ice from his robes.

"Professor?" Neville asked, bending down to look through the hole.

"Yes, Mr. Longbottom."

"Harry said I should find a defensible spot and stay there," Neville said, sounding as though he wanted it clear he had been obedient.

"Yes, very wise idea. But I need help searching the castle now, so come out of the tower."

Neville stepped out, wand raised. "Who attacked?"

"Death Eaters." Neville's eyes widened and he peered oddly at his former teacher. Snape spun on his heel. "Come along."

At the staircases someone was shouting and Harry came running up to them. "Is Pomfrey here?" he asked breathlessly.

"Minerva is bringing her in by Floo right now." Snape hurried to follow down to the third floor and Lupin's office.

The office lay in disarray and Lupin sat on the floor, clutching his injured arms around his waist, staring at Greyback, who like the others didn't have attention for anything beyond his own internal horrors. Harry crouched beside Lupin and said to Snape, "He's got a bad bite and his other arm's broken, I think. Remus?" Harry prompted.

Lupin responded only slowly. He held up his bitten arm. "Look," he said.

"What?" Harry asked.

"You cannot see it?" Lupin demanded.

"Let's get you to the hospital wing, Remus," Snape said. "Pomfrey will be here momentarily. Come."

## CASTLE ROOK

Between the two of them they put him on his feet and led him out. In the corridor leading to the hospital wing, they found Lavender crying.

“Where’s Ron?” Harry asked, nearly panicked by the scene.

Lavender pointed through the doors to the dispensary. Harry left Snape to handle Lupin alone and rushed ahead. Inside, he came to a stop. Ron stood between two beds looking down at something. “Ron!” Harry said, “you’re...” The object of Ron’s attention came into view. Firenze was splayed on a sheet on the floor, skin ashen. Blood dotted the sheet. “Oh, no,” Harry said. He closed his eyes, but there was nothing left. Snape and Lupin came in and stood beside them. “Where did you go?” Harry asked his friend.

“Out in the Rose Garden,” Ron said dully. “Came in the side door and found Professor Firenze like this. I didn’t know what to do for him.” He tossed his arm helplessly.

Pomfrey rushed in, followed by McGonagall. Heading for the door, Harry said, “We still have people missing.”

“Ministry’s on its way,” McGonagall informed him just before dropping her head at the sight on the floor. She quickly turned to the obviously battered Lupin and forced him to take a bed at the other end.

Harry went at a jog back to the staircases. “Where’s Ginny?” Footfalls came up behind him and Snape joined him. Harry informed him: “I told Hermione to start searching from the Dungeons up, so I know where she is. Ginny’s still missing. And the twins.”

“The Weasley twins?” Snape inquired with interest.

“Yeah. Ginny said they stayed after the funeral to plan some prank.”

Snape raised his wand. “If it was they who weakened the castle’s security, they are in serious trouble.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, worried that may be the case.

Harry started down the next staircase, thinking of checking on Hermione’s progress. A door banged open and Ginny stumbled out. “Ginny!” Harry said, relieved and alarmed. She was clutching her middle.

Ginny swore colorfully and leaned back against the wainscoting. “Witch used the same hex as last time.”

“Here, let’s get you to Pomfrey,” Harry urged, propping her up with his shoulder.

“I was doing so well, too,” she grumbled.

Harry grew alarmed by something moving inside Ginny’s robes. “Pomfrey. Now. Stop talking,” Harry ordered and marched her to the staircase.

“Yeah, but... I think Filch...” Ginny pointed behind her, looked up and spied Snape. “Professor,” she said in clear dismay.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Harry read the potential for embarrassment in her tone. “Severus, can you find Hermione?”

Ginny overrode him. “Filch is dead back there, I think,” she clarified.

Snape gave her a sharp glare as though to verify what she said and then headed through the rough wooden door.

“What’d you get hit with?” Harry asked as they reached the corridor leading to the hospital wing.

“Don’t ask.” She heaved as though she might be sick and then made a very pathetic noise of distress.

“Oh, Ginny. Almost there.” He kicked open the door.

Ginny flopped down on the first bed, too wrapped up in her own troubles to notice the dead centaur across the way, still very recognizable under several crisp white sheets. She curled herself into a ball and moaned.

Pomfrey left Lupin’s side to assess Ginny, saving Harry from fetching her. Ginny shoved Harry. “Go ‘way!” she insisted with an almost childish voice.

Harry backed up, confused. Pomfrey efficiently Accioed a set of curtains and set them up. Harry stood on the far side of them, too concerned to move far. Pomfrey’s reassuring voice drifted out. “Now, now, the Tentacle Erasing Ointment will work in just a half an hour.”

Harry shuddered in sympathy and stepped down to where Lupin sat, propped up on pillows, his broken wrist already safely in a Kwikcast. He was staring closely at his other hand and this time Harry saw that his nails were just a bit too pointed and his knuckles hairier than before. His bites had been wrapped in rags soaked in something purple and foul smelling.

“Can you become more of a werewolf?” Harry asked in surprise.

“I’m becoming like him,” Lupin said bleakly. “Half a werewolf all the time.”

“I’m sorry, Remus,” Harry said.

Lupin shrugged as though trying to pretend it did not matter, even though it clearly did. “Better off than others, though,” he said, nodding his head in the direction of Firenze’s body. “Always have to keep that in mind.” He rested his injured arms at his sides and leaned his head back. “Something overcame Greyback. He just went mad.”

“I did that,” Harry said.

Lupin’s thicker than usual brow went up. “You did?”

“I cast an old spell of Slytherin’s that was described as bringing bane to the castle’s enemies.”

“If you were still my student, I would yell at you for trusting such a spell source. But since you’re not... I won’t.” Instead he appeared quite grateful.



## CASTLE ROOK

McGonagall entered with a group from the Ministry: Arthur Weasley, Shacklebolt, Vineet, and Tonks. Harry patted Lupin's shoulder and joined them. McGonagall crouched and pulled back the sheet from over Firenze's head. His light hair was barely distinguishable from the bleached sheet. "Never really fit in. Living in a castle is hardly natural for such as he."

Harry thought McGonagall must still have eulogies on her mind, since she seemed to be giving another again already.

"Who knows what happened to him?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Ron found him," Harry said. "I think he's taken Lavender somewhere quiet. One of the nearby classrooms, maybe."

Shacklebolt departed.

"Up to helping with a search of the castle?" Mr. Weasley asked Harry, who had been communicating silently with Tonks.

"Yes, sir." Harry glanced at the nearby bed with the curtain drawn around it. He did not say anything, figuring if Ginny wanted her dad's attention, she could have easily made enough noise to attract it.

On the second floor staircase, they encountered Hermione. "I searched everything below here, except I don't know the password for the Slytherin common room."

"It's the same as the Gryffindor one," Harry said. "They make them all the same over the summer."

"'Periwinkle' didn't work though."

"Well, we'll look into it," Mr. Weasley said, "Vishnu, why don't you join Ms. Granger in continuing to search upward."

Hermione appeared to be controlling her reaction to this by biting her lip. Vineet soberly followed her as she led the way up to the next floor. On the way down, Mr. Weasley asked Harry, "Tell us a bit more about this spell you used..."

Harry glanced back at his friends a few times before reciting the notes surrounding the spell. Snape stepped out of the narrow side corridor off the first floor landing, looking grim. "We have another body and three more Death Eaters here," he said.

Mr. Weasley gestured for Tonks to take care of it. "We also need assistance with getting into the Slytherin common room, apparently."

In the much cooler dungeon, while Snape investigated the stuck door leading to his house's common room, Mr. Weasley said, "So, you think the spell was one left behind by Salazar himself?"

"I suspect," Harry said, "that of the four founders whose notes are in the book, he seems the most likely candidate. He also apparently couldn't spell... words, that is." When Snape gave him a borderline insulted glance, Harry added, "The other notes don't have quite the same issue with the English language."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Snape considered the door. “The password has been changed. Anything in the Ravenclaw book about the commons’ gateways?” he airily asked Harry.

“Yeah,” Harry said. “It says: be certain not to forget the password.”

Snape stepped back, gesturing for Harry and Mr Weasley to do the same. As he aimed his wand at the exposed hinges, Harry said, “Don’t want to try to guess it?” Snape ignored him and fired a cutting charm at each hinge until they blossomed and clanked to the stone floor. The door still refused to move.

“The magic is on the door itself, it seems,” Mr. Weasley observed.

McGonagall appeared then, Minister Bones in tow. “If I ever get two good nights of sleep in a row, I will be forever grateful.” She waved her hand before her nose to disperse the smoke. “What is this?”

“The password’s been changed,” Harry said. “And we don’t know it.”

“Well, for goodness sake, Severus, you should have said something. There is an unlock charm just for this situation that only the headmaster or mistress is allowed to know. Turn around, all of you.” She cast something without an incantation and the door crashed to the floor, making them all jump. “At least it was your house door you damaged,” she said as she stepped by Snape to enter. “Well... it... was your house.”

Harry followed her in and stopped dead at the oppressive sight before him. The entire place had been redecorated as though by a mad grandmother afflicted with an obsession for pink and white doilies. Harry could not hold back a gasp. Simulated windows had even been added, complete with bright sunlight – despite the post-witching hour, probably just to highlight the yellow and blue flowered curtains pulled aside with broad pink sashes. The room made his arms tingle with revulsion; he rubbed them, which did not help. Snape reached up to tear down a Gryffindor Rulz banner but it snapped viciously at him.

“Oh, wonderful,” Snape said. “And it is all cursed.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

Bones propped her fists on her hips and said, “Quite an improvement, I would say.” When Harry turned to her to gauge if she were joking or not, she said, “Thanks to you are in order, Mr. Potter, for your quick actions this evening. Quite a coup.”

“Quite honestly,” Harry said, “I was just trying to save my friends, as usual.”

Snape turned sharply and leaned into their conversation with: “What he means to say, is: Thank you for the accolades and I hope this means you will be supporting me tomorrow during the meeting of the full Wizengamot.”

Minister Bones smiled faintly. “Harry is not a political animal, Professor.”

“No,” Snape breathed in mildly disdainful agreement. “Despite my numerous attempts to change that.”

## CASTLE ROOK

A noise attracted Harry's attention to one of the dormitories, which was only partially redecorated. On the floor – one by the doorway and the other by a half-formed, simulated window that rose and set rapidly between day and night – lay the twins, clasping their heads and thrashing as though caught in a miniature fit. "In here!" Harry shouted.

"Fred and George!" Mr. Weasley exclaimed. "Buy why...?"

"Enemies of the castle," Harry said. "At least the castle thinks so." He moved quickly to hover the twin who was tangled in curtains with a bright pattern of doe-eyed kittens playing with yarn or curling up to sleep with puppies. "I think if we get them out of the castle, the spell will lift."

He and Snape hovered the two of them while Mr. Weasley cleared the way, showing distress at the state of his sons. They glided them out onto the dewy, moonlit lawn where the shadows cast by the torches stretched away to the lake. The twins fell unconscious, which was definitely an improvement. Something howled from the forest and a colony of bats fluttered overhead.

"Serves them right," Snape muttered, too quiet for Mr. Weasley to overhear. His long shadow shortened as he bent down to check that the nearest twin was breathing all right, even rolling him onto his side and checking that he had not swallowed his tongue.

Mr. Weasley was shaking his head as he knelt beside the other. "Should get them to St. Mungo's," he said. To Harry, he asked, "Any idea what the recovery time on this spell is?"

Harry was forced to shrug, which made him feel almost regretful. He had not meant for anyone he cared about to get caught in the middle. With a cry of yah! one twin violently sat up, holding his head. "Bloody hell," he kept repeating.

"Guess they'll be all right," Mr. Weasley said and Harry slumped in relief.

Harry followed Snape when he moved to return to the castle. Mr. Weasley also stood, pointed his wand at the nearest befuddled twin and said, "Stay put!"

Ron stood in the castle doorway, looking out. "You found Fred and George?"

"Yes, yes," Mr. Weasley reassured him.

Ron took the heavy door from him as though heading outside, but spotted something that made him turn back and say, "Wha's that?!"

Everyone turned and watched Lavender approach, carrying a familiar creature with matted and tangled fur. It was purring loud enough to hear across the hall. "I found her crying on the fourth floor," she said, petting the animal.

Ron let the door go and it fell closed with a resounding boom! "That's Mrs. Norris!" he exclaimed in horror.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Lavender petted the cat. "But she was so sad. And now look at her." It was true that the cat was completely at home in her arms.

Ron was nonplussed. "But... but I HATE that cat!"

Lavender pointedly turned sideways as though to shield Mrs. Norris from Ron's anger and petted her some more.



In a far wing of the fourth floor, Hermione and Vineet walked in silence. Hermione had only made two attempts at conversation but they had elicited nothing more than one syllable responses so she had given up. By this time her excitement at getting this assignment had dulled to a manageable tingle that was renewed every time she turned to her companion. They had not found anything for a while, so Hermione jumped more than expected when Vineet grabbed her robes to pull her back from approaching the curved stone staircase that led upward at the dead end of the corridor.

"There is a barrier here," he said, sounding concerned.

The light was poor but Hermione could see the sky outside the windows reflecting in a small pool of water on the floor. "It's just this," she said, shaking him off to step closer. A frog leapt from the reeds, making a splash that reached her shoes. She stared down into the black water with some sadness. "This is where Professor Flitwick moved the portable swamp to get it out of the way rather than get rid of it." She gestured along the corridor. "No one ever comes down this way, usually."

Melancholia pervaded Hermione's mood as they continued. Two corridors later, this allowed her to identify Vineet's mood, although not the source of it. She wondered if she should ask Harry what was wrong with his colleague, but did not look forward to his look of disapproval if she did not ask very carefully.



When the search was finished and all eleven captured Death Eaters carted away, Harry stepped into the Great Hall in search of Tonks. Voices echoed from the pair sitting at the Gryffindor table near the freshly lit hearth. Harry came to a stop far enough away as to not interrupt Tonk's interview of Ginny. The clock on the end wall was difficult to read without squinting, but it showed half past three. Harry yawned.

Ginny was saying: "Then this cutting curse came from the staircase side."

"That's what happened to the rug?" Tonks asked, writing all the while.

"I guess, yeah," Ginny replied.

## CASTLE ROOK

A figure approached Harry and stopped beside his shoulder. It was Mr. Weasley. Ginny went on, gesturing with her hands to show the layout of the corridor and the gestures of her spells, "I moved to get a wall between me and the attacker down the corridor..."

"But that one was farther away," Tonks pointed out.

"Yeah, true," Ginny said thoughtfully. "I guess I was thinking that was where the fatal spell that took out Filch must have come from. But I wasn't thinking much... didn't really have time."

As Ginny continued to relate her part of the battle, Harry turned to his boss. "All right, sir?" Mr. Weasley did not appear to be all right. He ignored Harry's question, so Harry said, "She's pretty good. With a little training..."

Mr. Weasley grimaced and approached the two of them hunched over Tonk's report parchment.

"Hey, Dad," Ginny greeted him happily.

Mr. Weasley put a hand on her shoulder. "Go on," he said.

Ginny finished describing the spell exchanges, growing more agitated when she had to describe the Tetchy Tentacle Hex that she had not managed a counter for, despite getting hit with it previously. "Do you know one?" she asked Tonks in near desperation. "I hate that hex."

"I'll find out one for you," Tonks assured her.

"You should get home; it's late," Mr. Weasley tiredly said.

"I... can I go home?" Ginny asked eagerly.

Mr. Weasley rubbed his forehead. "That's right. I forgot."

"I can't forget," Ginny retorted, sounding grudging.

"It was supposed to be safer here for you," Mr. Weasley muttered.

"Yeah," Ginny said. "How many teachers are dead now?" She frowned deeply and noticed only then that Harry was hovering on the edge of the light. "Hey, Harry."

"You're in better spirits," Harry said, approaching.

Ginny rubbed her robe front. "Yeah, better without tentacles in uncomfortable places." She blushed then, which was clear even in the firelight. "Can I really go home?" she asked her father.

Mr. Weasley continued to rub the thinning hair on top of his head. "I don't know," he admitted.

Ginny stood. "Guess that's a 'no'," she muttered. "I'm going back to the tower then." A few steps away, she said, "G'night, Dad."

Harry hovered, waiting to see if Mr. Weasley would leave as well so he could talk to Tonks. Mr. Weasley rubbed his hair back and forth again, looking beaten down. Tonks said, "She's not a baby anymore, Arthur."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“Seven kids. Six boys,” Mr. Weasley complained. “Why does SHE insist on being an Auror? Why not one of them, like Bill?” Grumbling, he departed.

Harry sat down beside Tonks. He wanted to hitch an arm around her shoulder but worried someone may come in and see. He stroked her thigh under the table instead, feeling like a silly student again.

Tonks remained business-like. “I need to interview you next.” She found a fresh report sheet and filled out the top of it. Harry clasped his hands before him on the table and behaved himself.

Giving his version of events went smoothly. He had written out enough reports by now to easily order and describe the right details. Halfway through, while he waited for Tonks to finish describing Hermione’s defense of the library, Harry asked, “Do you want me to write?”

“No,” Tonks replied in such a way that Harry wondered if he had offended her but she was trying to hide it. This served as a reminder that maintaining a working relationship was not going to be straightforward or easy. Harry sat quietly after that, waiting for a cue to continue.

Without warning a hand fell on Harry’s shoulder. “You need to rest for tomorrow’s Wizengamot meeting,” Snape said.

“We’re still finishing up reports,” Harry pointed out, not wanting to leave Tonks’ side quite yet.

Sounding immovable, Snape said, “You can finish it tomorrow after you have slept. It is quite late.”

Tonks rolled up the parchments and stashed them inside her robe as she stepped over the bench. “You go. I should relieve Kingsley anyway; he’s patrolling the grounds.”

Harry asked, “Have you figured out how the Death Eaters got in?”

She shook her head. “Not entirely. They came in the side door where Firenze looks to have been waiting for a rendezvous with someone.”

“Another centaur?” When Tonks shrugged, Harry said, “Could the centaurs have carried the Death Eaters over the barrier spells?”

“The centaurs would never consent to do that,” Tonks said.

Harry turned to Snape. “But that would work, wouldn’t it?”

Snape pondered a moment before he agreed that it could. He patted Harry’s shoulder as though to get him moving. Harry stood and said, “But what happened to the elves?”

“To bed,” Snape commanded. “You can solve the rest of the wizarding world’s problems tomorrow.”

“But...”

## CASTLE ROOK

Snape pointed and gave him a shove in the direction of the doors. Harry moved his feet to remain upright and went that way reluctantly. As he approached the open center door a large figure blocked the way.

“Hey, Hagrid.”

“Got someone for ya’,” Hagrid said and held out a small mummified bundle.

Harry stared at it, shifting into the Entrance Hall where the light was slightly better. “Kali?”

“Aye, she took to thrashing in ‘er cage. I couldna calm ‘er down. Didna realize that meant trouble I ‘ave ta admit,” Hagrid explained as Harry lifted the tiny fox-headed bundle from his massive hand. Hagrid went on, “ ‘Fraid if she re-injured ‘erself badly she’d never fly again. We should keep ‘er like that fer a while, ta give ‘er a chance to heal a bit.”

Harry cradled her on his arm, where she immediately rested her head against him. A sense of utter relief washed through him, leaving his limbs jelly-like. “Thanks, Hagrid,” he said. He glanced back and hesitated on his toes while he judged whether Tonks’ or Snape’s postures, clearly outlined by the fire, indicated that the conversation may be one of concern. Harry decided not and gave Hagrid a wave before departing. His pet was asleep before he made it to the top of the Grand Staircase.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



# LUX & VERITAS

The boy's dormitory in the Gryffindor tower stood empty, as everyone else had decided to sleep at home. Harry, not having a home at the moment, decided he might as well stay as originally intended. He used a spell to put the bedding from the pile in the common room onto his old bed. He stripped to his t-shirt and dropped onto the mattress leadenly with Kali cradled against him. Either his own fatigue had caught up with him or hers did, because he was hard out immediately. He was so solidly asleep that he did not wake when Snape came up to check on him and he had to be shaken hard hours later when morning arrived.

"Harry," Snape's voice cut through his distorted dreams. A hand passed through his hair, turning his face upward. Harry blinked into the sunlight, forced to shade his eyes. As he sat up, Kali made a chirping noise and struggled inside her bindings.

Snape peered at her with a disturbed expression. "What an unfortunate creature."

Harry scooped her up and stood to collect his robes. "I trust that Hagrid knows what's best for her. What time is it?"

"Half past nine."

The Great Hall was empty. Snape sat across from Harry and watched him eat breakfast. Harry pushed his watery scramble around his plate and said with some trepidation, "This doesn't look like normal Hogwarts fare. What happened to the house-elves?"

Snape scratched his chin to stall and said, "There were only six in the castle last night. The rest are still on loan helping to clean up from the troubles. Had there been more about, I doubt they could have been overwhelmed."



## LUX & VERITAS

Harry put his fork down. “What happened?”

Snape crossed his arms. “The elves here are not tightly bonded to their servitude. It is difficult to bond them, even if the school wished to, since the spell works with an individual or a family. Were they bonded to the Headmaster that would create issues during succession.”

Harry began to see the possibilities. “The Death Eaters bonded the elves to themselves?”

“Yes.”

“Dobby even?” Harry asked, feeling terrible for the elf as soon as he considered this. When Snape nodded, Harry asked, “Where are they now?”

“Two cannot be located. The other four are at the Ministry in the care of Control of Magical Creatures.”

Harry glanced at the clock. “I’m going to go see Dobby, then.”

“Wizengamot meeting is at 1:00, remember,” Snape sternly reminded him.

Harry nodded and lifted Kali up from resting in his lap. “Guess I’ll take her back to Hagrid for now.”

Snape held a hand out. “I will take her. Why don’t you get on your way; it is getting late in the morning and the Auror’s office may wish to give you further instructions given that thirty members of the press have been invited to the meeting.”

“Are you going to be there?” Harry asked.

“I was intending to, unless you would rather I not.” He rested Harry’s pet in the crook of his arm and placed his other hand over her to hold her there.

Harry felt dizzily uneasy and then secure as this transpired. “No, I’d prefer you be there.” Harry glanced at the doors to the hall, considering Apparating.

“Take the Floo,” Snape ordered him.



McGonagall approached Snape as he crouched on the floor, cleaning up his office. Burnt files littered the floor, some burnt not by spells but by the smashed potions that had also stained and etched the stones.

“Faring well enough, Severus?” she asked.

He stood with a stack of less-damaged papers in his hand. “I should have cleaned up last night; the potion ingredients would have done less damage if I had.” He set the stack down on the desk and spread them out.

“Did you see Poppy about your arm?” McGonagall asked, either remembering his burnt sleeve from the night before or seeing something in the way Snape moved.

“It is no matter. I’ll mix a bit of plaster for it if need be.”

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“Severus, that’s ridiculous, go up and see Poppy now. Things have quieted down.” When Snape did not respond, but continued to sort out the salvageable files from the hopeless, she commanded, “Come along right now, then if you are going to be that way.”

Snape glared at her. “It is literally a scratch.”

“Now, Severus, or I will call Fawkes down here to haul you away.”

“The bird would regret that,” Snape threatened. They stared at each other before Snape gave in with a roll of his eyes.

In the hospital wing Snape took a seat where directed to. Pomfrey bustled out and upbraided Snape for waiting so long getting himself tended to. As Snape sat through having a burn plaster applied, his eyes narrowed as he took in the occupant of the bed across from him. Snape glanced meaningfully at Pomfrey and nodded in Lupin direction. Pomfrey simply shook her head. Snape then glanced at McGonagall, who whispered, “Maybe you could speak to him.”

“Me?” Snape mouthed.

“You have a better chance of shaking him out of it,” McGonagall said in an extremely low whisper. “He doesn’t expect anything from you.”

“No, I imagine he doesn’t,” Snape muttered inaudibly. He used this task as an excuse to shake himself free of Pomfrey before she was finished. He ignored the hospital witch’s tossed up hands and crossed to Lupin’s bedside.

Lupin lay curled up as though asleep but given the late hour, this seemed unlikely. At the sound of his name, he rolled onto his back and propped himself up slightly with the pillows. The change in him was still very subtle, having been arrested by the quick application of a wrap to draw the mutagen out of his bites. “What can I do for you?” Lupin dully asked.

Snape sat on the next bed over and clasped his hands together. He had no good conversation ideas and felt out of his depth with this task. He finally settled for the basic truth: “You are looking quite well, Remus.” Indeed, the slightly furred point to his ear would not be visible if he failed to cut his hair for a month and nails could be trimmed shorter to hide their slight points. The more subtle change of his shoulders hunching fractionally forward like a quadruped’s, would be harder to mask.

Lupin’s pursed lips appeared to restrain a counter argument. He didn’t speak.

Snape crossed his arms and said the next thing he thought of. “Not the best evening, facing one’s most reviled nemesis, whose encounter was almost fatal the last time.”

Lupin stared at Snape. “Avery come and see you?” he finally asked.

“Yes,” Snape replied casually. “Fortunately, I had a bit of warning that things were amiss. One you missed getting, unfortunately.”

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Lupin looked him over. “You all right?” he asked. “I noticed you’ve got some bandaging there.” He seemed to be trying hard to pull himself out of his emotional morass using concern for someone else.

“It is minor,” Snape said dismissively.

Lupin scrubbed his face with one hand, a sign that he was slipping down again.

Snape said, “How is the damage to your office? I only ask because the Defense files have been rather badly damaged by both fire and potion as well as fiery potion.” Snape spoke with an edge of beaten down fatigue that he did not really feel but suspected may be effective.

Lupin rubbed his arm and glanced around the wing which was otherwise unoccupied. “I guess I could go,” he said. “Pomfrey hinted as much enough times during breakfast.”

Snape handed him his robes which were hanging behind the bed. Lupin was exhibiting the trait that Snape found most annoying above all others: self-pity. He steeled himself for a rather long remainder of the morning but a half hour later, Lupin had sufficiently engrossed himself into copying examination keys and lecture notes over to clean parchment that he didn’t speak much, although he still sighed too frequently, usually after studying his less than human hands.

“Does it really matter that much?” Snape finally asked after one such incidence.

“I like moving among Muggles. I’m going to have a hard time doing that now,” Lupin replied. “Muggles aren’t particularly fond of... creatures.”

Snape returned to his task of returning files to an unbroken drawer beside the door.

“Avery made a mess, didn’t he?” Lupin observed.

Snape surveyed the room. “It was my deflection block that did this damage,” he said, indicating the smashed cabinet from which the parchments had spilled. “I was not going to underestimate him this time, even though I hoped my first offense would be fatal to him.”

“They listed Avery as taken away in one piece. Why didn’t you just kill him?” Lupin asked. It was an unexpected question for him.

“Feeling a bit more the vigilante than usual, Remus?” At Lupin’s shrug Snape said, “I was most pleased that Harry had not taken that action last time, so I did not have it as an option, myself.”

Lupin squinted at a sheet of notes and diagrams demonstrating locking charms. “That doesn’t sound like you, Severus.”

Snape crossed his arms and leaned against his desk. “There was a time when I would have been satisfied with considering Harry’s virtuousness as my own redemption, but I do not find that valid anymore.”

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Lupin put down the sheet he was holding and stared at Snape. “You feeling all right?”



In the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, Harry was directed to a cage in the massive back storeroom which held four tragic-looking house-elves, three of whom were passed out on the floor with open bottles of butterbeer near or still in their boney hands. Dobby crouched near the door of the cage, his nose pressed through the bars.

“Harry Potter, sir,” he squeaked when Harry approached.

Harry crouched down opposite him. “Mr. Diggory said you should be un-bonded very soon.”

The elf nodded without freeing his nose. “Dobby’s master is bad wiz-” the elf started to say and then felt compelled to slam his head against the bars. The bars were too close together for Harry to reach in and keep him from doing this.

“Dobby, just don’t talk about your master, all right?”

The elf fell still, but muttered, “Dobby bad elf; could not help Harry Potter.”

“I didn’t need any help. It’s all right. You’ll be all right. Have a butterbeer.”

Dobby blinked his big eyes and said, “After watching Winky drink butterbeers Dobby not want any.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Harry said. “I’m sorry I can’t stay; I have to get upstairs.”

Dobby tugged on the bars. “Harry Potter is great wizard for visiting Dobby in the Clink.”

“Just hang in there, all right?”

Too soon, Harry found himself escorted into the large meeting hall of the Wizengamot. To his surprise, he was brought not to a seat in the front center of the floor, but to one along the wall, amid the reporters, who gazed at him with inquisitive wariness. Snape had been hovering near the rear of this pack, but stepped forward to stand just behind Harry’s right shoulder. Minister Bones was saying, “I now move us onto the main issue of this meeting, and that is making a determination on Mr. Harry Potter’s future in this organization.”

Harry swallowed. Tonks leaned close and said, “Minister thought you should hear all of the debate; that’s why she asked that you be brought in at the beginning.” Harry let his shoulders fall and tried to relax.

Bones went on: “Because Mr. Potter is an apprentice in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, investigations concerning him have been overseen by the Department of Mysteries.” Beside Harry, some of the more foreign journalists were

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taking note of this. “Cornelius Fudge will be leading the debate over Mr. Potter. So I will turn this over to him.”

Harry’s heart sank. Fudge, sporting his old self-important attitude of walking with his chest pushed out to compete with his belly and his hands hitched around his lapels, strutted down to the floor. Percy followed him, carrying his parchments, which he arranged neatly on a nearby podium. Fudge said, “First off, I would like to make clear to all present...” Here he bowed to the reporters, including explicitly to Rita Skeeter, who had appropriated a member’s seat on the end of the lowest tier. “... exactly what Mr. Potter’s rogue magic is capable of.” He turned to the door with a sweep of his arm and it opened. Tertius Ogden stepped in, walking backward to guide a heavy wooden chair that was being hovered in. Lockhart, still sporting the dull red eyes of Voldemort, was chained to the chair. His vicious eyes scanned the room as though lining up who he would make victims of first.

The reporters backed up against the wall, ignoring their earlier desire to keep some space between them, and a few of the elders gasped. The chair was lowered to the floor with a thud. Bones visibly gathered herself. “We would have used Courtroom Ten had we known you were bringing him in here.”

“But why?” Fudge asked with sarcasm. “He is harmless.” With a snap of his fingers the chains fell away. Ogden backed up a step to aim his wand at the prisoner, presumably in case he tried to leave the chair. The room was definitely on edge now. Voldemort, using Lockhart’s soft face, sneered at the assembled.

“If I may?” Fudge asked, still using his airy tone.

“If you may what?” Bones asked.

“Demonstrate?”

“If you must,” Bones said, sounding uncertain about what she was agreeing to.

Fudge pulled his wand out and handed it to the figure in the chair. One of the reporters ducked behind the others and some of the Wizengamot looked ready to leap up and run despite their advanced age. Voldemort clutched the wand in both cherishing hands, his face the picture of ecstasy. With a snap of his arm, he aimed it at Percy, who had taken a position beside Fudge, but now clearly wished he were elsewhere. Voldemort shouted a curse, but nothing happened. He shouted another to the same lack of result. Eyes wild, he moved his aim among the tiered seats, where many ducked. “Avada Kedavra!” he yelled repeatedly, but soon ended in a sob. Still clutching the wand as though it were a lifeline, Voldemort slipped off the front of the chair onto his knees. He sobbed heavily now, head bowed, shoulders shaking. The rest of the room was utterly still, not even the reporter’s quills moved.

Fudge stepped forward and easily snatched his wand from Voldemort’s beautiful hands, which in his distress had gone nearly limp.

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“Unprecedented,” Fudge announced. “A threat to the very foundation of wizardry itself.”

“What?” Harry heard himself utter.

“No one,” Fudge went on, sounding more and more like a carnival sideshow announcer, “in the history of wizardry, has ever before, removed the most fundamental energies from another being, the very thing that makes them magical. Until now.” He turned to glare at Harry.

“You’d prefer I killed him?” Harry asked.

Fudge pointed his wand at him, although it felt less a threat and more like simply pointing. “You are not called as witness at this time, Mr. Potter.”

Voldemort had fallen into a heap, his head resting on his bent knee. Fudge stepped by him as though he were part of the furniture. Harry wished he would at least reach out and trip the man, but Voldemort had no will left to care about his surroundings.

“This is just one of many roguish spells Mr. Potter has demonstrated he is capable of. He has also...” Fudge began counting on his pudgy fingers. “Communed with the Dementors, admitting in fact that he negotiated with them. His Animagus form is a beast of unusually large and dangerous proportion. He has the power to SEE Voldemort’s servants when they are not present. He could see through Voldemort’s eyes when he chose to do so. He can call forth all manner of vile creatures from the very underworld... and these creatures remain at his command. Just yesterday he executed – on the very first try, I might add – a long and difficult spell left behind by Salazar Slytherin himself.” Fudge tossed his waistcoat back and paced once in front of Voldemort, who still had not moved. “Ladies and gentlemen of this fine committee,” Fudge said with a hand held up and out to them. “I submit to you that Harry Potter...” Fudge’s hand swung around to Harry. “... is the new Dark Lord.”

Harry stared at the former Minister for Magic. The reporters stared at Harry, most holding off on describing the scene in their notebooks. Tertius Ogden hazarded a glance behind him to gauge Harry’s reaction. Harry remembered to breathe.

Fudge was approaching, so Harry sat up straighter. “No comment, Mr. Potter?” Fudge asked.

“You said it wasn’t my turn,” Harry pointed out, grateful that he wasn’t supposed to speak until he had figured out where to begin. He felt a bit dizzy as he tried to formulate a strategy for responding. He made the mistake of glancing over his shoulder at his guardian.

Fudge took this cue and leaned in Snape’s direction, hands on hips. “I won’t even start in on your choice of adoptive fathers, Mr. Potter: Death Eater and all.” He spun away. The reporters began scratching madly. “Need I say more?” he announced to the room.

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Harry realized with a fast sinking heart that he had no power to protect Snape anymore; he could barely protect himself.

“Take him out of here,” Fudge gestured at the destroyed man on the floor.

Ogden and Percy hovered him out.

Bones, at least, seemed unimpressed with Fudge’s performance. Others around her were leaning forward, appearing disturbed and interested in hearing more. Bones said, “Mr. Fudge, we are well aware of Mr. Potter’s resumé, off of which you have left a long list of things, including his exemplary performance and dedication as an Auror’s apprentice, his fine leadership at the Demise of Voldemort Day festivities...” She glanced at the empty spot on the floor where Voldemort had just been removed and added more quietly, “Perhaps soon to be renamed.” She pulled her monocle out of her eye and polished it calmly. “As I see it, Cornelius, you are one of the few harboring the belief the Mr. Potter is a dark wizard and are merely using fear to compel others to your belief.” She ignored someone clearing his throat in the tiers behind her. “Let’s move on, shall we? You have insisted that we run a Darkness Test, so let’s do that then and put this to rest. And I expect everyone to honor the results, whatever they may be.” She glared pointedly at the former Minister.

Fudge gave a little bow and gestured – still with that annoying grandeur – that Harry should come forward. Almost pointedly, Harry was directed to the chair Voldemort had just vacated. It was a sturdy old thing with broad armrests freshly marred by the chains that had been around them. Ogden hustled up with a small trunk, setting it down on the floor and taking bottles out of it.

Fudge stood with his hands behind his back, flicking his wand rapidly. “Ever have a Darkness Test, Mr. Potter?”

“No, sir,” Harry honestly replied, glad that he could.

“It is believed that no dark wizard can pass this test. Not worried at all?”

“I’m not a dark wizard,” Harry said.

“You insult our intelligence, Mr. Potter,” Fudge muttered.

Harry held in all kinds of retorts, such as, not particularly difficult to do that. He sat quietly while Ogden hovered Harry’s wand before him. He stepped back and instructed Harry to take it up and use it. Harry did so and even held onto it, intentionally waiting for the instruction to let it go again, so as to not seem to have lied just moments before.

“You are not to touch the wand again during the test,” Ogden stated.

Harry assumed it was he who was going to run the test. He was mid-preparation for what kind of tester Ogden may be when Percy strode over and stood beside him, face set like a mask, wand in hand.

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“Mr. Weasley will be administering the test for our department,” Ogden stated and stepped aside.

Harry waited, trying to adjust to this new development. The room rustled and fell quiet as though a play were about to begin. He glanced down at the wand hovering before him and told himself that he could do this, easily; certainly everyone had faith that he could.

“I’m prepared to begin,” Percy nasally pointed out.

“Go ahead then,” Fudge said.

Percy raised his wand and aimed it straight at Harry but, unlike Snape, he had no difficulty in striking out. A stripe of pain like the lash of a whip cut across Harry’s chest, making him gasp. The pain faded quickly, but before it could disappear completely, a second spell came at him. It was the third spell, a Blasting Curse that pushed him hard against the chair-back, that made Harry’s arm jerk in the direction of the wand hovering before him. It was instinctive. He arrested the motion before getting even close, but Percy had spotted the movement.

Percy sneered with pleasure. “Go on, Potter. You know you want to hit me back.” He cast a spell that doubled Harry over so that his forehead grazed his floating wand. Percy dropped his voice so that only Harry could hear. “Of course you want to hit me, I have Belinda now.” While Harry forced breath into his reluctant lungs, Percy went on. “Shall I tell you about what we did last weekend? She is always saying how much better I treat her you know. She’s such a willing young woman if you tell her all the nice things she wants to hear.”

This was not a line of assault Harry had prepared for. His face heated and his jaw clenched. And just as he filled his lungs finally, a Glove Hex materialized to redden his cheeks all the more from the slap of leather. Every ounce of Harry’s being longed to smash Percy back across the room with a Blasting Curse.

“Come on, Potter,” Percy mocked a little louder this time. “You are such a faker, playing at hero.” His voice dropped again, “But I hear you can’t live up to it in bed.”

Harry fists clenched and he began to doubt that with he could possibly hold out with his will further weakened given how very close he was to losing control clearheaded. If Percy had been within reach, Harry was certain he would simply throttle him.

The sixth spell was a Delirimens Curse that made Harry feel as though hundreds of insects were crawling all over him, biting him. Percy was maintaining the spell by turning the point of his wand in small figure eights, making it last as long as he could. Harry could not help scratching and clutching at his arms and back as his brain screamed at him to strike back to shut it off. Finally the spell faded and Harry bent forward, needing to catch his breath yet again. He was doubting himself for part



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two of the test and that was taking away some of his breath too.

Ogden approached with a piece of stained dissolving paper. Harry ate it, dreading what was coming. Seconds ticked by and Harry's frantic worry melted away to a dull concern. Ogden leaned close and repeated slowly. "Remember, you cannot touch your wand." Harry needed this slow instruction as his brain wanted to forget what was happening. As a litany, he repeated it to himself so as to not forget. "Don't touch the wand. Don't touch the wand."

Again, Percy raised and aimed his wand, a peeved crease distorting his face, perhaps because he had not defeated Harry on the first round. The sting that arced across Harry's chest felt simultaneously far away and sharply inescapable. "Ah!" Harry said and rubbed his collarbone, unable to hide the discomfort this time around. "I'm go –" Harry cut himself off. He had almost verbally threatened to kick Percy's arse later, but better sense shut him up just in time. He scowled instead.

Harry was ready for the Blasting Curse, but still had a dangerously weak moment, during which it seemed completely sensible to grab for his wand and utterly insane to hold off on doing so. He forced his fingernails to bite into his palms instead. In the curse's wake, he tried to catch his breath, but could not. He was suffocating, breathing heavily but not getting any air. His arms felt bound, even though they were not really. This confused him, which rattled his control. He had to be insane not to defend himself. What was wrong with him that was not blasting this sneering idiot out of his sight? He certainly deserved it. But Harry could not move his arms.

The Glove Hex weakened Harry all the more. He glared at Percy, who continued to drop insults supposedly passed on to him by Belinda. Harry was so focused on his hatred that his control of the interstice to the Dark Plane began to weaken. A musty chill wind floated under his robes. Harry dipped his head and drew on reserves of control he was previously unaware of. Releasing the creatures here would be the end of his current life, and that he feared far more than a mere childish insult or even a stinging slap across the face. The truth of this simple priority gave him much better control and he could even release his frantic grip on the armrests. Nothing else in the world mattered, only surviving this ordeal intact, and the ordeal would end very soon. He was almost there.

Harry raised his head and defiantly faced down the last of the six curses without even flinching. Percy's lips twisted sourly when Ogden called the test to a halt. Harry wanted to glance away from his own knees over at his guardian, but could not transform the will to do so, into action; he was spent.

Wood-soled footsteps approached, but Harry didn't lift his head. Fudge said, "I submit that we move onto the second proposed procedure." Harry did raise his head upon hearing this. Fudge went on, "The proposal that Madam Bones refused to allow

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to come to a vote at the close of the last meeting of this august body.”

Bones said, “Cornelius, Mr. Potter passed the test. It was correctly administered, as we all witnessed. As you yourself stated, no dark wizard can pass this test. I move that we dismiss this issue. Everyone but you is satisfied.”

Fudge paced before the first tier of seats. “I don’t believe that is true. But if it is, you have no reason to hesitate to submit it to a vote.”

Bones tossed up her hands. “All right then. All in favor of executing Mr. Fudge’s previously defined second procedure.”

A number of hands went up. Harry hurriedly tried to count them, but there were too many. Nearby, Ogden crouched on the floor, arranging little bottles inside his small trunk. Fudge wore a crooked grin when he turned back to Harry. Madam Bones stated, “I wish to express that the current state of extreme mistrust, not only of this body but of the wizarding world at large is due in no small part to the inflammatory and one-sided nature of the articles published in our newspapers.” She didn’t glance at Skeeter as she said this, but many others did. “I have to wonder if you will ever be satisfied, those of you who voted in favor. You have all forgotten how much we owe Mr. Potter and you underestimate the risk involved in ostracizing him, whether he in reality be a good, bad, or medium-evil wizard.” She peered straight at Harry. “All right there, Mr. Potter?”

Harry nodded. He felt saddened more than anything else, even given that he still ached from the physical battering he had just received. The suspicion would never end and this realization depressed him. He found himself better understanding Snape: he too could never convince most people that he was not as they believed; it was simply too much for the average person to overcome. Harry leaned forward, arms wrapped around himself. He felt mummified and half-strangled.

Ogden approached with another dissolving paper, this time stained thoroughly. Arthur Weasley rapidly approached as well.

Mr. Weasley’s hand fell on Harry’s shoulder. “I think he may need a Healer.”

“Nonsense,” Ogden said, “He didn’t get hit that hard. I was standing close enough to see every spell effect. He said he was all right.”

“Harry?” Mr. Weasley prompted.

Harry looked up at his boss. “Nothing is going to change their minds,” he said grimly. “I want to get this over with. Then I want to go on a long holiday.”

Mr. Weasley patted his shoulder and retreated back to the side opposite the press. Harry glanced the other way and found his pensive guardian standing a few feet in front of the press, as though he had started to approach but then held off. Harry considered that he himself could slip away anytime, into the floor and far away, where ever he wished. He could go to Finland and never come back. But he did not want

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to do that. Too many people were relying on him and he would miss his friends.

Harry let Ogden put the torn and folded paper on his tongue. A cloud of indifference crowded out the world. Someone was speaking to him and a voice sounding very much like his own was replying. The mummified feeling intensified. Harry could not have moved his arms had he wished to. What bothered him most was that his wings were immobilized. He hoped he did not need to fly anywhere.

Fudge had been asking Harry a series of standard background questions, but now he asked, “Have you ever willfully injured another – not a criminal wanted by the Ministry – or attempted to do so?”

Harry nodded and in response to the question of who, replied, “Draco Malfoy and some other of the Slytherin Quidditch team.”

“Ah, the incident deemed serious enough to ban you from the sport, correct?”

Harry nodded.

“And other times that you hurt others?”

“I’m sure I tried to hit Malfoy and other Slytherins many times.”

“Any other people since you have left school?” Fudge asked, getting impatient. Harry shook his head and Fudge frowned. “Are you currently breaking or have you ever broken any Ministry rules?”

Harry’s ascent was interrupted by Bones, who said, “Cornelius that is a ridiculously general question. I broke a rule just an hour ago, carrying my cup of tea down here in the lift. Keep the questions specific, otherwise I shall call a halt to this.”

While Bones was speaking, Mr. Weasley had approached Harry and bent close to him. “Harry,” he asked in a whisper, “are you breaking any other rules besides the one involving fraternizing with a fellow Auror?”

Some recessed part of Harry’s willful mind groggily wondered that Mr. Weasley knew that. Harry shook his head.

“Not a single other rule?” Mr. Weasley asked more loudly.

Harry shook his head. Mr. Weasley straightened. “This is an administrative matter, Madam Minister; one that we are already aware of.” Mr. Weasley moved off with a dismissive attitude.

“Move on, Mr. Fudge,” Bones said. “And keep the questions specific to things you already have reasonable suspicion of or I will float a proposal that we subject you to the same treatment. I, for one, have questions still about the favors you gave to wizards such as Mr. Malfoy when you were in power.”

Fudge smiled weakly, looking to need cover for a case of nerves. “Of course, Madam,” he replied with false politeness. Fudge turned to Harry. “Do you regularly practice Dark Magic in order to perfect it?”

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Harry again indicated “no” with a kind of lolling of his head from side to side, his will too weak to do more. He wished he could breathe. He wished he could move. “Dark Magic is horrible,” Harry slowly stated. “Dark things reach through to our Plane and feed upon it, sucking your soul away.”

Harry spoke this with such grave seriousness that Fudge stared mutely at him rather than continuing his interrogation. Percy approached and whispered something to him. Fudge started and asked, “Er, yes. Have you ever performed a surreptitious spell on someone that you later regretted?”

Harry nodded just as a small shudder passed through him. With his awkward pose of keeping his arms wrapped around himself, the shudder appeared very odd.

“Upon whom?”

“Severus Snape,” Harry replied.

The room’s attention shifted. Snape, arms crossed, wiped the startled look off his face, took a half-step forward and said, “I waive my right to redress.”

Bones nodded and made a note. “Move on, Mr. Fudge,” she said casually.

“What?” Fudge blurted.

“You have no victim,” Bones gently informed him. “Therefore the line of questioning is dropped.” She sounded as though she were enjoying herself a just a trifle.

Fudge sputtered and stalked over the Snape. “You press me, Snape, and so help me, we’ll have a session just about you.”

Snape rose up so he stood over Fudge. “Go right ahead. I would prefer it to this. The Ministry itself gave me responsibility for Harry’s well-being and just in the last quarter hour, you have repeatedly caused him pain and have overdosed him with a powerful potion. You have caused him far more harm than he has ever inflicted upon any innocent party.”

Fudge spun away. The foreign reporters near Snape all stared at him as though keenly interested in dissecting him. Bones said, “Given that Mr. Potter practices no dark magic, harms no one, and is clearly suffering the worst effects of Veritaserum, I call a halt to this proceeding. Arthur if you will see to him while we discuss the results and take a vote. Also, the guards should see that the reporters are escorted to the Atrium.”

Snape made it to Harry at the same time as Mr. Weasley. “The antidote,” he snapped to Ogden. Snape tipped Harry’s head back and prepared to tip the bottle into his mouth. Harry’s uneasy eyes turned grateful upon recognizing him. “I’m sorry,” Harry said.

“Swallow this; we’ll discuss it later.”

Snape pocketed the empty bottle, guided Harry to his feet and, with Mr. Weasley assisting, led him out. In the corridor Harry said, “I want to hear the result,” and

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forced them all to a halt with a clumsy backing up of his feet. He shook the two of them off and leaned against the wall beside the heavy door just as it swung closed. The booming noise of it rattled his raw nerves. His legs were wobbly, however, and he still could not peel his arms away from his body. He slid to the clammy stone floor to rest.

Mr. Weasley said, "I think he needs a few more minutes to recover."

Snape said, "He was overdosed; it will require a little longer than that." When Harry weakly leaned his head back against the wall, Snape crouched beside him, dark robes flowing around his feet. He pushed Harry's fringe back and rested a palm on his forehead. "All right?"

Harry nodded. "I'm sorry," he repeated.

"What is he apologizing for?" Mr. Weasley asked, bending low.

"I actually do not know," Snape replied. "But it is no matter."

The heavy door opened and McGonagall stepped out. "How is he?"

"He will eventually be all right," Snape stated darkly.

"You held up admirably, Harry," McGonagall said.

"I almost failed. I almost struck back," Harry admitted.

"So did I," Snape breathed.

McGonagall allowed the door to finish closing and said. "I think Cornelius' actions garnered quite a bit of sympathy for Harry, so the vote should not be a problem."

Groggy and perhaps still under the influence of Veritaserum, Harry said, "That means I don't have to go work for the French."

"Were you going to?" Mr. Weasley asked in surprise.

Harry nodded, "I was going to take Tonks and Kerry Ann with me."

Sharply, Mr. Weasley exclaimed, "You were going to raid my department?"

Snape waved Mr. Weasley to silence and asked Harry, "Even if the vote is in your favor, will it have been worth it?"

Harry dropped his gaze. "I still have things to do and I need the Ministry's help with them. I don't want to handle Merton alone, even if I thought I could."

Mr. Weasley patted Harry's knee. "Growing up a bit there, Harry," he said.

Harry threw him a narrow, challenging look, but gave up on it quickly. He still couldn't breathe freely and was still compelled to keep his arms wrapped around himself. Snape reached over and peeled Harry's hand away from his side. His intensely curious gaze shifted quickly to knowing. "Let's get you somewhere you can rest, Harry."

"I want to hear the vote," Harry countered.

"I insist," Snape commanded. "Come." He stood Harry up and put one of his oddly rigid arms over his shoulder to support him.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Mr. Weasley said. "I'll go back in and owl you when the debate finishes and they finally call for a vote. You'll be at Ms. Granger's, correct?"

Harry nodded and Mr. Weasley slipped inside the heavy door just as Snape Apparated them away.

Hermione jumped up and helped guide Harry to the couch. Snape sat beside and again peeled Harry's arm away from his abdomen. "Certain you are feeling all right?"

"I can't really breathe," Harry admitted.

Softly, Snape said, "Yes, of course," as though expecting that. "Ms. Granger, would you do Harry the immense favor of fetching his pet from Hagrid's cabin?"

"Uh, sure." Hermione straightened from bending over Harry and took up her empty owl cage. "Need anything else from Hogwarts?"

"No, that will suffice," Snape answered easily. He raised a knowing brow at Harry and said, "Your pet is bundled up, remember?"

Harry gaped at his guardian. He shifted his shoulders as though testing that theory and said, "Severus, that's why I couldn't strike back. I really wanted to."

"And Percy would have deserved it," Snape stated drolly.

"But, I didn't mean to cheat," Harry insisted, arms jerking as he fought the invisible sense of being bound.

"You did not cheat," Snape insisted. "You simply had a bit of help from your friends."

Harry sighed and leaned back. "I really wanted to strike back but I couldn't move my arm. Maybe I could have stopped myself anyway, but Percy was saying things about Belinda."

"Then I would propose that he was the one cheating."

Harry fell silent, wondering how he would have fared without the extra help. Maybe he would have done all right. Harry kind of wished he knew for certain, though. He glanced at Snape, who was studying him closely. "You bailed me out, too. So did Mr. Weasley."

"You deserve the help, Harry. Always." Snape crossed his arms and lifted his chin. "The Ministry treated your capture of eleven more of Voldemort's associates as just another day for you."

Crookshanks sauntered over and bumped Harry's shins. "They didn't like how I did it."

"They have no cause for complaint," Snape insisted.

"They didn't complain, just stared at me all worried-like. Like everyone always does."

"Give them time to adjust. They do not know you as well as your friends, who trust you implicitly."

## LUX & VERITAS

“That will be forever,” Harry asserted. “I can Legilimize people just as well as you. I know what they’re thinking.” He crossed his arms for real now, feeling peeved just discussing this. “You haven’t asked me what I did to you,” he went on in a sullen manner.

“I assumed that we would discuss it when you were recovered.”

Hermione returned and handed over the cage. Within it, Kali was preening her wings fastidiously. “Was the Chimrian like that when you arrived?” Snape asked, sharply concerned.

“No. Hagrid unwrapped her before giving her to me. Said to keep her in the cage so she doesn’t use her wings.” Hermione plunked down beside Harry. “How was the vote?”

Harry complained, “I don’t know yet. Someone dragged me away before I could find out.”

Snape peered at Kali before setting the cage aside. “It was critical that no one find out exactly what was happening to you,” he pointed out.

Harry stretched his arms out straight. “I do feel better, except...” he trailed off and shook his head. “I am sorry.”

“Ms. Granger,” Snape said, “I fully realize that this is your flat, but would you mind terribly? There is something I need to discuss with Harry.”

“Oh. Sure. I’ll take Crookshanks for a walk. He hasn’t had one in ages.” The cat gave an unhappy squawk as he was hauled up under his front legs and toted to the door.

Snape said, “I do wish I had a home of my own to take you to. I feel a bit remiss that I do not.”

Harry shook his head. “Your faith in me is my home, really,” he said quietly.

“You cannot lose that,” Snape stated.

Harry did not speak; he was balancing between pained gratitude and the weight of too many concerns.

Snape folded his hands before him and respected Harry’s silence a minute before saying, “Given your predilection for letting guilt gnaw at you – a truer sign than any other that you are firmly stuck on the side of light,” he added almost disparagingly. “I thought I should give you a chance to get this out into the open.” When Harry still did not speak, Snape said, “If you are fearing my reaction, there is no need to. Anyone who can throw around old, forgotten spells of Salazar’s I tend to give extra consideration to, if only out of an interest for self-preservation.”

Harry could not help a small laugh escaping his lips. “I’m not sure what I did to you,” he admitted. He reluctantly met Snape’s gaze and looked away again.

“You are not certain what you did...” Snape tonelessly repeated.

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Harry shrugged, pleased with having enough freedom of movement to do so. “See, when I pushed the Cruciatus curse out of you...” Harry stalled for a lack of words. He held his hands out before him and moved his fingers as he remembered the feel of sorting between Radiance and curse. “It’s hard to explain. I used the Staunching skill that Per showed me I had. Blood is very Radiant, you know; so is the core spirit of someone. That’s what the Crucio messes up. But since I can feel cursed things too, I just pushed the two apart until the curse was gone. And unraveled the damage at the same time, but that was the easy part.” He glanced at Snape and away again because he did not like to think of him that way: injured and surrounded by little hope.

Harry went on: “But I think I did more than I was trying to. I didn’t know what I was doing; I only tried to help because everyone was giving up and I... Anyway, you seem... different now.”

“Do I?” Snape asked challengingly, which Harry realized was the tone he had been dreading when he started explaining. “And you believe that was solely your doing?”

“Severus, you... you’re getting married, of all things. You and my trainer are almost friends. And you... couldn’t...” Harry stopped again. In a quieter voice he went on, “When I asked you to help me practice the Darkness Test, you couldn’t do it. You’ve never backed down before.”

Snape’s hands, no longer tightly folded, spasmed as though that comment had struck a nerve. Visibly, he recovered himself and more calmly said, “You do not think it was because of my experiences just before?” He paused to let that sink in. “Harry, I thought that I had cheated fate. Voldemort believed me to be his most loyal servant, safe to have living in the very den of his most powerful and reviled enemy, safe to share his concerns about the prophecy, which above all things, indicated that he was fallible. He did not dare share that knowledge with any other of his followers, nor did he take the knowledge away from me, which he could have easily. He needed to consult with me, trusted that I had only his interests in mind. But I was not his most loyal servant... I was his least loyal servant. Voldemort died in the Entrance Hall battle without ever learning that.

“But there I was, faced with his wrath after all those years of facing him down in person and fooling him, and after a year of being safely ensconced in the belief of succeeding, to the absolute end, in that treacherous role. Worse yet, he was being egged on by Malfoy, of all people, although that was not going to last long.” Snape sat back on the couch as well and tilted his head back to stare off into memory. “Voldemort’s personality was tenuous, but it was solidifying rapidly. I have no doubt that he would have returned to his former power given enough time. You took him down just in time, Harry; the task would only have grown more difficult.”



## LUX & VERITAS

“I was mostly rescuing you,” Harry pointed out. “Not that I didn’t want to get rid of him. He was making me crazy and... evil.”

“You seem to have recovered from that well enough.” Snape put his elbow up on the back of the couch and rested his chin on his knuckles. “Assuming I have changed – which I am not admitting to – you believe that your unrefined spell... not these significant events... are to blame?”

Harry’s face twisted thoughtfully. “You aren’t usually influenced by events that much,” he pointed out.

Snape’s lips twitched into a smile. “As I prefer it to be.” He fell silent and studied Harry, who waited for what felt like a verdict of some kind. Snape said, “Why would it bother you so to believe you were responsible, given that these changes would be considered positive by any ordinary standard?”

With more than a hint of passion, Harry replied, “Because it wouldn’t be fair to you.” Snape’s doubtful expression made Harry hesitate, but he plowed on with: “You’re your own person. You’re allowed to be whomever you wish to be, Severus. I don’t have the right to... to just hit you with a spell and change you. I hate the thought that I might have, and I’m very sorry if I did.”

Snape stared at his charge with an expression Harry had not seen in a long time: uncertain and slightly surprised. Nearly a minute passed before Snape spoke again. “That has to be the single most considerate and benevolent thing anyone has ever said to me. I had never considered the power of that before, but... I believe, now that I think about it, that has been your attitude all along, has it not?”

Harry blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

Snape rested his chin on his knuckles and muttered, “See, you don’t even understand the question.” He sighed and smiled faintly. “Harry, do not concern yourself. I do not think it was your actions but my cheating fate and death yet again that effected a change... if indeed I have changed.” His eyes narrowed as he added, “But I appreciate your sentiment.”

“You wouldn’t have said that before; you know,” Harry pointed out.

Snape’s hand flung out from under his chin to whack Harry on the arm. “Stop that,” he commanded. He stood with purpose and turned to stare down at Harry. “You are looking for differences now and are seeing them where it is unwarranted.”

“I think your perception has changed and so you can’t tell you’ve changed,” Harry argued.

Snape spread his hands like a preacher might and replied smoothly, “Then it truly is no matter to me.”

“But I’m still sorry,” Harry argued.

“I heard you the previous... uncountable... times you have said that,” Snape

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retorted. "If you are truly going to be an evil wizard then you must stop apologizing so much... it ruins the effect."

Harry smiled despite himself.

Snape went on, "Evil wizards do not apologize. They do not unconditionally accept those around them for who they are. They mock, taunt, abuse and manipulate those around them." The two of them stared at each other. "Say it," Snape commanded in a low voice. "I can see it in your eyes... you are not Occluding your mind well enough to hide it."

Harry took a breath. "That's how you used to be," he said, with clear reluctance. He even drew in his lips to try to recapture the words.

"Then I apologize," Snape said with a tiny bow of his head.

"You've already made up for it," Harry said. "I've told you that before." He stood as well, rubbing his collarbone which was still smarting from Percy's spells. As he stared at Snape, he felt nothing of his past emotions, only affection. He still wasn't Occluding his mind, and assumed Snape could see it.

Snape turned away as though uneasy with what he saw. As a distraction, Harry said, "So when's the big day?"

"I don't actually know," Snape admitted, still facing away.

"Soon? A year from now?" Harry went on, finding this an excellent topic to recover from the previous one.

"I... don't know," Snape said. "You will have to ask her that." He rotated back toward Harry. "You do not mind?"

"No, not at all."

"Strangely, neither do I," Snape muttered.

An owl appeared at the window. Harry fetched it inside, his heart speeding up despite not wanting to care so much about the outcome. The note had been dashed off hurriedly, but it said: Thirty-eight votes in your favor to thirteen against. Rogan is up next.

"I'm all right," Harry said, unable to hold back a broad smile. "Maybe we should go out and celebrate."

"Maybe you should owl your friends with the news and then rest because you are on duty first thing tomorrow."

Disappointed, Harry lowered the note and said, "You're sounding parental."

Snape drew himself up and said, "I should think."

Snape eventually departed and Harry fell back on the couch with a groan. More minor injuries were making themselves known. Harry rubbed a tender spot on his arm and tried not to sink into black hatred for Percy; he settled for strong annoyance, but it was a struggle to do so.

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A knock came on the door and Tonks let herself in before Harry could lever himself onto his feet. His whole outlook changed upon seeing her. She dropped her cloak and wand at the table and came over to him. "How are you? Rodgers said you really got knocked around." Her concerned tone made him feel vaguely melty.

"Rodgers said that?" Harry asked. "Percy's treatment wasn't that different from what Rodgers does out in training some days."

She sat beside him, close by, and brushed his hair back from his ear. Harry decided that the whole rest of the day really did not matter at all. "Don't tell him that," Tonks said. "He sounded like he felt pretty sorry for you."

"Rodgers did?" Harry asked. "You're certain were talking about the same person here?"

Tonks laughed and rested her head on his shoulder, filling his nostrils with the scent of her hair. Harry's battered spirit inflated painlessly as he put his arms around her.

Minutes later, Harry pulled out of a kiss and said, "Hermione will back soon."

"No, she won't," Tonks said, still working slowly at the buttons of Harry's shirt. "I saw her down the block and asked if we could have an hour."

"Tonks, this is her place," Harry pointed out.

"She didn't mind. Said she'd visit her parents, which she needed to do."

"We can go to your place," Harry said, but he quickly forgot that suggestion. Minutes later a larger concern jolted him to push her away. "I forgot to tell you," Harry said. "Mr. Weasley knows about us."

Tonks stared at him. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "I'm not sure how he found out." Harry explained about Mr. Weasley bailing him out during his questioning.

"That was really nice of him," Tonks said. She stroked Harry's arm and fell thoughtful. "But, you know, I care less than I would have thought about what Arthur may think. Everything is really bolloxed up right now at the Ministry. Nothing good is happening. We've lost so many in the department..." She fell quiet and sad.

Harry tightened his arms around her slender shoulders. "I know what you mean."

Tonks' head again rested on Harry's shoulder. "I hung onto that stupid plank door in that bloomin' freezing water thinking what the hell was I worried about the darn rules all the time for? I promised myself I'd act out how I felt about you if I managed to get back, to survive. You're not a kid at all anymore, Harry. No reason to..." She faded out. "But it's the way I am. I need help breaking the rules." Harry turned her over onto his lap, encompassing her. "We can deal with Arthur later," she insisted breathily.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Author's Notes: 2 weeks again, at least. I think we are down to three chapters remaining. Maybe two if they are long ones. I mean, long even for me.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



# BLOOD AND WATER

In a sprawling but decrepit flat, at a rough table that looked to have been nicked from a run-down pub, Maudant Merton sat fidgeting with a small pile of charmed bracelets. He had a stained, old book open in front of him. He had not turned the page of the book in over an hour. His truculent expression did not ease when his cohort entered carrying supplies. Debjit gave Merton a worried glance and stashed his wand away from having unlocked the door.

“Go see how things are progressing,” Merton grunted.

“I’m sure it will be the same as this morning,” Debjit quietly pointed out. He ignored Merton slapping the table with the flat of his beefy hand. “I am uncertain what the hurry is,” Debjit pointed out with care.

Merton pushed himself to his feet. “The hurry is that the Ministry is wounded, but will not be for long.” He gestured at the photographs on the cover of the Daily Prophet showing workers moving about the atrium reception area making repairs.

Debjit placed the grocery sacks on the counter, scaring up a variety of insects. He placed one black sack with the label Clipper & Clydewhistle closer to Merton. “The special order you asked for.”

“Took you long enough to return with them. I could have run the errands that fast myself.” He pulled out the objects: two necklaces and a beaded glove and studied them each by holding them in the light. He scoffed as though pleased but then said sourly, “Go and see to things. I am losing patience.”

Debjit meandered through the teetering piles crowding the peeling vinyl floor until he reached the back room where Svaha sat contemplating a crate of ceramic vessels

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

in the manner of a connoisseur. She held one aloft and stared at it, paying no mind to her husband's entrance.

"He asks the same question as before," Debjit said, generating no reply. "He grows more impatient," Debjit then pointed out. Head bent, he circled the room, pausing at a crate with broken vessels visible within. Not all underneath were broken. "You could placate him by offering some of these."

This statement attracted Svaha's full attention. Her suspicious gaze fell upon Debjit. "Do you wish me to offer those to him?" she challenged.

Debjit's shoulders moved uneasily in independent circles. "No," he replied in a whisper.

She raised high the vessel in her hand. "This one will keep Master happy for a while."

"It is more powerful?" Debjit leapt in to ask. "That has been his concern since we lost our guest," he quickly added to explain.

"Not more powerful, no, but it does not need to be. It is far more... efficient, shall we say. It does not waste any energies unnecessarily. It is aware, you might say. It is attracted to movement, and it will wait for its chance."

Debjit also contemplated the uplifted vessel. "That should please Mr. Merton, yes."

"Merton wishes to... make a point," Svaha said. "But the chaos itself is so much more satisfying." She fell silent, but finally added, "Perhaps a little less precision would be better. Randomness, entropy, they create such lovely fear. Hm, yes..."



Bright and early Monday the four second-year apprentices were shuttled to the training room by Rodgers. "We are going to try for some normalcy today, although..." Here he glanced at his watch with a pained expression. "Just for an hour... at most. Thursday, this room is being used for the applicant's examinations, so no training then either." The four of them took their seats as Rodgers flipped through a ragged stack of parchments. "Somewhere there's a schedule of what we are supposed to be doing."

Aaron raised his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Wickem? My, such formality... yes, what is it?"

"Can Tonks be scheduled to do some additional sessions of Animorphus spells?"

"We hadn't planned on any, why?"

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Aaron put his hand down, clasped them together before him in the mode of a schoolboy, and said, "Well, if Harry is going to go around disguised as me, I want to be able to go around disguised as him." He shot Harry an overdone smile.

Rodgers replied, "I don't think that is going to be a regular occurrence." He put the parchments down with a huff. "Blast, I forgot a memo I need to send. Why don't you start with your drills and we'll go from there." He rushed out.

They paired up, Harry with Vineet, and began their old drills. For someone who seemed a continent away, Vineet sure could put a lot behind an attacking spell. Harry, out of habit, held back on his own attacks. Vineet waved them to a stop and said with strange dull anger, "You are patronizing me."

"No," Harry replied, immediately annoyed. "Really, I'm not. This is just drills. If Rodgers announces that we are doing... I don't know, knock your drill partner into the wall drills, I'll oblige," Harry explained, waving his arm and going for a satisfying sarcasm. He held off on pointing out that Vineet himself apparently thought that was the drill instruction.

"What's going on?" Kerry Ann asked. The two of them had halted as well.

"I don't know," Harry said, rubbing his hair nervously. Vineet appeared even more stoic, which Harry suspected masked that he was approaching some kind of breaking point. This made him realize that he was close to one too. "Look," Harry said, more gently, forcefully calming himself. "I would never patronize you. Why in the world would I do that?" They were arguing about nothing, Harry was certain. Vineet was bothered by something remote from his complaint and, apparently, Harry was too.

Vineet lowered his wand and his head and turned away. A minute later he turned back and bowed faintly. "We were instructed to do drills, I believe."

Harry sighed. "Yeah." Before he could ask if Vineet really wanted him to pour more power into his spells, Vineet said, "It is your prerogative, certainly, how to make your spells go."

Aaron and Kerry Ann resumed their own drills. Harry hesitated, wanting to say more, but having no clue how to say it. He had pretty good idea what was irking his fellow, but discussing it would have to wait until they were alone.

Harry dodged Mr. Weasley the entire day, finding it too difficult in the light of day to wish for their inevitable encounter. He and Tonks only crossed paths once and did not even manage a word, just a smile, but she appeared far too busy for any meetings with the boss, so Harry hoped she'd avoided him too.

Late that afternoon, they were gathered in the office and Rodgers informed everyone that Rogan was to be allowed back on part-time duty. During the Wizengamot meeting, Rogan had passed a test similar to Harry's truth serum one and due to the

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shortage of Aurors, the Ministry were willing to give him light, supervised duty. Harry found this news a little uplifting, even if Rodgers sounded grudging and annoyed as he explained it to the apprentices. That announcement dispensed with, Rodgers dug around on his desk and pulled out a roll of thick vellum. “And this too, a new wanted poster for Merton.” He pinned it up on the board by the door over the top of a notice regarding revised rules for magical pet licensing.

“That’s an even older picture than the last one,” Kerry Ann commented.

Indeed, Merton appeared to be in his late thirties with a thin mustache. He was standing outside the Quidditch World Cup stadium, smiling and holding an armful of recently purchased memorabilia.

“Seventy-six, we think, based on the banners that sometimes fly by on broomstick over the stadium,” Rodgers explained.

Kerry Ann joined Harry in leaning over to peer closely at the picture. “Wears a lot of jewelry, doesn’t he?” Kerry Ann observed.

Harry would not have noticed that; especially not through the binocular straps, the miniature Quidditch players dangling on cords, and the many overloaded bags of other sparkling sports-related goodies. But it was true; Merton wore three necklaces, multiple bracelets on each arm, and several tie pins, even.

“Maybe he’s a puff,” Aaron suggested.

“It’s not that kind of jewelry,” Kerry Ann stated authoritatively.

Harry remained staring at the poster longer than the others. It struck him as off that this seemingly innocent, childish even, wizard had created so much trouble and was prophecy bound to create more. Harry could not imagine pulling his wand on the man in this particular picture. This differed greatly from remembering facing a younger version of Voldemort; Harry could clearly imagine pulling a wand on Tom Riddle, Hogwarts student. Maudant Merton, Quidditch fan, did not seem to warrant any offensive spells.



On the way out in the evening, Harry tugged Vineet aside. “I want to talk to you, come out somewhere... to a pub.” In a fit of defiance, Harry suggested the Leaky Cauldron. In the past simply being around frequently in public had worked to reduce the attention he attracted. He hoped it would work again and what better strategy than to start with a companion who would accept the attention.

Harry led the way to a corner table but felt observed there, even though there was only a hag and a table of chatting witches on the other side of the room and an



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old wizard by the door. Harry ignored his bad sense and asked his fellow, “What’s going on with you?”

Vineet responded only after the old man with a long staff had finished his slow journey to the back door and the door had swung closed again. “Nandi has left to live with my mother.”

“Vineet, that’s... your mother? Why your mother?”

“She left her family when she married me,” Vineet pointed out as though it were obvious.

“Oh, sure, right... Look, I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t make more trouble coming over that day. If you want me to write her a long letter explaining that you really weren’t that much help at Malfoy Manor and kept giving me disapproving looks the whole time, I can do that.”

Vineet stared off at the front door as he spoke. “Deception would not improve the situation. She was already upset at finding out my magic was strong.”

“It would be true, not deceiving. But why didn’t you tell her about your magic?”

Vineet leaned back against the dusty wood wall, scaring a spider out of a nearby web. “She seemed... happy... to have more magical utility than myself. I thought it pleasing to her to believe it, and it seemed a harmless belief. Everything is still as clear to her, you see, as it was to me in the beginning, so she was not pleased to learn of my deception.”

Tom the bartender put two mugs of mead on the bar and nodded at Harry to come pick them up. “Maybe it would have been harmless if other things had not happened,” Harry said, mostly just to say something.

“Perhaps, but I remember now that all deception is bad.” He crossed his arms and, perhaps in the spirit of his last statement, said, “I have lost track of why I came here at all. It has grown most confused from such clarity at the beginning.”

“I feel that way sometimes too,” Harry admitted. He excused himself to pick up the drinks. Tom would not let him pay, but Harry dropped coins on the bar anyway.

When he returned to his seat, Vineet said, “But you have the prophecy to fulfill. I have heard mentioned that you are now supposed to destroy Merton; that prophecy says this is true.”

“That doesn’t make a purpose any easier to find,” Harry argued. “It just limits my freedom.” Vineet puzzled that and did not appear to believe it. Harry said, “Trust me on that. It isn’t a path; it’s bondage.” He sipped his mead. “I’m sorry about Nandi.”

Vineet shook his head. “We grew apart, I think. She cannot understand that I have a different outlook now – an indistinct one. It was very clear before.” He peered into his mug. “I miss that calm state.” He took a rather large swig and said, “On the

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other hand, I comprehend much more now. Perhaps I should return to own-Dharma,” he mysteriously said, sounding as though the mead had already taken hold.

“What’s that, or where’s that?” Harry prodded, glad his friend was talking at all, even if Harry could not follow all of it.

“Every caste and sub-caste once had its own morality. So a merchant was not the same as a priest was not the same as a knight. A knight was allowed to do violence without violating his Dharma because it is necessary to his role, essential, in fact. I refused to understand this before, and Nandi still refuses.”

Harry scratched his head. “You came here to become an Auror, thinking you could avoid violence?”

“I came here because I thought I needed to. I was magically weak then, or so I believed. I could not do much harm.”

“I did need you,” Harry pointed out. Vineet nodded deeply once, like a bow.

Vineet worked his way down through his mead, eventually stopping to say, “Valmiki may have been right. He told extensively about Rakshasas.”

“Did he?” Harry asked with interest. “Where can I read him?”

“Everywhere,” Vineet said, waving his arm. “He is... similar to your Homer.”

“I’ve never heard of him,” Harry admitted.

Vineet pondered this. “You who command Rakshasas,” he muttered. “Do you have a monkey army too?”

Harry felt he was being baited, but took it easily. “No, not that I know of,” he answered gently.

Vineet put his mug down, unfinished, as though done drinking. “I feel I am in the right place, but I am most confused. You should rather have monkeys. You are upside down.”

“You think about things too hard,” Harry said. “That’s your problem.”

Vineet sat in contemplation of that assertion, while Harry shook his head and made his way through his own drink, withholding an overly willful observation about how similar he was to Hermione. Tom gestured from the bar to ask if they wanted a second round. Harry shook his head.

The door from the alleyway creaked open and Draco Malfoy appeared, eyes sliding keenly around the room as he walked. He came to a stop upon seeing Harry.

“Mr. Malfoy,” Harry said in greeting. Malfoy tipped his head sideways in acknowledgment before going to the bar and sliding upon a stool. He slouched there without removing his high-collared cloak, even though the room was warm.

“Ready?” Harry asked Vineet.

“I should return home,” Vineet intoned as they both stood. Harry thought it a little sad to realize that his friend was going home to an empty flat. He gave Vineet

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a pat on the arm just before he disappeared.

Harry sauntered over to Draco. People were beginning to arrive for the dinner hour and both doors were opening and closing. One group hesitated upon seeing Harry, but shuffled to a remote table with lots of backward glances.

Harry slid onto the stool beside Draco who asked, "How's it feel to be one of the disdained?"

Harry shrugged. Draco was turning his small drink glass around and around in the fingers of one hand. It was empty already.

"Another mead, Harry?" Tom asked.

Harry nodded. Draco said in a grudging tone, "My former head of house is faring all right, I hear."

"He's fine."

"Surprising," Draco said. "Your luck must be rubbing off on him." He flicked his glass across the bar and Tom scooped it up before it could hit the floor and refilled it, all in one motion. This let Harry's unattended mead mug overflow and it left a large puddle when it was plunked down on the bar. Draco sipped this time, but his posture continued to curl wretchedly.

When Tom went into the back room, Harry asked, "Anything I can do for you, Draco?"

Draco snarled quietly, "Why would I want anything from you?"

Patently, Harry replied, "It was just an innocent offer, Draco."

Draco turned back to his glass and began rolling it between his palms. " 'Innocent offer'," he mocked. "We got what we deserved, you mean."

"I didn't say that," Harry stated flatly.

"The Ministry did."

Harry did not want to get into that. It was certainly true that the Malfoys were keeping bad company, but the issue of just desserts was too thorny a topic. Harry wanted to ask more about Merton, in case Draco knew something more, or had heard something more. After all, the Death Eaters had raided Merton's weapons stash, so they must have known where it was. Harry fell thoughtful, wondering how much his department knew that he did not. As to asking Draco anything, Harry followed the lead of the Auror's he had shadowed for a year, that of building good will before asking for any big favors.

Patrons came to the bar to order and the ones that recognized Draco glanced in confusion at the two of them sitting there. Harry gave each of them a pleasant nod, no matter what their reaction. Most people nodded back automatically, no matter how befuddled they were.

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Harry's second drink went down faster than expected and he thought he should stop. He placed some coins on the bar and slid to his feet. Draco did not react and, given his dejected state, Harry felt a stab of something in the vicinity of sympathy. "It must be quieter at your place now, at least," he said, trying to connect.

Draco shook his head. "You don't know anything, Potter," he said.

"Sorry," Harry said. "But the offer's always open." He walked away.

At the door leading out to the Muggle street, he encountered Ron, red-faced as though exerting himself. "I've been looking for you. Come to the Burrow with me," his friend insisted.

"Er, how about..." Harry turned as though to suggest a drink, before remembering that he had decided he was done with that for now.

"Mum wants to see you. Come on..." Ron took his arm and they Disapparated.

Harry resisted being pulled forward from behind the shed where they had arrived. "Is your dad home?" Harry asked.

"Nah, he'll be at work for a while yet."

Harry stopped resisting and as they walked, asked, "Do you know if Ginny is allowed out for the examinations? The Auror exams, that is?"

"Yeah, she'll be there. McGonagall wouldn't listen to Dad, turns out."

Inside the kitchen, Harry received a grand hug from Mrs. Weasley. She kept one arm around him and led him into the sitting area. Harry's feet failed him when he came face to face with Percy and he was glad for the clutching arm that kept him from tripping.

The awkward silence was ended by Ron explaining, "Mum insisted he apologize." Ron crossed his arms and glared disgustedly at his brother as though he were a Skrewt. "The rest of us had a very different idea about how to handle things and most of them would have involved his NOT being able to speak again let alone"

"That's enough of that," Mrs. Weasley interrupted. "You remember what Dumbledore always said."

"Oh" Ron suggested with too much innocence, "something about preferring Muggle sweets because the flavor was always the same?"

"That's not what I mean, and you know it," Mrs. Weasley countered.

Ron did not give any ground and the delay gave Harry much needed time to gather his wits. He was surprised by how affected he was to be in Percy's presence. It was more than anger or hatred, he felt ill and uneasy, and given an open choice would take escape over a battle, which surprised him to realize.

Mrs. Weasley was saying, "He always gave people a second chance."

"SECOND," Ron said, long neck stretched toward his mother. "Not HUNDREDS."

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During all of this, Percy stared at the walls, the floor, anywhere but at the others in the room.

“Percy,” Mrs. Weasley prompted when Ron hit a lull in his snark.

Percy appeared to screw himself up for some great task. Harry decided that Percy disliked being there as much as he and Ron disliked Percy being there, and that made him feel a little better; mutual hatred was so much cleaner.

Percy’s Adam’s apple bobbed a few times. “Sorry,” he finally said with bare meaning, still avoiding anyone’s gaze.

Harry could feel the air rush out of Mrs. Weasley as she sighed. She patted Harry’s arm. “Harry?” she then prompted.

“What?” Harry sharply asked, reacting strongly to what he construed to be some kind of expectation from him.

“Do you accept Percy’s apology?” she asked.

Harry mutely stared at her. His insides were churning as though the creatures from the Dark Plane were emerging inside of him. The very notion of forgiving Percy made his limbs cycle between tingly and numb and for a blazing instant he was dead grateful to have been an orphan if it had spared him being asked such ridiculous questions.

Ron’s appalled expression anchored Harry, but Mrs. Weasley’s pure-hearted question would not let him answer “no” even though his very fiber screamed to do so, as well as add a long list of choice words beyond that. “I... I’ll have to work on that.” You have no idea what happened, Harry bit his tongue on adding, mostly because he did not feel like recounting everything.

His disgust seemed to disappoint her, but it also warned her off, because she released him with another quick pat on the arm. With one short glance at Percy, that later upon review, Harry wished he had studied further, Harry headed for the door, Ron on his heels.

Outside beyond the shed, short of the field used for Quidditch, Harry stopped, confused by Percy’s last facial expression. He had finally met Harry’s gaze, or perhaps just had lacked warning to look away. Harry had a fleeting impression that Percy was deeply befuddled. Not defiant, as expected, but confused.

“Don’t want to stay for dinner, eh?” Ron asked.

Harry turned to his friend. “Well...” Harry hesitated, curious about Percy, even though he wanted to forget everything and go home. “Trouble is, I’m avoiding your dad.”

“You are?” Ron asked, sounding slightly hurt.

“Yeah. He found out about Tonks and me... I don’t know really how he did... and I’m not in the mood to be told quite yet to cut it off, or else.” Harry rubbed his

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hair back and forth. "I haven't decided what I'm going to say if he insists."

Ron gave him a sympathetic crooked frown. "Tough decision."

"Yeah, I jumped into the file room twice today to avoid him, too," Harry admitted.

Ron laughed. "You could stay for dinner if you disguise yourself as our long lost cousin, Alfred Flimnap, whom no one has seen in three decades."

Harry said, "Inventing stories all evening would be harder than simply talking to him."

More soberly, Ron said, "Threatening to quit would put Dad in a very bad position."

"Sure about that? Half the Wizengamot wishes I were gone."

"What do you mean? The vote wasn't that bad," Ron retorted sharply enough that Harry realized his exaggeration could be a dangerous sign of self-pity.

"Yeah, you're right. But I should go, anyway. Have a good night. Don't kill your brother... you're mum would never forgive you, even though I might."



Over the next days, Harry avoided encountering Mr. Weasley as best as possible, but knew he could not manage it forever, nor should he really be trying to. Mornings they had a little training and afternoons, he was assigned to go on patrol with Rogan, who had been allowed out on low-risk patrol duty. He had asked to be paired with Harry, who did not mind, really.

They strolled the busy streets of one of several large cities, mostly in the Muggle parts of them. Occasionally they encountered magical people, who were easy enough to spot by their cloaks or just the home-spun look to their clothing. Harry, who could identify them even without these clues, found that he rarely encountered any magical people who could completely pass for Muggle. Once you looked closely enough, some clue would give them away.

They were strolling along a relatively quiet street of offices when Harry sensed that the blonde woman approaching must be a witch. She carried a course sack from the greengrocers in her arms and wore an intent expression, as though thinking far ahead. Upon spotting the two of them, also intentionally quite identifiable in their cloaks, her steps faltered. She caught Harry's gaze and her brows knitted in consternation. With a hazardously quick glance for traffic, she put her head down and crossed to the pavement on the other side of the road. Harry, who did not wish to increase her alarm, kept himself from following her too long with his gaze. Rogan was studying the map of their assigned route and had not noticed her at all.

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Harry sighed and let his eyes stray over the brass solicitor's plaque on the nearby brick wall they were passing. The witch's actions were causing a slow, inexorable sink in his mood, one he could not find any means of arresting. Patrol ground slowly on and by the time they returned to the Ministry, Harry found himself in a dark mood and needing action as a distraction, followed his trainer, Rodgers, to the file room after offering to help carry the stacks that had accumulated in baskets on the floor beside the door. In the quiet dimness of the file room, Harry said, "Can I find out what's happening with the Merton investigation?"

Rodgers finished sliding two thick files back into their proper place before replying. "We don't have any new leads."

"But what about the interrogations of the D.E.? They should have turned up Merton's hideout, or how else did they get their hands on his stuff?"

Rodgers slapped the file he held down on top of a cabinet and leaned heavily against it. "You have the right kind of mind for this type of work, I'll admit." He stared at Harry before saying, "We did find his hideout, or one of his old ones. It had been abandoned. They hadn't had time to take the kiln, so we've been tracking all purchases of new ones."

"Can I see the place?" Harry asked.

Rodgers shrugged. "Not much to see." He returned to straightening files by knocking each of their edges repeatedly against the cabinet top. The cabinets sometimes knocked back if you got the rhythm right.

"I can probably tell if its the place they were in most recently," Harry said.

"Could you?" Rodgers asked, sounding doubtfully disdainful.

Harry took a deep breath. "I was seeing the place out of Voldemort's eyes while he was there."

"Good point," Rodgers conceded, and proceeded to empty the basket of files. Harry slowly worked on filing another basket-full, waiting for a response. It came eventually. "I can take you down there." Rodgers glanced at the clock. "We can go now if you like."

"I would, sir," Harry replied in his most polite manner.

Rodgers verified that Blackpool was able to cover the office before he took Harry away. They arrived in a large open space lit by high windows with billows of dust dancing in front of them. Harry immediately began exploring. In a small side room he stopped dead. The piles of discarded objects stacked precariously along one wall gave him a terrible bout of déjà vu. He stood stock still, breathing in the dust until he could identify the matching moment. It was during his one-year review examination when he was trying to remember the filing rules and had let himself drift to visualize the list he knew was posted on the file room wall. This vision had invaded instead.

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“This is the place,” Harry said to Rodgers, who had come up behind him. Harry resumed investigating. The dust was disturbed in some areas more than others, indicating occupancy. A crate, reinforced with wire fencing, sat in the corner of another very familiar room. “This is where they kept Lockhart when he started to get difficult to handle.” He pointed at a cleared spot on the floor. “They wrapped him up with a torq here, away from Nagini’s cage. The scene was crystal clear to Harry, just as though it were his own memory.

Rodgers didn’t reply, just followed Harry around. Harry glanced back and found his trainer’s expression difficult to read. Harry went on with the tour, ending up in the pottery area where discarded vessels littered the floor. “The kiln’s gone,” Harry said.

“We took it,” Rodgers said. “No sign that they tried to come back, but we weren’t taking any chances.”

“Looks like it was occupied by several people,” Harry said.

“Would you recognize them if you saw them?” Rodgers asked, suddenly animated as he looked around. “Interrogations turned up only pseudonyms that didn’t match any of our files.”

“I never saw any faces,” Harry said. He reviewed his memories from that time. The only face he had seen at all had been an outline reflection in the windows of the Dursley house. The fire had been burning inside of Lockhart’s mind, Harry realized, that’s why it showed only in the dream reflection.

They returned to the ground floor. A shadow fell across the floor as a silhouetted head moved before one of the small dusty windows. Rodgers raised his wand and Harry put up a hand to halt him, even though he was too far away to reach. Harry whispered harshly, “Muggle!”

The shadow ducked and scuttled away. Rodgers lowered his wand. The both stepped over to the window, which was embedded in the large delivery door with its rusted and dangling machinery for hoisting goods inside. There was no sign of movement on the road outside.

“Convenient skill, Potter,” Rodgers commented.

Harry thought again of the witch who had avoided him on the road and kind of wished he did not have it. He could have excused her actions away, if he could have assumed she was a Muggle. He turned away from the window, focusing on more important things, and said, “I don’t know how I’m supposed to destroy Merton. I don’t even know how to find him.” He fell thoughtful and added, “I hope I didn’t miss my opportunity when he had Voldemort with him. I may have had a chance then of locating them... had I understood.” Harry’s voice dropped to nearly inaudible at the end of this admission.



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“We’ll find him,” Rodgers said. “Hopefully before he re-arms and comes after us again... which I fully expect he will do.” Rodgers coughed. “Let’s go, Potter,” he said, sounding fully the mentor, which eased Harry’s renewed worry.



Pamela Evans answered the knock on her door and found a familiar, cloak-draped, willowy figure waiting on the doorstep.

“Pardon the unannounced arrival,” Snape said, “But I am in need of your assistance with Remus.”

Pamela reached for her handbag. “Sure. What’s – ?” she began, but had Snape stepped inside and he Apparated her away before she could finish the question. They arrived in the back of a small, smokey pub. “Where are we?”

“Dungruddy. There is a Floo Node here that we can use. But I must speak with you first.” He steered her towards a chair at a broken table. Worn out dart boards and more obscure games crowded the walls and no other tables were set up nearby.

“What’s happened to Remus?” Pamela asked in concern.

Snape sat back and could not help lifting his chin. “He is being obstinate; that is the primary problem. He does not know I am here. If Harry were not on duty today, he would be a better choice for this errand, but alas it is me instead.” Pamela propped her chin on her palm and waited for him to continue. He said, “Remus has a most annoying penchant for enriched self-pity. It is a habit he has always had.”

“I’ve never noticed that,” Pamela countered, sounding defensive.

“Fortunate for you that he suppresses it in your presence then,” Snape dryly stated. He huffed and rubbed his forehead which then necessitated shaking out the wide sleeve of his robe. “It is like this: Remus was attacked again by the same werewolf who attacked him as a child.”

“What!” Pamela started to stand in alarm and had to be grabbed by the arm and urged back to her chair.

“I didn’t do that properly, I see,” Snape said. “He sustained only minor injury, but he is slightly altered.”

“What?” she asked again, less alarmed but still hyperactive.

“Well, I see he does matter greatly to you...”

“Of course he does. So what do you mean he’s altered?”

Snape sat back, which dangerously rocked the old chair he was in. “Greyback, the werewolf who bit Remus, enjoys being a werewolf. He has cultivated in himself anti-cycle Lyncontropic features. What that means,” Snape explained, “is that he is partially werewolf all of the time. When he bit Remus again recently, he passed on

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some of that, although quick application of a toxin-wicking potion reduced the end effect considerably. Nevertheless he is behaving as badly as expected: wallowing in self-pity and refusing to go out or even consider visitors.”

“What... can I see him?” she asked.

“Yes, of course. Just be aware that I’m certain he assumes you will reject him.” Snape stood and shook his robes straight. “He is remarkably thickheaded,” he added with a mutter.

“And you’re not?” Pamela added sarcastically, garnering a very dark look. “Save it for a Muggle who’s easily intimidated,” she said. After Snape continued to glare at her, she asked, “Can we go?” She then relented, “Please?”

Snape shook his head and led the way to the hearth in the large, little-used kitchen. A plump woman sat on a stool tapping a keg and arranging colorful hosepipes that led through a gap in the wall. She nodded at them and went back to her task. Snape added a log to the glowing coals, brushed off his hand, and poured a few ounces of Floo powder out into Pamela’s cupped palms.

“What are we doing?” she asked.

“You have not traveled thusly, I see,” he stated. “Simply toss the powder onto the flames, announce Hogwarts, and step into the hearth. Do remember to duck... this one is a little low.”

She stared at him, at the course granules in her hands, at the fire quickly growing to tall, hot flames on the bark of the new log. She stared at her hands again, closed them around the powder, and with an expression of determination, did as she had been instructed.

Pamela wandered into the center of the Great Hall, bumping into benches and tables because her eyes were raised to the ceiling and did not want to waver. Snape arrived in a burst of flame and stood beside the hearth until she had finished ogling.

“So this is Hogwarts,” she marveled. “I wanted to see this place since the first time Harry mentioned it. Amazing.” She joined him, slowed by taking in the medieval wall decor and the banners as she walked. “You won’t get into trouble bringing me here, will you, because I’m a Muggle?”

“Thanks to Harry, you have the same status as our recently departed caretaker. So, no, I won’t. Come along.”

By the time they arrived at the third floor, Pamela was thoroughly enthralled. “Geez, I wish I were magical. Oh, what a grand place.”

“You would not have liked it Sunday night quite so much, I assure you.” He rapped on Lupin’s door. Lupin’s response was slow in coming and difficult to hear. Snape opened the door and gestured for Pamela to enter. “Someone to see you,” Snape stated. He received only the shortest glimpse of Lupin’s distressed expression

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before he snapped the door closed again, shutting them in together. Glad to have that dispensed with, he returned to his own office to finish recreating some missing examination notes.

“Hey, Remus,” Pamela said. She ignored his trepidation but could not help letting her eyes roam over his heavy brow and furred ears.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, clearly stressed.

“I wanted to see you. See that you were all right. You didn’t owl me and tell me you were hurt or anything. It’s been three days, I’m told. You didn’t think I’d want to know?”

Lupin glanced at the closed door where Snape had just disappeared. “I wasn’t... ready to see you.”

“Why not?” she asked, being intentionally obtuse.

He snorted a mirthless laugh. “You’re kidding, right?” he asked, hurt anger coming through now.

“You think I care about your looks?” she asked, coming up hard against the other side of the desk.

Lupin dropped his gaze and let it wander over the objects in the room. “I’m hideous. I was hideous inside before, but I learned to cope with that. Now I’m hideous on the outside as well. Nothing more than an animal.”

“Remus, be reasonable,” she argued.

“I’m a regulated creature, you know that? Our Ministry has a department just for things like me.”

“Wow,” Pamela snapped sharply. “You are proving Severus Snape absolutely right; you know. He said you were wallowing in self-pity.”

Lupin’s anger grew hotter. He stood and said, “And why shouldn’t I?”

Pamela leaned forward over the desk. “‘Why should you?’ is the real question. Do any of your friends here care what you look like? Does Professor Snape care? He came and fetched me to talk to you.”

Lupin’s shoulders hunched and in a wounded voice, he said, “He would have no business caring about such a thing. Being an ex-Death Eater leaves precious little room to be criticizing others about much of anything.”

Pamela froze. “What did you say?”

Lupin bit his lip, which showed his vaguely pointed teeth. “Never mind. I don’t think they wanted you to know.” He deflated then and paced to the window.

Pamela laughed nervously. “Didn’t want us to know? Wait just a minute... you’re not seriously suggesting Severus Snape was one of those ones... helping Voldemort?”

Lupin scratched his ear and the long hairs that stood off the top edge of them now. “I spoke out of turn. Please don’t say anything. I don’t want to use a Memory

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Charm on you.”

She took a step back from the desk. “You’d do that?”

“No. I wouldn’t; that’s why I’m asking you not to say anything. Just forget about it.”

“But, you’re saying – ”

“Forget it,” Lupin repeated, running his triangular nails noisily over the stone sill.

Pamela put her hands on her head, partially because of the noise. “I can’t understand any of you people,” she complained bitterly. “Why in heaven’s name would Harry-”

“Pamela, drop it,” Lupin snapped. He had control of himself now and came around the desk. “That was a bad mistake of mine, although you probably would have found out eventually.. it’s common knowledge now.” He fidgeted. “But, I cannot imagine you don’t mind what I have become.”

“I don’t care. You haven’t changed inside.”

Lupin held up his hand and studied its rough knuckles and dark nails trying hard to be claws. “I loath myself. I cannot pretend with this constant reminder.”

“Pretend what? You’re the sweetest bloke I’ve ever met who isn’t also a pansy. The night you were guarding Harry at the pub without letting him know... that was really touching, and I realized what a keen sense of duty you have. I like that. Most men I know don’t have any of that.”

“You don’t mind not getting out?”

“We can go out,” she insisted. “We... have to select the clubs carefully, but I know some where you would look pretty mild.”

He turned his hand over, back and forth. “I could mask some of this, too,” he said sadly.

“It just hurts to have to do it,” she said, speaking for him and taking his hand. “I understand.”

Lupin smiled painfully. “Severus really brought you here, on his own?”

“Yup, but had I known...” she shivered.

“I can’t figure him out,” Lupin said. “Harry’s really changed him.”

“Explain this to me,” she said. “Why in the world is Harry now his son?”

Lupin added his other hand to her two. “I can’t explain that. Bad histories run deep around here, insurmountably deep most of the time. I guess they saw strengths in the other that each needed and had the courage to take a chance.”

She grasped his hands tighter, ignoring the sharp points. “I’m willing to do that too, you know.”

He bowed his head, appearing to be trying to accept that.

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She said, "I'm not sure I want to be fetched by Professor Snape next time, however..."

Lupin laughed lightly. "You're safer with him than you are with me."

She dropped her hands and propped them on her hips. "Really?"

"Yes. He's always the same, unlike me, who becomes a monster."

She rubbed her arms and squared her shoulders. "Can I see this monster?"

"You will leave after you do," Lupin stated softly, emptily.

Pamela frowned. "I understand you've been hurt before, but it hurts me when you don't give me any credit." She let that sink in. "When's the next full moon?"

"Twenty-eighth, Monday. But I am not ready for you to see."

"Well, it'd be nice if you'd let me see, then you'll know for certain that I don't care."

Lupin closed his eyes, found his chair with his hand and sat down.

"You all right?" Pamela asked.

Lupin nodded sharply. "Yes. Fine." He waved her off as though wanting to preserve his pride.

"Dinner tonight?" she asked hopefully.

"In, I assume?"

"We can go out if you like."

Lupin shook his head before studying his hands yet again. "I can work on a disguising spell for these... but it will take some time. Perhaps in would be better."

"I can't deny that would make it easier, but I want to have dinner with you either way." He didn't respond, so she said, "Seven, then?"



Harry sat on Hermione's couch with his feet propped up on the low table, Kali draped beside him. He had readings again, something he had grown to appreciate not having during the recent chaos. He snapped the book closed after five pages dense with the historical timeline of wizarding criminal law in Northern Europe. He felt a twinge doing so, as though he owed his recently deceased fellow Aurors more effort.

"That looks like a good book," Hermione said from where she sat eating crisps at the small table in the kitchen area. "Can I borrow it when you're done?"

"You can have it now," Harry said.

"You're finished already?"

"I'm done for now," Harry announced.

She laughed. "That sounds like the Harry I remember." She came over to take the book.

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“I got used to not studying,” Harry said, trying to patch over her implied criticism. “You know; while I was trying to stay alive and save the world and everything.”

Harry settled into one of his old books on advanced blocking, and quiet descended on the flat until a knock came upon the door. Hermione let Headmistress McGonagall into the flat. She had to bow to fit her tall hat inside the door and immediately doffed it. Hermione took it and her cloak and quickly hung them up. “Would you like tea?”

“I would indeed, my dear. How are you, Harry?”

Harry had stood to greet her, and now said, “I’m fine, ma’am.”

She smiled. “You’re a resilient young man, Harry, for which we are all terribly grateful.”

“Do you need to speak to Harry alone?” Hermione asked from the sink where she was heating a teapot with her wand.

“I am here to speak to you, young lady.”

“Shall I...?” Harry asked, gesturing at the door.

“No, please remain, Harry. I didn’t intend to chase you out.” She spoke with more than her usual graciousness, and with dignity accepted a seat at the flimsy little table.

Hermione poured a round of tea. McGonagall cradled her tea cup in her hands a moment. “Even in the summer, I do so love a nice hot cup of tea. Don’t know how the Americans can drink that awful iced stuff.” She considered Hermione before glancing at the title of the book lying face down beside Hermione’s teacup. “You have become quite the law expert, I hear,” McGonagall said.

Hermione shrugged. “This is Harry’s book.”

The headmistress turned to him. “They are educating you quite broadly, Harry, that is good to know.”

Harry shrugged next, having been quickly defeated by that book.

McGonagall sipped her tea and pushed it aside. “I have a proposition for you, Hermione. Don’t feel compelled to answer right away. As I was plotting out this visit, it occurred to me that I have not kept in as good of touch with you as I always intend to with our best students. Everyone’s lives are so busy, it seems. For instance, I have no idea how happy you are in your current position.”

Hermione appeared to search for an answer. Harry jumped in with, “She’s been happier. She’s not challenged enough.”

“That’s not exactly true, Harry...” Hermione argued. “But it isn’t what I expected to be doing. Researching cases for precedent and learning everything about one arcane subject so I can write it up and someone else can take credit for it.” She frowned into her teacup. “But it IS challenging.”

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McGonagall clasped her hands before her. "I wonder if you would be willing to try a bit of a change?" When Hermione blinked at her curiously, McGonagall said, "I was wondering if you would consider taking Professor Flitwick's old job... as Charms instructor at Hogwarts?"

Hermione gaped at her. "Who... me?"

"But, of course, you, my dear," McGonagall said affectionately. "You were the best student Filius could remember ever having. That alone qualifies you in my mind. The board will take your excellent test scores into due consideration, of course."

Hermione glanced at Harry, who was grinning broadly. "Did you know about this?"

Harry shook his head. "But I think it's a brilliant idea."

McGonagall patted Hermione's hand. "As I said: no rush on an answer."

"I... I don't know what to say," Hermione stuttered.

McGonagall stood and said. "Don't say anything at all, then. But please owl me with any questions of any sort." She turned. "And you, Harry, owl if I can do anything at all for you."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said, feeling the weight of her concern.

She smiled more deeply. "Severus was right, I believe, when he said we don't deserve you, Harry."

"Severus told you that?" Harry asked.

She winked. "Perhaps I was imagining things."

When she was gone, Harry sighed. Hermione muttered, "I second that sigh."

"You should take the job."

"I have to think about it," she said, standing to clean up the tea. "It's a big change."

"You aren't happy now, though."

"I'm not happy about a lot of things, Harry."

Harry scratched his head. "That's no reason not to change things to fix some of it."

She hovered the teapot up onto the high shelf above the stove. She then laughed lightly and sadly. "First spell Flitwick taught us, remember?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yup, I remember too that you were the only one who could do it."

She dropped into her chair at the table, wand held out before her. "It was really easy."

"And bloody useful. Honestly Hermione, I think Flitwick would pick you specifically to take his place."

"I'll think about it," she said, slipping her wand back into her pocket.

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The following morning Harry went directly to the Auror's office since the training room was set up for the Apprentice testing. Although no test takers had arrived yet, an air of anticipation hung about the whole floor. Shacklebolt was covering calls and Kerry Ann sat on Tonk's desk, reading the newspaper. Harry took the chair of the desk, leaning back to stare above the door where Munz's wand hung from a strand of ribbon. Presumably, Whitley's and Moody's would be there too if they had not been lost. Frowning, Harry's thoughts wandered down the paths that made up the last year. Stretched out, they seemed far longer than twelve short months.

Kerry Ann lowered the paper. "How are you doing, Harry?"

Harry shrugged. "You?" he prompted.

She nodded with a sly smile. "I have fewer complaints than usual," she said.

"Ambroise still around in England?" Harry asked.

"Back and forth. He's been given a temporary diplomatic assignment so he can visit longer."

Harry grinned in return, unable to resist, given her clear glee. "So, have you figured out what's wrong with him yet?"

At this, Shacklebolt turned his chair with a squeak to stare at Harry in curious dismay. Harry defensively pointed out, "I'm only quoting her from before."

"Well..." Kerry Ann mused. "He doesn't like beer. Insists on wine."

"Tragic," Harry commented.

"Yeah," Kerry Ann agreed with false sobriety. "I think I can live with it though, with some time to adjust."

Shacklebolt's chair squeaked back into place and his dark head shook for many seconds. After their conversation went on for several more minutes, he said, "Go see what you think of the applicants. You'll have a say in who we accept." As they stood, he added playfully, "Since we lost Nagini, we're thinking of using Harry as a substitute phobia."

Kerry Ann laughed. "They fail that one, they are definitely out."

Harry managed a soft scoff, but the comment stung, even as a jest. It prodded painfully at his memory of the witch going out of her way to avoid him during patrol. Harry followed Kerry Ann down the corridor and composed himself before peaking inside, hopeful of finding Ginny at one of the desks. She wasn't there yet, but five others were, some of whom Harry remembered from last year's exam and some Harry knew from Hogwarts. They all looked up expectantly at the two of them as though presuming something official was about to happen.

Kerry Ann asked one of them, "Study harder this time, Tridant?"



## BLOOD AND WATER

A man in the front row crossed his arms. He had cropped blonde hair and looked more Muggle than the rest. “I was dead sure it would be easier. I’ve seen how the Ministry operates and couldn’t imagine the requirements were so high.”

Taken aback, Harry turned to Kerry Ann to see her reaction. She was grinning. “Just you wait,” she said.

Harry couldn’t shake the notion that Tridant would make a poor team player. He then hoped none of them had been that cocky. If they had, by the time Rodgers had knocked them around for a month, they would have forgotten to be.

Kerry Ann tilted her head to the side and said, “You know, we have a new test this year. You have to beat Harry in a duel.”

Harry gazed confidently as the man jerked his head over to him, even though he was six years Harry’s senior. “Really?” Tridant asked, dubious.

“Well,” Kerry Ann added thoughtfully, “there is consideration that will not allow anyone into the program, so the requirement may be simply surviving three minutes against him.”

She sounded very believable, and Harry was glad no one packed up and departed. A few had grown rather glazed expressions. Far less cocky, Tridant said, “I may be able to manage that.”

Some newcomers entered, stutter – stepping upon discovering Harry there. They took their seats. Moments later, Ginny entered, hair damp, robes askew, rushing and glancing at the clock.

“Harry!” she said in pleased surprise and gave him a hug that was limited by her bag.

“What are you carrying in that?” Harry asked.

She flipped her sizeable handbag open and said, “Pens, quills, paper... I didn’t want to run out of anything.”

“Nothing from the twins, I hope,” Harry said in all seriousness.

She pulled her head back as though insulted. “No, of course not.” She moved to one of the desks and dropped her bag over the chair-back. “You know,” she said to the room, “I knew Harry when he was fun.”

Before Harry could compose a reply, Kerry Ann stepped closer to him and said, “Really? I’d like to have seen that.”

“What do you mean?” Harry retorted, glancing between her and Ginny. “I’m not any less fun than I used to be.”

Ginny stared at him in disbelief. “You used to not care about the rules... broke them all the time. You’re too serious now.”

“I haven’t been sticking to the rules all that much,” he pointed out.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Kerry Ann leaned in and told the assemblage. “Only Harry gets away with things. Don’t get any ideas.”

Several nodded in clear understanding of this. Harry spared a glare for his fellow apprentice too. He decided he should be civil and let the ribbing go, asking Ginny, “How are things at Hogwarts?”

“Good,” Ginny replied flatly.

“What, you live there?” the Asian wizard beside her asked.

“Yes,” Ginny smartly replied. “Someone has to guard the place.”

Harry suppressed a smile and again suspected that him and his fellows were originally closer to this level of independent cockiness than he cared to admit. Someone in the back raised her hand, a small witch who was probably the oldest one in the room. “How many are being accepted this year?”

Harry replied, “There is no set number, but it is usually one or none. They let in more last year due to losses during the war.” He did not point out how understaffed they still were; he assumed they knew that and pointing it out could sound like they might be willing to lower the requirements.

More people arrived, followed by Rodgers carrying a stack of examination parchments. “Everything on the floor except the quill you are going to use,” he commanded. Everyone obeyed immediately as Harry and Kerry Ann made their departure, Harry with one last wave at Ginny, who was fiercely biting her upper lip as she accepted the thick, rolled parchment. In the back row, Askunk was pulling out quills and ducking her head as though hiding.

As they re-entered the office, Kerry Ann said, “Ah, to think that was us.” To Shacklebolt she said, “Aaron and Vineet really that late?”

“I sent them out on assignment, and now I’m sending you two.” He handed them a slip of parchment.



Saturday, following instructions in Snape’s owl, Harry Apparated to the main hall of the house in Shrewsthorpe. Blue tarpaulin still covered the gap in the roof, but the thick beams had been patched with notched, bright blonde wood and metal plates. Harry checked the progress on the other rooms which felt forlornly empty with most of their possessions packed up and stored elsewhere.

Snape arrived minutes later. He immediately went to check the post and Harry found him sorting it in the drawing room. He halted this as soon as Harry entered, tossing the stack he held down onto the desk. “How are you?” he pointedly asked.

## BLOOD AND WATER

Harry shrugged. "All right, I guess." He had been thinking that he would like to discuss with Snape how after so many Rita Skeeter articles denouncing him as dark, one witch's actions bothered him so. The topic proved awkward to open up, so he did not try. Instead he said, "Ginny thought she did well on the examinations, especially the blocks."

Snape let this slide by. "The Ministry is treating you all right?"

Harry nodded. He did not want to share his difficulty with avoiding Mr. Weasley, because he did not want Snape to know why he needed to.

Snape's demeanor darkened and narrowed as though sensing his reticence. He said, "My father wishes us for dinner tomorrow. "

"I imagine," Harry said. "I have duty in the morning, but I can probably get away in time." Then glad to cause more distraction, said, "Have you heard from your mum?"

"She sent an owl. The news of Voldemort's return finally arrived at the coven." He leaned hard on the back of the chair, his fingers gripping tightly and said with clear loathing, "Must be nice to live in such an oasis of unreality." He released the chair back and stood straight. "Any changes with regard to the prophecy?"

Harry shook his head, glad to have something to talk freely about. "I'm afraid I may have missed my chance," he confessed. "When I was in Voldemort's head I should have been able to see everything they were doing. But I didn't know. It was all so confusing."

"You were not at your best," Snape agreed.

"You thought I was under an Imperio," Harry pointed out, finding fresh annoyance at that memory.

"I was not so far off. But I also could not see through to the truth." Snape pulled out the chair and took a seat before the stacks of post. "Trapped in my own oasis, perhaps," he muttered.

"How long before the house is fixed up, do you suppose?" Harry asked. He was keen to move home again.

"Quite a while, I think. Weeks, at least, before it will be habitable." His nose was already buried in a letter.

"After that you'll be returning to Hogwarts again anyway," Harry said, feeling disjointed to consider that. He was craving normality as though it were chocolate. In a normal world, people wouldn't fear him. And if the prophecy were not yet fulfilled by the time Hogwarts' term started, he would be dealing with that alone again as well. Well, not alone, but not with help he could trust absolutely.

Snape pondered him before saying, "Do you wish me to ask Minerva if Remus can handle the first few weeks of classes?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Harry rebelled at being treated as though he were a child, despite all of his concerns of seconds before. “No, it’s all right.”

“Remus certainly has been throwing himself into work of late, I doubt he would mind.”

Harry shook his head again. “I just want to get this prophecy over with... and hope there isn’t another one,” he added glumly.

“Prophecies have their own time and place; you cannot force it.”

“Right, Albus,” Harry retorted lightly.

Snape sat back and folded his hands together as though Harry’s jab had sent him into a reverie. “I used to wonder occasionally what Albus would think of certain events. I have not felt the need to do so in a while, I’ll admit.”

“That’s probably a good thing. I don’t think he liked being relied on when he was around.”

Snape sat forward and moved as though to continue dealing with the post. “I will meet you here tomorrow at six. Owl me if you cannot make it.”



Harry returned to Shrewsthorpe the next day as instructed. The weather had turned foul and the tarps covering the holes in the roof snapped viciously. Winky offered Harry tea, but he told her he would not be staying long. He took a seat in the drawing room, the only room that was not completely packed up. Snape was late and Harry had to work to keep his imagination from running wild with potential bad situations.

When Snape did arrive he was as distracted as Harry had ever seen him.

“Everything all right?” Harry asked in concern.

“What? Oh, yes, certainly. We are late, let’s go.” He led the way to the Floo and held the canister out for Harry. But Harry would not accept any.

“What’s wrong?” Harry demanded to know.

“Nothing,” Snape replied in such an unconvincing manner that Harry wondered that Snape imagined Harry could possibly believe him.

“You’re lying,” Harry said, wondering at Snape being late without any good guesses as to why.

Snape’s glare grew into a more classic version of itself. “We’ll discuss it later.” He held the Floo powder out even closer to Harry.

“We’ll discuss it now,” Harry returned calmly. Nothing was going to slide with Harry anymore; too much had happened.

## BLOOD AND WATER

Snape set the canister down on the table. "Are you disobeying me?" he asked, half annoyance, half surprise.

Harry swallowed, "Yes, I guess I am." Silence descended beyond the crackle of the fresh fire. "You're late. You're never late. Something's clearly bothering you." These were all statements, not demands or even questions.

"We'll discuss it later," Snape insisted, again holding out the Floo powder canister.

"Nothing I need know about right now?"

In a very odd and wry tone, Snape said, "Not immediately, no."

They arrived in a modest drawing room that felt drafty even in the warm weather. Shazor gave Harry a close inspection, but Gretta gave him the same hug as always.

"So, the busy young man was able to make it," Shazor said, leading the way to the dining room where Candide was already seated. She appeared flushed and distracted. "Would you like a drink, Harry... of course you would," Shazor said, doling out shots of something thick and dark. Candide set hers before her but did not join them in a toast.

The evening dragged on slowly. Harry sat across from Gretta, who happily took care of both ends of a conversation if left to it. The only interesting part of the whole evening was when Severus bothered to mention that he and Candide were engaged. Shazor and Gretta took this with less surprise than Harry had and Candide kept her head down through the ensuing congratulations.

When the question of the date came up, Severus replied, "Soon," with such a annoyed tone that Harry, who had been expecting the same open-ended answer as before, nearly spit out his sherry. He shot Severus a curious glance, but received nothing in return. He did not get a chance to ask later that evening; Severus took Candide back to her flat, leaving Harry to finish his goodbyes with the others.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



# INHERITANCE

First thing Monday, Harry's luck failed to hold. He stepped out of the lift and immediately had to stop dead to avoid running over Mr. Weasley.

"Good. You are here early," Mr. Weasley said as though he had parked himself there just to catch Harry. "Come with me."

Harry prepared to follow, head down. But Mr. Weasley did not go to his office. Instead he reopened the lift gate and waited for Harry to follow him in.

Harry's heart rate slowed when it was clear they were headed for the Minister's office, which Harry was quite certain would be too serious a venue for such a simple issue as intra-department fraternization.

As they swept through the outer office, Belinda's greeting gave Harry pause. It was a simple "good morning," but she had not said much of anything to him for a long time. Harry stopped at the door to Bones' office to return in kind, spirits lifted by even that small incident.

In the Minister's spacious office, Harry took a seat in a tall, maroon chair with gleaming brass buttons, identical to the one Mr. Weasley had taken.

"Now," Bones said, taking a seat at her shining desk. Her manicured hands began strumming her crossed knees. "I have discussed this with some of the other department heads as well as Minerva, and they are all in agreement, more or less."

Harry glanced between the two of them, lost already. Bones explained, "We have been discussing how to best manage your image, Mr. Potter."

"My image?" Harry returned.

Bones explained with patience, although in a speaking-to-a-child voice, "Your

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image is the Ministry's image, Harry. You are the most famous wizard in Britain, for certain, if not the world. By keeping you on, we are also taking on your reputation, which unfortunately at the moment is a bit of an ambiguous one. We have decided that it is best to end the second-guessing of the Wizengamot's actions currently filling the papers by demonstrating that we whole-heartedly support you."

Harry, who had been avoiding the papers much of the week, had no comment to add to this.

Bones went on. "Supporting you means supporting your actions, which on the surface are certainly easy to condone. No one would argue that Voldemort should have been allowed to return to his former self, and it is clear in hindsight that would eventually have been the case. The previous prophecy was probably still valid, which is also in your favor with regard to violating direct orders." She frowned as she said that, but then waved her hand as though an insect bothered her. "But that is in the past. For the immediate future we have decided to award you the Merlin service medal." She reached into her desk drawer and pulled out an ornate miniature trunk from which she extracted a golden coin on a ribbon. She put her eyepiece in place and squinted at the back of it. "Ah, yes, Flying Merlin Distinguished Service of Wand is the name of it." She let her monocle fall. "But we have to do it properly, of course."

Harry sat quietly through her description of the award proceedings, hoping as the Minister did, that this would indeed help.

As the meeting concluded, Harry began to dread walking back downstairs with Mr. Weasley, but he was spared doing so by being dismissed early. As he closed the door behind him with no little relief, he thought perhaps getting it over with would save him rather a lot of stress. Belinda was busy taking dictation from one of the Minister's advisors, so Harry only managed a small wave in her direction.

Back down in their department, he wondered suddenly if Belinda had broken up with Percy. He cornered Kerry Ann at the first opportunity, during a break in their readings discussion.

"Not that I know of," Kerry Ann replied to his question.

"Huh," Harry uttered. "She seemed, well, in a better mood."

"I'll ask around," Kerry Ann promised. Harry nodded that he would appreciate that, finding himself in the odd position of desiring more gossip.

In the afternoon the four of them plus Blackpool were called together in the tea room to discuss the applicant examination results. Blackpool sat with her arms crossed, looking sulky, and she pushed the sheet of scores by her to the next person as though not interested. Harry wondered then with no little jolt whether she and Munz had been closer than he realized, perhaps even against-regulation close. His death had certainly hit her hardest. He stopped himself from intending to ask Kerry

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Ann this as well.

The list came his way. The range of numbers was broader than expected, some quite low. Ginny had tied for top in spell blocking with Tridant. Askunk was just ahead of Ginny on the written part, and just below her on the blocking. Harry thought that it would be interesting to put them all up against each other. Ginny's written scores were in the high middle, but not stellar, unfortunately. Or perhaps fortunately, if Mr. Weasley's opinion were to be counted.

"What do you think, Potter?" Rodgers prompted, since Harry had been holding onto the list longer than his share of time. Harry passed the list along with a shrug. Vineet held it up and studied it. Rodgers asked, "Arthur's youngest wouldn't normally make the cut, but given her performance during the attack on Hogwarts, I am tempted to allow her to move on to the next stage."

"I think she deserves a chance," Harry said, comfortable with showing more loyalty to his friend than her father. "She only got serious about her book studies this year."

"And we won't have full N.E.W.T. scores this year, to add to her record," Rodgers added. "What about Tridant?"

"He's kind of a jerk," Kerry Ann said.

"Opinions, Ms. Blackpool?" Rodgers prodded.

She shook her head, and said, "We have too many other things to worry about right now to think about next year's apprentices," she darkly pointed out.

Rodgers picked up the list of scores. "We always worry about the future around here. You look like you could use some duty. Take Potter out for half a shift."

Blackpool stood without responding and Harry hurried to follow her to the office, where she scooped up a handful of assignment sheets, tossed each of them down and picked one back up, seemingly at random.

"Mugglebaiting call, Earswick. Let's go." She Disapparated, but fortunately Harry knew where to go.

They appeared in an abandoned stable on a rundown farm. Blackpool started immediately for the wide carriage door which hung crooked on a bent railing, but Harry restrained her, asking, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," she insisted and Harry had a sense he was seeing himself saying of course I'm still fun.

"Something must be the matter," Harry insisted, rubbing his nose. The musty scent of decaying hay made his nose tickle.

She snapped in return, "Potter, everything's the matter, but I can't do anything about any of them."

"We can do something about this call," Harry pointed out.



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“It’s an old, unclosed one from the weekend. Just some magical folk wandering drunk into the countryside after a night out in York is all.”

“You’re sure about that?” Harry asked, never wanting to be so certain that he would let his guard down.

“Yes, I’m certain.”

“Were you one of them?” he asked, curious more than anything.

She snorted. “Don’t I wish. Do you know how badly I need a break?”

“We all need one. If you’re that close to losing it, you should ask for one.”

“That’s impossible. We are completely short-handed. Who’s going to cover?”

“The department will manage. If you crack, they’ll be short of you anyway.”

“I’m not going to crack,” she insisted derisively. “I just want to get...”

“Get what?” Harry asked when she trailed off. An owl fluttered in the upper part of the building.

Her fist was clenched, but she opened her hand to touch her wand pocket. “Get Merton,” she replied as though fatigued but then her demeanor shifting to cold anger. “Him and his bloody weapons. You want to kill someone, you should have the guts to face them with a wand and do the job properly, not send a stupid machine to do it for you.”

Harry feared for a moment that she may turn and blame him for not fulfilling the prophecy sooner, but she did not add anything more. She stepped out into the thickly cloudy day with its fresh breeze and Harry followed.

They strolled along a narrow lane until they came to a gathering of houses. The motorway whined close by. She stepped over a small garden gate and strode to the door through the overgrown footpath. “Let’s see if it’s the same blokes as last time.” She knocked on the door. When it opened, Blackpool said, “We’ve come about a disturbance.”

“What disturbance?” the man rudely asked. He was unshaven and wore only a vest and a half-open robe, despite the hour. It certainly seemed likely that he frequented both mead and the wee hours of the morning. He was gearing up to say more, beginning with, “Don’t you Ministry people have real criminals to catch-” but he spotted Harry standing beyond Blackpool’s shoulder. Harry had been gauging how violent the man’s belligerence may get, so he was surprised when the man stepped back and tucked himself behind the door for protection.

Blackpool sent a sly glance back at Harry. She propped her hands on her hips and chuckled cruelly. Fatigue seemed to blunt her because she said to the man, “Right, as if that door would help you against him.”

Harry wanted to look away from the man’s alarmed gaze, but he was duty-bound to keep an eye on him.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Blackpool demanded, “No more late-night excursions. I know it was you and your friends because it’s been you and your friends every other time.” The man’s eyes revealed that this was indeed true. Blackpool went on, “Things are tough right now all around and every witch and wizard needs to pull more of their own weight to keep magic out of Muggle sight. The crap you guys pull when you get too much drink in you... Does. Not. Help.” Her voice sharpened as though focusing all of the frustration of the last few weeks on one relatively hapless wizard. At least the man now seemed to think she was as much a threat as Harry. She jabbed at the door he was peaking around. “Keep the drinks in line or we’ll be back and we won’t be gentle next time.”

The man glanced again at Harry, whose Legilimency made it clear how very fearfully uncertain he was about how much of a threat Harry represented. As they walked away, Harry wished for someone or something to take his own frustrations out on.

As they strode back to the stables to Disapparate, Blackpool said, “You’re a good partner to be out with.”

“How’s that?” Harry asked flatly. The dirt two-track they followed provided lots of cover for an ambush, so he was keeping a close eye on the brush.

“You’re quiet and just having you around makes everyone behave themselves. Last time that bloke tried a treacle trap on me. With you there he didn’t even think to try anything.” After a quarter mile of silence, she prodded, “What’s the matter, don’t like playing the bad cop, eh?”

“I’m not used to... I don’t know... people being afraid of me.”

They reached the broken stable door and slipped inside. A few whole sticks of straw still floated atop the rotted wood floor, getting swept around by their cloaks. “It’s respect. You’re misreading it.”

“It’s not respect,” Harry insisted.

“I’d kill for that kind of respect,” she went on, fully in the mode of venting now. “People see I’m a witch and think they can mess with me. Munz was small; he never got much respect either.”

Harry turned to face her once he was out of view of the open door. “I’m sorry what happened to him. I was there and I’ve replayed it a hundred times in my head, but there’s nothing different that could have been done.”

She stood in the ripe air, breathing heavily. “I wasn’t blaming you,” she said with concern. She tossed her head back and stared upward at the open sky visible through the rotting boards. “It’s supposed to get easier, but it doesn’t seem to be. It doesn’t help that this threat hangs over us, that it could descend at any time to tear everything apart again. Stupid mindless machines of death.” She shook herself. “Rodgers is right. Let’s get another assignment; I need to feel useful.”

## INHERITANCE

Harry thought she needed a few weeks holiday instead, but he followed her back to the Ministry without argument.



Harry didn't return to Hermione's flat until well into the evening. There, he found a note from his friend explaining that she needed to return to work for a few hours. There wasn't much to eat, and Harry prowled the kitchenette restlessly, poking into the same cabinets and drawers repeatedly, hoping to find something substantial that did not require much effort. The wizard's alarmed face from that afternoon overlaid on many others, dogging him. He dumped crisps into a bowl and took them to the small table to eat them as though they constituted a decent meal. Harry licked his fingers between bites, trying to relish what he was eating. The pipes pinged from the upstairs neighbor running the tap. A knock sounded, quiet as though it came from a different door. Harry stood and checked their door, wand out of view in case it was one of the Muggle neighbors.

Harry opened the door wider when he saw who was there. "Mrs. Granger," Harry uttered in surprise.

"Harry, dear," she said in soft greeting. She clutched her pink leather handbag against her pink coat as though not certain she would be invited inside.

Stepping back to let her come in, Harry said, "Hermione's not here."

With true motherly tones, she said, "I received an owl from her just an hour ago, said I should check on you while I'm in the city visiting my sister." She slipped off her long coat and hung it up on the hook beside the door.

"She shouldn't have done that," Harry said, stashing his wand in his back pocket. "I'm fine," he argued.

"I hope that isn't your dinner, dear," Mrs. Granger criticized as soon as she espied the table.

Harry sighed. "It probably is." He took the salty bowl to the sink and balanced it on the other unwashed dishes.

"You don't look all right to me, Harry," Mrs. Granger said, her voice shifting rather startlingly to stern.

"The last few weeks've been rough," he admitted, feeling good to be able to tell that to someone new. He considered washing the dishes, but stared at them instead.

Mrs. Granger stepped closer and turned his chin to her. "Why don't you tell me about it, Harry?" she asked kindly.

Harry laughed and stepped away. "I can't tell you about much of any of it, Mrs. Granger," he said as he dropped into a chair.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“Let me make you some tea,” she said as she began moving about the small counter and its two cabinets. She used the burner to heat water and a few minutes later, set a cup before Harry. She didn’t sit, though. “Rather startling those eyes of yours.”

“So, I’m told,” Harry replied while he blew across the hot cup. At least Hermione’s mother wasn’t afraid of him, he thought. Others’ fearful faces haunted him just then at that thought with a tenacity that in itself bothered him.

“Very startling,” she uttered with queer thoughtfulness.

Harry put the cup down without sipping.

“Not thirsty for tea, dear?” Mrs. Granger asked, sounding the most motherly yet. “Would you like something else?”

Harry ran their conversation so far through his head again. “No, this is fine. Just letting it cool,” he explained to buy time to figure out why his sense of things felt so wrong. Mrs. Granger tapped her finger impatiently on the chair-back before turning to attack the dishes in the sink. “Don’t do those, Mrs. Granger,” Harry chastised and reached for the milk, thinking to cool his tea.

“Do you want sugar with that too?” she asked without turning her head from where it bowed over the sink.

Harry aborted lifting the milk and reached for his wand, which was not in his back pocket. He pushed the tea cup away. “What’s in it?” he demanded.

Mrs. Granger put down a half-washed plate which caused the rest to clatter to an even more disorganized pile. She turned and put her hands on her hips.

Harry, insides in a frozen knot, said, “The only person I know of who sees things without turning around is supposedly dead. What’s in the tea... Mad Eye?” Harry asked again, the revelation so certain it made his blood rush.

After a brief pause, the image of Mrs. Granger replied, “Veritaserum.”

“You don’t need that,” Harry argued. “You can ask me anything you want; you’re an Auror, remember?”

The visage of Mrs. Granger didn’t move. “I remember what I am,” it grunted. “Do you remember what you are?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry demanded.

Moody, snorted, an oddly uncouth thing for Mrs. Granger to do. “You have me worried, Potter. Very worried.”

Harry ignored that. “Why are you pretending to be dead?” he asked derisively.

Moody shuffled his feet. “I’m finally living my life, believe or not. I can do as please... investigate as I please.”

Harry cocked his lips. “Finally don’t have to live in paranoid fear, eh Mad Eye? No one tries to poison or curse someone who’s already dead.”

## INHERITANCE

Crossing his arms, Moody commented, "You were always fast on the uptake."

Harry stood. "I want my wand back."

"After we chat," Moody countered.

"We are chatting."

Gruffer still, Moody, who was starting to appear more as himself, leaned over the table and said, "We're not finished yet. I'm still not convinced of what you are." He spoke with such suspicion that it ground on Harry's nerves, already sore from tolerating the last few incidences of similar suspicion.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I don't bloody well care if you're convinced. I want my wand."

"Tough luck. You'll get it when I'm through," Moody countered. His wide, crooked frame had half emerged now from Mrs. Granger's much primmer one. Moody glanced at his hand, took his trademark silver flask from his pocket, and then put it away again without drinking from it.

When Harry stepped around the table to face him down, Moody aimed his wand at him and said, "That's a lot of confidence for someone who's unarmed."

"Yes, it is," Harry said, stopping a yard away, fists balled.

In a critical tone Moody said, "You still haven't learned, have you, Potter." He raised his wand, "Do you need another lesson like the last I gave you?"

Harry put his fists on his hips and mocked, "Since you're dead, you'll have a hard time doing my next six month review, won't you?"

"We can do it right now..." Moody offered darkly, wand steady as he pointed it at Harry. His left eye was sinking backward into his skull and he leaned as though relying more on one leg.

Harry's eyes narrowed further. "It was you, wasn't it? Percy doesn't have that much in him."

This shifted Moody's demeanor. "You're too bright on top of too powerful, Potter." Oddly, this was an even more threatening statement than the last two.

Harry leaned forward, letting anger out through his eyes. "You still don't know enough about me?" he demanded. "You put me through hell, and you're still sneaking around trying to... you've been following me around, haven't you?" Harry asked, thinking of the times he felt watched when there wasn't anyone there. Harry took a half step forward, wanting Moody simply to go away and leave him alone.

"What are you, Potter?" Moody asked as he solidified his aim so it was directly at Harry's nose so that Harry stared down the length of the wand straight into Moody's good eye.

Harry felt around himself with the opening to the Dark Plane just cracked enough to sense what might be near. His anger made opening the gateway trivially easy.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“You want to find out what I’ve become, you just try something.” When Moody didn’t move, Harry taunted, “Come on. I’m unarmed.” He held his hands out to show they were empty. “Try something,” he snarled, tired of this, tired of everyone’s distrust.

“You’re really asking for it, Potter.” Moody’s hand tightened its grip and he started to speak a spell.

Harry snapped open the gateway for just the instant it took to loose the creature prowling at the interstice. In a blur the old werewolf leapt out of the join between the floor and the wall beside the door and toppled Moody before he could aim his wand at it instead of Harry.

“Back!” Harry shouted and the pathetic creature scrambled away to rear up before the cupboard, hair bristled, teeth bared. “You think I need a wand to defend myself?” Harry mocked the Auror.

Moody swallowed hard and held his wand pointed at the disturbingly distorted half-werewolf, at the exposed ribs and patchy spotted skin starkly obvious and almost clinical in the Muggle lighting. He fumbled in his coat and pulled out his wooden peg leg, which he then brandished in his other hand. The wolf growled.

Harry threatened, “If you hurt him, you’ll deal with me.”

“Hurt him?” Moody echoed, “What the devil is that thing?”

The werewolf lowered down to four legs to sniff the air just above the floor. Harry went to the fridge to pull out a package of raw chops. “I’m still figuring that out,” Harry admitted as he crouched to hold out the meat. The creature whined piteously a second before snatching the package away. As it did, Harry pushed it back through the gateway. He hoped it got its share once he felt all the other things waiting nearby before he blocked the gateway again.

“My wand,” Harry demanded before Moody could even decide the room was safe again.

Moody pushed himself to sit upright, recovering quickly. He put on his leg and got to his feet. With clear determined unwillingness, he pulled out Harry’s wand and said, “Do me one favor, Potter: at least try to remember what your dear mother would think before you do something.”

Harry countered with, “And you try to remember that I’ve been through more than she or my dad ever had been.”

Moody shook his head while plucking his bright blue magic eye from the breast pocket of his pink coat. “That doesn’t make a whiff of difference.” He pressed the eye into the sagging left socket, and looked at Harry with a sour expression before relenting and saying grudgingly, “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone you’ve seen me.”

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“Whatever,” Harry uttered.

Angry again, Moody stepped closer and waved his finger before Harry’s nose. “Your mum, Potter. Remember your mum. She didn’t like evil much; not the kind old Voldie did and not the kind you are so terribly fond of.” With that he was gone, and Harry stood alone in a Muggle kitchen, the air oily, the floor freshly scratched by long claws.



“I need to go,” Lupin said, standing in Pamela’s small sitting room. With a burst of orange rays, late evening was turning into night beyond the roof of the neighboring house.

“You won’t let me see this monster, then?”

“It’s not safe,” Lupin argued.

“I thought you said Wolfsbane makes you clear-headed during the full moon,” she argued.

Lupin frowned. “It does, but not absolutely. And I don’t know about this time around after getting bit again.” He took her hands and held them between them, but it was more a communication of restraint than understanding. “Others should be there to ensure your safety. We’d have to plan ahead.”

“Why didn’t you do that?” she asked.

Lupin laughed depreciatingly. “Because I’m not ready. I know I’m making much of this, but... it’s harder with you.”

She smiled lightly. “That’s something, anyway.”

Lupin bit his lip and glanced anxiously out at the darkening sky. “Really must go,” he whispered.

“Come back in the morning,” Pamela insisted, catching his hand before he could make it to the door. She explained, “You’ll need a good breakfast and a good sleep.” Embarrassed, she admitted, “I had Minerva send me a pamphlet on Lycanthropy.”

Lupin shook his head as though betrayed, but he appeared to want to be swayed. “I’m only a burden after the change.”

“Really, come back anyway. Please. As soon as you can,” Pamela insisted.

Lupin’s body twitched. “I have to go,” he whispered again, pained, and then ran out the door.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Severus Snape finished straightening his office in preparation to return to Candide's flat. As he did so, he thought he heard movement. He waved the lamps higher and turned full circle. A familiar, but very unexpected voice said, "I'd be needing a word with you."

An invisibility cloak was lifted aside to reveal Mad-Eye Moody, whom Snape gazed at in no little surprise. Recovering, Snape snidely asked, "What can I do for you?"

"First off, I wonder if you still consider yourself the father to that boy of Potter's?" Snape drew himself up and replied, "I certainly do."

"Are you keeping a right close eye on him?" Moody demanded.

"As close as possible given the circumstances. When the house is repaired I shall be keeping an even closer one." He paused and challengingly asked, "Why?"

Moody paced once, his limp pronounced. "He's on the cusp, Snape."

"Your paranoia notwithstanding, what makes you believe that?"

Moody snorted. "A hundred things, Professor, and if you aren't seeing them then you've lost your edge. Been dulled by this role you are playing and by the favors he's done you."

Snape looked away, at the rapidly setting sun outside the tall windows. "Harry is hardly dire. He has improved immensely after taking care of Voldemort."

Moody snorted again. "And you last saw him when?"

"Yesterday. You must not be keeping very good watch yourself if you did not know that."

"I'm keeping watch over a lot of different things," Moody explained airily. "Being dead frees up a lot of time." He stopped and picked up to examine one of the cursed boxes from the desk that were used for neutralization practice.

Annoyance clearer in his voice, Snape said, "Trust that I am keeping in close touch with him. I consider him my primary responsibility, and I would much prefer that you leave him alone."

"You don't worry about the half rotted werewolf he's keeping as a pet."

Snape's brow furrowed and this gave him away.

"Didn't know about that, I suppose," Moody mocked quietly.

"Get out of here, Alastor," Snape stated softly. "I can take care of Harry."

Moody ignored the demand and picked up another box to study it. "See, I don't think you can. You are mostly at your best when keeping men like Voldemort happy, I think."

Snape snapped his wand around and the cursed boxes flew from the desk to the shelf, some of them shattering and smoking. "You are dangerous you understand so little," he snarled. In a treacherously quiet voice, he went on, "Harry's future relies on his being trusted. Wizards like you – especially like you, whom he formerly looked



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up to – are very, very unsettling to his state of mind. Leave him be. Albus put him in my hands, not yours.”

Moody’s lip twitched as though he had a retort ready, but he slipped his invisibility cloak over his head and departed.



Snape found Harry sitting on Hermione’s couch, petting Kali, who slept in his lap. Crookshanks sat on the couch back nearby, eyeing the Chimrian. Harry looked up at Snape when he arrived in the hearth, but didn’t want to disturb his pet by standing.

“Where is Ms. Granger?” Snape asked.

“Had to work late,” Harry answered.

Snape eyed Kali a moment. “I had a most interesting visitor just now.”

“I’m surprised he risked letting yet another person know he’s actually alive,” Harry commented. He wished Snape would sit down, but suspected that he would not.

“Harry,” Snape said. “Please always trust that I am on your side. But Alastor had one concern that I must inquire about.”

“So?” Harry prompted when Snape paused.

“For a wizard of your power the path from dark thoughts to dark deeds is extraordinarily short. I don’t want you treading that path. I think it best if you resist interacting with the Dark Plane as much as possible.”

Harry straightened his head, prepared to snap something derisive back. But looking at Snape’s concerned gaze halted him and his annoyance evaporated. “I mostly don’t,” Harry insisted.

“What was this Alastor mentioned about a... werewolf?”

“Oh,” Harry hedged. “It is this creature from the Dark Plane that I’ve been trying to understand more about.”

Snape peered around the room, spotted the new scratches and said, “You let it in here?”

“I let it loose on Mad-Eye,” Harry clarified. “He nipped my wand.”

Snape stopped. “You let him get your wand,” he chastised.

Harry frowned. “Yeah. I won’t let that happen again.”

“I should hope not.” Snape paced once, attracting Crookshanks off the couch to watch. “You did not leave Alastor with a good impression of your state of mind.”

Kali took flight from his anger and Harry stood to face Snape at eye-level. “He came in here using Polyjuice to look like Mrs. Granger, did he tell you that?” Harry demanded. When Snape shook his head, Harry went on, “Tried to slip me Veritaserum

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

in a cup of tea. Did he tell you that?" Another head shake. "Turns out he was Percy for my Darkness Test, did you tell you THAT?"

Yet another shake. "Well, you certainly had a right to be annoyed with him."

"He mocked me," Harry complained.

"That you should be capable of withstanding," Snape said, touching Harry on the shoulder for emphasis. "You are bigger than that."

"He told me my mum would be disappointed in me. That after he gave me hell during the Darkness Test. And then there was my last review when he made me look like such a fool," Harry explained, ticking off these complaints on his fingers.

"When he was pointing out your less than comprehensive knowledge of every spell in existence, you mean?" Snape challenged.

Harry put his hands in his back pockets and slumped a bit. "You sure you're on my side?"

"Always," Snape stated fiercely. "No matter what."

Harry dropped his gaze. Crookshanks rubbed against his shins. He asked. "Do you think I've let my parents down... with my power becoming what it has?"

"No," Snape said. "You are a long way from that." He sighed. "I wish you had told me about the werewolf, however. I do not appreciate getting tripped up."

"It wasn't anything significant," Harry argued.

"Yes, it is," Snape returned. "You may be guilty of what you accused me of: losing perspective."

Harry said wryly, "Only in the other direction."

"Harry, please confide in me. I am always on your side," Snape said.

"Even if that means nailing me to the wall for doing something stupid?" Harry suggested lightly.

"Sometimes it may mean that, I'll confess," Snape replied dryly, but almost smiling.

"Speaking of trouble," Harry began, "what was the problem last night? Why were you late... and so distracted?"

Snape immediately reacted to this question, stiffening and turning to stride away. He growled lightly and paced back, frowning. Harry in his mind threw all his other concerns and annoyances away, prepared to focus on whatever Snape may need from him.

"I discovered something," Snape finally explained.

Harry waited. "Yes?" he prodded when he could hold out no longer.

Snape's demeanor shifted. His shoulders hunched slightly, his head turned slowly; it was as though he wished to return to his old kind of anger where the target of it

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was intended to cower. Harry did not do so, of course, but he grew vaguely alarmed at this change.

“Candide is pregnant,” Snape said. He spoke so softly, Harry was not certain he had heard him correctly.

“What?” Harry prompted, but Snape’s return to his disturbed demeanor, confirmed Harry’s hearing. Harry swallowed a laugh.

“You think this is amusing?” Snape challenged.

Harry nodded, lips pressed together to hold in his silly grin. Then after a pause, he said, “Especially after all the things you said to me. It’s very unexpected, Severus.” He could not resist giving him a ribbing in the form of a sly look.

Snape pressed his fingers to his forehead. “I was indisposed after my ordeal,” he muttered.

“Not too indisposed, apparently,” Harry said, still having far too much fun with this. Snape gave him the narrowest, darkest look Harry had received in years, but Harry continued to grin. “Good thing you were getting married anyway,” he went on jovially, thinking Snape’s attitude out of line and in need of adjustment. “What’s the problem?”

Snape bowed and shook his head, hair falling into his face. “Far more consideration should have gone into it,” he grimly stated.

“If that were always true, no one would have children,” Harry pointed out, still buoyant, but he fell serious as he said, “Come on, Severus. You’re a great father, you know.”

This statement produced an awkward silence broken by Kali, flying over to perch on Harry’s shoulder. Snape shook his head again, but with slightly less dismay.



At half-past five in the morning, a quiet knock sounded on Pamela’s door. She had not gone to bed, but was napping on the couch as best as possible while worrying what it must be like to scramble about in the dark forest all night in a form not one’s own. Lupin stood in the chilly, dewy air of the front stoop, bundled crookedly in his worn cloak.

“Come on in,” Pamela said, trying not to sound too affected by his state.

She directed him to the couch and moved to dust off and plug in the electric heater to warm the room, given that he was shivering. He sat, hunched dejectedly, nearly doubled over his knees. She went to the kitchen for hot herbed tea and turned the burner on under the pasta she’d made, but had let cool.

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“Here, chamomile is supposed to help.” She poured a healthy serving into the largest mug in the house and set it on the low table before him, but he did not move. His eyes were closed and his skin looked pale and almost bluish in the dim light. “Remus?” she prompted. He reached out a hand for the tea, and rested it over the rim. She said, upbeat as possible, “I made you something heavy to eat like the pamphlet said: cheesy noodles... if you’d like some?”

He nodded weakly. She fetched him a bowl-full and a fork and sat down beside him. The room was growing overly-warm, but she ignored it. She set the bowl in his lap and folded his fingers around the silver fork.

“Remus, this is terrible. How do you manage?”

“It isn’t easy,” he replied in a faint voice.

“Eat up. You need to get your strength back.”

He clumsily worked the fork into a better grip and stabbed a few sloppy noodles on the tines. Pamela literally sat on her hands to avoid even the appearance of wanting to help him eat.

After a few bites, already sounding stronger, he said, “I hate having you see me like this.”

“I hate the thought that you might have to go through this alone more, I bet,” she retorted.

He put the fork down to use both hands on the mug. After he put the mug down, he stared at his hands with their shaggy knuckles and pointed nails. “I keep expecting the change to complete, but it doesn’t.” He sounded very down.

“Eat. You’re a wisp of a thing as it is.”

He turned to her with a faint smile. “Takes a lot out of you to change back and forth from a monster.”

“How does Harry turn into that bright red bird without showing any after-effects?”

Lupin took up the bowl again and returned to eating. “It’s not the same. His change is magical; mine is cellular. I tried to learn that kind of transformation when my friends were... when we were all in school. James Potter managed it easily... became a most wonderful stag just so he could be safe around me during the full moon. I tried to learn it, but when I realized I would just become the same monster more of the time, it didn’t seem worth it.”

Light was filling the room from the window in earnest by the time Lupin set down an empty bowl and leaned back lethargically. “Thank you,” he said sincerely.

“If making cheesy noodles and chamomile tea is all it takes, you’re not asking for much.”

The small clock on the mantelpiece quietly chimed six in the morning. “It’s not that it takes much to actually do the things... it’s that you are willing to.”

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“I bet more people would be willing to... if you’d give them a chance,” she said, bordering on critical. “Why don’t you lie down for a nap and I’ll make you second breakfast in a few hours.” When he hesitated, she said, “Come on, in for a Knut, in for a Galleon. Isn’t that what you say?”

He shook his head. “We don’t say that.” But he turned to arrange the cushions to better lay flat.

“What do you say?” she asked.

He was settled in to sleep, eyes already closed, when he responded, “Once you’ve been bitten by the fire newt, you might as well wait around for the enchanted giant crocodile.”

Pamela burst out laughing. “That’s dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. That doesn’t mean the same thing at all.”

He sounded much more relaxed as he replied, “Yes it does. It’s a way of saying: you’ve made one small bad decision, stick around and make a big one too, why don’t you?”

“Wizards are nuts,” she complained as she headed for her bed.



Later that morning, Harry arrived early and walked straight to the office of the man he had been avoiding all week. Mr. Weasley looked up at him in surprise when Harry opened the door. Harry pushed the visitor’s chair into the corridor and closed the door before running a series of spells to check that they were unobserved by any magical devices. A flare of yellow gave away the old crystal ball of the twin’s. Mr. Weasley tossed his cloak over it.

“I need to talk to you,” Harry explained.

“I see that,” Mr. Weasley replied. “Surprising given how little I saw of you last week.”

Harry suspected then that Mr. Weasley also wished to avoid dealing with the issue of him and Tonks. Harry scratched his ear and put that other topic aside for the moment. “I just needed to tell you something in confidence, is all. Er...” Harry hesitated, wondering how this was going to come across. “Alastor Moody is actually alive.”

Mr. Weasley’s red brows rose to his hair. “Are you certain? You’ve seen him, I take it?”

“He’s been stalking me, turns out. You didn’t know, then?” Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley rubbed the nearly bare top of his head. “No, Harry, I did not know that.”

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“Says he prefers being dead because he doesn’t have to worry then about anyone trying to kill him.”

After a head shake, Mr. Weasley said, “Harry, if anyone but you had come and told me this, I would not believe them.” He sighed. “Rather selfish of him to keep to himself that way. Wonder if we can count on him for any help at all.”

“He said he was carrying out his own investigations.”

“Of the wrong things, I suspect,” Mr. Weasley said, adjusting the cloak over the crystal ball to be sure it was completely covered.

“Do you think he’s still working for the Department of Mysteries?” Harry suddenly wondered aloud.

Mr. Weasley sighed again. “I don’t know, but it isn’t impossible. They have little distaste for working with the dead in general. Perhaps you should have asked Alastor. Sounds like you had rather a long conversation with him.”

“He doesn’t trust me at all. Told me my mum would be disappointed in me.”

“Oh, now there he’s wrong, Harry. Don’t believe that for a minute.”

They stared at each other as Harry pondered the unusually stern tone of that assurance. Mr. Weasley looked away and pulled himself closer to his desk. He straightened one of the thicker file folders and said, “I assume you are still breaking departmental rules.”

“Yeah,” Harry reluctantly replied.

Harry waited, pained, during the lengthy pause before Mr. Weasley went on. “You’ve put me in a very bad position, Harry.”

“I don’t mean to, sir,” Harry returned, truly meaning it.

“No, I don’t suppose you do,” he agreed. Without looking up, he went on, “It’s already affected your judgment to the point were someone lured you into a trap. You recognize that, correct?”

“Yes sir, I do.”

A knock on the door interrupted the next long pause. Shackbolt was there, needing to speak to Mr. Weasley. Harry made his escape but Mr. Weasley’s voice saying, “See that it doesn’t happen again,” followed him out.



Harry’s week went by much faster once he no longer had to carefully guard against running into his boss. Wednesday, his first evening off, he took the Floo to Hogwarts to talk to Ginny before her second round of Auror testing. In the Great Hall where he arrived, Professors Sprout and Vector were having afternoon tea. They greeted Harry warmly and he asked if they knew where Ginny was.

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“Helping Mr. Filch in the armory, I believe,” Vector replied.

Harry stared at her, at her short black hair that stood up straight from her head, cropped level on top. “With Mr. Filch?” Harry repeated, confused and wondering if he were in the right Hogwarts.

“His name is technically Filch-Plumefeathervane,” Vector explained, “but we have simply been referring to him as ‘Filch’.”

“Minerva hired a new caretaker,” Sprout explained, adding milk to a warm-up of her tea.

“Argus Filch’s cousin,” Vector clarified, the two of them making Harry’s head go back and forth.

“Ah,” Harry uttered, feeling sort of disappointed by that news. “Is McGonagall here?”

“She may be in her tower. She’s been in and out the last few days.”

“Thanks,” Harry said.

Harry went first to the corridor where he and Hermione had battled the cursed suits of armor. Spread out on the floor like rows of fallen soldiers lay the suits of armor, their pieces getting matched up to their correct comrades. Ginny stood holding two gauntlets, comparing the filigree on each to that on the helm of the suit lying before her.

“I think this one looks better,” she said.

A grunt from Harry’s left brought his attention that way. He nearly jumped out of his shoes; the man limping over from the corner window was less Filch’s cousin than Quasimodo’s. He was twice the width of the old caretaker and twice as bent over and even more alarming, could probably put the crooked, knotty wand in his hand to real use. Harry blinked to clear his eyes: the new Filch’s wand had spikes on a metal collar above the handle, just in case one wanted simply use it as a mace or something.

“Who are you?” the vision demanded, squinting challengingly, one eye larger than the other.

“Harry!” Ginny exclaimed, setting down the gauntlets and rushing over.

“Hi,” Harry said, taking a welcome step in her direction.

“I see you’ve met the new Filch,” Ginny said, sounding dismayed but unaffected. Loudly and slowly she said to Filch-Plumefeathervane, “This is Harry Potter. He’s allowed to be here.”

The suspicion didn’t fade much. “Don’t break nothin’,” he growled and returned to polishing and hammering out pieces of armor with a spirit that implied violence was a willing part of his nature.

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“No, sir,” Harry assured him. Turning to Ginny, but with a backwards glance every few seconds, he said, “Just came to see if you were ready for your test tomorrow.”

“Ready?” she asked, confused. “They said there wasn’t any way to prepare.”

“Well, there isn’t. But you should be well-rested. It’s rather hellish.”

She stared at him. “People have been saying that but I didn’t believe them.” She picked up the two gauntlets again, setting one of them back down close to where the prone suit’s hand would be. The other she carried over to a pile that appeared to represent a random collection of eras and countries of origin. “With you telling me that...”

“I think you’ll do all right, but since you’re here, rather than home, I thought you could use some support.”

“Thanks, Harry. I could use some hints, it sounds like.”

“Before my test I didn’t get any hints or help,” he pointed out. He bent down to pick up the highly decorated gorget at his feet. “This is still dented,” he said.

Ginny took it from him and held it to the light. “And whose fault would that be?”

“I’m not apologizing for any damage in here. My only regret is that I didn’t learn the welding spells you were doing that day in the kitchens.”

Her mouth fell open, appalled. “Thank goodness. You know what a mess that would have made?”

“Excuse me. The armor was trying to kill us,” Harry pointed out.

Ginny gave the gorget to Filch-Plumfeathervane. She then picked up a greave and looked through a pile of them, presumably for its mate. “So, no hints, eh?”

Harry shrugged even though she wasn’t looking at him. From the corner a burst of pounding interrupted Harry’s reply. “I’ll tell you what Rodgers told me, which he may tell you anyway, but I’ll do so in case he doesn’t because he’s really over-stressed. He said that nothing in the test would harm you and that the only thing that could defeat you is your own demons.”

Ginny took this in very thoughtfully. “Good to know,” she said around chewing her lip.

“Sort of obvious, now that I think about it,” Harry said.

“Good to be reminded of, then.” She carried a bent greave over to the repair corner and returned to sorting.

Harry said, “I was thinking of staying for dinner. I could use an elf-cooked meal.” Ginny’s bright smile indicated that she would love to join him. He said, “I’ll meet you downstairs,” before heading farther along the corridor, in the direction of the next staircase leading upward.



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Harry found the door to the headmistress' tower open as usual. The windows were cracked and a warm breeze floated through, balancing out the heat of the late evening sun.

McGonagall greeted him and said, "Have a seat, Harry. What can I do for you?"

"I, um, just met your new caretaker. And I, uh..." Harry was not sure how best to phrase what was on his mind. "I guess I wondered why you hired someone so much like, well, even a cousin to, the previous Filch." Harry was unaware that he was cringing as he said this.

McGonagall steepled her fingers and leaned back. The flowers stitched in silver thread on her robe collar caught the orange light of the sky. "You don't like my choice," she observed lightly.

"Er, I guess," Harry admitted. "He isn't a Squib, is he?"

"My stars, no. We needed more magical help around here." She rocked back farther. "Would you like some tea?"

"I'd like to stay for dinner, if I could."

"Of course, my dear boy. Severus is not here, you realize?"

Harry snickered. "I figured as much."

She considered him. "I sense there is something you know that I do not."

"Probably," Harry said. "But we weren't discussing Severus."

"No," she ambled mildly on, "we were discussing why I have hired what appears to be a cruel monster as caretaker of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"Yeah."

She laughed lightly. "Harry," she said, sounding only fond of him. "The students of this school, given even a short window of opportunity, would disassemble this castle to very last stone, pebble, and beam, and no brick barriers or charmed concrete would stop them. There would not be a single unbroken thing remaining after one year, let alone a thousand years. The caretaker always, always, must frighten the students."

Harry blinked at that. "So Filch wasn't, isn't, what he seems?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, he may very well be. I'll keep an eye on him." She raised an elegant finger and added, "Far easier to keep an eye on one caretaker than hundreds of magically curious, devious, and frightfully inept students."

She sounded so at peace with what she said that Harry had no argument.

"Unfortunate about Argus though," McGonagall added softly and after a minute added, "Life goes on, however, and our current caretaker was just about the only family he had." She stood and gave her robes a smoothing. "Let's head down to dinner, shall we?" As they walked at a leisurely pace, she said, "I plan to make it to the medal ceremony on Friday. Many others of the Wizengamot will be there as well. Good show of support, which you very much deserve."

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Harry pondered that, finding something unsettling about the whole thing. Perhaps it was just how very politically orchestrated it was. He did not need or care for another medal.

On the Grand Staircase, McGonagall took Harry's arm. "So," she whispered conspiratorially. "What is it that I don't yet know about Severus?"

"I think I'm going to let him tell you," Harry said, bending his elbow to give her a proper escort into the Great Hall. "I pushed my luck too far just finding amusement in his telling me."

Harry enjoyed dinner with Ginny and the handful of staff who were present. The cooking made it clear that the elves had returned and for the first time in weeks, Harry stuffed himself with thirds.

He looked over at Hagrid, who had brought Willy, his pet pranticore, to the Great Hall with him and was feeding him scraps from a bucket of six-inch slugs and enormous millipedes. No one seemed to mind that he was doing this, despite the frequent escapes from the bucket. Hagrid gave him a wink and said, "I hope they give you the largest medal the Ministry's got, Harry."

"A small one would be fine, too," Harry said. "Are you going to be there?"

"He's on guard duty," Ginny said. "I can't go either." She shot a dark glance around at the teachers at the table. "The twins are banned as well, you know."

Harry looked around more closely too. "Where's Remus?" he asked.

Ginny leaned closer and said, "Monday was the full moon."

"Oh yeah, that's right," Harry said.

McGonagall, overhearing his question, said, "I received a letter from him yesterday saying he will be back on Friday."

Ginny leaned forward over her plate in McGonagall's direction and whispered, "Tell Harry where the owl was addressed from."

McGonagall turned again from her conversation with Sprout. "My dear girl, gossip is not welcome at the staff table."

"It isn't?" Ginny blurted. "That's news."

Harry slyly pointed out, "Gossip by students is not welcome at the staff table is what she really means."

"Don't you want to know where the letter came from?" Ginny prompted Harry.

"Do I?"

"Godric's Hollow," she returned with a grin.

"That's all right," Harry said.



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Harry waited in the tearoom with Kerry Ann while Rodgers gave Ginny her instructions and closed the door to the room. Others ambled in and leaned forward toward the large crystal ball in the center of the table. The scene inside it showed the inside of the training room where the glow of the single blue fairy light made Ginny resemble a wax figure as she stood and waited, unmoving.

Harry found this task of watching the testers highly and improperly voyeuristic, but recognized how valuable it was in evaluating each candidate. He felt even less comfortable with Ginny than he had with the other candidate that morning.

Ginny reacted well to the claustrophobia test and the blood test, but had an extreme reaction to the spiders. Harry had no idea she had the same difficulty as Ron in that area. At least she did not leap up from the floor, just sucked in her breath loudly, perhaps to swallow a scream. Harry found himself biting his nails as the test went on, something he never normally did.

“Something between you two?” Aaron finally asked, when Harry, jumped when the Ogre’s whip cracked.

“No,” Harry said, quickly. “Well, she’s an old friend. Like a younger sister really.”

Aaron chuckled. “That explains you chewing your fingers off over there.”

Kerry Ann said, “You’re handling this worse than she is, you know.”

“How would you feel watching your little brother go through that,” Harry asked.

Kerry Ann sat back with a smirk. “He’d deserve it,” she quipped.

Harry went back to chewing his thumbnail as the boa constrictor that he himself had instructed, slithered its way into the room. Ginny watched it with little interested, perhaps seeming insulted by such a test.

“Ick,” Aaron shuddered. “How can people like snakes?”

“This from a Slytherin,” Harry commented. He glanced at Vineet, who had not spoken at all, just sat watching the crystal ball in silence.

“Who’s playing evil wizard this time?” Blackpool asked.

“Reggie,” Tonks said. “Said I was too easy on Tridant. I think Reggie looks more like a vampire in his disguise than a dark wizard.”

“You’re too short to be a dark wizard,” Aaron said.

“You don’t have to be tall to face someone chained to the floor. How can they tell how tall you are?”

“Shhhh,” Kerry Ann said, since Ginny had just woken from the Sleeping Fog, unknowingly doped with truth serum.

“I am not in favor of this part,” Vineet stated.

Harry silently agreed. Ginny appeared small and helpless huddled there on the floor. Rodgers’ disguised appearance seemed to confuse her more than frighten her. She figured out quickly that she was still potioned, even though Rodgers lied when

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

she asked. She actually swore at him, which made Kerry Ann put her hand to her mouth in surprise and to suppress a laugh.

The tiny figure of Ginny was groggily sniping, "Yeah, you think I don't know what every bloody potion concoction known to wizardom feels like, then you don't know Fred and George Weasley very well."

Even Tonks laughed. "I don't think anyone has every told off the dark wizard before. People have tried to trip him, kick him even, but not tell him off."

Rodgers recovered though, and said, "Think you're strong enough to face anything, eh?"

"No, not anything," Ginny returned. "I think I'm still alive when there were a lot of chances not to be. That's all I think. You're only pretending to be dangerous."

He held the second cup of Veritaserum out then, earlier than normal. When she realized what it was, she snorted and said, "You think I'm lying about you looking like a fake dark wizard."

Rodgers had lost most of the tone of his persona, as he simply said, "Trusting us, this department, enough to swallow that, is part of the test. Most teenage girls think they have secrets but they are not real ones, just silly little embarrassments that they fear reliving."

Ginny took the cup in her hand, noisily trailing the chain on her wrist as she did so. She gave Rodgers a dubiously insulting raised eyebrow. "I had Voldemort inside my head for most of a school-year, you know." She did like most testers did and stared into the cup.

"Did you put that on your application?" Rodgers asked.

"You didn't ask it on your application," Ginny said, drinking down the cup.

The amused silence in the tearoom was broken by Tonks saying, "I should have done the dark wizard on this one."

When the test was over, Harry escorted Ginny to Hogwarts, since Mr. Weasley turned out to have been called away to a meeting. Ginny's face was wane, but she was doing better than Harry remembered doing.

At the lift, she shivered. "I can't believe everyone was watching."

"It won't seem so bad later. If you actually get accepted and are apprenticed, you won't have any secrets around here at all."

"I supposed," Ginny said, rubbing her hands over her arms. "I can make it back all right by myself."

"I have to take you. Someone has to take you."

"Take me for a pint, then," she insisted in worn tone. "That's what I really need."

Harry glanced back down the quiet corridor. "A quick one," he said quietly.

Ginny's face pulled into a grin. "Thanks, Harry."

## INHERITANCE



Friday, the current Auror apprentices were nearing the end of their lunch break when Tonks came in to tell Harry that he needed to go down to the Atrium. Harry glanced down at his training suit and rushed to the changing room, Tonks following. Harry pulled out his dress Auror robes and, holding them up under his chin, asked, “These?”

“Yeah, quickly, Harry,” Tonks insisted. “Minister thought you’d be down there already.”

Harry started to pull his robes over his training suit, when Tonks said, “Wait, you’re chains are wrong. You’re supposed to have a second chain.”

Harry, robes askew and half inside out, leaned one shoulder into the mirror to look at the decoration in question. “Does it matter that much?”

She helped him untangle and stared at his robes in consternation. “We never had an Advancement Ceremony for you four; Voldemort interrupted it. And yes, it matters; you look like a first-year.”

Harry found that prospective vision more debasing than expected. The last year had been a hard-earned achievement. “I could wear my regular dress robes. I brought those too.”

She was looking through the other lockers, even unspelling some that were locked. “Yeah, why don’t you. I can’t find another set with the right number. Munz’s must have been sent to his family.”

“His wouldn’t fit anyway,” Harry pointed out, feeling very odd about the prospect of wearing his dead fellow apprentice’s robes.

“Dress robes then, and let’s go.”

The other apprentices followed them down, chatting with an ease that had been lacking for weeks. “Harry must have a wardrobe full of medals by now,” Kerry Ann teased.

“Not really,” Harry insisted. He yet again straightened his robes, hoping they did not need a good cleaning.

“You look fine,” Tonks said.

Harry turned to Kerry Ann and then Aaron for confirmation of this, annoying Tonks who accused him of not trusting her opinion. “Come on, Valentino; you’re late.” She hauled him out of the lift, pulling his robes crooked again.

Minister Bones did not seem to care that Harry was late. She was beaming and looking over the busy crowd, which only had to fill half the Atrium, given that the podium and backdrop had been set up just in front of the fountain.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Harry waited behind the golden cloth backdrop as instructed. His fellows departed after a few last teasing jabs and headed around to the front. Harry was left alone. He felt nervous and wondered at it. Certainly, he was hopeful that being given a medal would make people less alarmed by his presence, but that did not seem to be what was bothering him. Harry tossed his robes straight again and checked for his wand. His other pocket was not empty either, it dropped heavily against his leg.

"Afternoon," Snape said, stepping up to him. At Harry's surprised glance, Snape explained, "I saw the other apprentices joining the audience and assumed you must have arrived as well."

"Yeah," Harry muttered, deep in other thoughts.

"Everything all right?"

"I kind of wish we weren't doing this," Harry said. That rang true inside of him. He stood on one foot and bounced his other heel impatiently.

"You are in need of this show of support, I think," Snape pointed out.

"I could get by without it," Harry said. He fingered his wand inside his pocket, swung his arms forward and back, and finally stopping all that, gave out a sigh.

Bones came to fetch him. "Ah, Professor Snape," she said. "We are about to begin, if you'll excuse us..."

She led Harry before the curtain and up to the podium. The faces of the crowd revealed curiosity more than any other emotion, and Harry had grown accustomed to fascinating people since the first time Hagrid introduced him in the Leaky Cauldron. Some faces, especially Mrs. Weasley's and Hermione's in the front row, were smiling broadly. Harry gave them a smile back and did not have much time to wonder where Mr. Weasley was as he strode out from behind the backdrop at that moment.

Harry glanced around at the other familiar faces of Candide, McGonagall and Ron and Bill Weasley as Minister Bones tapped the podium with her wand and began what she promised would be a short speech.

"We are here this afternoon to honor one of the Ministry of Magic's most dedicated servants for good..." She went on in this vein, giving everyone a history lesson that they almost certainly did not need. Harry tried very hard not to fidget as her speech wound on for many minutes. Finally, she gestured off to the side, to where Rodgers stood waiting, prompting him to carry over the small trunk Harry had seen in Bones office. Bones was saying, "... by this small token, we today recognize Mr. Potter for his steadfast..."

Harry did not hear what came next. A wave of aversion washed through him in parallel with a realization of utter clarity: he did not want this ceremony because it represented such an irresistibly tempting target.

The trunk clattered to the floor as Harry grabbed Bones' robes and shoved her

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down behind the podium. A blast smacked into the heavy ancient wood, cracking it deafeningly. Harry pulled his wand to put up a block, but Rodgers already had the Minister firmly behind himself and was scooting her to the edge of the curtain. A shot arced out from nowhere in their direction but Rodgers' block held. Bones had her own wand out now, but let Rodgers handle the spells. People were screaming and running for the hearths and the rear corner of the Atrium where Apparition was allowed.

A twisting, ill feeling took over Harry's chest as he looked out over the surging mass of people; he was helpless to do anything. Another arc came from elsewhere and the crowd heaved in panic from the spot where it struck. More screaming followed as Harry tried to track the movement of his friends, but they were swallowed up. Snape Harry found easily; he had pushed a group toward the hearths beside the raised platform and along with Mrs. Weasley, was trying to provide cover for their escape. A young witch leapt up and ran across the platform. Harry, feeling that warning aversion, caught her with one arm and spelled a block to protect her. When the onslaught ended, he pushed her to keep running. Thinking that her motion drawing the spell may not have been a coincidence, Harry ran to the other rear corner of the platform and yes, he did indeed attract another shot, which knocked him to his knees behind a Titan Block. He could probably keep this one's attention, but the other weapon was still randomly picking off others in the frantic, shifting crowd.

As Harry ran, the thing in his pocket slapped against his thigh. He pulled it out. In the bright Atrium he could better read the writing scratched into the black wax: Monster Mash a simple Alohomora will suffice. Ill helplessness coiled violently around Harry's heart again. "If you ever made magic that was obnoxiously big and disruptive," Harry said to the absent twins, "let this be the time." He dropped the disk, took two quick steps back and hit it with the prescribed spell.

The rush of air nearly knocked Harry flat. Two massive two-legged creatures had surged upward out of the disk until their heads skimmed the ceiling. Harry scrambled back off of the platform and gaped up, as many others did, at the giant green ogres in sequin suits who seemed to be dancing to the sparkles of one small lone mirror ball on the high Atrium ceiling. Harry pushed himself to his feet and joined Snape at the nearest hearth. Snape shot him a glance of sharp confusion and then shouted and pointed behind him to urge the next panicked person to enter the hearth.

But Harry's diversion seemed to be working. The spell arcs now flew high and harmlessly over the crowd's head to pass through the bizarre apparitions, scattering their magic sequins but not much else. Harry moved to the next hearth, where Ron, Hermione, and McGonagall were playing traffic cops. She waved him on that they was all right and next he found two of his fellows, protecting a larger group that was

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far more unruly. Tonks and Aaron were carrying a fallen wizard to the Apparition corner, shouting to clear a path. Harry rushed their way and ahead of them, clearing a path easily.

By the time the Atrium was emptied of visitors and the two ceramic spelling devices, as well as the disco ogres had spent themselves and crashed to the floor, leaving behind only dust and a few stray silver sequins, Harry himself was spent. He sat heavily on the edge of the platform and let his arms go slack. A hand fell on his shoulder and he looked up at Snape with a wry expression.

“As long as you are all right,” Snape said.

Harry stared at his burned sleeve. “I must have got grazed, but it doesn’t hurt.”

An argument reached their ears, approaching fast. “If they portkeyed in, there MUST be a record,” Bones fumed to the Head of Magical Transportation.

“There is no record; I just double-checked myself,” the man said, striding hard to keep up with her, despite not wearing heels.

Bones made a noise of disgust and stopped beside the burned curtain to survey the Atrium. Her eyes made it around to Harry and, loudly so it would carry, she said, “Good to see you survived, Mr. Potter.”

“You too, Madam Bones,” Harry replied.

After her inspection, she stepped over and held out her hand until Harry held out his. She dropped the medal into his hand, letting the ribbon fall slack, saying, “This is yours, I believe.” She started to step away but stopped and asked, “That crazy... thing... that was a Weezes device of some kind, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, Minister,” Harry replied, uncertain if she was hoping for that answer or not.

She walked away, but added over the clacking of her heels, “You deserve the medal, Harry, but it is too dangerous to give it to you where anyone else can see.”

Harry stared at the profile of Merlin engraved on the medal. He dropped his hand and looked over the scorch marks on the floor. For some reason seeing them make his arm hurt. “Good thing more people weren’t here. Good thing Candide got away. Did you hear if more than two died?” he asked.

“I did not,” Snape replied.

Harry sat another minute before he pushed himself to his feet. “I’m sure there are things needing to be done.” That helpless feeling was still following him and guilt was now competing with it. He hoped to get distracted from all serious emotion.

Snape grabbed hold of his undamaged sleeve, gesturing at the other scorched one. “You are certain that is minor?”

Harry glanced down at his arm and tugged his layered sleeve up. The only part that still held together was where the decorative stitching reinforced the fabric. He tore it free, exposing a row of black marks marring the flesh of his forearm. When he



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lifted his arm, the same tattered scorching showed on the side of his robes. "I can't feel it."

"You will shortly, I'm sure. To St. Mungo's with you."

"Don't you have a poultice in your potions cabinet for it or something?" Harry asked, not wanting to visit the Wizard hospital if he could avoid it.

Snape lifted Harry's arm gently by the wrist and looked more closely at the equally spaced row of oval burns, arranged as though he had been hit by something that had been waving when it struck. Snape shook his head. "They are deep and worse than you realize." He released Harry and added, "St. Mungo's is a supremely wise idea right now if you have any injury at all."

"How's that? It must be mad there." Harry wondered aloud, now dreading the pain that must be hovering there in his arm, trying to reach his brain.

"Come along; it will become clear later."

Snape sent a silver message through the floor and began leading Harry away across the debris-strewn atrium to the corner where they could depart. Before they made it, running feet sounded by the gate and Tonks came across to them.

"Harry, why didn't say you were hurt?" she asked accusingly, clearly unnerved.

"He did not know," Snape calmly pointed out.

"Do you want me to come along?" she asked.

Harry nodded, but Snape mysteriously said, "You can take the midnight shift."

Tonks straightened but then, looking more official, nodded and gave Harry's shoulder a pat before she ran off again.

Harry's asking, "What's the midnight shift?" was interrupted by Snape Apparating them to hospital.

## CHAPTER FORTY



# WOUNDED FUTURE

As they weaved their way through the crowded and shifting waiting room, Harry began to feel quite unwell, and was looking forward to lying down. The world melted into a blur while Snape spoke to the greeningwitch and lifted Harry's arm for her inspection.

Rita Skeeter approached, parting the fog of Harry's mind. "Well," she snorted, "don't tell me you were injured too?"

Harry simply stared at her, unable to comprehend her meaning. He still held his arm out of his torn robe sleeve. Skeeter lifted it with quick confidence and probably meant to rub at one of the black marks, but her thumb broke through into crackling black flesh. A noise of distress escaped Harry as, at her prodding, the pain leapt the gap of his shock. The two of them stared at each other in surprise. Snape pushed himself between them and made a motion as though to go for his wand, but he was hampered by holding Harry up.

Harry was quickly led away, aware only of the daggers seemingly stabbing his arm, not the daggers Snape sent Skeeter's way with his eyes. After a tormenting journey down corridors and up the lift, they eventually arrived at Shankwell's treatment room. Rodgers was sitting on the table, but he leapt down when he saw Harry and helped lead him over to take his place.

"What happened, Potter?"

Harry could not find a response, but Snape said, "Delayed reaction." He moved to the potions cabinet in the corner and pushed bottles around until he found what he was looking for. He poured a dose into a small crystal tumbler from on top of the

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cabinet and brought it to Harry.

“Don’t you think the Healer...” Rodgers began.

Snape explained in unusually rapid speech. “It cannot wait.”

Harry drank down the tumbler held up to his mouth and soon nothing at all mattered. His arm still hurt, sort of, but it seemed very unimportant.

Healer Shankwell returned moments later and he easily shifted to working on his new patient.

“Did you give him something?” Shankwell asked as he charmed a tankard of salt water so it would flow more slowly.

“I gave him a swallow of Misinguish,” Snape stated as though very uninterested in arguing. “From your cabinet, there.”

Harry lay unmoving, uncaring, as the charred burns were cleaned and salved and wrappings put on them. Snape stood beside the table, assisting as needed since the Healer was alone. Rodgers stood at the head of the table, watching.

Harry spoke but no one could understand him. The Healer leaned very close and then relayed his message, “He says he is glad you two are not fighting.”

After that, Harry was out cold. He awoke in a large, dark ward. The floating fairy lights hovered close to the ceiling against the wall, over each bed, only emitting a faint glow. Their slight movements made Harry feel as though he were under water, staring up at buoys floating on the surface.

“Hey, Harry,” Tonks whispered from close-by.

Harry’s chest tightened at the sound of her voice. “How long have you been here?” he asked.

“Since midnight,” she said with a smile that he could read in the dim shape of her round cheek. “The midnight shift’, remember? Severus didn’t want you left unguarded.”

Harry moved to sit up, sending a stab of pain through his arm. He ignored it and adjusted his pillow to lean back against it. He studied his arm, which was wrapped in white bandage from the tips of his fingers to his shoulder. “I don’t even know when I got hit,” he said.

“That happens,” she assured him. “Healer came by an hour ago. Said you were going to be healing for a while.”

“Great,” Harry breathed sarcastically. “At least my wand hand is all right,” he said, stretching his right hand out and then clenching it to check that it was working properly. “How long do I have to stay here?”

“Well, you need a lot more treatments, they said, every few hours. They did two while you were sleeping.”

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Whispering, because the patient on the next bed had snorted in his sleep and rolled over, Harry said, “Tonks, I have things I need to do.” She nodded in understanding, and he added, dropping his voice more, “I have to get this bloke.” He sighed in frustration and rested his head on the wooden headboard.

“There are chunks missing from your arm, Harry, and a chunk out of your side.” She sounded distressed now as she spoke, making Harry relent a little. She leaned over and gave him a kiss, which really made him relent. “Does it hurt... your arm?”

“A little, but it’s all right,” he assured her. “What time does Severus come back?” he asked, leaning forward, hoping for another kiss.

“Seven. A few more hours.”

Harry lifted the covers. “You could join me...”

“Behave yourself.”

“No... really.” He glanced around the room. “Everyone’s asleep.”

“You should be too,” she said, sitting back and crossing her arms.

He reached a hand out to rub her knee. “We could Apparate away...”

“Go to sleep,” she whispered. “Next time I am not taking the midnight shift.”

Harry gave her a mock frown and gave up on teasing her. Unfortunately, his merriment was the only thing keeping the weight of the attack, the prophecy, and his frustration at bay, so his frown grew into a real one.

“Come on, Harry, keep your chin up,” she coaxed. When Harry did not react, she added, “Hey, look on the bright side, only one patient insisted on being moved when you were brought into the ward.”

Harry gave her a very dark look.

“I thought that was good. Look, there are twenty-some people in here.” She waved her arm along the row behind her.

Harry tipped his head back, making it clunk audibly against the headboard, and returned to staring at the fairy lights.

Defensively, Tonks muttered, “I thought that was good, just one. Oh, and Ron left a note for you. Your friends all stopped by, but the staff would only let them in two at a time.”

Harry unfolded the note and squinted at it in the low light before shaking a Lumos from his wand to see better.

*Bit of excitement, Harry. Just like old times. Hope you got that medal in the end. Terrible to get cheated out of it, since you definitely earned it. Just receiving it, you earned it, funny enough. Won't be able to stop*

## WOUNDED FUTURE

*by again until evening tomorrow – have extended duty at the bank due to a rise in the new security appraisal the Goblins are using here now.*

Harry finished the letter and refolded it, grateful his friends were all there to help and that none of them had been hurt.



Early in the morning, Harry was roused from his half-sleep by his fellow visiting. Aaron took a chair from across the room and sat close beside Harry. He glanced at Tonks and said, “How ya’ doin’? Lucky you’re here. Rodgers seemed eager to talk to you this morning.”

“He could have talked to me yesterday,” Harry said, remembering his trainer here at the hospital at some point.

“He tried. Said you were doped out of your gourd.” Aaron watched the doorway. “I expect he’ll be here shortly.”

“That’s fine; I’ll talk to him.” He glanced at Tonks, who shrugged.

Rodgers did arrive five minutes later, carrying a notebook and looking serious. He started in with a question, “How did you know the illusions would distract the devices?”

Harry replied, “I didn’t know. I didn’t even know what the disk was.” They stared at each other. Harry went on, “I saw the aim of one of those things follow a witch who ran toward the back curtain and then successfully drew its fire onto myself. But I couldn’t draw both of them to just shoot at me. I had to try something else.”

“Harry gets very lucky with his guesses,” Tonks pointed out from where she leaned against the wall after giving up her chair.

Rodgers frowned thoughtfully.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked.

“We don’t want it to look too pat; as though you may have been involved.”

“What?” Harry asked weakly.

“We’re being precautionary here, Potter. Ministry has to tell this story with the right explanations attached is all. I need to understand them to explain them to the Minister.” His gaze grew sharper. “I am not accusing you of anything,” he pointed out sharply.

“Sorry, sir,” Harry said, dropping his gaze.

Rodgers flatly said, “It does help that you’re injured. I don’t normally say that, believe me.” He flipped through his notebook. “Well, we’ll see when the papers come

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out this morning. Minister hoped to steer the stories this morning, but you were unconscious until after they went to press. We'll see how it goes."

Harry's memory teased at him. "I saw Skeeter yesterday, here."

"How'd it go? Did you talk to her?" Rodgers asked.

Harry used his good arm to scratch his head. Across from him a man with four eyes was getting two of them examined while gesturing to the Healer with hands of ten fingers each. Harry shook himself and tried to remember better. "I don't think it went so well. I... don't think she believed I was hurt."

Rodgers slapped his notebook closed and stood. "Yup, doesn't surprise me." He nodded to Tonks and departed.

Tonks retook her chair. "You don't remember what Skeeter said?"

"Something sarcastic about my really being hurt." Harry hesitated, eyes darting over the far wall as he tried to piece together spotty memories. "Um, I think Severus tried to pull his wand on her. I don't remember too much."

Aaron and Tonks shared a look of alarm, which Harry did not see as he settled back onto his stack of pillows. "I didn't get any dinner. Do you think breakfast is coming soon?" he plaintively asked.

Harry was finishing breakfast when Snape appeared, newspaper rolled under his arm.

"Is that the Prophet?" Aaron asked.

Snape lay the paper out across Harry's debris-strewn breakfast tray. The headline read: More Chaos within Ministry's Own Spell-Protected Building. And below, the article's only mention of Harry was that his unorthodox thinking had probably saved quite a few lives.

"Hm," Harry muttered.

"That's excellent," Tonks said, sounding very relieved.

"Why would anyone think I was involved?" Harry asked, annoyed.

"You knew the attack was coming before anyone else did," Tonks replied.

"I could feel it; that's why I knew that," Harry pointed out.

"We all know that Harry, but Curse-Nose is pretty rare."

"Curse-Nose?" Harry echoed.

"Yeah," Aaron said. "My great aunt could smell curses."

"I don't smell them," Harry pointed out smartly, finding annoyance coming on quickly. "I feel them."

Aaron shrugged. "Same thing: you know about them before anyone else does."

Healer Shankwell approached then, guiding a floating tray of tins. "Time to renew the Thewsolve."

## WOUNDED FUTURE

Tonks and Aaron departed, leaving Snape at Harry's bedside across from the Healer. He suspiciously eyed the other occupants of the ward a good three rounds until he was satisfied they were harmless, and Harry was glad to have him there, so he did not have to think about anything.

"When can I go home?" Harry asked when the last of the fresh bandage was being tied into a bow under his armpit.

Shankwell appeared doubtful. "A while yet." When Harry groaned, the Healer asked, "Tired of us already?"

Harry nodded.

"If you really feel up to departing, you can return every six hours for treatment. But only if you feel confident enough to Apparate. We can't have you missing any appointments."

Harry glanced around the ward, at the curious faces who looked away when he looked their way. "Yeah, I'm good," he said with forced confidence.

After Harry signed out, Snape took him to Hermione's flat. Harry said, "I can't wait 'till the house is fixed." Hermione stepped out of her room as he said this. "No offense, Hermione."

"None taken." She gave him a long hug. "I came to see you twice yesterday, but you probably don't remember."

Harry shook his head and tried not to lean on her. "I think I need to sit down"

Hermione cleared off the couch while Snape went off to fetch a few potions. Harry fell asleep but was startled awake a short time later by Snape touching him on the arm.

"It was a little early to depart the hospital, I think," he said calmly. He poured out a small glass of something. "Arm bothering you?"

Harry nodded and struggled to sit up. Snape helped haul him up by his good arm and handed him the glass. After drinking it, Harry leaned his head forward onto his palm, which was propped on his leg.

"Harry?" Snape prompted in concern.

"I can't take care of the prophecy like this."

Snape's hand brushed Harry's head. "It may still work out for the best."

"What's with the optimism?" Harry accusingly asked. He cocked his head to the side to look up at him. "I count on you to worry about every last little thing in order to guard against it. Don't get all everything-will-work-out on me."

"You are young; you lack understanding in how these things work, Harry. And I rarely have seen you fail."

Harry rolled his eyes and sat back, struggling to come up with an argument when it was clear Snape intended to forcefully instill Harry with faith in himself, even at the

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cost of his own usual pessimistic viewpoint. Crookshanks leapt up on the corner of the armrest and stared at them. “Really, Severus, I think you haven’t been watching closely enough. I failed yesterday to stop the ceremony. I should have known it would attract Merton.”

“I do hope you are not nursing yet a new source of guilt.”

“They were there for me,” Harry said, forgetting himself and gesturing painfully with his injured arm.

“They were there because the Minister of Magic asked them to be.”

“Yeah, but because of me. They would not have been there if it had not been for me.”

“In the end, everyone takes their own risks in life, Harry.”

Harry wanted to argue more, but he was too exhausted to. He closed his eyes but opened them again immediately. “Are you sure you’re you?”

Snape’s left brow rose dangerously. “I will try not to take that as an insult.”

“Yeah, well, you’re different,” Harry griped as he lay down onto his side to get comfortable for a real nap. “It’s confusing.” After another pause, Harry challenged, “If you thought I wasn’t ready to leave hospital, why’d you let me?”

“I did not want to have to potion you again, just in case,” Snape explained. Harry turned his head up to look at him and he clarified. “I was afraid that extreme pain may cause you to open the interstice to the Dark Plane. That is why I gave you such a heavy overdose.”

Harry lay his head back down, muttering, “Now that’s the Severus I know.”

Snape woke Harry six hours later. He found his robes and helped him into them.

“Do not use your left arm,” Snape chastised him.

“Yes, Dad,” Harry breathed.

Snape’s razor sharp tone continued. “Do you not remember the Healer’s instructions?”

Harry allowed his cloak to be swung over his shoulders for him, despite his dislike of needing so much help. “It’s hard to remember to follow them. It doesn’t hurt so much anymore.”

“Well, that is something. Let’s go.”

They waited in the corridor outside of Shankwell’s treatment room. People passed by, many gave Harry sympathetic glances. When the corridor was empty briefly, Harry said, “Well, that’s a change.”

“Best public relations move you could have made, really,” Snape dryly observed. “Had you not been injured, I fear what we would be dealing with right this moment.”

Harry shook his head in disgust and leaned harder against the wall.



## WOUNDED FUTURE

Shankwell re-salved the deep grooves that had just started to fill in with new muscle and then re-banded them. The Healer said, "You have to keep that arm out of service. Looks like you haven't been."

"All I did was sleep," Harry argued.

Back at Hermione's flat, Harry stared down at Crookshanks looking up at him and said, "I should go see what I can do at the Ministry."

"You will stay here and rest," Snape countered.

"How can I do that? We're too shorthanded." He went over to Kali's cage to let her out. She hobbled up his right arm to his shoulder, clearly favoring a leg. "She's hurt."

"Of course she is hurt," Snape said. "You are hurt."

Harry plucked her off of his shoulder, to hold her up for inspection. Snape loudly said, "Uh, uh. Not with that hand."

Harry transferred her to his right hand and pressed his left against his side with the intent of leaving it there. His pet spread her wings and flapped for balance. "Her wings are all right." He carried her to the couch and sat down. "Severus, I can't just sit here for six hours at a time," he complained.

Snape scooped up a stack of four books from the floor before the bookshelf and dropped them on the couch beside Harry. "Those are yours, are they not?" At Harry's nod, he went on, "You must have readings to do."

"I'm about a week behind," Harry admitted, aborting using his left hand to lift the top book. After juggling his pet around, he could use his right hand to open the book and prop it on his legs. He read a few lines and asked, "You aren't going to stay all day; are you?" Harry did not at all want to be baby sat that long.

"I was considering it."

Harry returned to his book, saying, "Candide's all right and everything?"

"She is fine. She believes she is growing accustomed to the unexpected."

Hermione returned, arms full of grocery sacks. "How are you Harry? Professor. Thought we should have some food around for once," she breathlessly explained. "Some owls arrived too, Harry. Did you see them?"

Harry moved to stand, but Snape beat him to it. "Really, Severus, I'm perfectly able to fetch my own post," Harry complained, but he accepted the letters and held one up, resisting using both hands to open it. The return address indicated it was from Suze. Harry tried holding the envelope between his knees and prying at the gummed flap with his right hand. That sort of worked. Snape stood, arms crossed, watching him, which did not help. More rebellion worked its way to the surface of Harry's mood. "I can get by, Severus. Really. I can make it on my own to my evening appointment."

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Snape, unaffected, bowed his head and swung around to look at Hermione meaningfully before Disapparating.

"I'll make some lunch," Hermione said, to break the long silence that followed.

"I'll help," Harry said, levering himself to his feet, while holding his left hand tight to his side.

"You'll not," Hermione countered.

"I can help with a wand," Harry pointed out smartly, not in the mood to be babied by anyone.

"Use it to open your post, then. I can cook."

Before dinner, Harry took himself to St. Mungo's for his next appointment, making a point of maneuvering into his cloak without help. Part of him wondered at his stubbornness about accepting assistance, but he quickly shook off that introspection.

During his visit with the Healer, he received an earful for continuing to use his left hand. Before Harry was allowed to depart, he had to accept having his arm put in a canvas sling. As Harry waited for the lift on the way out, he repeatedly adjusted his collar to get the itchy strap off of his neck. A familiar voice greeted him when the lift doors opened.

"Harry!" It was Elizabeth, his neighbor, using crutches with difficulty, her foot in a large Muggle cast.

Harry stepped back and guided her out from the front, while her mother helped from behind. Harry let the lift doors close without him. Elizabeth's mother greeted Harry and said she would go check in directly with the Healer.

"What happened?" Harry asked Elizabeth.

She shrugged with her crutches and then tucked them back under her arms. "I got stepped on when the crowd in the Atrium got crazy."

"You were there?" Harry asked in surprise. "I didn't see you."

"It was crowded, and we were near the back. I talked my mum into it at the last minute."

Harry rather than release her, moved his hand up to grasp her arm. "I'm glad you weren't hurt worse," he said, feeling an awful weight pressing down on him.

"It not much really." She lifted her casted foot easily. "Just two little bones. Dad insisted on going to the Muggle surgeon's, but after seeing me hobbling around for a day, Mum insisted on getting it taken care of properly." She laughed then. "Mum brought the x-rays and the greetingwitch downstairs couldn't believe what they were."

Harry grinned too; thought about recalling the lift; thought about leading her down to the Healer and decided on that, since her mother had not yet returned. He found himself unexpectedly drawn to Elizabeth. She did not have any makeup on

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and her abundant brown hair was bundled loosely on the back of her head, so she looked far more approachable. “Come on. I’ll take you down to your mum,” Harry heard himself say while offering a hand for balance.

As they walked, Elizabeth commented about how unfortunate everything seemed to be lately in the wizarding world, but noted that Harry’s house appeared to be getting repaired. “The slate for the roof had been delivered last time I walked by, and the hole in the wall is half re-stoned.”

Harry made noises of ascent but in reality was wondering where these feelings were coming from and then feeling bad because he was feeling them for someone other than Tonks.

They arrived in the alcove where Elizabeth’s mother waited. Harry left his friend off there, with what turned out to be a curt goodbye. Harry then violated both the advice of his Healer and his adoptive father and Apparated to the alleyway beside the temporary Ministry entrance.

Harry was greeted warmly by all he encountered on the way to the Auror’s office. When he arrived, Rodgers said, “You aren’t cleared for duty already, are you?” He sounded hopeful that Harry might reply in the affirmative, but Harry shook his head.

Tonks was at her desk. Harry approached and when she looked up at him in question, was relieved to find far more warm feelings for her than the strange tingle he had been getting with Elizabeth.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” Tonks said, sounding official, which put a dent in Harry’s feelings even though he knew that it should not.

“I wanted see how... things were,” Harry explained. In reality he thought he had to prove to himself he was not somehow cheating on Tonks. “I can’t stay long. I can’t let Severus catch me here.” In fact, the thought of that gave Harry serious worries.

“How are you healing?” Shacklebolt asked as he came in. He set something down and started to leave again but waited for Harry’s reply.

“Fine. Slow.”

“You missed the announcement this morning,” Rodgers said to Harry after a pause. “We have the partial N.E.W.T. results back for the applicants who were waiting on them.”

“How did Ginny do?”

Rodgers frowned.

“Askunk?” Harry then asked.

Rodgers tilted his head. “A little better than Ms. Weasley. Her second round of testing had been delayed. We are probably going to cancel it, invite them both to apply next year. Weasley won’t have to redo the second round, but her written scores need to rise.”

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It was Harry's turn to frown. He had urged Askunk to apply. "Mr. Weasley will be happy to hear that. Is Aaron around?"

"He's out on a call."

Harry stood between the door and Tonk's chair, thinking, for several minutes. "I need to go," he said. He had another letter to write, it seemed.



Harry had to use a sticking charm to get his parchment to lay still on the table so he could write with one hand. But he replied to Suze, who wanted to be sure he was really all right from the incident in the Atrium. And he tried to write a letter to Askunk, but found himself struggling. He finally explained his dilemma to Hermione.

Harry said, "She has a real chip on her shoulder about not getting a fair chance to be an Auror because she sorted into Slytherin."

"That's ridiculous," Hermione said, setting a heaping plate of meatballs on the table beside large bowl of noodles that was already steaming there. She seemed to have cooked for six people even though there were only two of them eating.

"I told her that. And Aaron's been writing to her with advice." Harry stared at his nearly blank letter. "Maybe I should just go talk to her."

"Really?" Hermione asked. "You think you need to do that?"

Harry scrunched the letter into a ball with his right hand and tossed it into the rubbish bin. "This is how we make enemies. We offend people, even if we aren't trying to. Maybe it's worth going out of your way sometimes to avoid it."

Hermione pushed the plate of chops in Harry's direction and sat down across from him.

As Harry ate, he kept glancing around the room. "I keep expecting Severus to just show up, checking on me."

"I doubt he'll do that. You made it pretty clear you didn't want him around."

Harry stared at her. "I didn't. I just didn't want to be babied, that's all. He should be taking care of Candide anyway, with a kid on the way and all."

Hermione's bite of mashed potatoes sprayed far enough that Harry jumped back, jarring his arm.

With exaggerated calm, she asked, "Did I hear you right?"

"Yup," Harry said. "Don't pass it around. I expect he plans to not do that himself."

Hermione laughed. "Boy or girl?"

"I have no idea."

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The following day passed slowly in forced idleness. The flat was empty except for Harry and three pets, who stared at him far too much. Harry closed the book he had been half-reading and took his cloak down off the rack. He arranged the cloak so it fell to cover his sling and Disapparated to Diagon Alley.

The alley was quieter than expected, given how warm the day was. Nearly every window was open and more noise floated into the alley from within the buildings than from without. Harry strode toward the Post Office, gathering long looks and turned heads as he went. He mostly ignored everyone, but he did warmly greet the woman exiting the Post Office, who probably had not intended to hold the door for him, but did so by virtue of having frozen in place.

Harry wandered along the long counter to where the battered Wizard Register sat chained. Harry flipped open the heavily creased pages and scanned the As. He noted Askunk's address, confusingly written as Nosehill, Wembley, but Harry had grown used to translating old Wizard locations into new. The book groaned as he closed it, and seemed to wilt in relief at getting a break from holding itself together.

Half an hour later, after much walking and a bit of hunting for house numbers, Harry used the dragon-shaped knocker on the door of a low house with ubiquitous dark brown paint over the siding, trim, and door.

An unusually long time passed, but Sylvia Askunk opened the door and propped her hand on her hip. She had grown since Harry had last seen her standing up, she may even be taller than him, but three stone lighter for certain.

"What d'ya want?" she asked flatly.

Harry had not really planned out what he was going to say. He said, "Just wanted to tell you I was... well, sorry you didn't get into the program this year."

"Yeah, well, I didn't expect to," she muttered. She glanced inside before pulling the door closed behind her and stepping out onto the stoop. She stood crookedly, long arms crossed, red hair blowing in the breeze.

"You weren't that far from getting in. You should re-apply next year," Harry pointed out.

"What, go through all that again?"

"You didn't even get to the worst of it," Harry said.

"Little Ginny Weasley did," Askunk commented.

"Ginny's application got deferred as well, you know. She didn't get accepted either."

This broke Askunk's annoyed expression, although it did not alter her difficult

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tone. “Really? Darling Gryffindor daughter of the department head didn’t get accepted?”

Harry found the edge of his patience. “Look,” he said firmly. “Your attitude isn’t doing anything except hurting yourself. No one is up against you but you, and the sooner you realize that the sooner you’ll get what you want.” She stared at him as though surprised by his outburst. Harry went on. “You did well, just not quite good enough. Look at Aaron. He wanted to be an Auror badly enough that he worked at it for five years. This was just your first try. And honestly it doesn’t matter what you decide you want to do; this attitude of yours is going to get in the way. It would get in the way of scooping ice creams at Fortescues just as much as becoming an Auror.”

Harry backed up a step. He had not meant to come out with such a diatribe and worried that he had done more harm than good. Dropping his gaze, he scuffed his foot on the walk and said, “Well, I should go...”

His starting to turn was interrupted by her saying, “You came here on duty just to yell at me?”

“No,” Harry insisted, gesturing more widely. “I just wanted to say that I thought you were good enough to get in, but the requirements are really strict. And I’m not on duty; I’m not allowed until my arm heals.” His arm, which was starting to ache from his moving it around as he talked. He pushed his cloak aside to show her his sling. “Which reminds me that I should really go.”

This time, his departure was halted by her grudgingly saying, “Hope your arm gets better.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, maybe if I win next year’s dueling tournament.”

“That couldn’t hurt, but it’s the books you need to spend more time with. I know it’s boring sometimes, but to be an Auror, you need to be a walking law book and a walking filing manual and on top of that, memorize hundreds of evidence collection protocols and...” He made the mistake of waving his arms again.

She apparently ignored what he said. “Are they going to hold the dueling tournament again next year, given that Voldemort isn’t really demised?”

Harry had not thought of that. Temporarily befuddled, he said, “I don’t know. I’ll definitely push to keep the tournament. The picnic can go.”

She seemed to have relented somewhat. “Don’t like picnics?”

“Not in my honor. Ordinary picnics are fine.”

Harry returned to the Leaky Cauldron to use the Floo to get to Hogwarts, figuring if he was going to ignore the health of his arm to talk to a Slytherin he barely knew, he should also console Ginny.

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Harry encountered McGonagall in the Entrance Hall. “Ah, Harry, well timed. Ms. Weasley is in the tower, shouting down her father just this minute.”

As Harry approached the Fat Lady, he picked up the gist of the conversation drifting out of the tower. Mr. Weasley was unwisely sticking to the argument that this was for the best. Harry’s entrance instantly quieted things. Ginny turned her red face away and stalked to the stairs leading to the girls’ dormitory.

“Want me to talk to her, sir?” Harry asked his boss.

Mr. Weasley straightened his errant hair. “Yes, please,” he said. “And then you go straight home to rest, like you should be,” he added before exiting, sounding as though Harry were one of his own children.

Ginny turned after they were alone. “How’s the arm?” she asked.

“Getting better. How’s the ego?”

She rolled her eyes and sat heavily on the armrest of a ragged overstuffed chair. “Not good. Dad said they accepted that doofus, Tridant.”

“Really? I hadn’t heard that.”

“He was such a weenie, giving everyone pointless advice they didn’t want. Yick.”

Harry chuckled. “We’ll beat that out of him.” At her doubtful expression, Harry said, “Really. Rodgers is good at that. It happens to everyone. I’m kind of looking forward to seeing it happen to Tridant, in fact.” He grinned faintly.

“What’d they have to beat out of you?” Ginny asked.

“Nothing, as far as I know, but they tried hard to anyway.”

“Really?” Ginny cringed as she asked.

“Really. You have to be molded to fit into the team. Most people who are really good don’t want to be part of a team; they want to go it alone. And by the way, you did really well on everything but the written. Retake it next year. Work your tail off studying in between.”

She huffed and said, “I thought if I passed the second part I was in.”

“They gave you a chance to take the second part based on your performance during the battles. But that didn’t mean you were in for certain.”

She frowned. “Now I have to figure out what I’m going to do with myself.”

“I thought you wanted to work for the twins?”

“I don’t know,” she moodily said.

“It would keep you on your toes. Keep your instinct for survival well tuned...” Harry teasingly pointed out.

Ginny laughed, but it faded. “I don’t think they want me working for them, really.” She stared at Harry thoughtfully. “Maybe I just won’t give them a choice.”

“That’s the spirit.”

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At Harry's next appointment, Shankwell threatened to check him back into the hospital ward.

"Do I have to dip that arm in solid plaster of paris to force you to give it a rest?" He facetiously asked Harry.

"I don't use it, really," Harry insisted. His arm was currently resting on a floating platform while Thewsolve was reapplied to the gouges which each time were a little less deep.

Shankwell dabbed his fingers into the salve and spread it onto the next untreated spot. "It's going to scar," he threatened. When Harry failed to respond to this, he added, "It's not going to heal as strong as it was. This is a nasty curse you were hit with and I can tell by the pattern that it leaked through a modulated block. You're lucky to be alive and you're taking healing very casually." He went back to smearing salve. "Though I haven't seen a boy your age who does care properly," he grumbled, "let alone one playing Auror."

"I'm not just playing Auror," Harry retorted, stung.

"Are you a full Auror already then?" Shankwell shot back. He looked poorly slept, which probably explained his short temper, but Harry's temper was even shorter.

"No. Are you really a Healer then?"

Shankwell's left brow rose and he stared at Harry in clear offense. "Excuse me?"

"If you were a real Healer I wouldn't have had to heal my father myself," Harry said, anger taking his caution with it.

Shankwell continued to stare at him, though with more of a keen expression than an offended one. Harry dropped his head and said. "Sorry." He glanced at his arm. "Are we almost done?" he asked in a much more conciliatory tone.

Shankwell finished spreading on salve and wrapped Harry's arm in fresh bandage. "We may not be done. We'd like to know what you did." He set his work tray aside and stood before Harry looking rather immovable.

Harry said, "I didn't want to lose him," as though that explained everything. To Harry it did.

"We certainly understand that," he conceded without conceding in general. Silence fell, Shankwell asked, "The spontaneous partial recovery of Mrs. Longbottom have something to do with this?"

Harry replied, "I needed someone to practice on."

Shankwell's head tilted violently as though appalled.

"I didn't hurt her," Harry insisted.

"You left her in an odd state, don't you think?"



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“There’s nothing left to do. That’s all there is of her now.” Harry made the mistake of gesturing with both hands as he spoke. “It’s all fused together. I unwove what I could.”

Shankwell grabbed Harry’s left hand and snapped, “Stop using that.” He roughly handed Harry the sling. “You’re done.” As Harry stood up, Shankwell with hot anger said, “Don’t ever touch a patient in this hospital again without permission.”

“I just wanted to keep my father around,” Harry argued. “I – ”

“You’re finished. Get out,” Shankwell repeated, voice hard.

Harry stared at him before collecting the sling and its straps into a ball and stuffing it into his pocket. This sudden shift in Shankwell’s attitude had startled Harry. He almost tried to make his excuse again that he had not hurt anyone, but held back, not wanting to inspire more anger. He put his head down and said, “Thank you,” on his way out.



That night, Harry woke from a bad dream just before the alarm went off to remind him of his next treatment. Hermione came to her door and blinked into the lamplight.

“Is something wrong?” she asked in confusion.

“Just my six-hour alarm,” Harry said.

Hermione scrubbed at her eyes and sleepily said, “I thought I heard something else.”

She must have heard him struggling in his dream. “I have to go,” Harry said, finding his robes, which he simply slipped on over his pyjamas.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Hermione asked, sounding more alert.

“No.”

At St. Mungo’s, Harry hoped Shankwell had relented a little, but it was hard to tell though his hard-nosed attitude. Harry submitted to treatment in silence. He had been very careful with his arm so there was no reason to reprimand him for that again. At the door, Harry glanced back and wondered if the man ever slept. Harry politely thanked him and departed. As an Auror, Harry was certain to need him again. Harry shuffled down the corridor with his bare feet rubbing inside his shoes, since he had not taken the time to put on socks.

Harry stopped and thought about just leaving from where he stood. It was considered rude to Disapparate from the general areas of the hospital, but the corridor was very quiet right now. Harry waited for the lift anyway, as though wanting to more closely follow the rules. His confrontation with Shankwell gnawed at him fiercely. The Healer was not exactly out of bounds with his anger, either. Harry perhaps should

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have tried to work with them instead of on his own, but at the time things had felt too overwhelmingly urgent to stop and explain something that he could barely explain even now.

Harry sighed and shook a bit of his disquiet off as he rode in the empty lift. He would repeat what he did again, if he had it to do over. And everything had worked out for the best, even if it did anger some people... who were perhaps justified in their anger.

The lift came to a halt at the ground floor, but Harry did not move to open the gate. He was thinking that he was justifying accepting two distinct sets of rules: the set everyone else had and the “Harry” set. This did not feel like a good precedent, especially for someone who was most likely harboring a piece of Voldemort.

Harry continued to turn this over in his head as he returned home, walking from a block away to avoid waking Hermione. It continued to circle his thoughts while he moved carefully around the flat, getting undressed, slipping his sling back on and settling in to sleep. Lying back, he stared at the spots from the streetlights shining on the ceiling. They had always had two sets of rules, he and his friends. Now that Harry could quote from memory a good quarter of the Ministry of Magic’s rules, could he have an acceptable excuse for keeping another set on the side?

Harry slept restlessly, waking repeatedly from a dream where he was trying to help someone who kept running away. It was a disjointed dream composed of seemingly unrelated snippets like the witch he was chasing turning into a Snitch, and finding himself wearing skis, unable to move because he was on grass.

“Harry?” Hermoine’s voice roused him from pleading with someone who insisted on walking out onto the High Street in Hogsmeade despite Harry being certain that hungry bears lurked there. Harry was lying on his injured arm and it throbbed in response to this. He rolled over onto his back carefully because he knew it would hurt more initially when he got off of it, and it did.

Hermione moved across the room in the darkness.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked when he could see her silhouette opening Hedwig’s cage.

She finished pulling Hedwig out and taking her to the window before replying. “Owling Professor Snape.”

“Why?” Harry’s tired brain asked.

“Because you’re having a nightmare,” she replied, sounding stubborn.

Harry sat up, careful to use only his right arm to do it. “It wasn’t a bad nightmare or anything. Don’t bother.”

In a quieter voice, she said, “He said to.”

Sharply, Harry said, “Hermione, I’m fine. Don’t disturb Severus in the middle

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of the night. I don't need him." When she slid the sash up, Harry grew angry. "Hermione!"

Hermione waved the oil lamp up that sat beside Harry's bedside. In the low light she looked five years older. She held Hedwig on one forearm and held her wand in the other hand. "Do you remember what you said to me?" she asked as though not expecting an answer, and indeed she did not wait for one. "You said never let your guard down. Don't you remember that?"

"Yeah," Harry breathed, anger gone, replaced by a darker brooding.

Hermione let Hedwig out the window. She closed the sash and stepped to the kitchen. "Besides," she said more brightly, "you may be my oldest friend but he's a potential colleague."

"So you're taking the job?"

"I don't know. Maybe I am since I'm trusting him over you."

Harry rapidly shook his head and then rubbed his face, wondering if he was still dreaming; he didn't feel terribly awake.

Ten minutes later, Snape Apparated in. Hermione immediately took her herbal tea to her room and closed the door. Harry sat with his jaw propped on his hand. "I'm fine," he said.

"That is good," Snape said, pulling a chair over from the table. "How is the arm?"

"Slowly getting better," Harry said. "I get to return to light duty tomorrow."

Snape clasped his hands in his lap and sat watching Harry a while before saying, "And your dream?"

"Nothing important," Harry muttered, setting his chin on his knees. "Didn't need to bother you," he added.

"It isn't a bother," Snape stated easily, almost sounding like Dumbledore.

Harry looked at him. "We need a secret word so I know that you're you."

"What is in your dream?" Snape repeated, ignoring Harry's comment.

"Stupid stuff. Everyone's afraid of me, even people I'm trying to save from something." He straightened the duvet and leaned forward again, half hugging his knees. "I don't want people to be afraid of me."

"Stop doing terribly frightful things then."

"I didn't this time," Harry pointed out.

"Indeed, and look how much better the response was. In fact you did the opposite, you received an injury which proves that you are vulnerable."

"I wasn't trying to get hurt," Harry said. "Healer said it looked like a curse bled through my modulated block."

"That certainly would explain the pattern. It must have been an awfully powerful strike, in that case."

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Unbidden, the chaotic scene from the Atrium played through Harry's mind again. Harry set his forehead down on his knees. "I have to get to Merton," he said, stressed. "Not tonight."

"A lot of people I knew were in that Atrium," Harry said. "Elizabeth got hurt. Did you know that?"

"Seriously?"

"Just broke her foot. I saw her at St. Mungo's getting it healed." The scene played selectively again through Harry's mind's eye. "What does he want? Why does he want to hurt so many people? I don't understand. If I don't understand, how can I stop him?"

"At the risk of sounding like my former mentor again, I will say that I think you need to wait for your time to come. I have observed that you instinctively know when it has arrived."

"I want it over with now. I don't want anything else bad to happen."

Snape stood and rested a hand on Harry's flannel pyjamaed shoulder. "Do be careful, Harry."

"Yup. Always," Harry acknowledged. Snape departed and afterward Harry considered that he had not babied him at all; he had, in fact, done nothing more than prompt him to share his concerns and provide just the right kind of support. Harry relaxed as he sat hugging his knees, feeling comfort in being so well understood.



Harry rose before Hermione did and fixed breakfast one-handed. Hermione apparently had not slept well either, because she did not comment on this, just accepted her plate, ate, and rushed off to work, still dreary eyed.

By the time Harry put the dishes in the sink, after chasing Kali away from finishing Hermione's breakfast, he was late for his next treatment. He vacillated between not wanting to go and hoping Shankwell was there so Harry could talk to him. Harry took his time getting dressed, having to shoo Kali off his shoulder three times.

Shankwell was indeed still on duty, fortunately still straightening up from what must have been a complicated previous patient. Harry sat down and propped his arm up to have the bandages cut as usual. He wished that he had stashed his pet in his pocket, if only for moral support. Harry hesitated until the round-nosed scissors were snipping along his arm to say: "I didn't mean to cause trouble."

"We like things to happen for a reason around here," Shankwell said as he tossed the old dressing into the rubbish.

"They did happen for a reason," Harry pointed out, not understanding.

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The hard tone returned, “A reason we understand.”

“Is magic a reason?” Harry asked. His wounds were doing much better, but the texture of the new flesh was different, softer and bubbly.

“Of course it is,” Shankwell replied, opening the tin of Thewsolve.

“Muggles don’t think so,” Harry observed. “They mean that events have no explanation if they say they happen by magic.”

Shankwell stopped what he was doing. “That would be silly.”

Harry just shrugged.

As Shankwell finished with the salve, he said in a manner of criticism, “You’re an unknown entity, Mr. Potter.”

“I don’t mean to be,” Harry honestly said, even as a voice inside his head was saying, “You don’t know the half of it.”

A fresh bandage was being rewound around Harry’s arm. “So, what did you do that a trained and experience Healer could not?” Shankwell asked with that difficult tone. Harry began to detect, perhaps not jealousy, but at least suspicious resentment. It made Harry feel better to recognize it.

“I have curse-nose,” Harry explained. “I just un-wove the tangles the curse had caused.”

“Hedgepeth and Versa can do that well enough,” Shankwell pointed out as he started a new wheel of white bandage just above Harry’s elbow.

“You have to Staunch the curse’s heat at the same time, though, or the tangles will just come back.”

Shankwell fell silent until he was finished and had tied the bandage in a petite bow under Harry’s arm. “I’ve heard of Staunching, for bleeding. You know how to do that?”

“Yes. A shaman in Finland showed me.”

Shankwell seemed upbeat now, eager. “Can you teach someone else?”

“I can’t teach it, exactly,” Harry said. “Or, I mean, you can’t learn it. You either are a Stauncher or not. That’s what the Shaman said. He spends his time going around looking for children who can, so I expect he knows.”

“What a strange skill,” Shankwell commented, sounding like a Muggle discussing Potions.

“It’s not,” Harry argued, wanting to be understood rather than resented. He assumed he was finished and stood up. “It’s just Radiance. Everything alive is Radiant. You leave Radiance behind on metal things you carry with you frequently. You have two quills in your pocket and I can tell that the birds that gave them are both still alive. They still resonate with life.” Shankwell’s expression was a little overwhelmed and Harry could not tell if he was going to be understood if he kept

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going, but went on anyway. “Blood is just very Radiant stuff and all a Stauncher does is pack it tightly with cold to stop it escaping. Versa should be able to do it, I expect.”

Shankwell thought in silence before saying, “She has a strange fondness for examining other people’s jewelry.” He seemed to wake up to the state of things and began putting the tray of tools away. “Can you teach her?”

“You mean, can I show her that she already knows how to do it?” Harry clarified.

“That’s really how it works?” Shankwell asked doubtfully.

“It’s old magic,” Harry said. “Not wand magic, like you’re used to. I Staunched Vishnu’s wounds while I was sitting in the corner over there when we came in after the pub explosion.”

“So, Versa wouldn’t even have to touch the patient?”

“She doesn’t even have to be in the same city,” Harry said.

Shankwell’s eyes grew wide with interest at this. His entire mood was now one of excitement and curiosity, making Harry very glad that he had explained better. Perhaps that was the key: eliminating the unknown so people ceased to fear. Harry’s own excitement at that realization dampened when he considered that such a conversation about letting in demons from the underworld would not go over nearly as well as healing people’s injury.

Harry said, “The entire training I got from the shaman was just what I said, to pack cold around where the Radiance is leaking.” Harry thought aloud further, “Healer Versa must feel it leaking out all the time. It would be maddening to not be able to stop it.”

Shankwell tilted his head. “She does have a tendency to get rather emotional,” he stated wryly.

“If you want me to show her, I can. I’ll certainly be back in six hours,” he added, gesturing at his arm.



Harry’s first day returning to duty, he owed Hermione at work, saying he was going to dinner with Tonks and to not expect him. That evening, instead of going home, Hermione walked along the sunny path of Greenwich park. She found herself there without much of a good reason for it. She was drawn against her better judgment to approach Vineet’s flat, but could not take the final step of visiting. What would have made the most sense – speaking to Harry about why his fellow had been so melancholy – she resisted doing due to Harry’s utter dislike of gossip, not to mention his disapproval of Hermione’s interest.

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So there Hermione was, strolling the lovely rolling park with no particular purpose, not a situation she often found herself in. The pavement forked and she turned toward the shadier route only to stop short at the sight of Vineet walking towards her. The two of them hesitated before Hermione said hello. Vineet gave his signature small bow of his head. Without verbally agreeing to, they began strolling along together. Hermione glanced frequently at her companion and decided that his mood had not improved from last time.

They reached the top of a steep section of path and Hermione stopped to rest in the shade, sitting crosslegged on the grass. Vineet lowered himself down a respectful distance away; the distance a stranger might sit if shade were scarce enough to warrant sharing this particular tree's shadow.

It was Vineet who spoke first. "I have heard that you were offered the job of teaching Charms at Hogwarts."

"Yes," Hermione said.

"Are you accepting this offer?" Vineet asked.

"I'm still thinking about it," Hermione replied. Silence descended beyond the rustle of the leaves above them and the distant shouts of children chasing each other about. Hermione eventually went on: "It's a big change." And after another gap: "I'm not sure I can fill Professor Flitwick's shoes."

Vineet plucked at the grass. "You would have to make it your own... your teaching. Leave the shoes of others alone."

That simple, yet deep, statement reminded Hermione of her attraction with a surge. "Yes, definitely," she said as neutrally as possible.

"You were born to Muggles, that makes you more qualified, given the large number of Muggle-born children requiring training in Britain."

Hermione considered him at the same time as she mulled over that observation. He seemed to simply wish to talk, about anything, which felt slightly desperate and made Hermione's heart twist. "I hadn't thought of it that way. Not so many Muggle-born where you come from?"

Vineet shook his head. "Your parents must have been accepting of this fact of your magic."

"Surprisingly so," Hermione replied, thinking back many years now. "Thank God they didn't realize how dangerous most of my years at Hogwarts were. They didn't get the wizard newspapers." She plucked at the grass too. "That made me tougher, I think, not being able to tell them. That meant I couldn't lean on them at all."

Vineet, the usually quiet man, continued with his questions. "When did you learn that you were magical?"

"When I received my letter – the one from Hogwarts – so when I was eleven. I

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had my whole future planned out before that moment. Serves me right. How about you?"

"I am told I always knew although others did not. My mother told me repeatedly for as long as I could remember. She was so certain, she gave me the dachnam of Vishnu, which implies great power."

"Yeah, I'd say," Hermione concurred. "But you didn't think you had much power until recently."

Vineet nodded soberly. His gaze had shifted from melancholy to intense, which was a kind of improvement. He said, "My mother never gave up insisting that I could achieve greatness, despite this. It was maddening."

"She was that certain?" Hermione asked, trying not to find humor in his observation. He was not an easily shaken personality.

"Near Baripada, a hundred years ago, lived a hermit who was quite revered. He foresaw a great warrior being born from a woman who gave birth to a tiger cub."

Hermione gave him a dubious expression. "And?"

"That is how I was born."

Hermione stared at him. "You were born in your Animagus form?" she exclaimed, nearly toppling over backward into the grass in shock at the thought. "Lucky your mum didn't die of a heart attack. Wow..." Hermione contemplated that while staring down at the ribbon of river visible over the trees. The breeze felt chilling as she stiffened and sat straight. "Wait a minute... you were born into a prophecy?"

Vineet stared back. "Yes, you could describe it in this way."

"Vishnu, don't you know what that means?" His curious and confused expression answered for him. Hermione hurriedly rocked herself to her feet. "Come on, we have to find Harry."

Vineet caught up to her at the path while she glanced around for a good place to Apparate from. "What is this?" he asked.

"Just come along. I can't believe this," she frantically said. They slipped through the shrubs onto a deserted stretch of grass that did not seem to encounter the cutter as often as the other areas. "Harry's out with Tonks for dinner, they probably went to one of the places near Tonks' flat." She Apparated them both to an alleyway near there and they checked the two pubs along that road, finding their quarry in the back of the second one.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry said in bright greeting, then glancing between the two of them after he spotted Vineet.

"We need to talk," Hermione insisted.

"Get a pint and join us," Tonks suggested, sliding over on the bench to make room.



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Hermione was too agitated to wait in line at the bar. She took a draught of Harry's mug instead. "Harry, you aren't going to believe this."

"What?"

Hermione patted his shoulder, almost consolingly. "Vishnu, tell Harry what you told me."

"Which part?" Vineet asked.

"The tiger cub part... the hermit part," Hermione insisted. But she did not wait for him, she said, "Vishnu was born in his Animagus form. Did you know that?" she asked Harry.

"You were born a tiger cub?" Harry asked, straining to understand.

Vineet nodded. Tonks nearly spit out her beer. She appraised him in a new manner and said, "Hate to be your mum."

"That's not all," Hermione said. "A hermit from a neighboring village foretold of it, though, a hundred years before."

Harry understood the significance before Tonks did. "You aren't thinking...?"

"I am not understanding..." Vineet said, sounding kindly hopeful for an explanation.

Harry said, dropping his voice, "You haven't heard the whole prophecy relating to Merton, have you?" When Vineet leaned closer, Harry said, "It ends with only the one born into prophecy is equal to stopping the fountain of evil at its source." Vineet stared at him, so Harry said, "That's why everyone thinks the prophecy is mine."

"But you are not the only one meeting this criterion," Vineet said.

"Apparently not," Harry concurred, feeling a giddiness almost like the first time he had been on a broomstick. He turned to Tonks, "Were you born into a prophecy?"

Tonks shook her head, making her Mohawk sway. "No."

"You?" Harry then asked Hermione.

"Certainly not."

"Maybe we should have taken a survey around the Ministry," Tonks commented.

Vineet said, "You are saying that the prophecy we are currently trying to complete may be mine, not yours? I do not wish to impinge..."

Harry picked up his mug and gestured with it before sipping. "Oh, you can have it," he insisted.

Vineet glanced at Hermione and then at Tonks. Tonks said, "I don't know if you can just give it away, Harry."

"It was 'just given' to me..." Harry began and then had to drop his voice because the pub was growing more crowded. "It was just given to me without any consideration. Why can't I give it away?" He sipped his beer. "I'd like to give away at least

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the possibility of it not being mine.” Indeed just that thought lifted the weight off of him. “We need another round to celebrate,” Harry insisted.

“I’ll get them... you can’t carry many with your arm like that,” Hermione said, sliding off the bench.

“Thanks,” Harry said, and slid over into her spot to better face Vineet. “You know what you are getting here, don’t you?” he seriously asked. “You’ve been hinting that you think that having a prophecy is a good thing... some kind of life purpose or something.” Harry faded out and they simply stared at each other. Vineet appeared a bit on the stunned side. “I feel cruel giving this to you. I don’t think you understand.”

Vineet shook his blue-black head. “I came here believing in a purpose. I cannot shirk if it rears up, even if it is you telling me I should.”

Tonks studied the two of them. “I never gave it a second thought, Harry, that it might not be yours.”

“Is there a ceremony of some kind where it is assigned to you?” Vineet asked.

Harry laughed. “No. Everyone just assumes.”

Tonks said, “Maybe we should take him down to the prophecy room to see it.”

“I don’t think it was recorded. Ginny never mentioned it.”

Critical, Tonks said, “They are supposed to ALL be. You never know what might happen.”

“May I hear the whole prophecy?” Vineet politely asked just as Hermione returned with full mugs for each of them.

Harry quoted, “Few will escape the blood and chaos of darkness bound, sought, and released. They do not understand what they have wrought. They conjure allies they cannot control and poisonous dark hordes will be liberated to rend the land. Only the one born into prophecy is equal to stopping the fountain of evil at its source.”

“You’re certain that’s how it goes?” Tonks asked. At Harry’s nod, she said, “We should take you down to the Department of Mysteries and record it.”

“Why don’t we just complete it instead?” Harry asked. “It’s almost over.”

“I expect McGonagall recorded it,” Hermione pointed out.

After combining his two beers into one nearly overflowing one, Harry said to Vineet, “So, we can go listen to the official version, if you wish.”

“I trust that you have it correctly,” Vineet stated solemnly. “I should send a letter to Nandi, explaining. Perhaps...” He trailed off. Hermione did not look up from her mug.

Tonks pulled out her pocket watch. “I have do some errands I have to do with this my first evening off in about forever. Harry, take Vishnu in and explain to Mr.

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Weasley if you can find him or Reggie or Kinglsey if you can't."

Harry nodded. Tonks awkwardly stepped over Vineet to depart before the Indian could stand to let her out. Her shoe clapped hard against the floor and a nearby patron helped catch her and said to her departing form, "The 80s ended, you know."

Vineet still appeared befuddled. "Do you really think it is my time?" he asked Harry.

"I don't know, but I can say for certain that I don't know what I'm supposed to do to end all this. I hope you have a better idea."

Vineet fell thoughtful and did not reply. He pushed the remainder of his beer aside.

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# NEW PATHS

At the Ministry, Harry and Vineet located Shackbolt and Mr. Weasley in the tea room, discussing something in low tones. They fell quiet upon their entrance. Harry had forced Vineet to lead the way in, but then the Indian stood silently.

“Er...” Harry began. “We just discovered something.” He looked between the three of them, wishing Vineet appeared less like he was six miles inside himself. “Vishnu was also born into a prophecy.”

Brows lowered. Mr. Weasley scratched his thin hair and stuffed the small parchment roll into his pocket. “Were you?” he asked Vineet. “Hm,” he muttered, sounding unconvinced. “We’ll see, I suppose.” He looked back and forth between them, leaving Harry with the impression that he preferred to still consider it Harry’s prophecy. Not that Harry didn’t appreciate the implication of confidence, but he wanted to assume Mr. Weasley was wrong.

Harry’s introspective fellow apprentice accompanied him up to the Atrium, where he bowed and Disapparated away. As Harry approached the hearths, he turned in a circle, looking up at the charred gold leaf, the darkened and cracked magical windows, and the new damage to the just recently repaired fountain, which was dry again, awaiting yet another patch. The scene left him aching and unhopeful.

On Diagon Alley he took the stairs two at a time up to the rooms above the Apothecary. Inside Candide’s flat, the scene of Snape sitting on the bed across a small table from Candide, playing cards, brought a curl to Harry’s lips.

“Good to see you smiling,” Snape said. “Come in,” he invited.

Harry approached and sat on the bed beside Snape, since not only was there not

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another chair, there was not space for one. “You won’t believe this,” Harry said with clear anticipation of telling. Giddiness had filled him again.

Snape stared at him before saying, “Hard to imagine what could make you so buoyant, so quickly.” He put down an eight of diamonds and Candide shook herself away from Harry’s storytelling and drew from the deck.

Harry said, “The prophecy might not be mine.”

Snape reacted less than expected. Same as Mr. Weasley, he became contemplative. “What leads you to believe that?”

“Vishnu was born into prophecy as well.” Harry added, “And he believes he’s here for a reason. He wants the prophecy, even.” When Snape made a thoughtful noise in response, Harry said, “You sound like Mr. Weasley. Don’t you think it’s possible?”

“Most certainly,” Snape conceded. “The prophecy does not mention you by name.”

“It doesn’t mention Voldemort, either,” Harry pointed out, noticing Candide flinch ever so slightly.

Snape drew a card. “I do hope it is true for your sake. For the rest of our sake, I am more trusting of you, however.” He gestured at the stove where a large black cauldron sat with dried stew dripped down the side of it. “Did you eat dinner with all of this excitement?”

“Yes,” Harry assured him. “I went out with Tonks.”

Snape started to put down the three of clubs, but his gaze came over to Harry instead. “Not on a date, I assume...”

Harry started to bite his lip, then stopped himself. It had not been formally called one, but Harry had certainly thought of it as a date. “Maybe,” he hedged. It amazed him how fast Snape’s gaze could go from neutral to laser-sharp. Harry defensively said, “You’re the one who gave her the ‘midnight shift’.”

Snape retorted, voice as cutting as his gaze, “Because I wished to have someone there I and you both trusted. It was not license for anything else.”

Harry held his breath in trepidation about what may come next. He did not know what he would do if Snape outrightly forbid him to continue with their relationship.

Snape turned back to his hand and changed what he was going to discard. “You disappoint me Harry; we discussed this.”

Harry dropped his head, searching for rational arguments that would work with this man. They were in short supply, so he did not speak. Candide gave him a reassuringly sympathetic look. Snape followed this look back to Harry and said with some regret, “I did not intend to remove the only smile you’ve had for a month.” He reached out a hesitant hand that clenched and unclenched once as it approached, but

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when it grabbed Harry's shoulder it was firm. "I am going to assume that you are old enough to make your own mistakes in this area. And this is a mistake, Harry, which you will undoubtedly discover on your own."

"Optimistic as always," Candide teased. "Are you going to lay down a card?"

"It is your turn."

"Is it?"

Snape turned back to Harry. "I am disappointed in Ms. Tonks, as well."

The card game played out for a while. Harry wanted to say some things but not in front of anyone but Snape. Finally, he decided that since they were all a family, he should just say what was on his mind. "I don't otherwise really have anything for myself," he said, hoping to be understood.

"A future is not enough for you all of a sudden?" Snape sharply asked.

Harry frowned. Snape glanced his way and then looked to regret his tone. He said, "Try as I might I cannot protect you from dark wizards and certainly not from prophecy, but I thought I could protect you from yourself with a bit of guidance." He paused to study his hand to see if he should keep the card he had drawn. He tossed it down instead. "So be it if you wish to step into such a difficulty." He pointed a finger at Harry's nose. "See to it that you don't come to harm as a result."

"I came to harm getting a medal," Harry pointed out, gesturing with his slinged elbow. Softly, in dire need of confirmation, he said, "As long as you're not forbidding me to see her or anything."

"That would not succeed; I suspect – your temper and your stubbornness being what they are."

"You would know," Harry pointed out, with no rancor.

"Yes, I would," Snape said with a hint of an understanding smile. "I am here as always to catch you when you fall."

"That's rather poetic for you," Candide supplied.

"You really think I'm making that big of a mistake?" Harry asked.

"Yes. If only because it clouds your judgement, which is perhaps your weakest quality." Snape laid down his hand, indicating that he had won. With a slap, Candide folded her hand into a small stack.

Harry said, "Glad you have such confidence in me."

Snape sat back while Candide shuffled the deck. "I have enormous confidence in you, just not in the manner you are thinking. I have complete confidence that you will always do what you think is right. But like the time when the log was changed and you headed straight into a trap, your judgement about what is "right" is not always reliable."

Harry sighed. "Mr. Weasley pointed that out too."

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Snape accepted the new hand he was dealt. "Be careful, Harry. That is all I ask."

"Did you want to be dealt into this hand?" Candide asked, holding the deck out.

"No," Harry replied. "I should go. Make it an early night."

At Hermione's apartment, Harry found his friend cross-legged on the floor, organizing the books that had migrated from the shelves to stacks all around the flat.

"So what do you think... take the Charms position?" she asked without even turning around.

"I think you should." Harry tossed his cloak off onto a chair back, but then picked it up and put it on a hook instead.

"I'm starting to think I should too," Hermione said. "Getting away from London would be good for me." She moved about with purpose, putting every last book in place and then shuffling some of them around into better places.

"You're still hopeful about getting a chance with Vishnu, aren't you?" Harry asked. She did not reply, just kept examining book spines and reorganizing. Harry went on, "I don't ask that to be cruel. I'm trying to be a friend."

"He wants to patch things up with his wife," Hermione stated in a queerly flat voice.

"Of course he does," Harry said. "He always wants to do the right thing." It was not until those words were out that Harry heard them as an echo of Snape's observation about himself. Harry thought Vineet a much better fit for that description.

She pulled a tassled bookmark out of reach of Crookshanks' claws and stuffed it into the closest book. "Yes, of course he does. That's what I like the best about him, that he wants to do the right thing. What horrible quandary" She laughed painfully. "It can never work; can it?"

Harry sat down on the floor beside her. "We need to get you out meeting more people."

She gave him the sad smile of someone who really did not want to do that, who would only find that frustrating and disappointing. "Sure," she said unconvincingly.

"Aaron, my other fellow apprentice, is available. Don't you like him?"

Hermione laughed, truly amused. "He's like the Great Gatsby, Harry. Not my type. Cute though. Fun probably. But not my type."

Harry looked over the shelves surrounding them. "True. He hates books."



The next day, they had an abbreviated morning training session, during which Harry was forced to sit out drills, despite protesting that his blocks would hold just fine. He sat in the corner, re-reading a chapter in a Muggle book on evidence collection

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that Hermione had bought him. Rodgers thought the book a bit silly given that it did not assume one had a wand to use. Harry thought that not having a wand made the investigator think a bit harder about what mattered.

After lunch the uncovered assignments began to pile up and they were sent out on duty, even Harry, who was sent out with Blackpool again on yet another Muggle-baiting call. Someone had charmed the traffic signals to go green in all directions and the maintenance crew could not seem to fix them, bollixing up rather a large section of London. Harry's job was to set up a distraction, while Blackpool performed the necessary spell neutralization. In one case Harry made the horn on a bus stick for a minute, doubly loud, which made people turn and cover their ears. In another he caused a lorry to drop its delivery ramp, which caused quite a clamor and made everyone jump. In all cases he had to also fog the plastic covers of the surveillance cameras which were constantly recording the scene and wondered if the perpetrators had done the same.

As they walked away from their third site, Harry said, "Someone else is going to check the police video?"

"The CCTV?" she asked. "I doubt the Muggles will check it. They'll just assume their technology is broken. But Reversal usually does that, when needed."

"You don't think the wizards who did it will be on the videos?" Harry asked.

"Only if they are extremely stupid," she said derisively. "The kind of blokes that play with things more complicated than sewers, tend to cover their tracks."

"I wish Merton was stupid enough to get caught," Harry muttered. They walked along the pavement to check the next signal, which had a crew working at it, but from a distance seemed to be functioning. Harry was unable to fully adjust his thinking to not having responsibility for Merton. Worry still gnawed at him while he walked along with nothing else to think about. Harry considered that if the prophecy were really Vineet's, then his fellow must have some special quality that Harry did not.

Harry scuffed his shoe as he came to a sudden stop. Blackpool turned and looked questioningly back at him.

"I just thought of something," Harry said. Muggles flowed by on the pavement, ignoring them.

"About Muggle traffic signals?"

"No. About Merton."

Blackpool's attitude changed instantly. "What about him?"

Harry rubbed his head, mussing his hair. "What was the name?" he asked rhetorically. "There was a name that was oddly familiar. It was an Indian name." He dropped his arm, feeling a rush toward abandoning their current task. "Do you think we're done here?"



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She glanced back at the signal they had been approaching. It was red, currently. “If you think you know something about Merton, we are very done.”

They hurried into the back of a busy dress shop and piled into the small changing room to Disapparate before anyone could ask what they were up to. At the Ministry, Harry walked with purpose, struggling with his memories from when his magic had gone black. In the file room, he stared at the imposingly large cabinets. He could not go through them all in hopes of jarring his memory.

“Rogan,” Harry breathed. “Where’s Rogan?”

Blackpool frowned at the sound of the disgraced Auror’s name. “Writing memos for Mr. Weasley.”

Harry swept back out and down the corridor to a desk propped against the wall at the very end beyond Mr. Weasley’s door.

“Rogan,” Harry said, “do you remember, when I was helping you with the filing... there was a file I asked about. I said, ‘why is this one in here?’ Do you remember that? Do you remember the name on the file?” Harry’s desperation was coming through in his voice.

Rogan let the parchment before him roll up and it and a few others fell to the floor, but he aborted stooping to pick them up. “What’s going on?”

“I think the name is important,” Harry said. I recognized it when I had Voldemort in my head, he thought, but did not want to remind everyone of that.

Rogan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Harry prompted eagerly, “Do you remember the name?”

Rogan frowned. “Traincar or something. Hang on.” He stood and rubbed his neck as though he had been sitting in the undersized desk too long.

“Traincar?” Blackpool doubtfully prompted.

“It started with a ‘T’ ” Harry agreed.

Rogan led the way down to the file room. “You aren’t allowed in there,” Blackpool pointed out, sounding petulant.

Rogan held his hand out as though to invite her to lead the way. Annoyed, he said, “With you two keeping an eye on me, I don’t think it will be a problem.”

“Let him go in,” Harry snapped at the senior apprentice.

Rogan went to first long drawer labelled Taalicksonson Teaberg. He scanned the thickly pressed tabs, ignoring the very thick, multipart file for Grisley that filled the end of the drawer, and closed it. Going to Teacakepot Thickneck he stopped halfway down and pulled out a very slim file with only a few sheets of ordinary paper in it.

“This is it.”

Harry grabbed the file from him and opened it up. It was the same one all right.

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Blackpool read over Harry's shoulder, "Debjit Thanakar. Why is he important?"

"I remember the name..." Harry said, feeling lightheaded as though isolated from the world. "I remember it from when I was seeing out of Voldemort's eyes. I think he heard the name. I think he may be with Merton. I think that may be why this is Vishnu's prophecy and not mine."

"That's a lot of 'thinks'," Rogan commented. "And we interrogated Voldemort... well as much as we were allowed to given he is now a Muggle."

"There's an address in Kennington," Harry said, feeling right about what he was thinking.

"Maybe we should go have a look," Blackpool said.

"You should find Arthur," Rogan said, pushing the long file drawer closed the rest of the way.

"We should find Vishnu," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley was just coming up in the lift when they closed the door to the file room. Rogan snuck quickly back to the desk down the side corridor. Harry checked the Auror's office as they passed, finding only Shacklebolt there.

"Tonks is still out," Shacklebolt informed him without prompting.

"With Vishnu?" Harry asked, to which Shacklebolt nodded in confirmation.

Harry tried to explain to Mr. Weasley about the name. His pessimism equalled Rogan's. "You only think you remember this name because Voldemort knew it."

Harry sighed. "I don't know why I know the name," he admitted. "But we should check the address. We don't have any other leads."

"We still don't," Shacklebolt observed dryly.

"No harm in checking," Mr. Weasley admitted. "Why don't you two go?"

"Vishnu has to come along," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley looked him over and then glanced over the log. "He'll be back eventually. Are you that certain, Harry?"

"Remember when you told me to tell you when I think the time has come?"

Mr. Weasley actually appeared slightly amused. "Yes, but you also told me yesterday that you don't think the prophecy is yours."

Harry nearly snarled in frustration.

Mr. Weasley relented. "Why don't you and Blackpool scope out the neighborhood only, ask around the shops and neighbors if anyone has seen him, and we'll send Tonks and Vishnu along when they return. I don't wish to recall them unless it is an emergency."

Blackpool grabbed down the new wanted poster from the board and started out, but Mr. Weasley said, "If you are planning on showing a picture around, you cannot use that one."

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Blackpool pulled out her wand and hit the wizard picture with a Stupifying spell, freezing Merton's face with his mouth half open and twisted. "Good enough," Mr. Weasley said.

They Apparated behind a chain link fence overgrown with shrubs that bordered a red-brick estate. Harry, having left his robes behind to appear an ordinary Muggle, un-tucked his shirt to better hide his wand in his back pocket. Blackpool, slipped hers inside her white, buttoned sleeve with the point caught in her palm. She folded the parchment wanted poster so that only the photograph in the center was visible.

They walked the four blocks surrounding the address, asking shopkeepers and anyone loitering on the pavements if they had seen the person in the photograph... no one had.

The address was just in the next block when Blackpool called a halt because they had completed a full circuit. She peered down the street on tiptoe, chin high as she studied the distant upper floor windows.

Harry feared she was going to suggest some kind of full-on assault, but before she could decide on anything, Tonks and Vineet approached from behind.

"Any leads?" Tonks asked.

Harry shook his head. Tonks appeared tired as she let her gaze follow along the same course as Blackpool's. "Well, let's find out who's there, shall we?" she said. But then she immediately walked off in the opposite direction.

The rest of them followed curiously. Tonks turned in at a corner chips shop and ordered three boxes of take-away. She gave the shop boy rather a thorough looking over as she waited for the order, raising Harry's hackles.

Tonks was all business as she carried the white-bagged styrofoam boxes out of the shop and down the street to the correct building. Inside, with business-like efficiency, she assumed the logoed polo shirt and pimply-faced appearance of one of the chips shop's employees. Quietly, she said, "Stay out of sight, but not too far out of sight. Understood?"

They all nodded and Tonks led the way up the stairs. All but Tonks waited just before the bend leading to the last flight of steps. Tonks crept along the corridor, lit poorly by one bare bulb whose socket hung on stiff wires from a hole in the ceiling. She went to the end, examining each door before returning to the closest door and using a spell to knock something off of it. She kicked the thing that had fallen to the side and knocked loudly, making the rest of them jump. A rather long time passed and Tonks knocked again. "Fisherydoo Chips orda'!" she shouted and remarkably, as though it were a spell, the door opened. There was no question what Tonks was carrying, the odor of overused, fish-spoiled oil drifted even to the stairs where the three of them huddled. Harry wished he could see who had come to the door.

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“Yer orda’,” Tonks said in the blunt tone of an hourly customer service worker while pushing the box through the doorway. The response was unintelligible. “Yer sure? Twelve D it says on the slip. Your “D” fell off.” She kicked the thing on the floor. “Oh, tha’s a “B” ain’ it?” Tonks began to step away, but was called up short by something from inside. Harry’s rigid fingers slipped on his sweat-damp wand. “I can’ give the order to ya’ if’n isna yours,” Tonks stated derisively. “I’d havta fetch another an’ all... I’ll jus’ take it down ta’ yer neighbors.” More discussion from inside and the door closed. Harry breathed out in relief.

Tonks pulled her wand, but she only used it to Banish the now very wrinkled and oil-soaked sack. She stepped down to them and started through them.

“Is he there?” Harry whispered.

“Yes,” Tonks replied as she started down the next flight of steps. “Let’s wait for back-up.”

Harry glanced back, but began to follow, saying, “Someone should stand guard, right? What if...” But he was cut off by Blackpool dashing up the stairs in the other direction. Harry caught a corner of her robe, but it pulled free of his grasp. He and Vineet followed first – Harry shucking his sling as he ran – but by the time they had reached the landing, Blackpool had already blasted the door open.

No one shouted; no one said anything; they simply piled in behind her as she dashed inside. Harry’s blood warmed to the chase, preferring this to waiting. Inside, others were shouting. Movement came from the rooms off to the right, but Blackpool ran around the corner to the left. Harry followed that way, and found her holding a wand on someone who certainly resembled the photograph on the wanted poster. Blackpool was yelling at him, seeming unaware of his fumbling in his pocket with just his fingertips, as though wishing his movements to go unnoticed. Pounding footsteps indicated that Tonks and Vineet had gone the other way into the unexpectedly large flat.

“So help me, I’ll blast you one if you don’t hold still,” Blackpool threatened. “Put your hands up!”

Harry moved without thought since Merton looked to be un-interested in obeying. His shaking hand had unhooked the buttoned pocket on his waistcoat. “Don’t!” Harry shouted at Blackpool, panicked that she may do something rash. He put himself between the two of them. “He’s a Muggle.”

Blackpool stared at him uncomprehendingly. “What? But he’s reaching for his-”

Harry turned and yanked Merton’s hand out of his pocket. A locket was knocked free, striking the wall before clattering to the dusty floor. Merton dove for it and Harry tried to hold onto him, but some force repelled his hand. Harry leapt for the locket as well, his reaction time beating out the older man. Harry clenched his hand

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around the locket, rolled to his feet and shouted. “Get his jewelry off of him. It must be charmed.”

Blackpool used a Summoning charm so forceful that it jerked Merton’s arms toward her because of his many bracelets and tore holes where items had been stashed in his pockets. He stepped back, glancing around for escape and rubbing his wrist. Blackpool struck him with a binding charm and he toppled to the floor, striking the wall.

Deciding this was in hand, Harry ran through the flat, dodging spilled crates of random junk, some of which sent prickles of disgust through him. In the farthest room he found a standoff. A middle-aged Indian couple were standing before a large smashed out window, ready to leap upon a broomstick. The man, whom Harry assumed to be Debjit, was aiming spells at Vineet, who was getting blocking assistance from Tonks, pressed up beside him. They were not shooting back, and at first Harry wondered why not. But then he saw the net sack of ceramic weapons that were slung to the broomstick. Striking them with the wrong spell would take out the entire block surrounding them.

The man sneered at Harry and lifted the broom handle, causing it to leap out into the air above the road outside. The three of them ran to the window but then cautiously glanced out, fearing a curse may be aimed back at them. But they need not have worried, their quarry was fast becoming a bird-sized speck hovering over the buildings beyond.

Tonks was glancing around for another broomstick. Harry said, “Vishnu and I will follow them. Blackpool has Merton back near the kitchen.”

“She does?” Tonks eagerly asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t think that’s who we really need to get,” Harry quickly said. “Vishnu, jump on... I’ll take us.”

Harry transformed into his Animagus shape and flapped his wings to break the startled gaze he was receiving from his fellow.

“Go on,” Tonks urged, tossing an Obsfucation charm at the two of them before running out of the room.

Harry hopped carefully up onto the large smashed window frame – three legged because his front left leg complained fiercely when he leaned upon it. His wings bumped the sides of the frame and Harry hoped he could really get both of them into the air, rather than plummeting to the pavement below. With a powerful shove from his rear legs that crumbled the wall behind him, he jumped into open space and beat mightily. They dipped but Harry quickly regained altitude and leaned his head forward, focusing his keen cat-sight on the fleck of black in the distant sky.

They gained at the chase as the city slid by beneath them. Harry, at the beginning,

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felt that his burdened range may be too short, but he slowed the pace of his flapping and coasted more between to conserve his strength and now he felt he could fly forever like this. Harry hoped that the Obsfucation charm was holding out, or this particular flying incident was not going to compare at all to the Ford Anglia one, and this time Harry had to write a formal report explaining it.

The dense city gave way to a web of round-edged, planned neighborhoods which melted into pastures, fields and grudging clumps of forest. They flew over the motorway and a wide sand quarry, where Harry finally caught up enough for Vineet to spell a warning shot in the broom's direction. In Harry's mind it seemed better to fight them out here where they could not hold an entire city block hostage, and clearly Vineet thought the same. The figures on the broomstick glanced back at them after the red spell sizzled by them. The broom's flight path faltered badly as though the person steering had been badly startled. Harry swooped over them, reaching down with his good right front leg to snatch at them, but they ducked out of the way, careening dangerously close to a grey, crenelated tower attached to a church.

The broomstick veered right and dropped sharply downward beyond the town, toward a field of swaying barley. Harry had to spiral in behind them, unwilling to risk his wings' braking ability with so much weight. As they neared, the man was struggling to pull one of the orange ceramic things out of the sack. The woman fired a spell at them, which Harry could only attempt to dodge, and was certain they were doomed, but Vineet met the spell with an identical one and the force of both exploded harmlessly in the air between them. His feet on the ground, Harry stood straight and transformed back into himself. He reached for his wand but did not find it in any of his pockets. He glanced around on the ground while stepping to better get behind Vineet for protection.

Another pair of matched spells exploded and then another, the forces equally matched.

"How do you know what she is going to use, or are you just getting lucky?" Harry asked from behind.

"She is following the standard training sequence that I learned in India."

"You know each other?" Harry asked.

"No. Do you know how many people there are in India?" Vineet asked somewhat sharply as another blast was cancelled out.

The man, Debjit, had spelled and released one of the vessels at the woman's command. It disappeared as it floated upward.

"Shit," Harry said. "And I lost my wand."

Debjit reached down to fetch another from the sack. Muggle emergency sirens floated into hearing. "Cover me," Harry whispered, and just as another pair of spells

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arced between his fellow and the woman, Harry dashed headlong at the man. The woman broke off the attack on Vineet and aimed her wand at Harry just as Harry grabbed the front of Debjit's jacket, making him drop the sack with a worrisome clatter. The next instant they were elsewhere when Debjit Disapparated.

Harry's momentum knocked them both to the gritty floor. His quarry tried to throw Harry off, painfully straining Harry's injured left arm, so without much thought he punched the man with his good hand. Debjit's head hit the hard floor and he tried roll away, but then fell still.

Harry shook his stunned knuckles and looked around the empty dark stone room with its tiny unframed openings which let in the sunlight and a drift of birdsong. He had no idea where they were. The doorway leading in behind him was only half-height. There was no time to be contemplating what this old place was, nor how complicated his eventual report was growing, so he grabbed both Debjit's wand and his wrist in his right hand and Apparated them back.

The battle was still equally matched when Harry arrived. The woman's wide eyes took in Harry's arrival, but her spells did not falter. The ground now had long burn marks that still smoldered. Harry felt that awful, familiar aversion and with an instant of fumbling raised Debjit's wand for a block. They were both knocked back hard, tangling Harry's limbs in the unconscious man's.

The woman shouted, "No!" and reached out a hand in their direction.

"You shouldn't have let the thing loose then!" Harry shouted at her. He dragged Debjit by the arm as he approached Vineet who, given the numerous burn marks at his feet, must have been dodging rather well.

"Shoot down the thing if you can," Vineet said to Harry. He sounded unusually harried.

Harry glanced around, trying to sense where it had gone since the last blast it had emitted. "It will just explode, then," Harry pointed out.

"Out here in the open that will not be so serious."

Harry pondered the gold-trimmed wand he held out to the sky as he tried to track by feel the deadly thing hovering nearby. He sensed it to the right of where it had been, just as it was about to fire. Harry sent a Blasting curse in that direction and then shouting, "Down!" ducked and spelled a block he hoped would protect him and the man he had rendered unconscious.

The bright sky was blotted out by a yellow flash, but Harry's block held easily.

"Go," Vineet said, standing straight, wand out. "I will finish this."

"What?" Harry blurted. He peered across at the woman; her long hair had fallen out of its braid and floated behind her, disarrayed. She looked like a Muggle vision of a witch now. Her eyes had fallen empty. "Why are you doing this?" Harry yelled

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to her.

"I like seeing things upset. It is too quiet here. No one here appreciates the peace."

"Right," Harry shouted back. "You haven't been here long, have you?"

"The people appreciate what they have lost now," she stated as though making an announcement. "They are learning."

"Great," Harry muttered. "That's why you were helping Merton?" Harry shouted back. He could see people gathering at the side of the distant road, but at least the police had not yet arrived.

She lifted the sack of weapons closer to herself. "Merton simply wished to destroy British wizardry," the woman replied, "because as a Squib he could not truly belong to it. He is a simple man with no sense of subtlety. But you were an unexpected arrival," she said to Harry. "Flattering to be chased down by the likes of Garuda. It implies we have made trouble even the gods took note of."

"What's she talking about?" Harry asked his fellow.

Vineet did not reply, instead saying to Harry, "Go. One shot will take her out completely. When she goes the knowledge of those things will go with her."

"I'm not leaving you here if you are going to do that," Harry argued.

Impatiently, Vineet said, "This is my destiny, not yours."

"But you don't have to die for it," Harry snarled. He stepped closer and grabbed hold of Vineet's shirt. "Trust me... she isn't worth dying over."

"What she knows changes everything. The way a Muggle machine gun changed wars. It makes killing impersonal."

Speaking fast, Harry said, "I admit she's been a lot of trouble. But we can get her without losing you."

Vineet glanced at Harry just for an instant and a shot arced out, which Harry tried to block, but it had rather a lot on it. Harry had to pick himself up from where he had been tossed, ignoring Vineet's pleas to depart.

"No!" Harry shouted.

The woman was removing another vessel from the sack, slowly as though gauging what their reaction was going to be.

"We are running out of time," Vineet said.

Harry felt the earth beneath his feet. It seemed radiant itself, or perhaps it was just the young grains bowing in the wind that gave forth that impression. "She only has five of them, just hit one of them and duck into my block. But duck low, I don't want to need a large block.

Vineet appeared pained, but did not dare glance at Harry again. Harry cajoled, "Come on, you were willing to die a minute ago..."



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“But not if it means risking you as well-”

The woman was tapping the vessel with her wand and Harry felt a surge of distaste. “Now!” Harry shouted, jerking Vineet down beside him, confident that his strength and dexterity would let him aim properly even when unexpectedly tugged on.

Harry timed it just right. The flare of Vineet’s cutting curse just began to ebb when Harry waved a Titan block around them. The world outside their dome of safety ignited blindingly. Harry felt the ground pressing into his knees and, thinking of Snape’s lecture about contact with the ground being what a wizard pushed against for a hover charm, imagined himself rooted there in the earth as he poured more power into the block.

The flare died down along with the tail end of a rush of wind. Harry stood straight, or tried to, his left arm complained with a bone-deep ache when he moved. Debjit’s foot had been outside the block and was now a black stump. “That’s going to hurt,” Harry commented as he stepped over the man and down the lip of the crater that had appeared. Where they had been huddled was merely an island now in a sea of upturned earth. There wasn’t much left of the woman, but Harry found a boot and a few feet away a glittering ring, which implied that she could not have Apparated away.



“What do you mean ‘he’s a Muggle?’ ” Rodgers demanded of Tonks as he and Blackpool looked over Merton, who was sitting on the floor, alternately cringing and sending sour looks up at them.

“That’s what Harry said,” Tonks explained.

Rodgers peered perplexedly down at the man who had been their number one target for at least half of a year. “Are you really?” he asked.

“Never mind that,” Tonks said, tugging on Rodgers’ arm. “We have to catch up to Harry and Vishnu.”

Aaron arrived with a bang! and a message. “There’re Muggle calls coming in from Surrey, in Bletchingly. Loud explosions and such.”

“Fetch some broomsticks, quickly” Rodgers ordered him.



The smoke and dust were drifting away finally, clearing the view to the road. Harry could not see figures there anymore, although they had been far enough away to remain safe. A figure rose up and stepped over the fence, but immediately fell.

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Harry started that way, concerned, but was halted by a formation of ten broomsticks sweeping in. Three peeled off and circled wide, knocking the other approaching Muggles unconscious as well.

Mr. Weasley landed beside Harry. "We have to hurry. The tree we toppled to block the road can be bypassed easily enough." He gestured to some wizards from Reversal and directed them to the deepest part of the crater.

Tonks landed and, tossing her broom aside, gave Harry a tight hug that made him flinch, since it pressed on his arm. Mr. Weasley turned from where he gave instructions to two wizards hovering a large rusty and crystalline rock and studied the two of them. Vineet moved to assist with cleaning up the remains.

"Do you need St. Mungo's?" Tonks asked.

Harry had zero interest in that, so he said, "No." But he pulled his sleeve up to look and found that his arm now had brightly colored fur and, farther up, feathers in even stripes as though his injuries had transformed and not transformed back. "Maybe I do," he admitted. The furred spots were quite sensitive and when his sleeve caught on them, extremely painful as if that flesh really did not belong there. "Yeah, I suppose so. But I need to find my wand."

"You lost your wand?" Tonks asked, sounding shocked.

Harry looked around them, even though it was hopeless that it would be at his feet surrounded by such destruction.

"We'll find it. But right now I'll take you in." She shouted to Mr. Weasley, "I'm taking Harry to hospital!"

Mr. Weasley waved them off, but said, "Be careful!"

The wizards from Reversal were arranging their rock rather carefully as though concerned about its artistic appearance. Harry pulled out of Tonk's grasp to continue watching as others used a wind charm and a firetorch charm to add some detail around the rock. The rock began to sizzle as it heated up.

When Harry pulled out of Tonks' grasp a second time, she said, "Meteorites make for another good explanation for Muggles. Gas leaks. Meteorites," she recited as the scene of destruction disappeared and the waiting room at the wizard hospital appeared instead.

"Take a seat, Harry," Tonks said, indicating the bench closest to the greeting-witch's desk.

Harry obeyed, glancing around the quiet half-filled room before dropping his head to stare at his own shoes, which were spattered with wet mud. He felt chilled and wished he still had his cloak.

"Tonks," Harry said, sitting straight.

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Tonks turned from where she waited for an old wizard to finish explaining something long and complicated. Harry said, "Can you find Severus?"

"When I get you in to see Shankwell..."

"I mean now," Harry insisted, feeling this was extremely important all of a sudden. "He's going to hear half of what happened and he'll be worried."

"Harry-" Tonks began, but she was now at the front of the queue. To the greetingwitch she said bluntly, "Harry here needs to see Shankwell, is he available?"

The middle-aged witch in coarse, dark brown robes leaned back to check an indecipherable chart on the wall. "He's with someone, but its been a while, so I 'spect he'll be free soon."

Tonks turned back to Harry, "You can hold out, right?"

Harry nodded. If he held completely still, it did not hurt really that much. When Tonks sat down beside him, Harry said, "Can you fetch Severus?"

Tonks scanned the room. Most people who had taken an interest in Harry's arrival had returned to their Witch Weeklys and Better Burrows and Broomsticks. "If you want me to leave you alone here... You don't even have your wand," she criticized.

"I'm fine. This one works well enough," Harry said of the borrowed one in his pocket. "Can you go look for mine at the scene in Kennington?"

Tonks stood but halted and peered down at him. "Which is it? Severus or the wand?" she teased.

"Severus first," Harry said.

Tonks Disapparated and Harry sat, feeling more glum than expected once he was alone. His wait was short, fortunately, and Harry walked carefully down the corridor so as to not jar his arm further.

Shankwell, was using a cleansing charm on his hands when Harry stepped in. "Ah, you again. You're late you know. The Thewsolve really cannot be delay-"

Harry lifted his sleeve and the healer shut up abruptly at the sight. He recovered and said, "Sit on the table, then." He began organizing his tray, saying, "You are trying hard for a chance to get chained to one of our worn but comfortable ward beds, you know."

Harry swallowed hard. He wanted to assure the man that he would behave this time, but found he would not believe himself if their situations were reversed.

"Did you warn me about the Animagus interaction?" Harry sheepishly asked.

"Doesn't come up, usually. What is your form anyway?" he asked, peering curiously at the bright scarlet tufts sticking out of Harry's arm.

Harry glanced around. "It won't fit in here for me to show you."

"It won't fit in here..." Shankwell slowly echoed. "Never mind. I don't need to see it." He moved to put some bottles of potion together, sending puffs of grey and

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purple smoke into the air as he worked. Harry hoped Snape arrived soon.

A knock sounded on the door soon after and Harry's wish came true. Snape stepped in and said, "Ms. Tonks did not exaggerate for once."

"Why, what did she say?" Harry asked, ready to defend her.

"She said you were not really injured."

Harry grimaced at his arm. "Well, no. Not really."

Snape peered at the Healer as he worked and then grew more interested, leading Harry to ask, "What?"

"Bit of painkiller with that, I expect?" Snape asked the Healer.

"It's mixed in, in fact." Shankwell moved in close with a large bowl of purplish grey goo.

Harry, alarmed, said, "What's this?"

"Flesheating poultice. We have start again with growing back your real arm again."

"You can't just fix this?" Harry asked, trying not to grimace.

"That is just fixing it. Unless you wish to stay like that. By the way you are moving, I expect it hurts."

Harry stared at his odd arm. Despite his assurances to Lupin that it did not matter if he appeared more werewolf-like all of the time, Harry had no desire to appear more Gryffylis-like all of the time. "All right, then." He closed his eyes as the stuff was glopped on and then loosely wrapped.

"We'll let that work for a few minutes," Shankwell said in a tone that implied things were looking up, despite Harry's immediate prospects.

Harry looked up at his guardian. "I hope you weren't worried."

"Worried? No, certainly not," Snape stated, clearly sarcastic.

"I sent Tonks to tell you what had happened."

"Interesting use of a Ministry Auror during a time of crisis."

"It's not a crisis anymore," Harry insisted. His arm felt very odd, making him shudder.

"Does that hurt?" Snape asked.

"Feels really strange," Harry said. Indeed, he almost could believe he was feeling his own Radiance diminishing as his arm did. He set himself to ignore the queasiness the feeling brought on, figuring it would end soon enough. "But it's fine," he insisted. And then changing the topic as a distraction, said, "Everything's taken care of. We have Merton and everything."

Snape bowed his head in appreciation of that.

Harry said, "Did you hear that Merton's a Muggle?"

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“I did not hear that,” Snape replied, clearly disbelieving and perhaps questioning Harry’s mental wellness.

Harry said, “Yeah, turns out he’s a Squib who pretended to be a wizard. He was covered in charmed jewelry. Must have needed them to get by in the Wizarding world.”

Snape considered that and said, “A Squib, truly. Not simply very weak on magic?”

“Really. But he decided to destroy it all because he really couldn’t join in, I suppose.”

“Did his parents die recently?” Snape asked.

Harry shrugged and then regretted it, his left arm felt far too light and he did not want to think about that. “Don’t know, why?”

“Because he would have been cut off from wizardom at that point. I have seen that happen to other middle-aged Squibs and the occasional Muggle spouse. Difficult adjustments are required for some people to lose access to magical power, even if only through a family member.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

Shankwell returned and unwound the loose bandage. Harry was very glad his arm had gone numb, because the gaps of missing flesh were even larger than before. Harry stared straight ahead at the wall as his arm was washed and yet again spread with Thewsolve.

“Six hours,” Shankwell said as he finished the last few loops of bandage. “Not a minute more.” He hooked the sling around Harry’s head and for good measure, tied Harry’s wrist around his waist so that he truly could not use his arm.

“Do you ever leave St. Mungo’s?” Harry asked, a little annoyed with getting bundled up so.

“My wife swears I don’t,” Shankwell responded. “When it’s busy, we can’t. Plain and simple.”

“Gets that way in the Auror’s office too,” Harry commiserated.

Shankwell rubbed his hands off on a rag, saying, “We still need to have you in to spend some time explaining Staunching to Healer Versa.”

“I’ll have more time now,” Harry said.

“She won’t do it while you’re injured. Doesn’t want to strain you.”

Harry tried not to feel insulted or at least underestimated. He jumped down off of the table. “It’s not a problem, really.”

“Five hours and fifty-five minutes,” he stated firmly. “We’ll be seeing you.”

They finished Harry’s paperwork and Harry said, “I need to go into the Ministry,” to cut off what he was certain to be Snape’s suggestion that he rest.

“I will take you, then. Go on,” Snape gestured toward the waiting room.

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Harry came very close to insisting that he could go it alone, but he instead said, "I'm fine, really," and left it at that.

The Ministry was closed again to all but staff, but Snape still had his Evanescent Deputy badge in his pocket and they allowed them both inside. The Atrium was quiet. Harry found the sight less depressing now that he knew that when it was fixed up again, it would remain that way for a while.

At the lifts, Belinda was just coming down. "Minister wants to see you, Harry."

"How did you know I was coming?"

"I didn't. I'm running the Minister's errands." She headed off toward the gate and disappeared.

In the lift, Harry stared at the levers. "Minister's office or Auror's office?" he pondered, feeling slightly dull-witted after a day so crowded with action.

Snape said in the mode of offering important advice, "Always appease the highest ranked first."

Harry selected the highest floor on the panel and snapped the door closed with his good arm, grateful that his injured one was so confined, because he had tried to use it just then.

Vineet and Mr. Weasley were already in the outer area of the Minister's office suite. Mr. Weasley stepped over and asked Harry pointedly if he were all right.

"Yeah, fine, sir. I'm barred from duty though, until this really does heal."

Mr. Weasley patted him on his good arm. "I think we can arrange that now without difficulty."

Minister Bones marched in from the corridor, trailed by one of the Muggle officials Harry had seen before. Bones was assuring him that everything was under control, but he was not easily convinced.

Upon seeing Harry there, the man stopped and derisively asked, "It worked out in the end, this mad scheme of assigning a great task to such a young man?"

Bones said tiredly, as though having already repeated herself, "We did not 'assign' it. A prophecy did so."

Harry patted his chest with his hand and said, "It wasn't me. It was him." He pointed at Vineet.

Vineet calmly said. "I do believe it was you."

Harry started in surprise. "It was definitely you," he insisted.

"I beg to differ-" Vineet began.

Mr. Weasley stepped in and said to the Muggle in the fine suit, "No matter; you have the perpetrator. It is taken care of."

The man shook his head and took a step toward the door. "At least your meteor was convincing," he muttered before departing.

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Mr. Weasley appeared about as relieved as Harry could remember seeing him. For that matter, so did Minister Bones, who said almost happily, “We’ve got some cleaning up to do. No slacking now.”

“What did you mean, Mr. Weasley, that they have the perpetrator?”

Minister Bones replied, “He wasn’t magical, so we gave Mr. Merton over to the Muggles to prosecute. He certainly cannot be sent to the French wizard prison.”

Harry stared at her. “You didn’t... do the same with Voldemort, did you?”

Bones laughed, genuinely amused. “Of course not. He fits in just fine at a wizard prison, magical or not.”

Harry frowned with his brows, trying to sort that out.

Bones, who had no trouble rationalizing that discrepancy, moved on by saying dismissively to Harry. “Press conference in an hour.”

“What about Vishnu?” Harry asked.

Bones evaluated Vineet where he stood beside Mr. Weasley. “You really think he fulfilled the prophecy, not you?”

Harry hesitated starting another argument with his fellow apprentice, so he simply nodded.

“It is simpler to explain it as yours, Harry,” Bones stated. “Reassures the public.”

Harry bristled at what felt like a slight to his friend. “What reassures them?”

“That the same old heroes are still hard at work, fulfilling their role in keeping the peace.”

Harry resisted rolling his eyes. “It wasn’t really me, though.” He glanced around for support on this. “I couldn’t have countered the witch we were fighting. I didn’t even have a wand.”

“Do you have it back, now?” the minister asked.

“No.” Harry pulled from his pocket the colorful blue and green painted wand with gold decoration that he had taken from Debjit. “I’m using one I took from the witch’s husband.”

“We’ll need that for evidence,” Mr. Weasley pointed out.

Harry moved to hand it over, but Mr. Weasley said, “Keep it for now. I certainly don’t want you going about with no wand at all.”

Harry slipped the wand back into his jeans pocket.

The minister said, “I want both of you down in the Atrium on the hour for the press conference then. But I don’t want any arguing in front of the press over who is responsible for what. We’ll just call it a team effort and leave it at that.”

Down in the Auror’s office while they waited for the clock to swing around, Vineet stepped close to Harry and said, “You saved my life again. I am becoming too far indebted to you.”

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“Hey, no prophecy is worth losing your life over,” Harry insisted.

“That is easier for you to say,” Vineet countered.

Harry grinned at him. “Yep. Easy for me.”

Vineet said, “I am still not understanding why you wished to give the prophecy away.”

“Even the chance that the next one might not be mine makes me happy,” Harry pointed out.

“I wish to have purpose,” Vineet stated after a pause.

Harry thought that he did not need a purpose that badly. He was, in fact, looking forward to living without purpose for at least a week while he healed. Although, there was all of that reading he needed to do.

Rodgers stepped in with a box containing all of the ceramic debris from the scene. He nodded at the two of them, glanced at Snape, and departed again.

Harry asked, “What did the witch mean when she said she was flattered to be chased by Garuda?”

Vineet took a deep breath and replied, “She meant she thought there was great purpose.”

“That’s not an answer,” Harry criticized.

Snape wandered over to them from the log book, where he was almost certainly listening in. “Prophecy is not something anyone should wish to be associated with,” he stated and, for an instant, Harry could see – in Snape’s bent cloaked shoulders, in his distant gaze – what a toll the last twenty years had taken on him.

“Yes, let’s hope there aren’t any more,” Harry said, pained.

Snape’s gaze pulled back around to him and he said, “Not that I expect that to keep you out of trouble, by any means.”

Tonks laughed from the doorway. “In trouble again already, Harry?”

Snape swung away and Harry could see him biting back on what he certainly would like to say to her. Harry was grateful that he resisted.

“Did you find my wand?” Harry asked in a hopeful tone.

Tonks shook her head. “That’s what took so long. I took a broomstick over what must have been your route, casting Accios the whole way, and... nothing. If you dropped it at the scene when you transformed back to yourself, it’s truly gone. Otherwise, if you dropped it on the way, a Muggle must have picked it up.”

“I’ll have to get another one made. Fawkes will give me a tail feather, don’t you think?” Harry asked his guardian.

Snape replied, “I understand that you are the only one who has any control over him, so I expect you would know.”



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Thinking aloud, Harry said, “Or maybe I’ll just go down to Ollivander’s shop and see if he’s got something else.”

This garnered close scrutiny from Snape. “Truly hoping for that much change in your life?”

Harry shrugged with just his right shoulder. “Maybe,” he replied stubbornly. “I don’t know.”

He sat down to use the remaining time to write owls to his friends, so they would also know for certain that everything was all right.

Down in the Atrium for the press conference, Vineet stood demurely by while everyone asked Harry questions. The podium had been magically shortened so that – as the Minister explained to Harry in a whisper – the photographs would all include Harry’s bandaged arm.

As usual, Skeeter was the toughest questioner, doubting everything Harry told them. She clearly still did not trust him. Harry made certain to be extra patient while he replied to her, which seemed to properly annoy her by the end of it. Unlike the others, she cared less how the Ministry could be having so much trouble with a non-Magical person and wondered why Harry was always so involved in every dark plot that was afoot.

Finally, the Minister stepped in. “Mr. Potter is supposed to be resting, and we are neglecting our duty to him keeping him here so long. So that is all for today. Arthur Weasley will handle any remaining questions. He has been cleared to release an inventory of the charmed devices on Mr. Merton’s person, for those interested in that. Suffice to say we will be adjusting our Ministry building and event barriers to prevent in the future such objects from allowing a Muggle or Squib to pass as magical.”

She led Harry away to where Snape waited beside the gate. Harry was starting to feel as though he needed either a good meal or a good nap. Without comment, Snape took hold of his unhurt arm and they Apparated to Candide’s flat.

Candide turned from where she stood at a small range with only two burners. She hesitated hugging him after seeing the sling, instead, patting him on the arm. “Good to see you’re all right, Harry.”

“Have a seat,” Snape invited, referring to the neatly made bed beside the small table.

Candide gestured to the domed, wooden box on the shelf behind her. “They carried the press conference on Wizard Wireless. You sounded good. You didn’t give Rita Skeeter any openings and I think she ended up sounding the monster.”

“She doesn’t trust me,” Harry said, accepting a plate of pork chops, reconstituted mashed potatoes, and tinned French beans. He eyed it hungrily, not caring that the

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food was not at house-elf level. As Snape settled at the nearest corner of the table and Candide across the table, their plates having to overlap because the table was so small, Harry did not care if dinners never were back to house-elf standards, or the house ever any bigger. If he had to fight as hard as he had been for even this level of normalcy, he would do it willingly, for as long as it took.

Candide said, "This is your plate, Harry," and handed him one where the chop was already cut into bite-size pieces.

Harry stared down at his new plate with a bit of chagrin. But he did not know a spell to cut up food and he really could not have managed on his own, given how leathery the chop looked.

Perhaps because he had not started eating, Snape asked, "Everything all right, Harry?"

"Yeah," Harry said. Being mothered had brought forth an annoying twinge, but that was all there was to it. No gaping well of pain was revealed. Harry stuck his fork in the nearest tough piece and asked, "I could use a food chopping spell, though, for next time."

"Scriborgo," Snape said, gesturing with his index finger to show the wand movement.

"Thanks," Harry said.

After the meal, Harry stood, saying, "I should get to Hermione's. Her owl said a lot of friends had called and were waiting."

"Be careful, as always," Snape said.

"Thanks for dinner," Harry said to Candide.

"Not much of one," she said, wiping her hands and stacking plates without standing up.

"It was lovely," Harry said, meaning it.

At Hermione's flat, the room was crowded with old friends from Hogwarts and nearly every Weasley. People insisted on making room for Harry on the couch, which he accepted after some urging.

"I'm all right, really," Harry insisted for the hundredth time, even though his arm was throbbing from all of the welcomes that were not so careful.

Hermione came over and handed Harry's pet to him. "Kali is just dying to see you. I thought she'd tear that cage one by the time you came home."

Kali climbed around Harry's neck and then investigated and curled up inside his sling. "Hey," Harry said before Hermione could step away. "Who's Garuda?"

"Wasn't that the Weird Sisters' first drummer?" Lavender suggested from where she sat on the floor between Ron's knees.

"Want a beer, Harry?" one of the twins offered.

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“Only one that isn’t open yet, if it’s you giving it to me,” Harry said, half-serious.

The room erupted in laughter and the twin put his hand to his breast, behaving highly offended.

Hermione had gone to a shelf and to pull out a tall book which she held out to Harry. “Garuda’s a giant man-bird who helps the God Vishnu. Flies him around on his back and such.”

Harry stared at her, not noticing that an unopened bottle of beer was being offered to him. “You’re making that up,” he accused.

Hermione laughed. “Why would I make that up?” She flipped through the book’s shiny pages, and held it out open to a reproduction of a very old painting showing a man riding on the back of bird-headed man with bright red wings.

“He’s eating a snake,” Ron observed. “Yick.”

“I knew it was his prophecy,” Harry said, feeling chilled all of a sudden. A beer knocked against his shoulder and he accepted it eagerly. “I’m going to need another, soon after this one,” he said to the twin.

The twin bowed and stepped away, iridescent cloak sweeping across the heads of those sitting on the floor. Harry closed the book and handed it to Ron, who had his hands out for it. “It’s over and I’m putting it out of my head.”

The evening grew late, and the few remaining guests sat around the table at the border to the kitchen. A figure Apparated into their midst.

“Professor,” Hermione said, standing.

“I received an owl from St. Mungo’s. Harry is overdue for his appointment.”

“Oh, drat,” Hermione said, pulling her wand out and approaching the couch. “He fell asleep, so I put a Bubble of Quiet charm around him. He didn’t say he needed to go in, but I should have thought of that.” She waved the charm away, but Harry did not stir from where he lay, half reclined on a pile of pillows, thoroughly out.

Snape leaned close as Hermione said, “He had a few beers and fell asleep like that.” She snapped her fingers. Snape used his toe to push a large book aside from the foot of the couch. Its cover featured a photograph of a burnished statue with twelve arms and six heads. Hermione picked up the book to put it away.

“What is that?” Snape asked.

Hermione held the book up for him to see the cover, saying, “Karttikeya, God of war,” before stashing it away in its place.

Snape disregarded the book and reached to shake Harry by the shoulder. Harry’s sling moved before he did and his pet stuck her head curiously out to look at Snape. Harry sat up and Kali climbed with a limp up to his shoulder. Hermione scooped her up and took her to her cage. “Enough of that for today,” she said.

Snape said, “You are late for your appointment.”

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Harry rubbed his hair back, trying to flatten it. "I fell asleep." He then rubbed his eyes, urging them to stay open.

"Shall I see if it is possible to bring the Healer here?"

"No, I'll manage." Harry sniffled and pushed himself to his feet.

Harry let himself be Apparated again. As they walked down the quiet 2 a.m. corridors of the wizard hospital, Harry asked, "Can we go on holiday? If we can afford it, that is," he quickly added, thinking that the demands on Snape's finances had become more complicated of late.

"I think that is an acceptable notion. Where would you like to go?"

"I don't know," Harry said, thinking the possibilities too broad to narrow at this time of night.

"Spain? Egypt? Canary Islands?" Snape asked. They had reached Shankwell's treatment room.

"Anywhere would be fine," Harry insisted. "We could go to Finland. You could meet Per. It's nice this time of year," Harry assured him.

"You sound as if you know that firsthand," Snape stated keenly.

Harry hesitated. "What if I did?"

Snape shook his head and opened the door to the room that had grown almost loathsome in its familiarity to discomfort and stress.

Shankwell was not in, but a young wizard who was covering his duties was waiting. He did not realize Harry was late, or did not care; he simply went about the business of cleaning and re-salving Harry's arm. Harry was grateful that he did not have to get yelled at.

They were on their way back out. Snape stopped at the end of the quiet corridor to say, "I expect we can move back home before your birthday." The floating fairy lights congregated above them, circling. They did a poor job of lighting given the dark panelling on the walls.

"I'd like that," Harry replied, adjusting the neck strap of his sling. "So, I can have a big party?"

Snape nodded as though feeling doting. Somewhere in the distance a door closed.

Harry said, "I'm looking forward to it." Snape turned to head down to the lifts, but Harry restrained him by touching his arm. "Thanks for... taking care of things, as usual." He moved his bandaged elbow to indicate that he meant bringing him here to the wizard hospital.

"I cannot do otherwise," Snape stated.

As they stared at each other, Harry thought that if this were his real father standing before him, he would be taking him for granted right now. He could not do that with this man. It was impossible. They had far too much history.

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“Well, thanks anyway,” Harry awkwardly said, wanting to express more, but unable to. He was feeling good, better than he had a very long while. He was certain that if he waved out a spell right now it would not contain any darkness, and he could not imagine needing to worry that it may do so again. Forgiving the distant past had been the right thing to do; it had freed him and his future. He recoiled inside at the thought of where he would be this moment if he had not found the strength for that path.

Harry had struggled long enough, trying to find words, that Snape softly asked, “Ready to go?”

“Yep,” Harry said, heading down to the lifts. “I’m going to be really tired of this place by the end of this.”

When they reached the waiting area, Snape Apparated them away. Back at the flat, only Hermione remained, wrapped in a dressing gown and drinking tea at the table.

“How’d it go?” she asked.

“Good,” Harry said. He skipped returning to the couch and joined her at the table. Without asking, she poured him a cup of chamomile.

“Shall I return at 8:00 for you?” Snape asked Harry.

“I’ll see that he wakes up,” Hermione assured him.

“I can get there on my own,” Harry said. “You don’t have to come.”

Before Snape could depart after nodding, Hermione asked, “Do you think Headmistress McGonagall will be at Hogwarts tomorrow?”

“I suspect not,” Snape replied. “Not this far into summer, usually.”

“Do you have her home address?” Hermione asked.

Snape nodded and found a quill and paper on a pile beside the couch and brought them back to write at the table. “Any particular reason you wish to correspond?” he asked, sounding highly knowing.

“Yes. I’m going to inform her that I’m accepting the Charms position.” She sounded nervous as she spoke, as though a first- or second-year student again.

Snape wrote out and handed the slip of paper over with a nod that could have been a bow.

Harry said, “That will make you Professor Granger, you know.”

Hermione stared at the address and said, “Yes, I suppose it would,” with a smile. She looked back at Snape and asked, “You’re all right with that, correct?”

“Of course,” Snape said, but then added, “Meaningless wand waving, anyway.”

Hermione laughed lightly. “So, it doesn’t matter who’s teaching Charms, you are saying?”

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“I suppose that isn’t quite true. I would prefer the students be challenged by other teachers so when they bring their tiny minds back ‘round to my class, they are cannot feign surprise at needing to work. In my experience, those who find subjects too easy when they are in school, make their subjects the most challenging for students when they become teachers.”

Harry turned back to his friend to see her reaction. Hermione seemed keenly interested in this conversation. “So you expect I’m going to be too hard on the students?”

“By no means.” Snape leaned forward over the table conspiratorially. “There is no such thing.” He made his good-byes and Disapparated.

Hermione said, “Oh dear,” in his wake.

Harry grinned as he sipped his tea. “You’ll do fine.”

“And how about you?”

“My arm will get better and I can return to training. Maybe I can even catch up on my reading in the meantime.” He glanced over at the forlorn pile that seemed to have grown just since yesterday, or maybe some of the guests had rearranged things.

Hermione sighed. “I’m excited about teaching.”

“I’m excited about moving back into my house.”

She put her hand over his and squeezed it. “That’ll be great for you, Harry.” She glanced around. “I won’t need this flat anymore. That will save some pounds. I can find a place just for the summer. On a lake somewhere. That will be nice.” She appeared dreamy as she held her tea cup out before her lips.

Harry pulled the Indian wand out of his back pocket and placed it on the table before him.

Hermione said, “Is your wand going to show up?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, fingering the one before him. He felt a bit lost without his original one, but also felt that perhaps losing it was a good sign. “Maybe if I don’t have it the prophecies will stop.”

Hermione shook her head rapidly in confusion. “How’s that?”

“There are lots of things I’d like to start over again, although most of them bother me less than they used to. But getting out from under fate would be the one I’m keenest on right now.”

“So you aren’t just going to get a new feather from Fawkes?”

Harry held up the wand before him as though checking it for true. “I’m going to see what Ollivander has first. I’m hoping I find something there.”

She cradled her cup more firmly and observed. “That’s a big change, Harry.”

“These eyes are big change. I still startle myself when I look in the mirror. I’m not the same person Dumbledore arranged that wand for. I don’t want to be that

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person anymore.”

Hermione fell silent, but finally said, “It’s reassuring when you say it that way. I was afraid you were rejecting what... well, what Dumbledore did for you.”

“No,” Harry said. “I can’t do that. But I want a new path now.”

She held up her teacup as though for a toast. “Well, I’m finding a new one too. Cheers.”

“Cheers,” Harry echoed.

- End -

Yes, this is the end of this story. I left some plotlines to pick up in the next story, to be titled Resolution. I’d like to thank everyone who’s read Revolution and Resonance, feed me back, and recced it to your friends. It is much appreciated. I learned a lot writing this and having readers makes me up the priority of this practice writing. I also owe my betas a tonne of thanks: Ally in England, Audrey in NYC, Bettina in Finland, Jane in Mich, Nana in Switzerland, Steve fellow Upstater, Verdenia in SanFran. As well as Amy for tolerating my silly last-minute grammar questions that I’m too embarrassed to ask anyone but a best friend. There are two older hp stories of mine posted on my website at darkirony dot com if you want an fix at the expense of recently acquired skill. They are Reconciliation and Rending (yes, there was an odd time when I thought all my stories should start with “R”)

I’m going to get all of Resolution in draft form before posting any of it. I want to see if I can solve some problems I had in Revolution if I do that. I’m also hoping everyone will accept the main premise of Resolution, but since you all willingly accepted Harry as master of the underworld, I’m feeling pretty confident on the acceptance front. You all have changed so much since I first started posting Resonance. It really freed me up, I have to say.

We dearly owe my betas for bailing me out on many of the mistakes I made before you readers had to see them. I’d rather be smoothing than patching in these cases and if I don’t post as I go, I can actually do that. So don’t look for anything until April. Everyone should have had a great winter by then (in the northern hem. that is; you Australians and South Americans can fend for yourselves) and I hope to see everyone back here at that time. I intend to get the story fully posted before book 7, which I’m suspecting is slated for summer release (if not precisely on 07/07/07).