

Harry Potter Fan Fiction

REVOLUTION^{*}



written by
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source
<http://darkirony.com>

version
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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 third part in a Trilogy following "Resonance" and "Revolution" and currently work in progres.

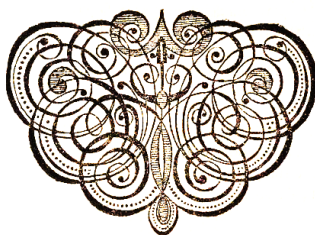
Rating: PG-13 *for occasional violence and very roundabout romantic references.*

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 RESOLUTION

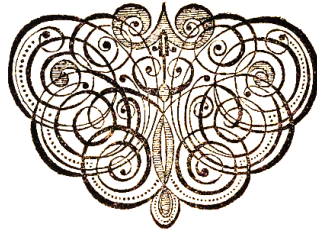
This is the third story in a trilogy that begins with the stories *Resonance* and *Revolution*, which I would strongly recommend reading before this. You can find them on this website by clicking on the author name somewhere on this page.

To quickly catch you up: Harry is nineteen in this story and an Auror Apprentice. He lives with his adoptive father, Severus Snape, in the mythical village of Shrewsthorpe. As the story opens, the characters are dealing with the aftermath of the most recent prophecy and the destruction that accompanied it.



He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

CHAPTER ONE



ON THE COAST

You need chaos in your soul to give birth to a dancing star.

– Friedrich Nietzsche

Harry lay sleeping with the warm breeze languidly flowing over his skin. A magically enlarged umbrella stretched over him, reducing the hot sun to manageable brightness. Red, blue and green bands of light discolored his chest and more obviously, the white bandages encasing his left arm.

“Do you really have to wake him?” Candide asked from behind oversized sunglasses when Snape glanced at his pocket watch. Snape did not reply, simply rose from the awkwardly low beach chair and crossed the white rocks. Unlike the others, who had donned swimwear, he wore shorts and a white starched shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

Snape tapped Harry on his unbandaged shoulder, saying, “It is time again.”

Harry woke slowly, groggy from the heat. It was as though he had been dreaming his surroundings and some time was required to adjust to the coincidental reality. Rubbing his eyes, he asked, “It’s 2:00 already?”

“Yes,” Snape said, collecting his shoes to change out of the ridiculous plastic things they had needed to purchase from a vendor.

ON THE COAST

“If you’re coming back, I’ll stay with the stuff,” Candide said, putting aside the fat magazine she held.

“We’ll come back,” Harry assured her. If nothing else, he wanted to finish his nap. He tugged a shirt on but skipped buttoning it, and instead ran his fingers through his sweat-damp hair. The sunlight sparkling on the water made him squint and he gratefully turned away from it to follow Snape up the beach.

The pervasive scent of briny water was stronger inside the small hotel room. Snape selected from the supplies spread out on the tiny dresser. Harry looked around at his things layering the room and considered that he was going to have to make some space when Ron arrived the next day. He held still while the current bandage was unwound with care because they had to reuse it.

“It is doing much better,” Snape observed. “Your forearm is almost completely healed.”

Harry gave the remaining wounds a closer look. The skin was almost normal, just lacked hair. “Well, I have been taking it easy, finally.” While his arm was being treated he said, “Thank Merlin the Healer let me go.”

“I believe after you shrugged when he threatened to remove all the flesh from your arm upon your return, should that be necessary, he could not argue further.”

Harry spied his Auror books on the marble window sill. They felt farther away than two yards. “I needed a break more than an arm.”

“We all did,” Snape agreed, while methodically rewinding the old bandage.

Harry gave him more scrutiny. “How are you doing?” When Snape made a non-committal noise, Harry asked, “You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“What sane person could not have second thoughts about marriage?” Snape returned with some sharpness. “Let’s arrange one for you, shall we? See how you cope.”

Harry chuckled and moved to put his shirt back on. He felt revived after being out of the sun and his eyes had relaxed in the dimmer light. Pushing his shoulders back to bolster himself to return outside he said, “It’s nice in here, but we should get back.”

“Mad dogs and Englishmen,” Snape commented.

At Harry’s questioning look, he prompted toward the door, “Go on.”

“You two are good together, you know,” Harry said as they walked down the narrow staircase of the hotel. A stiff breeze blew in off the Mediterranean, ruffling the promotional brochures lined up on a side table across from the front desk. Snape dropped the rubber-edged, heavy brass key on the desk as they walked by it. Outside, the wind bullied along the curved, cobblestone street and on the shady side it was almost chilly, but as they reached the quay the heat and light poured on once again.

CHAPTER ONE

Harry returned to his former seat after assuring Candide that he was fine. He clasped his hands over his abdomen, and stared out at the red and white ferry boat passing by just below the horizon. Despite the high-pitched squeals of children playing nearby, he fell back to sleep.

“Can we have pizza again?” Harry asked later, when they were packing up their things with surreptitious glances in all directions to ensure no one noticed them shrinking the umbrellas back down to their normal size.

“Again?” Candide asked at the same time as Snape said, “Whatever you wish.”

They picked their way over the craggy, bleached rock and around potholes filling with the tide. On the road, the locals were reopening shops for the evening, rolling up gates and unlocking glass doors. Pizza was nearly the only option for anyone wanting to eat before 10:00 p.m.

After a quick clean up they were settled in at a small place open wide to the pavement. While they waited for their order, Harry watched bicycles roll by and the occasional car, that he instinctively believed must have been charmed to fit on so narrow a road. Frequent horn honking – which echoed violently in the canyon of stone buildings – seemed a requirement of driving through the narrows of the old town.

Harry sighed. He had finally relaxed and found some perspective on recent events. A glance at Snape’s hooked profile reminded him how tenuous life was, but he had grip on that now, having overcome bad odds once again. It made him feel more confident that should he need to, he could force things to work out again.

Pizzas arrived. Harry downed two slices in rapid succession, wondering how he could have grown so hungry for not having moved all day. When her salad arrived, Candide pushed her remaining pizza in Harry’s direction.

“Still growing, I see,” she teased him.

Harry’s mouth was full, so he did not reply right away. Snape filled in with, “It’s the Thewsolve.”

“Is it?” Harry asked after swallowing a gooey lump of cheese.

Snape nodded and Harry moved to consolidate her pizza with his on his plate. He ate another piece while the two of them sat comfortably across from one another, sharing a second beer. Harry felt comfortable with this too and mildly regretted that Ron was arriving the next day because it would disrupt the rhythm the three of them had settled into.

By the time they were walking back to the hotel, though, the thrumming of the various small night clubs vibrated through the night air, calling him to spend some time out late. He had decided to wait for Ron before exploring the night scene and looked forward to his arrival on that account.

ON THE COAST

Instead of exploring on his own, Harry left the others and went to his own room to attempt some assigned reading. He propped a book on the windowsill in the glow of a streetlamp and sat on a chair, hunkered over the pages. Outside the open shutters, motor scooters whined, bicycles dinged, conversations outside the shops drifted up to the window; all of it fortified by the unceasing wash of the sea waves surrounding the peninsula. As lulling and relaxing as it was, it made Ministry evidence handling policy a rather meaningless, or at least remote, topic.

Harry read as long as he could bear to and then lay on the bed. The plaster above him had an organic feel as though he were inside a big handmade clay pot rather than a building. Harry imagined his own room at home and considered that he could probably just return there in an instant. At Candide's insistence, they had come by aeroplane, but now that Harry knew where he was, he could slip into the Dark Plane and home again with little effort. The thought made him feel less distant from home than he wanted to actually be.

On the other hand, he could go visit Tonks, which sounded highly appealing and indeed his core warmed at the thought. Except she did not know that he had worked out a kind of Apparition to go such distance and Snape did not want him to tell anyone who did not absolutely need to know. But Harry would not mind her learning about it, and he could spend a few hours with her – if she were not on duty – and return back and Snape would not know the difference. Harry mostly resisted because afterward he would truly not feel properly separated from home the way one on a holiday should be.

As he mused upon this, a knock sounded on the door and it opened. Harry sat up suddenly; he had forgotten about his next treatment and was grateful that he had not gone anywhere.

As Snape worked at unwrapping his arm, he said, "I believe this is the last treatment your forearm will need."

"Good, I want to go out to the clubs tomorrow night with Ron," Harry said.

"Wear the sling in that case."

"I was hoping to hide the bandages altogether under a long-sleeve shirt."

"Then you will be tempted to use the arm, which you should not do. Observe how well it is healing now that you are resting it."

Harry could not argue with that, the streaks of pinkish new flesh were otherwise perfectly formed. "I can avoid using it," Harry insisted.

"You will wear the sling or you will not go," Snape stated.

Harry took that in until his surprise passed. He sighed and propped his arm up to be rewrapped. "All right," he said, staring at the mirror over the dresser.

"Look at me," Snape said.

CHAPTER ONE

Harry did, but his mind was Occluded.

“You have grown far too good at that,” Snape complained.

“I’ll wear the sling,” Harry said. “You’re right, of course. Daft to have it not heal right because I wanted to go dancing one night.”

Snape did not acknowledge Harry’s reasoning, simply collected the supplies together into a sack and set it aside. He left Harry alone again and Harry returned to reading in the window, this time rereading a book on advanced double blocks. Conversation from the next room drifted in, and despite wanting to pull back out of hearing range, he held still.

“...the matter, Severus?” Candide asked.

“Nothing is the matter,” Snape insisted. A chair scraped the floor. A scooter sounded in the distance, blotting out everything else, and Harry returned to his reading, nearly forgetting he could overhear if all else was quiet. Quiet descended again and between the calls of a nightingale Harry heard Snape saying in a low tone as though specifically not to be overheard, “There will come a time when he will simply cease to obey.”

Harry forgot his book, certain he was topic of conversation.

Candide’s voice came next, clearer over the low rumble of the waves, “He’s very nearly nineteen,” she said, as though that explained everything.

“It isn’t his absolute age that matters, it is that his power is far ahead of his maturity.”

Their voices were drowned out again. Harry ran his fingers through his salty hair, curled unusually in the humidity. He did not mean to concern Snape so much. He did not mean to be difficult. He was glad he had given in on the sling so easily and very glad he had not Apparated back home and gone missing. That narrowly missed possibility gave him a spark of panic. That he had even contemplated it supported Snape’s assertion.

Snape’s voice came through again. “...wish to control him. No one could control him. I merely am concerned that he may not submit even to guidance long enough to come to terms with his own power.” His voice dropped, more to make a point than hide his voice. “He is extremely powerful.”

Harry’s skin prickled, even in the presence of the sultry evening breeze.

Snape continued, “At least he understands that he must hide his power, but I fear circumstances will continue to force him to reveal more of it.” Silence fell and a chair moved again. “I am glad his power does not disturb you.”

Again Candide’s bell-clear voice, chastising: “He’s a sweet young man, Severus. I think you’re worrying too much.”

ON THE COAST

Harry backed up, and carefully and silently pulled the windows nearly closed so the noise bounced off them instead of floating in. He took his book to bed and sat back with it, but he did not recall what he read after that.

Harry tried not to behave subdued the next day, but large thoughts weighed upon him that he could not shake off even with a bright sunny hot day at the shore ahead of him. He was glad to have something to plan. At breakfast he said, "Ron is supposed to come in by portkey a few miles up the coast. Then he is catching the bus."

"Where is he connecting again?" Candide asked, sounding doubtful.

"He wasn't sure. Said someone at the bank was going to let him use a private portkey but he hadn't figured out the best connection yet."

"He may not be in shape for nightclubs this evening," Snape said. "That distance by portkey is quite nauseating."

"He's here three days; he'll have time to recover."

When Ron arrived – after waiting four hours for a second portkey in St. Petersburg, and indeed looking peaked – Harry was glad for his company. As soon as they returned to the hotel, Ron fell straightaway onto his narrow bed and lay there moaning until Harry fetched him something from the chemists that Snape recommended.

Eager, Harry sat beside his friend on the bed while he drank the prescribed chalky liquid and asked, "Any chance you'll be ready to go out tonight?"

"Out?" Ron squeaked. "Like, to drink?"

"Well, you can have soft drinks," Harry said. "You can hear the music from here... hear it?" The dull thumping was indeed audible if one tuned into it.

"Loud music?" Ron whispered, sounding more pained.

"Tomorrow then," Harry conceded, wishing for a distraction other than his books, but seeing nothing for it. "I need to read more anyhow. Take a rest so you're better for tomorrow." He sat on his own bed and opened the top book to a random page. Ron fell back on the bed and, within minutes, began to snore.

The next day flew by. Each new day did this as though it were half the length of the last. Ron spent the day under a large black umbrella, wearing a broad-brimmed hat. He did not seem to mind keeping company with Snape as Harry had feared he might. The day was exceptionally hot and they swam frequently to cool off, especially mindful of the sea urchins hiding, black and spiky, among the crevices as they climbed out. Harry had a waterproofing spell on his bandage, but the edges of it still became wet and salty and by the afternoon, he was grateful to have it changed.

Harry sat on the bed, less tired from the sun than previously, while Snape bent to untie the wrappings. Snape's face had lost its unhealthy paleness and with his features relaxed, he did not look nearly so harsh and angular. He pulled out the tin of Thewsolve and Harry asked, "Any chance I can lose the bandage today?"

CHAPTER ONE

Snape shook his sun-lightened hair. "I expect you can lose it about the time we depart."

"Too bad we can't stay longer," Harry said, thinking less of getting around freely than that he thought Snape could use a bit more time to get used to being relaxed.

"We have much to do. Moving home, for example."

"That'll be nice," Harry confirmed.

"And you have a birthday party to plan, as well, I believe." He was rewrapping Harry's arm as he spoke.

"Hermione said she'd do it while we were gone." He picked up his wand and renewed the waterproofing. "I'm so glad it wasn't my right arm that got hurt. I think I'd go mad trying to cast with my left."

"I doubt it would slow you down for long," Snape said, stashing the supplies away.

Harry would have disregarded this comment, previously. He wanted to say something, to reassure his guardian, but did not want to give away that he had overheard anything. He held up the borrowed wand from the Ministry that he was using. It was short, only 9 inches, and made of ash wood. "This wand is really slowing me down," he commented as a distraction. "Although I like that it is easy to hide."

"I am surprised you did not replace it sooner."

"I keep hoping mine will turn up," Harry said, slipping the pale wand back into his pocket. He had been hoping this partly because it avoided the decision about whether to have one remade exactly the same.

Snape pulled a heavy wooden chair over and sat down facing Harry, as though detecting his ambivalence. He steeped his fingers and said in an oddly reassuring tone, "I sense there is some larger issue at work here."

Harry had a vision then, of Snape's years placating Voldemort. The careful phrasing and tone sounded too well practiced.

"What is the matter?" Snape then asked more pointedly, which broke the vision.

Harry decided it was best to stick with the first topic. "I sort of want a different wand now."

"That is understandable."

"But I want one that works as well."

"You are unlikely to find one to meet that criterion without duplicating the wood and core. You are a match for such a wand, as I understand it."

Harry frowned. "I bet if I cut Voldemort out of myself I could use a different one just as well."

Snape's dark gaze did not waver, but he held back on repeating what he already had firmly threatened in the past. "Do you still sense him?" he asked instead.

ON THE COAST

“I had a dream I was in prison the other night.” Harry shrugged as though it was not important. “I don’t know if it was just a dream or I was seeing out of his eyes.” He had not planned on confessing this, but Snape’s tone was persuasive, even knowing it was intended to be.

“If it happens again, do let me know.”

“There isn’t anything you can do about it,” Harry pointed out.

Snape stood and returned the chair to the wall beside the window. “I wish to keep track. I certainly cannot help you if I do not know what is happening to you. With that in mind, they are going to wonder what became of us.”

Ron and Harry headed out that night, following the siren call of the thumping music. Despite spending the day under a hat and dark umbrella, Ron appeared reddened as though he were stuck in a blush.

They quickly discovered that the clubs were far quieter in terms of other patrons than their loud music implied. So, at the third one, where only a few people gathered at the bar, he and Ron took their icy beers out on the balcony where they could talk. For an hour they talked of nothing in particular, a luxury Harry had not considered before. When times were bad, one could not afford to relax and speak of things lacking importance – not planning, not worrying, not plotting contingencies for the worst case – just idle thoughts expressed in no particular rush.

Ron, though, grew more serious when he spoke about Gringotts. “They’ve put me on a promotion track.”

“That’s great, Ron. Congratulations.”

Ron shrugged. “It’s a long-term track. It may never lead anywhere.”

“It’s already lead somewhere,” Harry pointed out. “You said that only Goblins ever got promoted higher than where you are now in your department.”

Ron flipped his tall beer bottle back and forth between his hands. “I heard rumors that they only did it because they realized I was friends with you.”

“What?” Harry burst out. “Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t even have enough Galleons left in their bank to be interested in what they’re doing with them.”

“That’s not the point,” Ron argued. “They, well...” He trailed off.

“They think I’m dangerous,” Harry filled in for him.

Ron nodded reluctantly. “That’s my impression. They call it hedging their bets.” At Harry’s shake of the head, Ron said more strongly, “You got your Misfortuna Mutual pay-out on the spot for the house.”

“How’d you know that?” Harry asked, certain he had not bothered to bore anyone with that information.

“I work with the people- goblins who process these things.” He leaned forward to add, “Sometimes it can take a year to get gold on a claim.”

CHAPTER ONE

Harry could not dispute that because Snape had already indicated that his living in the house had rapidly moved things along. In the middle of these annoyed thoughts, Ron said, "I wonder now if that's the reason they hired me in the first place."

Harry left his own concerns to lie. "Ron, don't be silly. If anything it's because Bill worked there already." Harry immediately wished he had not said that, but Ron came back with a hopeful, "You think so?"

"I'm certain," Harry confirmed, glad in this case that Ron thought nepotism an acceptable alternative.

Their beers had run out so Harry fetched two more, thoughts moving faster than being on holiday justified. "I don't think their promoting you, or putting you in line for it, has anything to do with placating me, Ron. Think about it. Imagine they believe I'm a dark wizard." Ron avoided his eyes as he sipped his beer, but Harry went on. "The last thing they would want is my best friend in a high position at the bank. Come on, that's what Voldemort was always doing: getting his Death Eaters into high positions so he could manipulate things more easily. Wouldn't they expect you to do things for me, not that I'd... what... leave them alone because you're my friend?" It occurred to Harry only after this speech that through the Dark Plane he could probably slip into any vault he wanted.

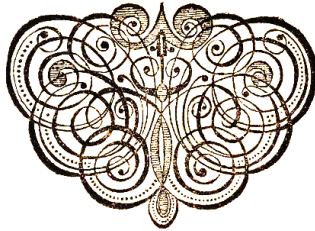
Ron shrugged, unconvinced. "That's just what I'm hearing."

Harry took a deep swig of his beer. "Two more days of holiday before we return to this nonsense. I plan to make the most of them."

Author's Notes:

Chapter two will be at least two weeks. Sorry for the short chapter one but that was the only good cut-point between one and two. I have a lot written on this story but it is not contiguous. I need to connect the first chunk to the next big chunk before two is safe to give you. Next weekend I'll post my much-worked-over post book 7 one-shot. For status updates, please go to [darkirony dot livejournal dot com](http://darkirony.livejournal.com).

CHAPTER TWO



YIELDING

Harry tried to convince Ron to join them in flying home, but Ron, while staring with discernible consternation at a photograph of an aeroplane in one of the travel magazines in their room, said, “I’d havta figure out how to use the telephone and everything to make arrangements. Doesn’t seem worth it.”

“I’ll see you back home then,” Harry said, stuffing the last of his expanded possessions back into his trunk.

“Yeah. I should do a bit of gift shopping before I go,” Ron said, sounding relieved that Harry had let the suggestion drop.

Harry hefted his trunk and slapped Ron on the arm. “Later then.”

Snape behaved better on the flight home since he was not so mystified by everything and he withheld further commentary on how enthralled Mr. Filch would be with the torturous seating. This time, he was only really curious about the silvery material composing the miniature pretzels’ packaging. This generated the only very strange glance they received from the stewardess, when Snape refused to give up the empty package for rubbish because he was still examining it. Harry and Candide kept their noses in their respective reading and their smiles sucked between their teeth until this mini confrontation ended.

Snape glowered at the blue-uniformed staff for a while afterward. Harry leaned over and whispered, “No hexing.”

“I was not considering it,” Snape countered. He crossed his arms and huffed. “Even though there is no magical jurisdiction up here, eight miles in the air.” He closed his eyes then as though staggered by the thought.

CHAPTER TWO

Harry laughed. "Should have brought a broomstick as backup."

"That would not help." Snape glanced across at the white oval of window. "You'd freeze to death before you had a chance to even attempt a warming charm."

Without looking up from the magazine propped on her tray, Candide asked, "Can we drop this topic? Some of us are closer to the window of frozen perpetual drop here."

"I'll switch seats with you," Harry said. "I like looking out the window."

She timidly glanced out while biting her lip. "You're on."



Harry returned to training with mixed emotions. He was simultaneously sad to be no longer relaxing but glad to be losing his boredom.

He arrived early on his first day back. The quiet atrium was almost completely repaired. The paintings and their gilt frames were brighter for the cleaning they had received and the gates sparkled, but the grand ceiling, while cleaned of the black streaks of spell burn, had yet to have the gold leaf reapplied in the gaps. What felt most normal was the echoing sound of the Ministry staff and visitors chatting amiably as they crossed paths in the vast open space.

In the corridor leading to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Harry encountered a new face on an unusually tall body, standing uneasily outside the training room door.

"Tridant," Harry said, more a statement than a greeting.

"Mr. Potter," The blonde man said deferentially.

"Sheesh, call me Harry."

"I don't prefer Trevor, particularly; if you don't mind."

Harry shook his head, opened the door to the empty training room and led the way in. "This your first day?"

"Yup," Tridant replied, taking in the room. He walked over to the training dummy and gave it a push, making it swing on its hook. His obnoxious attitude was missing, but Harry expected it would reappear presently.

Harry left Tridant alone to check if Tonks was about. He could not find her and did not feel like deciphering the log in Shackbolt's presence to try to figure out where she was.

By the time Harry returned to the training room, Kerry Ann had arrived. She gave Harry a friendly welcome-home hug.

"Did you see that Tri-D starts training with us today," she said.

YIELDING

The pained annoyance Tridant turned on Kerry Ann boded poorly for his new demure attitude. “Please don’t call me that.”

“Sure,” she replied, but her eyes sparkled. “How’s the arm, Harry?”

“Good.” Harry waved his arm. “All healed.”

Tridant asked quietly, “Is that the injury you received at the award ceremony that you’re talking about?” As he was asking this, Vineet and Aaron came in and rather than take their seats, joined them in standing around.

“Yeah,” Harry confirmed. “I messed it up more changing into my Animagus form so it took a long time to heal.”

“Did you get the award?” Tridant asked.

“Minister gave it to me after the battle was over.”

Tridant turned to the others. “How many medals get doled out every year?”

“Hoping for one already?” Kerry Ann teased, but Tridant just shrugged cockily. She said, “Harry’s the only one with medals I think. I’m sure he’d let you polish them... if you asked nicely.”

Harry moved to a desk and unpacked his books. A fifth desk had been added to the room, upsetting the symmetry. “Medals don’t matter.”

“How could they not matter?” Tridant asked, disbelieving.

“Staying alive is all that matters,” Harry stated with authority.

Tridant stepped closer, head low to better be at Harry’s eye level. “It doesn’t matter to you whether people recognize what you’ve done or not?”

“I prefer to be left alone,” Harry said.

“No wonder your press is so rotten awful,” Tridant commented, taking a desk for himself. He barely fit his tall, burly self into it.

Rodgers came in then, distracted as usual. “I assume you’ve all introduced yourselves. Mr. Tridant is going to be mixed in with you for training purposes because Merlin knows we can’t spare anyone to train him separate. On that note, we’ll have your belated advancement ceremony tomorrow afternoon so we don’t have five Firsters.” He bent over his papers and muttered, “I think I would die if we did.”

The anticipation in the room was palpable the first time Tridant was called up for a demonstration. Harry rubbed his nose, trying to hide a smile that kept tugging at his mouth. But Rodgers disappointed them all by being relatively gentle with the first round of spells he used to test Tridant’s basic counters. Harry frowned then, thinking that Snape and his trainer had changed an almost disappointing amount.

“All right, then. Your Titan, let’s try that one again,” Rodgers said, stepping back to the wall for more room, which in general would give his opponent more time to react.

CHAPTER TWO

Tridant landed on his rear this time when the spell poured out at him, and in response to his stunned expression, Rodgers said, "I don't use the same power every drill, Tridant. Stand up and do it again."

Like a Great Dane, who has tripped over his overlarge paws, Tridant stood and shook himself out before raising his wand. He was rattled still from the last fall and did no better with the next spell.

"Take a seat... at a desk this time," Rodgers said, gesturing with his wand. "Kerry Ann."

Kerry Ann stood and took on the exact same spell. Her block threw the spell around the room, knocking a book off Tridant's desk. He reached too late to catch it and had to scoop it off the floor. He still appeared stunned as though wondering whether he perhaps was in over his head.

"Modulate those, Kalendula," Rodgers snapped to Kerry Ann's sly expression. "Again."

They were paired up for drills, Rodgers taking the new apprentice. Harry was hoping for a chance at him, but by the time drills were done Tridant seemed befuddled by the long string of corrections and criticisms only rarely interspersed with praise.

As they broke for lunch, Harry hung back after everyone else left to say to Tridant, "You're lucky he's going easy on you."

Tridant stared at Harry. "This is easy?"

"You haven't been sent to the Ministry Healer yet, have you?" Harry pointed out.

"You have?"

"I can't count how many times," Harry said, truly enjoying himself and starting to understand why the program selected apprentices for their seriously oversized attitudes. By the time they were reshaped and could hold their own they had also learned to deal easily with defeat and rough treatment. Harry was tempted to tell Tridant that things would get better, but he did not quite like him enough yet. "Come on, lunch time," he said instead.

In the afternoon Harry was very pleased he could answer all the questions sent his way regarding the readings, especially since Rodgers had gone into some kind of intense examination mode due to Tridant's presence.

"Did your readings while sunning on the Dalmatian Coast. Amazing," Rodgers observed, after Harry recited or passably recreated the policy for interdepartmental magical equipment loans.

Harry's mood continued to rise, given that his evening entailed moving the rest of his things from Hermione's flat and the Burrow back to his house. And to top it all off, he could use his arm as much as he liked while doing so.

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Hermione helped Harry convey trunks of stuff through the Floo network and then hover them up the stairs. Ron was working late, which did not seem to disappoint Hermione any. On one such trip, they encountered Snape in the main hall, hovering a new pair of couches onto the rug placed in the far half of the hall, near the small windows.

“Those look nice there,” Hermione said, letting the trunk she herded clunk to the floor by the steps where she abandoned it. She went over to examine the new furniture.

The couches were black suede. Even the throw pillows were black. “More places to sit will be good for the party,” Hermione observed, sounding approving.

“The invitee list is long, then, am I to presume?” Snape asked.

“Harry’s not to know,” Hermione informed him. “He’s just to show up, not to worry about anything.”

Harry said, “I live here, showing up isn’t a problem.”

She gave him a knowing smile and went back to ferrying the trunk to the first floor.

“She’s up to something,” Harry said, running his hand over the soft fabric of a cushion. “Wow.”

“You are sufficiently skilled to already know what she is planning,” Snape pointed out in a low tone.

“I don’t do that,” Harry said. “It’s cheating.”

“Surprising you are still alive,” Snape stated airily. “How is your arm, by the way?”

Harry ran it through a range of motion with no pain, just extra tickling sensitivity where the flesh was new. “Great.” Just sitting down on one of the couches and not moving a muscle seemed highly appealing. “I need to unpack,” he said reluctantly. “I was hoping to stay the night in my own bed for once. Where’s Candide?”

“Dinner with her parents,” Snape said, domestically adjusting cushions as a distraction, which made Harry have to swallow yet another smile that day.

“You’re not there?” Harry prodded.

Snape’s shoulders curled and his head angled to the side, but he did not seem angry, just disturbed. Hermione came back down the stairs just then and, being the very intelligent person she was, took in the scene and said, “I’ll meet you back at the Burrow, Harry,” and disappeared.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked Snape. He wanted this marriage thing to work out, so he was not going to sit idle if warning signs began appearing.

In a disgusted voice, Snape mocked, “Dinner with the parents.”

“So? She’s been through dinner with your dad.”

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“My father has far lower expectations.”

Harry, thinking of Snape’s intensely critical father, said, “Are you joking?”

“I think he is more easily satisfied in matters such as this,” Snape restated.

Harry gave in to the siren call of the couch before him and dropped onto it. It absorbed him with a sigh. “Uh oh,” Harry muttered, but returned to the topic at hand. “Are you afraid they’re not going to accept you, or something?”

A hard tone appeared. “They have no choice.”

“So then, what does it matter? Go have dinner and get it over with.” He stared at Snape, who was clearly unconvinced. “Severus,” Harry criticized.

“I don’t like caring,” Snape hissed.

“Caring about...?” Harry prompted.

“About what people think,” Snape clarified, getting angry with Harry now it seemed.

Harry’s neck was getting sore. “Sit down,” he suggested. “I’m tired of looking up at you. And clearly you need to relax.”

Snape looked like he might resist, but moved slowly to sit on the edge of the other couch, set at a right angle to the one Harry sat on. Unfortunately for him, the couch did not allow for upright sitters and he fell backward into it.

Harry laughed from his fully slouched and comfortable posture. “You shouldn’t have bought charmed couches.”

Snape fought for a more upright sitting position. “I didn’t. They are Muggle furniture, through and through.”

Harry closed his eyes, drifted a minute, and said, “If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect you of not only caring what they think but fearing they are going to reject you outright.” There was no response, so Harry, still staring at the darkness behind his eyelids, added, “But I know better, so that can’t be it.” Harry tilted his chin to his chest and looked over at his adoptive father, reclining awkwardly with his hand propped under his chin. Quietly, Harry said, “To hell with them, Severus, if they don’t accept you.”

Snape came back with, “Watch your language,” but it lacked force.

“I think you should just get it over with,” Harry said after a pause. “Do you want me to go with you?”

Snape shook his head. “I should not use you as a shield, or a distraction, for that matter.”

“Do they know about me?”

“Yes, of course.”

Harry waited for more, and finally had to ask. “Am I helping? Or...?”

Snape snorted lightly. “Your presence in this family does help I am told, yes.”

YIELDING

Harry felt more relieved to hear that than he wished to be. With a great heave, Harry pushed himself to sit forward, hands clasped between his knees. The couch felt unstable if one sat on just the edge, as though it might let you slip to the floor without warning. “Let me know, Severus, what you think will help. I’ll do whatever you ask.”

Snape did not reply so Harry, thinking he was feeling awkward, changed the topic. “We’re at last having our advancement ceremony tomorrow. If you wanted to come.”

“I most certainly wish to attend,” Snape stated.

“It’s at 2:00, but I don’t think it will be really formal or anything. It’s being held in the Aurors’ office.”

“I shall be there.”

“No bells on though, I suppose,” Harry teased, trying to lighten the mood.

“I never wear bells,” Snape stated with finality. He rocked forward and made it to his feet on the second attempt. “Let’s finish moving back in, shall we?” He stretched his neck as though he had strained it and added, “And perhaps return these couches...”



The next afternoon in the changing room, Harry donned his Auror dress robes, which felt a little tight across the shoulders. They looked fine in the full length mirror, so he ignored the constricted feeling they gave him. He transferred his borrowed wand to the wand pocket of the robes and joined his fellows in the Aurors’ office.

Kerry Ann appeared flushed with excitement as they allowed themselves to be lined up in the narrow space between the cubicles. Aaron by contrast was more subdued, unusually matching Vineet’s attitude. They had an impromptu moment of silence for Munz who would have been made a full Auror that day. Kerry Ann lost her bubbly attitude after this and stopped sending bright glances over at Ambroise beside her mother. The Minister was not attending, so Belinda had come bearing the box of new adornments.

Tridant stood off to the side with the other visitors while Mr. Weasley went down the row of them, Belinda on his heel holding the box and seeming distracted. Mr. Weasley shook each of them by the hand and added a chain to their shoulder, starting with Blackpool, who now had two gold and one silver.

While Harry waited his turn he glanced over at Snape and Candide standing in the doorway and for a moment he felt dizzy with the alternative endings to the close calls that could have left either or both of them dead. A deep breath later, he felt

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less fragile but not as strong as he wished. He was distracted by Mr. Weasley adding a second gold chain to his left shoulder.

“Good job, Harry. Knew you could do it,” he said, shaking Harry’s hand vigorously.

Harry fingered the chains, finding that they meant more than expected. Even though they were just a symbol, they provided solid evidence that the last year was over and therefore could be put behind him. Mr. Weasley finished up with Aaron, gave then all one last round of accolades and then chided everyone to return to work. Snape approached, clearing the doorway.

“Loads to be proud of, Harry,” Candide said when they reached his side and the tide of people had washed the other way.

Harry wanted to repeat what he had said the day before, that being alive was all that mattered. But he could not say it again now; their pride in him did matter.

“Shall we have a celebratory dinner somewhere nice tonight?” Candide suggested.

Harry had to hold himself from glancing at Tonks, with whom he was planning to have precisely that. “Er,” Harry hemmed.

Snape said, “I think Harry’s birthday will have to do for the celebratory dinner.”

“Oh,” Candide said, clearly not understanding.

The room had nearly emptied. Only Tonks hung back, fiddling with papers on her desk. “I have to get back to my training,” Harry said to dismiss them. “Thanks for coming, even though it was short.”

Snape nodded in acknowledgment. He shot a last level glance at Tonks before turning and departing. Candide squeezed Harry’s arm and followed.

When they were alone, Tonks said, “You could have gone out with them tonight instead.”

“I’d rather go out with you,” Harry said quietly, stepping closer.

She held a hand up. “Rodgers is about to come hunting for you, I’m certain.”

Harry dearly wanted to wrap her up in his arms, something he had not had a chance to do in a week and a half. He sighed and departed for the training room, thinking the evening could not come fast enough.

Indeed, their dinner out was delayed because Tonks was late returning from an assignment. After having too much time on his hands during holiday, Harry found himself impatient with things not happening exactly when he wanted them to. He loitered in the corridor after the other apprentices had left for the day, hoping Tonks would make an appearance. When this failed, and various passing people glanced up at him questioningly, Harry decided to give Belinda a visit. Her mood during their advancement ceremony had declined again, in contrast to most everyone else’s around the Ministry.

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Before Shackbolt could pass by a third time with a raised thick eyebrow, Harry headed for the stairwell to go up a level. He reminded himself that Tonks would be a while finishing reports, if she did return before he did.

Belinda sat at her desk, scowling at a sheaf of parchments in her hand. The outer office was a hive of activity; a meeting was going on around the low table and workers were repairing shelves in the corner, so books, crystal balls and gifts from foreign dignitaries were stacked on the floor along the walls.

“Hi,” Harry said.

“Hallo,” Belinda said dully, making Harry believe that she was upset with him about something, although he had no idea what it might be.

“I, er, didn’t get a chance to talk during the ceremony earlier and I realized, well, that we hadn’t in a while.”

She set the stack of parchments before her and smoothed them, not meeting his gaze. “Congratulations,” she said, almost out of the blue.

Harry’s awkwardness increased. He could not ask her what the problem was here in the office. “Do you want to go out for coffee sometime? You can sometimes get out for lunch, right?”

“Not a good idea,” she said.

“Oh.” Harry fidgeted and turned sharply when a nasal voice said, “Problem Potter?” Harry turned to face Percy Weasley, who had one boney elbow propped outward, fist on hip.

“No,” Harry replied easily, glad he now understood why Belinda had been giving him such chilly responses. “Just came up to chat.”

“It’s a bit busy here,” Percy pointed out as though Harry were ten years old. A drilling spell from the dismantled corner loudly accented the accusation that Harry may be in the way.

Harry shrugged and said goodbye extra sweetly to Belinda as he departed. The corridor was blissfully peaceful in contrast. Harry shrugged inside his robes, feeling like he needed a shower after simply talking to Percy.

Late in the evening, Tonks and Harry finally made it to a small Muggle restaurant in the West End. It was so dark inside, Harry at first thought it was closed for the night. But it was not and they were seated at a candlelit table beside a mirrored wall that reflected myriad, cascading candlelit tables and orange-hued faces from the mirror on the opposing wall.

Harry appreciated the darkness as he took hold of Tonks’ hand across the table. “I missed you,” he said.

Tonks replied, “It felt like more than eight days. More like eighty days. You look gorgeous with that bronzed skin. Makes me jealous.”

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In the flickering darkness, her usual tall pink hair appeared orangish, or perhaps she had changed it to orange. She wore a form-fitting knitted top that made Harry wish they could just skip dinner and go straight to her flat.

“Next time you and I should go.”

She teased, “I didn’t have an injury serious enough to keep me from working, unlike some people.”

Harry said, “You seem more relaxed, or is it just me assuming you are because I am?”

“No, things quieted down nicely. We’ve caught up with the worst of the escapees from Azkaban. The Ministry’s getting cleaned up.” She shrugged. “Let’s not talk about the Ministry.”

Harry fished in his head for another topic while the warm hum of conversation and the clink of silver surrounded them. “You’re coming to my birthday party, right?”

“Late. I’m on duty until 9:00.”

Harry frowned. “Which means you probably won’t make it until 11:00, at the earliest.”

“I’ll make it eventually, Harry. I promise.” She gave him a smile to seal it.

At her flat, they curled around each other on the couch and Harry silently agreed that it felt like it had been eighty days since they last were together. Despite believing he would take it slow and relish things, it did not work out that way, and too soon they were threaded around each other, spent.

Harry was half asleep, in spite of not being entirely comfortable, when Tonks stirred and said, “I could use a cup of herb tea.”

Harry unwound himself to let her rise, then pulled random articles of clothing back on as she made tea.

“Want some?” she asked, standing just outside the kitchen holding a teapot, wearing only an unbuttoned shirt.

“Sure,” Harry said, thinking that she could skip the tea and just stand there for a while and that would be fine too.

From the kitchen, she asked, “How’s it feel to be a Second-Year?”

“I thought we weren’t going to talk about the Ministry.”

“I’m not; I’m talking about you.” She brought the teapot out and two tea cups, which she proceeded to dry with the loose corner of her shirt.

“It’s nice to be reminded I’m making progress.” Harry held out a cup for her to fill, then had to move his fingers to the lip when the thin china grew scalding hot.

Tonks said, “Minister Bones held a little meeting with a few people from the department to talk about how we can work on your image.”

Harry growled.

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“Don’t make noises like that while I’m holding a hot cup of tea,” she said. “I have a hard enough time with that, normally.”

Harry smiled, but then heard himself say, “You’re very cold at the Ministry.” He may not have said it had he thought ahead.

She stared at her hands cradling her cup. “I have to be, Harry. You should be too, but you keep slipping up.”

“I just... think it’d be nice to behave, well, normally.”

“If we are in a bad spot – which happens not infrequently as Aurors – neither you nor I can take personal feelings into account. It’s deadly if we do.”

“The Longbottoms managed it. Since they were married before they were Aurors, they could behave normally.” Harry was not certain why he continued to argue this, but he needed to get it out in the open more than he needed to be rational.

“Harry, look where they are now. Ask Shackbolt what happened to them some-time.”

“I know what happened to them; Bellatrix happened to them.”

“Yeah, but how’d she catch them? They messed up, Harry.” She topped up her cup and folded her feet under herself.

“Bellatrix thought Voldemort could be still alive. Turns out she was right. I wonder if she knew about the horcruxes.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. It was way before my time, so I may not have the story straight.” But despite her assertion, she added, “Course, Reggie messed up with Bellatrix too.”

Harry pulled the knitted blanket from the back of the couch over the both of them and leaned closer to her. “What exactly happened with Rodgers?”

“He walked into a trap. But he was at his limit already. At some point after that many hours on duty you are on automatic and can’t think suspiciously enough.”

“What did Severus have to do with it?”

“He came to the rescue. You didn’t hear that?”

“I don’t think Rodgers wanted me to know that,” Harry said, grinning. “No wonder they’re no longer at each other’s throat.” He took her tea cup away and set it on the floor so she would not spill it when he aggressively moved to kiss the hollow above her collarbone.



Saturday arrived and with it Harry’s birthday. Harry slept in till 9:00 a.m. because he had been out field shadowing until 1:00 a.m. the night before. He had shadowed

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Blackpool, who could now officially take him around, although that had not stopped them being assigned together before when the office was too busy to avoid it.

Most of the evening, Blackpool seemed to have other things on her mind, but at one point she asked Harry to help her reinforce a spell barrier around a wizard bulletin board in Blossom Square that had suffered during the riots. Harry at the best of times found large barriers difficult, but his borrowed wand made it impossible to sustain the right magic to complete the spell. He could only apologize for not being able to do this minor duty. Her pragmatic words of, "Just get a new wand, Potter," still echoed in his head this morning.

Harry snarfed breakfast while Snape and Candide read the newspaper, having long since eaten.

"Off somewhere?" Snape asked, when Harry stood not five minutes after sitting down.

"I have to go to Ollivanders," Harry explained. "The Ministry wand I've been using isn't working well enough for me."

"Do you have sufficient gold for a new one?"

"I think so. I can go to my vault if I don't."

Snape's distracted attention narrowed down at that. "Let me know if you do need anything."

Harry swung his cloak on and prepared to use the Floo. "I need a wand that doesn't have a history."

Snape stood at that and intercepted Harry as he was putting the canister of Floo powder back on the mantelpiece, crystals of powder dribbled out between the fingers of his over-full left hand. "Fighting fate is rarely successful."

"Thanks, Sybill," Harry breathed before tossing in the powder.



Harry took a deep breath and turned the latch of Ollivander's shop door. Bells jingled above his head. A lean shadow crawled across the back wall and the old wizard came into view.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, what can I do for you?"

Glancing around the tightly packed boxes surrounding them, Harry said, "I lost my wand and I need a new one."

Harry could not read Ollivander's piercing, pale-eyed gaze. The older wizard clasped his hands together and fell thoughtful while peering around his stock. "We tried quite a few wands last time, Mr. Potter. But... there are a few new ones you could try..." He trailed off accommodatingly.

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“I’ve been using this one,” Harry said, holding up the borrowed wand from his department.

Ollivander cursorily examined it, asking, “How does it work for you?”

“It works. Mostly. Doesn’t do everything quite the way I’m used to.”

Ollivander reweave his fingers together. “Lost the old, you say?”

“Fighting Merton, yes. It might have shown up... that’s why I waited to get a new one. I wasn’t certain if it was destroyed or not.” This excuse sounded good, even to Harry, who knew he had put it off because he feared fate would repeat itself yet again with a replica of the old one.

They had reached an impasse; Ollivander broke it by turning to fetch his ladder and some wands from his stock.

“This is an unusual one,” Ollivander said, shaking open a long narrow box much the same as the others. He held up a long white wand with a spiral pattern of grain. “Unicorn horn with fairy wing tendon.”

Harry took hold of the wand. It felt different, all right. “The Unicorn is still alive?” he asked, knowing the answer, but asking nevertheless. He really was musing on how the wand would behave after the Unicorn had died.

“I would expect.”

Harry tried a few spells. The hover came out strangely. The book floating before him visibly vibrated.

“That wand is looking for someone,” Ollivander said, almost confessing. “I don’t know whom. Does not like charms as well as hexes, in my practice with it at least.”

Harry handed it back and another box was lifted off a healthy pile of two dozen still to go. “Coral tipped Palissandre,” Ollivander announced as he held out a pastel pink wand streaked with brown. “The core is harpy feather.”

This wand did nothing when Harry waved it. He handed it back.

“As expected,” the shopkeeper said. “I made that one for the mer-boy the Hogwarts headmistress tells me is getting a letter just about now.”

“One of the mer people is attending Hogwarts?” Harry asked in surprise. “How is he going to breathe?”

“A water charm of some kind, I’m sure. Or a diving bell full of water if all else fails.”

He handed Harry another wand. “Sandlewood with Mngwa whisker.”

Half an hour later, Ollivander informed Harry that he had exhausted his stock of new wand materials since Harry had last shopped there. “The rosewood and glass Cherufe hair performed the best, I believe,” Ollivander helpfully said.

“Not good enough. Charms didn’t work at all,” Harry admitted. He dropped his head and let his eyes flow over the piles of open boxes on the counter. Ollivander

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began meticulously putting each wand away in its proper box and stacking them in a basket for restocking. Harry did not want to give in, but there seemed no choice. “If I bring you a feather from Fawkes, can you make me another like my old one?” Harry heard himself ask.

Ollivander nodded.

“I’ll do that, then,” Harry informed him, feeling dispirited. “I should fetch one now while I have the time.”

Harry Disapparated to Tonks’ flat, which he knew was empty, and dropped through the Dark Plane to arrive behind Hagrid’s hut. Snape did not want Harry traveling though the Dark Plane, especially on so casual an errand, but Harry was feeling disgruntled and unwilling to obey even good advice as a result.

Hagrid was tending his vegetable plot, thinning the small pumpkins down by picking out those that were not of his preferred shape. “That one’ll never do,” he said, tossing a donut-shaped, beach ball sized pumpkin beyond the garden fence as though it were a trifle. “Oh, hello Harry. Didn’t see ya there.”

“Can I borrow Fawkes for a minute?” Harry asked. “I need a tail feather from him for a new wand.”

Harry almost half-hoped Hagrid would forbid him to have one for some obscure exotic animal care reason. But Hagrid just stood straight, rubbing his great broad back, and said, “We’ll, let’s see what we can do fer yeh.”

Fawkes flapped his wings when they entered. He was in full feather, Harry observed and could not avoid the eerie sense of coincidence. “He looks good,” Harry said.

“Aye. He’s about to start a month of molting then comes the flames and ashes, and then we start again.” He turned to Harry conspiratorially. “That’s when I have to move his perch outside or risk losing my thatch.” He turned to the bird. “Harry here needs a tail feather. You’re going to lose those two you have in a week or three anyhow and by then they’ll be ragged as the weeds I dredged out o’ the lake last week.”

The bird tilted its head to look at Hagrid better and shuffled along its perch away from him. Harry approached and stroked the bird’s head and wing. “Believe me, I don’t really want to take your lovely feather but I don’t have any choice.”

Fawkes stepped up onto Harry’s hand and pecked at his robes but it did not seem aggressive, more conversational. Hagrid said, “That’s all right then.” And gave a snapping tug on the longest of Fawkes’ tail feathers. He startled Harry and the bird equally when Fawkes gave an ear-splitting squawk! and fluttered once around the cabin before flapping back to the perch and fussing with his remaining good feather.

“Thanks Fawkes,” Harry said. The bird ignored him.

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Hagrid wrapped the feather in a soft deer hide and handed it to Harry. “There you are.”

“Thanks Hagrid. I don’t know if I could have... yanked it out like that.”

“Ach, nothing to it. He was going to burn it to ash shortly enough.”

Harry returned to Ollivander’s via the Floo in Hogsmeade, uncertain if passing through the Dark Plane may harm the feather’s magic. He presented the whole bundle to the old wizard craftsman and put down an eight Galleon deposit.

“I’ll push your wand to the top of the list, given your position, the poor match you have with your current wand, and your history of attractiveness to those with evil intent. It should be finished in a week. Call again next Saturday.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry said, giving the old wizard a small bow because just saying goodbye seemed insufficient.

Harry was still melancholy when he returned home. The house had been decorated in his absence and now black, maroon and green streamers lined the center hall and a pile of presents had been started on a table in the corner. The house was quiet, and Harry stood still there in the center of the big room, captured by his own thoughts.

Snape stepped up beside him, quietly, but not so silent that Harry did not lack all awareness that he was there. Harry shook himself and returned to the here and now.

“How did it go?” Snape asked.

“I fetched Ollivander a feather from Fawkes to use to make another.” Try as he might, Harry could not make his voice come out other than annoyed.

Sounding as though he wished to tread carefully, Snape asked, “What is wrong with having a wand that works properly for you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with that,” Harry said. “It’s just that... that wand had a role to play and if that wand is always destined to be mine, then the role is also.”

“I don’t believe I ever expected to have to say this to you, but I believe you are over-analyzing the situation.”

Harry plunked himself down on one of the couches and let himself sink backwards. “I don’t want to fight Voldemort any longer.”

Snape stepped around until he faced Harry, expression narrowed with disbelief. “I do not know what makes you fear that you will need to. He is safely, and helplessly I might add, ensconced within the French wizard prison. I cannot imagine he will be going anywhere anytime soon.”

“True,” Harry admitted.

“It is time to focus on your training-”

Harry interrupted with, “It is time to focus on my birthday.”

“Yes, well, for today,” Snape conceded.

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Harry got to his feet and surveyed the tables that had been set up. An empty punch bowl and haphazard stacks of crystal cups sat around it. “Hermione’s been busy already.”

“I believe she won’t be returning until 4:00 or so,” Snape informed Harry, sounding cryptic.

“You know something I don’t,” Harry suggested.

Snape gave a haughty lift of his nose and stepped away.

“Ach,” Harry said, resting his head back. “At least I don’t feel followed around all the time anymore.”

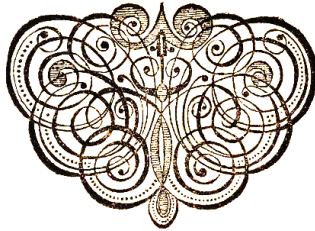
This re-attracted Snape’s attention before he could reach the stairs. Harry went on: “Maybe Mad Eye’s found something better to do.”

“Maybe he decided on a holiday as well,” Snape suggested.

“Maybe he’s just getting more careful,” Harry said, sitting forward. He ran the detection spell for the house, but it fizzled. Harry slapped his own forehead and groaned.

“Good thing you gave in on the wand,” Snape said, snapping his wand out and running the spell himself. A thin trail of blue glitter flickered over the walls and then faded, indicated the house was secure. Snape turned and headed up the stairs saying, “Unless you are looking for an exercise in humility, I would recommend declining any invitations to duel at your party tomorrow.”

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NINETEEN YEARS

Partygoers began showing up just before 4:00 and the hall filled with voices and merriment. Old school chums, including Ginny, now released from her detention, Ministry fellows, and neighbors clustered about the room. Harry admonished each new arrival who brought a gift, but despite this, the gift table filled up. Suze released a training Snitch and set it to zipping around the chandelier. Aaron, unusually, arrived dateless and cornered the Slytherin Seeker, intent on learning his old house's upcoming prospects for the cup. The Weasley twins arrived, sporting matching silvery cloaks, and began handing out small sample bags to those willing to swear with a Promissory Spell not to sue them later.

"Ron, are you sure you want to eat that?" Harry asked of the thick transparent jelly-like biscuit his friend held up for inspection. It appeared to have a tiny toy top spinning inside of it. Harry did not hear the answer because Hermione arrived, bearing an unexpected guest.

"Penelope?" Harry uttered in surprise, jumping up to approach them.

Harry gave his old girlfriend a hug. She said in surprise, "You have grown more so!"

Hermione said brightly, "I thought we should have all of your old friends and allies together, Harry. You need all you can get."

"I'll give you that." To Penelope, he said, "It's good to see you," as he led her to an empty seat near people she would know from Hogwarts. "You came all this way for my birthday?"

She giggled. "I have a colloquium in Glasgow next week. I am making a long trip

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of it.”

“Ah. It’s nice of you to come.”

She leaned close and said, “Even a few people I know say such things about you. Unbelievable. You have not changed except to grow more. I can tell.”

They chatted a while, meandering slowly toward a corner. “You remember Neville, right? And Luna, and Lavender.” Harry pulled a chair over to join them. “Where’s Ron?” he asked Lavender.

“He’s had too much punch already. He’s on the floor over there.”

Harry jumped up and, sure enough, Ron was flat out behind a couch. Harry bent down and shook him. Hermione was just suggesting they take him to St. Mungo’s when Ron burst into giggles and spat out the biscuit Harry had seen him with earlier. It rolled away across the floor and stopped, but continued gently rotating on its edge.

One of the twins scooped it up. “He wasn’t supposed to eat that.” He rolled eyes and said, “Oy! Fred, give me a hand.”

The two of them sat the giggling and clumsy Ron up by hoisting his long arms over their shoulders.

“What’s that thing?” Harry asked.

“It’s a Misplacement Gimcracker. You slip it inside something and then that thing is never where you left it.” To Harry’s confused look, he went on. “You do it to someone you don’t like. You know, put it in their briefcase or handbag, or something.”

“You all right, Ron?” Hermione asked him.

Ginny crouched down with them. “Did he choke on something?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Hermione said, sounding less sympathetic now.

Ron’s giggling slowed and he managed to get himself onto a chair with only light assistance. He shook his head repeatedly as though to clear it. He blinked and looked around. “Is this Harry’s birthday party?”

“Yes,” several people replied in unison.

“Oh good,” Ron said.

Candide came in. Harry would not have noticed her in the crowded room, except she was sneaking over to the presents table. Harry leaned his head to the side to better watch her slip a gift onto it from behind her back.

Harry intercepted her on her way back to the dining room, truly surprising her with his admonishing expression. She said, “I can’t believe you caught me at that. There must be a hundred people in here. I had trouble thinking of a good gift until this afternoon. That was the first chance I had to get it on the table.”

“I’m quite certain the invitations stated, no gifts,” he said, mostly teasing.

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She pulled herself straight and said, "I didn't receive an invitation. So there." She tugged Harry toward the dining room. "Your cousin wants to say hello."

Harry joined the real adults around the far quieter dining room table. Snape sat back with his hand hooked around a small tumbler of something. Candide returned to sitting across from him and sipped her tea. Pamela sat holding the hand of Lupin, who appeared excessively withered.

"How are you, Remus?" Harry asked.

Pamela patted the hairy hand she held. "Only three days since the full moon, but I convinced him come to your party, I'm afraid."

"s good to get out," Lupin said.

Harry was not given much time to talk before being dragged back into the hall to open his gifts. The punch had been spiked twice by then and the voices had grown louder and less sensical as it was consumed. Harry accepted each gift with some trepidation that he did not need so many things. But by the time he opened the fourth highly practical gift—in this case a set of orange curtains from Ron with cannon balls flying around on them—he turned to Hermione questioningly.

She leaned forward to pat Harry on the knee, saying tipsily, "Of course I told everyone exactly what to get you. After the fire, you needed some things."

"Thanks. And thanks, Ron."

"My mum sewed them for you, I expect." Ron sounded like he wished he remembered for certain. He pulled a corner of one close and said, "Hope you don't mind that it probably was a duvet cover of Charlie's before this."

"I don't mind at all." He held them up. "They look the right size too."

Hermione said, "I gave Ron exact measurements, but he doesn't remember my doing that."

"I do," Ron argued unconvincingly.

Many of the boxes contained silver gift coins. Harry made a careful stack of the ones to Cloak Couture, one of the new shops in the Diagon Alley expansion. He did need a new cloak.

When there were no more un-opened boxes, Harry said, "Thanks, everyone." He found Candide in the crowd with his eyes. "Especially for the collapsible pet cage."

Tonks arrived after the party returned to its former boisterous conversation. She gave Harry a chummy hug.

"How did shift go?" Harry asked, drawing her aside into the corner so he could be relatively alone with her.

"Swimmingly. It was quiet enough we went ex-prisoner hunting."

"Catch anyone?" Harry asked.

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“Two ones,” she replied between bites of cold, scattered tidbits from the table nearby. “They were silly enough to return to England after initially running off to Belgium to hide.” She licked her fingers. “Happy Birthday, Harry. I didn’t tell you that yet, did I?”

“No, but thanks. It almost isn’t anymore.”

“Just in time, then,” she said with a wink. Harry would have accepted her good wishes two or three hours late with no difficulty.

The party wound down as they talked, which Harry was only vaguely aware of until Ginny came over, sheepish about interrupting. “We have to go soon.”

“Oh,” Harry said, glancing around the much thinned crowd. He spied Ron, playing with a wooden game Harry had received where you tilted it to get a metal ball through a maze. If you went down the wrong hole, it squirted ink in your face. Ron had streaks of grey around his ear and a stained hanky in his hand. Harry pulled Ginny closer. “Better tell your mum what happened to your brother.”

Ginny’s whole demeanor shifted. “She’s going to lay into the twins if I do.”

“Ron may need a Healer though. I offered to take him, but he doesn’t remember what happened, so it’s tough to convince him. Your mum could get him to go if he doesn’t get better.”

Ginny sighed. “Yeah. You’re right. He’s not really bad, but I don’t think that thing did him any good.” She glanced between the two of them, with a hint of jealousy, but it turned out to have a different origin than expected. “How’s your training, now that you’re back into it?”

Harry relaxed, not realizing he’d tensed. “It’s good. Apply again next year, Ginny.”

He expected the same noncommittal response as last time, but she said, “Of course. Your fellow apprentice, Aaron, said he’d send me his reading list and some of his books, which he’s highlighted all to death with the critical things.”

“That was nice of him.”

Ginny’s gaze slid over to where Aaron stood talking with Vineet, Hermione and a few others. “Yeah, he is nice,” she said, sounding far away.

“Ginny,” Harry snapped. “You can’t get involved...” he started, but had to close his mouth. He was standing there next to Tonks after all. His face heated up.

Ginny broke out laughing. “I don’t even know if I’ll ever get into the program for it to matter,” she argued when she had the chance. She had the grace to not state the obvious, but she kept giggling periodically and shaking her head in amusement. “I have to take Ron home, like you said, tell mum. See what she wants to do with him. See if she thinks he’s not quite himself.”

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“Let me know if you need anything,” Harry said to her departing back. She waved over her shoulder in acknowledgment.

“Ron looks the same as always to me,” Tonks said. “Well, the same as always if he’s been attacked by a squid.”

“Once we’re done here, we should go to your place,” Harry said suggestively.

Tonks stood more alert. “I’ll go on ahead and clean up. I was crawling around in shrubbery this evening.”

Harry wanted to give her a kiss before she departed, but decided it would be a bad habit to break, once started.

The hall gradually emptied, leaving only Snape lounging on one of the couches, perusing a book Harry had received on disguise spells entitled *Shrouded Aspect*. Harry dropped onto the opposing couch and peered around the littered room. The clock showed ten past one. It had been a good birthday. Harry should stop worrying about his wand situation. As Snape said, Voldemort was unlikely to cause trouble from his current position.

Snape closed the book and set it on a pile of boxes. He nodded when Harry asked if Candide had gone to bed.

“I hope we weren’t keeping her awake,” Harry said, suddenly thinking of this.

“Silencing charms work wonders in such situations.”

Harry stood, thinking he would head to Tonks’ flat. He picked up a few boxes, sorting out the gifts, not wanting to leave all of this for Winky to do. When he finished with a quick reorganization he noticed that Snape had not moved. Concerned that it may generate another lecture he nonetheless said, “I’m going to go stay with Tonks.”

Snape waved his hand dismissively and picked up his tumbler from the floor. He glanced around and waved the nearly empty bottle from the dining room to refill it.

This jarred Harry out of his immediate thoughts of Tonks waiting for him. “Aren’t you going to bed?”

“Eventually. Go on.” The tone had gone dismissive, hard even. He resembled Lupin that evening in his posture, as though overly tired.

Harry looked around the room, picking up and discarding possibilities. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Snape stated, adding annoyance into the mix.

“Something wrong with Candide?” Harry asked, plowing in because, not in spite of, the danger signs.

“Candide is fine,” Snape stated, and indeed his tone softened as he said this, indicating it was the truth.

Harry sat back down across from Snape, pouring over recent memories. He had been spending little time at home now that they had returned. “You look like you

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could use a good night's sleep," Harry said, hoping worry over him was not the reason Snape looked less than well rested. "Why don't you take one of your own potions and go to bed?"

Harry hung there, waiting for a response. He was certain Snape teetered between snapping at him and giving in. "Do you want me skip going to Tonks' place tonight?" Harry asked. "I know you don't approve..."

"It is your birthday; you should go," Snape stated flatly. He stood and sighed. "I perhaps will follow your advice."

Harry followed him down to the toilet and leaned against the doorframe as Snape searched through the cabinets.

"I certainly do not need your assistance with mixing a potion."

"I know that," Harry said. He wanted to press more to get Snape to talk, but he also did not want to have it confirmed that Harry himself was keeping him up at night.

Snape towed out a tall glass he had found and heated it with his wand until the water droplets in the sink under it hissed into steam. "When will your new wand be finished?"

"Next Saturday," Harry replied, determined not to be distracted.

Snape poured a bit of clear, thick liquid into the glass. It immediately began boiling. His hair now obscured his face. "That is fast."

"He made it a rush order because I tend to attract evil."

"True enough." Snape bent to add a grey powder to the glass with precise taps on the container. He stirred the mixture with a glass rod and said after several minutes. "You are still here."

Harry could not deny that. "I want to know you're all right." A thought occurred to Harry then. "The Crutiatus curse isn't coming back is it?" Harry half hoped it was that, because that he could help with.

"No, it is not," Snape replied tiredly.

"Do you want me to check?"

Snape shook his head decisively and crouched to add drops of something blue to the glass just until it turned glittery inside as though the liquid had frozen over all of a sudden.

"What are you making?"

"Something of my own concocting."

"I've never seen it before."

"You have. I concocted it for you when you were in the Dark Lord's grips and dared not sleep."

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Harry remembered that horrible day with great reluctance. But after a cursory review of compacted memories, considered that even if the Crucios were no longer bothering Snape physically that did not mean they were leaving his dreams alone. Snape lifted the glass and held it up where it could catch the light of the lamp. The crystalline frost inside slowly dissolved toward transparent.

“Are you going to be all right?” Harry asked.

With more typical grumbling spirit, Snape said, “I do not want you worrying about me.”

“Why not?”

“I believe your ladyfriend is awaiting you,” Snape said.

Harry laughed lightly. “She keeps me waiting all the time. You didn’t answer the question.”

Snape rotated the glass, tilting it as though to urge it along. “If you are worrying about me, I am failing at this role.”

Silence descended until the glass was completely clear and Snape moved to pour it into an empty bottle for which he could actually locate its matching stopper. He slipped the bottle into his robe pocket and began putting away the ingredients. That, done, he used a rag to slowly wipe up the sink.

“You’re very far from failing, Severus,” Harry said. But he bit his lip as he remembered the pain of discovering that it had been Snape who had told Voldemort about the prophecy. But it should not be buried where it could fester, so he said, “You were very patient with me while I worked things out about the prophecy that killed my parents.”

A shiver passed through Snape as he stood holding the edges of the sink and listening to Harry while staring at nothing in particular.

Harry insisted, “Say something.”

“It is all very tenuous.”

“What is?”

Snape huffed. “Life.”

Harry scoffed and criticized, “Now you are getting philosophical as a distraction.”

Snape moved with purpose to finish closing cabinets and then turned the lamps down to a tiny amber halo.

“Severus?” Harry prompted as he followed him out into the hall.

Snape turned slowly back to him but did not speak. His gaze was indiscernible in the low light.

“You don’t want to talk about it?”

“No,” Snape replied with finality and started to walk away again.

“I’m going to keep worrying about you, then,” Harry threatened.

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Snape paused but kept his back to Harry. "Fine."

Harry watched the black robed figure go up the stairs and into the first bedroom. Harry did not feel that things were tenuous. Thoughtful and distracted, he Apparated to Tonks' flat to find her soundly asleep. He shucked his clothes and slipped in beside her without waking her.

Harry returned for breakfast the next morning, leaving Tonks to sleep in.

"Harry! Didn't expect to see you here so early," Candide said brightly when he arrived.

"I could use a good breakfast," Harry explained, which was the truth. Breakfasts at Tonks' usually consisted of a stale scone or Danish at best.

"Came to collect your gifts, I see," Snape stated when he came in and found Harry at the table.

Harry smiled at his negative and accusatory tone. "Yep. You got me."

Candide glanced between the two of them in befuddlement. "You two have endless codes. Just when I think I've figured it out, it changes."

Candide merely picked at her small breakfast. "Feeling all right?" Harry asked.

"I am not so hungry this morning," she admitted, sounding queasy. "And I have brunch with my parents."

"You going?" Harry pointed asked Snape.

Snape shook his head, which shifted his hair forward to obscure his face. Candide was frowning as she sipped her coffee. She tapped her spoon methodically against the table a moment and then stood. "Well, I'd better go."

After she came back in, clearly dolled up more than before and disappeared in the Floo, Snape said accusingly, "Whatever you were going say, go ahead."

"I was going to say 'just as well'."

"I will second that," Snape stated as his plate disappeared. "If you had not been here, there may have been a row over that."

Harry poured more sugar into his coffee, feeling he needed the treat. "You're going to meet them at the wedding in a month in any event." He kept stirring, waiting for the gritty sound to decrease. "It isn't like you to play the victim." But as Harry said this, and he saw Snape's chin move slightly sideways as though he had been struck, a clearer picture was forming for him.

While he fished around for what to say next, Snape cut him off with, "I am all right, Harry. I've just had a few bad nights is all. Too much on my mind."

"I hope I'm not one of the things worrying you," Harry said.

"At the moment, no," Snape replied smoothly.

Harry, who knew better because of what he had overheard, said, "You lie too well."

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Snape put down his coffee without sipping it. Tangible tension rose between them as though part of the table, but Harry was glad this was out; it bothered him and he wanted it dealt with.

Harry went on, stating each word with certainty so that Snape could not dodge it, "You're worried about me, about what I could become with this power."

"Yes," Snape agreed, calm now, keen alertness overwhelming any fatigue or annoyance he had shown moments before. "It is less a reflection on you than it may appear. As Alastor has pointed out to me, I have lengthy experience managing powerful wizards. I have instincts born of that time that I cannot relinquish." He carefully watched Harry's face for a reaction.

Harry for his part was feeling relieved. Relieved to be talked to as an adult and relieved that Snape trusted that he could handle his concerns.

Snape, after thinking lengthily, said, "I cannot ignore the fact that were you to turn dark, you would be unstoppable. Voldemort would be a distant happy memory for wizardom in comparison."

Harry held back his gut response to consider it, but in the end said it anyway, "I'm not going to go dark, Severus." It hurt to have Snape even believe it a possibility, but he did not want to show that because he wanted to have this conversation.

"I agree that on the face of it, it is unlikely. You are conscientious to a fault. You are not afraid of emotion. And you are, as I am well aware, capable of great forgiveness." He sipped his coffee before continuing, speaking carefully as though picking each word specifically. "All this does reassure me. But at the same time you toy with things that are monstrously larger than you, and I do not feel you give them proper apprehension."

"I assume you're talking about the Dark Plane," Harry said.

"Yes. It is an unknown that I cannot discount as a danger."

Harry thought that over, not wanting to speak any less carefully than Snape was. But he was slow responding and Snape went on, "You treat it too casually for my comfort."

"That's just it, though," Harry was compelled to say. "You don't understand; that's exactly what gives me power over it: believing I'm stronger than it. I had trouble with it only before I knew that."

It was Snape's turn to fall thoughtfully silent. When he next spoke, he said, "And you disposed of Voldemort's magic there. Does that not represent some added danger? Is he not there now in some form?"

"I hear this odd howling now that I didn't previously," Harry said with a shrug. "It might be him." Harry realized something important just then: that thinking something and saying it aloud could be two very different things. He had only idly

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considered his suspicion that Voldemort's magic was still intact as an entity or force in the Dark Plane, but saying it aloud to Snape and watching his brow furrow, was a very different thing. "I'm stronger than him, though," Harry persisted, knowing Snape would recognize his own quote.

Snape did not speak and left his coffee to go cold. Harry said, "I'm not reassuring you, am I?"

Snape rubbed his chin. "If I thought you were avoiding the Dark Plane, I would be somewhat reassured. When were you last there?"

Harry, given the truths being bared here, could not lie. "Yesterday."

Snape to his credit did not react. "I did not think I could influence you on this point, anymore than I could influence you on the point of Ms. Tonks."

"I don't mean to be trouble," Harry said, finding a younger version of himself speaking out, one who was accustomed to being classed as trouble by guardians who were not shy about letting him hear about it. He tried to squash it, but it refused to be. He sighed, trying to think more adult-like. "I don't want to keep you up at night."

"You aren't," Snape insisted.

Harry wanted to believe him. And normally he would not dream of prying so, but he needed to know. "You're having nightmares about being Voldemort's prisoner?"

Snape nodded faintly. "It will pass. It takes time. Quite a bit of it sometimes, in my experience."

Harry did not like feeling helpless. "If you think the Cruciatus is coming back again, let me know."

"If it has not by now, it will not do so. But I will inform you, be assured. I am not fond of pain, even if the occasional student insists otherwise."

Harry laughed lightly.

Snape returned to serious. "I do not want you to take my concerns as a loss of faith in you. You are doing very well, I can tell even without taking advantage of your letting your Occlusion slip. Your wand seems to be the only thing distressing you right now."

Harry said, "I don't know why I let it bother me so much. I think I'm over it now, but I expect when I get the new one I'll be so happy to have a wand that works again, I'll ignore that it is so tied to my fate."

"All good wands are tied to a wizard's fate."

"Yeah, I got a better sense of that at Ollivander's this time. He gets some strange inspirations about wand materials and then has to wait and wonder who is going to show up for it." Harry pulled out the short pale wand he was currently using. "Yeah, I'll be happy to get a good one again."

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Snape pushed his empty cup away and it sparkled into the ether. “And perhaps this week sometime... dinner with the Breakstones.”

“Do you want me to come along?”

“As tempting as that offer is, I should manage on my own.”

Harry smiled. “Let me know, but I’d be happy to go along, Severus.”



“Have you attempted an Animagus transformation since the treatments have stopped?” Shankwell asked when he released Harry’s arm during his final appointment.

Harry shook his head.

“And you said before that your form is too big to fit in here...” Shankwell began but faded. At Harry’s nod, he suggested, “Why don’t you Apparate off somewhere more fitting to try a full transformation cycle and then come back. If that fails to produce any species distortion in the newly grown flesh, we’ll declare you fully healed.”

Harry leapt down off the examination table and Disapparated to the Puddlemere Quidditch grounds. It was early morning and no one was about. The few banners left up between matches snapped in the wind over the VIP box high above him. Harry walked to the main gate and peered between the decoratively curled bars at the grass oval of the pitch. No one was around inside either. Harry took a few steps back to get out from under the overhang of the stands looming above him, and transformed into a Scarlet Gryffylis. Once he did so, he could not resist flapping to feel the gravity lessen until his claws lost contact with the earth.

As much as he would relish circling the pitch in flight a few times to feel the freedom of it, he dropped until his claws dug into the turf and transformed back into himself.

Back in Shankwell’s room, Harry pulled up his still unbuttoned sleeve to reveal that no harm had come from transforming.

“Looks healed, finally,” the Healer said, addressing his notepad, rather than Harry. Harry pulled his robes back on and tossed them straight. Shankwell said, “Versa is still interested in learning Staunching from you. She is probably in the ward if you have the time right now.”

“I’m due at training,” Harry said, glancing at his pocket watch. “I can come back at 4:00, after training.”

“I’ll ensure Versa is here. Come to the staff room.”

An owl was waiting for Harry when he reached the Ministry. Harry read the letter from Ron as he took his seat in the training room. Ron complained that his mum had

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taken him to the Healer twice and now blamed the twins for every small instruction Ron forgot while helping her around the house while on sick leave from work. Like I normally would remember which rows in the garden were potatoes and which mug Percy prefers for cocoa! Ron wrote, making Harry chuckle.

Upon his return that afternoon to the wizard hospital, Harry reported to the greetingwitch and was led away by a small old orderly. Harry followed the man's downy white hair and mole studded ears to the staff break room. The boisterous conversation stopped when Harry entered.

Versa rose gracefully, spirit-like, from the couch, trailing her long hair. "Mr. Potter."

"Call me Harry," he said, looking far down to meet her gaze.

As the other Healers and assistants looked on in curiosity, she faintly said, "Let's go to an empty office, shall we?"

The office was small but neatly ordered due to judicious use of shrinking charms. An entire wall-full of files had been reduced to a foot square set of dollhouse shelves. A giant magnifying glass bounced on an armature before it.

Versa gracefully held her hair to the side as she took one of the two chairs, reminiscent of Penelope. "Mulvie tells me-"

"Mulvie?"

"Healer Shankwell, that is, told me a few things but I'd prefer you explain from the beginning, if you would, how this skill works."

Harry clasped his fingers in his lap, feeling vaguely nervous. "The shaman I learned it from in Finland says that it cannot be taught; one either is a Stauncher or they're not. I think though, from my own, er, observations, that it is tied to having a sense of Radiance in general. You know about that right?"

"That's where you can feel an object's owner in something metal," she said. "I know about that."

"Can you do it?" Harry asked. At her nod, he felt relieved that this would be easy. "Blood to me feels like a stronger kind of the same thing. When it's flowing freely, it is taking life away with it. I'm maybe not explaining this well," he said, but then noticed his companion had drifted away, eyes distant. Harry, remembering Munz dying, thought that working here in the hospital, constantly sensing all that radiance leaching away, would be difficult and wearing.

"Do you have a knife?" Harry asked, trying to sound brighter.

Versa, still distant, searched around in the desk and pulled out a shiny metal rod with a triangular blade screwed into the end of it. When she held it out to him, Harry said, "If you don't mind nicking yourself, I can Staunch it and you can see what it feels like."

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She held her lithe, pale hand out and turned it one way and then the other as though thinking where best to make a cut. Making a fist she pressed the blade to slice into her thumbprint.

Harry unfocused his thoughts until the leaching radiance was clear. Around him, the building itself felt dank, saturated with a stale, sickly echo of the same thing. Harry gently pressed on the radiance with imaginary snow and the bleeding stopped.

“It feels cold,” Versa commented. “Did you just release it?” she asked, intensely interested.

“Yes. Want me to do it again?”

“I will try it.” She reached for the blade to reopen the new wound. “It will work on myself, correct?”

Harry scratched his cheek. “I think so. But you can try on me.”

She dismissively said, “You’re a patient.”

Blood trailed thinly into her palm as she stared at the new wound, having no effect on it.

“Don’t try too hard,” Harry said. “It’s instinctive. I imagine packing snow around the wound and pressing on it, as tight as I can if its a big wound.”

She sighed, closed her eyes, stretched her shoulders, and in the end the bleeding stopped on its own.

“I think it would be easier to try it on me,” Harry said, trying to sound more authoritative than he felt. He took up the blade. Versa used her wand to heal her thumb and winced faintly when Harry cut into his. A few seconds later, Harry could feel an invisible pressure on the cut. “You’re getting it.”

Two re-cuts later, she had it down easily. “I had to imagine an ice sculpture over your hand to make it feel cold to you.”

“Well, it worked,” Harry said.

With a ghostly, yet irresistible, touch, she pulled his hand over to heal it with a tap of her wand. She released his hand slowly because she had again drifted far away. “We certainly cannot practice with a *Crucio*, so I will have to make do when the next patient of that sort comes in.”

“I think you’ll do all right. You seem very sensitive.”

She smiled, amused, “It is usually an insult when I hear that.”

“I didn’t mean it to be,” Harry quickly said, which she accepted with a broader smile.

Immediately growing serious again, she said, “May I ask you a question?” At Harry’s shrug, she went on, “I was not certain I wanted to have you come and teach me this. Mulvihill set it up today without informing me.”

“Oh,” Harry said.

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“I did not imagine that someone who had killed so many could have any sense of such things.”

Harry did not know what to say in his defense. She went on, “I remembered you caring for your father, whom it seems you healed rather than Hedgepeth.” She waited for Harry’s nod before continuing. “I wonder how you function as an Auror given that the harm you do to others must be immediately clear via this other Radiant sense.”

Harry countered, “I wondered how you functioned here in this hospital without knowing how to Staunch.”

She fell far away again. She probably would have let her question go, but Harry wanted to hear his answer too. “Aside from Voldemort I’ve never really killed anyone outright. I’ve killed accidentally in the heat of a spell battle. I’ve set demons on my enemies at a distance. Perhaps it isn’t really different, because the result is the same, but... I couldn’t just kill someone, one-on-one, if there was any kind of choice.” With bloody vividness, Harry remembered resisting doing so with Avery despite believing that the man had just torn his world apart. That devastating internal struggle was the last thing he remembered before his mind had shut off.

Versa stroked her hair nervously, distracting Harry from his memories. “Delegating to demons...” she said, trying to take it in. “I would expect them to just come after you.”

“They can’t if one believes they can’t.” Realizing he made her nervous, Harry stood. “I’m due at home,” he said to back out gracefully. “If you have any questions, you can owl me. I’m willing to help too, if you have a bad Cruciatu patient.”

She nodded and Harry departed. On the way down the corridor he considered that given how uncertain Versa felt about him, she must be either brave or foolhardy to have agreed to be in a room alone with him. He wished everyone trusted him the way they did when he was smaller. But given the copious articles about his powers, that was unlikely to ever happen again. At least Tonks treated him the same as she always did. That thought alone made his heart lighter and put it in anticipation of seeing her at the Ministry.



The week crawled by while Harry counted off the days until he would have his own wand back again. He already thought of the brand new wand as his own because he fully expected it to perform exactly as his old one did. Drills frustrated him all week, and when Rodgers paired him with Tridant, he could barely match their newest

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apprentice for spell power. Harry expected Tridant to point this out, but the man had fallen silently focussed rather than brash.

After drills, Harry sighed as he stuffed his wand away into his pocket. Vineet, whom Harry had not noticed step closer, said, "I understand this frustration."

Harry shook himself out of his own concerns. "Yeah. Saturday my new wand is ready. I can barely wait."

The room emptied for lunch and Harry noticed Tridant slowing rearranging his books as though to stall or just because his mind was far away and he was unaware of what he was doing. Harry hung back. It was not that he preferred his new associate's original demeanor, but the change concerned him.

"How's it going?" Harry casually asked, expecting to easily draw the other out.

Tridant shrugged his broad shoulders. His lip twitched.

Harry stepped to the side, to physically get in the way of getting to the doorway. "Something wrong?"

Tridant shrugged again and did not meet Harry's gaze. He seemed to decide that Harry was not going to get out of the way unless he answered. "This is hard, it turns out."

"Er..." Harry hesitated, trying to find his way. "But you're doing fine."

A third shrug.

Harry scratched his ear, thinking. "Rodgers is hard on people when they are first starting out."

Tridant's voice dropped. "It's like he wants me to quit. He isn't so hard on the rest of you."

Harry did not believe that to be true. Reassuringly, he offered, "He already beat us to a pulp over the last year and doesn't think he needs to do that so much anymore."

Tridant scoffed. "Yeah, it's like he wants me to quit," he repeated, gesturing toward the door. "Didn't you hear him harping on my Titan again today?"

"He may seem like that, but it's because he doesn't want to send anyone out unprepared. See, if one of us dies because we were unequipped, then he'd have to blame himself," Harry heard himself saying without forethought. "He doesn't want you to give up getting better."

"I had thought that block was easy," Tridant said, sounding more argumentative. "Do you know how long I've known that one. I used to show it off as a Fourth-Year at Hogwarts."

"Maybe you're too used to things being easy," Harry said, still just speaking thoughts as they popped into his head.

Tridant said sulkily, "This DID all use to be easy. I'm going to get booted I'm doing so terribly. I'd rather quit first."

CHAPTER THREE

Harry held back a smile because things were now clear. It was apparently possible for incoming apprentices to be too cocky. “He can’t boot you until your first review, which is months away. You have tons of time to work on things.”

“And to think I used to look forward to examinations. I’m going to be the bottom score.” He appeared horrified at the thought.

“You’re alone in your year. You will also have the top score. Out of our year, Aaron or I will be on the bottom,” Harry assured him.

“Yeah, but you can’t get booted.”

Harry’s brows went up. “Oh, don’t bet on that,” he said vehemently, thinking of recent suspicion of him. He sighed and said, “Look. You’re taking Rodgers’ exacting teaching too personally. He just doesn’t want anyone ever slacking. Everyone here is as good as you are. You’re not going to be the best anymore without a ton of work.”

“Nicely spoken,” a voice said from the doorway. Tonks stood there, leaning jauntily on the doorframe, arms crossed, looking very cute.

Grumbling, head down, Tridant asked, “How long you been standing there?”

Tonks laughed. “Long enough. Harry was doing fine and I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Tridant headed for the door, head still low. Tonks moved her foot to let him pass. To Harry she said, “You free this evening?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“I’ll see you after second shift, then. Your place.”



Harry sat alone in the hall, the house settling into night around him, books stacked on the floor at his feet. Snape and Candide, returning from dinner with her parents, were a welcome distraction. Snape’s dismayed expression made Harry hold off on asking questions until Candide had claimed exhaustion and gone to their room.

“How’d it go?” Harry quietly asked, wary of the answer.

Snape tilted his head noncommittally and, after a hesitation, stepped to the couch to sit across from Harry.

“Did you survive, at least?” Harry asked.

“Their expectations were not clear from the outset, and they remain obscure.”

Parroting, Harry said, “You should have sufficient skills to-”

Snape cut him off with a slash of his hand. “I do not wish to be quoted at.”

“Sorry.”

Harry held back, but finally had to ask, “Wedding still on?”

“Yes.”

NINETEEN YEARS

Harry waited for more, but was disappointed. "They were hoping for something different?" he prompted.

"That is an understatement."

Trying to help, Harry said, "They don't know the real you."

"They do not wish to know the real me," Snape pointed out darkly.

"True," Harry conceded. He still had the Manual of Uniform Ministry of Magic Report Scribing open in his lap. He closed it and set it aside. "Maybe I should have gone along."

Snape nodded, black eyes far away. "Things would have gone better, but it would have been a sham." He sat back farther and sank into the cushions, his formal robes flowing around him like a wrinkle on the flat, black suede. "As flattered as I have been in the past by your willingness to take up the role of my personal shield, I cannot tolerate it when it is not necessary to retain my liberty. I need to muddle through this myself, even if it means stooping to pretending to be something I am not to smooth the way."

Harry sighed. One of the candles sparked and sputtered as it leaked a river of wax down over the brass holder, which quickly turned opaque. Harry reached in and pinched out the flame before the wick burned up completely. He shook his burned fingers, then touched them to his tongue.

Snape shook his head, amused. "If I took you along, they would later swear you were not truly magical."

Harry ignored the dig. "I'm always willing to be your shield."

"I would rather follow your previous advice and cease to care. I abhor this position of being forced to give a damn."

"Did it really go that badly?" Harry asked.

"Oh, it was perfectly polite," Snape said sounding nauseated. He stretched an arm out forward to more easily sit up. He struggled with that as he said, "But I am fully aware of what they were thinking. They even had moments of doubting the story about you."

Harry laughed lightly. "Then I insist on coming along next time."

Snape stood. "Next time will be the wedding," he said with finality.

"Well, you got it over with, anyhow," Harry offered, wishing Snape felt better.

"And Candide believes it went swimmingly."

"Then you are set."

Snape made a dubious noise of assent and departed up the stairs.

Hours later, candles gutting, air chilled, Harry still sat reading his assigned books. He did not want to look at the clock yet again because it would force him to decide if perhaps Tonks' had forgotten or if she had been hurt or was even now under duress.

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When Tonks did appear in the dark hall, Harry greeted her with, “You’re very late.” It was after 1:00. Just a single candle remained, wick nearly drowned. He had been napping lightly, books stacked out of the way on the floor.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” she said. “Something came up.” The couch tilted as she sat down beside him. She let out a long sigh and he relented on his annoyance and put his arm around her.

“Is it something you can tell me about?” Harry asked.

“It’s Debjit Thanakar; something odd happened,” she sounded far away as though still trying to puzzle something out. Harry could hear her breathing more clearly than he could see her.

“What happened?”

“He’s been at St. Mungo’s, growing a new foot and recovering from his other wounds. They finally gave us permission this week to move him back to the Ministry for interrogation. He seemed fine when Kingsley and I fetched him to the dungeon but when we went to move him to one of the interrogation rooms, he was completely out of it. Disoriented and confused like he’d been potioned. We spent the last three hours trying various antidotes to no effect.”

“Do you want Severus’ help?”

“We decided that it isn’t a potion.”

“Memory charm?”

“No evidence of one. Or a Confusion charm or anything related.” She groaned and tossed her head back.

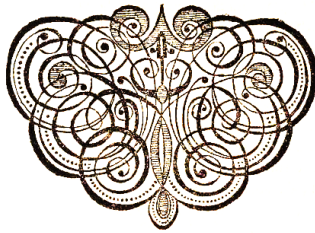
Harry wanted to help figure out what had happened, but the scent of her, even after a long stressful day, wasn’t something he could ignore. “Why don’t we go up to my room? Your silencing charm is pretty good.”

She chuckled in a way that made the center of Harry go liquid like the core of the remaining candle.

Author’s Notes: Writing is going well. Should have 4 posted next weekend again. we get into the main plot arc.

If you have trouble getting the chapter notifications you can send me an email requesting to be added to my personal list. You can find my email by clicking on the profile link somewhere on this page.

CHAPTER FOUR



BATTLE IN DARKNESS

Friday night, Harry reported for his field shadowing. Ever since Mr. Weasley had learned about him and Tonks, Harry rarely got paired with her, and this evening was no exception. In the Aurors' office he found Blackpool sitting at Tonks' desk, waiting for him. Rogan and Shackbolt were hard at work at their own desks, Shackbolt with two open files hovering beside him to avoid cluttering his desk.

"Should we pick out an assignment?" Blackpool asked Harry. She seemed in better spirits than previous shifts so Harry eagerly assented.

Her face twisted amusingly as she fingered each assignment slip beside the log book. "Mysterious lights not over swamp, nah... domestic dispute elevated out of Obliviatorobliviator squad... hm, that one should have been closed by now..."

"It has been," Shackbolt said from where he sat at his desk, battered quill in hand. "That is the closed pile."

Blackpool glanced up from the slip she had just picked up. "Oh, how did Repeat odd report intercepted from Muggle police in Burnipsbie turn out?" Harry glanced at the slip, wondering why she thought it interesting.

"I closed it, don't worry about it," Shackbolt snapped, startling Blackpool and bringing Rogan's head up out of his own quill-work.

When Blackpool simply stared at him in surprise, he waved the slip out of her grasp to his own, and bundled it up in his palm before turning back to his research. Blackpool shrugged after a second and pulled out a slip from the pile on the other side of the log book.

"Probable magical trickster loose in Loch Ness... Oh boy."

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“That one keeps floating to the top,” Rogan said, grin clear in his voice. “No one seems to want it.”

“We’ll take it,” Harry said, taking away the slip. “We’ll need the brooms,” he said grabbing up the two nicest ones propped beside the door and grabbing Blackpool by the arm to Disapparate to an empty overgrown field far from any significant city.

“I didn’t want that one, Potter,” Blackpool grumbled.

“Nor do I,” Harry said, handing her a broom. “I want to see what is up in Burnipsbie.”

“Oh. Did you get the road and number?”

Harry nodded, considering where he could closest Apparate into. “Er, except you’re in charge,” he said, sounding suddenly uncertain.

“Well, yeah, but I’d like to check that out too.” She pulled out a pair of flying gloves and began pulling them on. “Not like Mr. Shackbolt to lose his stiff calm like that. Odd.”

“That’s what I thought.”

She propped her broom on its twigs and adjusted her grip on it as though to stretch out her gloves. “So, I can get us about ten miles off from Burnipsbie.”

“Do you think we should go to Loch Ness first, as cover?”

“Let’s go after. I don’t think Shackbolt will check up on us right away.”

Harry worried otherwise, but she was in charge.

Blackpool said, “I like your suspicious way of thinking.”

“I can’t help it at this point.”

Blackpool laughed and took hold of Harry’s arm.

After a pleasant evening flight accompanied by the orange glory of the setting sun, they circled over the village of Burnipsbie, a stain of lights on the darkened earth as though the snaking necklace of the motorway had leaked into the rolling sheep fields.

They landed at the edge of the houses and Blackpool left her broom with Harry and walked into a pizza takeaway to ask for directions to Pollen Gate. With a jangle of the bell on the door, she soon came back out and around to the dark side of the building where Harry waited.

“Said the road is five over and that he hoped dearly that I did not want number sixty-four because everyone living there is right insane. ‘Creepy’ he said. They play rock-paper-scissors to see who gets stuck delivering there, and they order frequently.”

“Hm,” Harry said, hoping for more clues. “Did he say anything else?”

“They always order quadruple meat and spinach on their pizza. Apparently the steak house doesn’t deliver.”

They stood, each in their own thoughts, until a car pulled up in the last space on the end, illuminating their dark corner. Blackpool smoothly slipped the brooms

BATTLE IN DARKNESS

behind her back, out of view.

“Well, let’s go,” she said soberly.

As they walked, Harry said, “Shacklebolt didn’t seem to be under an Imperio, did he?”

Blackpool shook her head as she strode with purpose. “He seemed the opposite of far away and slow to me. His pupils weren’t dilated.”

They soon reached the correct street and stood by silent agreement behind two large tree trunks in the empty lot opposite. Sixty-four was the last house on the road. It stood forlorn, darker than the sky behind it, with only dim lights showing in a few windows as though candles were in use. The remaining windows were endlessly black. The shutters hung crooked and the slate roof had jagged rows of missing shingles like open wounds. Harry shivered.

“Magical household?” he asked of the candlelight as a swarm of swifts dodged by, seeming to avoid the house opposite in their dance.

“Wasn’t color coded as such on the slip.”

Silence fell again. “How about we come back during the day?” Harry proposed. “Say, around about noontime.”

Blackpool laughed. “Some Aurors we are.” She laughed more. Growing serious again, she said, “Kingsley got away unscathed. Let’s get a closer look.”

“Shacklebolt had something going on,” Harry pointed out as they stepped onto the cracked Tarmac, Harry felt a wave of aversion and he instinctively grabbed for Blackpool. His ungainly grab came up with the shoulder of her sleeve, which slipped free of his grasp.

“What is it?” she whispered.

Harry waved for her to slide sideways, but there was no cover on either side of the house, just flat dry ground interspersed with ragged patches of dead grass, as though the occupants desired to see who approached. She gestured for them to go back to the relative security of the trees where they had started.

“Potter?” Blackpool prompted. “You’re spooked and that can’t be good.”

“I feel the, uh, I feel evil when I get too close to that house.”

“This your curse-nose going off?” she asked, wand held at read, aimed at the doorway across from them.

“Worse. It’s like the underworld leaking through.” He breathed in and it did smell too earthy. “Can you smell it?”

“Smells like the country to me.”

“Would you be willing to let me approach the house alone? I get an early warning and know when to back off.”

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She rubbed her chin, considering him and the house alternately. Twilight was passing into real night, and now the sky glowed only from the city lights, miles off. A large black bird or a bat flapped around the chimneys before fluttering off.

“If you stay in view, sure. I can cover you from here. If you leave my sight, I’m coming after you,” she threatened.

Harry jogged across the road and up beside the steps where he could peek in the front window. He rolled his wand in his fingers, wishing it were his new one. The aversion had eased somewhat, so Harry canceled the Obsfucation charm, waited for the cold fingers of it to subside, and knocked on the door.

A long, empty time passed. A car roared by on the crossing road, pulling the hum of the motorway closer. Harry was about to knock again when he heard movement inside, shifting back and forth behind the door as though the source of it rocked side to side, uncertain.

The door clicked and swung open, creaking of course. An alabaster face appeared in the opening, a young woman, expressionless except for her wide eyes.

“Hi,” Harry said. “I, uh, I wonder if I could have a word with you?”

The person did not respond. The face glanced back behind itself, then again at Harry, long black hair swishing. Harry decided that he needed a bit of Legilimency here, and since the young woman was staring openly at him, he had lots of time. The resulting sense of terror nearly made him drop his wand. He gripped it tighter, eyes also wide now. Her face gave away none of the extreme battle going on inside her head. A battle of wills raged behind her grey eyes as though two personalities wanted to dominate fully and would not give ground for even the smallest action until utterly winning out. She continued to stare.

Harry pushed the door gently inward. This tore her gaze to the door, and she released it, hand frozen in space as though she still held the edge of it. She stood stock still in a two-story hall in a grey nightie with torn frills, wholly Muggle. Harry gave an okay sign behind his back, hoping in the dim light that Blackpool could read it.

A shrill voice grated on Harry’s suppressed memories of the Dursley’s as an older woman stalked into the hall. “What is this, Margaret?” she asked, eyes also wide as she glared down her nose at Harry. She was taller than him and wore a ragged but ancient dress with a hoop skirt. She pushed the outside door closed, concentrating the musty odor. The dim light sucked all the color out of her dress so, combined with her pale skin, she seemed a ghost.

Harry, having nothing to lose, said, “I’m an old friend of Maggie’s from school.”

“Margaret is not allowed visitors. You should go.” She pointed a boney finger at the door she had just closed.

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Thin fingers tugged on Harry's arm from Margaret's side. Thinking quickly, Harry said, "I just haven't seen Maggie around in so long..." That seemed a pretty safe bet. The old woman grew calculating. Harry Legilimized her too, wondering at her strangely increasing calm. He had rather a major struggle not to react to visions of someone mentally auditioning various means of killing him. The vision cycled from kitchen knives and stabbing to hatchets and blood to ropes and blue faces.

"Of course," the woman said calmly as the vision wound back to thoughts of long knives. "Why don't you take him up to your room, Margaret, dear."

Harry held his expression utterly flat, which was the best he could do, and assumed he looked just like the daughter. The woman turned away, dragging the ragged edge of her gown as she glided off, probably to the kitchen. The thin fingers tugged plaintively on Harry's arm again and he let himself be led to the far end of the hall. At the end, the stairwell wrapped around, heading upward back toward the door. Harry turned and stepped up and just before it went out of view, saw the door silently opening again.

Knowing that Blackpool followed, Harry held fast to his small wand and plodded up each step, senses fully alert. At the top another ghostly figure darted out of a side room. "Is it pizza?" a small boy frantically asked. Harry lowered his wand, sputtering faintly with the blasting curse he had nearly used.

"No," the sister simply answered. The first she had spoken.

The boy swallowed, looked about to cry, and ran back into his room.

Harry pushed down the thoughts of why Shackbolt thought this sufficient to let alone because he could not spare the attention. He and Margaret stepped along a thick runner and halfway along went into a girl's bedroom. A candle shed welcome warm light around the high-ceilinged room. The curtains, canopy and various frills still powerfully exuded their quaintness, but they drooped, leached of color by dust and time. The girl sat on the bed and clasped her hands between her knees. The battle still went on, Harry assumed. Even in the orange light, her skin stretched translucent and colorless over her features.

Harry, wand still firmly in hand, knelt before her. "Margaret?" he prompted gently. "What is going on?"

The battle raged harder and she shook her head. The door moved silently and Harry had to squint to see even a prismatic outline of the Obsfuscated Blackpool taking a position beside the door.

Relaxing just faintly, Harry took one icy hand and wondered with a start of his already active nerves if she could be an Inferae. No, he could feel a pulse. He bit his lip to try another deeper round of Legilimency but Margaret looked away, at the window. Harry turned that way as well, and stood instinctively with a jerk of surprise.

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Previously, darkness and a few lights had shown outside but now dense glowing fog pressed tight to the glass.

Harry stepped back and raised his wand. He felt sleepy and violently shook his head. A strange sound of delight came from beside the door, presumably from Blackpool. Harry found himself bending to drop his wand on the floor, and this frightened him enough that he fell to his knees to take it up again while forcefully Occluding his mind. His thoughts cleared and the room stabilized. Something fleshy collapsed to the floor behind him and Margaret now lay back on the bed, tugging her nightie away from her neck as though suffering from heat stroke. One of her hands stretched out as though to greet someone at the window.

Harry, holding his mind Occluded, stepped back farther as the fog leaked in through the cracks in the old window and began to coalesce. The aversion returned, making him hunch to fight running. The glowing mist gathered densely, darkened and became a tall man in a cloak. He did not turn to look at Harry, but approached the bed and its hypnotized occupant. Before reaching the bed, he spun away and stalked toward the door, eliciting a groan of dismay from the vicinity of the bed.

The figure rotated its head, mouth wide as though tasting the air. The vampire's long teeth were quite apparent as it did this. Harry held his breath, wanting to see enough evidence so that there would no argument later that this vampire was fully rogue and had therefore lost its rights.

The man-creature pawed around on the floor in search of Blackpool, frantic as though hungry for what must smell far healthier than the other victim in the room. The candle flickered as though in a breeze, white teeth flashed as the vampire moved to bite down on what he had found by feel and Harry blasted him against the dresser in the far corner.

Vampires were indestructible, and what would have knocked out anyone else did not phase this man. He rose up inside his cloak and swelled even taller as his gaze burned red with anger. Harry felt his Occlusion slipping due to his own anger and the vampire's head tilted as though interested in Harry's ability to resist him.

"It's over," Harry said.

The man laughed. "Oh, is it? How quaint."

"You're coming with me. You've gone rogue and that's against the rules."

"The Rules," the vampire mocked. "Whose rules are we onto now? Do you know how old I am?"

"Old enough that you should have been dead long ago; I'll give you that," Harry said.

The man laughed again, more mocking. "You have no idea how to catch a vampire, let alone the king of vampires. Look at you."

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It was true that Harry did not have the kind of trap he had once seen a coven use. “You have no power over me,” Harry pointed out.

“True. That is rare, I’ll grant you that.”

Harry shot a binding curse at the man, but he flapped out of it as a bat. Harry put a prison box around him but he slithered out of it as a mist, laughing.

“Oh, such games used to amuse me no end. But you are a puny mortal wizard. A mere insect, existing for just a flicker of time.”

Harry thought fiercely. “I’m still stronger than you,” Harry mocked, hoping to delay him. “There are rules, Ministry of Magic rules, that you are required to follow as a controlled magical creature.”

The man snorted, his smooth, ordinary face wrinkling in disgust. “I was around when your Isles were one continent connected to rest of Europe; that is how long I have been alive. Do not insult me.” He did sound angry, which suited Harry just fine, since he needed to buy time and hoped that meant he would keep arguing.

The vampire flicked his cloak tightly around him as though thinking of departing. “This place has been drained of the life that does more than sustain me. I have delayed finding a new home too long. If I want to truly live, I need flesh fresher than this.” He glanced covetously at the heap on the floor where Blackpool was reappearing as hazy arcs of black robe.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Harry said.

“Bah!” The vampire mocked. “Goodbye pathetic wizard,” he said and dropped through the floor.

Harry felt the interstice to the Dark Plane crack open and close again. He followed, heart racing. He had a hold of the vampire by the wrist before he could stride more than two steps away across the greyness of the Dark Plane. The Vampire gaped at Harry. Around them creatures scuttled closer, curious.

It was Harry’s turn to laugh. “I told you you weren’t going anywhere.”

Harry’s quarry recovered from his surprise and scooped his hand toward himself. The disgusting creatures closed in, obeying the command. Harry faced the nearest ones down and they hesitated but others climbing over the first, snarling, clapping their jaws together. Their oily breath reeked of rot and death.

Harry Disapparated to the area of the Dark Plane opposite the Ministry, taking the Vampire with him. Temporarily, they left the creatures behind. Vampires could not Disapparate, so Harry hoped this one was disoriented. He did glance around in consternation before glaring at Harry, who tightened the grip on his arm and pulled his wand.

The vampire’s eyes pulsed red at the sight of the wand and he fell, dragging Harry with him. Harry felt flattened, curled up, and towed through a row of cracks by

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his arm, but they arrived exactly where he wanted to be: in the Ministry dungeon. Seeming frantic, the vampire tried to shake his arm loose from Harry's grasp. Harry twisted the arm behind his quarry's back and threw him up against the damp stone wall. He pressed his wand into the back of his ribs, wishing dearly that it was his own wand so he did not have to make any empty threats.

"I suspect that if I carve your heart out, it will at least slow you down," he hissed into the man's ear. "It takes you three seconds to get to mist form; it only takes me half a one to spell a cutting curse."

"Hey, whatcha got?" Horace, the squat wizard who managed the dungeon, sauntered up and asked. "I didn't see you come in," he then said in alarm, glancing back in the direction of the heavy door and scratching his head.

"He slipped us in," Harry said, hoping that covered it.

"Oh, yeah, they're like that." He pulled a narrow, battered log book out of a belt pouch. "Name?"

The vampire didn't reply, so Harry pressed the wand harder into his flesh. It had to hurt. "Fueago."

"Last name, first name?"

"That is my name. It is as old as time you imbecile—"

"I need to get him somewhere secure," Harry interrupted to say.

"Oh, yeah." Horace drew a necklace out of his pouch and draped it over Harry's head. "Isle Mayfay has a facility for him." He used his wand to tap the fleur de lis charm on the necklace and the dungeon twisted away. Harry barely kept hold of his prisoner as they flew and rotated a long time, landing hard on what turned out to be a pier.

Waves slapped against the sides of the neat straight stones. A dark fog hung over the water, obscuring anything farther than ten feet off. Flood lights illuminated the scene from behind and Harry torqued his head around to look up at the fortress that was L'île de Cachot Méfait, the French wizard prison. He dragged the vampire to his feet and, maintaining his wand point between his ribs, pushed him in the direction of the great doors.

Salt crystals blossoming in the dips of the stone crunched underfoot as they went. Harry did not see a knocker so he was glad when the right-hand door turned open on a central pivot as they approached.

A Frenchman about Harry's height, and carrying a crystal-tipped pike, approached as they entered the vast entry hall. Harry said, "I have a prisoner," but the guard simply stared at him.

Fueago rattled off a long string of haute French that raised the guard's eyebrow. The guard began to study Harry with suspicion.

BATTLE IN DARKNESS

“What are you saying?” Harry demanded angrily, which only bolstered the narrowing gaze of the guard.

The vampire said, “You are a typically stupid Englishman. I told him I am bringing you into the prison, but you overpowered me outside.”

Harry tightened his hold on the vampire and the guard set down his pike and put up his hands placatingly, at which point Harry realized that his only negotiating power at the moment was that he appeared to be holding someone hostage.

“I’m from the Ministry of Magic. I’m bringing this rogue vampire in...” But he was drowned out by a longer exchange of incomprehensible French.

“Shut up,” Harry said to the vampire, and began dragging him farther inside. The guard thought this an acceptable direction, so, leaving his pike behind, he followed over the smooth stone. They passed over a narrow causeway where the sea slapped at the bottom of long trenches on either side. Beyond, the floor changed to black slate. The Vampire struggled with him at the most vulnerable point, so Harry shoved him to the stone, wand in the center of his back.

“I’ll do it,” Harry threatened. “You’ve certainly lived long enough for one man.” In that instant, his curse sense went off and he ducked as a spell from the guard sizzled overhead. “What are you doing?” Harry yelled at the man.

The vampire, far stronger than expected, tossed Harry aside as though he were a doll and got to his feet. He pointed at Harry, who was occupied for a desperate breath with pulling his leg out of the waves and climbing to safety. The vampire continued to give the guard instructions in French. The pike leveled at Harry, who did not want to strike back, but had a counter in mind once he got his wand at ready. Running feet delayed the guard’s actions. Harry, sensing that the vampire did not want to cross to the slate floor, leapt to grab his wrist and tossed him there, using all of his strength. Both of them tumbled onto the damp, slippery stone.

The lead man of the new guards, identifiable by the ribbons on his silver tunic, stepped in front of Fueago before he could crawl back to the brown stone causeway. Fueago began demanding things in French. The guard almost lifted a hand down to help him up and then glanced at Harry. “Ah, Harry Potter, what a pleasant surprise.” He reacted quickly, pointing at the vampire, saying, “Is ’e with you?”

“My prisoner,” Harry said, relieved enough his knees went vaguely wobbly.

The leader withdrew his hand and signaled for the guards just as the vampire changed into mist. Harry raised his wand but a barrier kept the mist on the black slate side of the causeway.

“Eet is all right,” the guard assured Harry, and the mist, after shifting frantically back and forth, became a man again.

The vampire began arguing in French again while trying to step back over the

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line. Harry approached, helping to box him in.

“Eh, so you say,” the head guard said mockingly, gesturing for him to be lead deeper into the prison.

Harry took the vampire’s elbow when he hesitated moving, saying with a smirk, “You may be ancient, but I’m famous.”

At the lift, which was just a solid stone platform with no sides, the guards took over management of the prisoner. The head guard did not stop talking to Harry the whole way, but Harry did not mind at all.

“I ’ave always wanted to meet you, Mr. Potter. The warden will be thrilled too, I know because he has your picture on his wall, right between Meester Paul-Marie Verlaine and Meester Zherri Lew-es. Perhaps you could sign it for him... if it is not so much trouble?”

“Of course,” Harry assured him.

Down, down they went into the bowels of the rock. It was hot down here and Harry hoped they had not gone so deep that the core of the earth was making things warmer. They stopped finally and had to duck exiting the lift into a narrow corridor cut into the rock. In a small office where the tables, shelves and even the chairs were carved directly in the rock, Harry was instructed to sit at a desk.

“Just some papers-work and we will take care of this animal for you.”

Parchments Harry could not read were placed before him. “Can you summarize these?”

“Oh, yes. This is the Assignment of Overseeing, which means that you cannot have ’em back without some other papers signing. This is the Statement of Ill Deed, which you can fill in English, no? Since only another Englishman will need to read eet.”

Harry began filling things in, finding it hard to cast his mind back to the horrors of the house. It occurred to him now with a jolt that he had left Blackpool behind, unconscious with the murderous lady of the house. He swallowed hard and wrote faster.

The vampire was slouched on rock chair in the corner, looking desolate and harmless. “I just remembered something I should have done,” Harry said, handing the parchments back and standing up.

“There are a few more papers and the photograph for the warden...” the guard said.

“I’ll come back,” Harry insisted. “I really have to check on my partner.” He fingered the portkey on the necklace, close to panic so much adrenaline flowed in his veins.

BATTLE IN DARKNESS

“I will activate it for you, but it will not work here. Up above, only.” He pointed, sounding like he wished to calm Harry.

“Thanks.”

On the lift ride up, Harry thought about the procedures that he had not had the opportunity to work within. He should have told the guard in the Ministry dungeon to inform the Auror’s office. That’s what he should have done. Miserable, Harry rode upward as floors and side tunnels came and went, sliding below their smooth quiet platform.

Beyond the causeway, the head guard said, “We can finish the papers-work, but the warden will be sorrowful to not have met you.”

“I’ll come back as soon as I can,” Harry insisted. “I would like a tour.”

The man brightened considerably, eyes glittering with pride. “I would be honored to give you one.”

The portkey returned Harry to the Ministry Dungeon. Running, he passed Horace, who was back at his tiny desk, hunched over something small. Harry dropped the key beside an elaborate origami of a ball and chain that was in progress, and made his way to the atrium, from which he could Apparate away.

Harry arrived, wand out, back in the candlelit bedroom, which was empty. He scrambled down to the dark lower floor, where voices could be heard. He found Blackpool filling out interview sheets with the family around the kitchen table. The scent of pizza filled the air.

“You’re all right,” Harry breathed out, choking on the words in his relief.

“Yeah, Potter. I figured you must have been green enough to give chase to a vampire.”

Harry’s foremost concern was the older woman’s demeanor and whether it had improved above murderous. The woman sat, arms crossed, looking cold and aloof, tea untouched. She just seemed aggrieved now.

Blackpool said to the woman, “You really should see a surgeon. Get a transfusion.”

“We will handle things our way,” the woman said.

Margaret sat, nibbling on a pizza crust, saying nothing. Her brother was sleeping on his arm draped over the table. Harry stepped closer and bent down to ask the girl, “You all right?” After a very long pause, she nodded. To Blackpool, Harry said, “We need the Obliviator squad.”

“After the interviews.”

“Or, we need them for the trial, don’t we?”

“We’ll never catch him, Harry.”

“Who, the vampire?” The room jerked as though Harry had said the name Voldemort three years ago. “I dropped him at the prison just now. In fact, I need to go

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back and finish the paperwork.”

Blackpool set the quill down as well as the crust of pizza in her other hand. “You captured that bastard? Single handed?”

“Yeah, why not? I didn’t want him to get away.”

“Harry, Vampires can slip through a crack in the floor, barrier or not. If you can’t find their sleeping place and get them warded all to hell with garlic without so much as making a sound or giving yourself away to one of the creepy companion creatures guarding them, you can forget it.”

“I dropped him at the French prison just now.”

“You put him in prison?” Margaret’s faint voice asked from the end of the table.

“Yes,” Harry assured her, wanting badly to reach through her terror. “He won’t be coming back.”

Blackpool picked the quill back up and flicked it around. “Well, in that case, yes, we need them for the trial. Or at least one of them. The others we can wipe.” She glanced around the three of them, sitting still as though simply waiting to be victims again. “We’ll keep the girl, I think.” Blackpool stared additionally at Harry. “You really got him?”

“Yes,” Harry insisted, not insulted because she sounded truly amazed.

“Well, go and fetch Reggie, Tonks or Mr. Weasley. With the vamp gone we can more easily deal with the issue of Kingsley.”

“I forgot about Kings-... Shacklebolt,” Harry said, struggling to keep up with events. “I’ll get someone.”

Back at the Ministry, Harry found Shacklebolt at his desk, reviewing files and looking stern, but mostly himself. Harry had no idea how complete the psychic control of a vampire was. It had not been covered in their training, perhaps because it occurred only rarely. He gave Shacklebolt a nod and started to back out of the room.

“Find anything in Loch Ness?” Shacklebolt asked, eyes intent when they turned upon Harry.

“No,” Harry said, and slipped away before a followup question could get asked.

Mr. Weasley sat in his office, dictating a letter to someone in the Goblin Liaison Office. He held up his hand until he finished the sentence and grabbed hold of the dictation quill, which twitched as Harry said, “I need to talk to you and we need someone at the scene.” Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Shacklebolt approaching, looking determined about his destination, which was clearly Harry. Harry slipped his wand into his hand in a way that the Auror could not see, but Mr. Weasley had full view of.

“Harry?” he questioned, sounding concerned.

BATTLE IN DARKNESS

Harry stepped back into the corridor and to the wall, needing the space to defend himself, if necessary.

“Harry, put that away,” Mr. Weasley cautioned, sounding fatherly.

Harry faintly shook his head. Shackbolt looked between them but Harry had his conveniently small wand completely inside his sleeve now. Harry was not certain what to do. There were code words for this situation, both Auror ones and Order ones, but Shackbolt would know all of them. Pained, Harry quickly tried to think of something. In a battle of trust between him and Shackbolt there was no question who would win and already, Mr. Weasley looked doubting of Harry’s rightmindedness.

“Maybe I’ll speak to you later, sir,” Harry firmly said, hoping his boss would catch the hint.

Mr. Weasley stood and said, “If you need someone on-site, Rodgers will be returning shortly. That way Kingsley can cover the office.”

“I thought you didn’t find anything,” Shackbolt said, sounding gravely suspicious.

“Well, it’s hard to explain,” Harry hedged, wishing he were trusted more and having no good ideas for how to proceed. If he simply attacked Shackbolt, he was going to end up fighting him and Mr. Weasley.

Footsteps approached and Rodgers came into view. Harry could not have been more pleased to see him. “Can I talk to you, sir?” Harry asked, not liking how pleading he sounded.

Rodgers pulled his head back in surprise, but he then gestured gamely back down the corridor.

In the training room, Harry frustratingly said, “I don’t know the procedure for this. And I just found out how little Mr. Weasley trusts me still.”

Annoyance overwhelmed Harry’s temper before Rodgers dryly asked, “Is Arthur what you wish to discuss? I’m not certain there is a protocol for increased trust within a department of the Ministry.”

Harry gave him a cock-eyed glance and said, “You sound like Severus, you know. No, that isn’t what I wish to discuss. Shackbolt is compromised and I don’t know what the procedure is for that.”

Rodgers grew serious and asked, “Compromised in what way?”

Harry explained about the vampire and Shackbolt’s behavior. “The vampire is in the French prison now, so he is no risk.”

“You and Blackpool caught him by yourselves? Fueago is an old timer who comes in and out of the country but we’ve never been able to catch him.”

Harry now realized that he had perhaps given too much away through his actions, but there had been no choice. “Yeah, we did. The family’s in bad shape. Blackpool

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is still interviewing them, but after that we need an Obliviator squad.”

Rodgers stepped toward the door. “Let’s go take a look at the scene first to choose one to keep their memories for now.”

“We did already.”

Rodgers stopped and appeared more affectionate than Harry had ever seen. “You kids are coming along.”

Rodgers’ hand was on the door before Harry could remind him with: “Shacklebolt?” which he had to swallow because the Auror was behind the door when it opened. Harry raised his wand and the spells cancelled out between them, knocking Rodgers aside with the spell wash.

Shacklebolt’s brown eyes were dark and unreadable as spells lashed out again and Harry had to resort to his best attenuated block, which did not quite hold with his badly matched wand. Pain sizzled over Harry’s skin. Frantic that he could not defend himself, Harry squirmed when he felt a curse, nasty and rancid rising up as though from the floor, out of the earth itself. His mind flashed back two years to his torment by Crabbe and Goyle. He could smell the dark earth then too, along with the rot of leaves and twigs on the Forbidden Forest floor where he had writhed. Harry squashed this curse as he had done the one that day, by forcing it back down into the ground, where the only outlet it could find was the caster himself. Shacklebolt flickered and doubled over, but he recovered quickly, eyes blazing.

Rodgers pulled himself to his feet and shouted, “Kingsley, stop it!”

Footsteps approached in the corridor. The next curse, which had far less on it, Harry blocked normally, because it did not feel the same as the one he had squashed. His counter wavered worrisomely despite not having to withstand much. He tried to roll behind a desk for the next one; the desk was blasted aside, forcing Harry to cover his head with his arms. The room fell silent long enough for Harry to risk raising his eyes. Shacklebolt was in a binding curse on the floor with Rodgers bent over him, looking murderous which was normal hard anger for him.

“What the devil?” Mr. Weasley demanded. Other offices had emptied and come down to gawk.

Harry was working on sitting up when Rodgers asked, “Potter?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, not sure whether to respond positively or negatively because he had not yet decided what exactly had hit him. Using a desk, Harry got to his feet while Rodgers explained the situation. Harry could only return a helpless look when Mr. Weasley turned an expression his way that implied Harry should have handled things differently.

Mr. Weasley instructed Rodgers, “Put him in interrogation until we can get an exorcist in here.” He stalked off past a stunned Rogan, who slid inside to help.

BATTLE IN DARKNESS

Harry moved slowly until he could sit at the desk he was leaning on. He sat there, breathing, until he remembered that he had to get back to Burnipsbie. "Damn," he muttered, standing up and mustering the will to Apparate.

"What happened to you?" Blackpool asked when Harry stepped into the kitchen.

"Tangled with Shacklebolt."

"I'd have thought you could take him."

Harry gratefully took a seat at the table. "I will be able to tomorrow when I get my new wand. Stop me if I try."

"Excuses, excuses," she pleasantly said. "And the Obliviators?"

Harry stared at her, running recent conversations through his mind. "I'm not sure. I'll go check." It required great will to push himself to his feet, but he managed. "Things were a little crazy as you might imagine."

Later, at the debriefing when everything was straight and they all had returned to the Ministry, Harry felt sulky and used that as cover to give only scant details of his capturing the vampire. No one here knew he could slip into the Dark Plane and Snape had been adamant that he not let it be known.

When the comments came back around to marveling at Harry's feat, he said, "I need to return to the wizard prison. There's more paperwork. I told them I'd come back as soon as I could."

"Someone should go with you," Mr. Weasley said, glancing around. "I guess I will on my way home."

Harry held in his frown and stood slowly, still stiff from getting hit.

"Do you need a Healer, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked solicitously, which set Harry off more.

He stubbornly replied, "No."

They fetched a prison portkey from the dungeon and arrived at the dark pier, surrounded by a now still ocean hugged by low, dense fog. Floodlights flicked on as they turned.

On the way to the doors, Harry wanted to say something along the lines of: "It's hard to function at the Ministry if no one trusts me." But he did not want to sound whiny, so he stewed instead. The guard escorted them inside without speaking and down into the core of the island. The warden's office erupted in a hearty welcome for Harry. It seemed the whole shift had awaited his return and perhaps others had come specially. The office was wall-to-wall with French prison guards all wearing smiles, some sheepish.

"Mr. Potter, please, please, 'ave a seat," the warden said. "Your papers are here, but you have been promised a tour, no?"

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Harry, soothed by the fawning that Mr. Weasley had been forced to witness, said, "It's been a long day, I'm afraid. I think I will enjoy it more another time."

"Ah," the warden said in great dismay, hanging his head to the side. "Well, next time, then. I'm sure we will be seeing you often, no?" He rocked back in his own grand, leather swivel-chair and winked. He twirled his curled mustache while Harry finished the paperwork from earlier.

The warden spoke to Mr. Weasley instead while Harry wrote. "You are very lucky to 'ave this young man, eh?"

"Yes, yes, we are," Mr. Weasley said, dropping his hand on Harry's bent shoulder. "I'm not certain Harry is feeling so happy to have us, today."

Harry stared at the line where a translation had been added reading Place of Capture. He tried to hold his anger from draining away; he had been enjoying the just desserts of it, it turned out, and was not keen on losing it just yet. It leaked away nevertheless as Harry wrote out the village and address where he had first begun battling the vampire.

The warden was saying, "Brought thees monster in on 'ees own. Even we 'ave found records of this Fueago in our files going back eight-hundred years. We 'ave a medal in our Defense Division for such single-handed deeds. You 'ave one to give 'im, of course?"

"I don't need another medal," Harry said, turning the page over to fill in the Perpetrator Physiognomy section.

The guard let his mustache spring back to a spiral. "Ah, you are weighted down by too many already, I am sure."

Paperwork done, photo carefully lifted from a picture rail that ran along the ceiling and signed, they were led back to the lift by a guard who spoke no English. Harry sighed, his previous grudge building again as they rose up through the solid rock.

Mr. Weasley said, "I think it would be better if you said something, Harry."

"I wish you trusted me," Harry said, finding more sting in speaking than in stewing.

"We'll have to work on that," Mr. Weasley said amiably, forcing Harry to have to hold back on rolling his eyes.

It was three in the morning before Harry returned home. As he fell into bed, limbs stiff and painful, he wondered if he did indeed need a Healer. He stared into the darkness, thinking that he could wake Snape to take him to hospital. That sounded right awful, but lying there suffering was not terribly pleasant or rational either.

With a groan Harry rolled out of bed and, foregoing the dressing gown, padded down the corridor to knock on Snape's door.

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“Sorry,” Harry said when the door opened. “I hope you have a potion for... whatever it was I got hit with.” He rubbed his forehead as he tried to remember.

“Are you hurt?” Snape asked.

“Well, not badly. I just want something so I can sleep.”

Snape took Harry by the elbow and led him downstairs to the toilet where the potions were kept. The lamps in the small room stung Harry’s eyes as he took a seat on the closed toilet.

“What did you get hit with?”

Harry was grateful that Snape was not angry at being woken. “Something Voltage class, I’m not exactly sure what.”

“Not usually terribly harmful, just painful,” Snape said. “Sure it was that?”

“Yeah. It had a lot on it. Came right through my counter. I cannot wait to get my wand tomorrow.”

“That’s a switch,” Snape commented. “Who hit you?”

“Shacklebolt.”

Snape peered at him over the top of a bottle. “What did you say to deserve that?”

“Long story. Suffice to say, no one trusts me.”

Snape set the bottle down and pulled the step-stool over to sit upon it facing Harry. He considered his words before saying: “Trust is thin and fragile but requires great time and effort to construct, nevertheless.”

“I know that. It’s just hard to function without in the meantime.”

“Drink this,” Snape said, holding out a small glass of something rust colored.

Harry sipped the potion. “I’m sorry I had to wake you.”

“Do not be,” Snape stated firmly. “This is precisely the situation where I want you to do so. If I can TRUST that you will always do so I will quite frankly sleep better, which will far and away make up for any necessary interruptions.”

Harry handed the glass back. “Thanks. I feel better already.”

“You may have another half-dose in the morning if you need it.”

“We don’t have that potion at the Ministry. What is it?”

“Restricted,” Snape said with a smirk.

“We have restricted potions, believe me,” Harry pointed out with a grin.

“More restricted even than that,” Snape insisted with a smug lift of his nose.



One benefit of Harry’s difficult shift the night before was his resistance to having a wand identical to his old one had evaporated utterly. The chime of Ollivander’s

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shop door rang a jolt of eager expectation through Harry; he wanted dearly to be properly armed again.

"I'll be with you directly!" a wavering elderly voice came from the far aisles of the shop's stock area.

Harry gazed around the work space in search of his wand and spied a long holly-wood wand on a rack above the workbench. The rack consisted of spaced pairs of brass lizard feet that gripped each wand. A fat poplar wand was held only by the points of the claws, making Harry wonder if the finish was drying on it.

"Ah, Mr. Potter," Ollivander intoned with clear affection. He had approached silently, startling Harry.

"Is that mine there?" Harry asked. "It looks long."

Ollivander gave each brass claw a flick of his finger and they opened with a spasm before stretching themselves as though to work out the kinks. Ollivander lifted the wand and held it out. "Fifteen and a half inches. That was the length of the feather you brought me to use."

Harry took hold of the wand and felt a rush of tingles through his arm. "It is long," he said, giving it a wave. The tip bent even more than the old one as it moved. "It's great, though," Harry breathed, giving it a try by making the window shade neatly retract. "It's just right." His vaguely aching joints made him regret not having it sooner.

Harry paid the balance and tried to find a pocket to fit the wand. "I need larger wand pockets," he said, dismayed.

Ollivander closed the till and placed his long hands on the counter between them to study Harry's problem. "Many wizards with wands of that size utilize a scabbard pocket, here, at the waist." He mimicked drawing a sword. "Or a pocket down the back." Here he lifted his age-stained hand over his head. "If you are adept at getting the wand to jump into your hand with a charm."

Harry practiced that motion and the other one. "One or the other will work, I'm sure." He stashed the wand in his sleeve, point caught in the hem like he often stored his old one. He could not bend his arm with it that way. "I'll have to do something." He flicked the wand back into his hand and caught it.

"Longer sleeves, perhaps," Ollivander suggested.

"Yeah," Harry said. "All of mine have grown a tad short, I think." But he liked the long wand. It exuded its own confidence as it swished through the air. Its weight made it feel stable and trustworthy, which overcame its inconvenience. "Thanks again," Harry said, slipping the wand back into his pocket and holding it in place with his hand.

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Back at home, Harry showed off his wand. Held out over the worn, thickly re-varnished dining room table, the wand gleamed with newness, unmarred by being dropped or bumped or other mishap.

“Very nice,” Snape said, handing it back and returning to the brittle-paged tome open before him. It was all in hand-scrawled latin with no diagrams, so Harry could not make out the subject of it.

“It feels right,” Harry said of his wand, but then tried to put it in his pocket, forgetting it would not fit. He set it out on the table as he sat down. “I’m not used to such a long wand.” He picked the wand back up to fetch his books from the library. They zipped to him in record speed, slowing with exquisite control and resting flat without a sound.

“At least you are behaving like a wizard now,” Snape observed dryly.

Harry feigned insult.

Snape said, “I’ll be at Hogwarts tomorrow, now that you are properly armed. I have much to do there to prepare for the upcoming year.” He turned a vellum page and leaned over the book, squinting at the small writing.

“What are you reading?” Harry asked, hoping Winky would bring a snack or tea or something if he sat there long enough.

“Something.”

Harry frowned at him but did not press. His idle mind returned to what had happened the day before, with his blocking Shackbolt’s curse without using his wand. It felt like a tenuous way to block curses, but same as the last time it had happened, he was grateful it had worked.

Harry mused, “I wonder how Shackbolt’s exorcism went.”

This raised Snape’s nose out of his book. “What?”

“Oh, I didn’t tell you...”

“NO... you did not,” Snape said, laying a strip of linen in his book to mark his place and pushing it to the side.

Tea appeared. Harry took time pouring some out. He was reluctant to recount how he had nearly revealed his secret skills to the Ministry.

“What happened?” Snape asked, sounding determined not to be denied.

“There was a vampire preying on a Muggle family, and well, let me go back to the beginning.” Harry explained how his evening went, trying to sound remorseful about needing the Dark Plane to catch the vampire. He tied his story up with: “But I avoided saying exactly how I caught him. Hopefully at the trial, Fueago won’t mention it. He didn’t know who I was, so maybe he won’t think he can get back at me that way.”

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Snape said, “He will not be brought back for the trial. It will be judged too risky. Take that offered tour of the prison and you will see how he is being kept. I expect in addition to the special wards around his cell block, he will be potioned nonsensical. A rather miserable way to spend eternity.”

Harry exhaled. “So I’m safe?”

“I expect. As long as you continue to tell your story judiciously.”

“What will the Ministry do if they find out?”

“I honestly do not know. It would depend upon your standing at the time. Best not to establish exactly the hard way.” Snape set his tea cup down and pulled his book back before him. After a minute, he put his hand down hard and sat straight to say sternly, “I understand that you needed to capture the vampire. But do try to be more careful.” He again returned to his book only briefly, then asked, “Does this werewolf Alastor mentioned move in and out of the underworld at will?”

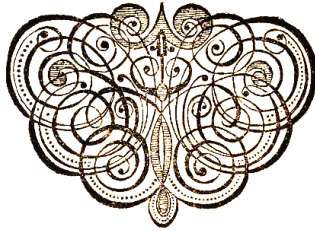
Harry shook his head. “No. I have to let him come into this world.”

The Floo surged with verdant flame, heralding Candide’s return. Snape said, “That is something anyway.”

The topic was dropped after that.

Author’s Notes: Life (mostly working on my house and an art project) may get in the way of five coming out next weekend, but I’ll try. Otherwise, look on Wednesday.

CHAPTER FIVE



PERSONAL PERIL

Sunday, Harry headed to the Burrow for lunch. When he arrived on the lawn, Ginny and Ron were dodging about on broomstick, playing catch with a Quaffle. The sun sliced through the dense clouds in bursts of yellow beams as though teasing about coming out for real.

Upon seeing Harry, Ron gestured at the shed where Harry could find a broomstick. Mrs. Weasley shouted from the door that they should instead all come inside. On the way to the door, Ron nudged Harry in the ribs and said, “Ginny wanted to invite Aaron.”

Ginny shot a deadly glance at her brother.

Harry asked, “You didn’t, though?”

Ron replied for his sister, “She couldn’t get the nerve up to owl him.”

They stepped into the cozy and worn Weasley household. They plonked themselves down upon the ragged orange and green couches where the twins sat, unusually subdued.

Harry gazed around the rough, abused decor and wondered what Aaron would think of it. His thoughts were paralleled by Ginny asking, “So, would he have accepted an invitation?”

“I don’t know. He grew up in decent wealth...” Harry trailed off, trying to take care.

“Oh,” Ginny said. “He was dressed nice. Not many men dress nice... unless they’re gay.”

Harry said, “I shouldn’t speak. I don’t know if he’d care.” The others were

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engaged in their own conversation, so he felt free to say, "It's possible that you'd care more than he would."

Ginny chewed her nail and glanced at her brothers' red heads all clustered together, talking low. She said, "You think he'd go out on a date with me?"

"I think Aaron would go on a date with anyone."

Ginny laughed. "Well, that's promising... and not so promising. I guess I should try. What kind of women does he like?"

"He likes to have fun, as far as I can tell."

"He sounds perfect." She stared off into the distance. "For a while..."

Other Weasleys arrived and the room grew louder. Harry glanced up each time, dreading to find Percy, but did not have the displeasure.

"Looking for someone?" Ginny asked.

Harry leaned forward and so did she. More privately, Harry said, "I'm kind of hoping Percy isn't coming."

"Mum didn't say he was and she usually makes a big fat deal out of it. Like we're all so much better off all together, even if that means tolerating him."

"Well," Harry thought better, "he IS family."

"Don't remind me."

She started to pull back. But Harry motioned her forward again. "Is he still dating Belinda? I thought maybe they'd broken it off."

"Thinking of hitching back up with her?" Ginny asked.

"No, just seemed like she was happier around the time I had heard that."

"I think they're still an item," she said consolingly.

Harry replayed the scene in the Minister's office. "Yeah. Seems likely." Harry reclined again, thinking back on the little coincidences with Percy at the Ministry, like his reviewing the Department of Magical Transportation's procedures just before the Floo network started always dropping him in the wrong place. Worst yet, around the time they stopped detecting illicit portkeys. Harry mulled over these old suspicions until Ginny handed him one of the two butterbeers she had gone and fetched.

He gestured for her to sit beside him. "What's Percy doing these days?"

She swallowed a mouthful of beverage. "The usual. Whatever Fudge tells him to. Sometimes I fantasize he might order him to drain the Thames or something impossible like that so we won't see him for a long time."

Even though she clearly disliked her brother, Harry found it hard to express his worst suspicions to her. "Maybe I'll stop in to see Belinda more often," Harry said. "Percy was there last time I did."

Ginny chuckled. "That would right irk him. He was so proud he had your former girlfriend. Paraded her around the Burrow here so bad the first time she didn't want

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to come back.”

They sat down to a heaping meal at a long, crowded table. Harry passed along a plate of jacket potatoes brimming with butter to Ron and glanced at his boss, Mr. Weasley. He was the one Harry really should talk to about Percy. But Mr. Weasley, not two minutes later, raised his fork and said, “Well, unfortunate that we couldn’t all be together this Sunday.”

“Yeah, too bad,” one of the twins muttered in a passable imitation of regret.

The Weasley parents bobbed their heads in sad agreement. Harry sighed and accepted a giant bowl of green peas.

A ruckus broke out at the end of the table, and Bill appeared dismayed by something. “You two just don’t know when to give it up,” he said.

“What?” Fred asked.

Bill held up his bread knife, which was welded to his spoon.

“Oh, right, that looks like something WE’D do,” George offered. “Try your sister.”

Ginny had held her face innocent, but now she grinned. Bill stood up and used his long arms to trade utensils with her. “You can have them.”

Ginny pulled out her wand, but was interrupted by her mother scolding, “I do hope you haven’t ruined that knife and spoon, dear.”

“No, mum,” Ginny insisted calmly. She waved a complicated spell at the utensil pair and a burning orange beam separated the two. She used her robe sleeve to hold onto the spoon without burning her fingers while she cleaned up the edge.

“Can you show me that spell?” Harry asked.

She demonstrated again to take the flash off the knife handle. Harry tried it a few times and managed to shorten his own butter knife by an inch. The cut off tip burned away to ash as it fell to the table.

“Okay, that I can’t fix for you,” Ginny said.

“That’s all right, Harry dear,” Mrs. Weasley said. “They’re old anyway.”

Harry shrugged at Ginny, who rolled her eyes. He awkwardly stretched his arms apart to work the spell until he at least cleaned up the foreshortened round end.

“That your new wand?” Ginny asked.

“Yup. It works great. I don’t know if it’s just the time without it, but it responds more naturally than I expect it to. Like it know what I’m thinking.”

“It’s a long one.”

“It is. I’m still getting used to that. As you probably noticed.” He spread his arms exaggeratedly to make the point, making Ginny and many others laugh.

“You, of all people, should have a good wand, Harry,” Fred said.

“That’s what Ollivander said when he put it on rush order.”

“We love that guy,” George said.

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Fred followed with, "Yeah, we've never played any kind of prank on him... we must really love him."



When Harry came home from the Burrow, Harry faced the stack of his books still sitting out on the table where he had left them earlier in the hopes that he would get to them after breakfast. He settled in and propped the top one open before him. Again, Sunday early evening was upon him and his reading list had not shortened since Friday. It was as though a hex had been applied to it.

Dulcet voices filtered down from upstairs, distracting him. Halfway through the second chapter of a book entitled Paranormal Prankster Pop Psychology, footsteps tramped down the stairs and the voices grew clearer.

"Let's see the swatches in better light."

"You're right, the light isn't any better down here."

Harry's brow knotted up slightly. He stood and slipped silently to the doorway where he peeked around to observe the figures hunched around one of the small windows, discussing the merits of beads versus sequins. The couches were strewn with stretches of fabric in various shades of off white and what appeared to be tiaras. Harry rubbed his eyes but they still resembled tiaras.

Harry decided with a growing sense of bemusement that this was some kind of ritual wedding preparation so he ducked fully back into the dining room. Candide saying, "Harry will be home soon, so we should straighten things up a bit," slowed him returning to the table. As if he would care. He could not imagine she believed him orderly. He shook his head.

"Who's this?" a voice asked.

A third voice, sounding like Candide with a bad cold, said knowingly, "Candide is inheriting a son, didn't she tell you?"

"Ruthie, really, not exactly," Candide said, speaking to her sister, Harry now knew from the name.

The second voice was shrill as it said, "He's expecting you to take care of his brat?"

Harry ducked his head, face scrunched in amusement. He stayed put, near the doorway, wanting to hear how Candide handled that.

"Hardly. He's nineteen."

"Worse! Still at home at that age? Must be a regular dossier."

Fabric rustled as though being gathered together with care to keep it flat. "You should tell her who it is," Ruthie said with a grin in her voice.

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“Your mum said his father couldn’t seem to find the time to pay a call.”

“Severus works very hard,” Candide said with patience.

“I had a year of Potions with him at Hogwarts,” the grating voice said. “I quickly decided I’d stick to using cauldrons strictly for cooking. You remember him, don’t you, Ruthie? Used to slither around the dungeon during class. We thought he must hang himself up like a vampire bat in some dark corner to sleep at night.”

Harry, who very well knew how evil a vampire was, bristled at this.

“Karol, if you don’t want to be in the wedding, you don’t-”

“NO, NO, I love weddings. It’s men I can’t stand.”

Harry scratched the back of his head, thinking he may have missed his opportunity for an unembarrassing entrance, from Candide’s perspective anyhow. If he were Dudley, he could pretend to have been wearing headphones of some kind all this time. Instead, Harry Disapparated to a spot two feet from where he stood, hoping it made only one noise, given the short distance. He sat at the table and pulled the teapot over, and made other noises with his books.

Footsteps shuffled over and Candide said, “Hello, Harry.”

Harry lifted his head as though surprised. A second figure and then a third came into view. Ruthie was a heavysset, rougher skinned version of Candide. She wore glowing red lipstick and her eyelashes were unnaturally long. The other woman, in contrast, had a sunken-cheeked face and a sour mouth, and at the moment, it hung open.

“This is my sister, Ruthie,” Candide said, indicating the wide-robed figure on her right.

Harry stood to shake hands. Ruthie had a glint in her eye as though thrilled to meet him.

“And this is Karolyn, a childhood friend, and also a third cousin.”

Harry nodded at her because she did not have the sense to lift her hand. He did not bother Legilimizing her, because he would rather not know. He retook his seat where his books provided a wall to bunker behind. Ruthie placed her beefy hands on the table and leaned toward him. She moved like someone accustomed to using her size to seem immovable or unstoppable, depending.

“You didn’t come to meet mum and dad at The Dinner.”

Harry found he instinctively wanted to be careful what he said to her. “I didn’t want to be in the way.”

This answer struck her as odd and funny, or so her face indicated. “In the way? That wouldn’t be a problem.”

“You, uh...” Karolyn began. She turned to Candide. “You, uh, live with Harry Potter?”

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Candide laughed and said, "Well, yes."

"Don't, uh..." She glanced painfully at Harry. "Don't, uh, bad things tend to happen..."

Ruthie broke in, laughing too. "Didn't you see all the new repairs to the house there?"

Candide fell serious. "Sometimes bad things happen. But they're handled well." She shifted her arms uncomfortably, indicating to Harry that recent events had not let her go yet, even if she hid it most of the time.

Ruthie put her hand upon her generous breast and said, "Oh, you have a knight in shining armor. How sweet."

Candide looked straight at Harry and said, "I have two, actually." She glanced around. "Let's leave Harry to his studies. Come on." As they re-entered the hall with last glances back, Candide said, "Taffeta, silk, velvet, lace, hell, felt even; it really doesn't matter."

Later, after her companions disappeared in the Floo, Candide sat down across from Harry, clutching her hands momentarily. "Sorry 'bout that."

"It's all right," he assured her.

"My cousin is a little... uptight. But she loves weddings, knows all the latest... styles. What's in. What's out." Candide sounded regretful. Harry remained silent. She went on, "So much to do to get ready. You don't know."

Harry flicked his quill around in his fingers. "No, fortunately I don't know."

Candide put her hands in her lap and sat vaguely hunched. "I always wanted to get married. It always looked like so much fun... get to be the center of attention for a day... everything just the way you want it." She slumped a little more. "Now I just want the day to come and be over with."

Harry's lips twitched impishly as he said, "You want to just wave a magic wand and make it so, you mean?"

She refused to be baited, sounding stressed as she said, "You have a spell that conjures a florist, a hairdresser, a jewelry, a candlemaker, a cupbearer, a dressmaker, a decorator, a makeup artist, a Supreme Mugwort... and a string quartet?"

"Nope. I would conjure them all for you if I could, though."

She relented. "I appreciate that."

Harry rubbed his stomach which complained faintly of being empty. "What time did Severus say he'd be back from Hogwarts?"

Candide jumped up. "Oh, I forgot. He told me to owl when we were through." She rushed to the other room for a pen and parchment.

Harry muttered to himself, "Smart man."

PERSONAL PERIL



Monday first thing at training, Rodgers appeared and told Harry that he was wanted in the office. Harry mused about what he may be in trouble for until he found a contrite Shacklebolt speaking with Mr. Weasley, who appeared chipper, especially in comparison to the man beside him.

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley said after the Auror remained quiet, “Kingsley wishes to apologize.” He stepped closer to Harry and leaned down as though sharing something confidential. “You realize that the hold a vampire has over his victim is stronger than an Imperio in some ways because it does not require the master to stay in the vicinity of or remain aware of the person they are controlling?”

“Er, we haven’t covered it yet, but I understand.” Harry remembered tossing his wand down before Occluding his mind. It gave him shivers, even here where he was safe. “I can imagine it, sir. Fueago put a fog around the house and I lost Blackpool to him and almost lost myself.”

Mr. Weasley patted him on the back. “It’s fortunate for us that you didn’t. Severus’ lessons held you in good stead.”

“That and lots of experience with Voldemort,” Harry agreed. At this, Shacklebolt raised his head slightly. “It’s all right, sir,” he reassured the Auror.

“I really was trying to get at you, Potter.” He rubbed his upper arm, ash still marked the back of his hands and his forehead, as though the exorcism had just ended that morning and he had not gathered the sense to wipe it off. “I remember doing that, but I couldn’t stop myself.” He sounded truly horrified.

Upbeat, Harry said, “Now that I have the right wand, it would be all right.”

“It would not be all right,” Shacklebolt insisted. “I tried to throw an Imperius Curse at you-”

“You what?” Mr. Weasley blurted.

Still clutching his arm, Shacklebolt gestured clumsily at Harry. “He blocked it somehow. I don’t know how.” Harry was not accustomed to seeing him so uncertain and just wished he would return to himself and stop worrying so.

“I just squashed it,” Harry said. “Since I couldn’t block it.”

Shacklebolt stared at him, taking that in. He said. “But you’re all right now?” he asked, oddly needing reassurance.

Harry still ached in various random places, but he said, “Yeah. ’S Fine.”

“Well, Harry, back to your training,” Mr. Weasley said. He steered Harry out with a hand on his shoulder. “I’m glad that’s taken care of,” he confessed. “Kingsley will be a few days returning to his old self. Feels rather guilty, I think.”

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They had arrived at the training room. "Sorry I delayed Harry," Mr. Weasley told Rodgers. Harry's fellows were already well into their drills. Rodgers gestured for Harry to take over opposite Tridant. Their newest member had a much shorter sequence, which Harry was happy to stick to while he grew accustomed to the nuanced responsiveness of his new wand. Tridant seemed less defeated today. Harry figured he was sick of constant advice, so he kept quiet as they exchanged spells and counters, back and forth.

At lunchtime, Harry headed up to the Minister's office. Belinda was sneaking bites of a sandwich out of the bottom drawer of her desk. She gave him a dull hello without meeting his eyes.

Harry glanced around, frowning to find Percy glaring at him from where the workmen were affixing the hand-carved flowery edges to the new shelves in the corner. The room smelled pervasively of shellac.

"I was going to see if you wanted to go out for lunch," Harry said sweetly to Belinda. "But I see you're already eating."

She jerked strangely as he spoke, making Harry turn to see if Percy had made some kind of move.

"I can't go to lunch," she said dully.

Harry noticed that her robes were not as neatly pressed as expected. Percy and his obnoxious ways may be making her depressed and that made Harry's skin prickle. He leaned closer, feeling that he really should talk to her alone. "Coffee later?" Someone, most likely Percy, stepped up beside him and Harry's skin prickled more, his robes felt dank against his flesh as though in dire need of being washed.

Harry stood straight and spun on Percy. The feeling faded slightly; Harry now was merely nauseated by the sourest Weasley's presence.

"You have no business up here, Potter," Percy said, spitting faintly on Harry's name.

Harry wiped his cheek. "I have business wherever I want to have it." He tried to Legilimize Percy, who was glaring at him as though inviting him to do so, but Harry received no impressions. "What business do you have here?" he asked, hoping to jar some impression loose. His temper was getting the better of him, so Harry asked mockingly, "Messing up another department, are you? Why is that every time you are assigned somewhere, strange things start happening? You know, like the Portkey detection going all haywire around the time the Ministry is getting attacked by devices coming in as illicit Portkeys."

Percy's hard gaze did not waver. "The Portkey detection has always been hit and miss. I didn't have anything to do with that." More mocking, he went on, "They can't seem to ever fix it properly; it just didn't matter so much before. I was assigned

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there for a review BECAUSE they were incompetent.” He turned to check on the workmen behind him. When he turned back he stood on his toes, leaning over Harry. Nasally, he said, “Get lost, Potter, what do you want, anyway?”

Harry, who beat Percy for physical bulk, but not height, stood his ground. “I want to talk to Belinda, what’s it to you?”

Percy’s face grew ugly. “You’re an idiot; it’s everything to me. Get lost or I’ll call security.”

Harry propped his hands on his hips. “Oh, I’d like to see that.”

Smugly, Percy said, “Have you forgotten how many times this year we’ve needed to call security because you were in here?”

Percy found the mark with that one. Harry backed off and with a sweet goodbye to Belinda, departed, feeling ill tempered.

Tonks did not return before Harry’s stomach growled for dinner, so Harry remained out of sorts as he headed home. In the dining room Candide sat alone, reading the papers.

Harry took a seat, stomach rumbling. Plates appeared, but just two of them.

“Where’s Severus?”

“He’s started working on something today.”

“He’s at Hogwarts?”

“No, upstairs. But he insisted he not be bothered.”

Harry ignored this and headed up.

The door to the spare room used for storage was closed but a whiff of something metallic and hot emanated from under it. Harry knocked and waited, not wanting to barge in and disturb anything fragile.

The door opened just six inches. “I am working on something,” Snape said dismissively. “And you are interrupting.”

“Oh. I was just... wondering why you weren’t at dinner.”

“I’m at a critical juncture, then I can let it steep. I will eat later.”

The door closed with a click.

Downstairs, Candide asked, “Does he throw himself this completely into his work often?”

“Occasionally.” Harry tried not to display his befuddlement and Candide returned to reading that oddly peach-colored Muggle newspaper.

Harry sighed and tried to answer his post. He found himself not in the mood for correspondence and tossed it aside, half-unopened. His books did not hold his attention well either. When the door-knocker sounded, Harry’s heart leapt at the distraction.

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Outside, Elizabeth stood in the gathering gloom of the garden. “Hope you don’t mind if I call. I owed from my instructor’s house, but didn’t get a reply before my lesson ended.”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t open my post yet. I don’t mind at all, come in.”

“We didn’t get a chance to talk at your party. There were so many people and I couldn’t stay long.” She removed her cloak and fastidiously straightened it before handing it to Harry to hang up.

“How are your studies?” Harry asked.

She laughed. “I have a long break, so I’ve been learning new pieces on the piano mostly.” In the hall she said, “The repairs are marvelous, by the way. I didn’t get a chance to tell you that.”

She seemed a tad nervous as he sat her down across from Candide and poured her some tea. Elizabeth sniffed the tea cup dubiously, sleeves pulled down, halfway covering her hands.

Harry supplied, “Oh, that smell is not the tea. Severus is brewing something.”

“Oh, my mum used to do that. Now my dad says it’s ridiculous to stink a nice house up when the chemists is just around the corner.” This statement led to a fade out of her expression.

Harry was just thinking that this was the second time today he needed to be alone to talk to someone. Candide folded her newspapers and set them aside. Harry thought she was going to leave, but she topped up her teacup.

“Your dad isn’t magical?” Candide asked in a highly conversational tone.

“No,” Elizabeth shook her head. She wiggled her hands so they stayed inside her sleeves which were stretched taught where they emerged from her pullover.

Harry remembered her father quite clearly as he nearly threw him out of the house after a small tiff sparked solely by Harry’s presence. Harry had been interested in Elizabeth before then and after had put her off in deference to not causing trouble.

Candide went on, “Did your dad know your mum was a witch before they married?”

“Yes, of course,” Elizabeth laughed lightly, but it faded quickly. “You know, I should probably go. I was on my way home from my lesson. It ended early, and-”

“You don’t need to go just yet,” Candide said. “Have some more tea.”

Elizabeth accepted the cup and drank from it as though the task require a great deal of concentration. “I’m glad I came to your party the other night,” she stated out of the blue, almost like a pledge.

Harry’s brow furrowed. “I should have another smaller one so I can actually talk to people.”

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Candide teased, "You would have had more time had you not stood in the corner all night with Ms. Tonks."

Harry blushed. Elizabeth ducked her head. "I really should go." She sounded breathless now and would not be convinced to stay longer. Harry helped her on with her cloak and said goodbye. She glanced back and waved before fading into the wet night.

"Huh," Harry uttered as he sat back down across from Candide.

"You have that skill Severus does to see into people's heads. Didn't you use it?"

Harry shook his head. "Think I should have? I don't like to unless I'm in danger."

Candide unfolded the next unread newspaper and said, "People have odd ways of asking for help."

"Are you referring to Elizabeth?" Harry asked sharply

"Yes." Candide turned the large page and flattened the section with a snap before folding it backwards to read the bottom portion. "Just a sense I had..."

"You thought she was asking for help?" Harry asked, mystified.

She tilted her head. "Maybe she's not getting on with her father, or maybe she just had a bad piano lesson. I don't know her well enough to know."

"She was a little off."

"Then it probably isn't the lesson."

Harry pushed his teaspoon around. "Think I should go over to her house?"

"Have you met her family?"

"Yeah, her father hates me."

"That probably would not make things better in that case. Really, truly hates you?" she prompted doubtfully.

"Well, said I wasn't fit for his daughter. Threw me out."

"Really?" Candide tried to swallow a grin. "A whole wizarding world full of fathers who would dream of having you dating their daughter and you find the single one who wouldn't."

"You know; they think that until I actually show up for the date," Harry said, thinking of Tara's parents. "Then they start to have second and third thoughts. And verify that we aren't planning on marriage."

"No wonder you're dating an Auror. Have you met Tonks' parents?"

Harry puzzled that. "No, I haven't. I assume that means we're not planning on marriage."

"Not soon, in any event," Candide commented. "Tonks and you get along well?"

Harry considered that question. "I can be myself around her. I don't have to worry about anything. She can take care of herself." Harry's insides twinged happily thinking of her.

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Candide said, "Unlike the rest of us, who are all damsels in distress waiting to happen?"

"I didn't say that," Harry insisted. "It just lets me relax. She tells me what she thinks. Everyone else I've dated is always holding something back." He then added, "And she's cute."

"Well, that's all that matters," Candide stated, still teasing. "And she can look like most anyone, right?"

Harry shrugged. "I like her as herself."

Candide, sly grin in place, said, "Do you even know what that is?"

"Yes, of course," Harry insisted. "I think."

"You've never asked her to look a certain way? Or implied that you prefer one hair color over another?"

Candide seemed to be leading somewhere, but Harry could not see where. "No."

"That may be why she likes you too. I expect she gets a lot of that."

"She's a metamorphmagus, why would she care? It's so easy for her to change."

Candide paused before she said, "But that doesn't mean she wants to."

Harry frowned, not considering that likely. "She used to joke around with us all the time. Making her nose big, making herself old."

"I think that supports my point," Candide said.

"How?"

"She was removing it as an issue by making fun of it." She waved her hand dismissively as desserts arrived in a sparkle. "But it's no matter. More a matter seems to be that you aren't supposed to be dating her."

Harry rubbed his head, mussing his hair more. "No. We're breaking Ministry rules."

"And getting away with it because you're Harry Potter."

Harry stared off into the dim main hall. "Something I swore I wouldn't ever let them do."

"Your own moral code is always the first to go," Candide quipped. Harry stared at her, prompting her to add, "I didn't mean that so seriously. Besides, if anyone deserves to break the rules, it's you."

"That doesn't help." He flipped through one of his books, not reading it. "What do you think I should do about Elizabeth?"

"Take her out somewhere and get her to talk. Use that creepy skill you learned from Severus on her."

"That's cold."

She buried her nose in the paper again. "Depends on what's going on."

Snape finally came downstairs, trailing an aura of metallic acidity.

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“What are you working on?” Harry asked as a full plate materialized before his guardian.

“Something,” Snape replied rudely.

Harry and Candide shrugged at each other.



Harry did not have a good idea what to do about Elizabeth until Thursday. When he came home from training he found his friend Hermione at the table across from Snape, who sat far back in his chair, cross-armed, hair half concealing his face.

“Hi, Harry,” his friend greeted him brightly. She turned the page of a large grid-lined book in front of her. “So, names along here, in order. Marks here...” Harry leaned over her shoulder to peer at the blank grade book.

Snape said, “And you need a Fixitive charm. And an Fournalarm if you truly wish it to be permanent.”

“I know those,” Hermione stated. “And the red boxes and the purple boxes get repeated in the Grand Grades book in Professor McGonagall’s office?” She ran her fingers over the intervening black column lines. “How do I choose which are important enough? There will be a lot of assignments.”

Snape said, “That is up to you. The purple, obviously are the cumulative examinations you are expected to hold periodically. Some, like Vector, place a weighted mean of the preceding grades in the red columns. Some, like myself, tweak the grades based on the student’s house.”

Hermione gaped at him. “Do you really?”

Snape gave her a challenging look in return.

From her position bent over the grade book, Hermione said, “Harry, yell at him for me.”

Harry laughed instead. “I’ve heard him say that he works hard to reduce his advanced class to just Slytherins and Ravenclaws. That must be how he does it.”

Hermione shook her head disbelievingly. Harry took the seat beside her and opened his post. The one he had sent to Elizabeth was in the pile as though Hedwig had brought it back undelivered.

Hermione said, “I’ll be out of the way shortly. McGonagall sent me a box-load of stuff and suggested I get Professor Snape to answer any questions.”

Airily, Snape said, “And here I thought she and I were getting along better.”

Hermione leaned closer to Harry, “I’m not taking him seriously. Is that the best course?”

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“Yes. Especially since it’ll make him nuts.” Harry gave his guardian a smile to buffer that. To Hermione, Harry said, “Can you do me a favor before you go?”

“Sure, Harry.”

“When you’re done. Don’t rush.”

“I don’t have much time to get ready for first term.” She sounded panicky. “I put in my notice at work so I can have the next few weeks, full time.” She pulled out a battered booklet entitled *Rulers & Rules* and flipped to the first note she had taped inside. “Now, about this policy on reasonable detention... I happen to remember you violated it on at least ten occasions that I know of.”

They both waited for Snape’s reaction, which was not forthcoming. “And your point is?” he finally prompted easily.

Hermione went on, “So, does that mean I can violate it? Or is it only Heads of House or only YOU?”

Later, Harry led his friend out the door. The evening was warm and comfortable and he wondered why he did not find more time for walks. He stopped suddenly, thinking that Kali would like to come out as well. He could feel her claustrophobia and her desire for fresh air and open space. “Just a second,” Harry said, going to fetch her.

They resumed their walk down to the train station, Kali flapping along beside and around them while Harry explained. “You remember Elizabeth, right? Something is... I don’t know how to say it... well, suffice to say, I’d like to talk to her, but her father wouldn’t let me if he sees me, I expect. I’m wondering if you can lure her out to a coffee shop or to a pub so I can chat with her.”

Hermione puzzled this. “Sure, Harry.”

Kali fitted by. Harry urged her to fly to the approaching white house, thinking to make her look in the windows.

“Where’s she going?” Hermione asked in concern. Kali had been sticking close until then.

“I’m sending her ahead to scout. I’m trying to use her as a mobile extendible eye.” Harry stopped and closed his eyes but he could only get disconnected, fleeting impressions from his pet. Last time she had been in pain when he saw through her eyes. Without that strong sensation, she was difficult to locate in his mind. He shook his head, giving up.

“Not working?”

“It has before, but it’s hard. I should practice that; it’d be useful.” He urged Kali back to him and stopped on the pavement behind the large shrubs bordering the Peterson house. “I’ll wait here.”

“If I’m talking loudly when I return, the father’s with me.”

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“Got it. Thanks.”

Harry listened to her shoes clunk up the drive. The porch projected her voice faintly to the street as she spoke with someone at the door. Harry held Kali facing that way and tried to hear through her more sensitive ears. Sometimes he could manage, but it faded in and out.

“...yes, Hermione. I’m a friend from Oxford... I’m studying law there... yes. Just happen to have taken the train into town. I’m staying with a friend and remembered that Elizabeth lives here. ”

Things went on in this vein, like an interrogation.

“We’re in Magdalen together.”

Harry grinned in affection for his old friend. She could bluff anything because she knew enough about any topic to do so and remembered everything anyone ever told her.

“Well, when she comes in tonight, please tell her I stopped by.”

Hermione came back down the walk.

“He’s a tough customer,” she muttered.

“You got Mr. Peterson?”

“I assume.”

They reached Harry’s house a short, silent walk later.

“Something about Mr. Peterson I don’t like. Oh, hello, Candide,” Hermione said, when they were greeted at the door.

Harry explained, “We were just trying to wade through the Mr. Peterson moat to see Elizabeth.”

“Did you?”

“He said she wasn’t home.”

“Was he lying?” Candide asked, something Harry had not considered.

Hermione thought that over. “I’m not sure. Sometimes I can tell, but not with that guy. He’s the same no matter what he is talking about.”



Saturday afternoon, Harry had field shadowing again. He stashed his new wand in his newly extended pocket, glad to have it. In the office he found Rogan waiting for him.

“Well, Potter, ready to go?”

“Yes.”

Rogan’s step was lighter than usual as they strolled the East End on patrol. Harry wondered at his change in mood.

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“Nice day, isn’t it?” Harry asked, wondering if the weather explained it.

“What? Oh, yes.”

Harry decided that he needed to understand things better, so he dived in with, “This is the first time in a long while that they’ve let you do routine patrol, isn’t it?”

Rogan frowned, which his rounded face did not allow to be too grim. “Yup. They’ll let me out with a full Auror or you.”

“Or me?” Harry asked. “They have a lot of faith in me, don’t they? In some ways.”

“Things were better this week,” Rogan said. “Kingsley’s lost his superior attitude.” With mock dreaminess, he added, “Wonder why?” Minutes later he said, “At least I didn’t attack a trainee while compromised.”

Harry now understood why Rogan felt better. “He did seem less smug this week.”

“I’m lucky we’re shorthanded. I’d still be on full probation, writing endless memos, otherwise.”

They returned in the wee hours after a long and uneventful shift. The lamps in the Auror’s offices were at half wick, bathing everything in misleading warm light. Harry sat down on the bench to remove each of his shoes and rubbed his feet.

Rogan gave him a grin as Harry sat there with his socks exposed. “Need new shoes?”

“They are new; that’s the problem.” Fortunately there was a salve at home for just this situation, so Harry reluctantly slipped his lace-ups back on and skipped tying them when his feet protested the very thought.

Buried in distracted thoughts of future relief, Harry grabbed up his cloak and turned to go. Instinct made him drop the cloak, mid-swing to put it on, when a wave of aversion struck. If his wand had been shorter and had not been sticking inches out of his pocket, he would not have drawn it in time.

Harry managed half a rubber block before something dark exploded, filling his vision with four-foot hairy razor points. Rogan dived off the side of the bench, having drawn his wand immediately after Harry did. He threw a blasting curse that tossed the dissipating rubber block and the giant spiked object into the corner where it began to deflate with a musical squeaking sound. Fresh gouges in the wall haloed it.

Harry stared at his cloak, draped over something the size of a beach ball with a hundred spikes stuck through it. The spines tipped slowly flat to the floor as the ball lost volume.

“What is that?” Harry asked after taking a breath.

Rogan stood up and stepped over beside him to watch the thing in the corner, wand aimed at it. “I’ve never seen anything like it.” He jerked to look Harry up and

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down. "Did you get cut?"

"I don't think so," Harry dully said.

"I don't want to hear "think" Potter. It could be poison tipped."

Harry gestured at it. "Something that big and nasty would not need to be poisoned as well, would it?"

"Go fetch Tonks or whoever is on duty." Rogan kept his gaze and his wand on the thing as Harry obeyed.

Half a minute later, Tonks was saying, "Something jumped out of your cloak? A regulated creature?"

Harry led the way into the changing room and gestured.

"Merlin the White, what the heck is that?" She leaned her long neck out to better examine it without stepping closer. "Better get Mysteries up here." She dashed off, saying behind her. "Cover the office, Rogan. Harry can guard that thing."

Rogan dashed out the door in the other direction from the one Tonks had taken. Harry held his wand out but doubted he would need it again; the thing sat sunken, unmoving. Harry's right shin stung and when he shook it, his trouser leg stuck to his skin. Harry backed up to the wall, so he could put enough distance between himself and the spiked thing to lift his robe and check his leg. His black trousers made it hard to see how bloody it really was, but there was a rent in the fabric. Harry awkwardly covered the wound with his left hand, then remembered he could Stun it. He stood straight and imagined his leg packed to the knee with snow. The pain faded to a dull throb. He waited.

The door opened and Harry gestured with his blood-smeared hand that Mr. Weasley should keep to the left. The department head's red brow furrowed as he came over to Harry, while keeping his gaze fixed in the corner.

"Tristan sent me an owl by Floo saying something had attacked the changing room. What is that?"

"Don't know."

"Where'd it come from?"

"It was in my cloak."

This made Mr. Weasley turn his head to Harry. "You hurt?" He grabbed up Harry's wrist to better see his bloodied hand.

"I got cut on the shin. I dropped the cloak but didn't quite get out of the way of it." Harry played that half a second over in his mind. "Rogan blasted it into the corner before my block failed."

"Is it poisonous?" Mr. Weasley sharply asked.

"I don't know," Harry admitted.

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Led by Tonks, a crew came in from Mysteries, wearing padded robes and masks, so Harry could not recognize them. They hovered the thing into a massive solid titanium trunk and hovered that off.

Harry said to Mr. Weasley and Tonks, "All I know is I'm glad I have my new wand." Without it, the spikes would have been through him instead of his cloak. "Drat," Harry breathed. "That was my new cloak."

Mr. Weasley patted Harry on the arm and went to the wall where several of the spikes had broken off in the panelling. He used a hankie to pry the longest one free. "Tonks, take this to the potions room and check it for poison." He turned to Harry. "Come along, Harry. We have to keep a watch on you until we know you're clear."

Harry sat on a stool in the corner of what was actually a glorified cupboard. It was as though someone had put a shrinking charm on Snape's old office, leaving only six feet of floor space to stand in. The shelves were deeper than the open floor was wide.

Harry moved to heal the wound on his leg, but Tonks said, "We need a photo of it." She called out into the corridor for Rogan.

Harry rolled his eyes, but sat quietly through what he knew was a required evidence procedure. Rogan worked quickly, then departed, noisily winding the evidence camera film up.

Propping his heel on a shelf and stretching his back and neck, Harry could just get a good look at the wound. It was dark with rapidly clotting blood but it otherwise appeared normal. He pulled out his wand.

Tonks, both hands holding bottles of irritating liquids, scrubbed at her nose on her sleeve. "Why don't you let me do that. You're liable to leave a scar if you don't aim the spell properly."

"Because you're busy. Another scar isn't going to matter," Harry said, bristling at being babied.

"I don't want your lovely leg scarred," she insisted, voice taking on a sexy tone.

Mr. Weasley choose that moment to step into the doorway. "Am I interrupting?"

"No, of course not. No sign of poison so far," Tonks said, putting drops of something milky onto a glass dish and touching it with the end of the spike. "You're a wiz at healing spells, Arthur. Take care of Harry will you?"

Mr. Weasley crouched beside Harry and peeled his soaked trouser leg up farther. He frowned. "Good thing it didn't get more of you, Harry. Dangerous thing."

"Yeah," Harry had to agree. He held tight to his next thought by biting his lip. That thing seemed like something the twins might have invented. Harry decided he could check into that himself.

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Mr. Weasley cast several spells at his leg, then he spit into his hankie and rubbed Harry's leg briskly to remove the dried blood. "Looks good. It would have been deeper, but it hit bone."

"Spoken like a man with six sons," Tonks teased.

Even Harry smiled at that.

Some time later, with Mr. Weasley assisting because Tonks spilled the second to last bottle of Prismatic Revelation, Tonks declared, "I don't see any sign of poison."

Harry figured it must be around 3:00 in the morning because his eyelids felt made of lead. "Can I go?"

"Why don't you escort him, Tonks?"

"I don't need an escort," Harry sharply insisted, before thinking better that it would be Tonks and that would actually be quite to his advantage. "Sorry," he said to her. "I'm all right though. It was just a scratch."

Tonks put a stopper in the last open bottle and said, sounding fully professional, "It was just someone trying to kill you, Harry."

Harry frowned and huffed since it was difficult to argue otherwise.

At Harry's house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry pleaded with Tonks not to wake Snape.

"Really, it's all right," Harry whispered. "I woke him up last weekend too after shift."

"Why?"

"I got hit kind of hard by Shackbolt and couldn't sleep," Harry admitted, kicking himself for that slip-up. He went on, "I don't need anything. It's a scratch and it's healed."

"It's a higher alert level... for your protection," Tonks argued, also whispering.

"This house is already warded to the maximum it could be," Harry countered.

The sound of a throat clearing floated in through the door to the dining room. Snape stepped in, holding Kali. "She was making a bit of a racket an hour ago."

"Sorry," Harry said. "Didn't mean to wake you."

As he passed them, Snape inspected each of them before letting Kali crawl onto Harry's shoulder. Harry petted her head which she rested it on his collar, tired. "I need to get to sleep," Harry said.

"Bad shift?" Snape asked.

"No exactly," Tonks replied for him. "Someone slipped something deadly into Harry's cupboard."

"I lost another cloak," Harry said. "This must be a record."

"The cloak is no matter," Snape chided him, crossing his arms and confronting Tonks. "What was this thing?"

"We don't know. We sent it down to the Department of Mysteries."

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“Where you will be lucky to hear anything of it again,” Snape finished for her.

Harry said, “It was cursed. I felt it in time before putting the cloak on.”

“So it must have been slipped into the cupboard. You’re certain it wasn’t in the cloak when you bought it?” Tonks asked.

“I didn’t feel it before.”

“It could have been masked, though,” Tonks suggested.

“That does not fool Harry,” Snape provided.

“Okay...” Tonks mused, hair shifting to brown. “Our traitor is still skulking around, apparently.”

Harry held his tongue on his suspicions for the moment. If it was Percy, Harry felt a bit like handling it himself.

Tonks departed after breaking her work mode long enough to give Harry a hug.

“I’m tired,” Harry said, to cut off whatever Snape opened his mouth to say.

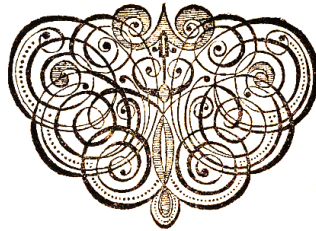
“I was going to suggest that you rest. But more importantly, I wished to know if that is your blood on your hand...”

“Yeah, I need to clean up.” He headed for the toilet, forcing Kali to hang on tightly as he broke into stride, calling over his shoulder, “It’s all healed, don’t worry about it.”

The door to the toilet closed in the distance and Snape said to the empty hall, “No, of course I shan’t worry.”

Author’s Notes: Sorry didn’t get this up at a decent hour. 10 hour drive took up most of my productive day.

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RABBIT HOLE

Sunday, Harry woke and while still in bed, penned a quick letter, careful not to get any droplets of ink on the bedding as he brought the quill from the inkwell to the parchment and back again. Still in his pyjamas, he sat on the trunk under his bedroom window and released Hedwig after giving her very specific instructions to deliver his missive directly to Elizabeth's room. The letter invited her out to the pub that afternoon and suggested that she not tell her father whom she was to meet.

When Hedwig returned while Harry buttoned his shirt, bearing the same unopened letter, he frowned at his owl. "What happened, you couldn't find her?" he asked. It wasn't terribly early, so she should be awake.

Harry tugged on his right sock while Hedwig flapped up to sit on his wardrobe. He padded over, pulled Kali from her cage and stared at her tiny fox-like face haloed by her purple body fur. She sniffed the air, then chewed on his finger. The prickly pain gave him a fleeting impression of a salty, poultry taste that must be from her. He let her out the window and urged her to fly to the Peterson house. She flew to the roof of the train station instead, where the pigeons made slow, chubby prey.

Harry willed her back through his window, which was not easy, mid-stalk like she was with her wings arched high and back. He held her up before his face again. "You aren't cooperating," he criticized her. He pulled on his slippers and took the rejected letter downstairs where he found Candide in the drawing room, glossy magazines spread out before her, pages filled with all manner of brides, posed against a ubiquitous brown background as though standing inside a giant, well-lit paper sack. Clearly the back of the dress was considered more critical than the front, given the

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prevalence of that angle.

“Would you do me a favor?” Harry asked her. “I mean, if you’re not busy.”

“Sure, if you do me one.” She turned a ten pound, three-inch thick magazine across the desk in his direction. “Do you like this dress?”

Harry stared at the picture. The dress was form-fitting, except for the oversized sleeves, and it had scroll-like beadwork sewn into the waist and down the back in a point. The overall shape was reminiscent of an upside-down tulip, down to the texture. But, to a first approximation, it was a dress.

“It’s nice,” Harry said, trying to sound like he meant it.

“You don’t think it’s too princess gown?”

“Too what?”

“You know, like Cinderella, or Snow White. Don’t you know Snow White?”

“Wasn’t she poisoned by a witch?” Harry asked, wondering how they had wandered into this topic out of dresses.

“She married Prince Charming; that’s the key point,” Candide supplied. “Oh, that’s right, I took you to your first film when you were young. ‘Course you haven’t seen Snow White.” She pulled the magazine back. “How could I forget?”

Harry stood, holding Kali, who sniffed with interest at the perfumes that permeated the magazine pile. He really had lost track of the conversation. “Oh,” he said, remembering suddenly that he had indeed briefly rendered himself half his normal age. “What’d we see?”

“Tarzan.”

Harry felt a bit left out by this revelation. “Did I like it?”

“Um.” She tapped her finger on a page bearing an adorable furry mutt carrying a flower basket and sporting a pink ribbon on the top of its head. “You seemed disturbed by it, honestly.”

Harry mulled that, while Candide flipped through twenty pages. She stopped at a dress worn by a woman clearly well along in her pregnancy. It lacked the sparkly effects most the others had and the fabric hue was reminiscent of old parchment rather than a fancy tablecloth like the others. “Good thing we’re getting married soon enough not to need THAT dress,” she commented. She flipped back to the dress marked with a folded over strip of spellotape.

Harry said, “I was wondering if you could go talk to Elizabeth.”

“Not that I’d mind doing so, but she walks by here everyday, doesn’t she?”

“That’s right,” Harry said. “She has lessons. I forgot. Maybe that’s why Hedwig didn’t find her.” Harry leaned over Candide’s shoulder to examine the page again, saying, “Maybe the puffy sleeves make it look like Snow White.”

Greatly alarmed, Candide asked, “You don’t like the puffy sleeves?”

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With immense care, as though he had disturbed a nest of asps or perhaps a sleeping horntail, Harry levelly and calmly said, "I didn't say that. I just suggested... that's perhaps where the... look of it gets its... well, Snow White... thing." Harry decided that he should not express an opinion if he could help it. "I like them all, really."

He did not expect this to pass muster, but Candide turned a pained eye back to the magazine and flipped idly through the pages she had just gone through a moment before. "They're all very nice. Well, there are few I don't like at all, but, yeah, they are mostly quite nice."

Harry closed his eyes in a moment's relief before excusing himself, saying he needed to do his readings right then so they were finished before Lupin and Harry's cousin arrived for dinner, even though it was only morning. Snape was not in the library or the dining room, and Harry caught a caustic scent in the air, which implied he was bunkered inside the spare room, brewing. Harry hoped he did not come out until the gown shopping was put away for the day.

Harry took his books outside into the front garden to read, the better to see his friend walk by. The burst of summer growth had pushed the ivy over the bench, so Harry had to urge it behind and sweep the dead leaves away with his hand before settling in. The sun was just reaching the ragged top edge of the wall beside him, so soon he would be out of the shade and the morning chill clinging to the surrounding stone would pass. Harry blew on his fingers and found the place where he had left off on the manual of evidence collection.

Two chapters in, reading grew tedious and Harry's mind drifted to the back garden of the house where Sirius' bike had sat idle for months. Once he had this vision in his head, he could not leave it be, even after he told himself he would read one more section before even going to take a look at the motorbike.

Giving in, Harry closed the books, and tossed them onto a table in the library on his way through to the back garden. Repeated trimming spells were required to remove the tangled dead and green ivy, but after that, the cover pulled away easily. The bike underneath gleamed as brightly as it did when Hagrid had delivered it; more so, because of the sunlight.

Harry, more easily than the last time he had maneuvered it, rolled it away from the wall into the small open space. The bike felt closer to the right size as he mounted it, his arms less splayed ungainly wide while holding the handlebars. Harry kicked the bike to life and it roared appreciatively.

Harry heard a shout and looked around and up to find Snape at the window of the spare room. Harry spun the Roar knob down till it fell silent.

"A bit of warning next time before you start up that infernal thing," Snape de-

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manded.

Harry waved. "Forgot how loud it was," he admitted.

"That is not possible to forget," Snape said. "And if you are going far, do be careful."

"How's the brewing going?" Harry asked to end the conversation.

And indeed, Snape hmfed and pulled his head back inside. Grinning, Harry flew the bike as low as possible over the back wall and rode it along the rutted field path bordering the gardens and out to the road. In the daylight, he decided to just keep it on the ground. He adjusted the Roar knob up again to make a reasonable noise and cruised off to the right to search the streets in that direction for Elizabeth's piano teacher.

Harry cruised slowly along rows of well-kept old houses. He was about to turn back onto the main road, when he heard a shout. With effort, he turned the bike around on the narrow tarmac and stopped before a grey house dominated by a large bay window. Elizabeth stood on the porch chatting with an attractive brown-haired woman in smart clothes. She waved, said goodbye to her teacher and came jogging, despite her heels, over to greet Harry.

"I wasn't sure where your teacher's house was," Harry admitted.

Elizabeth was looking over the bike, but she jerked her head to look at him as she said, "You were looking for me?"

"Yeah, let's get an ice cream. Hop on."

She laughed. "You have a helmet for me? You aren't even wearing one."

"Oh," Harry said. "There's a pair in the pannier; hang on." Harry put on the brake, flipped down the stand and swung off, finding his legs already complaining about being stretched by the wide seat. From the closer pannier, he produced a pair of sparkly white helmets. Harry suspected they were magical, given their leather interiors and handmade look. He gave the smaller one to her.

"Do you even have a license?" she asked as she used her colored fingernails and teeth to tighten the stiff strap. "Or a number plate?"

"No," Harry said. "I mostly fly on it anyhow, and the Muggles don't have a license for that."

She got on behind Harry and scooted close, still adjusting her chin strap. "Well, they do, but not for motorbikes, that's for certain."

When she put her arms around him, Harry released the brake and gently accelerated to the main road and waited for an unusual string of traffic to clear.

"Do you know where you're going?" she asked as he turned left.

"No," Harry shouted because he did not want to turn his head far. "I only know my way around from in the air."

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They rode for a while on the main road as it wound through field and forest. Sunlight played on the rutted roadway, filtering through the trees. Two villages over, they stopped before a small shop with a cracked giant plastic ice cream cone out front.

As usual, the great bike attracted everyone's attention. Harry, not wanting to embarrassingly deflect questions he could not answer, urged Elizabeth quickly to a bright pink table and went to the window to order.

Seated at the table, Harry took two bites of his treat and said, "So, how are you?"

Her mood shifted instantly, face darkening.

Using clues from Candide, Harry said, "Everything all right at home?"

She swallowed the large bite she had in her mouth and licked her lips before replying. "My dad has always been... has always sort of disliked magic. Well, maybe he didn't always dislike it, but when I was young he started dissuading my mum from using it. Except at Christmas and sometimes at the lake camp when the place really needed a good cleaning, or we wanted a fire, but otherwise, I always had the impression he didn't like it." She faded out, expression pinned on the cars driving by. "He's become a lot stricter about it. He gets angry immediately when the topic comes up, and ever since what happened at your place, my mum doesn't argue with him any longer. Takes his side."

She frowned and spooned up the liquid pooling around the mound in her bowl. "I've been difficult too; doing more magic, even when I'm not good at it, just to irk him more."

"I understand," Harry said. "The aunt and uncle I lived with for seventeen years despised magic. I think because they feared it."

"I don't think my dad fears it. I just think he hates losing..." She faded out.

"Losing what?"

Harry at first thought she would not answer. "Losing control. He likes to be in charge. Really likes to be in charge. Since I've been away at school, I can't take it anymore. When I was his little girl, I didn't mind so much, for some reason."

Harry thought he understood that too. Snape could be terribly strict as well, but Harry took it to mean that he cared, and Harry surprisingly found he preferred to please him as not, although he had been slipping on that. He pondered that during the subsequent silence. Snape's admission that he had not even attempted to enforce any rules about his dating or the Dark Plane meant that something fundamental had changed between them.

Elizabeth had faded out, and did not notice that Harry had as well. Harry returned to the present and said, "You have to put up with your dad for a while longer."

Her face fell sadder. "Yep. We had a real row the other night. I just couldn't take

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his silly rules anymore.” Her voice dropped, “He took my wand when I threatened to use it. I think he burned it.”

Falling into Auror interview mode, Harry asked factually, “What happened to instigate that?”

The tone worked; she said, “He threatened to slap me for something I said. I probably deserved it. But I pulled my wand on him.” She laughed dully. “Like I could do anything to him. Like I know any dangerous spells.”

“No one deserves to be slapped for mere words,” Harry stated, disliking immensely that she had said that. “Do you have friends you can stay with?”

“I could go visit some friends from school.”

“Why don’t you do that? Getting some space would help a lot.”

“Space is what made me realize what a domineering control freak he is. It would give me an opportunity to get a new wand. But my mum... well, she’d be unhappy if I did.”

They chatted for a while longer, until Harry’s uncompleted studies began to nag at him. He said, “I have to get home. We have friends coming for dinner and I have readings to finish.” They stood and Harry cleaned up their spots. “I can get you another wand. What kind did you have before?”

“Would you do that? I had birch and unicorn before.”

“I’ll take you to Ollivanders if you want. Or I can pick you up a wand since that combination sounds easy. Whichever you prefer.”

She glanced at her watch. “I need to get home too. Maybe you can fetch one for me.” She reached into her clutch and handed him several twenty-pound notes while sheepishly explaining: “Wands are expensive. I don’t have any Galleons...”

Harry pocketed the money, pulled out the helmets and slipped his on. “I’ll fetch you one tomorrow when Ollivanders is open.”

She laughed. “Thanks, Harry.”

He swung his leg over the bike. “No problem. Hop on.”



When visitors’ voices sounded from the dining room, Harry put down his books and eagerly went to greet them. The sconces had been extinguished and tall candles lit the table. Candide urged Lupin and Pamela to choose seats. Lupin appeared far healthier than last time he had visited; in fact he seemed to be bordering on chubby, which softened the canine edge to his visage.

They greeted Harry, who, despite not finishing his readings, decided to join them that instant.

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“Severus still locked away?” Candide asked Harry.

“I think so.”

“What’s this?” Lupin asked.

“Severus is working on something,” Harry explained. “He won’t say what it is, but he spends hours brewing upstairs.”

Lupin shook his head. “He’s always had an odd, anti-social side.” When Pamela swatted him lightly on the arm, he added, “I take that back. As long as he brews Wolfsbane for me, he can be as odd as he likes.”

Butterbeers appeared and they fell into warm conversation.

Pamela immediately brought up the one topic Harry hoped they would avoid, at least until later. “How is the wedding coming?”

Candide groaned. “It’s coming along. I was hoping for help from my cousin, but her tastes and mine are completely different. And she seems to think it’s insulting to allow there to be a budget for such a thing. But I did pick out a dress.”

“Did you?” Pamela asked with relish.

“Do you want to see the advert for it?”

The two of them leapt up and departed. Harry sipped his butterbeer and enjoyed the silence.

“How are things with you, Harry?” Lupin asked. He sounded solicitous, which made Harry think he was doing fairly well himself.

“Pretty good,” Harry said. “Skeeter has been mostly ignoring me. Training is going well.”

He smiled and asked, “No dark wizards haunting you?”

Harry frowned, thinking of the strange thing in his cloak. “Something odd happened the other day, but it might have just been a prank that went poorly. I’m going to investigate tomorrow with the twins. See if they know anything.”

Despite Harry’s assurances, Lupin’s heavy brow lowered and remained there. “Don’t make any assumptions Harry. Don’t hesitate to let us know if you need the Order revitalized again.”

Harry laughed lightly. “I don’t need the Order,” he said dismissively, feeling Lupin still thought him a child.

“I don’t like to see that overconfidence, Harry.”

“You sound like Mad-Eye,” Harry criticized between sips of butterbeer. “He always says that right before he bowls me over with a spell I don’t know.”

“You talk like he’s still alive,” Lupin said quietly.

Harry headed for safety. “No one ever found his body,” he pointed out. “Maybe I’ll go prod Severus. Do you mind if I leave you alone?”

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A fresh butterbeer sparkled in to replace Lupin's empty one. "Not at all. The service here is wonderful."

Harry dashed upstairs and in passing glanced into Snape's bedroom where piles of thick, square magazines had been hastily spread out.

"Your mum said what?" Pamela was saying. Candide glanced up at Harry in apparent consternation at being overheard and he accidentally saw in her eyes a vision of her mum arguing that she should call off the wedding.

"I was just seeing if I can drag Severus from his brewing," Harry said.

"Good idea," Candide said, sounding as pat as he did.

Harry walked around and slipped inside the storage room without knocking. The setup inside was unlike any he had ever seen. Intricate glass tubes connected glass bottles and cauldrons in a three-dimensional rack that filled the center of the room. Portable fires hovered under the suspended bottles propelling swirling liquids through the tubes. Crystal bowls full of colorful grains were lined up on the old door, again propped up as a worktable.

"What are you making?" Harry asked.

Snape sat bent over a stone board, using an obsidian knife to split a pile of course grains. He did not reply.

Harry said, "I take it you're going to be a little while longer?"

Snape nodded.

Harry took a deep breath. "I don't mean to be difficult, but it is probably not the best time to dive into an obsessive brewing session, especially so secretly."

Snape continued to split miniscule grains and push them aside into an indentation in the granite board. His hair hid his face except for his intent brow. Moldy books, heavily bookmarked, sat open nearby in a tall stack, their pages so yellowed they had gone all the way to rust colored.

Harry said, "I didn't realize Candide's mother was trying to stop the wedding."

This brought the glassy black blade to a halt. Snape stretched his neck back and said, "Did Candide tell you that?"

"Not directly." At Snape's sharp look, Harry added, "I didn't mean to pry. It was an accident. Emotion makes it much easier to read people, doesn't it?"

"Very much so. Emotion is a weakness for nearly everyone," Snape said, returning to his chopping. "I will be ten minutes more."

"Invite her parents over," Harry said. "I can work on them a bit."

Harry expected him to decline, but from out the veil of hair came: "Suggest it to Candide."

Harry joined the women as they returned downstairs. Candide was saying, "Headmistress has insisted that Severus delay starting at Hogwarts for a week. Most kind

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of her.”

Pamela resumed her seat and took up Lupin’s hand. “Remus doesn’t mind at all covering for a while.”

Lupin said, “Minerva has gone far out of her way to defend my being at Hogwarts. It’s the least I can do.”

Harry waited until the conversation about the wedding wore down before he suggested to Candide, “Why don’t you have your parents over for dinner here.”

“If they’ll come,” Lupin joked a little tipsily, making Harry wonder if butterbeer had the same effect on a werewolf that it did on an elf.

Candide said, “I expect they’ll come. I’ll see if Severus minds.”

Snape stepped in just then and brusquely asked, “Minds what?”

Candide reached out a hand in his direction and said, “Minds if I invite my parents over for another pre-wedding getting-to-know-each-other?”

Snape sat stiffly and said, “I believe I could survive that.” He glanced at Harry and let the topic drop.

Harry stared into his glass and asked, “What about your mum?”

“She’ll get an invitation,” Snape dryly pointed out.

Lupin broke into laughter. Snape explained, “We are NOT going through this taxing and fraught process with yet another meddling party.”

Candide had a faint smile as she gamely assured those present: “She’s on the invite list.”

Lupin continued to chuckle. Snape said, “It was her choice to take herself away from the world. We simply are catering to that.”



During lunchtime at the Ministry, Harry rushed about trying to get his errands all finished. At Gringotts, the queue for the exchange – headed by a gaggle of foreign witches, straw-like hair standing in all directions as they hunched over a sack from which they counted out individual triangular copper coins – was too long to make it through in several lunch hours, let alone one, so Harry instead asked the floor Goblin to fetch Ron to take him to his vault.

Ron gamely did so, chatting all the while about the Cannons as the mine car rolled and surged over the sparsely braced, randomly coursing, splitting, and recombining rails. Ron controlled their transport with flicks of his foot on the levers as though it required almost no attention despite the breakneck pace.

With his pocket weighted down with enough gold for yet another wand, Harry stepped back out into the bustling Diagon Alley. Ron followed, also blinking rapidly

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to ward off the brightness of daylight. Harry weaved through the shoppers and paused outside the window of Weasley Wizard Wheezes. Beyond the rain-streaked glass, stacks of brightly colored boxes, some with thick brass straps holding them closed, sat beneath mobiles replicating various Quidditch teams. The tiny figures at the farthest orbit of each set swerved and strained at their wires in an attempt to get at the opposing-colored players.

“I need to ask your brothers something,” Harry said.

A set of bells chimed out the Lyke Wake Dirge when Harry pushed the door open. Ron elbowed him, saying, “You have a pocket full of gold. You just can’t resist.”

Harry did not bother to correct him on this mistaken point. In the back of the cluttered shop Harry found one of the twins stocking things behind the counter. When Harry leaned over the stained and burned surface and gestured, George crawled closer, forcing Harry to crouch too in order to speak with him in confidence. George peered at Harry around Verity’s pink robes. She gave George a playful kick as she gave change to a customer.

Before Harry could formulate his question, the George whispered, “How’s Ron doing?”

“Oh, er, seems fine.”

“Good. Mum’s been giving us hell, I’ll tell you. You’d think we’d never done anything to him before or something.” He sighed. “What’dya need?”

“I wanted to know if you ever sold or... made anything like a giant black inflatable spiked ball.”

George placed the brown-paper wrapped boxes onto the counter and stood. Harry gratefully followed suit. “You’re looking for one?”

Harry waited for the young customer, who was giving him a silly grin, to slowly wander off before continuing with, “No, I saw one and guessed it was your handiwork.”

George pondered that, finally asking, “We in trouble?” He sounded surprisingly serious for a Weasley twin.

“No, I’m trying to track something down is all. This is just me asking.” Harry was glad he could be honest about that; it reinforced his asking around on his own.

George relaxed. “We had something...” He moved to the dimmest corner of the shop, shaded by tall full racks from the light of the windows, and began searching through the lowest shelves. “Hey, Verity?” he shouted, then thought better and went over to her to whisper to her privately.

He returned and continued to pull the lowest front items off and stack them on the floor, revealing different, older boxes packed behind, thoroughly haphazard. He pulled out a box and handed it up to Harry and returned to searching. “That’s the Giant Birds of Prey Pack. We had a Giant Ocean-Bottom Pack too, but I don’t see

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it now.” Harry stared at the crudely painted pictures of raptors, vultures, and even a pterodactyl on the box lid. George went on, “They were right popular for theme parties for a while there. Then like all great ideas, they became passé like that.” He snapped his fingers.

Harry turned the box over. A warning had been inked in red along the margin as an afterthought: Stand far back from minibirds before using expansion spell. And on the other margin: For best results expand only in very very large room with high ceiling. The “verys” were triple underlined.

“There was a sea urchin in the Ocean Pack?” When George nodded, Harry asked, “How big did it get?”

George held his arms out wide. “Originally, it would roll around the party following the fish as they ”swam“ but too many people complained of torn robes and rugs and drapery, so we left them stupid and static instead.” He started putting the newer boxes back in front of the older faded ones. “Which is no fun, really. I spent a lot of time getting the rolling just right. It was tough, it actually had to walk on its spikes. Which sounds simple, but really isn’t.” He shook his head sadly. “We now have to only come up with things that seem dangerous, but really aren’t. That’s tough.” He craned his neck like a periscope to check that Ron was nowhere near. “Even then people do dumb stuff with things we think are completely safe.”

Harry tried to hand the box back, but he was waved off. “Give it to Ginny if you don’t want it. She begged me for a set, but at the time, we couldn’t make them fast enough.”

Harry tucked the box under his arm. As George squeezed by Harry in the narrow aisle, he said, “Oh, and realize that they are only aloft for about an hour, in case you decide to make your house-elf ride one. Had trouble with that once.” He scooped the boxes back off the counter and ducked out of sight.

Harry searched the narrow aisles and found Ron selecting colorful sweets from a wall-full of bins. He held a struggling licorice tarantula between his fingers and he gazed at it suspiciously. “Ah,” Ron said accusingly, gesturing with the spider at the box under Harry’s arm. “Knew you couldn’t resist.” He dropped the spider back in the bin and wiped his fingers on his trousers. Peering into the paper sack he held, he said, “Guess that will make lunch.”

Harry panicked, having forgotten the time. He pulled out his watch and found it was only three minutes until his training resumed. “I’ve got to run. See you later,” he said, patting his friend on the arm to be certain he heard before he Disappeared.

Running, Harry just had time to stash the box of Giant Birds and his spare gold in his locker, seal it with the best spell he knew, and skid into the training room, out of breath. Rodgers gave him a depreciating look, but withheld comment.

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Harry's stomach growled through the afternoon and by the time they were finished, he was keenly focused on getting home for a snack. But he needed to go back to Diagon Alley for a wand. He left the Giant Birds Pack balanced awkwardly beside his spare jacket and pulled out the sack of gold.

Tonks strode into the changing room as Harry's fellows departed. As though speaking for his hollow stomach, she said, "I have half an hour before my shift if you want to find an early bite."

"Sounds great," Harry said, weighing the sack in his hand before slipping it into his pocket. "I need to go Diagon Alley anyway. I told Elizabeth I'd buy her a new wand."

By unstated agreement, they Apparated into the Leaky Cauldron. On the way through the wall in back, Tonks asked, "Why doesn't Elizabeth get her own wand?"

"It's a long story," Harry said, thinking stressfully of his friend stuck at home with an overbearing Muggle father. "Her father burned her old one. He's getting difficult about magic." The alley was sparser with shoppers than lunchtime so Harry's sigh was quite audible. Elizabeth's situation disproportionately irritated him, so he was not paying attention to what he said. "It'd be good if she moved out, from what I could get out of her. I took her for a ride on my bike; other than her lessons, I wonder if she's been allowed out."

"You what?" Tonks asked. Harry heard the warning tone this time and realized belatedly that he should have heard it in her previous question too. They were stopped before Ollivanders, but Harry did not reach for the door handle.

His hesitation did not help. Tonks said, "You've never taken me for a ride on Sirius' old motorbike."

It was odd. Tonks, when angry, normally put her hands on her hips and cocked her head. She did not do that now; her arms hung slack, head craning forward. Harry sensed a crumbling cliff edge before him and had no idea how to avoid skidding over it. "We can go anytime you like," he stated. He held off on adding anything about her never having the time, certain it would compound the looming confrontation.

Now, she more familiarly propped her hands on her hips, and let her body kink into a zig-zag topped in spikes of pink. "So, what else did you do?"

Harry could not help it. He knew better, but did not have time to analyze his own quick anger. "Tonks, this is stupid," he said of her getting upset.

"Oh, right... silly me."

"It is silly. You sound like it matters if I take a friend out for ice creams."

Tonks colored slightly. Harry was not sure, but her hair appeared to edge more to the red too. "When she's... a cute... thing in distress, of course it matters."

Harry felt dropped in the middle of a maze and had to stop and try to take stock

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of his position. Passing shoppers slowed at Tonks' tone and Harry tried not to care what they heard, nor fear that Skeeter may appear any second, quill already blazing.

"Look," Harry said, thinking he'd feel more certain about how to handle a vampire than a jealous girlfriend, "I need to get a wand real quick and then we can get some dinner."

"I don't think I really have time for both of those," she snipped and Disapparated.

Harry swore, garnering disapproving looks from a pair of approaching witches burdened with packages. He took a deep breath and stubbornly continued his errand rather than chase Tonks immediately.

Inside the store, the quiet clashed with his disturbed emotions and klaxon-loud thoughts. Ollivander wandered to the front, hands clasped before him as though to exude calm.

Harry said, "Good day again. I need a birch wand with a unicorn hair core... for a friend."

Ollivander turned away with a small bow, pausing to ask, "Do you know what length, perchance?"

Thinking it should be easy to hide, Harry said, "Shortest you have, please."

Ollivander waved his sliding ladder over and climbed it to fetch a small grey box which he returned to Harry. Inside it was an eight-inch wand, looking petite and innocuous. Harry began counting out the same thirty Galleons his own wand had cost. Ollivander waved off the last ten.

"Tell your friend if the wand does not fit, it can be exchanged."

Harry's thoughts were already flying ahead. He reined them back in and said, "Thanks, I will."

Ollivander froze him in place by asking, "And you are how, Mr. Potter?" He sounded more than conversational. He sounded as though he felt it a duty to keep track of Harry.

Harry pulled his attention completely back to the dusty old shop where he stood. "In a hurry I'm afraid, otherwise, quite well."

This even-headed, though rushed, answer, drew a reassured smile from Ollivander, who nodded him out.

Pocketing the small, bright blond wand, Harry stepped out of the shop and Disapparated for the Ministry before he could be overrun by an teetering cart stacked with noisy animal cages.

At the Ministry, Harry slipped into the office and not finding Tonks, proceeded to check the rest of the Department. He located her in the break room, nibbling on a stale Danish and looking dangerously peeved. Her lips pursed when her gaze came up to Harry's.

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Harry realized that he should have prepared what to say because he found he only wanted to repeat himself. "I don't know what's wrong," Harry said.

This apparently deserved a dubious raised pink eyebrow. Harry worked very hard to not get angry again. Rogan's voice interrupted, calling down the corridor: "Call's come in!"

Tonks dropped the pastry heel on the table and slipped by Harry without touching him, which wasn't easy given that he was blocking the doorway. Harry followed her down to the offices where she picked her teeth with a long pinky nail while reading a slip. "Yeah, I'll take it. Call Kingsley in too." She Disapparated.

Harry picked up the slip because it was only Rogan manning the office and Harry expected he would not criticize him for doing so. Harry knew where Upminster was and knew the most likely Apparition area Tonks would use. He carefully set the slip back on the pile. He should not go. He would be in the way. It would be best to wait till later to talk. Harry knew all of these things, but he Disapparated anyhow.

Harry arrived in the shadow of a windmill. Tonks was there but it took Harry a moment to recognize her in the disguise of a pensioner wearing a long grey cardigan. She clearly expected Harry to be someone else.

"What are you doing here?" she whispered.

Harry ducked slightly like she was and glanced around for danger. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Not now," she hissed, clearly disturbed.

Harry plowed on because he had just then put his finger on the problem, "I don't understand why you don't trust me."

Tonks had her wand out already; she angled it at Harry. "I'm seconds from hitting you with a Mummy Curse and sending you back to the Ministry. Get out of here."

She truly sounded like she meant it. A low bang! sounded nearby. Tonks ducked under a strut to glance around the side of the windmill. "Kingsley's coming," she whispered, but Harry was gone. Tonks glance around. She'd only heard one Apparition noise and wondered if Harry had pulled an invisibility cloak over his head. Shacklebolt's approach, in the khaki guise of a parks worker, aborted Tonks' wondering about Harry's quiet exit.

Harry sighed into the grey gloom of the Dark Plane. Something scuffled over the ground in the distance and then silence permeated the dank, earthy air. Harry felt intermittently empty and annoyed. He wished to not care at all because there was no chance for an argument to hash things out, so he might as well ignore it. But the will to do so was not sufficient to make it happen.

Delaying returning to the world of sunshine, Harry strolled in a random direction. He walked hunched, hands in pockets, thoughts far away. He wondered what time

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Tonks would return from the assignment, then told himself not to care. Did she really trust him so little to display such jealousy? It was true that she had also behaved badly when she learned about him dating Belinda. Perhaps he should have seen this coming.

Harry's thoughts circled on in this vein as he trod on the fine grey dust. He perhaps should have been more attentive to where he was going, but he felt more secure here than most anywhere else. So, he was quite startled when a loop of rusted wire caught his ankle and he tripped. Clumsily, he tried to tug his hands free of his robe pockets to stop himself from crashing down into the mass of abrasive metal looming before him. He could not catch himself in time and he would painfully, if not fatally, be entangled. Instinctively, he fell through the ground short of striking it.

In that instant, Harry's body was flattened and pressed as though to squeeze it through the crack between the great unyielding doors of Hogwarts castle. A blast of absolute zero grazed him at the narrowest point of his passage, but he was helpless to reverse course. The excruciating crushing and drawing out as though he were mere clay made him certain this was the end. But the deadly pressure released just as the cold began to numb him and he was ejected out of the ground on the other side, only dimly aware of tumbling into tall, saw-edged grass before he lost consciousness.

Harry rose to consciousness slowly, chilled to the core, but with the sunlight blessedly warming his flesh because of his dark robe. A cord in his neck screamed when he moved his face away from the sun. Ants were crawling up his nose and thick grass stems stabbed him behind the ear.

When he could, Harry rose up and stood on cold-creaky limbs and looked about. Half fallen trees lined a dip where a creek ran. He stumbled over hidden ruts in the grass, too weak to catch himself without severe straining that only increased his misery. Half decayed, bleached, and sagging wood houses came into view through the ragged forest, matching the half-dead and bleached trees surrounding them. A whiff of curse attracted his gaze to one house in particular. It was the only house with smoke coming out of the chimney. A spell masked the smoke, making it visible only if one looked beyond it at just the right angle.

Harry stretched his neck side to side, pulled his shoulders back and took out his wand. He felt vaguely confident he could reverse his accidental arrival but did not want to face the Dark Plane again until he was strong and clearheaded. While he recuperated and finished warming his bones, he moved to satisfy his curiosity about where he had ended up.

The occupied house was spelled in layered and subtle ways. Harry stepped in an ungainly manner over and around the cursed zones on the ground – laid out in an invisible maze – until he finally reached the door. Like at the house where the

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Vampire had taken over, Harry simply knocked, wand at his side, obscured by his robe sleeve. The man who jerked open the door startled Harry severely, but he hid it quickly. Snape gazed with equal alarm back at Harry. Harry blinked and felt a chill permeating him again, but this time from the ice in Snape's eyes. Snape's hair was astoundingly disheveled and his eyes showed wrinkles at the corners that Harry had not noticed before.

Snape gazed intensely at Harry and harshly whispered, "Potter..." But his eyes then took in Harry's own with close scrutiny, then narrowed in further confusion as though they were unexpected.

Harry, for lack of anything else to say, said, "Hello, Severus," and stood on tip-toe to peer inquisitively beyond at the small room. It was full of books, which gave Harry some reassurance.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Snape demanded in a low voice.

"Good question," Harry answered amiably despite his racing brain. "I'm not sure." Snape had stepped back as though to verify something in the room. Harry used the opening to stride inside. He felt and heard, rather than saw, Snape's jerk of surprise as he passed. The small room was clearly well lived in but in need of a good cleaning. Maybe the cold had addled his brains, but they refused to piece things together.

Harry finished his short circuit and looked about himself. It felt Snape-like in every way except wholly unfamiliar. Where was he? Harry wondered. What was Snape doing here, and what had transpired to change him so?

"What happened to your eyes?" Snape asked warily, voice demanding an answer.

Harry laughed lightly in a kind of weird relief that this could not be the man he knew. Gamely, he answered honestly, "Playing with too-powerful magicks. Or... I am told that's what caused it." He again considered Snape, who was holding his wand just shy of ready. Harry continued to expect that at any moment this was going to make some sense.

Snape said slowly, "Must have been... rather powerful. Your Occlumency certainly has improved." He sounded disappointed and annoyed.

Harry grinned to himself, finding light amusement in that compliment. "Can't get by without it. You don't need your wand," he said, holding his hands up, empty, wand caught on his sleeve hem, easy to retrieve.

Snape lowered his wand only an inch. "You will forgive me given that the last three times we have met, you have tried to kill me."

"Oh," Harry said, glomming fully onto the notion that if there were an unfamiliar Snape that there was an unfamiliar Harry Potter as well. He scratched behind his ear and pondered that, but felt only additional unease. He gave the room closer scrutiny

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in hopes of a clue.

“You should not be here,” Snape hissed.

Harry was examining a trinket on a crude shelf without touching it, it was a locket that looked vaguely familiar. “That I know, believe me. I should have just left, but I was curious.” He moved on to study a shelf packed so tight with books that they were stuffed in on top and curled to fit in every available gap. Harry asked, “So satisfy my curiosity: why are you here rather than Shrewsthorpe?”

There was a palpably uncomfortable gap before Snape retorted, “What?”

Harry shrugged. “I mean, this isn’t really much of a holiday cottage. What’s wrong with your house?”

Snape sounded oddly disturbed as he cautiously answered, “It is much easier to layer barriers here than in the middle of an occupied village. How did you get through them by the way?”

Harry ignored the question. A creaking bookshelf swinging inward drew his attention that way and Harry flicked his wand into his hand as Peter Pettigrew came into view, ducking low to see into the ground floor from a hidden staircase. Poisonous anger filled Harry. “Get out of my sight,” Harry snarled, aiming his wand and gripping it as though to crush the wood of it. “Go!” he insisted when Pettigrew merely froze in shock. “Or I’ll finish the job I stupidly stopped Sirius from doing and it will be long and excruciating as befitting a bloody traitor like you!” Harry’s anger surprised himself and Pettigrew, apparently sensing his unbalancing of Harry, retreated back up the stairs with a squeak of fear.

The hidden door swung closed with a thud. Harry lowered his wand and paced, thinking fiercely. Where is this where Pettigrew is still alive? Reluctantly, he closed his eyes on the current sight of the ghostly etched glass of the potion bottles crammed tight on the shelf before him and let himself drift. The dark stain of evil that reached its fingers under his lowered guard made him jerk. Voldemort. Great effing Merlin, Harry thought. It’s him. Not a pale shadow of him, but full force, followers free, will-not-die him. Harry opened his eyes and turned to his unexpected host, who was giving him a penetrating stare in return. “Well,” Harry breathed, sounding stunned.

“Problem?” Snape sneered.

“Pretend I know nothing and catch me up with what’s been happening.”

Snape managed to appear even more annoyed, which was no small trick. “Were you Obliviated, Potter? Or knocked silly?”

“In a sense,” Harry said, recovering his earlier amiable manner mostly because it alarmed this Snape so thoroughly and he was willing to grasp for any shield under the circumstances.

“You truly wish me to fill you in?” Snape asked, disgust lining his words.

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“Yeah, what is happening with Voldemort?” Harry asked and heard Snape flinch since it rustled his robes.

“DO NOT use his name in my presence. If you are foolish enough to use it around your little friends, that is your own stupidity. But. Not. Here.” He looked as though he wanted to raise his wand but instead it vibrated at his side.

Harry shrugged and asked calmly, “All right, what is happening with the Dark Lord?”

“Suffice to say he is gaining in power, nearly unchecked at this point. It is unclear how he will be brought down given how much he has survived to date.”

Harry considered that. “Haven’t all the Horcruxes been found?” he asked, thinking that might explain things. Perhaps they were more powerful here.

Snape’s head drifted downwards as though he might collapse before he turned and paced the very short distance to the grimy window. “That explains enormous amounts,” he whispered. “Bloody hell.”

Harry considered that his Snape hadn’t known that either. “Why aren’t you at Hogwarts?” he asked.

Snape turned such a disbelieving glare on him before raising his wand; although he didn’t appear to have a spell prepared. “What the devil are you on about, Potter? You are at least aware Dumbledore is dead, correct?” he mocked. “You were certainly there when he died.”

“Yeah,” Harry retorted, losing his calm. “He went when he wanted to go. What’s that got to do with it?”

Snape nearly dropped his wand his hand fell so fast. “You’ve finally figured that out?” he snidely asked.

Harry was thinking that perhaps he did not have it figured out at all. He held in a response. Instead he asked another question, “Why is Wormtail here with you?” This really bothered him, more than mysterious differences about Dumbledore and almost more than Voldemort himself.

“I was assigned to look after him, an assignment that has lasted far too long. Lasts any longer and I’ll kill him myself.”

Harry laughed, which brought Snape’s wand up to his point at his throat. “Who are you?” he demanded, voice low, head tilted predatorily.

Calmly, lifting his chin to keep the wand from hurting the soft flesh of his throat when he talked, Harry replied, “Harry Potter isn’t the answer you’re looking for, I assume.”

Harry’s scar throbbed and then seared. He closed his eyes to avoid giving this away and found seven more shadows hovering very, very close. “Were you expecting company?” Harry asked.

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“Not you, certainly,” Snape replied smoothly, greasily.

“No, I mean other Death Eaters. Seven of them, besides the two of you, just arrived in the village.”

Snape’s alarm was clear, even as it bounced between Harry’s strange knowledge and the prospect that he was correct. Snape paced the floor, tossing a barrier status spell in each direction. A knock sounded on the door. Harry backed into the corner beside the door, wand at ready.

“Who is it?” Snape asked.

“Bella, Severus dear.”

Harry gagged at the honey-covered tone. The door was opened with the queer fake gallantry Snape employed when he truly disliked the visitor. “And to what do I owe this visit?” he asked with impressive casualness as he moved to the far side of the room. “Tea?”

“No, I think not.” She held her wand up, aimed at him.

Snape turned from the tea set and considered her. “And this is for?” he asked with an innocent lilt.

“Being a traitor, Severus,” she said with disturbed pleasure. “Our Lord has gifted me with the honor of making you pay dearly.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The Dark Lord would never-” But his words were cut off as he grabbed his arm as though his mark burned. He recovered his composure with effort, clearly suffering. He did not release his arm but clung to it as though it were deadwood and he a drowning man.

Bellatrix spoke before him. “I just finished with Mungdungus, Severus. He was a weak soul, so not equal to my skills.” She purred, “You are.”

Snape was suddenly on his knees and Harry at first believed Bellatrix had hit him with something but she said, “We altered your barriers, Severus. You aren’t going anywhere except your own personal hell.”

Harry, scar searing as he had never remembered it doing, leapt across the room just as the door, rickety as it was, dissolved in a sparkling spell and a whoosh. Harry jumped a low table and landed in a crouch at Snape’s side. Snape was just putting his foot flat to stand again. Harry took him by the wrist, looked over his shoulder into the red, fiery eyes of Voldemort – who in that instant stood fixed by surprise in the doorway – and dropped both of them through the floor. If the vampire had not dragged Harry along through the interstice, Harry would not have been prepared for how much force it took to pull another along. He may have tragically let go, assuming he would have killed his companion on the way.

Harry did not have a destination in mind so when they landed in the grey dirt of the underworld, he paused to regroup. Instantly, creatures scrambled over the rough

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ground in their direction. Harry still had Snape's wrist in hand and Snape, who looked about himself in consternation, did not seem to notice.

"Where is this?" he asked quietly, forced to shirk away from the snapping maw of a half giant ant, half weasel.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Harry said. "I just have to figure out where we are go-"

He was interrupted by the old werewolf charging at them from around a large hillock. Harry leaned toward the monster and stared him down, making him bay and grovel between snarls. Snape tried to retreat the other way, tugging on Harry's grip. Harry turned and snarled in his direction, "Don't fight me! They'll eat you alive."

Snape froze and glared at Harry before glancing around them at the myriad distorted creatures clambering over one another, salivating at him. He stopped resisting with a fatalistic drop of his shoulders. Harry thought of where he could take them and Apparated them both to another spot inside the Dark Plane before dropping them both through the ground and, after a long struggle for Harry to get his companion through, into the green-meadowed sunlight. Harry released his hold on Snape and immediately closed his eyes. He was relieved this time to find Voldemort and many, many shadows hovering in the middle distance of his mind. That meant he had not mistakenly transported this Snape back to where Harry himself belonged.

Snape was shaking his robes out. "This is an improvement. Where are we now?" he asked in a tone that conveyed an almost subservient attitude.

"The reserve about twenty miles north of Shrewsthorpe," Harry explained. He had settled on arriving in the area the witches used because it was open and he didn't want to arrive into a trap, and given the witches regular use of devices here, he expected it connected well to the Dark Plane. He looked the worn Snape up and down. His hair was indescribably filthy, and his face were sunken as though from long term stress and poor eating.

"We should get you some dinner," Harry suggested, eliciting a look of disbelief. It didn't fade right away, so Harry added, "And I can try to explain."

While Snape stared into the distance as though plotting, Harry considered that unlike a time turner, he could not damage things here; he had not moved through time, only through possibility. Somewhere in the past there had been a forking of events and this place was the alternative outcome. He hoped to Merlin that he COULD get home again.

"I know an Inn in Wolverbury. It is just a little north," Snape said. And when Harry willingly offered an arm, Snape shook his head and grasped it. They arrived between a tall old car grill and a brick wall. A rusty abandoned car faced them down, tilted on its broken suspension. They walked around it and inside where only

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one customer sat hunched at the bar. The barman gave them a narrow-eyed look, especially Snape.

“Which o’ya is payin’?” he asked doubtfully.

Harry reached into his robe pocket and held up the twenty pound notes, which spurred the man to gesture at a table. He and Snape sat to face each other beside a cracked and taped stained glass window.

“Beers?” the barman shouted. Harry shook his head, but Snape gestured that he would have one.

“What do you want to eat?” Harry asked. “I’m buying.”

Snape shook his head lightly and appeared to consider Disapparating. When the drink was plunked onto the bar, Harry picked it up and ordered a plowman’s platter. With another distasteful glance at the two of them, the barman stalked into the back without a word.

Snape sucked down the top quarter of his beer as though it were the elixir of life. Harry began, “I’m not in the right place.”

“I was beginning to suspect that,” Snape said. “You are too gently confident, for one thing, rather than obnoxiously heedless, and you have rather unexpected powers.” He turned his mug around once, leaving wet rings on the rough wood of the table. “So, where do you belong?”

“Somewhere else,” Harry stated vaguely.

“Somewhere where you do not try to kill me on sight,” Snape said with forced pleasantness.

“Correct,” Harry said. Banging from the kitchen gave him a chance to think. “I’m not sure what to do. Just go home... I’ve interfered already. But I don’t think it matters.” At Snape’s odd expression, Harry quickly amended with: “Well, it matters that I saved your life, but you may have managed to get away on your own if I hadn’t been distracting you.”

Snape rubbed his forearm and flinched as though suffering a strong stab of pain on top of unending agony. Harry felt badly for him but did not express this, knowing it would not be accepted.

It wasn’t until the platter was empty that Snape spoke again. “That place you took us to get us out of Weaver’s End... I have read about such a place. Perrodrick, an insane wizard in the six hundreds, claimed there was a magical pathway to the underworld.”

“The Dark Plane,” Harry clarified. “I’ve never taken anyone through it before. Got dragged through it myself recently. But I didn’t see any choice but to try. It was risky. I’m glad you came through all right.”

Snidely, Snape asked, “Do you go there often?”

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“It gets me under barriers, as you saw.”

Snape’s brows rose at the possibilities of that. He sipped at the last inch of his beer as though to drag it out. “Dark Lord gone where you come from?”

“Not exactly. But neutralized.”

“Are you the one who did the neutralizing?”

Harry nodded.

Snape fell thoughtful and brushed his hair back, which was hopeless given its condition. “And you are one of the Horcruxes?”

“Yes. That’s why the Dark Lord is still around. I can’t bring myself to really finish the job.”

Snape snorted lightly and tilted his beer to better examine it. “Understandable.”

He looked utterly worn down and on the verge of self-destruction. Harry pulled out and pushed the folded stack of pounds over to him. “Take it.”

Snape left it in the middle of the table. “It only delays the inevitable. Everything is doom.”

“No,” Harry snapped sharply. “You of all people cannot give up. Not after all this time.”

Snape rubbed his eyes and held his fingers pressed over his face. “I believe I am hallucinating you.”

Harry jerked one of Snape’s hands down when they remained for more than a minute. “I can tell you what needs to happen. Believe me, I know.”

Snape put his hands down flat on the table and stared at Harry. “Go ahead. Hallucination or not, this may be helpful.”

“You have to get your Harry Potter to forgive you. Volde- The Dark Lord owns him until you do.”

Snape’s face twisted downward into a kind of mad tragic humor. “Impossible.”

“No, it’s not,” Harry insisted. “You’re the key to all of this and all you’ve been doing is hiding out.”

Snape grew angry, which gave Harry hope. “That is not ‘all I have been doing’. I have been passing messages in secret to the Order through the one person who still trusted me.”

“Mundungus?”

Snape nodded grimly.

Harry pushed the money closer to him. “Take it. I’d give you more if I had it.”

Snape raised a slim, almost skeletal hand and did so. “And as for you... you are just going to pop on home?” he sarcastically asked.

Harry grew uncertain. “I’m going to give it a good try. It was an accident coming here, one I’ll have to reverse.” Harry stood, prepared to depart if only to relieve his

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own chest-clenching fear about whether he was trapped here. He said firmly, "He's capable of forgiving you. You just have to be patient."

"That is the one thing I possess zero of with him."

"Try, Severus," Harry heard himself pleading, caring even though he did not wish to. "It's the only way."

When Harry moved to leave, Snape restrained him with a claw-like grip on his arm. "Prove you are not a hallucination by telling me what magic changed your eyes so."

Harry relaxed his arm against the bones crushing it. "I turned the Dark Lord into a Muggle. I carved his magic out of him so he'd be harmless."

Snape's grip did not ease. "I don't think the Potter I know can do that."

"He'll think of something else," Harry assured him. "He's clever under pressure." Snape's grip released suddenly and he turned back to his empty mug as though expecting Harry to depart. Harry added in a low voice, "If he feels hatred when he faces the Dark Lord, he is doomed."

Snape's gaze did not come back to him, so Harry departed.

Back in the Dark Plane, Harry walked a bit, paying far more attention than before to what was around him. When he was back to the familiar area opposing his house, he stopped, certain if he inverted he would not find home. He did so anyway and indeed he arrived in a dusty grim house where the smashed windows were boarded up and the burned balcony had not been repaired but had been left to rot and dangle halfway to the ground floor. The hall floor rug underfoot had been chewed by mice down to a ragged triangle. Harry's eyes adjusted to the darkness and he let them follow up the stairs and around to where his room was, or would be if he were in another place.

Harry had to get to that other place or die trying.

Returning to the even mustier Dark Plane, Harry rehearsed what had happened last time. He had a gut feeling that it was not the interaction with the metal, but the falling sideways that had done it.

Harry dropped his shoulders and bolstered himself. The house was below him, above him. His house. It was there, waiting. The thought of never returning brought his heart rate up and keened his senses nearly to overload.

Harry chewed his lip and remembered long ago when Snape had tested him by standing him in an active pentagram device. It was dark magic because it thinned the barrier between the living world and the underworld. Harry had envisioned a hundred successive floors and ground in that spot. Snape had suggested that Harry was seeing temporally, but Harry now realized it was dimensionally. If he could see it that easily, he should be able to find his way. This thought calmed him considerably.

CHAPTER SIX

Harry stepped back and looked around himself. Dragging his foot in the grey dust, he drew a pentagram as tall as himself and then stood staring at it. The grass on a nearby hillock rustled as something crawled by. There was no howling in the distance. A deathly silence ruled after the furtive creature moved on.

Harry had to get home but he had no knowledge of pentagrams and the magic surrounding them. If he could activate this one, maybe it would be easier, he thought, but he knew nothing about how to do that. It made him recognize the gaping hole in his knowledge, one he had preferred until this moment.

“Some dark wizard hunter I am,” Harry wryly muttered. “I don’t even know how the most basic dark wizardry works.”

He stepped into the center of the dry pentagram but felt no vibration of power. He imagined what he had felt that day in the storage room and tried to impose it on this one. He closed his eyes and imagined home. He imagined the opposite of the house he had just visited: one bright with light, freshly redecorated, with voices, movement, and grave concern for him should he never return. Home.

With that place, that plane, firmly fixed in his mind, Harry toppled sideways and at the last second fell through ground.

The excruciating slip between planes was the same as last time. Harry was flattened between icy walls that crushed absolute cold into his body. He was folded and mangled until he was certain the life had been wrung from heart and his bones reduced to rubble.

Harry landed hard on a freshly polished wood floor, shaking violently with cold. Adrenalin propelled his unwilling limbs to seek heat. It was a grey rainy day here and the crackle of a fire drew him like a moth to the drawing room. Scrambling clumsily on senseless hands and knees, Harry approached the salvation of the fire, and fell, striking his head on the andiron inside the hearth.

NEXT: Chapter 7

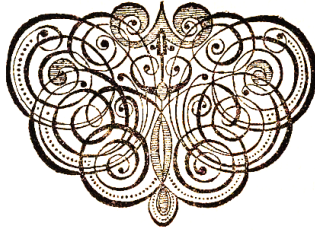
Harry raised his head and found Snape’s concerned gaze. “What happened?” Harry asked him.

“That’s what I was going to ask you,” Snape said, sounding angry with a hint of distraught.

“Oh,” Harry said, again restrained from rubbing the bump on his head and this time the Healer added an admonishing slap on the hand. Harry insisted upon sitting up and no one stopped him from doing so. The drawing room was not the location he thought he should be in, but that did not mean he knew where he expected to be.

Author’s Notes: Most likely ten days again before chapter 7. Life is crazy.

CHAPTER SEVEN



EDGE OF A DREAM

Candide came running when called and found Snape unceremoniously tugging an unconscious Harry to the center of the drawing room floor.

“Get a Healer, quickly,” he said, spritzing Harry’s head with a water charm. The noxious scent of burned hair tainted the room.

Candide closed her mouth on the question she was about to ask and ran out. When she returned, Snape was gripping each of Harry’s hands in turn.

“He is frozen nearly stiff, what the devil was he doing?” Snape aimed a heating charm at Harry’s chest, but the yellow-orange spell wavered with a buzzing sound and burst before it could reach him.

“What was that?” Candide asked breathlessly.

Snape rubbed his hair back, long fingers clenching. “I do not know. Get a blanket. A heavy one. We’ll charm that instead to warm or he will likely freeze to death.”

Harry roused to wakefulness from deep within a cocoon of heavenly warm, but scratchy, blanket. The first sight he had was of an out-of-context familiar face in pale blue robes.

“Didn’t you used to play Beater?” Harry asked the Healerwitch.

“Yup. That’s why I know that someone thought your head was a Bludger.”

Harry tried to rub his aching head but was stopped from doing so. “That why it hurts so bad?”

“He’ll be fine. His core temp is normal now,” the witch said to someone else in the room.

Harry raised his head and found Snape’s concerned gaze. “What happened?”

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Harry asked him.

“That’s what I was going to ask you,” Snape said, sounding angry with a hint of distraught.

“Oh,” Harry said, again restrained from rubbing the bump on his head and this time the Healer added an admonishing slap on the hand. Harry insisted upon sitting up and no one stopped him from doing so, but his head tried. The drawing room was not the location he thought he should be in, but that did not mean he did know where he expected to be.

The Healer departed after final instructions were given and Harry finally got to feel how bad the bump was. It felt like his skull was trying to grow a spike out of it, or a horn. “Ow.”

Snape leaned close and looked him hard in the eyes. “You do not remember what happened? You were nearly frozen when you crawled in here. What spell were you attempting?”

Harry rubbed the rest of his head as he thought about that, glad to find it unharmed otherwise. “I wasn’t doing any spells. I don’t know what happened.”

Snape rolled his eyes and huffed in disgust.

“Sorry,” Harry said, wincing as his head pounded momentarily, in rhythm with his heartbeat.



Harry was kept home from training the next day, and he wandered the house like a caged animal. He still had not talked to Tonks, but today he felt embarrassed about having followed her while she was on duty and very grateful that she had not told anyone. Well, he expected that he would have received a visit and a good talking to by Rodgers or an owl from Mr. Weasley had they been informed. Harry wandered into the drawing room, badly in need of a distraction and wishing he were at the Ministry.

Candide, before rushing to the office, had delivered Elizabeth’s wand, the now-vaguely-dreaded object that had started his argument with Tonks, so Harry had nothing to do.

“I thought you had things to take care of at Hogwarts?” Harry asked his guardian.

Snape looked up from the musty old book he had open and said, “Remus offered to do them.”

“You’re staying home to babysit me,” Harry accused grumpily.

“If you wish to drop the façade, then yes,” Snape stated.

EDGE OF A DREAM

Harry rolled his eyes and tapped his toe against the doorframe in frustration. “Want to practice some spells with me?”

“No.”

“I’m not hurt really. Why not?”

“My ego cannot take the hit at this time,” Snape stated, returning to his reading.

“Hmf,” Harry muttered, inclined to belief because of the unlikelihood that Snape would offer that as a diversionary excuse. Harry dropped into one of the other chairs in the room and propped his chin on his palms. His bored mind flittered from one thing to another restlessly, but it kept coming back around to an incongruous vision of Snape answering the door to let Bellatrix Lestrange in. No meaning could be attached to this memory.

“I had the strangest dream last night,” Harry said, excusing the vision the only way he could. Snape was not one to prompt and he did not do so now. Harry went on, “I was trying to protect you from Bellatrix... and Voldemort too.” Harry rubbed his eyes and tightened his shoulders at the memory of Voldemort’s poisonous and unyielding power snaking into his inner vision. He wished his dreams would not chose to torment him so; he had had more than enough of the evil wizard and dearly wished to be left alone by memories or imaginings of him.

“I assume they are both still incarcerated,” Snape said levelly as though to reassure Harry.

“It wasn’t Lockhart. It was the real thing.”

Snape sat straight and steepled his hands over the book. “You think this dream means something more than that you still have stressful events involving him that you need to recover from.”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “I certainly don’t feel Voldemort now. I could in the dream.”

“Was there anything in your dream not reminiscent of recent events?”

Harry sat back and said, “You were in this strange house and... you didn’t know who I was. Well, that’s not quite true. You kept expecting me to try and attack you. And you said something about Dumbledore and how long it took me to understand that he had died when he wanted to.” Harry shook his head and let those thoughts repeat themselves. “I’ve accepted that,” he added, slightly defensive.

Snape paused before suggesting, “Maybe you have not truly.”

Harry sighed. “I still miss him. Maybe I haven’t completely accepted it.”

Snape moved as though to return to his reading. “Dreams are just the subconscious working things out when the conscious is out of the way and cannot prevent it from doing so.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Harry smiled lightly. "So what does it mean that I found you living in a hovel in a half-abandoned town. Interpret that for me," he challenged, teasing. "You called it 'Weaver's End'."

Snape froze. "What?"

"What does it mean—"

"I heard you the first time," he snapped.

Harry shut up while Snape stood and paced once, disturbing the rug as he passed the corner of it. Impatient, Harry finally asked, "There is such a place?"

"Yes. I have an old hideout there."

Harry's stomach clenched faintly. "You do?"

Snape considered Harry. "I have not been there in rather a long time." After thinking longer, he gestured for Harry to stand, Accioed their cloaks, and said, "Come, let's pay a visit and see if it is the place you dreamed. We can then add clairvoyant to your already long list of skills."

Harry hooked on his cloak but held back on raising his arm to be Apparated. "I don't want to be clairvoyant."

"Wise young man. Take out your wand, just in case. And give me your arm."

Before Harry could protest further, they arrived at the edge of a ramshackle village. An old mill works leaned above the trees, ready to fall into a heap of bleached wood and rotting mortar. Snape led the way, tossing detection spells to each side every now and then.

Harry swished to a stop in the long grass when the familiar little house came into view.

Snape turned when he realized Harry no longer followed. "This is the place?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "It was in slightly better shape," he observed of the tenuously leaning walls and nearly hammock-like, sagging roof. "Not tough for that to be true."

Snape circled the house once before pushing open the door. Harry, gut heavy, followed. The bookshelves were empty and the furniture had been consumed by rodents, but it was the same.

Harry pointed and said, "The bookshelf there is a secret passage up," making Snape spin on his heel to stare at him again.

Snape strode that way and had to forcibly pry the hidden doorway open. Harry said, "Peter Pettigrew came down that way."

"Pettigrew?" Snape confirmed. "Hm, I was sometimes put in charge of him since he feared me enough to behave for a few hours at a time."

EDGE OF A DREAM

Harry's teeth tightened together as thought about his dad's old 'friend'. He stepped around the small house, finding no evidence of a major fight. "Maybe it wasn't a dream," Harry said, wanting to understand. "Voldemort vaporized the door, but it's intact. One of the few things that is."

"I am at a loss to explain," Snape said. "I am certain I have never mentioned this place to you or anyone in the Order. Anything else from the dream that you remember?"

Harry shook his head, but then said, "I think I took you to a pub for something to eat. You were in really poor shape." After looking Snape over, Harry said, "In contrast, you are getting a tad plump, there, Severus; I now notice."

Snape feigned insult. Harry shook his head again and winced when he forgot about the bump before rubbing it. "So, if I am clairvoyant then I would be seeing the future, but that doesn't make any sense. You would know me better than you did in the dream." Harry steered his thoughts away from an incident just recently when he threatened to attack Snape over the revelation about the prophecy that killed his parents. He could not bear to imagine the level of betrayal necessary for him to reach that state permanently.

"I don't know what to say, Harry. Perhaps you unknowingly captured memories of this place from me using Legilimency."

Harry grabbed hold of that, feeling great relief at a rational explanation. His voice came out slightly desperate. "That could be it. I hope that's it."

Snape approached and said, "You seem to be in need of a chocolate ice cream."

Harry was not finished, though and said, "I don't want to be clairvoyant. I don't want any more prophecies. I certainly don't want to be making them, let alone living them."

"Like I said," Snape said, taking Harry's upper arm with authority. "Chocolate ice cream is definitely in order."

Minutes later they were sitting in a small shop with Harry facing an opposing bowl containing three oversized and gloopy scoops, armed only with a spoon. His eating slowed periodically as his thoughts wandered.

"You are dwelling. Stop it," Snape admonished.

Harry laughed lightly. "I was thinking that the dream was my subconscious reminding me how far we've come."

"Hm," was Snape's only reply.

"I certainly wouldn't want that version of you around the house, jumpy, wand out all the time." Harry ended up grinning.

"Finish your ice cream."

CHAPTER SEVEN



The next day, Harry was relieved to return to training, until the third time he had to explain what had happened to necessitate a day off. Lamely, Harry replied, this time to Rogan, "I'm not certain. I hit my head and I don't remember exactly."

Even Rogan, the lowest-ranking Auror and on probation to boot, gave him a doubtful noise in reply to this. Harry wondered what the response would be if he failed to edit his explanation to include the hallucinatory Scrying. The only upbeat part of his day came at lunchtime when Tonks pulled him aside. She appeared chastised, which made Harry hopeful.

"What'd you do to yourself?" she asked, concerned.

Harry tugged off his glasses to rub his eyes. "I wish I could answer that. I don't know. I was angry at... angry that I couldn't argue with you properly."

Her next question knocked him back a bit. "You carry an invisibility cloak with you all the time?"

Harry hesitated answering, not understanding why she asked that. She went on. "I mean, I know you own one, but I never saw you using it around the Ministry before now. I'm sure Rodgers told you it's preferred that you not use one as a trainee. Makes you sloppy. You need to practice and re-practice your other stealth techniques."

For lack of a better response, Harry said, "I don't use it for field work."

"That's fine then," she said, patting him on the arm. "You disappeared on me, and it wasn't clear how."

Harry understood then. He had unwisely slipped away from her without a sound and she had come up with the best possible explanation for that. Harry felt worn down by his necessary deceptions with her. But there were more important things to work out. "Do you have time to talk this evening?"

Equally stilted and nervous as he, she said, "Yeah. I'll come over to your place when I'm through here."

Harry felt formal around her all of a sudden. "I have to scare up lunch," he said, gesturing in the direction of the break room.

"Go on," she said, sounding friendly but also formally stiff.



That evening when Tonks appeared with a bang! Harry stood from the table where they had been lingering after the meal and excused himself. He expected a piercing glance from Snape, but Snape remained fixated on the drink he held in his fingers as Harry passed him.

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“Let’s go out for a walk,” Harry said, collecting his cloak with the expectation that Tonks would follow, and she did.

They stepped out into the late evening light that barely reached over the wall of the garden. Tonks asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Harry said.

“I heard that Severus brought in a Healer for you.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Harry repeated, bristling at her concern, even as another part of his mind told him it was a good sign.

On the road, Harry immediately said the thing he most dearly wanted to get off his chest. “I’m sorry I followed you. Thanks for not reporting it.”

Voice normal and chummy all of a sudden, Tonks said, “I figure you won’t do it again, so there’s no reason to get Arthur or Reggie involved.”

“I wasn’t... I shouldn’t have done it,” Harry said, face flushing. The low light hid this, he assumed with relief. He sighed, feeling pained all over again. “I just couldn’t believe you didn’t trust me.”

Tonks hesitated responding. Their fast pace brought them to the edge of the village where they stopped. Harry sat on the top rail of a stout gate that led to a fenced field, which had been left to grow waist-high, ungrazed. The last of the orange sunlight just brushed the tops of the dark green plants. Tonks sat on the other half of the gate and swung it back and forth.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, it just hurts to think other women get to do things with you that I don’t. Really, it’s other women I don’t trust. You’re famous and everyone wants to be with you.”

Harry puzzled that. “But that still means you must not trust me.”

“Well... maybe, but I wasn’t thinking of it that way.”

Harry swung his side of the gate, making the hinge rumble. “I didn’t mean to make you jealous. You’re on duty all of the time. I’d take you out on the motorbike whenever you wanted...”

“Yeah,” Tonks dully acknowledged. She sighed into the evening air. A breeze rustled the leaves of the trees and made the tall grass bow around their feet. “That’s the way it goes every time,” she said quietly. “I don’t have enough time and they find someone else who does.”

Harry frowned, feeling for her. “I’d like to think I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Still dull sounding, she said, “I’d like to think that too, but it always happens.”

“I don’t plan to have it happen. I understand why you’re always busy.” Harry wished he could confess his other powers to her, just to square things with his own conscience, but he held back. “Want to go for a ride right now?”

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She smiled and laughed lightly. “I have a broomstick if I feel like flying around. It wasn’t really the ride, per se.” She sighed again. “Just that you weren’t giving rides to someone cute and in need of rescue.”

Harry stood as a car roared by, much too fast for the small road. He stepped over to Tonks, gave her a hand standing up, and immediately pulled her close. Lights came on in the house adjacent to the field. A door banged and young voices could be heard calling out playfully.

Tonks felt lithe within his arms against his front, but he knew her seemingly delicate body held magic sufficient for an Auror and skills a chameleon could only dream of. Harry said, “What I like about you is that you don’t need rescue. The one time I tried to come rescue you, I needed to be rescued. I’ve learned my lesson about that.”

Sounding professionally concerned, she said, “You don’t remember what you did two days ago, between leaving me and going home?”

Harry shook his head and tightened his hold on her. “I had an odd dream.” He laughed lightly at admitting that was possibly what had done him in.

“It didn’t involve Voldemort, did it?”

“Well, yes,” Harry reluctantly replied. “I think I was just reliving recent events. In the dream I was trying to save Severus from him. I don’t think it means anything.”

She huffed worrisomely. “I hope you’re right that it’s nothing. I don’t like worrying something bad happened to you that you don’t remember.” Harry felt her paw around in her pocket suddenly and knew what that meant. He let her go. She used a Lumos to read the slate board. “I haveta run.”

“Any chance you need me?” Harry had to ask.

It was her turn to laugh lightly. “I’ll be certain to let you know if we do.” Then she was gone.

Harry waited for a string of cars to roll by. They accelerated one by one out of the nearby turn. The village fell placidly quiet with their passing. Harry took a step towards home and stopped. That old familiar tingle of being watched had returned.

Harry bit his lip and glanced to each side, but saw nothing. “You again?” he asked aloud and with grave confidence that he was correct.

After a moment, a figure emerged from under a cloak and Alastor Moody was eyeing Harry with grudging appreciation. In the dim light, his scarred face had an unusual swarthy and he moved with unusual speed as he approached.

“Where have you been?” Harry asked. “The Canaries?”

Moody snorted. “Somewhere no one would know me, so farther away than that.” He hobbled faintly over to Harry. “Getting along all right without me, I see.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Harry asked, trying not to sound rude just yet.

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Moody strode in a circle around Harry, footsteps crunching in the gravel. “You don’t think you owe me?”

Harry crossed his arms, trying for haughty. “For what, pray tell?”

“You still think you managed a block with a borrowed wand good enough for an explosion that took out half a click of earth?”

Harry froze, remembering the panicked moments when Vineet struck the spelling vessels to destroy Merton’s cohort, Svaha. “You were there?” Harry asked.

Moody snorted again.

“Well... thanks,” Harry said, not ungrateful.

“I’d give you a two out of five for how you handled that situation with the Indian husband and wife team,” Moody grumbled.

Harry rolled his eyes and noticed for the first time that Moody’s footsteps sounded oddly even. He no longer wore a peg leg. “Whose leg did you steal?” Harry asked.

The footsteps stopped. “I did a few favors for a Vodou priest in Haiti and he arranged the leg in return.” Moody stared down at his foot while lifting it for examination in the gathering twilight. “Don’t know whose leg it was before...”

Harry stared at him and decided to change the subject. “So, are you going to be following me around again?” he demanded.

“Miss me, Potter?”

“Hardly.”

“I’ll be around,” Moody ambiguously replied. “I have other things to keep an eye on,” he replied grimly. “Seems you’ve been behaving yourself. Keep it up and you’ll see less of me.”

Suspicious, Harry asked, “Know anything about a giant sea urchin?”

“Why, didya lose one?”

He did not sound to Harry as though he were deflecting the question dishonestly. “No. I was given one unexpectedly.”

Moody strode away, saying over his shoulder before flipping his invisibility cloak back on, which made less difference in the gloom, “I never went in the water at the beach; I don’t know anything about sea life.”

Harry mostly believed him, although his trust in the man was limited. Harry found a parting insult on his tongue, but taunting the old Auror was not wise if he wanted to be left alone.

When he reached the house, Harry found the energy he had stoppered up to keep his calm around Moody now demanded release and doing his readings would not suffice to burn it up. Snape still sat at the dining room table across from Candide. Harry pleaded, “Would you do some drills with me?”

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Snape asked, "You do not get enough practice at the Ministry?" But he stood directly after speaking. "Drills I can handle," he said to Harry's questioning face.

"Oh, good."

Candide strolled in while the furniture hovered a foot off the floor during its journey to the wall. Harry lowered his wand from moving the lamps to the corner, remembering the sagging balcony in his dream with a spasm of distress.

"What is the matter?" Snape asked.

Harry did not want to explain in front of Candide, so he shook his head and raised his wand for drilling.

They did several sequences of Hogwarts-level spells and Candide, losing interest in the repetition, wandered back to the dining room before Harry said, "I want to try something. Can you use a nastier curse like a... er, something that won't hurt too bad..."

"Something that won't hurt you too badly?" Snape asked, lowering his wand.

"No, you. How about a Sponge Knees?"

Harry held his wand at his side and waited. Despite appearing doubtful, Snape raised his wand. Harry felt the prickles from the curse as it generated, but he could not squash it like he had with Shackbolt, and his knees went soft and he toppled to the floor.

"Drat!" Harry said, trying to push himself up, despite it being impossible to put his legs under himself.

Snape strode over and neutralized the curse. Harry got to his feet and untwisted his robes. "Huh, it didn't work."

"What did not work?"

"You remember that I... that when Goyle tried to use a Killing Curse on me, I was able to block it from forming and it exploded inside of him instead of casting. Well, that worked the other day again when Shackbolt cursed me and I only had the Ministry wand and I could feel this awful curse coming. I crushed it back into the earth and it hit him instead."

Snape tapped his wand against his robes. "What was the curse?"

"An Imperious."

"You can feel any curse, correct? But you cannot block them all."

"Shackbolt's felt worse than ordinary."

"Of course it did, it was an Unforgiveable."

Harry raised his chin to stare at him in surprise. "It only works with Unforgiveables you think? Can you try tossing one at me?"

Snape stared back at him. The wand in his hand had fallen still. "There is only one I can use on you." He turned and took a few steps away but it did not raise his

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wand. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Something intangible passed between them, an unspoken acknowledgment of trust. Harry relaxed, but said, "Cast it slowly so I have a chance to feel it."

Snape nodded and raised his wand. Harry felt the spell, odious and tainted, as it ballooned from the floor. He had lots of time to notice that black, sickly tendrils hovered at the periphery.

"Stop," Harry commanded. He could squash the magic, he was certain and did not want it to strike Snape, nor did he want him to attracting those things. The spell faded and the room returned to its normal vaguely cheery self. Thoughtfully, Harry said, "Those spells really are different. I thought they were Unforgivable because of the effect they had, but the source of energy they draw on is inherently evil."

Snape stepped closer, studying Harry as he considered this revelation. When Harry remained silent, Snape offered, "One can make most any ordinary spell into an evil one through creative use. Just as one can use a knife for chopping stewing vegetables or stabbing someone in the heart. Unforgivable Curses have always been considered distinct and perhaps you are able to sense precisely why."

Harry said, "You're opening a conduit to the Dark Plane when you use one of those spells. That would make you very vulnerable if you didn't know how to protect yourself."

"It makes you vulnerable even if you do believe you know how to protect yourself," Snape stated sternly.

Harry heard a parental correction in that. "I don't plan on making it a habit to use them, if that is what you mean."

"That is what I mean."

"They feel terrible," Harry said. "Sickly, rancid... I don't know how to describe it."

"Like death?" Snape suggested, with lightness used perhaps as a shield.

Harry shook his head and stashed his wand away. "No. Death is neutral." Harry remembered feeling Munz slip away as he asserted this. "This is something else. Something worse than death."

Snape dropped his voice. "One of the reasons I would much prefer if you left the Dark Plane alone."

Harry said, "Once you're there, it isn't so bad." To Snape's dubious brow, Harry explained, "It's as though the mixing of our world and the Plane is the actual trouble. Although the creatures there are not so pleasant; it's true. But they behave."

Snape shook his head but gave up the immediate debate.



CHAPTER SEVEN

The next day Harry came home from training and found Candide alone in the dining room. For once she did not have some kind of fabric, parchment, flower, or scent samples piled around her. Instead, a scrolled list of names bordered by Xs and naughts occupied her placesetting accompanied by a stack of open letters. Harry settled into answering his own post, only taking stock of Snape's absence when this was completed.

"Severus working on his brewing again?" Harry asked.

Candide nodded. Harry could not detect if she was growing dismayed or intolerant of this behavior. If she wasn't, then Snape had chosen remarkably wisely. His own troubles with Tonks solved, Harry felt quite good about things in general, even looking forward to meeting Candide's parents.

Owl claws grated on the glass before slipping inside the open window and over to Harry's hand. Harry recognized the Peterson owl and eagerly took the letter it held. He told the owl to wait, but it took off again without so much as hoot and Harry assumed that Elizabeth told it to return quickly so its absence could go unnoticed.

Harry read the letter, relieved that Elizabeth sounded upbeat about keeping out of her father's path and avoiding provoking him. She expressed gratitude for the wand and hoped that she had given Harry enough money for it. Harry's blood went from pleasantly warm flowing to painfully icy upon reading that femininely cursived sentence. He had not seen the money she had given him in several days.

Shaking slightly, Harry went through his robe pockets, once, twice and then more carefully a third time.

"What did you lose?" Candide asked after watching him do this.

"A bit of money," Harry said, distressed.

"Do you need more spending money?" she asked pointedly. "You don't have to go without anything. Severus told me you were used to doing that..."

Harry stood, thinking to check his other robes upstairs, even though he was quite certain he currently wore the robes he had on in Gringotts the other day. He mentally walked through rushing back to the Ministry after going to his vault, but he was certain he had left the money in his pocket. The only other memory he had of it was sliding it across a sticky pub table to the rather shabby Snape in his dream. Maybe a pickpocket had taken it, Harry thought, with queer hope, although he thought it unlikely given how much cheek that would require of someone.

Candide's concern ratcheted up as she asked, "Harry, what's the matter? Was it a great deal of money?"

"No," Harry said, trying to dismiss her worry, but failing. "It's more complicated." He considered interrupting Snape's brewing to tell him about this, but sat down instead, not wanting to run to him until his thoughts calmed. Sighing, he finished

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reading Elizabeth's letter without really taking it in.

Candide prompted him again, and Harry distracted her by asking about the invitation list she was working at. She huffed a laugh as though not wanting to let go so easily. She said, "It's going well. Looks like around seventy people." She considered Harry before asking, "Severus asked if you would be Superlatus Wizard, right?"

"No. What's that?"

"Hasn't got around to it yet, apparently." She shook her head as she rolled up the invitation list. "Muggles refer to it as 'best man'."

"I'd like to be that," Harry said.

"I'm positive he wants you to. Just doesn't want to ask." She absentmindedly straightened the sliced envelopes stacked beside her. "He's a tough nut to crack."

"You managed though," Harry said with no little compliment. Fixed in his mind's eye was the image of the dreary and desperate Snape from his vision. The missing pounds made the disturbing vision clearer. The contrast alarmed him.

"It was more me who needed to change than him, I think," Candide said, pulling Harry back with her voice.

"I know what you mean," Harry said after a space. Brightening slightly, he went back to the previous topic, "I've never been to a wizard wedding before. What happens at them?"

She waved his question off, "All the same things as a Muggle one, I'm sure."

Harry thought about that. "I've never been to one of those, either."

"Really?"

Harry felt vaguely annoyed at her surprise. Without meaning to, his hand felt around in his pocket again, seeking the missing pounds. His empty pocket echoed in his worried gut. He stood and said, "I'm going to see how Severus is doing."

Harry rapped softly on the spare room door, responded that it was just him when asked, and entered when told he could. Inside, the room had been rearranged. Fewer tubes bubbled and on the upturned door rested a row of black rocks with holes drilled in the top. Snape worked over one of these, dripping what appeared to be mercury into one of them as a spell hovered it in a tilted spinning orbit as though to coat the inside evenly. Harry took a seat on a stool well out of the way of the hiss of noxious steam and the scent of baking rock.

Hands clenched between his knees to hold tight the ungraspable, Harry watched Snape work, alarmed by the notion that somehow his dream had left behind yet more material proof of its reality. A yawning gap separated him from the will to speak his suspicions, since like a spell, speaking threatened to make them real.

Snape glanced at Harry, then away, and then sharply back again. "What is the trouble?" he asked.

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Harry realized that he had been sitting there waiting to be prompted, childishly perhaps. “Er, the money I had in my pocket the other day... it’s gone.” Snape waited for more, so Harry added, “I remember giving it away in my dream... to you... and now it’s gone. It was the pounds Elizabeth gave me for her wand. I had them in my pocket,” he repeated, avoiding feeling around said with his hands for a fifth time.

Snape’s gaze grew vaguely disturbed. Harry said, “I’d rather be prophetic than have my nightmares become reality. What if everything becomes a dream? How would I know what’s real?”

Snape spoke lowly, “Tell me not in mournful numbers life is but an empty dream. For the soul is dead that slumbers and things are not what they seem...”

“What’s that?” Harry asked in alarm.

“A nineteenth century American wizard named Longfellow said that.” Snape carefully placed the vial of mercury he held back in one of several crowded racks and crossed his arms. “You are not the first to worry about such things.”

Harry’s brow furrowed, unappeased. Snape plucked up a pointed chunk of uneven silvery metal between metal pinchers and held it over a flame. White snow flaked off as it burned and he collected it with a tin plate as it fluttered downward.

“What are you working on?” Harry asked, vaguely aggrieved.

“It is almost finished. You will see soon enough.” Snape smiled faintly then. “I have succeeded though.” He stated this with unusual lightness, which shook Harry out of his own worries.

“Succeeded at what?” Harry asked, peering at the mysterious porous rocks, some broken open, some wrapped tightly with metal wire, as if reinforced to keep them from exploding.

“You will see,” Snape said, sounding distant.

Harry frowned. Now that he had unburdened himself he wanted more concern but by some infinitesimally small chance, had caught Snape in a buoyant mood. Snape placed the tin saucer on the stained door and waved the flame away with his wand before facing Harry again. “Suffice to say, you are not living a dream at this moment. Or we are all suffering one together if you are, but I cannot believe that true.”

As unnaturally philosophical as that was coming from Snape, Harry resisted it and stated, “I’d rather be prophetic. I like things the way they are. I don’t want them to change.”

Snape’s smiled faintly, but purely, again. “Satisfying to hear you say that.” Stepping closer with a challenging swish of his robes, he asked, “Truly nothing you would change?”

Harry thought over the imminent wedding, for which Candide’s broad concern well-covered any needed from him or Snape. He thought of his unclear notion of

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an infant in the house. Even the dreaded dinner with the new in-laws felt dutifully acceptable. The past, however, still held stabs of regret. “I can’t change the past,” Harry admitted. “Everything else is good.”

Snape made the unusual gesture of resting a hand on Harry’s shoulder. It had the opposite effect from what was probably intended. It made it hard for Harry to take a breath. “What if I destroy all this. Without trying?”

Thoughtfully, Snape replied evenly, “Give us some credit, Harry. You are not the only one with power in this household.” He fixed Harry with a level, unflinching gaze before releasing him and returning to his zinc and mercury.



The sky above Diagon Alley glared down with an unusually jewel-like blue as Harry walked toward Madam Malkin’s. In his hand swung a sack containing his dress robes, still un-repaired after their last altercation with a public event. Even if they were serviceable, Harry thought them too formal for dinner at home and he had nothing besides his ordinary robes, which always seemed more worn than he remembered once he took a close look at them.

The shop was stifling in the heat, oppressive with new fabric scents. Even the bell chime on the door jangled mutedly in the robe-packed shop. Harry searched through a likely rack while the shopkeeper assisted someone else. Solid, bold colors dominated the robes in his size. Harry would have insisted before stepping in the store that he did not care what color robes he wore, but faced with saturated maroon and orange-brown, he realized differently.

The young shopkeeper bound over upon spotting him, pigtails bobbing along with her. “Can I help you find something?” she brightly asked.

Harry scratched his head. “Do you have anything in black?”

“What kind of event?”

Something about the way the scritch of hangers on metal across the shop stopped suddenly upon Harry’s speaking, made him hold back on particulars. “Just a family dinner,” he said, shrugging. He held out the sack with his damaged robes. “These need repair. And I need the robes for tonight.”

She took the sack without peering into it and hovered it over her shoulder to the counter behind her. “Well, we have some greys...”

Harry tried to focus on the myriad robes held out for his inspection, but he could not keep his awareness away from the way the other customer happened to always remain out of sight when they moved about the shop.

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The shopkeeper's voice was losing its perkiness without yet growing impatient as she held up a grey robe with light green decorative stitching. "The stitching would highlight your eyes..." she said in a practiced tone.

"I like that one," Harry said, dropping his shoulderbag to try them on.

Even before he had them pulled all the way over his head so he could see, she was leading him to the mirror. Harry tripped on the raised dais where he was supposed to stand for the fitting before stepping up onto it. He tugged the robes straight, while the shopclerk adjusted a curved, wall-mounted mirror to reflect the outside brightness on him. Harry had to agree that the light-colored stitching brought out his eyes. As he stared at his reflection, he wondered with a skip of his heart if his eyes had not become lighter still.

The shopkeeper prodded for a verdict, so he gave the robes a look. The spare and tasteful stitching evoked the right level of formality, he thought, without being stodgy. "They're good."

"Arms up, then," she ordered. "I need to pin them now for taking in if you want them tonight."

Harry held his arms out to the sides and waited while a tick tick sound emanated from taps of her wand along the side seams. The needles stiffened the fabric and pricked menacingly.

"So, important event?" the shopkeeper asked chattily.

"Just a family dinner," Harry said, squashing the urge to complain a bit about his new in-laws.

"That's all, really?" a new voice suggestively asked. Rita Skeeter, the source of the voice, slipped into view behind a tower of pastel pointed hats festooned with flowered ribbons.

Harry stiffened but sharp needlepoints bristled at him through his clothes, so he held still, arms tiring so that they drooped. "Almost finished?" Harry asked.

The shopkeeper was crouched, undoing the hem. "No, needs to be lengthened," she mumbled around the needles held between her lips. Harry sighed and held his arms up again. This at least removed the threat from the metal points in his armpits.

Skeeter slipped her notebook out of her handbag and after stopping to examine her red nails flipped it open. "Come on, Harry, if you give me something of value, I'll go away and leave you alone. If you make me dig, you don't know what I might uncover."

Harry had no desire to help her. "Go ahead and dig, then."

She pondered him and scratched something down with a quill made of a feather the same blood red as her nails. The scratching aggravated Harry who wanted to know what she was writing. As though filling him in, she said, "Grey is such an

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appropriate color for you, isn't it?" With a glance up at Harry's fixed form, she returned to writing, commenting, "Those eyes of yours are heading for diamond, aren't they? Green must be out this year."

Harry weakly bit at his top lip wondering what magic he had done now to further that. Other related worries about his powers tumbled out behind that thought as though loosed from a gate. The shopkeeper was halfway around the hem with her pinning.

Skeeter pondered aloud, "There is a major family event coming up for you, I hear. I sadly did not receive an invitation. I do so love weddings. So what could be this evening that would make the most famous of wizards have to rush out for a new robe?"

Harry's stomach flipped at the notion of seeing his extended family issues spread out for all to see in the newspaper, right before the big event, which promised to be sufficiently complicated on its own. Bolstering himself with a dark look, that at least put a halt to her incessant scratching, Harry asked, "Why do you want me as an enemy?"

The question appeared to catch her off guard. Her nails were due again already for further inspection. She did this while saying, "Leaving aside that you are more profitable as an enemy, I personally don't buy the innocent routine. You spread it especially thick."

Harry's leaden arms had tilted lower again, garnering a rebuke from the shopkeeper. He sighed and raised his arms straight again, finding strength in the notion that she was almost finished. Pins glittered in a circle around his feet, brighter than the light green thread of the pattern along the hem.

"So your plan is to annoy me until I prove myself dark enough that it is safe only to leave me alone?" Harry asked Skeeter.

She closed her notebook and said soberly, "Oh, you've probably already done that." She turned while stashing her notebook away, and stepped out of the shop. The door squeaked closed with a jangle of the bell and the shopkeeper announced, "Done."

Harry dropped his arms in relief and got poked in the side for it. He had to raise his arms all the way up to have the robes safely hovered off him. She hung them on a rusty pipe behind the counter suspended from the ceiling by an even rustier chain. "I'll have them in an hour." She handed him a slip.

"That's fast."

She leaned forward and with a hand beside her mouth said, "My brother bought an elf so our mum could have nights off. He's really fast, the elf is, even if he doesn't speak much English, and not a stitch out of place." She waved at the otherwise empty

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pipe. “See, nothing waiting. We’re going to go custom next month: bespoke robes while you wait and everything. That’s why Rita was in here, to write an article.” She accepted Harry’s Galleons and gave him change, still chattering. “You should have told her all about your plans. She’d lap it up and then all your friends would get to read all about it. We were thrilled when she agreed to come do a piece on us.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Harry muttered.

Outside on the alley, the conversation with Skeeter still circled in Harry’s mind as his eyes checked to make sure she was not around, in obvious human form. He was just considering heading home and coming back to fetch the robes rather than dragging Ron out of work early to keep him company when another voice stopped him short.

“Hello, Harry,” Belinda said, appearing chipper in the fine weather, which startled him into uttering something unintelligible in response. “Would you do me a favor?” she asked.

He was so pleased to see her happier that he instantly said he would. She led the way down the Alley, explaining how the Minister needed a special, certain liquor for a visiting dignitary and the only shop that carried it was on Knockturn Alley and she hoped he would keep her company because it was more crowded that day than usual. Harry thought crowded better than empty from a safety perspective, but he agreed, knowing it would give him a chance to talk to her.

Her light footsteps floated her along Diagon Alley, Harry beside, until they reached the turn. Harry asked her how the Minister’s office was treating her; the best small talk he could come up with in a hurry. She shrugged and gave a version of her standard answer about working too late every evening, but it being worth it.

They ducked together under the crooked bay window that blocked part of the narrow entrance to the less-than-savory side alley to Diagon. The sun here fell on dusty wide-brimmed hats pulled low and hoods pulled far forward, leaving features in inky shadow. The scent of old smoke and bromide leached from the age-darkened walls. A group of witches slid aside grudgingly to let Harry and Belinda pass. The witches hum of conversation fell still, eyes tracking even though heads barely moved.

Harry fell silent too, needing to concentrate on watching the denizens of Knockturn observing them in return. Belinda continued to talk, until Harry said, “I’m glad to see you so upbeat.”

Oddly, this set her lips into a purse and Harry regretted speaking. They neared the end of the alley. Cracked and aged signs hung lower here outside the shop doors, varnish darkened, obscuring the print. Belinda stopped before a newly painted sign depicting a curly eye surrounded by the words Cellar ObscurI.

Belinda pulled open the door, revealing not a shop but a long wooden staircase

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curving downward. A small lamp hinted at a landing somewhere in the depth. Harry stared down at the tiny light until his eyes adjusted and then around at the hunched and gritty old wizards and witches loitering near this end of the alley, slitted eyes slipping over to fix on him. A sharp glare at the closest renewed their walking.

The stairway appeared far more like a trap than a place of business, even if Harry's curse sense gave him only the usual distress of Knockturn Alley in general.

"How long will it take to buy the bottle?" Harry asked, torn between stepping into a trap and letting her step into one alone.

But her concerns had evaporated now that they had reached the shop. "Oh, just two minutes or so."

"If you aren't out in five, I'll come in after you," Harry stated, hand checking for his wand, obediently in his pocket where it was supposed to be.

Belinda laughed, believing he was joking, apparently. She slipped quickly down the steps while Harry held the door open to give her more light. After she had made the turn out of sight, Harry scanned around him and backed up to the far wall where he could keep watch on the whole alley and the shop. He noted the time on his watch and stood, waiting.

Hunched shoppers shuffled by, tattered robes dragging. Shop doors here did not have chimes but low foghorns, or even screams. Harry waited, thinking time must have run out, but a check of his watch repeatedly told otherwise.

When Belinda slipped out the shop door, sack-wrapped package tucked under her arm, Harry felt a bit silly about his worry.

"Thanks for waiting. Minister gives me these errands and its nice to have company."

"Where's Percy?" Harry asked. Forethought told him not to, but curiosity overruled.

"He wasn't around today. So I couldn't ask him to come with me," she added. "Normally, he would," she then added in a tone of defense.

Harry did not like Percy, but he did not want Belinda back. Sandwiched between those two zones, he could not find anything to say.

Belinda glanced at her own pocketwatch. "I'll Apparate back from here, if you don't mind. I hate to break the incoming rule, since our office wrote it, but we have no plans to regulate outgoing."

Harry barely nodded before she had gone with a last, "Thanks again." He stared momentarily at the shop door and the brand new sign. He turned to go and was run into by someone walking quickly and not watching where they were going.

Harry disentangled himself and said, "Candide?" in surprise at recognizing the person he helped right.

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Flustered, she blurted, “Harry!” Then covered her mouth and said, “Oops, was I not supposed to give you away? Or, you’re not in disguise are you?”

This all came flowing out so quickly, Harry needed a second to catch up. By the time, he did, she was tugging on his sleeve and moving down the alley.

“No, it’s all right. What are you doing here?” Harry asked. Even with her head bowed, he could see her flush. On the return trip out, the alley’s occupants moved aside more deliberately, eyeing Harry’s companion and him alternately. Harry sent sharp Auror-eyed looks back. A particularly pointy-bearded, tall wizard standing in front of Best’s Bestiary Provision seemed amused by this.

“I shouldn’t have, I know, The boss was gone, so I slipped out,” Candide said, sounding guilty. She took his arm in a tighter grip and whispered excitedly, “But I know what I’m having now.”

Not understanding, Harry said, “What?”

“I went and asked Grisley—you know the old augerer—what I was having; you know a girl or a boy.”

“Oh,” Harry said. They were passing through the narrows leading to Diagon. Harry ducked so Candide would not have to. “So, what did she say?” he asked, suddenly intensely curious and jarringly on hold until he heard the answer.

“It’s a boy, she said,” Candide recounted.

They stopped in the intersection of the two alleys, shoppers veered around them, packages rustling.

“That’s excellent,” Harry said, not sure what difference it really made, except that just knowing made a kind of major difference. He stared beyond her hair down Knockturn Alley and the robed figures skulking about there. “I’d not mind seeing Severus’ reaction if you could hold off on telling him till I was there.”

She smiled. “I’d like you to be there when I tell him, of course. But I have to get back to work for a bit, just in case the boss comes back.” She moved off in a hurry after patting Harry on the arm.

Harry watched her negotiate the crowds to reach the door leading up to the accounting office. It swung closed and Harry felt strangely disconnected and unsure why that would be the case. The evening held the promise of even more interesting encounters and he now felt vague dread about it, even as he felt more determined to make things work with Snape and his new in-laws.

Shaking himself as a group of children passed, one of them turning back to wave excitedly at him, face aglow with recognition, Harry Disapparated for home.

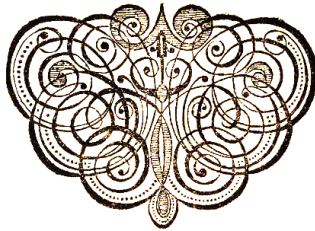
Author’s Notes: The delay was due to my travelling around too much to

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write. If you follow my author link to my lj blog you can track what the heck is distracting me. It takes a lot to distract me from writing, but lately life has managed.

Also, the misnaming of the village is intentional. Spinning is what one does to generate one story, but with this story I'm making a metaphor for fanfiction, and the multitude of stories that make it up, hence a weaving. Plus timelines are now seriously off from canon, so I can only peg it as close as I can to the books and the renaming is also an acknowledgment of that.

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Grey robes just brushed the stone floor as they should, perfectly tailored. Harry gave himself one last check in the mirror inside the wardrobe door and shut it, consciously neatening the room despite not expecting the visiting in-laws to look into it.

Downstairs, Candide moved frantically about, straightening fresh candles in the tallest ornate holders on the dining room table, adjusting the silver and the napkins. She turned to Harry with the attitude that he was next in line for inspection.

She stopped. “You look good. New robes?”

“Yep.”

Sounding doubtful it could be true, she asked, “Did you pick those out yourself?”

Harry grinned in the face of the implied insult. “Yes, I did manage to pick them out myself.”

She pushed her styled and extra wavy hair around. Harry figured the comment had its genesis in stress, so he said: “It’s all right. Really, the shop clerk suggested them.”

Candide glanced at the simple little clock up on the shelf that had been moved from her flat. It was merely a varnished block of wood with four brass ticks in the cardinal positions. “Why did Severus have to go to Hogwarts today of all days?” she asked, peeved.

Harry assumed Snape was continuing to stay out of the way. “I’m certain he’ll return soon.” Candide crossed her arms, eyes fixed on the clock, frown still apparent. Harry went on, “I think it will go all right tonight.”

She patted Harry’s arm and burst back into preparatory motion, this time re-

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attacking the main hall.

Snape arrived shortly after, pre-occupied as he wandered into the hall, reading from a bundle of pale, animal-hide scrolls with bright red and purple tassels. By standing on tip toe to get a glance, Harry decided they must be school board decrees. “That time again,” Harry said.

Snape harmlessly crushed the bundle together and slipped it under his arm. “Yes. Minerva for the moment kindly reassigned my preparatory teaching and even Head of House duties, but failed, suspiciously enough, to find another deputy.” His words came out clipped, having wrapped himself in disdain already for dinner, Harry figured. Candide minced over while this conversation went on and Snape took wary stock of the two of them. “What is it?” Snape asked, put on alert by what must have been the pensiveness they exuded over Candide’s news.

“I, uh, went to see Grisley Teaberg today...” Candide opened.

“Why? No, don’t tell me,” he added quickly holding up his hand. “You fetched a beauty potion for your cousin... an excellent plan,” he asserted, turning to stride away.

Harry swallowed a grin, but Candide propped her fists on her hips, eyes narrowing. “That’s hardly what I did.” Snape made a bored turn back to them, leading with his toes. Candide said, “I had her divine whether we’re having a boy or girl.”

Snape’s carefully built dismissive wall appeared to hollow out, even though he did not actually move. “And?” he finally asked.

Candide made as if to speak, but then crossed her arms and, perhaps in retaliation for his crack about her cousin, tauntingly said, “Which do you think she said, boy or girl?”

Snape considered for just a second before replying, “As long as she didn’t say ‘neither’ it doesn’t much matter.”

“Or one of each,” Harry contributed, enjoying this game.

This drew Snape’s increasingly undone gaze to him. “She did not say ‘one of each,’ did she?”

Harry laughed, unable to leave him hanging vulnerable like that for long. “No.”

The movement of Snape’s shoulders gave away real relief. “Well, which is it then?”

Candide relented. “A boy.”

Unmoving, Snape took that in. “Ah.” Harry watched him fail to react, outwardly anyhow. He turned slowly to look at the tall clock. “I best get ready,” he said. He stepped away and this time Candide moved as though to catch up and grab hold. Harry, without thinking, took hold of her as she passed. A dispute felt imminent and it could not be a worse time for it.

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When the door clicked closed upstairs, Harry released her. Eyes watery and fiery, she demanded quietly, “What’s the matter with him?”

Harry felt around inside his head for something to say, certain he lacked the skill to sooth her but having no choice but to try. He hesitated simply telling her to leave it for later, because even if that did not backfire, it would poison the evening. “Severus didn’t have a very happy childhood,” Harry said, sort of to stall but understanding opened before him as he said it. “Maybe he’s afraid it isn’t going to be any different this time around.”

Candide lost her battle-ready posture and asked, “Do you think he’d have preferred a girl?”

Seeing as it was a done thing, Harry preferred not to conjecture on that but he had to answer the question. “That might not have reminded him so much, possibly. But it’ll be all right,” Harry insisted. “Give him some time to get used to the idea.”

She sighed loudly, which under any other circumstances would have concerned him. In this case it was the sound of giving in, at least for the moment.

“I thought he’d be happy,” she said.

Harry thought that a strong word for Snape under any circumstance. Trying to lighten things, he said, “Not that he’d let anyone know if he was...”

She ducked her head for a grin that was half grimace. With another sigh, she patted his arm and said, “I don’t think this would work without you.”

Harry would rather like to think it would, but he could see her viewpoint. “Your parents will be here soon. Is everything ready?”

This properly distracted her utterly. She strode in a circle around the carefully arranged hall, even leaning back to scrutinize the chandelier, composed entirely of fresh candles, all glowing merrily. “I think we’re ready,” she said, sounding fatalistic.

Harry pondered the notion of bringing someone home for the two of them to scrutinize with thoughts of marriage. His initial instinct that they would be more forgiving and open than Candide’s parents gave way to a more pessimistic vision of them asking awkward and pointed questions. These considerations made Harry more nervous for that evening.

Snape returned, taciturn and faintly glowering. They all sat down on the couches – Snape with a tumbler of something amber – and waited. When the knock came on the door and Harry stood, Snape arrested him with a sharply raised hand. “I instructed the elf to take care of the butlering.”

A small pop indicated Winky had indeed gone to the door. The three of them stood as cloaks were shed in the narrow, dim entry hall. Three figures shuffled into the main hall and Harry was grateful to see Ruthie leading the way, knowing smile firmly in place on her substantial face. Candide’s parents followed, trailing farther

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behind as the room widened out. Her father was a man going toward portly, but did not move like one as far along as he actually was. Her mother's greying hair was swept back in a style similar to Candide's but the grey streaks left one with the impression of a badger. This was reinforced by her distasteful expression as she took in the old house and its patchwork of recent repairs.

Harry fought a defensive acid rising in his chest and stepped forward with a friendly smile to follow behind the others' greetings.

"And Harry," Candide said, making introductions. "My mum and dad, Adalais Martyn and Farnsworth Breakstone, and of course you've met my sister."

Attitudes shifted instantly and Harry's hand was pumped excessively by Candide's father. "A pleasure, Mr. Potter, absolutely smashing to get to meet you..." He went on in this vein until realizing abruptly that he should stop. This was followed by a peck on the cheek by Adalais. Thus reassured that he could influence their opinions, Harry relaxed and took the liberty of suggesting they sit down and that Winky should fetch them drinks.

Harry taking charge eased the atmosphere until they were settled in and no good topics of conversation caught hold. Ruthie rescued them, by leaning her broadly round shoulders forward and asking Harry, "So, what is it like to be an Auror? Exciting I bet."

"Yes and no. We spend a lot of boring hours on patrol or stake-out between bouts of excitement."

No one joined in, certainly not the poker-stiff Adalais or slumping Farnsworth, so Ruthie said, "The papers have been covering the upcoming vampire trial. What do you think about the expensive solicitor Fueago hired?"

Harry knew nothing beyond that he would be pulled out of training for his testimony. Before he could explain this, Snape intervened with, "Harry prefers to remain ignorant of what gets printed about him."

Ruthie jerked in surprise. "Really. I'd love reading about myself... even bad things. Those would be the best fun." She laughed heartily and peered at Harry with amusement.

Harry could not judge if she was joking. The attempts at conversation were mercifully cut short by Winky, gold edged tea-towel glittering in the excessive candlelight of the chandelier, summoning them to dinner. As they made their way to the dining room, he overheard Adalais muttered something grudging about how nice it must be to have a house-elf to take care of everything.

Dinner slid by at a snail's pace with nearly all comments directed at Harry, who did not mind at first, but by the time the roast was cut into for second helpings he began to think more progress towards their accepting Snape would be more valuable.

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When a ripe opportunity presented itself in the form of Candide insisting to her mother that she had survived any bouts of morning sickness with a good potion, Harry jumped in. He said, "Severus is an expert brewer."

Candide's father wiped his mouth, folded his napkin and said, "You used to teach that, Candy tells us. I'd expect you to get good at it if you were teaching it." He sniffed, heavy cheeks shifting in layers as he considered the row of them across the table. "You teach Defense Against the Darker Arts now, correct?" His tone implied less small talk and more ground-work-laying. Harry began to see this not leading anywhere good and indeed, his instincts were correct. The man said, "You teach that from experience too, I suppose?"

"Of course," Snape answered easily, uncaringly, which unclenched Harry's chest. "I wouldn't be very good at it if I did not teach from experience. It is a serious and necessary subject, sadly neglected in the past as Harry can attest."

Harry took up this opening with the first thing he could think of. "That's true. It's so important now that Hogwarts has two professors on the subject, sharing the load."

Farnsworth straightened his silverware and said, "There was some controversy about that too in the papers this week, something about keeping a werewolf on around all those children. Or am I mis-remembering?"

Snape calmly refilled his own glass of wine. "No, that's correct, but he's rendered relatively harmless by regular potioning before and during the full moon."

"Well that's something anyhow," Farnsworth conceded without changing his challenging tone.

To Harry it seemed the strained discussion about Lupin and Hogwarts was actually a substitute for something else, a different topic or perhaps a duel.

Farnsworth went on while Adalais ate heartily, content with her husband's handling of things. Ruthie, the more likely candidate to eat while food was plentiful, had had the same potato poised on her fork for the last minute.

"Just doesn't seem worth the risk, does it? If I had a son or daughter there still, I couldn't possible approve it," Candide's father said and his wife nodded broadly in agreement. "I can't imagine allowing a dangerous creature like that around children. He could spread that evil easily, couldn't he?"

Harry cut Snape's reply off with, "He isn't a creature; he's a very kind man." He managed to pull his voice back from angry into the realm of calmly informative by the end, but his heart rate rose in response.

Snape did something unexpected; he reached beside him and gently laid a hand over Harry's arm, where it rested beside his knife, as if to silence him. Snape went on, the very model of control. "You have to forgive my adopted son, he is passionate

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at defending those he cares about.”

Harry watched Farnsworth’s eyes cautiously move back and forth between the two of them and realized that Snape’s gentle assertion was actually a threat, and Harry had to slow his breathing to avoid giving away that he had grasped that. Ruthie’s brows were at her hairline. She puckered her lips and ate her potato, which was the cue for the conversation to move to something else.

Things remained superficially congenial until the sherry was poured by Winky after the pudding plates glittered away. Winky bowed herself out with a quick backward shuffle clearly desiring to leave. Farnsworth, while peering through the dark red liquid in his glass at the nearest candle, said, “If we had a say in this, we’d put a stop to it.”

Oddly, Harry felt relief upon hearing this, despite its bluntness. Snape swirled his own carefully observed sherry and did not reply. Candide colored but also held back. Harry suspected she had heard that at least once before.

Ruthie, finishing off her tumbler, said, “Good thing you can’t then.”

Farnsworth ignored her and accused Snape: “Figures someone with a background like yours would use the most despicable, old-fashioned form of coercion. Doesn’t it?”

The tightening of the cords on the back of Snape’s hand was the only outward sign of his self-control. He brushed the fingertips of his left hand over each other as he answered, “On that point you are grossly mistaken.”

Adalais snorted faintly, prompting Candide to say with a blush clear even in the candlelight, “I’m certain I explained this, Mother.”

Farnsworth did not remove his eyes from Snape. “Like I’d believe the likes of you,” he said in a low voice perhaps propelled and bolstered by alcohol.

Harry would have spoken, but Snape’s fingers brushed his forearm again before he could compose something. It was torture to sit quietly.

“Mother,” Candide chastised, perhaps expecting an ally in this.

“Well, Dear,” Adalais said in a voice pitched higher than normal, “We always expected you to do better than this – you of all people.” Adalais glanced at Snape dismissively and straightened her crushed napkin back over her lap. “I mean, really, Dear,” she added, flustered.

Candide dabbed quickly at one eye and bit her lip. Harry was ready to burst. Snape had tapped him yet again as though sensing this. Harry, taking his anger out on his guardian because it was the only direction allowed, asked, “Why don’t you want me to say anything?”

“I simply don’t,” Snape said calmly. “You have already lost your temper.”

“Oh, no I haven’t,” Harry countered, just barely in check. “I wouldn’t be sitting here like this if I had, would I? I don’t like sitting here quietly while the only family

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I've even known is roundly insulted."

Candide's parents stared at him. Harry tried to find another ounce of calm to apply to his nerves and he must have managed because he backed down, but assumed it was clear to others that he was struggling.

Ruthie piped up, "Well, like you said, 'nothing you can do about it'."

Farnsworth's face twisted as though the sherry beneath his nose had grown foul. "She's old enough to do as she pleases, but that still doesn't make it easy to turn her over to a supporter, former or not, of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. We read all the papers; have for years; years and years; we know what you are, even if she downplays it." He nodded in Candide's direction.

"Voldemort," Snape said just as Harry had opened his mouth to do so. "His name is Voldemort."

Candide's parents cringed and Ruthie had to hide a grin behind pretending to drink from her empty tumbler.

Adalais resumed addressing the daughter across from her. "People don't ever cease to be dark wizards, Candy-dear," she stated as fact. "Imagine if you told us you wanted to marry a... a vampire. Wouldn't you expect us to dissuade you?"

Candide, eyes bright, did not reply. She looked away, at the empty grate, char-coated and cold.

Silence reigned until Snape set down his empty tumbler and said, "Perhaps if we have run out of things people wish to get out in the open, we should declare this an evening."

Farnsworth tossed his napkin onto the table. "There's no legal recourse for us; I already checked. Even asked a solicitor for help requesting a dispensation directly from the Wizengamot."

Snape followed this immediately with, "But in the hearing you would be up against Harry Potter and I suspect that put an end to the idea." He smiled for the first time, but it did not reach his eyes.

"Daddy, you didn't," Candide complained and then huffed in annoyance.

Harry wondered if her father had considered going to the papers. Skeeter would certainly provide a willing ear. Harry did not ask about this, just in case.

Farnsworth said, "I can't in good conscience give you away."

Snape said, "Someone else will be happy to do so," at the exact same time Candide asked, "But you'll still come, right?"

"I insisted we go," Adalais said. "Wouldn't be proper to not go at all."

This finally was the last comment of any substance that evening. When the door finally closed and the three of them were standing alone in the hall, Harry said, "That

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could have gone worse, I suppose.” Snape turned on his heel to face him. He was still calm, which Harry had to comment on. “You did well,” Harry told him.

Dryly, he said, “With due respect to Candide, I decided they truly do not matter.” Candide’s gaze was fixed to the floor and it remained there until Snape said to her, “I do hope that’s the end of it.”

Candide nodded. Harry gave her a weak smile when she looked his way. “Thanks for trying Harry,” she said.

To her he shrugged. To Snape Harry said, “Sorry I talked out of turn.”

“Oh, do not apologize. I wished you to.”

Harry lowered his brow and stared at him. “You were manipulating me?”

“I wished you to express your thoughts in a context that made it absolutely clear you spoke of your own will, which you did. It was useful that you are so predictable, but I must point out that you should work to eliminate such a bad habit that makes it easy for your enemies to entrap you.”

“I can try,” Harry said doubtfully. He huffed and said, “I have readings to do,” before he strode up the stairs, intending to take Kali out of her cage, settle in with his books, and willfully ignore the realization that even when he tried to use his influence, he could not succeed at it properly.

An owl from Hermione distracted Harry from sorting through his books. The bird carried an invitation to a small luncheon she was having at the Leaky Cauldron before leaving for Hogwarts. Harry pulled out his small diary and made a note of it. At the bottom of the printed invitation she had added:

Harry, I should probably warn you that I invited Vishnu as well. We’ve owed on occasion, but I haven’t seen him since your birthday and found I really have to or I might lose my mind. It should be safe enough since I’m leaving for ten months.

Harry tossed the invitation into the cold hearth to burn later, thinking Hermione may not want anyone seeing that note. He frowned, feeling for his friend and wondering how things were with his fellow. Harry should have found or created an opportunity to speak with him, but feeling partly responsible for his marriage difficulties made it even more awkward. Maybe he’d have a chance during the luncheon, or maybe that would be completely the wrong time to bring anything up.



Saturday, Harry took his bike out again, this time to meet Tonks, whom he had arranged to meet for dinner in Hogsmeade. Harry flew to the wizarding village, which gave him a rare chance to mull over things. The helmet, when he had to wear it until clear of Muggle habitation, rubbed painfully against the bump on his head, reminding

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him of the mystery of how he had ended up with it. He had flashes of crawling toward the warmth of the fire, but not exactly how he had become so cold in the first place. Also a mystery that dragged on his mind was why Belinda had been back, mostly, to her outgoing self when he had seen her on Diagon Alley.

This second mystery still gnawed at Harry's consciousness as he landed with a musical clang! of metal on the narrow road before the Three Broomsticks. Shoppers turned to stare at him before giggling and going on their way. The great chrome machinery of Sirius' motorbike did stand out in the age-tainted, wooden surroundings of the wizarding village.

Tonks stepped out of the pub and propped a hand on her skirted hip. "That explains why you wanted to meet here," she said, giving him a peck. Her hair stood tall and lemon yellow today.

Harry rolled the bike out of the way into the alley and tugged her farther between the buildings using the bike as a barrier to hug her properly. "Glad you could get away today," Harry said. He felt eyes upon them and pulled away with a glance at the empty light behind the buildings. He fought a temptation to send a curse that direction.

Inside, the two of them settled over mugs of butterbeer. Harry, wanting help working things out said, "Oddest thing. Belinda was nice to me the other day."

Tonks' dismay was most likely exaggerated, making Harry grin. "Sorry," he said. "It's just that something has been up with her."

"Harry, is there a witch in England you aren't trying to come to the aid of?"

"Don't be silly," Harry said, trying not to laugh. "Not all of them. Just the ones exposed to the hazard that is Harry."

Tonks tipped her mug at him, slopping some onto the table where it smoked a bit as it mixed with the other stains on the wood. "I'll grant you that one."

"You don't have to be jealous. I prefer my dates to not need rescuing. Really."

She smiled with her eyes and Harry accepted that she believed him. Her eyes rolled though, when he said, "But about Belinda..."

"How about some other topic... how are the wedding plans going?"

"Oh, please," Harry groaned. "Some other topic."

A group of hags shuffled in, the mustiness of their robes making some customers sneeze. Madam Rosmerta stalked over. "The Hog's Head serves fare more to your liking I expect," she said to them. The five of them ignored her and with much loud adjusting of chairs, made themselves at home.

Tonks took everyone in with a practiced eye before turning back to Harry. "I hope things aren't going badly."

"Well, the in-laws could be happier..."

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“They always could be happier.”

“But I’m just tired of all the discussion about dress colors and flower selection and music and... ugh.”

She laughed. “Blokes don’t go in for that; it’s true.”

“And Severus is up to something. Won’t say what it is.”

Tonks finished her butterbeer in record time and stood to get another. “That sounds like him.” She returned seconds later with a fresh drink, this time sitting back more relaxed. “You have to get to know him by guessing correctly,” she asserted. “But you would know that. How’s he coping with having one on the way?”

“I haven’t asked him,” Harry said. A group of youngsters flew by out on the street dressed all in the same color robes as though on their way to use the school Quidditch pitch.

“I’d be dying to ask him,” Tonks said. “Just see his reaction. Imagine a junior Severus. Or juniorette.”

“Junior,” Harry said.

“It is now?” she asked, grinning. “Seeing himself grow up again. That will be a change for him. Most blokes love that part of it, but I don’t know about him.”

Something about the hunched hags in the window made Harry remember the other Snape, the ragged, beaten down Snape. To distract himself, he said, “I’ve never met your parents.”

“Eh,” she said, waving her hands weakly. After a pause she said, “If you really want to, we could all go out for dinner some night.”

“I think I’d like that. Is there some reason you wouldn’t want to?” Harry had to ask.

Tonks shrugged and glanced into her mug.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

Tonks shrugged again. “No, we can go out. Pick a date.”

“Maybe after the wedding,” Harry said. “You’re coming to the wedding, right?”

“I received an invitation, in fact.”

“Oh good, I just realized I’d assumed you’d go with me.”

She laughed. “If I don’t get called on duty in an emergency, of course.”

Harry tried to keep his mind off concerns for Belinda and Elizabeth, but found it difficult. He kept clear of the topic in conversation as they sat, but he was distracted. Finally, he said, “Want to go for a ride?” to which Tonks after teasing him, agreed.



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Sunday for Hermione's party six of them settled into a corner table that afforded some privacy due to the irrational architecture of the Leaky Cauldron. Harry pushed the present he had brought across the table, gathering a sharp look from his old friend.

"Harry, what's this?"

"If you can't figure that one out," Ginny said of the beribboned package resting before them all, "I think you should disqualify yourself from teaching."

Ron gave his sister a slap on the arm.

Beside Ron, Vineet appeared slightly less than completely serene. Harry observed him in profile and hoped that angle accentuated his unhappiness. Hermione would glance at him and then glance away. Lavender caught onto this and shot Ron a knowing look, which Ron gallantly ignored or simply did not notice.

Hermione opened her tall gift and found it contained a stack of one of each kind of stationary currently sold at Flourish and Blotts.

"You'll be doing a lot of owling, I think," Harry said.

Hermione dabbed at her right eye. "I think you're right. It's going to be long months without seeing you all."

Ron said, "What's to stop us from coming up to Hogsmeade for a pint?"

"Well, I'm going to be terribly busy and I know it isn't so far away, but I suspect everyone will have other things to do."

"Yeah, I hear they lock all new teachers in the keep for the first year," Harry said. "Only the bats for company."

Hermione laughed, but her eyes were still too bright. "I feel like I'm going very far away, I'm not sure why."

Lavender said, "We'll come up to see you. Don't get all dewy-eyed about it. It's not like you're going to Durmstrang, then you would be on your own."

Harry had a feeling he understood this, that the opportunities to see Vineet were going to be cut down to nil. Vineet had not spoken at all, so Harry had no clue about his thoughts, which were apparently a matter of deep attention for him.

"It's going to be so strange, but I'm dying to get started," Hermione said. "I realized the last month how dreadfully bored I've been. I think this will put a stop to that." She went on, words flowing freely. "Headmistress said that after a few years I could be Head of House, even, Sinistra only took on the duty because there was no one else. Wouldn't that be just grand?"

"You sound like a kid again," Ron said, slight disgust clear in his voice.

"Don't you remember our first year at Hogwarts?" she asked him.

"I remember Voldemort tried to kill Harry. And then the second year he tried again..."

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“Ron, that’s not going to happen this time. Harry took care of him once and for all. Didn’t you Harry?”

Her need for reassurance surprised him. “Yes. He’s nothing now,” he insisted. Hermione smiled and announced, “I think we need another round.”



As expected, Arthur came to the training room door to fetch Harry. They were mid-practice of neutralizing curse spells frequently used for traps, like the Super-gummy Curse, the Infinite Fall Hex, and the Brain Spin Hex. Harry immediately abandoned Aaron to Tridant and Kerry Ann, who were competing vigorously on trapping each other.

“You’re next up in the dungeon. Courtroom Ten,” Mr. Weasley said before turning to go back to his office.

The torches in the dungeon always seem to burn fainter and colder than in the rest of the Ministry, suppressed perhaps by the damp, thin air. The breeze of Harry’s striding by made the tall flames spasm once before standing still again. The masked guard outside the door could have been related to a troll. He moved his ax aside and let Harry stand before the door and wait for it to be opened from the inside. All of these preparations made Harry wonder if the Ministry actually had brought the vampire from the French prison for the trial, even if Snape did not believe they would. Harry swallowed hard; he had put aside thoughts of any risk to his secrets from the trial and now those worries woke and came piling on again.

“Ah, Mr. Potter,” the presiding elder of the Wizengamot said when Harry entered. The door boomed closed behind Harry as he strode across the floor. He was relieved to find the chair in the center empty, chains slack, but not as pleased to see that Tiberius Ogden was presiding. The old wizard squinted at his papers and said, “We have questions, for you. And when we are through, the solicitor for the accused will have an opportunity to ask you anything relevant as well.” Here he gestured over to the side at the lowest seats which held a row of witches and wizards in fine black robes trimmed in velvet. The tallest one, a stately, greying dark-haired man, gave Harry a searching look with his transparent blue eyes.

Ogden went on, “Poyser DeBenedictus and his associates are here in the accused’s stead, due to security considerations. We have already dispensed with the protests over this decision. Your fellow Auror apprentice, one Barbarella Blackpool, will be called to testify as well but based on the report, she is not as reliable a witness as you have been judged to be, Mr. Potter.”

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Harry nodded in agreement and squinted into the high torches in an effort to see the faces in the tiers above him. Only twelve seats were occupied and McGonagall's seat was not one of them. On the far side a handful of reporters sat on stools added along the floor. Skeeter had her head of shining ringlets down, bracelets flashing as she wrote. Someone loudly cleared their throat during the lull while Ogden flipped through his parchments.

"Yes, Cornelius, we will be moving along presently. Now, Mr. Potter, we have read the report you signed off on, so we need not re-cover all of the events, but some points must be established to the satisfaction of this committee if we are to determine whether we should incarcerate the accused and for how long."

He went on to ask for more details about the vampire's hold over the Muggle family, asking specifics that surprised Harry, such as did the girl ever open her eyes or did she speak to the vampire. Harry had to admit she only moaned, which he was uncomfortable describing, and this must have come through because he could see amusement on at least two faces as he struggled.

"All right then," Ogden went on. "After that, Fueago was reported to attack Ms. Blackpool. You described him as 'hungry' in your report."

"Objection," DeBenedictus said, standing up, which showed him to be even taller than Harry imagined. "The witness cannot know this to be true and it is conjecture only."

Harry waited for his opportunity to speak and drawing on Snape's fine example of calm from the dinner on Friday, he said, "Fueago had his mouth open wide and he sniffed the air like a dog might when trying to find a scent. He moved jerkily, frantically," Harry also added, feeling that safe from the solicitor's reach to cancel out what he said.

Ogden finished up with his questions, which Harry strained his memory to reply to accurately. DeBenedictus stood again more deliberately, unfolding like a lamppost might he moved so rigidly. He eyed Harry as though not happy to see him there. "Why don't you take a seat, Mr. Potter," he said flatly.

"That's all right, I'll stand."

The man's voice did not modulate at all as he spoke, pitched to be heard clearly by the full assemblage while still sounding conversational. "Too familiar with that chair, are you? Well, your choice then."

Harry forced more calm on himself, having learned that this was not just defensive, but also could be used offensively and would suffice for the moment. He waited for a question as though bored.

DeBenedictus circled once, considering the tiers above them, picking out and attending to each individual peering down. Without warning, he asked, "Have you

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ever dealt with a vampire before, Mr. Potter, in the course of your Ministry work?”

“No, sir,” Harry responded politely.

“No,” the solicitor agreed like a whip-crack. “And indeed the report indicates that you did not even know the proper procedures that should be followed, such as taking a mouth swab within fifteen minutes of a vampire’s purported attack. Did you know that was in the manual your very department keeps on file?” He turned and gestured at one of the wizards seated with his colleagues. “I have with me as a supporting witness none other than Eldred Worples, foremost expert on vampires and he can attest to your manual being veracious on this point.”

He fell into a lecture mode then, as though pretending to help Harry for the next time. “You see, there can be no admissible determination of whether the vampire intended to create another vampire during the bite, if no swab is, within a short period of time, obtained and sealed in a silver box for later testing.”

Harry wanted to shrug. He nodded weakly instead.

The solicitor went on still sounding kindly informative. “If you are, as Elder Ogden indicated, the best witness the Ministry Department of Magical Law Enforcement intends to produce for this trial, I would not be sanguine about your success in these proceedings.”

Despite his heart rate rising, Harry believed he managed to hide his agitation. He imagined his department’s dismay if, because of his testimony, Fueago went free. Harry said, “He kept that Muggle family terrorized for over a year. He told me when I confronted him that he was older than the British Isles itself and therefore above or outside our laws.”

“Is that an exact quote or are you interpreting?” the solicitor asked.

Harry cast his mind back to the darkened bedroom in Burnipsbie. “He laughed when I told him he was breaking the rules and he said ‘what rules?’ ”

“And that means what?” The solicitor paced away. “Only that he found something funny and wanted more information.”

“He was mocking the whole notion,” Harry insisted.

The solicitor tossed his hand as though this was ridiculous. Harry longed to say, like you’re doing now, but he held it in. More calmly, Harry said, “When I told him there were Ministry of Magic rules he had to follow he said, and quote, ‘Do not insult me’.”

“He just simply meant that it was insulting to imply that he did not know such basic rules.”

Harry ground his teeth and took a deep breath. The solicitor beat him to speaking. “Really, Mr. Potter, your reputation notwithstanding, you are a mere trainee. You

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failed to follow the required procedures, understandable of course,” he said with small solicitous bow, “given that you haven’t learned them yet.”

Harry found the man’s ultra-friendly patronizing tone the most aggravating of all. As he lost control of the situation, Harry found control of himself slipping away as well. “He lied to the guards at the French prison.” This was lame, but it was the one thing Harry could convey with certainty.

“How do you know? You do not speak French.”

“He told me he did. When I asked him what he’d said.”

The solicitor addressed the tiers now. “How do you know he did not lie then? And besides, lying to a foreign national, especially a Frenchman, isn’t a crime in Britain.”

Harry tried not to fall prey to the frantic thoughts circling in head. He was going to fail at this and that had been unthinkable when he had walked in. He grasped at something, “You spoke to the girl. She should have been a witness too.”

An unexpectedly welcome voice came from above. “And she will be, when we settle which expert Healer to believe about her mental state.”

The solicitor, perhaps sensing an increasing advantage, moved in for the kill. “Mr. Fueago complains in fact about your assault on his person and your repeated threats to cut out his heart.”

Harry found the heat rising in his throat a comfort all of a sudden. It felt good to get truly, unabashedly angry about something worth getting offended about. “How can one possibly assault a vampire?” Harry asked. “Ask Worple there. He’ll tell you they can disappear out of our world at will or turn into a mist and slip away. How does one assault something like that?” Harry felt hemmed in by his own need to hide the truth, so he stopped there. He needed a better tactic and quick.

Harry’s turning and putting up a fight set DeBenedictus back a step. The sound of papers rustling more loudly in the tiers bolstered Harry, who did not give the solicitor a chance to reply. He laid the bait out and expected it would not be resisted. “What I saw in a Muggle house in Burnipsbie was a rogue vampire, a hungry dark creature...”

DeBenedictus raised his finger. “I objected to that already, Mr. Potter.” He turned to the tiers, “I wish it to be stricken ag...”

“Why?” Harry asked sharply, too sharply. He needed more control.

DeBenedictus turned to him and Harry found his eyes and latched on. “Why?” Harry asked again, less excitedly.

“Perhaps you are more daft than expected, Mr. Potter, but you cannot know someone’s motives if they are unspoken and sometimes not even if they are spoken...”

Harry cut him off. “I’m a Legilimens, Mr. DeBenedictus, I can indeed know a person’s motives without he or she speaking them.” He left off that this was not true

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of the Vampire.

DeBenedictus stopped, elevated finger slowly falling. It was Harry's turn and the man was stunned enough not to look away. "For example, I know you regret having to interview me of all people but are also thrilled at the possibility of besting me before this group." The man made the mistake of glancing for help at the reporters behind Harry before glancing back. Harry said, "You think Rita Skeeter should perhaps not wear such a short skirt and bright red tights to a serious official proceedings, but you think she does have nice legs."

Now DeBenedictus retreated two full steps. To the chair, he demanded, "Is he on the record as having this skill?"

Surprisingly bored sounding, Ogden waved at Fudge, who flipped through a stack of files in the trunk before him and handed one up to him. Ogden perused what must be Harry's file. While they waited, Harry, finding a patronizingly helpful tone himself, said to the solicitor, "It's the same skill your client would be using against you were the French not poisoning him into oblivion. You do realize that, I assume?"

Ogden spoke. "Yes, it is listed on Mr. Potter's internal biographical form and on his application to the Aurors program." A pause ensued before Ogden said, "Are you finished with the questioning of this witness, Mr. DeBenedictus?"

The solicitor licked his lips and had trouble speaking. "Yes." and then again with a normal voice: "Yes. I'm through." He hurried back to his files. His assistants rose up to assist even though they did not appear to be needed.

Harry thought that for a man whose primary weapon was hairsplitting to support the subtle ruse of his logic, discovering he was utterly exposed could be rightfully upsetting. As the solicitor kept his back to him, Harry's initial burst of elation simmered down into plain relief that he had survived.

Ogden spoke to Harry. "Perhaps in the interest of the defense's mental state, you should retire from the room. If we have any more questions, you will be called back. Next witness."

Harry tried not to grin. He turned to go, catching Skeeter's eye. She lifted one red calf slightly as though teasing, then shot him a look of grudging respect. Harry strode by her, not giving any ground to her either.

Back in the training room when Rodgers asked how it went, Harry asked in return, "Are we getting instruction in how to handle testimony before the Wizengamot?"

Rodgers chuckled lightly. "You will indeed, but third year."

Harry dropped into a chair. "We need it."

Still smiling Rodgers asked, "Went that badly?"

Harry felt a bit hung out on his own. "I could have used some preparation, some coaching." His voice sounded a bit blameful, so he added, "Sir."

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Rodgers held his notes to his chest and said, "First off, I thought you had enough experience to handle yourself well enough, and second, the case doesn't hinge on you, but on the girl's testimony and the lab examination of the family."

Harry was relieved to hear that. "Oh."

After a short stare at Harry, Rodgers asked, "DeBenedictus take you apart?"

"He tried," Harry conceded, still aggravated by his early performance and the fierce fighting back that losing so much ground necessitated.

Rodgers found this amusing and he continued smiling as he returned to an introduction of heat-seeking hexes.



Friday, Harry arrived home after the pubs closed and his fellows had begged off searching for other amusement. Hermione's party had inspired Harry to get the five of them to spend more time together outside the Ministry even at the risk of their fieldwork sharpness. He was glad he had because Tridant by the time they left the last place, he behaved less reserved and brightly said he would see them all on Monday.

The house hung in stillness. Harry almost simply walked up the stairs to his bedroom, but the dark hall made the candlelight from the dining room clearly apparent. He stepped down backwards and glanced inside, surprised to find Snape resting his head on the table, pillowed with his arm.

"Severus?" Harry prompted.

Snape raised his head and reached out as though to grab something, presumably the tipped-over decorative bottle, its surface of green beaded swirls plucking at the gutted candlelight.

"Did you drink all that?" Harry asked in concern.

Snape righted the bottle with noisy effort and glared at it accusingly.

"Severus?" Harry prompted again. He slipped the delicate bottle out of Snape's grasp and set it on the mantel out of harm's way. "Where's Candide?"

Snape waved in a way that indicated elsewhere. Aloud, Harry remembered, "Oh, that's right. It's her hens' night tonight, isn't it?"

Gesturing at his own chest, Snape said, "Flashing robes."

"They wore flashing robes?" Harry confirmed.

Snape nodded and gestured at his head. "Matching... flashing hats."

"That was enough to drive you to drink?" Harry asked doubtfully.

Snape's hair tossed as he shook his head. He laid his forehead on the back of his hands, flat on the table. "Didn't help," he muttered.

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Harry pulled the head chair out and sat down at it with a sigh, hands clasped between his knees. A pile of post lay unattended on the sideboard beneath the window and towering over that were the parchments and white leather planning books Candide had been using for the wedding.

“What else is the matter?” he asked.

A long pause ensued. Harry tried to be patient.

“I’m not fit for this,” came the reply that filtered up from the table.

“You’ve said that before,” Harry said. “It’s not any more convincing this time ’round.”

Snape rotated his scraggly head. Harry patted him on the shoulder. “Come on. If it were me doing this, you’d give me hell for it.”

“S different.”

“Oh, how so?”

Snape did not reply and in the silence a voice in the back of Harry’s own head reminded him how very much damage a few unleashed demons could do. Snape for all his bluster and snide insults could not touch that.

Harry patted him harder, forcing himself out of his self-rumination with effort. “Come on now... what is it?” he asked more strictly.

Snape lifted his head. His eyes were red-rimmed and his face elongated as though melting. “How did I let it get to this?”

“Severus, you can’t back out now,” Harry insisted with firmness.

“No,” Snape agreed. “The flowers are on their way to some Merlinforsaken glen somewhere or other.”

Harry blinked at that. “How much sherry was left in that bottle?” When Snape held up his fingers, Harry said, “Two bottles? No wonder.” Harry gripped Snape’s wrist. “Everything’s going to work out,” Harry heard himself say. Those words worked to sound hollow, but Harry truly believed them.

Snape murmured “Hero of Wizardry says I should go through with it... it’s not a farce.” He passed a hand through his hair and sounded the headline reader as he said, “Former Death Eater, now upright citizen.” He deflated after this pronouncement. “It’s not going to work.”

“What’s not going to work?” Harry asked sternly.

Snape again did not reply.

Harry cajoled, “Come on. You’re going to love being a dad. You’ll have a little Slytherin around the house.” A pause. “Well, I’m assuming he’ll be a Slytherin,” Harry said thoughtfully.

Snape’s poorly focussed eyes slipped farther away. “What if he is not?” he asked with dread.

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“No chance of that. Well, maybe Ravenclaw, like Candide, that’d be all right.” Harry wanted to sooth him, but found honesty getting in the way.

“Ravenclaw... that would be all right. Smart enough to stay out of trouble. As long as he isn’t a... Gryffindor.”

“Well, thanks,” Harry complained, stung.

The tired, black gaze slipped Harry’s way, but it lacked the usual razor keenness. “You think you’re still a Gryffindor?” Snape asked with slurred curiosity.

“Yeah.”

“Hm,” came the ambiguous reply that indicated only that this topic was of continuing interest. Snape gave up on it and scrubbed his eyes. “You don’t have anything to drink, do you? Stashed somewhere perhaps? Winky refused to fetch more.”

Harry laughed. “I’d have pulled it out for myself already if I did. You need your pink stuff, not more drink.”

“I want to be drunk,” Snape insisted. “Why does Candide get all the... fun?”

“I’ll take you out if you want,” Harry said. “I could get a crew together. McGonagall, for example, would pay to see you like this. She’d buy a few more rounds, surely.”

Snape broke out laughing, a harsh, odd sound. He then returned his head to resting on his arm.

“Do you want to be found like this or do you want me to brew you up some pink stuff?”

“I don’t care. I don’t care about her bloody parents. I don’t care about this.”

“I don’t believe you,” Harry criticized. “Severus Snape and his all important dignity would care whether he were found snookered by his wife to be.” Harry stood and propped his hands on his hips. “Are you playing for pity?”

Snape’s head came up, eyes blaring. Harry had pushed too far.

“Sorry,” Harry quickly said and reached for Snape’s shoulder, but it was jerked out of reach. In making this sudden move, which tipped the chair onto two legs, Snape unbalanced himself and tumbled sideways onto the floor.

Harry came around to help him up, apologizing again.

“Leave it be, Potter,” Snape said while pressing himself up with his hands, splayed wide and pale on the dark wooden floor.

It took the combination of his last name and the tone to make Harry back off and let Snape right himself rather than give him reason to escalate into real viciousness.

Snape sat back in the chair, even more hunched. “Leave me be,” he said.

Harry leaned closer. “Please don’t do this,” he pleaded, getting no variance in Snape staring straight ahead. There was nothing for it. Harry said, “You’re afraid

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it's going to be as bad for your son as it was for you? It isn't you know. But that's it, isn't it?"

"Merlin," Snape replied as though stunned.

Harry said to reassure him: "No, you're not really that transparent. That was a lucky guess."

This drew quite a glare from Snape.

"That very last wasn't a guess," Harry quickly explained. "I just know you that well at least."

He re-grabbed Snape's wrist, which he was allowed to do, and said, "It's going to be better this time. You'd do fine on your own, I know you would, but you don't even have to. We're both here to help you. You act like this is still just you. That's the biggest thing this adoption's taught me is that I don't have to go through anything alone. We're in this together and after Sunday it'll be all three of us. You think we'd let you mess up that badly?"

Snape tugged his arm free and rested his cheek on his arm again.

Harry gave up, assuming the alcohol was hopelessly in the way of reasoning. "We both love you, you know. If you haven't figured out yet how to deal with that, you better do so right quick." At the door, Harry added, "If you want something to sober up, give a shout; I'll be in the library."

Harry perused the crammed bookshelves, pulling out books based on their color, not really in the mood to read anything for long. He wanted to sleep but felt he should keep watch and he could do so from here.

When Candide returned, Harry could see her robes flickering all the way to the walls of the hall out of the corner of his eye.

"You waited up?" he heard her ask Snape.

Harry hurried that way and from the dining room door said, "No, he's drunk off his arse."

She gaped at Harry. "Severus is?"

Harry nodded. Snape had not moved. "Maybe he's passed out now," Harry said.

Candide prodded a shoulder with no response. "Maybe we should move him to the couch."

Harry pulled out his wand, but she stopped him with. "He hates being hovered."

So the two of them, with the addition of a Feather-light Charm, carried his dead weight to the hall where it fit in better on one of the long couches than at the table. Harry sat down with a sigh on the other couch and Candide sat directly beside. Stale pipe-smoke drifted off her, but no scent of alcohol.

"What happened?" Candide asked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I wasn’t here,” Harry said. “Hey, Severus!” Harry shouted and when there was only a twitch in response, he decided it was safe to talk. “He’s doubting himself and once he got started I expect drink only made it worse.”

“Severus doubting himself,” she uttered as though trying out a string of foreign words.

“Oh, don’t let him fool you,” Harry said, figuring that Snape had given up any rights to retain the illusion of his posturing about the same time he lost consciousness. “He doubts himself all the time. That’s the usual reason he gets angry, when he does. Well, people just annoy him to, but if he’s really worked up, it’s probably something in his own head.”

She stared at Harry as she took that in and then looked back at Snape.

Harry asked, “How was your party?”

She smiled. “Oh, excellent... brill. We had a great time, Dublin has a very nice Magical Corridor along the river. Have you been there?”

Harry shook his head, trying to hide his amusement at her almost bubbly shift in demeanor.

She sighed again and clasped her hands together out straight. “Well, it’s nice to know even he has a breaking point.”

“He has lots,” Harry said, standing up “Why do you think he works so hard to hide them? I’ll be right back.” Determined to right Snape so he they could all go to sleep, Harry collected the ingredients for his favorite potion, a foamy pink liquid that rendered one free of immediate and past effects due to over-consumption of alcohol.

Harry set up a burner on the floor to mix up one of the two key ingredients which they had run out of. He poured in a splash of ground cardamom, blue poppy seeds and horntail horn steeped in vodka. When this evaporated and left a sticky residue, he added bright blue powdered robin’s egg and mountain goat milk. He stirred for a while, becalmed by having something concrete to do.

“Did Severus teach you how to brew?” Candide asked from where she reclined on the couch, one hand resting on her belly.

“Yeah,” Harry admitted.

Minutes later it was finished and when poured into the Enchanted Mineral Water, it foamed a promising pink. Without preamble, Harry, bottle in hand, tugged Snape to a sitting position. His head lolled before it straightened up.

“Drink this,” Harry commanded.

Snape at first seemed to want to resist, but he took the bottle and took a swig.

“It’s hot,” Snape observed. He rubbed his face. “Did you just brew that?”

“Yes.”

He swung his legs to the side. “As long as you didn’t poison me.”

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“Such confidence he has in me,” Harry said, hovering the brewing setup back to the toilet.

In Harry’s absence, Snape forced his tired eyes to focus on Candide, who had sat straight as well.

“Have a good evening?” he asked.

“Had a wonderful one. Looks like you did to.”

Snape tried once to speak but then said, “Your sarcasm is not welcome right now.” She stood up and sat down beside him, arms enfolding him. “All right now?”

“Better,” he admitted.

Harry stepped back in, saw them there, appeared to think he should sneak off but sat down opposite them instead. “You make a cute couple,” Harry said.

“You did find more booze,” Snape accused him. “Otherwise there would be absolutely no excuse for saying such preposterous thing.”

Harry laughed. “Oh, come on. Relax a little.” With his eyes he apologized for provoking him. He assumed the message was received because Snape suddenly looked away.

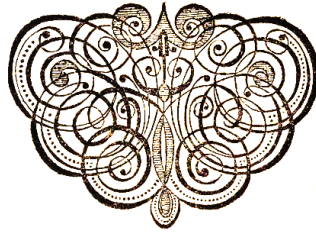
“Well,” Candide announced. “I’m tuckered out. It was a long evening. Ready to sleep for real rather than just passing out?”

“If I must,” Snape said, standing with her. He halted their departure long enough to turn and say. “Fine job on the brewing.”

“Anytime,” Harry replied.

Author’s Notes: chapter 9 is in rough shape so give me at least 10 days. I will soon add a progress bar to my website at darkirony dot com so you can check how things are progressing.

CHAPTER NINE



FORTUNE FAVORS

Harry stretched his arms as he strode through the house; they were stiff from a real workout instead of field shadowing. Rodgers had decided suddenly that they were all softening up too much and had set aside Saturday afternoon for weights and some Eastern Arts, demonstrated by Vineet. Harry's elbow twinged, reminding him that he had discovered the hard way that morning that Tridant also had a bit of background in this. He and Vineet, for the rest of the session, had circled each other as though sizing one another up in a new way. Harry grinned at the memory of it as he opened his post.

Under a large brochure declaring Ragnarth's Roustabout – Dangerous pet training is easier than you think! and more affordable than you might imagine! he found a package from Hermione. It contained a stack of books she had found on the new book carousel at Flourish and Blotts during one last round of book buying before school started. The note spellotaped to the stack indicated she feared he may not be able to do without them. Chuckling at his friend's ongoing proclivity for educating him, Harry picked up the top one, a thin book with a title of constantly fading and regenerating ink. It read *Spell Dissipation: Current Thinking*.

Harry was deeply involved in this book – actually a collection of notes compiled during a meeting of ISMS or International Society of Mage Studies – when Snape stepped in and jerked his head as though Harry should leave.

Harry closed the book and stood, taking it along.

Snape said, "Don't you have friends you should be out with?"

Harry scratched his jaw. "I suppose."

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Brusquely, Snape said, "Candide will be home shortly and I have something I wish to discuss with her, alone."

"I can go out," Harry said amiably. His thoughts immediately leapt to doing more remote vision practice with Kali. He slipped by Snape, saying, "I'll be back later. I can go to the Burrow for dinner; Ron always tells me his mum expects him to invite me."

Snape gestured dismissively that that was acceptable. Harry kept his curiosity in check as he put his things together and collected his pet from her cage. She bit him because he woke her up and he threatened her with sending her to Ragnarh. Either she understood him or simply caught his disapproval, because she rubbed the injured spot with the side of her head. Harry stuffed her into his pocket, where she curled up and most likely went back to sleep.

Before he departed, Harry stepped to the doorway of his room to catch a glimpse of the hall. He spent a breath studying Snape's self-absorbed pose as he stood before the couches, then Disapparated before Snape could chance to look up at him.

Ron was not home yet from Gringotts but Ginny sat at the long table with Weasley Wizard Weezes boxes stacked before her. Her hunched and involved scribbling on a large sheet of parchment, hair veiling her task, drew Harry that way, unable to stomach even more curiosity.

Ginny looked up at his approach. "Hi, Harry." She went back to carefully darkening the lines around a giant label reading Galloping Galoshes. The Gs sprouted little running feet sticking out the bottom.

"How are things at the Twins' shop?"

Vexed, she said, "They won't let me help with anything dangerous, so I've been redoing the packaging. There's a lot of neat stuff that gets overlooked and the peak Hogwarts shopping season is upon us. You wouldn't believe how disorganized those two are. Verity used to straighten up, but she gave up doing that like a year ago."

Making conversation, Harry asked, "How do the new students look? Have you seen any of them come into the shop?"

"They look small," she said, making Harry laugh. "And their squeaky voices get on my nerves. And I think I could sort them as well as the hat, if not better."

"I'll let McGonagall know, in case the hat finally gives up."

Ginny raised her head again, eyes shining. "THAT'D be fun. I could sit in a big gold chair at the front and point at each tiny student. YOU, you're a Hufflepuff. Your shoes aren't tied, they're knotted, and you're holding your wand backwards. YOU, come on, those glasses could ignite a forest fire, RAVENCLAW!" She laughed. "Ah, a girl can dream."

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Mrs. Weasley came in, and fussed over Harry before fetching him milk and a snack even though dinner was imminent.

Quietly, Ginny said, "Gosh, Mum is out of control where you're concerned."

Harry nibbled on a broken bit of shortbread and said, "You get special treatment too."

"That's because I'm the only girl," she stated as fact.

"It's a good thing," Harry said, thinking aloud.

Ginny erased some stray lines from inside her letters and reached for a bottle of brown ink. "Why?"

Not quite there, because he was seeing a vision of some other place, like this one but in critical ways, different, Harry said, "Because you'd be the seventh son."

"I always thought that be fun," Ginny said.

Harry's skin chilled as though an arctic breeze had slipped through his robes. "Maybe it doesn't matter," he said. He wasn't sure what he was seeing, it was more a sense, an alternative alignment of things that composed a reasonable whole of their own.

Ginny set the pen down. "Maybe what doesn't matter? Harry you are getting all Trelawney on me here. I don't like it."

Harry dropped his gaze from the arched window over the door, but the sense persisted. "Maybe it doesn't matter that you aren't a boy, I mean," Harry felt he should responsibly explain, just in case it might matter some day.

"You think I'm a sorcerer then?" she half-teased, clearly wanting to lighten the subject.

Harry who had heard that word from Snape in reference to himself, just shrugged. She waved a hand around, "Whoosh, look, a palace in place of the Burrow. Up, nope. Guess I'm not." She picked up her quill again and returned to carefully outlining the letters.

"Do you want the running feet to move?" Harry asked as she inked over the pencil lines, complete with little jagged treads on the boots.

She sat back. "I'd love the running feet to move. You know how to do that?"

Harry smiled and slid the drawing over to himself, careful not to upset the row of ink bottles. "I spent a summer trying to remake the Marauders' Map. 'Course I can make the feet move."



Back in Shrewsthorpe, Snape approached Candide as she sorted through the pile of parchments on the sideboard, unrolling each in search of something.

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“Oh, hi,” she said, vaguely startled by his silent approach. She picked up and waved a pink envelope. “My old chum from accounting school finally replied. She’s been living in Paris, or so I thought, but the reply came from Cape Town.” She laughed. “No wonder it took so...”

Snape took the fluttering letter from her and placed it near a pile of similarly sliced open envelopes, then took the current parchment away as well. “I have something I wish to show you,” he stated.

This grabbed her full attention. “What is it?”

His reply was to lead the way to the hall where he gestured that she should sit. He removed something from his pocket and handed it to her.

“It’s a rock wrapped with wire?” She queried, holding up a jet-black rock bundled twice around the middle with metal cord.

Snape tapped the rock and the cord fell away. Candide caught half the rock as it split and a ring that fell out of the middle.

“Hey!” she said, surprised. She scooped up the other half of the rock as it tried to roll loudly away under the couch. “Look at that, a golden ring!”

Snape sat beside and took the rock halves away and then the ring as well, so he could hold it up by the prongs of the empty setting. “This is no ordinary ring formed as the earth was. I made it.” His eyes positively gleamed as he placed the ring back in her palm.

“You made the ring?” she confirmed.

“I made the gold,” Snape corrected, voice low.

Candide stared at the ring while pushing it around her palm with a fingertip. “How does one make gold?”

“Out of lead. It is a base-metal transformation,” Snape replied, clearly enjoying the explanation.

She stared at him. “You’ve been doing alchemy.”

Snape reached into his pocket again and pulled forth a small deep red stone, a bit large for a ring, but with a spell, the prongs of the fitting were convinced to take hold of it. As though explaining to a student, he said, “There was only sufficient ingredients left by my old mentor for a small stone. Easily enough to make the ring and...” He held the ring to the light. “Thirty years of elixir. Perhaps forty if one is stingy.”

Her face shifted, eyes widening. “You made a Philosopher’s Stone?” She accepted the ring as he held it out and also held it up to the lamp. “How... I didn’t know there really was such a thing!”

Dryly, he said, “How else could I make gold?” He sat back casually and breathed out as though boring of the topic. “I imagined such a stone to be far more symbolic

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than a mere diamond, which is nearly worthless in comparison, and I have observed over the last month that burning time and money on pointless symbolic things was the purpose of the marriage ceremony. If not, it has no purpose.”

She shot him a playfully dismayed look and slipped the ring on. “Stone’s a... bit big, isn’t it?”

“Once you decide to use it for elixir it won’t be.” He sat forward and lifted her hand to hold the ring out before them both. “But I recommend waiting until you are no longer pregnant. I have no idea what the effects might be. At best you would simply remain so longer. The consequences could be unpredictable, though.”

She pulled the ring close and closed her hand over it. “No, I’d definitely wait.” She held her hand out again. The stone was uneven but deep, so it caught the light and magnified it. “It’s lovely though.”

He held out his hand. “I’ll keep it for now if you wish. Bad luck, isn’t it, wearing the ring ahead of time?”

“That’s the dress,” she corrected, grinning. But with a vigorous tug and twist she pulled the ring off. “Fits perfectly.”

“I measured. Of course,” Snape intoned.

“You’re a devil, you know that,” she accused with affection.

“Slytherin, but why mince words?” he asked while fingering the ring thoughtfully.

She rocked sideways to bump shoulders. “Are you ready for this? I mean, you’ve been working day and night on the ring.”

“I will never be ready, so it is no matter.”

“As long as you’re sober when they make you sign the certificate, so it’s legal.”

Snape slipped the ring away in a pocket and tapped it with a Nonobscundus Charm. “You said you did not want a binding spell. Is that still true?” his tone was too even as he asked this.

“I don’t want one. I didn’t think you would.”

“I don’t. It is a terrible ongoing coercion.”

She grabbed her knee and rocked back beside him. “Some find it romantic, that total commitment.”

“They deserve each other, then,” Snape uttered. “And the hell the spell will put them through before one of them goes mad or they find a wizard powerful enough to cancel it, if that is possible.”

Candide smiled into her sleeve. “If you even wondered why I didn’t ask your opinion on flowers, now you know.”

“I don’t mind flowers,” Snape corrected.

This caught her. “You don’t?”

FORTUNE FAVORS

“Not at all,” he replied. “They are composed of wonderfully useful potion ingredients.”

This brought on a real laugh. “You should let that sense of humor out more. Usually you only use it for sarcasm.”

He put an arm around her and she fit well nestled there. “It would ruin my reputation if I did that.”



Harry did not need to move from his spot at the Weasley kitchen table; dinner and the Weasley family gathered around, except the twins and Charlie, who could not make it. Ron sat beside Harry and immediately began critiquing his sister’s drawing, which Ginny put a stop to by pointing out that Harry had helped with it. When Harry looked over from Ron it was to find Molly insisting that Percy sit across from him. Percy had a distant, hard expression that lacked the normal pinching or smugness, making Harry wonder if he wasn’t Moody again. Percy tore his eyes from Harry and watched Mr. Weasley enter and sit down after giving Molly a hug.

When he looked back at Harry, Harry boldly said to him, “Not yourself today again, are you?”

After a moment’s consideration of the meaning of this, Percy’s eyes flickered to a more normal alarm before shifting away, back to Mr. Weasley, making Harry believe it really was Percy and that he understood that Harry knew Moody had impersonated him for his Darkness Test. At least, Harry hoped he understood that.

“He comes to dinner a lot,” Ginny whispered in Harry’s ear with more than a hint of annoyance.

Harry wished he knew who had taught Percy to Occlude his mind. Harry, feigning a friendly tone, asked him, “How are things in the Department of Mysteries?”

Slightly mocking, Percy replied, “Mysterious. What else would they be?”

Beside Harry, Ron laughed as though this were a real joke. “Mysterious,” he echoed and laughed more.

“Get any special training for that?” Harry asked.

“Quite a bit,” came the flat reply. They were staring each other down now, both holding their thoughts obscured. Harry decided the game was stupid and turned to Ron to ask about his day. When the dishes were being passed and Molly asked Arthur how his day was, Harry noticed Percy set down the gravy without serving himself any and turn his attention that way. Harry realized with a jolt that he and Percy could both pry into the minds of anyone at the table, but that perhaps of the two of them, only Harry was scrupulous enough not to do it.

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When Percy tore his gaze from the head of the table and picked the gravy back up and passed it without taking any, despite being about to do so before, Harry asked innocently, “Learn anything?”

Percy spent an inordinate time finding a reply, which attracted the attention of most of those seated at their area of the table. “Research... is what we do,” he said, quoting from something, most likely. “And the Mysteries, like Enforcement, offers considerable training.”

Harry took his uneasy response to mean that he did not like getting caught out. For his part, Harry wondered how he was going to warn Mr. Weasley without getting pinched between his boss’ strong loyalty to his family and his less strong loyalty to Harry.

Harry had not worked out how to handle this by the time he begged off that he had to go home because the next day was full of helping set up for the wedding on Monday.

It was Ginny who asked, “Why Monday?”

Harry, about to depart, felt the need to defend Candide on this point. “It’s auspicious, according to the constellations, both their horoscopes,” he explained. In his mind’s eye he saw all the astronomical charts and plots that Candide had worked out in one of those white leather books.

“She had a joint chart made up? Those are pricey.”

“She did it herself,” Harry said. “Said it was just like accounting, only with parabolas, or something. Took her ages to work it all out. And the glen of her choice was free that day. For a weekend, they’d have had to wait until the kid was in Hogwarts, or so she said.”

Ginny laughed. “Maybe I should rent a place now and find a boyfriend later then.”

From the kitchen, Molly loudly encouraged, “Good idea, dear.”

Ginny put her hand over her face.

“Well, you better get going,” Ron said suddenly from where he hunched over the chess board across from Bill. When Harry waited, curious, he explained in a whisper, “Mum’s got you pegged for Ginny, you know.”

Ginny stuffed her hands violently into crossed mode and glared at her brother, a blush topping off the effect. “Ron...” she threatened.

Rescuing her, Harry said, “That’s all right, Severus does too,” to which Ginny gaped, “Really?”

“I really have to go now,” Harry said.

Ginny pulled her artwork closer and said, “I have to finish this so I can get back to working on that sorcerer bit.”

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“What?” Ron and Bill both asked in unison.

“Harry said I could be a sorcerer.”

The two Weasley sons turned to Harry with dismay. “What?” Bill asked Harry. Harry shrugged. “Got to go. Really.”

At home, Harry found Candide and Snape playing cards on a the stained spare door from upstairs, hovered expertly between the couches.

“Not too early, am I?” Harry asked, feeling vaguely left out even though his evening had been full of company.

“Not at all,” Candide said brightly. “Show him what you made, Severus, or has he already seen it?”

Snape’s hair fell forward as he fished in his pocket after touching it with his wand. “He has not.” Snape held out a ring with a rather gaudily large stone.

Harry accepted it and stared at it, recognizing the color and the unusually curved faces of the asymmetrical facets. “It’s a Philosopher’s Stone,” Harry breathed, stunned.

“Severus made it,” Candide declared proudly.

Harry lifted his eyes to peer at Snape over the ring. “You did? I didn’t know you knew how.”

Snape held his hand out for the ring and Harry relinquished it. “It isn’t so much the knowledge, which can be pieced together by anyone diligent enough, as well as practiced with deciphering the coded writing of the arcane, paranoid mind, the real sticking point is the extraordinary ingredients required. I was left just enough by Albus, it turns out.” He studied the ring. “Much cheaper to make gold than to buy it. Back in the times when Galleons were more than dipped in gold it would have been easy to obtain sufficient metal.”

Harry nodded vaguely. The stone made him uneasy and he was not hiding it well.

“Does it bother you?” Snape asked bluntly.

Harry tipped one shoulder. “Just bad memories,” he replied, not wanting to dampen their enthusiasm, or Snape’s pride. “Voldemort can’t make use of it anymore.”

Snape said, “It isn’t a large enough stone to raise the dead. I think that is why Albus felt secure in keeping the ingredients.”

Harry said, “Maybe he worried he would need to stay alive a little longer, so he kept them just in case.”

Candide folded her cards together and set them down. “Is that how he lived so long?”

Snape nodded. “With judicious use of it and a little luck, you too could live to be a hundred and sixty.”

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Candide pulled her head back in surprise, but took the ring and examined it. “If I got rid of all the mirrors in the house, maybe. Otherwise no. Men look much better at that age than women. Women turn into white prunes... men turn into sages.” She held the ring out to Snape. “You should use it; you’re older than me. That way I can catch up.” As he accepted it, she changed her mind. “Or Harry should use it. Wizardom needs him around longer than you or I.”

Snape held the ring up for Harry again, but Harry did not take it. “No, keep it. It’s probably the most valuable ring in the world.”

Candide held out her hand, fingers splayed. “You’ll have to charm it on for me... so it can’t come off.”

Snape shook his head. “In that case a thief would have to kill you for it and that would hardly be worth it.”

“There are lots of theft-repelling charms,” Harry offered.

Snape nodded. “We will manage something,” he promised Candide.



Swaying decorations and the clashing scents of flowers spiraled in Harry’s head Sunday night as he slipped fitfully into sleep. The continuously rotating streamers and the bright columns of the three-foot, white candles shifted into the dark, smoke marred walls and torches of Courtroom Ten. He was trying to explain something to the Wizengamot, trying to convince them of something, but he was doing a very poor job of it. The members’ shadowed faces peered down at him from tier upon tier rising up until they tilted so the parchments before them must slide forward onto the center floor, but somehow did not.

Harry scanned for a familiar face, but found when he peered closely, each face was that of Umbridge, frog-like smile stretched unnaturally long and sinister. Grey dirt covered the floor and discolored the bottom edge of Harry’s new robes. Shaking them raised clouds of choking dust. In the center of the floor, half buried in a saw-grass hillock, rose the chair and chained into it was Snape, glaring defiantly straight ahead. Beside the chair, Candide, in her tulip-like wedding dress, tugged uselessly at the chains, glancing about frequently to check if anyone noticed her doing this.

Harry struggled to find something convincing to say. Vernon Dursley approached, as tall as DeBenedictus but not any thinner, so he seemed akin to Hagrid. Dust clouds stirred around his menacing footsteps as he approached. Harry’s feet tried to back off, but he forced them to remain in place by reminding himself that he’d been willing to sacrifice himself to Voldemort previously, so he should be willing to do the same to Mr. Dursley.

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Dursley ranted about freaks and evil magic. From the chair, Snape hissed at him, snake-like, revealing long, sharp teeth.

Harry woke at this. Kali was hissing from her cage. Disoriented, Harry sat up and pushed the chaos of the dream down. The musty draft in the room drifted off and Kali settled back into her rag pile.

Harry dropped back onto his pillow, thinking he should not have eaten quite so many of the fire-biscuits while hanging decorations. He stared at the grey ceiling. In the dimness the patching was not apparent; the room appeared unmarred.

Harry's eyelids refused to stay open and he was sucked unwillingly back into the dream, where the troll-cousin guard approached, sparks scattering off the ax he dragged behind him. He released the chains on the chair and with a heave of his great arm, shoved Snape in Harry's direction.

Harry helped right his guardian, but found as he did so, not his Snape, but the one from the other dream, the bedraggled and defeated Snape with eyes of hazardous black ice. Harry glanced around the courtroom for help but everyone was departing. Only McGonagall turned to him and when she spoke it revealed pointed ivory teeth. Harry grabbed hold of Snape's robes and tugged him to the door, wanting only to escape, but as soon as he stepped into the corridor they Disappeared away.

Harry stared down at the trodden trash lining the road where they had arrived, and with dread glanced up to find he stood before the house in Weaver's End. Snape had hold of his wrist and Candide's and now pulled them toward the house.

"You're home now too, I suppose," he said with vague disgust.

Harry tried to resist, to pull back against the force applied to his arm. The door to the house opened and Pettigrew, wearing an oversized tea towel, stood there. He reached out a hand and the pound notes he clutched caught the breeze and fluttered away to mix with the rubbish.

Harry woke to scrambling in his pyjama pockets for a wand. Even after it was clear he lay in his own room, he took up his wand from under the pillow and held it, just to feel the warm hum of it against his fingertips. He sighed into the darkness, a noise accompanied by Kali climbing inside her cage.

Fully awake, Harry slipped out of his warm, welcome bed and over to his pets. As quietly as possible, he released them for company. The metallic sounds of turning Kali's cage latch rang starkly in the dark bedroom, making him pause to listen for footsteps before moving to the next cage.

Cuddled between his hand and his breast, he carried Kali to the window and sat on the trunk beneath it to stare out at the streetlamp, which barely illuminated even the full width of the small road outside. A handful of bright stars glittered beyond the black branches of the stout trees across the road. Kali circled twice, brushing her

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soft body fur on his hand, before settling in so her only movement was the nearly imperceptible expansion and contraction of her breathing.

Her contentedness drew him in, but he felt compelled to remain alert. In his sleepy mind he needed to remain on guard to prevent that other place from encroaching upon this one, tonight of all nights. Harry rested his sweat-slippery wand on the windowsill so he would not drop it if he fell asleep; it barely fit there lengthwise. He gripped his pet with both hands, and stared out at the paltry pool of light on the tarmac beyond the crumbling garden wall.

Snape, unable to sleep for his own reasons, peered some time later through the doorway of Harry's room. A form huddled at the window, snowy owl perched on its shoulder. Orange-glowing fug haloed Harry's nose where it rested against the window pane. He looked small again, communing with his pets in this inexplicable vigil before the cold and breath-clouded window. Wanting time to understand, Snape did not immediately wake him. Careful not to disturb Harry, he leaned close to the window. Other than the empty circle of lit road and the two wan lights on the station platform, nothing was visible outside. The scene gave a sense that the world ended beyond that, no path in or out except via the starlit sky.

Snape straightened and held out three fingers for the owl, who tilted her head curiously but stepped onto them and accepted a ride back to the top of her cage. He waved one of the bedside lamps up and examined Harry from this new vantage point, wondering again why he sat in such an uncomfortable position when his bed was a mere seven feet away. Propped there, neck bent too far to the side and down, mouth parted, he did not appear even remotely powerful. As he stepped forward to lay a hand on Harry's shoulder, he fixed that much-needed notion firmly: this was first and foremost just a young man.

"Harry," Snape prompted.

Harry's head lifted and he blinked at the window in confusion. Snape had a hold of his thoughts and saw many similar vigils: summer nights away from Hogwarts waiting for owls, waiting for his friends, waiting for any hoped-for improvement in his situation. This past receded in a blink, and Harry shivered.

"Why are you out of bed?" Snape asked, not unkindly.

Harry's thoughts were Occluded then, so the only hint to an unobscured answer was in his brow curling worriedly.

"I had a bad dream." Harry stood then with the easy unfolding only the young can exhibit. He stopped after a second thought to grab up his wand, taking care to hold Kali against his chest.

"Do you wish to talk about it?" Snape asked.

Harry passed him on the way to the bed, where he slipped his wand inside the

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bottom of the pillowcase before settling in with his back against the headboard. “I don’t want to bother you with it, tonight of all nights.”

Snape stood beside the bed, considering before saying: “You are no less important than you were.”

“I know that. But you have a big day tomorrow.” Harry shivered and shrugged the duvet up to his shoulders.

Snape laid a hand on his face. “You are a little cold, but I expect that is from the window.”

“It was an ordinary dream,” Harry insisted.

“Not a nightmare?” Snape suggested.

“Well, maybe. But it’s no matter.”

Snape said, “I wish you would tell me,” but it lacked command.

Harry lifted Kali out of the covers and placed her on the duvet to pet her. She stretched her membranous wings and shook the fur of her body out straight before sniffing the air in Snape’s direction with her tiny black nose.

Harry said dismissively, “It’s just stuff that’s been happening.”

“No Weaver’s End in that case?”

Harry did not reply.

More firmly, Snape said, “I will allow you such an exception this evening, but not the morrow and not after.”

“Fair enough,” Harry said. “Good luck tomorrow,” he added at Snape’s retreat.

“Luck cannot favor me,” Snape said.

“I don’t believe that,” Harry said.

A small, knowing smile transformed Snape’s lips. “Remind me sometime to tell you about the Felix Felicis potion and a foolhardy brewer who made the mistake of misusing it.”



Harry attended his training in the morning and was given the afternoon off, which he did not think he needed due to a full previous day of helping setup for the wedding, but his afternoon was full of last minute changes to the decorations, like swapping the gold bows for silvery green, and rearranging the placesettings in the dinner tent.

“Thanks, Harry,” Candide said with real feeling when he announced things completed. Ruthie gave him a wink, which she did frequently. Candide pulled a watch from her pocket and stared at it the way one may the photo of a sworn enemy. She seemed to remember something and from another pocket, pulled out a charm on a thin chain and held it out to Harry. “Make sure Severus puts that in his pocket.”

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Harry held the tiny figure up to the bright ceiling. It was a terrier worked in pewter. "What's this?"

"It symbolizes loyalty," Candide said, already absorbed in a long, long list written on narrow parchment.

Pattering on the broad, white tent indicated that the intermittent light rain had chosen to return again.

"That's supposed to be good luck, right?" Candide asked Harry.

"Of course," Harry assured her, knowing no such thing.

"I told her that it was already," Carolyn complained. "She didn't believe me."

"She knows Harry wouldn't lie," Ruthie said, throwing in another wink, which made Harry wish he had simply said he did not know. This made him wonder what is was about weddings that led one to make up nice answers that were not necessarily true as often as he found himself doing.

Candide pulled a rolled parchment from the cluster in her hand and held it out. "Harry, can you mix this together... put some in bowls on each table?"

Harry peered at the list, seeing oak moss, larkspur, and carnation oil in a glance. "This is a potion?"

She tapped his arm with the parchment bundle. "You're as bad as Severus. It's a potpourri. The supplies are in the boxes under the table. Bad luck to mix them ahead of time, evil spirits can get into it. Or just pixies, which would be worse. And here are your boutonnières, make sure Severus gets the rose."

The pattering on the tent grew louder as Harry cleared a table to work at. Rather than risk misplacing the boutonnières in the midst of all the other boxes of flowers, he pinned both on himself.

"Speaking of luck," Ruthie teased. "Only an accountant would chose a Monday to get married. The guests can better get blotto on a Friday or Saturday, you know."

Sounding like she held her nose, Carolyn countered, "Monday for wealth, Tuesday for health... Friday for crosses, Saturday for no luck at all."

Ruthie opined, "You operate on a very short week."

"Wednesday is the best," Carolyn said, "but Candy hates my pointing that out. She'll need the wealth Those who in July to wed, must labor for their daily bread."

Harry resisted shaking his head as he poured white angel wings into little spherical bowls, spilling some because the opening in the top was too small. He pulled his wand to spell them where they belonged, but Candide said, "Dusting the table with petals is fine. Do it to all of them."

The wind played with the clear plastic tent walls, snapping them inward and outward successively. Inside, however, barely a breeze passed through. Shrugging, Harry better spread the spill out to make it look intentional.

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Candide disappeared, maids in tow, and Harry turned to find Lupin, in fine robes with a strangely Muggle cut to them, Pamela beside him. They peered about at the decorations. "I expected green," Lupin said, rocking back with his hands in his pockets to stare up at the streamers running to the tent peak. "But I expected more snakes."

Harry placed the last bowl on the last table and adjusted the spilled petals with a practiced flick of his fingers. "Snakes were right out," Harry said, laughing. "Talk about bad luck."

Lupin sniffed the bowl on the nearest table. "Never thought I'd see this day."

Harry preferred not to address such notions after the previous night's dreams. "It's good you could come," he said instead.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for... all the flower petals in Holland," he finished fancifully.

Others wandered in, shaking raindrops from their dress robes. Harry wandered over to Elizabeth and her mother. Elizabeth said quietly, "I convinced mum that since you're neighbors, we really should come. Not sure we can stay for the party."

"That's all right," Harry assured her, glad to see her.

Elizabeth examined the table-crowded tent and said, "Guess the other tent is for the ceremony."

"Yeah, come on. I should see that everything is set there."

Guests were slowly filling the white beribboned folding chairs. Harry returned McGonagall's dignified wave from a cluster of Hogwarts teachers. Hagrid sat off to the side on one of the trunks the tents had been packed in.

"Hullo, Harry!" he shouted, voice shaking the raindrops in a noisy rush from the tent roof.

"Hi, Hagrid," Harry returned.

When he turned, Harry found himself faced with Shazor and Gretta. Shazor appeared to be sizing up Candide's side of guests. Harry withstood what was certain to be too many firm handshakes that evening and found them seats before the teachers.

When the guests were all seated, including Hermione, who a bit shyly joined the teachers, Harry stood at the back, just outside the main part of the tent, under an overhand with a large flap that allowed in the mist of the rain. Lupin saw him there and slipped out of his row to join him, Pamela ducking to follow.

"Bride is always late," Pamela opined.

"How about the groom?" Harry countered.

Lupin glanced around. "Where's Severus?"

Harry shrugged. "I think he'll show," he offered, finding certainty in that based almost entirely on the ring. He had not seen Snape all afternoon, partly this was

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necessity so the bride and groom could avoid an unfortuitous meeting, but Harry would feel better if he had glimpsed Snape at least once.

The assembled inside were chatting quietly, showing no restlessness. Harry felt he floated above the trampled grass, or perhaps it was just the way the light came through the tent equally from all sides as though the world itself were aglow. Outside, the quaint glen surrounded them, unobserved.

An Apparition pop! made them both turn to the tent flap but it was not Snape, it was a charcoal smeared little wizard in a smashed top hat, carrying a telescoping bottle-brush broomstick.

"I'm not late, am I?" the man asked, sounding very concerned.

Harry was about to ask who he was, in that instant wondering if the man thought somehow that he was the groom.

Lupin said, "No, just in time. Go on in."

The man half danced his way inside with a little skip and jump and stood at the back. Harry could see his shadow on the rear of the tent, broom standing up beside him like a furry umbrella.

"What was that?" Harry sidled over to Lupin to ask.

He rocked up on his toes. "The chimney sweep, of course. Now we can start."

"Right. Just need a groom."

"You're the best man, you know. If Severus doesn't show you have to take his place."

"I don't believe you," Harry said, despite believing pretty much all the other silly things he had heard the last two days, including the part about the shoe shaped cake that Candide was supposed to get symbolically hit over the head with.

Lupin just grinned.

"Tonks wouldn't like that," Harry said, which caused the Auror to appear from inside.

"Wouldn't like what?" she asked, hooking her arm through Harry's. She wore knee-length pink robes that were longer in the back than front.

Harry raised his eyes from her exposed legs with some effort. "If I had to marry the bride in Severus' stead."

"Oh, that's not true. You're really here to help fight off the bride's family."

"That I'm well aware of," Harry stated tiredly.

"Besides, there is no bride," Tonks pointed out.

"She's around somewhere, getting ready. Severus we're less certain about."

A voice said, "psst!" from the tent flap. It was Ruthie. "Harry, got a Sickle on you?"

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Harry fished in his pocket, but shook his head because he only had a very precise number of Galleons. Lupin held out one. Ruthie pointed and said, “Give it to Harry, then Harry put it in your pocket and take it out again.”

Having no good reason to argue the wisdom of that, Harry did so, then walked over and held it out.

“Got anything blue?”

“No,” Harry replied. He could see that she stood under a very large pearlescent umbrella, one that would work well for Hagrid. Rain poured off the back edge of it in a waterfall.

“She’ll have to use my shoelace then. Don’t know why she doesn’t want to.” She shuffled off in her iridescent blue-green gown to the smaller tent beside the enchanted spring that made the glen such an attractive spot for weddings. At the moment the rain was causing the rock pool to overflow. Harry wondered as she disappeared into the seemingly wardrobe-sized tent whether he should have mentioned that they lacked a groom.

Harry walked back to the inner tent flap and watched Tonks retake her seat beside Shackbolt. He stared across the heads of the assembled, some leaning together to whisper, others staring at the decorations. The Supreme Mugwump – a worrisomely aged wizard with a silver beard and silver-flecked red hair – sat serenely at the front acting accustomed to this sort of delay. As long as he didn’t fall asleep, Harry thought.

When he turned back, the tent flapped opened and Snape appeared, brow surly and dripping water off his hair and the end of his nose.

Lupin strode over and tugged him off to the side, out of view of the guests who were peering back over their shoulders. With quick motions he dried Snape, straightened his robes, and pinned his cloak diagonally across his back, revealing the shiny blue lining. “That’s more like it,” he admonished.

Snape simply stared at his old enemy and Harry thought that even without Legilimency, Harry could read his thoughts and they were somewhere along the lines of how did it come to this? Snape peered over at Harry and his expression did not change.

“Ready?” Harry asked, as though everything were right on schedule and perfectly expected.

Snape nodded, just once, as if afraid his head might disobey and start swinging side to side instead. Harry unpinned the dill and yellow rose boutonniere from his own robes and pinned it on Snape. He straightened his own white chrysanthemum and lily and took Snape’s arm the way he might McGonagall’s. Snape arrested his leading him inside and gestured sharply to Lupin, who came closer. “Make certain the shoe-cake melts in the rain, won’t you?”

Lupin said, “Consider it mush.”

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“Thank you,” Snape said, seeming like that notion bolstered him.

Harry attempted again to lead him in, and this time he allowed it. The crowd quieted as they made their way. Harry sat him in the front row, alone. He bent to his ear and whispered, “Do make it look less like you’re facing the guillotine.” To which, Snape relaxed marginally. Harry left him sitting there, and thought things better move ahead without delay from this point.

On the other side, Candide’s uncle and father had both stood. Harry thought they were having an nonvocal argument about whether her uncle should give her away as planned, but in the end Farnsworth, Candide’s father, gestured for Harry to lead the way back down the aisle. Harry glanced at him following in curiosity.

At the rear, he said, “Changed my mind,” quite gruffly.

“All right,” Harry said, still in the mode of taking things as they came. The world, through a veil of too little sleep, felt tenuously balanced and he feared tipping it either direction by trying. Fortunately, letting it run along on its own was working out.

The massive umbrella stuck itself halfway through the back flap and Candide appeared, holding her dress up out of the fat droplets clinging to the battered grass.

“We set?” she asked.

Harry nodded and she bit her lip nervously. He was glad he had not worried her about Snape’s late appearance. They could all now pretend he had been here all along. Candide bent awkwardly to reach under her broad dress, female hands of support instinctively coming in on each side. She pulled off her shoe and shook it to get the sickle to slide to the heel before putting it back on. To her sister she asked, “How do I look?”

Ruthie pinched her cheek in reply.

“Wish I could see myself,” Candide muttered. “After all this effort for luck, this better be the luckiest wedding in history.” She sighed and smoothed her dress and shook out the row of lace handkerchiefs sown at the hem. “Go on, Harry. Wave at the musicians to start.”

Lupin wagged his eyebrows at Harry and they slipped in together. Harry went all the way to the front and gestured at the quintet and they gamely started sawing at their instruments, transforming the air of the tent into sound.

Harry remembered the trinket as he took up a position beside Snape. He slipped it out and handed it to him. Snape did not put it in his pocket, but held it in his hand and stared down at it, which meant Harry could no longer see his expression through his hair.

Harry glanced over the crowd and found Anita near the back on the end of a row, eyes disconcertingly distant even though they focused on the two of them standing

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there.

The music changed pace and Harry walked back to meet Ruthie and Carolyn and lead them in to the left as he had been told. The necessity of this and their bright dresses had been explained as a way of confusing evil spirits about whom the bride may be. Harry's suggestion about simply charming the bride against any hexes was not welcomed quite the way he expected.

These preparatory thoughts continued running through his mind as he resumed his place beside Snape. They represented the necessary momentum that would continue to drive events on the proper course, which seemed the only hope.

Everyone stood, including the Mugwump, to greet the bride, who kissed her father on the cheek, further reddening his over-stressed face. The Mugwump smiled serenely at the couple when they arranged themselves and faced him. He pulled out a gold-tipped wand and charmed them both with a tap on the head. Harry could not hear the spell, but he hoped it was something akin to a Mutushorum that would prevent either of them from bolting.

The Mugwump's face was as wizened as tree bark and his hands as quaky as leaves, but his voice carried authority as he addressed the guests and the couple and went on at some length about the point of it all. Harry found his shoulders unclenching with relief. No one spoke up when asked if they knew of any binding spells that should prevent this marriage, even though the Mugwump keenly demanded: "Anyone, anyone?" He then muttered something about preventing exploding grooms before moving on to the vows.

Candide had no trouble with this part, beyond a snuffle or two. Snape on the other hand seemed to require an application of great willpower to repeat what he was told to say. The Mugwump slowed down even, to make sure Snape was following, which only prolonged the agony. Harry closed his eyes. It's not a spell, he thought at Snape. It's just words, promises. They're only as important as you make them. But then it occurred to Harry that maybe Snape was making them very important, hence the pain. Dumbledore's past words floated through his thoughts, saying that Snape took nothing for granted. This certainly would all be easier if you did take it all for granted, he considered of the vows. Have, hold, faithfulness, partnership, friendship, forever... there were quite a number of words in there, most all of them a kind of binding.

Harry rubbed his hands together; his fingers were cold. He raised his head when the couple turned to face each other as indicated by the shuffling of a large dress. Snape appeared to have recovered himself partly as he took the ring from the Mugwump, who had charmed it with a few spells to prevent loss, especially through a drain, and to deter theft. As Snape slipped it on Candide's finger, the Mugwump

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seemed then to recognize the stone because his face left its serene state and entered one of surprise and perhaps covetousness.

That particular ring meant more than forever, Harry considered, and it meant more than the words in any event, and this let him relax completely as the Mugwump pronounced them married.

A pause ensued after the guests shuffled in place in preparation for departing.

“Go on then,” the Mugwump prodded. He was bent over more now, perhaps having tired of holding himself up straight against old age. “Why some of you young people have to be told to kiss flummoxes me.”

Snape stared at Candide, thinking of the waiting crowd, Harry suspected. He shucked his pinned cloak free and raised it betwixt them and the rest of the room, hiding their heads as he bent in. Harry ducked to fight an urge to burst out laughing.

After they straightened, it was clear that Candide was also laughing. The Mugwump gestured over his head with a swishing motion. “Off with you now.”

Yellow flower petals and sweetmeats rained down from tent ceiling in a line to cover the white runner leading out. After a brief adjustment on how their arms should be linked, the two of them strode out, Candide ducking, hand shielding her head.

Harry caught up with them at the rear, where Ruthie’s massive umbrella was put to use getting them all to the next tent, which from the outside was only as large as a beach hut.

Ruthie let Lupin take the umbrella to ferry others through the rain. Snape still had Candide’s arm linked through his as he stared at the tent full of empty tables. Harry pulled out his wand and one-by-one ignited the rows of tall candles lining the walls and the smaller ones on the tables. The space took on an honestly romantic glow.

Harry joined his guardian and Candide where they stood waiting by the tent flap to greet the guests. “How’re you doing, Severus?” he asked.

“The worst is over,” Snape stated.

There was not time to address Candide’s bemused expression before Shazor and Gretta appeared. Shazor was perfunctory, but Gretta gave hugs down the line. The bride’s father, despite changing his mind about giving her away, bowed rather than shake hands with Snape, although he did so with Harry. The teachers came through next. McGonagall greeted them all with grace, but her crooked smile hinted at words too pointed for the moment. It was Trelawney who first requested one of the handkerchiefs off the dress hem to “carry off some good fortune.” A few others, mostly children, did this as well, as did the Mugwump himself, who stashed it neatly in his breast pocket and fluffed the points where they stuck out. Harry needed nudging to

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be reminded he had to pay. He fished the brand new white leather drawstring purse containing fifteen Galleons out of his pocket and caught up with the curve-backed Mugwump where he stood off to the side, hat in his hand, deciding where to sit.

“Ah, young man,” he said wistfully, weighing the purse before putting it away with a spell that did not involve going to his pocket. Harry believed that closed the conversation and started to turn, to make his way back to the greeting line when the old wizard said, “I remember you from Albus’ funeral, but we did not get a chance to be introduced.”

Harry said some words about that as he remembered that day without really wanting to.

The Mugwump looked him over and said, “Ah, like all young people, you have things to be doing. Go on then.”

Most of the guests were inside or had made their goodbyes – like Elizabeth and her mother – when Anita slipped in with the last group. She and Snape greeted each other perfunctorily before she introduced herself to Candide. Candide insisted that she stay for the party, which she agreed to do and then headed for a seat without another word. Harry hoped all this self-control continued even after the many cases of prosecco stacked in the corners began to flow.

Harry took his seat between Snape and Shazor at the long narrow head table after everyone else had situated themselves at the round tables. The caterer’s elves then did their magic and bowls of sugared almonds appeared as well as bread. One might have thought the wedding was fifteen hours rather than fifteen minutes the way the guests tore into these tokens.

Candide leaned over and asked in concern, “What happened to the shoe cake? I just remembered we skipped breaking that over my head.”

“It got wet,” Harry said.

“Oh. All right. Shame. It’s good luck.”

Harry leaned over farther. “Do you really believe that much in luck?” he asked in concern. The obsessive preparations had maxxed out his tolerance for irrational behavior.

“Do you really believe in prophecies?” she returned.

Harry opened his mouth and closed it again. Snape said, “She’s got you there.”

Prosecco was poured for all but the wedding couple, who instead jointly poured mead into a beaten up old chalice that sported the selective gleam indicative of a recent desperate polishing. Candide took a small sip from this while the guests all started in on their own drinks. Snape followed by more than making up for her dainty helping.

Harry had his crystal goblet, which he was certain he had not emptied so far,

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topped up by a passing elf and then resisted drinking more of it immediately. When the crowd settled down, he stood, which finished quieting everyone except for some chairs squeaking when rotated for a better view.

“Thank you all for coming,” Harry said.

“Wouldn’t have missed it,” Mr. Weasley’s voice floated over the assembled crowd.

The crowd chuckled faintly in agreement. Harry said, “I was warned I had to say something and I’ve made a lot of speeches before, some I’ve even written ahead of time, but this one feels more important than the others and I did not figure out quite what I wanted to say until now.” More eyes in the room turned and fixed on him as he spoke and the interest level rose. “This is really big day,” he said, unwillingly remembering that he himself had been the first major roadblock to the two of them being together.

“Some people just have families... and some of us have to put them together.” He glanced at Candide and worried that he was overwhelming her already given the shine on her eyes. The pattering rain above faded, allowing him to speak closer to normal.

“We’re stronger as a unit than as individuals. But we have to give up something to be a unit and that’s what today’s about, pledging that the unit will be more important in the future.”

He glanced at Snape, who was fixated on the chalice set halfway between him and Candide.

“Most of you who know Severus from before are probably pretty surprised to be here right now.”

While the crowd laughed lightly, Snape made a motion, but it was just to smooth his eyebrow.

“But I’m not actually surprised. Well, I probably was at first, but not after I thought it over.” In his mind, Harry considered that if Snape could keep Voldemort happy, that he ought to be able to keep anyone happy, should he chose to. “He’s very good at this father thing, so I’m certain he can manage the husband one too, if he has a mind to succeed at it.” To Candide, he added, “Don’t worry, he wouldn’t get into this unless he intended to take it seriously. I don’t see anything but a successful future for both of you together and it is wonderful that you’re brave enough to give it a go.”

Harry had let his glass fall almost back to the table. He raised it again. “So, a toast to the triumph of hope over... better sense.”

“Hear, hear,” various guests uttered and silence fell as everyone drank.

A knife clanged on a plate as McGonagall stood up two tables away. “If I may add a few words?”

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Harry waved that she certainly could and resumed his seat. Under his breath and behind his hand, Snape uttered, “Why did you tell her ‘yes’?”

Harry chuckled. “It’ll all be over soon.”

Snape drank another sip of mead as McGonagall began. “It was a lovely ceremony. I am quite happy for Severus as well as pleasantly surprised that he has found someone compatible.”

Harry leaned closer to better hear Snape say, “I must be slipping. Usually I know what she’s getting even for.”

Harry said, “You are slipping, but we like you better that way.”

This generated a sharp glance. McGonagall went on, cutting off the follow-on glare.

“I’ve known Severus for, oh, upwards of twenty-six years, first as a student and then as a sometimes adversarial colleague. We’ve been through some very difficult times and I’ll second Harry’s contention that we are stronger as a unit because it was the unit of many of you here, bound to Albus Dumbledore, that is the only reason so many can be here today to enjoy this lovely party.”

She turned her dark green robed self to better address the room rather than the head table. “Severus doesn’t always think the best of people, which can make him a little difficult to get along with, but there is no one you would rather have guarding your back.” She turned again and raised her glass, which glittered in the now dominating candlelight. “I wish the three of you prosperity. I wish you peace, for what it’s worth, but knowing two of you as I do, I’m not sure my wishes are going to have any effect. I believe Ms. Breakstone had a proper preview of what she has got herself into before coming today. She is presumably ready for a life of adventure and she is in good hands. So I wish her, especially, but all three of you, the best of luck.”

“I can top that,” Ruthie said while glasses were being refilled. She stood on Candide’s other side, sizing them all up while the guests adjusted. Candide dropped her head and shook it faintly. Snape handed her the mead cup from which she took another very small sip.

Ruthie took in the room next with her skilled eye, gauging the audience. “My sister, Candy. Always did everything just right. Perfectly. Perfect grades. Perfectly neat room. Mum and dad’s favorite. Used to drive me bonko when we were kids. Years and years of this never living up to my sister.” She indicated Snape with a movement of her glass. “I don’t know where you found this one, but you’ve more than made up for everything.” Ruthie leaned down and asked, “Where did you find him, anyway?”

Candide had to clear her throat to be heard. “Hogsmeade.”

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“Hog’s Head?” Ruthie echoed loudly, to a few chuckles.

“HogsMEADE,” Candide repeated.

Ruthie shrugged as if there was little difference or she did not believe her. “Well, I like this bloke, but others are needing more time to get to know him. We’ll get there, I’m sure,” she said amiably. “He’s trouble, I can tell, but Candy needs balancing out for the rest of our sake. Between the two of them we’ve got one tolerable person here.”

Ruthie leaned on the table with one broad hand, straining it, judging by the creaks. “You know how you are supposed to tell embarrassing anecdotes about one or the other of the couple when you do these toasts?” she asked the assembled. “Well, trouble is, Candy doesn’t have any to tell. I would know, I’ve been her sister her whole life. Marrying this bloke is the only mortifying thing she’s ever done and you all already know about it... because you’re here. Takes the fun out of telling it to you.”

Harry and Candide turned at the same time to check that Snape was still all right. Ruthie, with a crooked grin turned too.

Snape said, “Clearly, you don’t know me very well.”

Harry grinned at the implied threat.

Ruthie returned, “We have loads of time now to get to know each other. You have a house-elf... we, or I will at least, be over every Sunday.” This generated more laughs.

“I look forward to it,” Snape said easily, eyes keen.

Ruthie laughed the most of all. “If anyone had told me I’d inherit a brother-in-law who teaches dark magic... ’scuse me, Defense against dark magic and that I’d inherit Harry Potter as a nephew... pshew, I think I’d have suggested they seriously consider having themselves measured up for the proverbial tight white robes that buckle in the back.” She raised her glass which triggered Harry to release the breath he held. “But welcome to our family. It’s a very boring family where nothing much happens, and I’m very grateful for your livening it up.”

With that, conversations broke out at every table and the food appeared. Everyone tucked into their plates and the conversation noise rose and fell pleasantly. Harry kept tabs on the bride and groom but they behaved as though this was just another ordinary dinner, as did most of the guests.

Long after the tables had been pushed aside and the makeshift wooden floor thinned out of eager dancers. Candide returned to the head table.

“All right, I’ve danced with every other male; it’s your turn now.”

Snape, who was sitting back from the table, hand on a goblet, said, “You danced with Hagrid?”

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Candide propped her hands on her hips, an action accentuated by her dress rustling. "Yes. How could you have missed that? He is easy to dance with, I'll admit... you put both feet on one of his and he does the dancing."

"You have not danced with Harry, here."

Candide stared at Harry. "Oh, you're right. Come on, Harry."

Harry, who had just sat back down after dancing with Anita a second time, pushed himself back to his feet.

Over beside the quintet, Harry asked her, "Glad now that it's almost over?"

"No, now I'm not."

Harry kept one eye on the head table where Shazor and Farnsworth were smoking cigars and chatting with the groom. "Everyone behaved themselves," Harry commented as they circled.

"Yes, they did. Hey, you're not a bad dancer."

"Hm?" Harry asked, watching as Farnsworth grew animated discussing something.

"I said, your girlfriend is lucky you are such a good dancer."

Harry glanced over at Tonks who had only danced with him once on the theory that flaunting themselves in front of both Shackbolt and Mr. Weasley was not a good idea.

"You're very distracted," she said, more concerned than criticizing.

"I feel like I should keep an eye on things," he explained, finally turning to her. Her eye makeup had spread, heavily accenting her eyes. Her spell-fixed hair was still exactly the same.

She said, "Your little speech was nice. I think that was the right way to explain it to Severus."

"Was it that obvious I was talking to him?" Harry asked as they passed Hermione and Hagrid with a shuffle of steps to avoid serious injury.

"I don't think so. It was fine."

The song ended and Harry took her be-ringed hand and led her back to the head table. "All yours," he announced.

Snape, after a brief hesitation, stood and wove his way through the blue smoke of his neighbors to come around the table. A tango started up. When the two of them reached the raised interlocked platform, Snape waved the musicians to a halt and asked for something slow. The bride and groom proceeded to, not so much dance as, turn slowly in one corner of the dance floor.

A green robe cut into Harry's vision and McGonagall and Hagrid took up seats nearby, Hagrid on the trunk which he dragged over for that purpose. From where Harry sat above him, he could see two broken ivory combs stuck in his wiry hair. The three of them stared across the room at Snape and Candide dancing.

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Hagrid said, "Aye, Dumbledore'd've like ter seen this."

McGonagall nodded sagely.

Hermione came over, empty goblet in hand, which she set down on the table beside some others abandoned there. "I should go," she said, slightly slurred. "Lots of arranging things for the term... Oh, hello Headmistress."

"Hermione," McGonagall greeted her, wearing that sly smile again.

Harry stood and saw his friend out. Hermione gave him a long hug before she Apparated away. Tonks was behind him when he turned back to the tent, Shackbolt at her side. "We have to go too. Call."

Harry shook her hand with a professional air, feeling a little neglected by her rule for the evening and wanting to make a point. She frowned and they disappeared as well. Harry remained standing in the crystal starlight. The tent fabric glowed richly with candlelight as though with the size charming, the light concentrated as it escaped to the outside.

Footsteps made Harry turn and he was surprised to find Moody standing there, wearing dress robes, his hair slicked back. Harry wondered how long he had been around and how else he had been disguised if he had been around. A mustache would not have sufficed given his distinctive posture.

"Enjoying the party?" Harry asked with no friendliness.

"The whole rest of the Order was invited," Moody pointed out. "It was a good chance to listen in on what everyone is doing."

Harry decided to simply ignore him and moved to re-enter the tent. Moody halted him with: "I want to know what you think you're up to."

Harry rotated back slowly. "I'm at a wedding... a very important one that I don't feel like wasting time talking to you during."

Moody's magical eye examined Harry. "Someone's been tracking me, I've figured out," he said. "And I don't like it. Reminds me of the old days a bit too much."

Inside, the music changed tunes, picking up the pace slightly which made it merge better with the bubbling water of the spring. "If you think it's me... believe me, I've had enough of you. I would hardly seek out more of you." Harry started to walk away and stopped long enough to say. "Only a handful of people know you're alive. How hard could it be to figure out who it is?"

Moody grunted. "My figuring exactly, so that's why I'm here, asking you. I thought you the most likely to manage it without my catching you at it, seeing as how you have certain, shall we say, skills in this area."

"Well, it's not me," Harry said with feeling and slipped back inside the tent.

Harry's annoyed mood eased the moment he stepped inside the flickering, candlelit space. He slid back along the head table to the chair beside Candide's. Snape wasn't

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at the table; he appeared to be dancing with McGonagall. Harry squinted across the tent at this, stunned.

“She insisted on getting a turn,” Candide said, sounding amused.

“Amazing,” Harry uttered. He pushed aside a few stray goblets and a scattering of colorful dried fruit from the cake and put his chin down on his hand to watch the dance floor without having to hold up his head.

Candide scooted her chair closer and put an arm around him. “Thanks for letting me in, Harry.”

Acute embarrassment made him wince. He had to lift his head to talk. “Sorry about that.”

“What? Oh, that’s not what I meant.” She laughed lightly. “I meant the way you two had such a language of your own. I needed some translation and eventually got it.”

“Oh,” Harry uttered, partly relieved by her explanation. His eyes were getting as heavy as his head. The caterer’s elves had not been around for the last hour, which was a shame as Harry could use that coffee now that he had turned down earlier with the cake. Candide’s parents were dancing as well as Ruthie and Hagrid and Trelawney with an elderly member of the Order. Anita sat in the corner talking to Professor Sinistra, who nodded frequently as Anita gestured. Shazor and Gretta occupied a table about as far away as possible, near the door flaps. Harry considered that if this evening could work out, then pretty much anything could.

Candide’s arm still rested reassuringly over Harry’s back. She did not seem so much a mother, he mused, as an extension of his adoptive father. Or, if Ruthie’s contention that the two of them formed a different whole was correct, she completed Snape, which was a comfortable thought.

The warm honeycomb atmosphere exuded by the candles overlaid the wet fresh leafiness of the glen. The air and the rhythmic music lulled Harry’s eyes closed. He tugged off his glasses, intending just to rest his eyes a minute by pressing them against his arm.

He must have dozed because he woke with a small jerk when hands came down on his shoulders. A voice, Snape’s, somewhere behind his left ear said, “It IS late.”

Harry sat straight and rubbed his eyes. The music still played but there were just two couples on the dance floor and the tables had cleared further. Snape pressed Harry’s hair back, giving it a tug as though to be sure he had his attention.

“You did not have so much to drink, did you?” he asked.

“No,” Harry said, wiping his glasses before replacing him. “And look who’s talking.”

Snape’s hand came down again on his shoulder, but he did not have a response.

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Across the room, Harry became aware of a stereo vision of Anita on one side and Shazor on the other, both watching them with expressions that were difficult to decode. Harry pretended not to notice. Unexpectedly, Snape brushed his hair back again, making Harry wonder if he was making some kind of point. If so, Harry was glad for it.

Anita approached as did McGonagall with Richard and the remaining teachers in tow. McGonagall said, "I believe it is time for us all to do as Harry is trying to, as lovely as the evening has been."

Anita, hands clasped before her almost placatingly, said, "Perhaps time to take your wife and son home, Severus. It IS nearly 2:00."

Harry did not want to come down in support of the critical side of her twisted, half-acknowledging statement, nevertheless silently agreed due to his training the next day. "Who's cleaning up?" Harry asked.

"The caterer's elves will return at dawn," Candide supplied.

The musicians ended the song and began to pack up their music stands and instruments. After the teachers moved on, Shazor and Gretta approached as well as Candide's parents, Anita stepped aside but did not retreat. Ruthie rocked on her toes behind them all. The tension level rose. Harry would have stood, but Snape's hand was still firmly on his shoulder.

Gretta broke the silence with, "Lovely wedding, my dear," she said to Candide. Other similar murmurs were offered and the group, with last good wishes, moved on out of the tent, leaving the three of them there with just the musicians who were stacking their large instrument boxes in a considerably small trunk, which had been hovered beside their platform.

"They all behaved well," Harry said. A thought then occurred to his tired brain. He asked Snape, "You didn't potion the prosecco or something?"

Vaguely insulted sounding, Snape said, "No."

Harry stood finally. "Not that I care..." And at that late moment he certainly did not. "I just wondered if we could expect them to behave next time."

Snape said, "Unlikely" at the same instant Candide said, "I doubt it."

Eyes heavy, Harry peered back and forth between them. He felt dizzily pleased with the day. Eyes smiling at Snape he said, "Shall we go home?"

Snape bowed in place of a nod and Candide jumped over beside him, saying, "I have to side-along. It's bad luck for the bride to Apparate herself to her new house." With much movement of the ever resilient dress, she tugged off her left shoe, dumped the sickle onto the table and tossed the shoe aside. "Okay, all good."

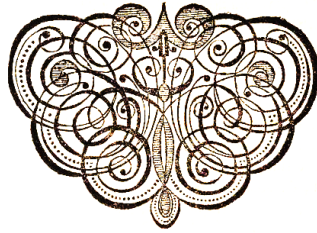
They both stared at here. Harry said, "Well, we wouldn't want to break the streak we have going today."

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Snape took her arm with accentuated formality and the three of them Disappeared.

Author's Notes: Sorry, got to get to sleep to get on a plane for home tomorrow. No time even for a preview. I'll add one when I get home.

CHAPTER TEN



A DARKER PLACE

Quiet settled over the house in Shrewsthorpe as Snape, divested of his shimmering blue-lined dress cloak, sat on the bed to unwind the long laces of the dress boots he wore. A shush-shush followed Candide as she strode to her wardrobe and considered herself in the narrow mirror inside the door.

“Dress worked out well,” she said in a fatigue-tinged voice. “Pearl was a good choice.”

“An overly sedulous decision for something to be worn once.”

She shrugged, smiling faintly. “I need help getting out of it. Bad luck to use a spell.”

“Ah,” Snape uttered. “So, a well-designed garment you are saying.” He stood with deliberate movements and stopped behind her, studying the fifty or so hooks and eyelets lining her spine. “This would constitute cruelty under the right circumstances.”

She laughed lightly. “You would object to that?” she asked doubtfully.

He peered at her in the mirror. “You have a bit more of your sister in you than you let on. Don’t know where you hid her... Certainly no room in this dress.” He started in on the eyelets, from the top.

“So,” she began. “While I have your attention...”

“Less of it than you might imagine...” he came back, frowning at getting his fingers behind the fabric to gain enough slack to continue unhooking beyond the looser high neck.

She lifted her ring hand and stared at it before dropping it back to her side. “You

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said, I do, but there are other things you've never said."

This garnered a glare in reflection. "And?"

"Hm," she said, pushing her unruly hair back. The spell holding it in place finally had worn off. "I'm curious," she said as he made it beyond the tough section where the fabric was pulled taut by her shoulder blades and sped up somewhat. She moved a quarter-turn to see him at least a little in the mirror. "Have you ever told Harry that you love him?"

His voice was much closer to stern as he replied, "You aren't in a competition with Harry."

"I know that. I wouldn't have even tried if I was," she admitted.

The gained only a disturbed shake of Snape's head. More eyelets were set free. Snape said, "To answer your question, however, the answer is 'yes'."

"Oh, good," she said. "He deserves to hear it, and there is hope."

More shaking of Snape's veiling hair ensued. More than half the eyelets were undone now, revealing the fine lace of an undergarment that almost no one would see.

"What did he say in response?" Candide asked. "Or am I prying?"

Snape huffed inaudibly. "Clearly the topic requires resolution as much the dress does, so I suppose not. But in answer to that question, he said nothing and when I myself pried, he said it was obvious. Harry does not care about words nearly as much..." He paused for a tough eyelet that kept re-hooking as though cursed to do so. It gave in only when it was uprooted. "He cares about actions. He cares solely that someone has faith and trust in him, and at least makes an attempt at understanding."

"He likes to be taken care of, doesn't he?"

"Not really." Less than ten eyelets remained at the edges of a decorative flap at the bottom edge of the bodice, which an oversized fake button appeared to hold closed.

"He doesn't complain that you check on him at night."

"That is a glaring exception. It is the singular thing he needed most as a child that he did not have." These last few eyelets made for quick work. "There." He stared at her in the mirror. "Why are we discussing Harry?"

Despite the topic being unimportant for the following hour, after the previous nights' experience of finding Harry sleeping in the window, Snape snuck away just at dawn to check on him.

Harry was sleeping only lightly and turned when the door opened. In support of Snape's earlier assertion, Harry sat up, eyes grateful for the company.

"Did you sleep at all?" Snape asked.

"Did you?" Harry returned coyly.

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"I'm not answering that," he asserted firmly. "I only ask because I wondered if you had the same dream again?"

"What dream?"

"The one last night that sent you keep vigil at the window in a fit of uncomfortable nocturnal arrangement."

"Oh, no. It was a dream, anyhow. Nothing more."

"Still doubting the strength of the fabric of reality?" Snape asked, slightly mocking.

Harry frowned and crossed his legs under the covers. "Maybe."

Lecturing, Snape said, "To damage reality without possessing a time-turner would require sorcery of unimagined power. You are the veritable ant in the realm of what would be necessary to even so much as tweak the thread of existence. To break and reweave it is inconceivable. You grossly flatter yourself by even worrying about it."

"What happened to me, then?" Harry demanded.

Snape's expression grew less fierce. "I'll concede that I do not know."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Immensely. But let me worry about your disturbed visions of my life, all right?"

Harry sighed and rubbed his aching eyes. "All right."



That evening, after a sleepy-eyed day where training felt more like drudgery than it should, Harry settled in with his books across from Snape, who worked at filling in fancy parchment forms bearing the Hogwarts's seal on the top of each.

"Hogwarts stuff?" Harry asked. "Lupin can't do that?"

Snape pulled his sleeve out of the way and considered what he had just written while it dried. "Unless I wish to conceded my position fully to Remus, I feel I should do the official paperwork. I also should make my presence felt at the Welcoming Feast as well as several staff meetings over the next week."

Harry considered how each year the students took early key impressions away from examining the teachers at the feast. "Good idea."

Candide arrived home just as Harry's stomach complained about wanting dinner. "Sorry I'm late," she said, setting a teetering stack of files on the sideboard. Dinner appeared shortly after she sat down. She jumped up again and fetched down the chalice used at the wedding and poured mead into it. She took a sip from it and set it before Snape's plate.

"It's the honeymoon," she explained to Harry's questioning look.

"I thought that was supposed to be a holiday of sorts," he said.

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“That kind will have to wait,” she said. “The Canaries or something would be nice. It’s really getting into the busy season at work now and Severus won’t have another break until Christmas.”

When the dinner dishes disappeared, they all settled into their respective work.

This routine continued the rest of the week. In the late afternoon after training, Harry only joined his friends at a pub briefly if he did at all. Ron teased him about this one evening, but Harry just shrugged, knowing that Ron, with his constant overdose of family, could not appreciate Harry’s wanting to capture this last two solid weeks of it.



Hogwarts’ stone walls exuded a warm mustiness from summer’s disuse. In an office on the fourth floor, overlooking the courtyard and the keep, Hermione blew her hair out of her eyes and pondered how best to arrange the next trunk of books. Unlike the two bookshelves full that occupied the office when she arrived, hers spanned a diverse collection of topics and it seemed a shame to disturb the lived-in organization of the dog-eared, old books with her own disparate and sometimes un-read ones.

She was just considering where to obtain another set of shelves to keep things completely separate when she realized the time, only by the accident of having a post owl arrive with the afternoon edition of the Prophet.

Hermione stared at the clock, brain unable to comprehend that she was supposed to be elsewhere just at that twitchy movement of the minute hand that landed it straight up. She scrambled for her new gold-edged notebook, pens, ran back for an ink bottle, exchanged that for a Never-out quill, grabbed all of it up instead along with the attaché her mother had bought her upon getting her job at the solicitors’, and ran out of her office.

The stairways down never contained so many steps as they did this trip, but she slowed on the last set to catch her breath, deciding that being later yet for her first staff meeting would be worse than showing up breathless and clearly at the tail end of an arduous run.

With one last deep breath and a quick finger brush of her hair, she stepped out of the Entrance Hall and into the staff room. The teachers, in all their varied colors and sizes, were standing around the long table, chatting, catching up on personal events from the summer. Hermione breathed out, heart still running fast.

McGonagall turned casually from speaking with Professor Sprout as Hermione placed her things out on the table, trying to ignore what she was certain was a

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borderline sneering amusement from Professor Snape, who stood off the corner of the table, facing Professor Vector as though mid-conversation.

“Are you getting settled in, Hermione?” McGonagall gallantly asked.

Hermione relaxed, being on time was not a test, it turned out. “Working on it, Professor. Lots of books to unpack still. Oh, where do I get some additional shelves?” she asked before McGonagall could turn away again. She thought this an excellent question, given the implication of it.

“Just ask Mr. Filch. He will come install them.”

Hermione had heard about the new Filch. “Right,” she managed to answer anyway. This one may actually be a test, she decided.

Hermione took a seat as the others, on some unseen cue, did so. Across the table Trelawney blinked her amplified eyes at her as though wondering why she was there. Hermione opened her lovely new gold-leaf notebook with an audible crack of the leather spine and listened as changes in marking and house points policies were considered.

At the end of the congenial meeting, McGonagall waved Hermione over to her side. “Take a seat, Hermione,” she said as Snape glided over to stand on the headmistress’ other side. He preferred to stand and glare down, it seemed, because he remained standing as McGonagall continued and the room cleared out.

“This institution has a program for new teachers who... may require it. You are a sharp young woman, Hermione dear, but brains alone does not a teacher make. I am therefore assigning you a mentor to assist you. Severus has agreed to take the first round of mentoring.”

Hermione glanced up at him, and then quickly down again before considering in private that for most of her school years, he had been her least-favorite teacher, although, she reconsidered, that had been based on a personal dislike, rather than a professional one. She composed her thoughts toward the future before looking up again. His eyes narrowed with a twitch before appearing grudging.

McGonagall went on, “You will report to Severus weekly to discuss how your classes are going as well as grading criteria, problem students, detention policy, etc.” She stacked her notes together as she spoke and finished by taking off her glasses. “Any questions?”

“No, Minerva,” Hermione managed to say with great effort, finding her first name far too casual for taste. “I’m excited to get started.”



It was near the end of his rare normal family time when Harry left early for

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training in an attempt to catch Mr. Weasley before he got too busy. He found their department head in his office, reading the Weekly Snitch, the Ministry's gossip and sport's score newsletter.

"Can I talk to you, sir?" Harry asked.

Mr. Weasley put his feet down and sat straight, prompting a brush painted to resemble a colorful toy soldier to sweep off the edge of the desk where his shoes had been. Harry glanced back down the corridor to check that no one approached before taking a seat.

"It's like this, Mr. Weasley," Harry began. "I... have a bad feeling about Percy."

"What's he done?" Mr. Weasley asked, perhaps sharply.

"Well," Harry hesitated. There wasn't all that much he had any proof of, really. Mostly just that he found him unsavory and with a bad habit of acting suspicious. "I think he's using Legilimency... around the Ministry when perhaps it isn't appropriate."

Mr. Weasley had picked up a ball point pen and was clicking the button on the end repeatedly. "As a Legilimens yourself, you would notice that, I suppose."

"Yes, sir."

The pen clicking stopped while he asked, "You aren't guilty of that yourself?"

Harry spoke slowly as he said, "I'm very careful to avoid it sir."

Mr. Weasley leaned over to reach into the farther file drawer so his voice was strained as he said, "Not always, it turns out." He pulled out a sheet and held it out so Harry could read it. "That's a complaint filed with us from a Mr. DeBenedictus." He pulled it back and scanned it. "I think it may be the first time ever someone has managed to fill this form out correctly. That alone would make him a bad enemy."

Harry bit his top lip. "I caught Percy using the skill on you, sir. And when I called him on it, he blushed and backed down, so I'm quite certain he was doing so."

Mr. Weasley reddened slightly and straightened the files on his desk. "I don't know why he would bother. He could ask me whatever he wishes."

Harry regrouped. At least his boss was now warned. "There just have been so many suspicious coincidences with him."

The pen clicking resumed. "That's also cauldron-calling, Harry."

"It's what?"

Speaking more slowly, Mr. Weasley explained, "The pot calling the cauldron black."

"Oh," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley held up the little plastic pen. "Lovely little thing, isn't it. Sucks itself inside so it doesn't write on things when you don't want it to." He put the pen down. "It's clear, Harry, that you don't like Percy, and certainly he's given you

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reason not to, but I'm not certain what you want me to do." When Harry hesitated answering he suggested, "Do you want to file one of these complaints against him? It will probably be dealt with in the same manner as this one, which was that all the senior staff signed off on it and it went in a drawer. But you may do so, if you have some kind of direct harm to report and I'm afraid personal lives do not count for much."

"I don't have any... direct harm," Harry said, frustrated by these circles. "I just feel justifiably suspicious and I thought I should say something. I've been told to work through the system and I'm trying to do that."

This scored, Harry determined, when Mr. Weasley's posture loosened. "All right, Harry. Good. If there's anything to be done, it will be handled. You're going to be late for training."

Harry thanked him and stood, feeling utterly unsatisfied, but having nothing left to say.

After training, Tonks found him in the dressing room and Harry waved his slow fellows out so he could talk to her.

"Feel like going out?" she asked. "I'm off."

"It's Severus' second to last night home, but sure, a quick drink maybe."

Rather than discuss anything interesting, Harry found himself complaining about Percy as they shared a pint.

"I agree he shouldn't be using Legilimency on Arthur," Tonks said after Harry related his conversation.

"You believe me that he is?" Harry asked.

"Of course. I trust you can judge that," she insisted, sensing that Harry needed reassurance. Her violet hair stood out from her head in all directions today. "I can only do the barest Occlusion. But it's not suspicious that he can do that; all Department of Mysteries staff can Occlude their thoughts completely or they wouldn't be allowed to work there. Many people learn Legilimency at the same time they learn that."

Harry, for whom that was true, was forced to concede that. "Something about him still bothers me. I wonder what he's up to?"

Tonks shrugged. "Can you get away tonight?"

Harry could not imagine himself more torn by a question from her.

"Come on," she said, "you said yourself Severus is going to be home more weekends as long as Remus is fit... moon-permitting."

"After dinner, then," Harry said, and the core of him thanked her for that decision by changing from knotted up to happily anticipating.

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Two days later as Snape stood beside the mantel with a small trunk at his feet, he glanced between the two of them with a hint of dismay as they hovered nearby to see him off. “I will be returning in less than two weekends. And will be home most weekends after. You look like the bon voyage committee for the Lusitania.”

Harry ducked his head to hide his laugh. Snape stepped in his direction and came almost nose to nose with him.

“Be careful. Stay out of trouble.” He started to turn away and stopped to say, with a point of a long finger. “Keep me informed.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said, finding odd comfort in being pre-scolded, but also somewhat lacking in decent warmth.

Snape relented just a bit and patted the side of his arm. He stopped before Candide and when she stood up on her toes and parted her lips, he gave her a kiss that went on long enough Harry felt the need to glance away, and even, eventually, clear his throat. After the flare of the Floo network died down, Candide smacked her lips and said, “I’ll have to tell the Weasley twins the lipstick really works and thank them as well. They said I could offer the “ultimate” test.”

“What?” Harry uttered, bordering on bending over on laughter.

She pulled a little gold lipstick from her pocket and held it up. Lip-Locker Luscious Red - Guaranteed longer kisses.

“Do not let Severus see that,” Harry said, grinning.

“Oh, don’t I know it.”



Training got a bit easier with Tridant in the mix since they were splitting their time between first-year spells for him and second-year spells for the rest of them. This new routine gave him time to catch up and feel he could stay caught up. And the quiet evenings with just him and Candide at home left him little distraction from even doing some old reviewing.

Harry began carrying some of his older books to follow along in while Tridant received his lessons. Harry found them surprisingly easy to understand now that he had far surpassed them. This made his center glow warm with a sense of accomplishment. It unfortunately made his book bag rather heavy and he was adjusting the straps of it, slow to leave the changing room, when he heard an unusually large group of footsteps pass by in the corridor. Harry left his bag and went to the door and just pushed it open a crack using his toe.

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Fudge's voice could be heard echoing back down the corridor and, through the gap, the former minister could be seen standing outside the tea room with a large group. He was saying, "Well, inter-departmental cooperation was of course one of my initiatives as well, and it's good to see Madam Bones continuing it. We should hold these meetings regularly, not just when there is a crisis afoot."

Harry shifted his head side to side and recognized Percy followed by Ogden entering the tea room along with a few others he did not recognize. Mr. Weasley was the last inside and he closed the door. Harry stood thinking a minute before scooping up his book bag and making a dash for the stairs.

More overly pompous voices halted Harry in the corridor outside the Minister of Magic's outer office. Harry waited around the corner out of sight while a Portuguese dignitary and his entourage made some extraordinarily drawn out goodbyes before finally departing. When the noise of the lift made it clear they had slid out of view at the far end, Harry slipped around to Bone's office.

Belinda was straightening up stacks of brochures on topics of wizard tourism and economic development. Other staff members were holding a debriefing of sorts. They glanced up at Harry and away again, ignoring him. Harry slipped over to Belinda.

"Hi."

"Oh! Hi, Harry," she sounded at least vaguely pleased to see him.

Harry could not help but suspect she knew something and simply was not saying. "Can I talk to you... er, this evening?" When her shoulders twitched, he said, "Your flat at say 7:00 o'clock."

She nodded, shoulder-length hair falling into her face so he could not read her expression. Harry thanked her sincerely, generating a faint blush in her ears and more interested glances from the others in the office, so he left.

Harry would have liked to have bided his time at Hermione's flat, but since she was even farther away than going home, he tried Vineet's flat instead. When the Indian came to the door, he registered no surprise at seeing Harry there in the corridor.

"Hope you don't mind if I call unannounced," Harry said.

Vineet gestured that he should enter without changing his distant demeanor. Harry stepped inside the now sparsely furnished flat and realized that in the process of worrying about Tridant adjusting, he had lost track of his usually resilient colleague.

"How are you doing, Vishnu?" Harry came out and asked for lack of any better tactic. It seemed clear from the empty rooms that Nandi had made a permanent move back to the home country.

Vineet tilted his head to the side, a gesture Harry was familiar with from another source.

Vineet's Adam's apple bounced once. "Would you like something?" he asked.

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“Whatever you have,” Harry said, and followed his fellow into the kitchen.

A stack of letters and other more official looking papers dominated the table, weighted down with half-globes of glass. Harry could not read any of these since they were covered in a script that resembled rows of dangling banners.

Harry waited until they were both settled into tea and biscuits before he asked, “Are you getting a divorce?” He held his breath while he waited for the answer, afraid he had stepped over some line.

“It is difficult,” Vineet replied, expression unwavering. Harry wished he would show some disturbance; it unnerved him that he did not.

“I don’t mean to pry... but I’m a bit worried about you,” Harry admitted, trying to pry under that unmoving façade.

The façade shifted all right. It grew even more remote. “You have far more important things to concern yourself, I am certain.”

“Not at the moment,” Harry said. He sipped his tea since he had ignored it so far. “There hasn’t been another prophecy that I don’t know about, is there?” he had to ask.

“No. I would prefer that there were.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “We should hook you up with Trelawney more often then. Get a prophecy arranged for you.”

Vineet stared at him, which was an improvement over him staring past him. “You are mocking me.” He sounded on the verge of peeved.

“Only to get through to you,” Harry pointed out, taking another sip of tea to seem more relaxed than he really was. “And it worked.”

Peeved turned to annoyed, and Vineet dropped his gaze to stare down at the biscuit on his saucer. Harry considered that Vineet had been left to himself what with Hermione starting at Hogwarts on top of his wife leaving. Harry certainly knew too well what that felt like.

“I’m not very good at this,” Harry admitted. “But rather than bounce back, you’ve just withdrawn. I don’t mean to be a busy-body, but I can’t sit by and let you sulk any longer.”

This drew his fellow’s gaze back up again and this time he seemed present and accounted for, bolstering Harry. “Fill me in, okay... it’s hard for you to divorce?”

“Very.”

It hurt to pry so much, but it was the next logical question. “But you want to?”

Vineet started to reply, opened his mouth, even, but he hesitated, caught in thought. “I don’t want the necessity of it. It brings ignominy upon my family, as well being a personal failure.” Making this statement returned him to withdrawn.

“So, what does your mother say?”

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“She has begun to side with Nandi, perhaps because of proximity to her arguments.”

“Do you want to go home?” Harry asked. “You aren’t here because you think I expect it or something? I mean, I certainly like having you as a colleague, I owe you my life, but I just want to make sure you don’t feel you are still under some obligation related to me.” Harry frowned, that had not come out right. “I remember you saying you came because of me, but if you need to be elsewhere, don’t let me stand in the way of that.”

Vineet’s gaze had returned to the present. “There is nothing for me there.”

“Good. I mean, I like having you around.”

Harry had the sense that if he wasn’t already so grim, Vineet may have smiled at least faintly.

Vineet finally sipped his tea, expressed surprise that it was cold, tapped it to reheat it, and drank it down. “Would you be disappointed in me...” he faded out. “Hogwarts school is not so distant.”

Harry threw his head back and stared at the cream-color ceiling. “How did I end up as the moral arbiter of you two?” he demanded. He relented his annoyance and peered at his friend and despite having scenes of Snape’s recent wedding still fresh in his mind and life, he said, “Vishnu, I think you should do whatever makes you happy. It seems like the system isn’t working very well for you.”

“The system has been changed. Some wizards in my country still practice the old system.”

“What old system?” Harry asked, now uncertain about the answer he just gave.

“The one where one can have more than one wife.”

Oh, Hermione will go for that, Harry thought, but kept it in because she could answer for herself. At least, he hoped she could. At the moment, she was living as good as a monk to get away from this situation, so perhaps he should not prejudge. Carefully, he said, “You think that’s a good idea?”

“It is a bad idea,” Vineet said, to Harry’s relief. But then less clearly added, “It is even more illusion that chains one to this life and prevents the soul from moving on.”

After a pause, Harry said, “Right.” He glanced at the time and finished his tea. “I have to go. I have an appointment and I have to walk a ways from where I can Apparate. Take it easy, all right? I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Harry still had the previous conversation in his head when he arrived at Belinda’s flat. Belinda was waiting, wearing a long, red high-necked pullover over her nice skirt from the Ministry. The flat did not feel cold to Harry, but Belinda must feel differently.

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“How are you doing?” Harry asked, buying time to adjust his frame of mind.

Belinda answered something meaningless and tried to lead him inside to sit, but Harry took her shoulders and said, “Look, something’s been going on with you and I figured before that if you wanted to say something, you would, but...” Her eyes taking on a haunted look stalled him momentarily. “But, now I think you should talk to someone. Have you talked to Minister Bones?”

The absurdity of this was reflected in her reaction. “Talked to the Minister?”

Harry did not know what the topic was, only felt confirmed that was a topic so he rolled along with: “Have you talked to anyone?”

“Yeah, I talked to someone,” she replied, annoyed and tried to turn away, but Harry held her fast, not finished yet. Her reaction to this was unexpected, she twisted instinctively, elbowing him on the soft part of his arm. “Let go of me!”

Harry did, immediately contrite. “I’m sorry.” Harry envisioned knocking Percy around a little to bring himself back under control. Gently, he asked, “Can I ask whom you talked to?”

She turned away, arms half crossed-half wrapped around her middle as though despite the overgrown jumper she might still be cold. “No. I promised I wouldn’t.”

“Are you scared of someone?” Harry asked, struggling hard to sound softly understanding when his mind was full of making a careful arrangement of spells that caused some kind of pain.

“No,” she replied, confusingly more certain of this answer than the last.

“Will you tell me anything?” Harry asked.

“No.”

Harry closed his eyes and then asked, “You broke up with Percy, right?”

“Yes,” she replied, then finally turned to face him while asking, “Happy about that?”

“Yes. ’Cause I don’t like him. It was your choice though. Why won’t you tell me what’s going on?” He was pleading now. He felt so close to something.

“Because I’ll lose my job.” She waved her arms around, thin fingers white. “Or at least get demoted down to... I don’t know, opening owls for the Department of Complaints.”

Harry had nothing but momentum now, “Why would you lose your job?”

Now anger came through. Harry found it welcome. “Because you’d tell someone at the Ministry, that’s why.”

“No. I wouldn’t.” Harry retorted. “Why would I do that?”

Her voice dropped, perhaps to avoid shouting. “Because you’re an Auror. Don’t you think I’ve seen the reports you blokes file with every last detail of some poor sap’s life laid out?”

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Harry pointed at his chest and bent forward slightly. "I'm not an Auror yet. Don't you know how many times they tell me that... every week it seems like."

She wavered, almost convinced. Harry said, "I promise not to tell anyone. I'll, however, reserve the right to try to talk you into telling someone. But I won't say."

Her eyes dodged between the door and the room across from it. "It'd be nice if someone else knew." She rubbed her eye impatiently. Voice thicker, she added, "But I'm too ashamed to say."

"Hey, there," Harry said, not by any means, wanting to make her cry. He took her arms again, remembering only after his hands sunk into the thick weave of her jumper that she had reacted badly to that before. She did not pull away this time; she bowed her head and rubbed her other eye.

"Can you at least tell me if this has something to do with Percy?" he asked.

She nodded, back of her hand covering her right eye. She appeared so terribly miserable that Harry stepped forward and gave her a hug. Without the high-heels she used to wear when they dated, she fit much better in his arms.

"Come on, then. I'll kick his arse for you if you want."

Her limbs stiffened under his arms. Muffled, she said, "Don't do anything... really bad. Like you... you did at Malfoy Manor."

Harry bit his lip. Careful not to sound caught off-guard, he said, "No, of course not." But in the wake of her comment, he felt a little sour in the stomach.

He pushed her to arm's length and asked, "Better?"

She nodded, keeping her eyes down. Harry felt it only fair to leave the questions for later.



The next morning, early, Harry was awoken in an unusual way, by Candide's voice at the crack of his door saying, "Harry, you should get up."

Harry lifted his head and blinked in the direction of the door with half-opened eyes. She wasn't really waking him up early, Petunia-style, was she? He wondered this more in surprise than annoyance, but the first toyed with becoming the second.

He dressed and made his way downstairs to the dining room where breakfast appeared immediately, accompanied by a brimming cup of coffee.

"Ready for this?" Candide asked.

Harry stared at her. Gears not meshing quite yet. "Er..."

"Nope, have some coffee, then," she said, knowingly. Her hand rested on the newspaper beside her plate. The headline was something to do with a post-Quidditch match pub brawl.

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Harry sipped the scalding hot coffee and taking a deep breath, said, “All right. What is it?”

Candide, mouth downward and regretful, lifted the paper, folded it so the back page was upward and turned it around. Filling the back page, as red as any blood, was a photograph of Harry hugging Belinda.

Harry stared at it. “I’m not being very careful,” he said. He meant that differently than it sounded. He was really just filling in what Snape would say, were he here. Harry had not run any spells to check if he had been followed, or checked if the blinds on the windows were closed or not. His eyes finally unlatched from the red wool filling the photograph to the headline: New Squeeze for “Boy” Hero?

“I have to go,” Harry said, moving to stand.

“Eat your breakfast first,” Candide said. “If you’re going to have a bad day... you’re going to need it.”

Harry stared at her, and she added, “Sorry, don’t mean to sound as if I’m mothering you. I’d say the same to Severus.”

“Yeah, well...” Harry said, thinking this was getting deep quickly. He stood. “Really have to go.”

She reached across the table and flipped his fried egg onto a slice of toast and folded it, squashing it flat. She bundled that in his cloth napkin and held it out.

“Thanks,” Harry said as he accepted it.

“Good luck,” her voice followed as he Apparated away.

Harry snarfed his breakfast as he strode across the atrium and stuffed the napkin in his pocket. One enormous benefit of his early arrival... he was almost alone in the atrium and the few glances he received moved on without real notice of him.

Harry could not locate Tonks in the department. Rogan was manning the office along with Blackpool. Harry snuck a peak at the log book and saw that Tonks was out on a call with Shackbolt and had been for half an hour. It pained him, but he wished Candide had woken him earlier.

Harry sat down in the training room after giving up on waiting for Tonks. Kerry Ann shot him a most disappointed look.

“It’s not what you think,” Harry grumbled.

Her attitude immediately brightened. “Well, that’s good to hear. You’re one of the few men I still have faith in. If I lost faith in you...” She turned back to her reading.

Harry stared at the side of her head and her ear. Her comments reminded him of Vineet, of being given too much moral or philosophical credit.

Rodgers must not know anything about the Prophet because he did not mention or even hint at it, to Harry’s relief. As their lessons wound through the morning,

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and Kerry Ann was called up for a third time, clunking her way to the front in her awkward shoes, Harry thought about high heels. He thought about how hard it must be to walk in them. And then a very bad notion occurred to him.

At lunchtime Harry, as much as he would have preferred to have broken into the Department of Mysteries and confronted Percy, went instead to Mr. Weasley's office. Mr. Weasley was speaking with Shacklebolt about some ongoing trouble communicating with the Obliviator Squad. Harry waited impatiently in the corridor, making sure he was in Mr. Weasley's line of sight. But when Shacklebolt moved off, Mr. Weasley stood and donned his cloak.

"I have a lunch meeting with Minister, Harry." He stopped before Harry as though to make it clear he had given him some attention. "I sense this is a topic we've covered already."

Harry required a moment to recover from his surprise at the astuteness of this observation. "Yes sir," he admitted.

"It's been duly noted already, Harry," he stated flatly and, swinging his cloak onto his other shoulder, he hurried away.

Harry watched him turn the corner, thinking that they were not leaving him many options outside of taking action on his own. Harry returned to the tea room and found Tonks, who found him at the same instant. Neither of them said a word, but the room cleared out with everyone else spouting various absurd excuses.

They stared at each other. Tonks' hair was mousey brown, not a good sign. Harry tried to imagine the situation reversed so he did not completely muck this up. It did not make him feel better to do this.

"You know there's nothing to that stupid photo, right?" Harry said.

Tonks finished her tea in one long gulp. "I have to go, I'm on duty," she said.

At the door Harry halted her with, "You aren't even going to hear me out?"

She stopped, hand still clutching the door handle mercilessly. "Harry, if we are going to have a row, it has to be off the clock. Meet me after shift."

"There's nothing to have a row about," Harry said as the door swung closed.

After a day of distracted training where he only felt he made good use of the weight training portion, Harry waited around the uneventful office for an hour, doing some random filing and then thinking she may have meant the tea room specifically, he checked there, went back to the Auror's office and then went back to the tea room to wait there. Dinner hour had come and gone and Harry checked the sandwich cart for leftovers from lunch. Only one pumpkin juice remained, tucked in the back on its side. Harry cracked the lid of this open, mind elsewhere. He took a long gulp of juice and set it down hard as the room began to swerve around him. He grabbed hold of the table edge, expecting the floor and walls to re-right themselves, but they did not.

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Harry's legs grew wobbly and he dropped to his knees. He called out, but heard no footsteps and when he managed to jerk his unwilling neck to stare at the door, he found it closed, even though he had not closed it.

Severus, Harry thought at the same time he decided firmly with his spastic mind that the juice had been poisoned... he had to get to his guardian. Harry immediately fell through the floor of the tea room into the Dark Plane. Unlike the quite corridors of the Ministry, things were busy here. Piecemeal, glittery creatures crept close, curious. Harry pushed himself up with one weak hand and stared down the nearest beady eyes. Saliva dripped from Harry's mouth as he did so and he knocked himself off-balance wiping it away. The creatures approached, rheumy eyes glowing more than they should in the scant light; Harry did not have the strength to will this second wave of tenacious beasts away. The closest one cocked its head and clapped its tiny jaws together, flashing row upon row of hypodermic teeth.

Harry had to get away, to Snape, right now. He would know what to do. He would take care of him. With that overriding thought, he pushed himself to Apparate.

A new section of grey desolation greeted Harry. Disoriented and weak and fearing for his life, he imagined the Hogwarts Potions Master in whom he had absolute faith, and dropped himself awkward and teetering through the gritty ground digging into his knees.

Harry arrived with a tinny clatter of ice shards in a lamplit room that smelled warmly familiar of stale potion brewing and wood smoke. His head was careening toward the floor that was already close due to his kneeling when he folded himself into the real world. As he collapsed, Harry cried out, "Severus, help me." His last thought before darkness sucked him in was to wonder why the stone floor pressed into his cheek smelled dank, like a dungeon.

Harry awoke to the same scents that had followed him into unconsciousness. He shifted his arm and found it to be under a warm duvet. A pillow cradled his head. Harry heard movement nearby and cracked his right eye open. Snape sat beside the bed, arms crossed, edged by the orange glow from the hearth far across the room.

Harry reached up a weak arm and rubbed his forehead. His scar itched. He lifted his head as a prelude to sitting up but decided to preserve his pride and not make the attempt.

"Er..." Harry said, trying to sort things out. He certainly felt greatly improved from when he had arrived, although he wished he felt more firmly himself.

Snape shifted minutely, seeming content to observe him. Harry squinted at him and leaned forward to look for his glasses on the bedside table. With minimal, almost economical, movement Snape reached into the breast pocket of his robe and handed them over.

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“Thanks,” Harry said, hooking them over his ears. The first thing that occurred to him was that this was Snape’s chambers all right, but not his current ones. The center of Harry’s gut grew heavy and ominous. He turned to his host and observed him in return. Snape raised a challenging brow as Harry did this, but it confirmed that this Snape was not the right one; his face was too gaunt, for one thing, and his gaze far too consistently hard as granite.

Harry sighed and regrouped. “Thanks for taking care of the poison,” he tossed out as a test, hoping for some conversation.

“It was a sophisticated one,” Snape stated with no feeling and left it at that.

“Was it?” Harry prompted.

A long pause ensued before: “It was a Personatus Potion. One that manifests as one thing to the casual observer, but in actuality, the expected antidote completes the original fatal poison.”

Harry pondered that, wishing his faculties were a little more game for action. “What’s the point in that?”

“The point of it is,” Snape stated, sounding the aggravated tutor, “is that the recipient will appear to have been killed by their would-be rescuer.”

“Ah,” Harry muttered. “Someone is trying kill me and get away with it.”

“A stunning conclusion,” Snape observed.

Harry rubbed his forehead again and this time had the courage to assume the worst. He closed his eyes and with some effort found that niche in his mind where the world bled green and shadows lurked. Many, many lurked very close by as though inside the castle. “Damn,” Harry muttered.

“Problem?” Snape prompted sarcastically.

This made Harry laugh. He could not have held it in had he wanted to. When he stopped he laid back on the thick pillow and said, “You even gave me your bed.”

Snape stood suddenly. “No place else to put you. Could not allow you to be seen.”

The room swayed for Harry, and he wished it would not do that; he needed to be sharp. “You could have turned me in.”

Snape spun and studied him. After a long silence, he asked, “Where have you been, Potter?”

“Um, studying,” Harry ventured.

“And, how, pray-tell did you cheat death?”

Harry hesitated. “If I tell you that, you won’t be curious anymore and then who knows what you might do.” He sounded drunken to his own ears and wondered if the antidote was still doing its work.

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Snape appeared to respect this answer. He departed through the door and moments later a glow indicated it was magically sealed.

Harry forced himself to sit up again, but dizziness overtook him and he fell back to the pillow.

Harry awoke later, quickly confirming that he had not just been having a bad dream. This time he applied more will-power and levered himself to his feet. He circled the room, which contained many familiar objects. He did not find his wand, even using an Accio repeatedly while holding out his empty hand.

Giving up, Harry stared down at a chess set near an overstuffed chair and considered simply departing. Except he wanted his new wand back and he was not fit for the Dark Plane in this state. Traveling via it in a drugged state was how he ended up here in the first place. On top of that Harry was as curious as he accused his host of being. He set the chess board for a game, waking the pieces as he lifted each out of the nearby bin. White was set up on his end, so he moved the pawn from in front of the right-hand bishop.

The door snapped open without warning. Snape stared at him long seconds before stepping inside and closing it again. He strode over to Harry, seeming to be trying to Legilimize him. Harry kept his mind properly closed, finally glancing down at the chess board. Snape followed his gaze and after consideration moved the opposing pawn for black.

Harry move the pawn before the knight ahead one and waited. Snape shifted to place some rolled parchments on the chair and placed his king's knight out.

Harry did not make a move. "Can you stop potioning me into submission?" Harry asked. Until he asked this, he had not fully formed the notion that this was why he felt so helpless.

"Hm," Snape grunted. "If it results in a decent chess game, I suppose."

"Thank you," Harry honestly returned.

"I am curious, however," Snape said as he strode to a long narrow table upon which sat a row of decorative bottles. He poured out a tumbler-full of a milky orange one and brought it back for Harry. He tauntingly withdrew the offered serving with the words, "Why did you dare come here?"

"I knew you were the only one who could help me," Harry replied truthfully, mind open enough to let the truth be revealed.

The tumbler was held out. "You are a foolish young man."

Harry swallowed the faintly herbal liquid. "I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"I would like to know how," Snape challenged, tossing his sleeve as he turned.

"I don't know," Harry replied.

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Snape's narrowed eyes slid around to Harry while he paced, muttering, "Albus must have arranged something... spirited you away..."

Harry drained the tumbler of the last few drops. "Maybe." Harry wished he knew how broadly he needed to lie. He wished his head would clear faster. Chilled and with his scar itching, Harry took the chair before the fire.

Snape said, "I must return for dinner. I will be missed if I am not there."

Harry's stomach rumbled at those words. "Any chance for...?" Harry began.

Snape sneered at him. "A heel of stale bread, perhaps?" he suggested maliciously.

"Anything," Harry said, not insulted.

Snape rolled his eyes and stopped at the door. "The house-elves are forbidden to come into my chambers or my office because of the potions. They must not see you as they would report to the headmaster immediately."

Harry blinked at that. "All right."

"I removed everything from your person that could possibly be charmed as a portkey. I'm assuming that is how you got in here, apparently from the North Pole since you were covered in ice."

Harry didn't reply.

The sound of the fire ruled for several breaths. Snape went on in a lower voice, "How you came into possession of a portkey keyed to my chambers I cannot imagine."

It seemed Snape would not depart without some kind of response. Harry said, "Something I was keeping around just in case."

Snape's expression did not change, but what could he say? He dropped the issue. "The ghosts also have loose lips, but they rarely come into my chambers. The Bloody Baron does on occasion, but him I can control. He is not particularly fond of the Dark Lord in any event, having nearly got himself banished on several occasions." He glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and hurried out, not noticing Harry's frozen expression.

Harry let his head fall back against the chair. "He didn't just imply Voldemort was headmaster, did he?" he asked the empty room. Suddenly, Harry felt much more reluctant to leave for his own Plane. Instead, he closed his eyes and tried to track the shadows that moved in the forest of his mind. By concentrating very hard, while simultaneously not concentrating at all, he counted thirteen very close. One of those would be Snape. Harry went to stand before the small corroded mirror over the washbasin and wished he had his wand.

Snape returned an hour and a half later. Harry sat before the chess board, playing against the pieces themselves, which was challenging because they cheated.

"Definitely a Slytherin set," Harry commented when Snape came over to observe.

"A gift from a friend."

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“Let me guess, name of Malfoy?”

After a pause, “Astute guess.”

Harry scoffed lightly. “Was that a compliment?”

This Snape, after a glare, sat at a small desk and proceeded to do what his Snape did, mark assignments. “So,” Harry finally ventured. “Still stuck teaching Potions? Never assigned anything better?”

Snape shot him a priceless look of disbelief. “Defense Against the Dark Arts is hardly in the curriculum at this time.”

“Oh, yeah,” Harry said, trying to sound knowing. His insides knotted a bit farther. He opened his mouth but couldn’t find a good way to ask if his worst assumption was correct. “No Advanced Arts of the Dark Arts class to replace it, eh?” he asked lightly.

This drew an unexpectedly thoughtful look from Snape, who said, “I expect the competition would not be welcome.”

The fire slowly died down and the clock read half past midnight. Harry stood with purpose and said, “I want to go look around.” It was either decide that, or depart entirely.

“Really?” came the sarcastic reply. “You do realize that the Dementors patrol the grounds and school from midnight to seven?”

Harry came to a halt, mid stride to the sealed door. “Oh.” He considered the chair he had just vacated with reluctance. He could just leave, but instead he made himself retake the chair, pulling the footstool close enough to curl up and use it as a bed.

He fell asleep minutes later, woken only briefly by something tangy smoldering under his nose and then after a whiff, he was out cold.

A headache stabbed, making Harry wince, when he next opened his eyes. He was alone but a small breakfast was stacked in paper wrappers on the empty chess board. After eagerly eating, Harry patrolled the room, finally settling on a book from the shelf on mutation spells and potions.

When Snape returned, Harry immediately asked, “Can I have my wand?”

“First, I want to know why you are here.”

“To destroy Voldemort, why else-”

Snape reacted with outright violence to the dark wizard’s name, sending the book Harry was reading flying up into his face. Harry blocked it with his arm and it flew beyond to smack the rack of fireplace tools.

“Sorry,” Harry said, rubbing his bruised arm. “I should have known better.”

Snape was pointing his wand at Harry like he meant it. “You damn well should have,” he snarled.

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Harry ignored the wand aimed at him and reached over the side of the chair to fetch the book. "His name has no power you don't give it," he stated calmly. "I'm certain that I'm not the only person to point that out to you."

Snape lowered the wand.

"On that note," Harry said amiably, "it'd help to have my wand back."

Hands propped on his hips, Snape asked, "How do you think you are going to accomplish any damage to the Dark Lord? There are powers he controls that even I do not understand."

Harry closed the book, treating it carefully after the violence to it, and stood with purpose. "First, I want to take a look around. I need you to get Filch distracted so I can impersonate him. He can go anywhere in this castle without question. But first I need my wand."

Snape used a spell on one of his inside robe pockets and retrieved Harry's wand from it. Same as the antidote, he held the wand just out of reach and said, "I want to know how you survived."

Harry shrugged.

Impatient, Snape demanded, "What do you remember of that night you followed Quirrell?"

Behind his carefully impassive features, Harry's mind lit up. "Er, I thought it must be you, actually."

"Figures," Snape said, pacing away, holding Harry's wand almost as though it were his own.

"Hey, I'm being honest with you. It was a long time ago."

"And where have you been in the meantime?"

"Studying... with anyone who will teach me. With a shaman in Finland." Given whom he needed to lie to, Harry felt the best artificial story would be one wrapped tightly in the truth.

"Explains the ice. What were you learning there?" Snape asked doubtfully.

"Old Magic," Harry replied. When Snape shook his head doubtfully, Harry insisted, "That's what let me survive the first time Vo- the Dark Lord came after me."

Snape looked him up and down. "They even had your body, Potter. Of course it was Albus... who fetched it." He paced up and down the room again, agitated as though personally offended. "You and your little friends had broken through all of the protective puzzles."

Harry thought rapidly though the events of that night. If he were to have messed up that confrontation where would it have been? He had to admit, the promise of his parents returning had tugged at him. Quirrell may have been smart enough to not

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touch him a second time, used a wand instead. Voldemort may have simply taken Harry over and he had not mustered the will to resist.

“I messed up,” Harry tossed out. “And I needed to get away to prepare better to face him. It was my task, Dumbledore said.”

“You should have come back after Dumbledore’s defeat; the battle weakened the Dark Lord immensely.”

Harry did not reply to this directly, not wanting to dwell on what sounded like a tragically desperate bid on his old mentor’s part. “My wand?”

Snape handed it over with clear reluctance. “He is stronger than he has ever been, even as distracted with running a school as he has been. Many times stronger. If he found out... ” Snape actually bit his lip for just an instant before snarling and spinning away to pace again.

“Why are you helping me then?” Harry asked, needing to know.

“I promised Dumbledore, many many years ago, that I would act to protect you.”

Harry smiled lightly and stroked his wand, glad to have it. “No matter what happens I won’t implicate you, Professor.”

Harry went to the mirror and began working on his disguise. Snape watched for a while before departing. He returned as Harry was finishing and said, “I sent him to the lower dungeon to clean up the water that floods there, a task he will be a long time completing.”

Harry grinned at that and headed out, careful to shuffle as he walked and to keep a hunch to his back. In the second cupboard he found a mop and wooden bucket, which he proceeded to carry up the stairs to the Entrance Hall. From there he had a view of the Great Hall. The walls had not been scrubbed in years so the black of the fires and candles had coated the stone streaky grey. But most disturbing was the banners. The Slytherin banners hung long and proud but the other three tables were marked by only small ones at the very front, looking more like badges of shame.

Standing in that spot gave Harry a feeling not unlike curse aversion, so he moved on up the broad staircase. Students sat on the steps talking quietly and bending over books as though everything were normal.

Harry wandered the corridors, ignoring the occasional look of alarm from a student lingering between classes. Most outrightly ignored him as though he wore an invisibility cloak. In the trophy room, Harry felt that awful aversion again, bad enough to make his eyes water. He stopped to pretend to mop until the room was empty and then moved down the case until he pinpointed where he felt worst. His eyes moved over the polished wood, and the gold and silver figures and plates until they landed on the golden cup that topped the tall House Cup trophy. That was it, definitely.

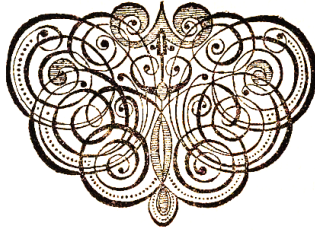
Harry looked around until he found a nearly identical cup atop another trophy in

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the next case on the bottom shelf in the back. Working quickly, Harry unwelded that cup and swapped it atop the big trophy, where it would pass ordinary scrutiny. He even used an anti-dusting charm to make it look untouched, which helped hide the switch rather a lot. Pocketing the cup, despite a strong will against closer contact with it, Harry shuffled along the room. He had one last stop to make before heading back down to the dungeons.

Author's Notes: Well, this was the last chapter before Deathly Hallows. I'll see what I can incorporate or I may just stick with what I've got written. We'll see.

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Kali flapped as best she could inside her cage and stuck her nose through the wires to the point where the thin bars pressed her ears back. Her tongue almost reached the fringe of Snape's hair when she flicked it to full length out over the dining room table where Snape sat with his head bent, resting on hands tangled in his hair. Kali's cage had been kept in reach for the last day and a half so he could keep a close eye on the creature. The sunlight streaming in the window mocked the household's distress with its glorious happiness.

A burst of ash ejected from the hearth as the Floo network flared and Tonks stepped out of it. Snape raised his head slowly, fearing hope, keeping it at bay until he could read her eyes. Her frown justified his caution.

She sat across from him with a sigh and without invitation. "I checked Transportation's records like you asked. They have no record of him Apparating out or using a Portkey and the atrium desk has no record of him leaving through the gateway. BUT, they aren't always a hundred percent there when it gets busy. AND, Transportation has been sloppy of late as well. But it is odd." She gathered her weathered, dim-haired self together and peered at Snape with curiosity. "Why did you ask me to check? What are you thinking happened?"

Snape had already made up an excuse. "I was wondering if for some reason he used his invisibility cloak."

"Yeah, but why would he do that?" At his shrug, she more stridently said, "He wanted to talk to me, was waiting, hanging around the office and doing filing for Kingsley." She glanced up as Candide slipped into the room in the attitude of one

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at a wake. She laid a hand on Snape's shoulder and trailed it around to the other as she took the seat beside him, keeping her chair facing his rather than tucking it in as though eating. Kali, head still through the bars, twisted to peer at her, but quickly returned her tiny gaze to Snape.

Snape studied the Chimrian in return. "She is calm, but far too attached to me."

Everyone stared at the bat-like animal, but Kali did not take note of this and continued to try to press herself through the bars in Snape's direction.

Tonks, eyes on the pet, said, "Candide, I know we've been over this already, but have you thought of anything new from Wednesday morning that might give us any clue?"

Snape stood and reached for the Floo powder. "I'll fetch my pensieve."

In his absence Candide replied, "No, I haven't. You spoke with Belinda, right?"

Tonks nodded, glancing away as if to imply that topic line was not a welcome one. Snape returned to a silent room and set the pensieve down. To Candide he said, "You do not mind... I assume?"

"Severus, I'll do anything I can to help."

"Think of that morning," He commanded her, and touched his wand to her temple, drawing out a glowing blue-silver cord that he fed into the otherwise empty stone bowl.

Tonks stood to bend over the bowl as well and watched the events of that morning as Harry was shown the newspaper. When Harry said, "I'm not being very careful," Tonks grunted, and when they all stood straight after the memory ended, her eyes remained dark.

"Any help?" Candide asked, and Snape shook his head, face grim. He turned to face the hearth, away from the women.

Tonks said, "Maybe I should pay another visit to Belinda."

Candide said, "If you think Harry was cheating on you, you are sadly mistaken."

Tonk's hair remained brown, but it bobbed out straight before settling down again. "You never want to think that about someone, do you?" She huffed and said, "We have everyone out looking and the Ministry's offered a reward. That probably won't decrease the number of reporters outside your gate, so owl if you need help handling them."

Snape, in a tone that indicated he would be pleased to have something to take his frustration out on, stated with certainty, "I won't need assistance with that."

"Well, then, stay out of trouble if you would; we can't spare anyone." Her voice cracked as she closed that statement. "If you think of anything at all, let us know." With that, she turned to the Floo and disappeared.

Candide said, "I assume you didn't bother to tell her about the spell you and Headmistress McGonagall tried last night because it failed."

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Snape strolled over to stand before the framed photographs of Harry and his friends propped on the sideboard, pushed to one end by the piles of Candide's folders. "I actually believe now that it did work."

"But it didn't flare red like you said it would. It didn't find him."

"He is out of reach of the spell. Out of reach of..." Snape, who had been standing with his head bowed low, raised it with a snap and grabbed up quill and paper from Candide's work pile on the sideboard. He scratched out a note quickly and folded it. "I'll return shortly," he said to Candide.

"Where are you going?"

"Owl Office. I need to send something as speedily as possible."

She opened her mouth to protest his thinking of something and not taking the information to the Aurors but he had already disappeared in the Floo.

He returned shortly as promised and began to pace. Candide looked up from her work and said, "Severus, please sit down."

He stopped pacing at least, but stood staring through her, thinking. She said with no little strain, "I'm sorry I can't be more help."

He faltered over the words, but managed to say, "You are more help than you know."

She bent back to the large grid sheet before her and said, "I figured I wouldn't get sent away this time." When he did not respond to this, she looked up with a softer expression and added, "You were feeling guilty last time Harry went missing... I think."

An empty gap stretched wide before Snape responded. "He is still my responsibility."

"He's nineteen."

"That does not change anything. He will need an eye kept on him as long as I have strength to do so."

She held up her hand, ring first. The scarlet stone echoed the square sunlight from the window in its core.

"Perhaps it will come to that," Snape said to the offer. He settled at the table across from her and sat with fingers perched before him, deep in thought.

"You don't want to join the search?" she asked after a while.

"I do not know what happened and must assume that this household is in danger." She blinked at him. "Oh. One never knows around here, I suppose."



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When Snape answered the knock upon his dungeon office door, Harry could see he had a student with him. Harry grunted, "You said you had a spill?"

"In the classroom," Snape said, snapping the door closed again.

Harry shuffled down there and took a seat at one of the familiar tables. He took the cup out of his pocket and dropped it into the bucket under a rag. This gave him a bit of relief from it. A noise at the door latch made Harry leap for the mop to pretend to be cleaning, but it was only Snape.

"You were quicker than I thought," Snape said.

"I."

Snape held up a hand and gestured with a sideways nod towards his office. Harry picked up the bucket and followed him out. Safely back in Snape's chambers Harry pulled the cup out and placed it on the chess board.

"And what would that be?" Snape asked with no confidence that it may be important.

"A Crux Horridus," Harry replied.

Snape straightened and put his clasped hands to his chin, eyes glued to the object. He fetched the valet chair from beside the wardrobe and joined Harry in staring at the cup more closely. Eventually, Snape said, "That explains quite a bit. I don't know why I did not think of it."

"Have a Caeruleus fire handy?" Harry asked.

"Even in the Potions classroom, such a thing would not go un-noticed."

"Do you know how to destroy it, then?" Harry asked.

"Albus did not instruct you in that?"

Harry shook his head. "Got any good books on the topic?"

"Not in the library, certainly." He stood suddenly. "But I have a few that may have something..." He went to the shelf tucked behind the bed and with a tap of his wand the apparently built-in stone shelves slid aside to reveal another bookcase behind the first. Snape perused these and ten minutes later returned with four heavy old books, the kind that squirmed or nipped at you when you tried to thumb through them too fast.

The two of them set to reading until Snape had to teach. By the time he returned after lunch, Harry had learned a lot about spells involving human and animal lifeforces, far more than he ever wished to know.

Snape, after five minutes browsing *Veil Avoidance*, one of the books Harry had given up on, he said, "Here it is." He turned the book toward Harry, who read where indicated:

The soule risepticol is best maed from metele or jewel, or the soule with-in culd prove fragile. An eccepxionale wizzard can crush the soule within wile forsing it to

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esscape too small an opening. The heete of esscape will bern up the soule, but bewaer if it doez not bern up, the soule will force a new home in whome'r is closest.

Harry took a deep breath and then another while considering the cup, shining there in the firelight. Tiny scratches marred its polished surface. He could do this, he was certain. Mind clear, he picked it up and pressed the bowl between his palms while imagining trapping what it contained. He knew what Voldemort's power and soul felt like, having once gathered part of it up to toss it away. The thin metal bent but what was inside resisted. Harry concentrated for a minute, but could not quite work out how to follow the instructions.

Harry straightened the cup to an approximation of round and set it back down to stare at it. "I can do this," he insisted when Snape shifted to cross his arms and peer down his nose. "Give me some time. And step back," he added, thinking he did not want to battle a possessed Snape.

It required an hour and uncountable tries but Harry finally got a feel for what was trapped inside and pressing hard enough to almost collapse the bowl, he imagined a tiny crack in his mental crushing and with an explosion, the cup jumped from his hands and clattered on the floor along with an unearthly cry of despair and a gurgle.

Harry shook his burned hand and examined the soot that coated it. He scooped up the cup from where it had rolled to a stop before the fire and used a spell to straighten it again. It looked and felt perfectly ordinary now. "That worked," Harry said, accepting a relievingly cold, wet cloth from Snape. "There must be more of them. I wonder how many." He thought back to the evidence lists from Merton's hideout, trying to remember how many Horcruxes were supposedly found. "Let's say there are six," Harry mused, assuming the number would be the same. "Nagini is one, the cup, another... I better go out hunting around again. Nagini I can kill when the time comes."

"I may know where one is," Snape said softly.

"Can you fetch it?" Harry asked eagerly.



In the dining room in Shrewsthorpe nothing much moved until a glittering pigeon came to the window. Snape leapt up and opened the sash and then growled as he removed from the bird's leg the very letter he had written. The bird took off again, flying at a blur.

"You rented a Silver Pigeon?" Candide asked in surprise.

"The cost was no issue."

"I'm just surprised they had one. It's always rented when we need it."

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“But it did not find the recipient. I may no longer have the correct address and the man has a habit, Harry said, of keeping an anti-post charm around himself.” He tossed the message aside into the Floo and burned it up with a wave of his wand.

“Whom were you trying to reach?” Candide asked, watching the last of the flames flutter out as the paper curled completely black.

“The Shaman in Finland,” Snape stood, thinking, and then without warning reached for the Floo powder again. “Come with me this time. You need to visit your office, correct?”

Snape left Candide at the accountancy and strolled to the Apothecary. Inside before a tall stand of glittering empty bottles, he waited for the current customer to leave and the proprietor, clearly aware of Snape’s presence, hurried the customer along.

“Jigger,” Snape said when they were alone. “I understand that you have a certain standard of secrecy toward your customers... indeed, I have much appreciated that over the years, but I am dearly in need of information.”

The old man behind the counter frowned. “You are certainly one of my better customers, Professor, but like you said...”

Snape spoke quickly, “I wish only to hire this person that I need to locate, nothing more.”

Jigger’s face relaxed and he put aside some stray bottles on the counter while asking, “And exactly whom are you looking for?”

“I’m not entirely certain; that is why I have come to you. I need to locate a vampire, and given their usual dietary requirements as well as your expertise in procuring almost anything, regulated or not, I am guessing that they not infrequent customers.”

Jigger stopped filing bottles and said stiffly, “There’s a registry at the Ministry. Why not start there?”

“I want an unregistered vampire, if possible, one I can trust to keep a secret. We go back a long way, Jigger. I promise you the vampire will not know where I learned of his or her existence.”

“Only for you, Sev,” Jigger said, picking up a rag and wiping down the counter. The rag began to smoke, so he shook it out and hung it up. “There’s an unregistered one of ’em moved in just a week ago on Knockturn. Number Twenty-Six. He’s one of several who have moved in recently, I’m not sure why that’s happenin’, but the rest are registered. I know, because they bring in their blood ration coupons from the Ministry. This bloke’s appetite runs beyond bovine and porcine blood, so do be careful.”

“What’s his name?”

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Jiggers shook his head that he did not know. "I wish I knew why the neighborhood is suddenly so attractive to them."

Snape stood thinking and said, "I believe it is because the most dominant of their number was recently removed to prison, leaving a vacuum. But that is only a guess."

"Ah," Jiggers muttered. "Good to know it isn't something more worrisome than that."

Snape thanked him and stepped along a few doors and upstairs to the accountancy. Someone was letting an owl grip a large package out of the window. More owls waited in a cage mounted directly in the largest window. When the woman turned, Snape recognized Roberta, who gave a small start at seeing him there. He knew Candide had invited her to the wedding and that she had refused to attend. He cared not at all beyond any impact on Candide's happiness with her work.

They stared at each other and for the first time Snape remembered her from Hogwarts, one of many students, nameless to him, who kept their head down inside a book most of the time except when an opportunity arose to glare with disapproval at a Slytherin. Roberta looked away first to return to her desk. Snape heard Candide's voice then, emanating from the smaller office off to the right. It pulled him out of memories not worth revisiting, for which he was grateful given that he had no thoughts to spare for anything beyond suppositioning on what may have happened to Harry.

As she stepped out of the side office, Snape noticed for the first time that her belly had begun to swell. A strange numbness suffused him as he considered a second son in his life. He had months to prepare, so he pushed it aside out of a mind too crowded with worry to take on even a remote conception of caring for an infant.

"Severus," she said, smiling in pleasure at his standing there. "Let me get some papers and we can go..."

Later that night, Snape's watching the clock caught Candide's attention.

"Expecting something?" she asked. There had been no communication from the Ministry, but several owls from Hogwarts asking for information and offering help. "Is Tonks supposed to call again?"

"No, I have to see someone, and it would be best to show up immediately at sunset."

"Whom do you need to see?"

Snape stood, thinking to get ready to depart. "You should go to the Burrow whilst I am gone. It will give you a chance to catch up on news of the search."

She put down her quill and followed him to the entry hall to collect her cloak. She did not ask anything more as Snape saw her off in the Floo. He immediately took himself to the Leaky Cauldron and out into the dewy air of Diagon Alley. He strode

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with focused purpose to Twenty-Six Knockturn Alley and inside a dusty staircase, knocked on the door. After many minutes, a metal plate slide aside with a clack and red-flecked eyes peered out. “What is it?”

“I have a proposition for you,” Snape said.

The man on the other side of the door laughed harshly. “Why would I talk to you? I don’t even know who you are.” He started to slide the plate closed, but Snape hexed it back open again.

Vampires were a dark bunch, untrusting, but Snape had a significant past connection he could use. “I am Voldemort’s last free servant; that is why you should hear me out.”

The eyes in the slot attempted to Legilimize him, but failed. The door clicked open.

“No garlic,” the man said as he stepped back from the door. Snape stepped inside, taking in the copiously candlelit room with strategic eyes. The vampire asked, “You aren’t one of us, are you?”

“Hardly,” Snape snapped back, insulted.

“Hmf,” the vampire snorted. He was tall and blonde with aquamarine eyes that glittered red at certain angles of the many flickering candles. “You don’t wish to live forever?”

“No, one life is quite sufficient.”

He posed faintly. “I get to be beautiful and thirty forever, what more could one want?”

“To be eighteen forever?” Snape offered, immediately disliking the man.

“Eighteen is a foolish age,” the vampire said.

Snape could not disagree with that given that he was hunting an errant nineteen-year old.

The vampire pulled the sole chair – an antique with lion-claw feet and a ghoulish face on the backrest – to the center of the room and left it there to lean casually against the closed coffin that sat on a stone pedestal off to one side. “Have a seat,” he said. “If we were at my castle I could offer you an entire wing of it for your comfort, but this is what I have at the moment. So, what is this proposition? Realize before you waste your limited breath that an immortal has little interest in most things mortals value.”

Snape took the chair only because he needed to stay on the man’s good side. “I need you to look for someone.”

“Really? A hunt?” The vampire tossed his wavy hair, displaying that it was brown underneath, which implied the improbable notion of sun-bleaching. “Few would hire a vampire for such a task, although we are quite good at it.”

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“I seek someone who has gone where only your kind and other beasts of darkness can venture.”

He had caught the vampire by surprise with that. If Harry had not told him, Snape would not have known vampires were able to use the Dark Plane.

The vampire stood silent, calculating, before saying, “Say I were interested in this task. Whom am I seeking?”

“My son. I expect he will be easy to spot, being the only human there.”

“He is not human if he is there,” the vampire said with a hint of disgust.

“He is human,” Snape insisted. “This is an easy task for you, surely you must need something. I can pay handsomely in gold or whatever currency is most convenient for you.”

The vampire pushed away from the coffin and began a slow circling of Snape. “I don’t need gold or rupees or florins or whatever is circulating these days.” He came around the chair back where he had started, velvet robes dragging on the floor. Snape wished he were not sitting, but given his lesser height he would still be at a disadvantage if he were not.

The vampire turned his pale face Snape’s way and it had lost the teenage blasé it had displayed before. “The task you request is indeed easy, and fortunately the payment will be equally easy for you.” He stepped closer as he spoke and reached out his index finger and slowly dragged it along below Snape’s jaw. “Trivially easy.”

Snape froze, torn between revulsion and dear need for this creature’s help.

The vampire went on, “You see, it is possible to purchase human blood, from the Muggles if you can imagine that. But it has been processed, filtered, treated, and chilled. You cannot imagine what an utter waste that is.” He circled around the back of the chair, pulling Snape’s hair back so that it no longer hid his neck. He dragged a finger the other direction, stopping and pressing at the jugular with a light touch. His voice was disconcertingly close to Snape’s ear as it hypnotically said, “Biting an unwilling mortal is grounds for banishment and I am intending to repossess my castle here in your less than sunny country so I do not wish that to happen. But I am also acutely hungry for fresh blood.” His breath brushed Snape’s ear as he added, “It has been a very long time... my teeth ache for the pressure of hot flesh.”

Snape twitched. It was a jump held back with iron will.

The silky voice at his ear laughed. “A barely willing victim would be even better.”

Snape swallowed. “Nothing else you might want?” The presence at his neck lifted and Snape nearly closed his eyes in relief.

The vampire came around to stand before him again. “At some point, yes, an interior decorator capable of rescuing a castle that has been hideously converted into a museum, but frankly you don’t look qualified for that position.” He licked his lips

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which shone with saliva. “No, there is just one thing I would take in payment or you have no deal.”

“You will not make me one of your kind?” Snape asked, gut urging him to make a run for it, but his rational mind seeing no alternatives.

“Traditionally, we dislike competition, to put it mildly.”

Snape imagined Harry learning of this. He would not be pleased to say the least, but Snape had no options and he could not sit by and do nothing. “All right,” Snape agreed. The vampire’s eyes flared red and he bared his long incisors. Snape cut him off with: “But after you have succeeded. Bring me back my son or at least proof that you have found him.”

“And how would I prove that. Shall I bring you his head?”

Snape sat unbaited by that. “Get me the answer to the question: what present did his father first give him?”

The vampire considered that. “Agreed. I will look for him tonight. Where shall I find you when I have found him?”

Snape did not want this creature anywhere near his house. “I will return here... a half hour before sunrise.”

“Clever man. Make it an hour.” He stepped forward again with a catlike grace and hunting manner. Whispering while leaning in close, he said, “I want sufficient time to enjoy my payment.” He licked his lips faintly, drawing in the saliva pooling there.

Snape stood. “Yes, I’m sure you do,” he stated brusquely, barely masking his violent disgust.

At the Burrow the worn, brightly mismatched couches and tablecloth calmed Snape given how far removed they were from black velvet drapes and wrought iron candelabras. Candide stood from the table where several Weasley’s had gathered, drooping slightly. “Any luck?” Candide asked.

Snape shook his head, not wishing to discuss what he had been doing. Ron and Bill frowned and returned to clutching the large mugs of tea before them.

“I appreciate your assistance,” Snape said to them.

“Anything for Harry,” Ron said into his mug.

“Indeed,” Snape agreed with vehemence.

The next morning, under cover of darkness, Snape escorted a sleepy and somewhat irritable Candide to the twin’s laboratory where a light burned in the window unlike the darkened offices on the first floors up and down the alley, including the accountancy.

“I don’t understand why you don’t want company?” Candide asked for the second time.

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Fred, the twin who was not sleeping on the rug using a giant marshmallow as a pillow, came to the rescue of Snape's thin patience. "Don't ask something like that of Professor Snape," he told her in mock horror. "The mind boggles at the answer might be. Come on in. I'll make you some tea."

At Twenty-Six Knockturn Alley, Snape found the vampire pacing.

"Well?" Snape asked.

After a pause, the creature said snippily, "I didn't find him. I found evidence of him, in the form of a pentagram I'm quite certain none of the creatures would have left behind. Plus a lot of trainer footprints, already covered by other tracks. But no sign of the boy human himself."

"What would it cost me to have you look again? Or bring me there?"

The vampire considered his nails before replying. "Nothing extra. Believe me, I thought I had my first real meal in a year coming to me. Waltzing in like a proverbial lamb, even." He threw down his hand, making the nearby candles flicker. "I know he is not there. I set my pets off to hunt for him as well as looking myself. He is not in the Dark Plane as the few mortals who know it refer to it."

Snape exhaled. He had not expected this answer and found himself lacking a plan for what to do next. He was slow gathering himself to leave. When he reached the door, the vampire joked in clear disappointment, "Stop in for a bite anytime."

Snape merely raised a brow at him as he tugged the door closed behind him.



The next day during Hogwarts breakfast hour when Voldemort would be out of the tower, Snape returned with four items in a small box and paced nervously while Harry examined them as they sat on the chessboard, which had become Harry's worktable.

Snape uttered, "Hurry with that, I must return them before they are missed."

"He must be overconfident," Harry observed as he lifted out each item from the box: a locket, a watch, and a pair of cufflinks. Each felt all right but afterward he still had a sense of advanced decomposition. Harry stared at the chessboard before him in puzzlement.

"What it is?" Snape asked impatiently.

Harry lifted the box to look for a hidden compartment and said, "It's the little box itself, even though it's wooden."

The box did not want to deform while closed. Harry opened the lid and pressed hard on the frame of the box. After many tense minutes and a few droplets of sweat, the brass-strapped wood creaked and a ball of fire consumed the velvet lining,

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emitting a scream. Harry made himself hold onto it so he could quickly quench the flames. The lining and part of the wood inside were ruined.

“That will not be easily repaired,” Snape observed grimly.

“Same dark green velvet as the curtains around your bed,” Harry pointed out, half-teasing.

“Do you know how to sew?” Snape asked.

Harry, who as a child had tried to lengthen the life span of any clothing, nodded. “Well enough for this.”

“But not fast enough, I suspect. Breakfast ends in ten minutes.”

“Cut me a piece and let’s see.”

“You are not the one who must work their way past all of the barriers to return the box,” Snape harshly pointed out.

“Return it as it is, then,” Harry said. “Or don’t return it at all; let it go missing.”

Snape tossed the trinkets into the box where they clinked harshly, saying, “You have no idea how badly that would go over.” He departed hurriedly. Harry dearly hoped he returned quickly and did not run into trouble. He reminded himself that he could leave anytime. He was certainly being desperately missed back home. Leaving and returning would be complicated; explanations would be required and Harry did not believe he could argue successfully that he should come back to complete the prophecy here. As he stood there, before the fire, it felt like his prophecy now and he could not resist it.

Snape returned presently, seeming distracted.

“Go all right?” Harry asked.

Snape took this as an invitation to get directly in his face. “Finish this quickly or we are all doomed.”

“I plan to,” Harry said. “I’ll go out right now looking for the remaining ones.”

Minutes later he re-emerged from the toilet, passable as Argus Filch. Snape stood in the center of the room, arms crossed, looking smug. “You don’t require a distraction?”

“No,” Harry said.

“No?” Snape echoed doubtfully.

“No,” Harry insisted, “I have this.” He pulled out the Marauder’s Map and snapped it open with one hand.

“What is that?”

“Something I picked up from Filch’s office last trip out.”

“I’ve seen that before,” Snape breathed, sounding suspicious.

“Yes,” Harry said, activating it and waiting for the decorative and infamous printing listing the designers to die away and the Hogwarts corridors to appear. “It was

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my father's."

Snape's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I should just turn you in now, shouldn't I?"

"Right," Harry said tiredly. "After all you've already done, for one thing." Snape did not reply, just continued to glower. Harry lowered the map and said, "Look, I'm sorry my dad was cruel to you, but there's nothing I can do about it now." He wanted to say more, about Snape keeping his priorities straight, but did not wish to risk arguing about that. Snape continued to glare as though thinking things through. "Come on," Harry said. "Hasn't your dad done things you didn't agree with?" Harry returned to studying the map. "I bet he has."

Harry folded the map away. Filch was on the far end of the fourth floor and Harry wanted to take a look around on the lawn anyway. "I really am sorry," Harry insisted, although he was understanding a little better right then his father's animosity towards this man. "What more do you want from me?"

"That you don't get me killed, I suppose."

Harry departed with, "I'll try."

The Entrance Hall was full of students, so Harry did not pause to investigate the aversion he felt there. It was one more of the Crux Horridii, most likely, which meant there was still another to find. Harry wandered out into the cloudy day. Shouts drew him toward the Quidditch pitch where one of the Houses was practicing. Harry stood and watched, wondering that things could go on so normally with someone like Voldemort in charge. Perhaps most momentum was too strong even for a powerful evil wizard to stop. Harry wandered past the gameskeeper's cabin where a small woman with a shiny bald head and wispy hair over her ears was tending to the pumpkin patch. Harry wondered where Hagrid was with a feeling of deep worry. Farther around the castle, just beside the rose garden he encountered a row of fancy cages set up like a miniature zoo or a menagerie. A pair of unicorns sat forlornly in the first cage, eyeing Harry anxiously, moving their tiny hooves spasmodically in lieu of running away. The next cage held a giant spider that snatched at Harry through the bars as he past, using a leg that clearly had taken a beating already. Harry looked down the row and hurried on to the largest one which had a kind of dirt hovel near the back of it.

"Hagrid," Harry breathed.

The large man inside stirred. The half giant resembled a towering pile of untanned skins thrown together. Harry backed up a step. Hagrid could not be trusted to keep news to himself. Before Hagrid could rise, Harry quickly moved on, slowing only when he passed a cage with a brass sign reading Werewolf. This cage also had a hovel in the center, this one made of wood. The figure curled inside the hut did not stir when Harry called out, "Hey there!"

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Harry could do nothing at all for them if he was caught here. Severely pained, he walked on, entering the bailey through the rear gate. Harry paced once around the fountain, forced to fish leaves out of it when a group of Slytherins came meandering through. His mind was moving too fast to be of use. Tossing a handful of rotted, slippery leaves aside, Harry strode to the door and into the castle.

The Entrance Hall was quieter now. Harry stood beneath the great hourglasses that recorded the house points and craned his neck to study them. He was feeling desperate and even knowing that would make him insufficiently careful, he waited for the hall to empty, lifted his wand, and said, “Accio Crux Horridus.” The jewels shifted and the glass of the Slytherin hourglass cracked in a spider-web pattern.

“Now you’ve done it,” Harry muttered to himself. He glanced around the hall. A few students were coming down the stairs but they ignored him in favor of their gossip and entered the Great Hall. Harry decided that fixing this would be Filch’s job, so he fetched a ladder from the nearest cupboard and climbed up to decorative wooden rack holding the row of glasses.

Harry assumed the emerald lodged at the center of the web of cracks was the one he wanted. It was near the bottom of the top conical section. Fortunately the Slytherins were far ahead and not many emeralds remained in the top portion. Just that moment ten blue sapphires flew upward in the next hourglass, putting Slytherin even farther ahead.

Harry adjusted the ladder to better reach the top and with some unlock spell attempts, finally got the glass cylinder to open. He had to wait for students to pass between attempts with his wand, and soon chilly sweat was dripping down his ribs under his robes. The ladder wasn’t high enough for him to reach inside or even aim his wand inside and he did not want to risk climbing up on the rack itself to do so, picturing in his mind the whole thing crashing to the floor. He also had to keep an eye on the Marauder’s Map to be certain the real Filch kept dallying in the attics.

Harry used a Hoover Hex to remove the emeralds above the one he wanted. The sucked up ones weighted down his robe pockets until they overflowed. He then used a whip charm to snag individual gems, feeling like his cousin Dudley must have when he tried to win a prize in one of those Muggle machines with a claw on the end of a crane.

Finally Harry snagged the correct one, feeling only relief, not joy at doing so. He slipped it into his jeans pocket and quickly hovered the remaining emeralds back inside. He then used a repair spell on the crack and retreated down the ladder on legs almost too shaky to stand, let alone climb. Keeping his head down, he properly snarled at some students while putting the ladder away.

He was back safely in the dungeon just a minute later, trying to get his breathing

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slowed to normal. He had taken the risk in the middle of the day because he had been angry about the menagerie, but he knew it had been foolhardy and that kept his heart pumping long afterward.

Snape strolled in as Harry was studying the gem in the firelight, pondering how he was going to deform a crystal to crush the soul inside of it.

“Another one?” Snape asked. “Ah,” he said. “A student complained that the total house points may be wrong, now I know why.”

“As if Slytherin could ever lose,” Harry mocked.

Snape grinned with no cheer. “I had a thought as to where another might be,” he said, raising Harry’s spirits. Snape went on to explain, “The Dark Lord was not always so sanguine regarding his position. He spent a month of the first year working in the lower dungeons on some project and did not let anyone down there for several years after.”

“Filch survived going down there, so it should be safe to take a look,” Harry said. “That would be the last one.”

Snape derisively corrected, “I thought you said six. You have the cup, the box, the emerald, and Nagini. Add to that the one in the lower dungeons and that still leaves one.”

“That would be me,” Harry said softly. “I’m the last one.”

Snape straightened and stared at him. “And do you plan to dispense with yourself using the same method you intend for Nagini?”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Harry admitted in all honesty. This was a topic he had been ignoring for lack of any hope for a solution. “I don’t plan to stay around here. I’ll take myself far enough away that it won’t matter.”

Snape dropped into the overstuffed chair, saying, “I think I am going to regret helping you at all.”

“Why?” Harry asked. “You like living like this?”

“The living is fine,” Snape said, sounding vaguely spoiled.

“You’re lying,” Harry accused. He put the emerald down, intact, in the center of the empty chess board and asked, “Why was V- the Dark Lord allowed to continue as headmaster?”

“Why was he allowed?” Snape echoed derisively. “No one had any choice, Potter! What a ridiculous suggestion. Fudge believed it would keep him busy, and he was correct about that. Turns out he never lived down Albus refusing him a job.”

“Blimey,” Harry muttered. “It’s a wonder any students come.”

“Most Slytherins still send their children, even more families from the continent than before, and some still don’t sort into Slytherin, so we still have four houses. The castle spells have been reinforced and he has the Dementors and the Giants patrolling

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the forest. There is no chance to overcome him by force. Even a large force, should they wish to risk the children.”

“Hm.”

Snape scoffed at Harry’s doubtful noise. “You will be dead before this is finished.”

“Neither can live while the other survives,” Harry quoted. “Or hadn’t you ever heard the ending of it?” he added mockingly. It was clear from Snape’s expression that he had not. “I can take care of myself; keep an eye on yourself.”

The hearth flared green and Harry barely had time to leap aside to press his back to the wall beside the mantelpiece before the dreaded slit-eyed, noseless, face moved into view in the flames.

“My Lord,” Snape greeted calmly. So calmly that Harry thought he deserved some kind of medal for it.

“Come to my tower, Snape, I would speak with you.”

Snape bowed and the awful face pulled back and the green flames flickered back to yellow. Snape glanced at Harry on his way to the door.

“What does he want?” Harry asked, whispering unnecessarily.

“I don’t know.”

Still pressed against the wall, chair-rail under his hands, Harry asked, “Does he summon you up like that often?”

“No.”

Harry sucked in a deep, worried breath. Despite or because he still felt shaky, Harry said, “I’m going to look in the lower dungeon. But I may need your help.”

Snape’s brow lifted. He departed without replying.

Motivated heartily by fear of his safe haven being at risk, Harry checked the corridor in the wake of Snape’s departing and dashed around to the door to the lower dungeon and slipped through after hitting the rust-red hinges with a quick oiling charm. The smell of crypt and the sound of lapping water wafted up as he descended the long curved staircase carved directly out of the foundation stone. With a wave, Harry lit the torches at the bottom so he could see more than the faintly lit arched opening that led to the quay.

Meanwhile, Severus Snape strode up and around to the gargoyles with his normal purposeful speed. He had grown immune to fear, which was fortunate, since he had no room to spare for it right then if he was to survive the next ten minutes.

On the second floor staircase he encountered Minerva McGonagall, one of the few remaining professors from Dumbledore’s era. Originally, she had remained because MacNair, the Care of Magical Creatures instructor had her under an Imperio, but later after it weakened, she seemed to believe she could do more good remaining. A

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naïve notion, but one that events never seemed to shake, especially given how lost many of the students felt when they failed to sort into Slytherin.

McGonagall, held up two fingers as though to slow him down and he shook his head and pointed upward. She pulled her fingers back into her sleeve and appeared to shrink into herself as she let him pass.

The headmaster's tower no longer had a turning staircase, but instead had a slide, and visitors were required to utilize a magic carpet to rise to the office. Snape stepped off the carpet at the top and it snapped its fringe at him before rolling up and storing itself against the wall to wait. An unwelcome guest would be unceremoniously rolled down beyond the second floor and into the bowels of the castle where it was rumored a basilisk awaited. Snape was not certain he believed that such a creature lived beneath the castle, but he certainly had seen his displeased master dispose of people utilizing the slide and its victims were never heard of again.

The snake-headed door knocker hissed and clacked on its own upon Snape's arrival and the door creaked open. Sunlight stabbed in slashes around the thick curtains valiantly blocking it out. Voldemort sat at the broad desk, pondering a long scroll. A basket of scrolls sat on the desk edge, awaiting review. Snape saw the scene with fresh eyes borrowed from Harry's ignorant questions and he almost laughed. But he held it in, not wishing to die so early in the conversation.

Voldemort said, "Two of your House's students were caught off school grounds. In the Forest no less."

Idiots, Snape thought to himself. Aloud, he said, "Do you wish me to punish them?"

"That failed to change them last time, so I have turned them over to Filch."

Snape withheld a shudder. "Until what time, may I inquire? I may wish to add onto their tasks." In reality, he wished to warn the Mediwizard so that he would be certain to be sober at that time.

Voldemort carefully re-rolled the parchment before him with his oddly knobby hands. It was as if they were the hands of an elderly person with severe arthritis, but with smooth young skin. "I did not give him a limit, so it will be ten, when he must clear the corridors preceding the Dementors' patrol." His factual tone was most likely designed to lull Snape into letting his guard down.

Time passed as Voldemort continued reading the long scroll. He finished, rolled it up, tied it closed and turned to toss it into the hearth, burning heartily despite the September warmth of the tower. Snape waited without moving or speaking.

Finally, Voldemort said, "You sent Filch down to the lower dungeons. Why?" The question was flatter even than normal, setting Snape's nerves on alert.

Using a tone carefully crafted to contain a hint of boredom and an underlying

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current of annoyance, Snape replied, “He crossed me too many times last week. Broke several rare potions open while cleaning up. I thought a pointless task would make a point, so to speak. The floor has undoubtedly re-flooded already.”

Voldemort did not look up from the wand he rolled between his fingertips. Snape had not seen him take it out, but he showed no reaction. His explanation may have been too long-winded, but there was no withdrawing it.

“The lower dungeons continue to be off-limits, Snape.”

Snape bowed as though mere acknowledgment was all that the situation required. “My mistake, my Lord. I certainly recall that used to be true, but... much time had passed since a reminder.” Snape feared that he was losing his touch at this game, having not practiced it in years for anything more than protecting the occasional student. That meant he was relying rather heavily on hopes that Potter, by some inconceivable chance, could actually complete the prophecy. The fact that the boy was alive at all made the odds something greater than zero, but not high enough to survive sloppiness.

Voldemort lifted one brow the way he did when annoyed with the likes of Crabbe or someone equally incompetent.

“The dungeon is your domain, Snape; I expect you to enforce the rules there that no one enter the lower dungeons or the cave leading to the lake.” He waved his hand dismissively as though wanting Snape out of his sight.

As the flying carpet unrolled and hovered and the office door slammed closed and the bolts thundered into place, Snape pondered that his shaky performance may have in fact lowered the Dark Lord’s guard and saved him from suspicion.

Shaking his head and trying to see hope while fearing its poison, he stepped onto the carpet and let it carry him downward.

In the lowest dungeon of the castle, Harry stood with the toes of his trainers hanging over the water of the small quay which was clearly now unused. No boats rested here but if he leaned far over, he could see two battered ones resting belly-up on the larger docking area used in the past by the First-Years. A bulky, rusty gate was closed across the entrance to the cave and the only other boats were sunken and sprouting plantlife.

Harry waited for his eyes to readjust to the darkness after staring outside at the lake, glaringly bright in comparison to the cave, even on a cloudy day. He examined the cave walls and then squinted, glasses pushed hard to his face to see across to the far side. A niche, perhaps just a natural indentation in the rock, kept catching his eye. Wand raised, Harry considered his options. He spelled a Lumos and shielded his own eyes from it. Something lay in the niche, weakly reflecting the blue light. Harry wasn’t watching thoroughly enough or he may have noticed eyes opening beneath his

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toes, peering up through the cold depths.

Grumbling to himself, Harry shook the Lumos out of his wand and paced. He could take a boat over and look. So, leaning dangerously around the corner of the wall, he hovered one of the rickety old boats around from the other entrance and gently down on the quayside at his feet. He manually rolled the badly peeled white hull over and hovered it into the water. A chill went through him as he held the boat against the rock edge, and considered that he should get help before going further. The oars were narrowed with rot, but serviceable. Harry set these into the boat; the thunk of them hitting the bottom echoed around the cave and he held his breath and waited to see if anyone heard. A minute passed before he breathed normally again.

Harry crouched at the quay edge, one hand holding the bow steady, while he considered whether to get help or just get moving. Snape may not even return, Harry considered. This may be the only chance.

Harry awkwardly stepped into the rocky boat and shoved off. He struggled to mount the oars into the rusty locks and began rowing across. His sense of cursedness increased as he approached the other side, giving him a joyous lift even as it made him cringe.

It was difficult to hold the boat against the rock wall while standing up to see into the niche, but Harry managed long enough to see that there was a metal ring on a chiseled hatch in the bottom face of the niche. Harry tugged upward on the ring, nearly sending the boat out from under himself. He had to shove with his hands against the rock and jump for the boat to catch it and prevent himself from tumbling into the water. The boat sailed back out to the middle of the cave before coasting to a stop with him in the murky, smelly bottom of it.

Harry's sense of alarm increased and he looked around the cave repeatedly for danger, but failed to look down into the water. He gazed instead at his trouser knees, which were soaked with green, slippery water. At the bottom of the lake more things were rousing, dead eyes snapping open to stare distantly upward.

Using the oars, Harry paddled back to the cave wall below the niche. He cast his mind back to Ravenclaw's book and used a demolition spell around the metal ring. Loose stone splattered into the water and into the boat, thundering, until Harry pushed with his feet to keep the boat away from the rock wall and apply some Silencing Charms.

The door at the top of the steps opened and footsteps sounded, just as Harry, perched to look into the demolished niche, finally looked down into the dark water. Harry's grip on the rock became tenacious with panic as he stared down into an army of dead white faces rising dreamlike toward the surface.

"Potter, you could perhaps make enough noise to be heard in the Entrance Hall

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if you worked at it – ” Snape’s voice criticized in a hiss.

“Get a broomstick!” Harry insisted, fingertips clinging to the rock as the boat inextricably drifted again away from the cave wall, taking his feet with it. “Hurry!”

Snape raised his wand and used a weak blasting curse to shove the boat back under Harry’s legs, knocking the head of the dead man just clearing the water. Harry leapt for the disintegrating niche and grabbed up the only thing that did not feel like rock, liberating a small golden box from the debris. More figures were rising. Harry tossed the box into the boat and heaved on the oars, but they had arms and hands clinging to them, so he moved no where. A hand came over the gunwale, tipping the boat dangerously toward the water. Harry lifted the oar to beat the hand off and then shoved against the cave wall with the oar, moving the boat a little. The other oar was tugged overboard and thrashing ensued as it disappeared beneath the choppy surface.

Harry glanced back at the quay, needing help. Snape stood, wand extended, gaping in chilled alarm at the figures rising out of the water. Harry took another swing with the oar at someone he tried not to recognize despite how familiar they looked. He was not certain what spell to use that would not risk upsetting the boat and he did not want to lose the last oar if he let go to use his wand.

The boat suddenly surged toward the quay, sending Harry into the wet belly of it beside the golden box. The surge also shed the worst of the clawing hands. The boat ran hard into the stone edge and a fiercely gripping hand hauled Harry up onto the quay.

“You did not exaggerate when you said you required help,” Snape muttered before issuing a stunning curse from his wand that slowed the figures from clambering up onto the ledge after them; their bleached and torn clothing dragging on their limbs, dripping. “Inferi,” Snape breathed. “Of all the horrific things.”

Harry joined him in casting spells to keep them at bay as they backed up to the staircase. “So, you did not know about this?” Harry asked, knocking a white-haired heavy figure back, which took down his companions as well.

At the top of the stairs Snape held Harry back from the door and opened it to check that the corridor was clear. He gestured abruptly for Harry to follow, and Harry gratefully did so.

“Keep your head down,” Snape hissed.

Harry leaned on the door to press it closed, keeping his face ducked and averted. Something thumped into the door from the other side and water sloshed under it.

Snape sneered to someone, apparently a student, “Mr. Callow, fetch a mop, will you? The rest of you clear out or you will all be assisting.” Harry was extremely relieved right then that Snape could wield that dreadful tone that even now, made

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him grateful it was not aimed his way. The door thumped again. Snape hit it with an Impervious Charm, a Silencing Charm and several more things since Harry was using one hand to hold the door and the other to hold the golden box. The door fell silent and still. Harry released his hand from the damp wood slowly.

The student returned at a run and Snape set him to mopping with strict orders not to open or touch the door itself. Harry snuck off while the hapless Slytherin had his head down, mopping inexpertly at the fluid slipping in under the door. After Harry turned the corner, Snape snapped his fingers at the boy and ordered, "Enough. Leave it."

"Army of the flippin' dead," Harry muttered as he tried to shake off chills by settling before the fire. The golden box joined the emerald on the chess board. Harry rubbed his hair back and calmed himself. "Let's hope they can't get out of there," Harry said as Snape approached.

"The cave is barred to the lake and the path to the Entrance Hall bricked in long ago."

"Still, let's finish this quickly, just in case." Harry held the emerald to the firelight as he spoke.

Snape crossed his arms and said, "Just like that? Just finish it? You think it so easy?"

Harry did not want the questions that would follow his pointing out that he had done it before, more than once. "I'll manage. Watch yourself, 'cause I can't do both," Harry said garnering a disbelieving glare. Harry turned to contemplate the box. It had the seal of a cross on it. "Ah, a traditionalist," Harry observed.

"What do you mean by that?"

Harry opened the box. Inside was a carefully preserved digit. "Its an old reliquary. Fitting." Harry dusted off the plaque inside. "Hey, it's St. Mungo's finger." Feeling punchy from too much stress, Harry said, "Should be grateful it isn't some other part of him..."

He carefully lifted the leathery thing from its setting, forced to overcome both curse discomfort and general dislike of the task. He squeezed the finger in his hand with great concentration, then jerked as it burst into flame and let out a wail. He tossed it on the fire and brushed his hand on his robe. "Sorry Mungo."

Harry set the box aside and turned back to the emerald, saying, "I assume you don't want to return this box...?"

Snape shook his stringy veil of hair, eyes fixed on the jewel.

Harry pressed the emerald between his fingers to no effect. He returned to staring at it, unsure how to proceed. In the end he knelt on the hearthstone, gem against the slate, held between his index finger and thumb, the fireplace poker point aimed at the

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flattest side of the jewel. He crushed with his mind before bringing the poker down hard. If he were to hit his fingers, his concentration would be broken and he was not certain what would happen then. To be possessed by Voldemort did not appeal, but the path home led through this task. His aim was true. The flare burst from the emerald as it was crushed and a thousand tinny cries of despair drifted around the room before dying out. Harry barely pulled his fingers away from the flame in time and had to suck on his fingers to relieve the sting of the burn. When the hearth cooled, he collected the green salt-like gem fragments into his robe pocket and sat back in the overstuffed chair to think.

“One left,” Snape reminded him helpfully, needling Harry with an accuracy only he could manage.

“Don’t I know it,” Harry returned, fingers rubbing his chin as he contemplated what he was going to do next. His thoughts came around nicely with a glance at the clock showing half past four. “I’ll finish it tonight, at dinner.”

“Will you then?” Snape asked sarcastically.

“Just don’t give it away.”

“YOU just don’t give me away,” Snape countered. “You are going to fail and I don’t wish by any means to go down with you.”

With a small smile, Harry said, “Such confidence.” He stood then and with a quick check of the Marauder’s Map, said, “I have to something to do before the Dark Lord Death Day Ball this evening.” He smiled more broadly. He wanted to go home and he could taste the freedom to do so, it was so close. “I’ll come in after the plates are cleared but before pudding is served. It will be over soon.”

Snape glared at him as though questioning Harry’s sanity.

“This is my destiny, Severus,” Harry said, stepping to the toilet to don his disguise.

“Did I give you permission to use my first name?” Snape snarled lowly.

Harry turned and gave a small bow, still smiling. “Professor.”

Dinner in the Great Hall progressed much the same as all the others the last five years. The castle felt colder than it should. The sky reflected in the magic ceiling slid by more brooding than the one outside as though the accumulated soot stained the magic. The students kept their heads down as a few owls swept in and down in a spiral.

Snape had by far the toughest job of any Head of House. His House table was full and even overflowed into the half-empty Ravenclaw one beside it. Only the Slytherins would dare make trouble during a meal. Snape wanted none this evening.

With a foreboding that made his stomach rebel against eating, Snape watched the main course appear. He had to eat, had to behave normally. He was more grateful than most nights to be on the very end of the staff table, overlooking his own

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table. MacNair and Umbridge sat on either side of the headmaster, pandering to him nonstop.

Snape served himself beans and potatoes with casual uncaring to hide what otherwise would be an utterly unacceptable shaking in his hands. He gave two students, Yuba and Oppeum, sharp looks when they furtively glanced his way. They looked to be plotting something out of a black velvet sack and clearly were checking if he had noticed. After seeing they were observed they placed whatever it was on the floor and bent their heads together.

Snape lifted his fork and tried to eat. He very nearly could not swallow even the thinnest runny edge of the lumpy mashed potatoes. What was bothering him so? He certainly should hold no concern for that miserably annoying son of his worst enemy. And at one level he did not. It was not concern for Potter that closed his throat and made his heart race beneath his carefully crafted calm exterior; it was hope. Hope had slipped in despite no conscious room for it in his soul. His fingers trembled in fear at losing that hope again.

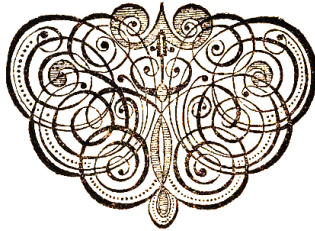
Damn you Potter.

Snape made a show of eating. No one paid the least attention to him; certainly the headmaster did not appear to, but often that meant he would later recount your every move back to you, expecting an explanation for each small thing. Snape thought he could handle that, if necessary. Certainly he could insist that he hated Potter to his very core. Yes, he could honestly state, even under Veritaserum, that he hated the boy... after Voldemort defeated him in just ten minutes time; hopefully the Dark Lord did not inquire if Snape also hated what the boy stood for.

Author's Notes: I see you are all rubbing your eyes and waking back up after Deathly Hallows. Welcome back everyone!

Yeah a cliff-hanger. I so love them.

CHAPTER TWELVE



ADOPTED DESTINY

Harry, without disguise, strolled through empty corridors to the statues that guarded the headmaster's tower. The hall leading there had been redecorated and now black curtains covered the walls, rendering the path tunnel-like with just a torch flickering at the end. The gargoyles sat unmoving and the doorway was open but there were no stairs. He put his head inside and called upward in parseltongue, then listened. Deep beneath him he felt a rumble and glanced down, noticing that the curving slide that had replaced the stairs spiraled away into the floor and darkness. The Basilisk would still be down there, he realized, since he had not been around as a Second Year to kill it. Voldemort apparently fed it often, since it called out with its deeper-than-Nagini's voice that it would appreciate a meal.

Harry feared using a spell so close to the headmaster's tower, so getting an idea he raced back to the main staircase and Accioed a barrel of cooking oil from the direction of the kitchens. He brought this back and after pouring it over the slide as high up as he could reach, he called to Nagini again and moments later, a slithering sound could be heard, but he could not be certain if it arose from above or below, so he backed off and, wand held at ready, waited for something to appear in the doorway. After half a minute of thumping and sliding, one of Nagini's coils slid into view from above. Harry, fearing being seen by her, ducked against the wall beside the still gargoyle and pressed himself there. Flailing sounded and more thumping and then a rapid sliding receded down into the bowels of the castle.

Harry stuck his head in the doorway and listened to the hissing that ensued and then the screeching and then the silence that followed. He called down in parseltongue

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and heard only the deep voice of the Basilisk. With a sharp exhale and glance at his watch, Harry hurried off.

Harry next strode into the kitchens with the attitude of head elf. "Attention, all of you!" he shouted. He scanned the array of bumpy heads framed by tall pointed ears, hoping to find Dobby, but did not. He spotted Grimpy, whom he recognized. He was by far the stoutest of the school's house-elves and always eager to give Ron food when his friend asked.

"Grimpy," Harry said. The elf blinked in surprise. "Get everyone out of here, now."

"You is being Harry Potter?" Grimpy asked. A few of the elves gasped. When Harry nodded, more a bow, really, Grimpy turned his long-nosed profile one way and then the other as though considering his instructions.

"Come back in ten minutes," Harry said to the kitchen elves, lowering his bargaining position. They shifted from foot to foot, nervous. Harry gave up on being nice. "I'm going to present you all with old socks of Dumbledore's if you don't leave now!" He pulled out a pink and green pair he had found stuffed in the Mrs. Pince's desk drawer when he was looking for the key to the Restricted Section. He brandished them at the elves. "You have ten seconds or I start distributing socks!"

The elves disappeared with a chorus of pops! Harry sighed and with several great heaves, shoved the long marble-topped tables aside to make room for two tall spell columns that, when they were finished, radiated prickly blue light even to the most remote nook of the vast kitchens.

The puddings sat on the longest table, on small overlapping plates, waiting to be magically served. Harry dipped a finger in one as he passed and then frowned. "Hopefully the food improves with Voldemort gone."

Harry initiated the spell he wanted, but stopped before the last line of it. He left the blue towers burning merrily to themselves, the air between them electrified and sizzling, and stepped out into the corridor leading to the Hufflepuff dungeon, but instead of walking up the stairs, he Dark-Plane Apparated silently to the Entrance Hall, just before the center doors. He stared at the marred old wood, took a deep breath, and adjusted his grip on his wand. His heart fluttered, inducing lightheadedness like it had before his first Quidditch match. Harry charmed his robes to bright blue, feeling he needed to represent some team, even an absent one. Beyond the doors, at the end of the staff table, Snape rubbed his thumb over his chin, experiencing similar cardiac symptoms, but no feelings of team spirit.

Harry pulled his hood far forward over his head, raised his wand, and blasted the doors open, following quickly through them before they could bounce closed.

"Lord Voldemort!" Harry addressed the surprised room and especially the slit-

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eyed man facing him in the center of the distant table. As he crossed the threshold of the tables, two forbidden curses formed behind him, aimed his way. Sharp watering came to Harry's eyes as he squelched the spells, which made the magic explode inside the casters' bodies. A few students gasped; the appearance of taking out one's opponents, without lifting a wand let alone turning to look at them was impressive all right, but Harry's feet had lost their marching cadence, and for that he berated himself.

Harry reached exactly halfway down the hall and he tapped his hand on his wand and pointed at the banners, snapping consecutively the Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Gryffindor out to the same size as the Slytherin ones. "All houses are equal here," Harry boomed as best he could. He wished he had a deeper voice. Fervent whispers rustled through the hall as though blown through by a breeze.

As Harry approached the end of the long House tables, Voldemort derisively asked, "Who dares challenge me?"

Harry stopped and tugged off his hood, wand aimed steadily. "Harry Potter."

The frantic whispering reached a quick crescendo then fell to stillness, the audience fearful of attracting attention or of just missing any detail. The closest Hufflepuffs leaned or scrambled away from where Harry stood defiant. Voldemort's eyes flickered with utter disbelief, which gave Harry a painful stab at the realization that his counterpart truly was dead in this Plane. Just as well he himself had stayed, then. No one else could do this.

Voldemort's wand flashed and Harry met the Disemboweling Scissors Hex with a block because that was ingrained habit and their wands and their paired cores locked together. Harry felt the first shudder of doubt; if the wands had not responded to their common origin, he was not sure he could have countered that spell well enough. To say the spell was loaded, did not cover it; it carried power equivalent to every wizard in the Ministry added together.

The ball of hex energy hovered between them, but Harry, familiar with this, forced it toward Voldemort, while mocking him to hide his sudden nerves, "Ha! Albus Dumbledore tricked you and assured that you would have a wand to match mine!"

Harry's words had the effect he had hoped and the hex exploded just in front of Voldemort, forcing the tall, boney wizard to duck awkwardly. MacNair was caught in the backwash and flew backward in his chair to smack the wall. Umbridge tumbled from her chair with a squeak. Harry laughed. It echoed around the hall's tall buttresses, reflecting back maniacally, sounding nothing like him. The room held a collective breath. Some of the teachers made a run for it, including McGonagall, who took up a defensive position at the top of the Gryffindor table.

Voldemort said, "You are surrounded, Potter."

ADOPTED DESTINY

Another spell came Harry's way and again they locked and Harry pressed his advantage of experience. Voldemort was standing now, his cloak and robes billowing in an unseen wind. He dodged this curse too as it erupted. This time, Harry used the gap, and very fast speaking, to complete Salazar's spell while looping his wand over his head.

The hall erupted in blue electricity that crawled madly over the walls before sinking into a cold glow in the stones. Half the Death-Eater laden staff table flopped to the floor in fits of hallucinatory horror along with several students. The others began to flee in earnest, lining the walls and pounding out the doors at the far end. Voldemort stood firm, shouting in fury, "My forbearer invented that spell. You thought to take me down with it?" He tossed a curse at Harry, which Harry dodged, letting it bounce along the floor between the tables. More students scattered to get out of the way. Some remained pinned where they were, forks in hand, bound in trances of amazement.

"Good!" Harry shouted as he rolled to his feet. "I prefer to take you out personally." He shot a curse at Voldemort that was blocked far too easily, but it let him dodge back to where fewer students were in harm's way behind him. Harry tried to pry open the Dark Plane, but it resisted his call; the castle resisted him too. He bit his lip.

Covering for his failure, he met Voldemort's Crucio with his own and this time they were spell locked for much longer, the curse energy hovering in the middle ground, neither holding an advantage for long. Voldemort was a fast learner, but he broke the spell off himself, possibly because of impatience. Harry dug desperately inside himself for enough pain and hatred to crack open the Dark Plane; it was surprisingly hard to find a sufficient amount. As a distraction while he worked at that, he said, "I'm your destiny, Tom."

Voldemort's eyes glowed even brighter red and he tossed an angry and less powerful spell at Harry, who matched it and held fast to the bound spells. "You are dead," Voldemort stated. It was unclear if this was a prediction of the future or an established statement of fact.

The spells were still locked, Harry propped up his tiring wand arm with his other hand. "Funny, I don't feel dead!" he mocked. "Perhaps you're not the only one who can't be killed."

Voldemort broke off the spell, startled by that statement. He tried to Legilimize Harry, making his scar burn.

Breathing heavier, Harry lowered his wand and found the pain he needed. He found a lonely boy, beaten down by his aunt and uncle with no hope for a life of his own.

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“This one’s for Lily and James,” Harry announced in a snarl as he overcame the castle’s weakened spells and glistening black creatures poured out of the seam between the right-hand wall and the floor. Most of the remaining students ran or leapt up on the tables. Those floundering on the floor of the hall, incapacitated by Salazar’s spell, were ravaged. Blood began to flow into the cracks between the hall’s worn stones. Harry could spare no attention for Snape or McGonagall. He held his wand on Voldemort, who gaped at this freakish invasion.

“Don’t know that spell, do you, Tom?” Harry shouted. Voldemort was forced to defend himself from the hordes, but he glanced up at Harry, letting a few crawl his robes before he cursed them and they fell with queer squeals. Harry went on, voice returning to maniacal, “Here’s a Riddle for you... Harry Potter is darker than you are!”

Just as Voldemort swung his wand to again blast the creatures trying to devour him, Harry snagged the dark wizard, bodily, with a whip charm and jerked him over the staff table and into a skidding stop on the floor. Harry dealt with Voldemort trying to aim his wand by stomping on his forearm. Voldemort dropped his wand but it zipped back to his hand. Harry stomped on his hand instead, sending a curse wide that smashed the upper windows, raining down a spray of glass.

Voldemort’s eyes betrayed him. Harry spoke, wand at Voldemort’s throat, “Yes, you fear death, don’t you? But you know, by doing so you never actually live.”

Black-bodied, disgusting creatures, part crustacean, reptile, and rodent, encircled the two of them. They smacked their jaws and scratched the stone floor musically with their absurdly long claws.

Harry, calmer, said, “And now you are going to die, consumed by evil greater than yourself.”

Voldemort, by attempting to not betray himself, did so with his flat and almost confident expression. Harry chuckled and reached into his robe pocket. He scattered the smashed emerald powder onto the chest of Voldemort’s robe. “I destroyed them all,” he said, trying not to smile too broadly.

Voldemort rolled his bare head to peer around himself in horror. The stench was distressing, let alone the vision of so many bared, needle-like teeth.

Harry said with queer pleasantness. “It’s like they haven’t eaten in an eternity... which I happen to know is not true.”

Voldemort thrashed then, lifting Harry’s foot with his arm, Harry hit him with a blasting curse that stunned him back flat again. “This is the end for you,” Harry promised. “You are released from this un-life of yours. Considering what my options are...” He thought of his Voldemort, trapped in a mere Muggle existence. “... think of it as a gift.”

ADOPTED DESTINY

Shifting all his weight atop Voldemort's wand hand, Harry used a Sectumsempra Curse to slash open Voldemort's chest and then leapt aside to let the creatures pile on. The thrashing figure was dragged toward the wall, trailing bright red, and Harry sent them all away, just as the upraised hand visible over the slithering black bodies drooped and released the wand it held.

The hall fell quiet after the creatures sank away into the stone and Voldemort's wand rolled to a quiet stop in a deep swath of blood. Several more smeared rivelets led to the right-hand wall along the staff table and in longer streaks from the Slytherin house table. The scent was like a butcher's might have, healthful still, but unnerving. Someone was sobbing nearby. A Ravenclaw boy clung to a bench, holding his broken leg. Blood drizzled from bites on his hand. Harry moved toward him to help, but the boy panicked and tried to escape him, falling under the table.

"It's all right," Harry insisted, not wishing to scare the boy just to fix his leg. McGonagall swept over and quiesced the boy and hovered him onto the tabletop. She turned then and said, "Harry," with overwhelming emotion.

Harry gave a little bow and said, "Headmistress," without much thought. The comment made McGonagall stand straight in surprise.

Snape slowly came up behind McGonagall. She turned and started, saying, "You survived, Severus."

Sharp and annoyed, as always, "Yes, of course."

Harry looked beyond him, barely giving him a glance, insistent still on not implicating him. Harry moved to repair the boy's leg while he was still quieted and while McGonagall went to attend to others. Finished with that, he looked around. Other students had taken refuge on the tabletops, one still brandished the stone goblet she had used as a weapon. A few stalwart friends were slinking back in to help the stragglers. Harry remembered the menagerie, turned, and strode out the door, ignoring McGonagall trying to call him back.

Outside, a light drizzle floated in the still air, soaking Harry's robes. His robes' bright sky color darkened as they grew damp and as the Morphmagus spell wore off.

At the largest cage, Harry called out to Hagrid, who roused slowly. Once the giant heaved to his feet, bent low because of the cage, he stomped up to the bars and lowered his bruised brow. He took a long sniff and said, "Harry?" with empty belief.

"Yeah, Hagrid, it's me. Stand back, I'll open the cage." Harry, after much urging to get Hagrid to move, blasted the lock. The door opened, but Hagrid remained standing where he was, perhaps finding freedom not entirely comprehensible.

Harry left him to recover and went down the line on the left, opening every cage except the giant spider's. At the unicorns, one ran off, but the other was lame and it did not get beyond the cage door. It floundered on the ground, eyes wide and

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alarmed by Harry's presence.

"Hagrid," Harry yelled to the half-giant. "Come help the unicorn!"

This got Hagrid moving. Cooing, Hagrid stooped to lift the creature in his broad hands and then stumbled off to the forest carrying it, glancing backward repeatedly, still disbelieving. Harry moved down the line of facing cages, releasing a beaked gibbus, a vampire duck, a hippogriff that was mostly likely Buckbeak, except it lunged at Harry before scampering off and taking flight on wings that lacked several major feathers. Harry reached the werewolf cage with great trepidation. He destroyed the lock and called out, "Hallo!"

Slitted eyes snapped open and a shaggy form put its head out of the wooden hovel.

"Remus," Harry said, surprised to find this Lupin appeared partially werewolf outside the full moon as well.

Lupin limped slowly out of the cage, gazing quizzically at Harry. "Can't be," he whispered. "Can't be."

Harry felt a twinge at his ruse, but it could not be helped. "It's Harry Potter," he said in a reassuring manner.

"You look just like James," he whispered hoarsely. He then jerked and looked about in fear as though an attack may be imminent.

Harry turned to look as well and found a familiar pink Mohawk approaching. "Tonks," Harry greeted the witch, with too much familiarity it turned out. She peered at him suspiciously. "Harry Potter," he said with a little bow, by way of introduction. "You're one of the Aurors, right?" he went on, masking the pain he felt seeing her prematurely aged and careworn face.

"Yes," she said flatly and turned to Lupin, who had taken to clinging to the bars of his cage, looking away from both of them as though ashamed. Tonks' pained gaze fixed on Lupin's tattered back.

"Can you take care of him?" Harry asked, nearly pleading. He wished to leave, but these new burdens were threatening that.

Tonks did not reply, only moved to put a hand on Lupin's arm to draw him away from the metal bars. Lupin resisted but finally leaned on her. Harry felt a twinge of jealousy and turned away.

"What did you do in there?" Tonks asked Harry over Lupin's shoulder. She sounded mistrustful.

Harry suppressed more disappointment. He did not want to feel the need to make her understand. "Something I should have done a long time ago," he replied, voice harder than he intended. He was not going to argue over, or justify anything he had done. Her eyes gave away that she saw only the blood on top of too much other blood.

ADOPTED DESTINY

“Not really Harry, is it?” Lupin asked faintly, scratching his pointed ear with one clawed finger. “Can’t be.”

Harry walked away, back to the Great Hall.

A Ministry retinue was mincing here and there in the Hall, oohing and ahing over what they were hearing described and seeing in damage. Harry strode up to the familiar, brown-coated figure and stopped in his face, just as he turned at the sound of advancing footsteps.

“Oh!” Fudge said in surprise. “Potter?” he prompted, befuddled.

“Don’t blow this, Fudge.” Harry jerked his head in the direction of Lucius Malfoy standing amongst Crouch, Jorkins, Percy, and Bones. “Clean up the likes of him. All of them.”

Malfoy’s mouth twitched and he drew himself up taller and set his cane before himself, one hand over the other.

“He’s one of them,” Harry said. “And there are most likely others. Get them out of the Ministry, into prison. If you don’t, I’ll be back.”

Harry turned, waylaid, by Fudge’s bruised pride. “Now, see here, Mr. Potter, if that’s who you really are!”

Harry spun back around, unnaturally pale eyes blazing. “You let this go on,” Harry snarled. Fudge’s mouth snapped closed. Harry’s gaze took in the group. “All of you, catering to evil.” Fury was taking Harry to another level of his mind, and uncertain what he may find there, he made himself step down away from it, tearing parts of his ego it felt like, in the process. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Snape standing with the surviving teachers, hawk-like gaze taking in Harry’s every move.

Harry gestured at the smashed window, the darkening bloody streaks on the floor, the empty robes and hats, the littered bones, cleaned bright white. “This is nothing,” Harry said, stepping closer into Fudge’s simpering face. “You should see me when I get really upset. Clean up the Ministry or I will be back to do it for you.”

With that, Harry stalked out the door to the hall, out the door to the castle – propped open with a bench from the hall – and away across the lawn. The lake stretched out before him, sparkling in the evening light in the spots where the clouds were breaking up. He could leave now, but he felt less than himself, and he wanted to shake that before facing what was certain to be a crisis at home, sparked by his absence. Buckbeak sailed into view, angling away from the hills to stay over the water, a grey reflection skipping over the waves. Harry heard voices approaching, arguing as only political figures could. He dropped into the Dark Plane to avoid them.

Chilled, he returned to Snape’s office where he imagined it would be warm. He

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pulled a chair over to the fire, snagging the sherry bottle from a shelf on the way past. He sat, feet propped upon a trunk, using the hypnotic sound of the fire and the stomach warming effects of the liquor to let go of the last few hours, working his way up to letting go of the last few days in total. His robes dried and finished deepening back to black. When he left for good this place would cease to exist. Given that, being haunted by it would be tantamount to a psychosis.

The door to the office swung open and Snape, appearing distracted, stepped in and did not notice Harry until he was halfway across the room. He scuffed to a halt, exhibiting rare uneasiness. "You are still here," he stated.

"I hadn't tried your sherry," Harry explained, voice gentle because his meditation had helped set his mind and emotions straight.

Snape crossed to the desk and stared down at it before stalking to the door to his chambers. His mouth worked before he said, "I was perhaps remiss in not offering it."

Harry felt saddened and adrift at being feared by this man, by any version of him. "Have I ever, ever threatened you?" Harry asked.

Snape turned to him, studying him.

Harry said, "I owe you my life."

Snape's shoulders rounded and his movements were less jerky when he came over to borrow the sherry bottle. He poured himself a full tumbler and handed the bottle back graciously, making Harry laugh lightly. "You think I buy that from you?" he asked and then regretted the teasing, since Snape's black gaze flickered with fear again.

"You really think I'd do something untoward to you?" Harry asked, badly needing to settle this.

Snape did not reply, but his eyes did. They answered in the affirmative. At Harry's prompting of "Severus?" Snape spoke: "I saw what you did to get even..." He trailed off.

"Ah," Harry said, understanding. "You mean for my parents." Harry swallowed the half tumbler of sherry he held. He tilted his head back to stare at the cobwebs on the ceiling of Snape's office. "I've forgiven you for that."

"Really?" Snape laughed uneasily. "Why?"

Harry rubbed his head and said. "You saw what happened in the Great Hall. If I didn't find the power to forgive you, I would have lost myself long ago. I wouldn't have power over myself and I'd self-destruct."

Snape considered that and added uneasily, "And you apologized for your father, no less."

ADOPTED DESTINY

“Of course,” Harry said, and stood, finally approaching the mood to depart for home.

“Where are you going now?” Snape asked, sounding casual and for all the world like he was dying to know the answer.

“Far away. Very far. Keep an eye on Fudge will you? Hold his feet to the Caeruleus fire.”

“I don’t have much power, Potter,” Snape pointed out. “Especially now. Before, I had rather a lot.”

“You’re good at surviving no matter what. It’s better this way and you know it,” Harry said. “If I stay, things will only be fixed for appearances, for my sake. Not really fixed.” He set his tumbler on the desk and said, “I’m going and I don’t intend to ever return. Do take care of yourself.”

Snape bowed faintly, doubt tinting his eyes even darker. Harry disappeared without a sound.

Clearheaded and determined, Harry found his way opposite his own house and tumbled sideways, focused on a painful affection for his real home.



“Severus!” Candide shouted frantically from the balcony where she peered over the rail down at Harry, strewn half across the rug below.

Snape came out of the library and, after spotting Harry, dashed over to him. He placed his hand on his shoulder to roll him on his side and icy sparkles haloed Snape’s hand against the dark fabric. “He is half frozen again.” Raising his head, he called out, “Get a blanket and heat it, quickly.” He pushed Harry onto his back, setting off swirls of crackling in the ice clinging to Harry’s robes. “And there is some odd residual magic still upon him.”

At a run Candide brought a heated blanket and helped Snape lift and wrap Harry bodily in it. The frost coating the tips of Harry’s locks melted where his limp head rested on Snape’s robes. Once lifted off the floor, Snape had not put his charge down again. He pressed his hand to Harry’s scarred forehead.

“Is he warming up?” Candide asked.

Snape nodded. “Get some hot water.”

Harry woke groggily. He could not move his arms for the heavy blanket bundled around them and his face was pressed into robes scented with Hogwarts and potions.

He was home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

And he was being clutched with surprising fierceness. Perhaps he did not fully appreciate how much he was cherished, he considered. He might be able to stir, but he did not, enjoying the warmth too much.

A hand ran through Harry's hair and with a spell he was forced to swallow warm water. The hungry heat of it seeped through the very center of him and he opened his eyes to Snape's dark concerned ones.

Candide was speaking. "And I contacted the Auror's office."

Snape started at that, looking away from Harry. "I wish you had not."

"No?"

"We need to protect Harry from everyone." Figures Apparated into the Hall. Snape finished with, "Even the Ministry."

The Auror's descended upon them, led by Tonks, who crouched close. "Harry, what happened?"

Harry opened his mouth and tried to concoct a reasonable story that was not the truth. He lifted his head but could not yet hold it up without severe strain.

"More water," Harry requested, to stall.

He was propped up better in the crook of Snape's shoulder and given several more sips which warmed him enough to let him sit up, but Snape's grip seemed uninterested in even allowing him to try.

Harry cleared his throat and said, "I was poisoned," which made Snape's grip tighten even more. Harry closed his eyes. "I tried to Apparate to Severus but... I missed."

Tonks, from close by said, "Well, of course, you can't Apparate to Hogwarts. You shouldn't have even been able to depart."

Harry shook his head, formulating a modified story with effort. "I tried really, really hard. I ended up in a different potioneer's dungeon."

Silence fell over the listeners. "Where?" Tonks asked.

"I'm not sure," Harry said. "Somewhere... somewhere in Eastern Europe. Latvia maybe. He was good at potions though... he cured the poison. Which was in the pumpkin juice in the tea room."

Mr. Weasley gestured to Shackbolt to take note of that.

Snape asked, in a manner that Harry could not read as helping a ruse or honest curiosity, "Was the castle small with two tall towers close together?"

"Er, yeah," Harry said, willing to accept any help to explain himself.

To the others, Snape said, "I know a wizard there by the name of Aldaris." To Harry he asked, "Do you remember the name Jazeps?"

"Uh..." Harry stalled and Snape caught on quickly.

ADOPTED DESTINY

Snape turned back to the crouching assembled and said quickly, "He is a hermit, corresponds only with those far enough away to be deemed not direct competition."

Harry broke in with a partial truth. "He was very good about the poison, but then he didn't want me to leave. Slipped me potions to keep me disoriented."

Tonks motioned as though this were horrendous. "No," Harry corrected. "He was nice, enough, sort of, and he saved my life. I think he was just... lonely or something."

Shacklebolt leaned in closer. "So, you don't want us to track him down, then, you are saying."

"No," Harry said in relief. "He saved my life; it's all right."

"How did you get back?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"I Apparated."

"From Latvia!" several people exclaimed at once.

"I concentrated really hard," Harry insisted.

"Wonder you didn't get Splinched worse than you did. You all right? No missing parts?" Shacklebolt asked.

Harry sat up and was allowed to. "Yeah, I'm fine. I didn't feel very good when I first arrived, but I'm better now."

"Don't make a habit out of Apparating so far," Mr. Weasley ordered him.

"I won't, believe me," Harry said.

Snape helped Harry to his feet, but steered him to the nearest couch. Of Mr. Weasley he asked, "Do you need to debrief him or can we keep him here?"

"No, I think we're set. I'll call a press conference and get everything straight."

After welcomes and wishes that he feel better and congratulations on making it home from so far away, the three Ministry people departed.

Snape turned to Harry and said, "What actually happened?" gathering a startled look from Candide.

Harry had a bad sense that they were not alone and he said, "Clear the house of bugs and we can talk."

Snape drew his wand and held it out toward the center of the room while turning in a circle around it. Harry had thought that the Snape he had shared quarters with the last three days was a slightly different man than this one, but what happened next disproved that assumption. Snape, with a slashing motion, cast a spell that forced any Animagus on the area to reveal themselves and falling with the floor lamp in a great crash was Rita Skeeter. Snape aimed his wand at her while she stood and brushed off her skirt and primed her curls. His gaze was hard and unyielding, looking for all the world capable of anything.

"Don't you dare point that at me," she commanded, trying to swap her quill for her wand in her beaded handbag.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Get out of this house,” Snape ordered. “You are not welcome here; you are trespassing.”

“The wizarding public has a right to know,” she stated, wagging her wand at him like one might a finger.

“The public has no such right as far as I am concerned. And that is just an excuse for what only concerns your ego. Get out or I will bind you with a mummy hex and hang you from the ceiling of the Ministry of Magic.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Skeeter countered, voice nasty.

“I’ll have the Weasley twins provide passersby with paint-filled balloons suitable for throwing at you; I expect they will have no shortage of takers.”

With a snarl, Skeeter Disapparated. Candide exhaled and said, “Oh she’s really going to love us now.”

Snape shot her a disappointed glance but moved to Harry and crouched before him, hands on his arms. “Are you all right?” he asked, sound like he had a long list of questions to follow. When Harry nodded, Snape asked, “What happened? Where did you go?”

“It was a terrible place,” Harry said, thinking first of the menagerie. “I... with the poison, in the panic, I forgot you were no longer in the dungeon. I got confused and tried to reach you there. So, as a result, I ended up there.”

“I thought... Latvia?” Candide interrupted, while taking a seat beside Harry.

“Harry needed a plausible story,” Snape explained.

“Thanks for that,” Harry said.

Candide clasped her hands together. “I’m sorry I called the Ministry in.”

Snape held up his hand. “You thought it was the right thing to do. Now you know better.” Returning his attention to Harry, he said, “Go on.”

When Harry said, “Voldemort was headmaster,” Snape’s head fell forward. Harry went on, hopeful that he would not be in trouble. “I felt I should stay and take care of things. That Plane’s Harry died in his first year trying to reach the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“And did you take care of things?” Snape asked.

Harry, mind full of the duel and the blood, replied, “Yes.” After a pause to push the fresh memories down in the hopes of making them older faster, he added, “I’m glad to be home. It’s Saturday, right?”

“Yes, you have been missing for days. We were most concerned about you.” Snape touched the side of his head lightly and stood. “I expect your friends to come swarming in shortly. Are you up for it?”

Harry smiled. “Yes, very much so. Tell me more about this Aldaris and his castle, will you, before they arrive.”

ADOPTED DESTINY

Snape smiled back, settled on the couch, and began speaking very quickly, holding up a hand when Candide tried to ask a question. "I'll explain it all later," he assured her.

She crossed her arms. "That ought to be good," she whispered.

Harry's friends began arriving within minutes as expected. Harry did not realize how badly he needed their companionship until he repeated his modified story and was roundly sympathized with by all. He wished he could tell Hermione the truth. Perhaps he would later. She was one of the few who knew already that he could Apparate inside of Hogwarts and she would keep any secret. Strange to imagine, but he found himself more willing to tell her than Tonks, who had just returned.

She gave Harry a hug. "Next time send an owl, a bat, anything!" she said while patting his back.

"I couldn't," Harry said. "Believe me... I wanted to."

Elizabeth arrived carrying a cake that said Welcome Home Harry in pink icing. Ron reached for the first piece, saying, "That was fast."

"I found a recipe in my mum's old magical cookbook."

Ron, mouth full, asked, "So it isn't real food?"

Elizabeth laughed while Harry worried about her doing magic at home where her father might spot it. "I just used a Foaming Heat Charm to cook it up in two minutes after the batter was mixed."

Hermione held her hand over her full mouth and asked, "Can you show me that spell?"

Elizabeth smiled painfully. "I'd love to show you a spell. You're the kind of witch who knows every spell. I'd be thrilled."

Hermione glanced at the clock and shoveled the next bite into her mouth faster. "It may have to be another time. I have to get back. And I'm sure Harry could use a rest more than a huge, late-night party."

She made her goodbyes and this triggered most everyone to leave. Eventually, only Tonks remained. Harry sat across from her in the dwindling candlelight, expecting Snape to check in any moment as he had throughout the evening.

Things clearly needed to be said, but her gaze skittered away whenever it met his. She said, "I was really worried about you. I couldn't understand why you left."

"I didn't leave-"

"I know that."

"Did you find anything out... about the poison?" Harry asked.

Tonks shook her head. "Everything in the tea room had long since been cleaned up."

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Harry sighed and tweaked his fingers to turn the empty butterbeer bottle sitting before him. "Someone wants to kill me."

"Someone inside the Ministry," Tonks added. After a spell, Tonks whispered, "Can you come to my place tonight?"

"I shouldn't go missing, and..." Harry glanced into the hall, which was quiet. "I could ask, I suppose. Tomorrow would be better."

"I'll come here."

Harry imagined Snape checking on him. "Maybe not a good idea," he said, chaffing a bit at feeling over-protected because of this cramp on his sex life, but it quickly was overwhelmed by the basic notion of home.

Tonks tossed her tall pink hair. "I should go too. The office wanted a report on how you were doing and I've been here forever."

"Thanks for staying as long as you did," Harry said on automatic, standing with her.

She gave him a deep kiss that said more than any conversation could manage.

Harry strolled through the hall and the dim but warm light of the chandelier. The peace of the house both soothed him as well as put him on alert to defend it. Here's a Riddle for you, Tom... echoed through his skull. At the time he had only been trying for mockery of his enemy, but now the assertion mocked him back.

Snape and Candide were sitting in the drawing room. Candide's gaze held wonderment, presumably as a result of Snape's explanation of what had happened. Harry hoped it went away soon.

"Friends all departed?" Snape asked. "I'm curious about exactly what transpired at this other Hogwarts. If you would indulge me?" For a polite question it came out rather commanding.

Harry glanced at Candide. She put her things together quickly and said, "I'll leave you two alone."

"Thanks," Harry said. She hurried out with one quick smile back at Snape. The door clicked closed. Harry took the chair she had been in. The seat was still warm.

Snape pushed his own parchments aside, grasped the edge of the desk, and sat back, but it felt a false show of letting his guard down. "Did you kill Voldemort outright?"

Harry nodded and then equivocated by tilting it side to side. "I fed him to the demons."

"Ah."

"They always seem to be hungry."

"Or there are many, many of them and only the hungry ones bother to show up." Snape stated this dryly, factually.

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A pause stretched out too long with Harry trying to stay out of memory, especially the memory of the menagerie, which had the tightest hold on him for some reason.

Snape finally said, "I worry that you are paying an unseen cost for utilizing these dark creatures to do your bidding."

"I didn't have any choice. I had already used Salazar's spell. It didn't take Voldemort down, just all his followers. Well, except your counterpart, who wasn't a threat to the castle." Harry pushed his fringe back out of his eyes. "He was stronger than me, Voldemort was. I couldn't take him down by myself. The wands saved me again. Kept him distracted until I could call in reinforcements. The Raksashas certainly took him by surprise."

Snape had him under intense scrutiny as he said, "I imagine it took everyone by surprise."

Harry nodded, thinking of the other Snape's fear of him. Harry examined his new wand, wondering that it didn't show any damage from battling. It looked exactly the same as before. He replayed the spells in his mind, wondering what he could have done differently. "I need to get stronger. I should have been able to beat him."

Snape merely stared at him, apparently unable to generate a response. An owl arrived, distracting them both. Snape opened the letter, which prominently displayed the Ministry seal on the flap. A minute later, he closed it, stuffed it back away and said, "It is from Arthur Weasley."

"Addressed to you?" Harry blurted, finding that odd.

"The Ministry is putting you under twenty-four-hour guard."

Harry laughed in a short burst, still deep in reliving the battle with Voldemort. "They think I need guarding? And besides, it's someone inside the Ministry; how do they know they won't just assign my attacker as my guard?"

Snape waved the letter. "They are certifying select individuals, by means of Veritaserum, and only they will be your guards."

"They can't spare anyone," Harry asserted. "And I don't need protection. I look forward to this person trying again, so I can catch them at it."

Sternly, Snape said, "I am not objecting to Mr. Weasley's plan, quite the opposite."

"Well, of course, it'll make it right impossible for me to spend any time alone with Tonks. I'm sure you'd appreciate that." Harry immediately wished he had not said that, but his frustration over being unable to arrange to stay with her that night boiled over without his control.

Snape's features sharpened with a predatorial edge. "I do not expect coercion to repair that proclivity of yours, so I would not attempt it. I would much prefer you get wise on your own." He stepped around the desk with a swift movement, trailing

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his robes. His voice lowered as he said, "For your edification, she is at the top of the list of guards to be certified, which if I am not mistaken will mean you will frequently spend nights with her for the foreseeable future."

"Oh," Harry uttered quietly.

Snape snapped the envelope with a flick of his wrist and tossed it on the desk, clearly disgusted. "For the weekend it will be myself guarding you. You are not to leave this house alone, do you understand?"

Harry felt about four years younger at that moment. But given how fiercely Snape had hung onto him when he had reappeared, Harry did not complain or argue. This stern admonishment was just another expression of the same thing, he knew in his gut. "Yes, sir," he said.

Snape crossed his arms and leaned back against the front of his desk. Still business-like he asked, "Do you have control over what happened? Or can we expect further disappearances?"

"I have control," Harry insisted. "I know exactly what happened, this time. I better understand last time too, now that I know it was real."

"Good," Snape said.

After a space, Harry added, "Sorry." But he wasn't any clearer on what he was apologizing for than Snape, given his guardian's raised brow. Maybe, as usually, he felt he should make up for the trouble he caused.

Snape relented; it was clear by the way he said, "Do not apologize."

After an awkward pause, Harry said, "I should get to sleep. I had a long day of killing Voldemort and I'm kind of tired." Harry stood when there was no objection to this. "Thanks for kicking Skeeter out. It was fun to watch."

"My pleasure."



Hermione sorted through the parchments spread out before her as she stood at the front table facing the First-Year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. She had expected that by three weeks into the term she would be less nervous, but she had not yet completely shaken a base unease. The students who did well, she felt were not really her doing; the students who were already falling behind, seemed unreachable; and the two who she sometimes suspected may be Squibs, or close to it, she was not certain what to do with. This included the Mer-boy, Namortuk, who sat even now, eagerly in the front row, his slowly shifting magical collar of lake water reflecting the room around him.

ADOPTED DESTINY

It was not that Hermione did not think the boy had any magic, more that his magic was too different to get anything out of her class and perhaps out of the school. She did not hold this against him; it would be as if Hermione herself had been sent to a school only for Divination. She could read the textbooks but never really produce any meaningful output, except by random chance. But the boy continued to be intrepidly pleased with his surroundings and the assignments, so despite her gut instinct that something drastically needed to be fixed, academically, she forced herself to just let the situation be, but it still needled her.

She asked the reluctant children arrayed before her questions about the assigned reading – a short and easy chapter that despite being so, had gone unread by a handful. Finally, names were coming to her easily. Last names, though. She found herself losing track of students' first names and sometimes when speaking to a student about another student, was not always certain as a result who was being discussed. As with most days, by the time she set them to trying out new spells and had circled the room offering advice and encouragement, the class period was nearly over. She considered doubling the reading, in the hopes of making the slackers take it seriously, but instead threatened them with a short quiz. Groans emanated from the room, a counterpoint to the vibrating squeaks of the desks shifting as the children rose to their feet.

It was lunchtime, but as usual Hermione had too much to finish to contemplate the luxury of the Great Hall's food and instead hunched over the Third-Year textbook entitled *Witchy & Warlocky Wand Waving* and jotted down a few notes for questions and as a sort of desperation outline for that day's topic.

A knock on the door interrupted this and for a moment, Hermione feared she was late for class even though only forty-five minutes had passed. Relieved by what the face of the clock showed, she called out that the person could enter.

In stepped McGonagall, smiling graciously. She took a position beside the guest chairs and clasped her hands before her. "I could not help but notice that you were missing from the mid-day meal once again. This is a first for a Monday."

Hermione replied, "I was helping look for Harry part of the weekend, so I didn't catch up like I usually do."

"Ah, of course," McGonagall said gently. "The students wish to start a Harry Hunt Club, in fact. When I informed them that only those of age could join, given the requirement to leave school grounds, they were most crestfallen."

Hermione smiled since she was supposed to find this story amusing, but it was difficult to do so given how much trouble Harry still managed to get into.

McGonagall said kindly, "The teaching will get easier. It is hardest for those who care the most about getting every last thing perfect, but for the first year it is

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impossible to do that, and you risk burning out while trying.”

Hermione gazed unseeing at her notes. “I wouldn’t know where to... cut corners to manage better. There are such a terribly large number of sections. For the First through Fifth Years there are two each twice a week, sometimes doubled in length, and then two more Advanced Charms for Sixth and Seventh. I don’t know how to fit it all in without a Time-Turner.”

“When you are practiced at it and are not doing prep each time, it is far easier.”

Another knock sounded. Hermione exhaled, blowing her hair around her eyes. “That must be my weekly review meeting,” she said, working very hard not to sound completely overstressed. She put away her notes in a folder neatly labelled for the next class while McGonagall opened the door to let Professor Snape in.

“Ah, Severus, I wanted to speak with you. Sprout again caught Orfius and Sirco again attempting to sneak into the off-limits greenhouse. They have fallen afoul of a skin-eating slime mold and have been sent to St. Mungo’s. If you would be so good as to pay a visit to their parents with a longer explanation than I could manage by Floo owl, I would appreciate it.”

Snape nodded and said he would do so immediately after his next class. Hermione was glad she was not yet at a level to be assigned such tasks. She wondered at McGonagall handing it off to her deputy, but Snape did not show any sign of complaint, in fact he behaved surprisingly obedient, something she had noticed before, that is, when he did not disagree forcefully with an expressed idea. She puzzled that while the two of them discussed the troublesome students using their own administrative shorthand. And she wondered if Snape had a need to be loyal to someone and so had transferred his old loyalty to Dumbledore wholesale onto McGonagall.

McGonagall parted and Snape took one of the visitor’s chairs, efficiently moving on to her weekly review without any small talk.

“How is Harry?” Hermione asked before he could start.

From his pocket, Snape removed his rolled parchment of notes from previous meetings and replied, “You saw him on Saturday, did you not?”

“Yes, but...” She hesitated, but with renewed confidence, said, “I had the distinct sense that a cover story had been fabricated so I wanted to know that Harry really was all right.”

Snape read over the unrolled the parchment before him, stalling it seemed. “Harry is fine,” Snape stated.

Hermione did not like being kept away from the truth. “What are you hiding?” When no answer was forthcoming, she said, “I can ask Harry. I know he can Apparate inside the school, which means he should’ve been able to reach you. That part was a lie; I know for certain.”

ADOPTED DESTINY

Snape rubbed his fingertips together. "Then you understand the need to protect him."

"Yes. I do." She stopped, having trouble with seriously contemplating something so terrible. "That's why they were going to give Sirius Black a Dementor's kiss, wasn't it? Because they couldn't keep him in prison. Azkaban, when it's completed, wouldn't hold Harry either. If he ever got into enough trouble with the Ministry..." She had to stop.

"They could hold Harry, but, like the few vampires they have incarcerated, quite a few precautions are necessary and the risk of escape is high if any of the extra security fails. So yes, under an exceptionally bad alignment of circumstances I fear the worst."

Hermione held off on pointing out that he was one of those arguing forcefully for giving Sirius exactly that treatment. Perhaps that was precisely why he was being so very paranoid this time.

Snape said, "Suffice to say, the story told to the Ministry and the press was essentially true. Beyond Harry returning safely and avoiding future such mishaps, I have less care for what actually transpired." He referred to his parchment, and moved to their meeting topic. "How did this last week go?"

Hermione pulled her thoughts from Harry to Charms in all its seven levels of learning. "I thought it would go better than it did," she confessed. "I don't know what to do with the very slow students and the slackers."

"You cannot force every last one of them to learn. If you have not accepted that yet, I suggest you work harder on doing so."

"Yes, but if they aren't doing well in Charms then they must be struggling mightily in Transfiguration."

"That is not your problem."

"It is, because Charms is the easy one. It's the one everyone can do first because it is all permanent."

"Hexes are what everyone gets first," Snape countered. "How you failed to notice that the very first day in the corridors..."

Hermione lightly rolled her eyes. "I'm also reluctant to assign points except as deductions."

"That is solely your prerogative."

"It just feels so... like such uneven treatment to reward someone for doing what they were supposed to do anyhow or just rewarding the ones who are trying to cozy up to me."

Bordering on derisive, Snape asked, "Did you not like receiving points as a student?"

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“Well...” Hermione said. “Well, yes, of course.” She stared out at the round stone tower outside the window. “It just all feels so different from this side.”

“You are worrying over it too much.” He let that lie for a moment and then said, “I need to sit in on one of your classes in the next week, but there are not a terribly large number of open times in my schedule that are actual class times for you. I may just have Remus take over and come some afternoon when it is convenient. Is there anything else we need to discuss?”

“Harry is really all right?”

Snape stood. “Harry is fine,” he repeated, but he sounded far away as he said it.

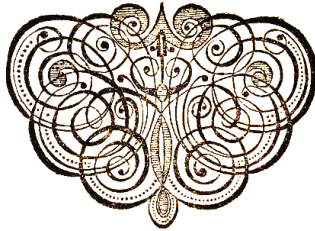
Author’s Notes:

Special thanks go out to those who nominated Resonance for a Dobby!

Yes, quick turnaround. Please, don’t get used to it: I’ll need two weeks for the next.

I haven’t done this in a long, long time, but I feel compelled—due to the sheer volume of comments that all say the same thing—to make a comment/clarification/offer some thoughts. First off, let me say that I love that you are all taking the story seriously and you are all sharp enough that I can’t keep up with you, which means I don’t have to worry about getting too far ahead. Very cool. Thanks for staying along for the ride and caring how it turns out. But to the meat of it: Harry’s response to Snape that he is the last horcrux. Yes, that dimension’s Harry is dead, which means that horcrux is gone too. (I didn’t adjust these chapters for DH, so the total is off, but no one’s mentioned that, and it doesn’t really matter.) Harry is an endearingly straightforward guy. When asked where the seventh horcrux is, Harry doesn’t think about this in a complicated way. He answers honestly, and also as a kind of confession, that he is the last one. Harry confesses because being the last horcrux (in his Plane, at least) still gnaws at him and he wants this Snape to understand what’s going on. And, it’s kind of a power move as well to tell Snape that. At the moment Snape asked the question, Harry’s answer was essentially true. Now, were Harry to stay in this Plane, would he really qualify as an undestroyed horcrux? Interesting question. I lean toward a “probably” because Harry, since his arrival in this other place has been using that connection to detect this Voldemort’s presence, so he clearly has a connection to this Voldemort (and for the record to the book 6 “canon” Voldemort too from the last fall into another Plane). At any rate. Those are my thoughts on this. Fascinating that so many of you had identical reactions to the scene.

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GUARD DUTY

Harry had Aaron trailing him as guard to an above-ground shop to get a pasty for lunch. The day was warm and breezy and the Muggle streets loud with cars and buses.

“Who’s your guard tonight?” Aaron asked.

“Tonks is supposed to be, but they don’t always say. They just gave me a list of passcodes to verify from whoever shows up next.” He handed over a few Muggle coins and accepted the wrapped food, which immediately soaked grease and heat through the crinkly paper.

“Well, Tonks wouldn’t be a bad deal.”

Harry smiled crookedly. “No, she wouldn’t.”

They returned to the atrium and walked to a bench overlooking the fountain to eat. Hungrier than normal, Harry had already taken a few bites and Aaron, when he noticed, asked, “Not going to use the poison-revealing drops first?”

Harry carefully waved his lunch and said, “I just bought this from a Muggle shop where no one knows who I am. That’s why I went there. The drops taste funny.”

“Your choice, I suppose.” Aaron groaned as he sat down and stretched his feet out before him. “We had a devil of a time looking for you.”

“Sorry about that. If I disappear like that again, don’t bother trying to find me. If I can’t get back, I’m too far away to be found.”

“Yeah, Latvia. It was not high on the list of places to search.” With false thoughtfulness, he added, “I don’t think it was on the list at all. So, what’s it feel like to Apparate that far?”

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"It hurts," Harry said. "Don't try it."

"What are you doing about this wizard, Aldaris?"

Harry tilted his pasty so the filling wouldn't ooze out. "Adding him to my Christmas list. I owe him one."

Aaron laughed.

During afternoon drills while facing his trainer for a demonstration, Harry asked how he could increase his spell power.

Rodgers scoffed. The others in the room turned their attention to them. "You aren't feeling lacking are you, Potter?" Rodgers teased.

"Well, sometimes," Harry said.

"Raw power is slow to increase. You're born with a certain amount and if you vigorously make use of it, some people anyhow, are lucky enough to get a little more of it."

Harry tapped his wand on his hand, impatient with that answer. "So, you're saying that there's nothing I can do."

"I didn't say that," Rodgers came back. "Step back and get ready with a Titan block." Rodgers also stepped back. "Part of what you think of as power is just focussed energy. The difference between this..." Here he sent Harry a Cutting Curse, but its beam wavered in the air, wide and ineffective. "...and this. Be ready for it." He repeated the spell, but the spell trail was almost invisibly thin. Harry's block sizzled and he was forced to jump out of the way and let the spell burn itself out on the wall behind him.

Harry stared at his trainer from where he kneeled in the corner. "Good thing you're on our side, sir," he said as he got to his feet. He tried not to feel frustrated with the thought that this was the second person in mere days who could take him down on raw power.

"Can you show us how to focus spells better?" Harry asked.

"We've already done exercises to improve that. But it doesn't help with all spells. I used the best example to demonstrate. Frankly, finesse is often more valuable and that you gain through repetition." With an amused tilt of the head he considered Harry before saying, "You don't look happy with my answer."

Harry, feeling unusually desperate about this, explained, "Well, what if we do meet a... bad wizard who can overpower us?"

"Outsmart them," Rodgers answered a tad mockingly. "Or bring a partner and corner them if you can't manage that. All kinds of options. Got someone in mind that we don't know about, Potter?"

"No," Harry answered honestly.

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Rodgers dropped his suspicion and said, “We’ll work on fine-tuning some powerful spells during drills. Everyone pick a partner.”

Blackpool followed Harry home that evening and read *Witch Weekly* while Harry studied. She traded with Tonks at 11:00.

“Puffball Mushrooms,” Tonks proclaimed when she arrived in the Floo.

“That right?” Blackpool asked Harry, wand unwavering.

Harry resisted laughing at her care. “Yes.”

“I’ll leave you to it then.”

“Thanks,” Harry said before she departed.

Candide, with a broad yawn, declared it time to go to sleep and Harry had to agree. Upstairs on the balcony, she bade them goodnight with a knowing smile, making Harry grateful Snape was away at school.

Harry slept with Tonks half overlapping him and was glad for the reassuringly pleasant feel of her when he awoke with a start from a dream involving hoards of demons rampaging out of control.

“Harry?”

“Yeah, just a dream,” he mumbled, because the room was quiet and it was clearly not happening here and may not be happening anywhere.

In a fit of what felt like rare good fortune, Tonks was assigned most all night guard duty for the rest of the week, except for when she had the regular night shift at the Ministry. During those times, Harry had a different guard in the form of a small, stout wrinkly-faced woman from Control of Magical Creatures. Mr. Weasley had pulled Harry aside and informed him that the woman, Hornisham, was overdue for retirement and due to her fearless handling of calls, her department worried she may not survive to retirement, so they were happy to give her something else to do. Harry believed they might feel differently if they knew what kind of creatures Harry could conjure while he slept.

The first night with her sitting beside the cold hearth, knitting metal dragon-proof cord into a tunic, Harry did not sleep so well. But the second time, other than wishing for Tonks instead, he slept immediately, lulled off by the faint grinding and clicking sounds and the thought that, if necessary, the witch could don the tunic which might actually hold up to demon teeth. Harry’s dreams remained murky, muddy and algae colored, like the lake water under Hogwarts castle. He always awoke feeling slightly less than well rested.

Friday, before Harry departed for field shadowing, Candide shooed Hornisham off, insisting she needed to talk to Harry alone. Candide had a letter in her hand, but she rolled it tightly into a tube and held it at her side when she noticed Harry eying it.

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“How are you doing, Harry?” she asked bluntly.

“Fine.”

“Training went all right this week?”

Harry stared at her, wondering at the redundancy; they had engaged in similar small talk all week.

“Fine. Still easier because of our newest apprentice, but Rodgers promises that the repetition won’t last. Why the interview?” he returned bluntly.

“Severus wants to know if he should come home this weekend.”

“He doesn’t need to for me. If you want him home...”

She frowned. “Work is only getting busier. I’ll be at the office at least some Saturday and Sunday, so he shouldn’t bother on my account, I won’t be here...”

“He shouldn’t bother on mine, either,” Harry said.

Candide moved her letter-laden hand, but did not need to reference it directly. “How are you sleeping?”

Harry did not want to reply, but he had to answer and he could not find the will to lie. “A few odd dreams but I’m sleeping all right.”

Again, point-blank: “Voldemort? Is Voldemort in your dreams?”

“No.”

This time she did raise the letter. While reading it, she said, “You need to go or you’re going to be late.”

Harry collected his guard from the hall where she was making faces at herself in the wood-framed mirror. Harry had to suppress a much-needed smile at the scene of this stout, middle-aged woman arranging her face into various scary expressions.

“Ready to go?” the witch queried, unfazed at being interrupted.

“Yeah. Thanks for giving us a few minutes.”

“No worries. Bugger for you losin’ your privacy like this.”

Harry was surprised by her understanding. “Well, you lose your nights,” he said.

She waved one pudgy hand that was missing the ends of two fingers. “’Tis nothin’. It’s jus’ me cats at home anyhow.”

Thinking of Mrs. Figg, Harry tried to make conversation, “How many cats do you have?”

The answer came after they arrived in the Atrium. “Twenty four... no... twenty...” She made a different kind of face and stared at the ceiling while pondering an answer.

“That’s all right; I get the idea,” Harry said quickly.

Up in the office, Harry waited for Shackbolt to finish his report from his last assignment. He was speaking unusually fast to his quill, making it skip words and have to jump around filling in. Eventually, the nib broke and it fluttered to the floor.

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“Ack,” Shackbolt uttered and pulled out a regular quill to finish by hand. Even writing fast, his handwriting was neater than the Autoquill’s, which said a lot. To Harry, he said, “We have a call we should hit within the hour; that’s why I’m hurrying.”

Harry Side-Alonged to Mumbles-under-Tyne and followed Shackbolt’s lead in stashing his wand away in his sleeve before stepping out onto the pavement from the abandoned newspaper printers where they had arrived. Harry thought it a less-than-wise place to arrive given the looming old equipment filling the place and the hiding places it provided, but he assumed Shackbolt was well aware of that, so he remained silent. Harry marked the doorway into the building in his memory. A sign with faded scroll letters outlined in still-bright gold paint read Mumbles Echo.

Harry remained mum as they walked with purpose, finally stepping down a narrow crooked alley that was much darker than it should have been in the noon-time sun. The entrance was between Mandragon’s Haberdashery with unpromisingly faded wares in the window and a nail salon with so much neon tubing framing it one could not see inside. The salon might have had a name, but if it did, it was part of the Chinese lettering sharing space with the English.

Shackbolt tapped with his wand on the keystone block of an archway spanning the alley twenty feet in. Beyond it a row of five shops sparkled into view. They entered the first shop. Inside, stacks of hats, large atop small, lined shelves and racks ranging from staid, closest to the door, to flashing Quidditch-themed ones lighting the far corner.

“Oy, what can I do you for?” a portly man with short mussed hair asked, making it seem the business of hats was a serious one with him. His eyes came around to Harry, standing off Shackbolt’s shoulder, and his attitude grew wary.

“We’re from the Auror’s office,” Shackbolt explained. “We had a report of some trouble...?”

The man laughed lightly, his lips glistening with saliva. “My sister, she overreacted. It’s nothing. Ministry didna have ta send Aurors of all things,” he complained, glancing at Harry and away again. “No one’s been doing any dark magic around hereabouts.”

Shackbolt stated helpfully, “You aren’t the only ones having problems.”

The shopkeeper laughed nervously. “So we are in good company for this thing we are not involved with?”

“Yes,” Shackbolt replied after a beat.

Harry watched the various signs the man gave off, the wet lips, the nervous movements of his feet that he was probably unaware of. “We don’t need you here. Go take care of something important.”

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“This IS important,” Shacklebolt said. “If it gets out of control, everyone suffers.”

Harry Legilimized the man the next time his eyes grazed Harry’s. All he caught was a flash of an argument with a woman.

“Is your sister here?” Shacklebolt asked eerily narrating the vision.

“She is. She’s in back listening to her favorite on the wireless. I’m sure she’d rather not talk to you.”

Harry considered piping in, but waited to see what Shacklebolt would do. The Auror said, “I’d rather hear that from her.”

The man grumbled but fetched his sister, who gave off more signs of nerves than the brother, including laughing more. She gave Harry more chances to see her thoughts because she seemed fascinated with him standing there and kept staring. Harry had visions of nighttime visitors full of threats. No faces, just odd grey cloth masks over wrinkled black veils so even the eye holes gave nothing away. Shacklebolt eventually gave up getting her to admit there was a problem. Perhaps he even felt bad for making her so agitated.

As they departed, Shacklebolt insisted to the shopkeepers that he, or someone else, would return if called.

They then went to each of the other shops on the alley, interviewing clerks and owners alike; Shacklebolt was adamant about talking to everyone who was available. No one was any more helpful. Only the young woman working in the beauty salon, whom Harry knew from Hogwarts, seemed to have no idea at all why they were there. The rest were all wary and dodgy with their answers.

Back in the printers, Harry waited while Shacklebolt paced.

“Is it safe to talk here, sir?” Harry asked. When Shacklebolt nodded, Harry went on, “Can I ask what this is about?”

“It would seem a shakedown is in progress on Mandragon Alley and I was hoping for a little more cooperation... from anyone. Question I have now is, are we dealing with just one gang or do we have a copy-cat already.”

Harry said, “The ones that came here wore odd masks, with cat-eye slits over the eyes and...” He gestured on his own face. “...over the nose and mouth. With a netting underneath so you couldn’t see any part of their features.”

Shacklebolt stared at Harry. After a long pause, he said, “I guess given that Severus taught you, I should expect you’d be that good at Legilimency. I saw you giving a few of them a good eyeing. I wasn’t sure if that was just intimidation... which didn’t seem like your style.”

“I didn’t mean to intimidate anyone,” Harry said. “That probably wouldn’t help.”

Shacklebolt waved his hand, raising his pale palm to face Harry. “In fact, one tactic is to come across far tougher than the people they fear. Not the nicest thing

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to do, but it can work.”

Shacklebolt straightened his cloak. Harry thought his chance for answers grew short. “Who are these people?”

“Don’t know. Fudge believes they are foreigners, from Italy or Portugal where the government is either not effective at shutting them down or are worse yet, part of the problem.”

“What do you think?” Harry asked.

“In an insular place like this, where the shopkeepers are English.” He shook his head. “I think they’d cooperate with us if the perpetrators were foreign. Must be locals involved. The ideas and methods may be imported, but I bet the manpower isn’t. Reggie took the last call of this nature and I thought maybe his glowing personality was part of the reason we didn’t get any help.”

Harry grinned.

Shacklebolt said, “Trouble is, if they’re smart, their threats are far greater than the fee they are asking for in return for protection. But that will change, and then we might get some help, but someone will get hurt first, I’m afraid. Let’s get back; there’s probably ten other things we could be doing for someone willing to have help.”

They spent the remainder of the shift trying to track down someone dealing in illicit cursed devices. This meant they snuck around sometimes very secure warehouses and interviewed people, mostly Muggles, which was time-consuming and involved making up lots of unlikely stories.

Harry’s feet complained when he finally had a chance to get off them back in the office at 7:00 in the evening. Rodgers sauntered in and said, “So, how’d it go?” with an annoyingly knowing lilt.

“Same as you,” Shacklebolt conceded. “Harry gets two gold stars for today. He’s a better partner than you... and on top of that he complains less.”

Rodgers crossed his arms. “Well, if you prefer a partner with a contract out on him...” He looked Harry over. “Waiting for your guard?”

Harry nodded. “I don’t really need one,” he said, not terribly hopeful that he would get free of the requirement, but feeling better to say that.

Tonks came in. “Ready?” she asked. “I’ll take you home and wait for your other guard, unless Severus is there.”

“No.”

“Or unless you want to go to dinner at my parents.”

Harry wondered at her saying that in front of not only Shacklebolt, but Harry’s even stricter trainer. “I don’t mind that.”

“You’re certain?” she asked doubtfully, straightening her robes which were not quite dress robes, but they glittered along the collar, matching her metallic silver

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hair. “No house elf at their place.”

Harry could not imagine anyone not wanting to show off their parents. He nodded.

“And Candide’s not expecting you?”

“She’s working late.”

Tonks tossed her head. “Well, come on, then.”

The other two watched them leave. Harry kept his head down until he was well out the door. In the lift, Harry asked, “Why would you think I wouldn’t want to go to your parents for dinner?”

Tonks puzzled the question, looked on the verge of explaining, but then shrugged.

They arrived in the Floo at the Tonks’ house. Harry conked his head getting out when he caught sight of Andromeda. Rubbing the crown of his head, Harry peered at her with eyes squinted in pain. Tonks gave her mother a quick hug.

“I brought Harry along, I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course, dear,” Andromeda said playfully. She held out her hand to Harry. “Nice to finally meet you, Harry. It’s all right to call you ‘Harry’, right?”

Harry nodded and flinched at the stab this sent behind his right eye. At Andromeda’s doubtful watching of him nursing his head, Harry said, “I thought you were your sister for just a moment.”

Andromeda propped her hands on her hips accusingly. “Would you like some ice for that?”

“Yes, thank you.”

To Tonks, as an aside, she asked, “Not as clumsy as you, I hope.” The two of them went off. Harry looked around the ordinary room, at the fancy oil-lamps on wrought iron stands and the forest-colored furniture.

A sandy-haired man with a rotund gut came in the door, dragging muddy robe edges across the pale green carpet. Harry’s presence distracted him from considering what to do about that. “Er, hello there. I don’t think we’ve met,” the man said.

Harry stepped up to him, hand out. “You must be Tonks’ father... I mean, uh, Ted Tonks right?”

“Dora’s father, yes,” Mr. Tonks said energetically, recognition brightening his eyes. “Very nice to meet you.” His hands were dusty with earth as well, it turned out.

“Dora? Oh, yeah,” Harry said.

“What can we do for you...” Mr. Tonks started to ask.

“Ted, the floor, honestly,” Andromeda interrupted, returning. She handed Harry a hot water bottle full of ice and pulled out her wand to clean the carpet. “Perhaps you should change for dinner.” She crossed her arms, wand bouncing. “Unless you want to stand there for the full treatment.”

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“No, I’ll just go and change,” he said. The trail he left as he departed was quickly Scourgified away.

Andromeda gave a long suffering sigh. “I’ll just see to dinner.”

Tonks sidled over to Harry, who was finding relief in the ice after the initial discomfort of it. “My dad doesn’t know we’re dating,” she said in a low voice.

Harry lifted the ice out of his view. “You waited till now to tell me?” He considered that as the ice crackled, heated by his head. “Same complaint as Severus?”

“No,” she said, turning away.

“Er...” Harry decided that could lie for now. “What about your mum?”

“She likes you a lot,” Tonks said, brushing her hand over the back of the nearby linen-draped couch.

Harry, voice low as well, said, “I didn’t get the sense your dad disliked me.”

Tonks started. “Oh, no, it’s not that...” But Mr. Tonks returned, robes changed, hair slicked back.

“So, Harry, very nice to meet you close up. Certainly have seen you at a distance a few times and in the papers far more times than that. Come over and sit down.” He gestured at the couch which he himself settled onto with a sigh of relief, belly covering part of his lap. He gave Harry a smile and reached for a box on the small table beside him. “Honeydukes?” he offered.

Harry accepted a chocolate covered wafer in the shape of a cauldron with a little loop of licorice for a handle.

Mr. Tonks went on, “Play any Quidditch these days? You’re finished at Hogwarts right... or not?”

Harry had trouble swallowing.

“Oh, yes, of course you are,” Mr. Tonks went on, slapping his leg. “Dora’s told us you’re apprenticing in her department.” Whimsically, he said, “They start you kids so young these days. It’s a wonder... Did you finish school, or well no, you must have left early, right?”

Dinner broke the flow of conversation but it resumed on the same course when everyone settled in behind their plates of ravioli.

Right after Mr. Tonks chastised his wife for offering Harry mead “at his age,” Harry finally said, “I’ve turned nineteen now... as of July.”

Tonks was shading her eyes with her hand while eating. Across from her Andromeda was enjoying the confusion and did not look likely to help.

Harry went on, “I finished school years ago, well, over a year ago. Completed a pile of N.E.W.T.s and everything.” Feeling defensive and hearing it in his voice, Harry took a deep breath and stopped talking.

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“Really?” Mr. Tonks asked in confusion. “Hard to imagine you as anything but little Harry Potter.” He held his hand out at seated shoulder height. Maybe taller than a house-elf, but not by much.

Harry shut his mouth, which was hanging open. “I’ve finished a whole year of the Auror Apprenticeship,” he said after regrouping, working hard on a factual voice. Maintaining the conversation had resulted in his not eating much. He thought he had managed to get his point across, but Mr. Tonks said, “If you don’t like that, you can skip ahead to dessert. We have chocolate ice cream.”

Harry almost said yes, but his pride would not let him. “This is fine,” he said, completely at a loss.

Back in Shrewsthorpe where Tonks waited for Harry’s guard to report, Tonks said, “Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault,” Harry said. But then shook his head and held his hand out. “Little Harry Potter? Hello?”

Tonks laughed but it was mostly embarrassment.

Harry said, “No wonder you didn’t want to go to dinner with your parents.”

“See, I tried to explain to him when I told my mum, but he completely misunderstood when I said I wanted to spend more time with you off-duty. He thought... I don’t know... that I was doing what the Order always did, you know, keeping a close eye on you now that Dumbledore was gone. Heck, then he so misunderstood, I feared he would start to understand. Do you understand?”

Harry laughed. “Yes, actually.”

She shrugged, blush visible in the dim main hall light where only a few candles in the chandelier were lit. “You know, for a long time you were Little Harry Potter, this... child... with far too big of things to do. He can’t get beyond that.”

Harry admitted, “I sometimes have trouble looking at the old photographs from first and second year at Hogwarts. I worry about the lightning-scarred kid in the picture. I can’t help it. So I sort of understand what your dad is thinking. It’s getting harder to imagine those days, in fact. I know so much magic now... I wonder how the heck that kid is possibly going to survive without having a clue.”

Tonks said, “You didn’t get any mead at dinner... do you have any in the house? I could use another too.”

Harry turned to go to the kitchen, but Tonks caught up to him. “I haven’t cleared the house,” Tonks said, arresting his progress. “Not to treat you like my dad was... but I have to treat you like my dad was for just two minutes while I check things out.”

Harry stood in the center of the hall and watched her disappear down the stairs leading to the kitchen. She reappeared shortly after, saying, “Winky says it’s all

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right.” But she checked all the ground floor rooms anyhow. Harry continued to wait while she checked the first floor, finding strong comfort in basic duty, as he had since his return to his own world. Her attentive progress around the house represented something so utterly lacking in that other place that he found no will to be annoyed with it, even post-dinner with Mr. Tonks.

“Candide working late again?” Tonks asked after sticking her head in the bedroom.

“November is the end of the accounting year for most wizard businesses, so she’s quite busy starting in September.”

“I’m surprised Severus doesn’t suggest she quit,” Tonks said upon returning to stand beside Harry. Winky appeared with a tray and two tall ceramic cups of mead.

“I don’t think she’d want to.”

Cupping their drinks in both hands, they sat down and the house settled around them. “When’s the baby expected?” Tonks asked between sips.

“Early March sometime. I forget the date.”

“Severus ready to be a dad?” Like most people, she could not help grinning while asking this.

“He already is one,” Harry pointed out.

“That’s not the same.” Tonks waved Harry off dismissively.

Harry felt a stab of annoyance and drank his mead with more purpose.



“Come on up here, Potter,” Rodgers said the next Monday during training. While Harry obeyed, Rodgers announced, “Harry’s comments about working on power made me realize I’ve grown too easy on you all.”

Tridant made a noise halfway between a squeak and an erp.

Pretending not to hear, even though he grinned more, Rodgers went on, “So we are going to push you all a bit more every day and see if we can’t squeeze a little more magic out of each of you over time.”

When Harry took up a position across from him, wand out, Rodgers said to him, “All I heard about all weekend from Kingsley is how much he prefers partnering with you. Get ready with a *Chrysanthemum*...” He fired off a curse, which Harry blocked. “Got a little old, I’ll admit.” Then the same curse repeated with more behind it. Then again. Harry’s wand began to vibrate when the curses hit his block.

“Shall I go back to making trouble during my shadowing?” Harry asked, trying to be cute.

Rodgers gave him a mocking grin and changed curses. Harry hit the wall.

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“You all right?” Rodgers asked with an amused laugh as Harry righted himself.

Harry’s head still hurt from striking it on the mantelpiece at the Tonks house, otherwise, he would not have any complaints. “Fine, sir.”

“You need to put more focus in the front AND back of that block for a Gorgon Curse. Try again.”

Harry did not complain as he sat down, even though his body did. He wanted to get better at handling someone with stronger magic than himself, and if getting beaten up a little every day like he used to was what it took, then so be it. Harry nursed his elbow, wishing for a little ice. Up at the front of the room Aaron managed four blocks in a row and then completely blew the same one on the next spell.

Rodgers said, “You have to concentrate, Wickem. You have it in you, you just don’t always pull it out and use it.”

Kerry Ann snickered. Rodgers directed his wand at her. “Don’t laugh; you’re next.”

Tridant did well; he fared almost as well as Aaron, albeit on a limited set of attacks since he had not yet learned nearly as many attack-counter combinations as the rest of them.

“Getting better,” Rodgers said when he finally released him. Tridant nearly lost his footing at the praise and had to put a hand on Vineet’s desk.

Vineet was last and Rodgers went much easier on him for a few rounds. “Everyone else gives you a Counter workout every day, I think. Why don’t you give me one. Everyone is having fun but me.” He gestured with a come-hither of his hand that he was ready. “Hard as you want... you’re like me, holding back all the time.”

Vineet cast a Blasting Curse at him and Rodgers used a rubber shield that deflected it under him as he jumped over it awkwardly. He stood straight. “Holy Merlin. I guess I should worry less that your blocks aren’t what they should be.” He stretched his shoulders back. “Okay, something else this time. Mix it up a little.”

Harry’s week continued on in this rough vein, including getting called onto duty with Tonks late on Thursday night. They, and every on-duty Auror and available personnel from Reversal were called to the scene of what Harry at first thought was a building fire: Blue and yellow flames licked out of smashed windows. Powerful lights cast circular beams on the scene.

Harry slopped through the puddles surrounding the fire trucks, following behind Tonks. In their black robes, disguise spells were barely needed, but by the time they passed the second truck, Tonks appeared to be in a rubber coat, baggy trousers and bulky boots. Harry made similar but not nearly as convincing or easy changes to his clothes.

The fire personnel were sitting on the curb, comically interspersed with civilians,

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including a woman in a nightgown and nightcap, her little white dog asleep in her arms. Reversal had just finished going down the line, issuing Memory Charms to the lot of them.

Harry had at least ten questions begging to get answered. He kept silent and waited for instructions while Shackbolt, Mr. Weasley, and other Ministry personnel talked. Shackbolt said to Tonks, “Keep an eye on him,” in reference to Harry. “Lot of confusion, anything could happen.”

Tonks turned. “Come on, Harry.”

Harry still felt a new seriousness to his duty, an impersonal seriousness that made it easy to say: “Should I go wait elsewhere? I don’t want to be in the way.”

She peered at him in the flashing, reflecting light, almost like that on a dance floor. “No, just stay close to me. Kingsley’s just reminding me that guarding you is my priority right now.”

They circled the building around to the far side and Tonks began laying down Muggle repelling barriers. Harry did not ask if he could help; if she wanted help, she would ask. He did keep an eye out through the dark trees and the dancing shadows beyond them on the surrounding buildings. Around the front, Reversal was canceling the spells that were causing the place to burn, brick and all. Clearly it was a magical fire, rather than the normal kind.

Beside him, Tonks said, “Get ready, as soon as the fire is just heat-based, they’ll release the Befuddlement on the Muggle fire brigade and we’ll have to get out of the way.”

Harry again forced the questions down. He kept his wand up, eyes never resting anywhere for long. At Tonks’ signal, they returned to the Ministry, their Apparition noise lost in the crack and pop of the fire.

Harry stood against the wall in the Auror’s office. Reports were assembled, casual debriefings ensued. He took a seat at Rogan’s empty desk and picked through the stack of Daily Prophets stashed on the overhead shelf. There wasn’t much of interest to read about and after flipping through three issues, one after the other, it occurred to Harry that the sports pages had by far the best photographs. Harry watched Krum sailing around at an International Invitational match and read that article with more interest than the one about training gnomes to care for begonias that occupied the page before it. The next section on the stack had been folded in strange ways. Harry turned it over and found Fudge giving a press conference. Fudge’s statements read like a bizarre litany of reverse Memory charms. Fudge claimed that the current Ministry was “acting too slowly to combat new trouble” and “falling back on old thinking despite it not working” and “not calling for help from our international partners in a time of need.” Harry scoured the rest of that issue, but it was not made clear what

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exactly the “trouble” was purported to be. Harry had an idea what it could be, but oddly it was never really stated literally for the record.

At the end of the article, the author stated that when asked for comment on Fudge’s comments, the Minister for Magic had nothing of substance to say on the topic. Other witches and wizards were interviewed and all agreed that something should be done, about whatever it was. Harry rapidly shook his head to clear it. The byline on the article was Mediastinus Delatio, whom Harry had not met, that he could remember.

Harry folded the paper back the way it had been and put it back with its fellows. He had field shadowing again the next day and considered that he better get used to this routine since, after his training was completed, every day of every week would be like this.



Friday after his field shadowing, Harry wanted to go out, but Tonks did not think it a good idea. She was tired from the double shift and lay down at Harry’s insistence for an afternoon nap. Harry sat with Kali in his hands, trying to get a better sense for what his pet felt. He pulled one of her leathery wings out straight and let it go again, repeating this until he could catch the feel of that through his link with her. Her wings were marred by long, vivid scars from battling the demons at Malfoy Manor, but the old wounds did not bother her; he knew this because when he traced the bubbly lines he felt no distress from her.

“Shall we give it a try?” Harry asked her in a whisper, holding her up to stare closely at into her beady eyes. He carried her to the open window and commanded: “No pigeons.”

With her wings pumping rapidly in the evening light, his pet resembled a violet puffball sailing over the garden wall. Sitting on his trunk, Harry closed his eyes and tried to see out of his pet’s instead. She dived and swooped disconcertingly, lights and the twilight sky streaking diagonally one way and then the other. Harry had to grab hold of the solid window sill to keep his mind and dinner from rebelling. The distress grew and Harry lost contact with his pet. He used an Occlumency technique to clear his own emotions and imagined flying. This was relaxing but it did not bring his pet’s direct experience back. Harry huffed and cupped his hands to the glass of the window to try to spot her, but she had flown out of sight.

The Chimrian would not fly far, Harry knew. She would hunt moths and night birds and return when she was satiated. On a whim Harry imagined being hungry and Kali came into his head and went away again like a passing cloud. Closing his

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eyes, he repeated this and found her more clearly this time and tried hard to hold onto her. When his vision of the streetlamps and passing car lights stabilized, he tried to steer her. She resisted, tugged side to side by scents drifting on the wind. Harry heard something unexpected: a woman's emotionally distressed voice raised high. He opened his eyes. Tonks lay soundly asleep on the bed and nothing stirred in the room. Harry held his breath and listened, but the occasional car out on the road was all he heard.

Realizing that Kali must have been the one who heard the voice, Harry closed his eyes again and searched for her. This took a few minutes, since she had been successful at hunting moths around a street light and was no longer as famished. Her vision swam in and out of Harry's mind's eye. When he heard the voice again, his instinct was strong enough to make Kali turn her head to tune into it better with her keen ears. She swerved in the direction of it on her own, picking up on Harry's curiosity.

Through her distorted, careening, fish-eye view Harry discerned the Peterson house with its tall glowing peaked windows. Harry thought he recognized the voices alternately yelling and he snapped back to his bedroom.

"Tonks!" Harry said, shaking her leg to wake her.

She sat halfway up with a jerk and grabbed up her wand while rubbing her eyes. "Yeah? What is it?"

"I think something is happening at the Peterson house. A fight or something with Mr. Peterson. We need to go over there." Harry was on his feet, straightening his robes and finding his shoes.

Tonks fell back onto the bed. "If it's a domestic, call the Muggle police."

Harry stared at her reposed form. "I don't want to leave this to the Muggles; Elizabeth and her mum are witches."

Tonks, groggy with fatigue, said, "You said the dad forbid magic over there, that makes it a Class Six household."

"Well..." Harry said, trying to find an argument because he had not expected this reaction.

"Call the Muggles in, Harry," she said, shifting her feet, making her boney knees more apparent.

"No," Harry said, now annoyed. "Elizabeth is my friend." Harry had found his shoes and he tugged them on hurriedly.

Tonks sat up. "You have to wait for me," she scolded.

"Hurry up, then," Harry scolded back.

Tonks, well practiced at jumping into duty, was up quickly. Harry Disapparated for the front steps of the Peterson house and listened, wishing for Kali's sensitive

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hearing, but his pet was off hunting again. He knocked on the door just as Tonks arrived behind him, wand out.

“You can hear the fight?” Tonks asked.

Harry shook his head. Tonks stashed her wand away. “Better pretend its a social call, then,” she advised.

Harry put his wand away as the lights showing through the windows framing the door shifted to indicate closer ones had been switched on. The door clicked and Mrs. Peterson, more mousey than Harry imagined she could behave, cracked open the door and peered out at them.

“Hi,” Harry said and, unable to concoct a neighborly reason for standing there, asked, “Everything all right?”

Somewhere inside the house a door slammed. Mrs. Peterson flinched backward. Mr. Peterson’s voice filtered down the broad, white-carpeted stairs: “I know you’ve got one of those sinister things!” Pounding sounded and Mrs. Peterson partly closed the door, except her face was still blocking her from completely sealing it. The voice said, “And I told you I’d take it away if I caught you with another one!”

Harry reached out to push the door open farther, despite Rodger’s voice in his memory telling him that barring clear danger to someone’s life or limb, he should wait for an invitation. “Can we come in?” Harry asked. More banging sounded.

The door closed a little more. Harry, with a full Auror standing behind him, knew he was going to violate his training in Ministry rules and go in anyhow. He felt both light and heavy at the same time. Light with the knowledge of his imminent transgression against carefully drilled procedure and heavy with the notion that ongoing training would limit him from future transgression when he wished it would not.

He stopped the door with his foot. Mrs. Peterson hesitated. Tonks remained silent behind him.

“Open this door, young lady!” Filtered down with more pounding. “Ouch! What did you do to this door, you little witch! This is my house and I’ll have none of that!”

Harry wished Elizabeth knew how to Apparate. A standstill fell briefly upon the house. Harry hoped that Mr. Peterson had given up, and perhaps he had, but just as Harry opened his mouth to ask again to be allowed inside, the sound came down of a door opening and banging against plaster.

“This what you want?” Elizabeth’s nearly hysterical voice bounced down the stairwell.

“Don’t you point that thing at me, young lady!”

Harry Disapparated for the upstairs corridor. Mr. Peterson had a tight hold on the wrist of his daughter’s wand hand and was forcing her aim away, making the cords in Elizabeth’s wrist stand out.

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“Let me go!” Elizabeth shouted, voice strained. She pounded her father’s arm with her free hand. A blast of hot sparks erupted from the wand and Mr. Peterson shoved Elizabeth away from him, hard enough to knock her down and make her cry out in surprise.

Harry jumped in between them as Tonks and Mrs. Peterson arrived. Harry left his wand in his pocket since he was dealing with a Muggle, but itched to have it in his hand.

“What are you doing in my house!” Mr. Peterson snarled, spittle flying from his angry mouth. He grabbed Harry by the front of his robes and jerked him forward, using his height and surprise to pull Harry onto his toes. Harry used a move he had learned from Vineet, and he swept his arm in an upward arc to break the man’s grasp.

“Stop it,” Harry ordered, catching his feet and settling into a low stance. Behind him he could hear Elizabeth rising with a single sob and her mother moved to help her. Harry did not trust the man in front of him enough to glance around. “What is your problem?” Harry asked him, furious.

“Get out of my house,” Mr. Peterson ordered, low and nasty, head cocked forward, comb over flipped outward. “You have no right to be here.”

“We’ll leave as soon as we’re certain everything will remain calm,” Tonks informed the man with annoying calm.

“What are you supposed to be?” Mr. Peterson said to the pink-Mohawked Tonks. “You a double freak?”

“Leave her out of this,” Harry said, stepping between the two of them now.

“This is all your doing.” Mr. Peterson said, grabbing Harry again. Before Harry could react Mr. Peterson pushed him into the wall. Harry had been tossed against walls by spells all week, but this physical move triggered something new. He straightened himself slowly, keeping his back pressed flat. Across from him, Elizabeth nursed a bruise darkening her cheek. Her tragically unhappy, red-rimmed eyes peered at her father.

The white corridor darkened despite the copious, powerful electric lighting. Mrs. Peterson glanced up at the ceiling lamps in consternation. Harry remained pressed to the wall, breathing fast. He could feel things clambering at the interstice. It made his skin itch as they clawed at the barrier just beyond the walls, eager, hungry. They could smell Harry’s fury and anger and they believed it meant a feeding was imminent. Harry imagined Mr. Peterson’s horror should he unleash them and with effort, squashed the imagining. Blinking, Harry watched Tonks move in, hand held up to calm Mr. Peterson, other hand on her wand pocket.

Harry pushed himself away from the wall to stand straight, trying to bottle up all the anger. Too much had escaped already and Mr. Peterson, arguing insultingly

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with Tonks, deserved something. The creatures prowled and circled, impatient with a frantic hunger that made Harry breathe faster in fear.

Elizabeth disappeared into her room and reappeared with a trunk which, after a hissing argument with her mother, she hovered while biting her lip defiantly and rubbing her wrist. Harry went over to her, needing something concrete to distract himself.

“Can I take you to your friend’s place?” Harry asked.

“You’ve never been there,” Elizabeth said.

Impatient and a little rough, he grabbed her chin and pulled her gaze to his. “Just think of it.”

Startled, she complied. To Tonks, Harry said, “I’ll be right back.”

Moments later, they stood in the entry hall of a quiet flat. They both breathed heavily in the stale air.

“She must be out,” Elizabeth said shakily.

Jarred out of thoughts of hungry demons by her voice and the change of venue, Harry took over her trunk and set it inside. “Sit down, I’ll wait with you,” he said, despite what he had just said to Tonks.

She put her hands on his robe front. “You have to go right back,” she insisted with surprising presence. Having her close was doing strange things to him, sending a flutter over his abdomen. She added firmly, “I don’t want to get you into trouble. Go on.” She let go and crouched beside her trunk and started plucking things out of it and setting them on the floor in neat piles. “Thanks,” she said without looking back at him.

“You’re going to be all right here?”

“Yeah, Diane will be fine with it. She kept insisting...” She trailed off and shook her head.

“I’ll come back when I can; make sure everything is set,” Harry said, thinking she was right, that he was going to be in trouble for leaving. “Owl... well, it’s a little far... and you don’t have an owl, anymore. Er, I’ll come back first chance I get. I might have to bring my guard.”

She looked up with a faint smile. “Thanks, Harry,” she said wistfully.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, Harry arrived back in the upstairs hallway and found it empty. He found Tonks interviewing the Petersons downstairs by the front door. Mr. Peterson sent visual daggers Harry’s way as he took up a spot beside the Auror. Tonks half-turned to Harry and he could hear her sigh between questions.

“That’s all for now,” Tonks said tiredly, flipping her notebook closed. “You’ll be hearing from us with some follow-up paperwork, I’m sure.”

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On the way down the pavement, Tonks said, "They cooperated all right. They were grateful we hadn't called in the Muggle police." When Harry remained silent, striding rapidly beside her, Tonks added, "Not an Auror-level call. Usually Reversal handles these and refers it to the Wizard Family Council for followup."

Harry still kept silent. He was uncertain how angry he might get if he started talking. The creatures had retreated, but in addition to not wanting a fight with Tonks, he did not want to feel them prowling around again.

Tonks gave up on conversation and they were both silently grateful when she changed shifts with Hornisham. Harry thought they could work it out later, especially if they had not actually let a real argument get started.

After Tonks had gone, Harry quickly wrote out a note for Candide and told Hornisham that he needed to run an errand. Hornisham repacked the knitting she had pulled out and stood by the hearth to join him.

On the hill above Hogsmeade, in the waning evening light, Harry argued with his guard. "I really need to go speak to someone, alone."

Hornisham glared back, stubborn in the face of Harry's misplaced anger. "I don't care what you want. I'm on duty to see you come to no harm and that's what I aim to do."

"Look," Harry said. He stepped back and transformed into his animagus form, flapped twice and transformed back. "I'll fly up to the school like that. Will that be okay?"

She stared at him like a Third-Year on her first trip to Honeydukes. "A Mountain Gryffylis. Can I see that again?" she asked in dazed wonderment.

Harry dropped his anger and obliged. He tilted his cat-like head at her and shook himself before changing back.

"Yer one dangerous creature, aren't you?" she asked. "Well, I doubt anyone would bother you if'n yer like that. I'll wait over in the Hog's Head for you."

Once Harry took flight from Hogsmeade, he could not resist circling the lake and a taking a short, weaving flight over the Forbidden Forest. His Animagus form did not care that it was delaying, it just liked to feel the autumn breeze buffeting its fur.

The Defense office window was dark as was Hermione's window, so Harry flapped hard to reach the roof and landed on the slate, taking care not to knock any tiles loose with his claws. A steady breeze poured through the gap in the hills behind him. He pulled his wings tight to avoid catching it, but found he needed them for balance, and so he spread them again, but kept them angled and loose to not catch air and send him flying again.

With his animal eyes he watched the people walking on the street in Hogsmeade, alternating between orange and shadow as they moved from storefront to storefront.

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A mist moved in over the lake, radiant in the twilight.

Harry decided he should not wait any longer. He launched himself on newly fresh wings and dropped down to Lupin's lit window and transformed into himself with his toes just clinging to the outside sill.

Lupin answered his knock immediately. "Well, Harry," he said, putting his wand away. "Didn't expect to find you there. Wasn't certain whom to expect, really. Come on in."

A young student in Slytherin colors sat at the visitor's desk, eyes wide, mouth open. Harry said hello to the girl, but she did not respond.

"Do you know where Severus is?" Harry asked Lupin.

"He's in a meeting with Minerva. Rough board meeting yesterday, I hear. They're plotting something."

"The board, or Severus and Minerva?" Harry asked, honestly uncertain.

Lupin laughed. "Both, I expect. They've been at it almost two hours. I expect you could go on up. But, aren't you supposed to have a guard?"

"She's waiting in Hogsmeade for me. She agreed that in my Animagus form, in transit to the castle, I wasn't in any danger." Harry started to step away, but stopped to ask. "How are things with you?"

Lupin smiled, doubling the crinkling around his eyes. "Quite good, surprisingly."

Harry put his own concerns aside and enjoyed that answer. He almost asked how his cousin was, but held off in the presence of the student. "I'll stop by on my way out," Harry promised.

With a slightly lighter heart, Harry made his way to the Headmistress' Tower. Guessing the password required three minutes of racking his brains for types of tea and coffee. "Macchiato" finally worked and the gargoyles leapt aside. Harry stared at the turning staircase, lost in overlapping memory for several breaths. As bad as suspicion of him sometimes became, as bloodyminded and annoying as the Ministry could be, this place, with everything in order as it should be, acted like a balm on his nerves. Harry stepped onto the stairs and rode it to the top, looking forward to seeing McGonagall, even as reluctant as he was to explain to his guardian what had transpired that evening.

"Harry, what a pleasant surprise," McGonagall greeted him when the door swung open. Snape's eyes came up from the scroll before him, keen, as expected.

"Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to talk to Severus for a few minutes."

"Of course, my boy, this meeting has gone on far too long already."

"Is there a problem with the board?" Harry asked Snape as his guardian rolled the scroll before him and tossed the tassels around it.

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McGonagall answered. "Some pressure to make changes that we are not certain are in the best interests of the school. This sort of tug of war goes on all the time, but I feel this time, we are the rope rather than the mud puddle as we usually are." To Snape, she said, "You can go on. I'll finish composing this letter to Cornelius and run it by you in the morning before sending it off."

On the way to Snape's office, Harry asked, "What's Fudge want?"

"Power, so he does not feel as insignificant as he actually is," Snape replied.

"More specifically, I meant," Harry said. "He's been talking to the press like he's in charge of everything. I don't get it."

Snape waited until the clusters of students had finished greeting Harry and moved on. "What exactly is it that is unclear?"

"He's just head of the Department of Mysteries. I guess I don't understand why Minister Bones doesn't slap him down."

Snape unsealed his office door. "I expect because she is busy with real work. But I agree, she has probably missed her chance to do so without creating a stir while doing it."

"Did I say that?" Harry asked, confused.

"You implied it. I assumed intentionally," Snape said with a slight sneer as he waved the lamps up. "Sit down. I assume Fudge is not what is on your mind." He himself leaned back against his desk where he could tower over the visitor's chair.

Harry took a seat and rested his eyes on a crowded shelf behind the desk. "You wanted me to tell you what was going on with me."

"Yes, I did. What is going on?" When Harry hesitated, Snape asked, "Is this a complimentary status report or did something happen this evening?"

"Something happened."

Into the empty air that ensued while Harry formulated, Snape prompted, "But you are reluctant to say exactly what?"

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

Snape rubbed his hands together before propping them back on the desk edge behind him. "Does anything require fixing at this time?"

"What? No. Everything's all right right now." True, Harry reminded himself, things could be much worse.

"What happened?" Snape asked.

Harry tossed his head to the side, uneasily dipping into memory. "Elizabeth got into a row with her father... over magic, of course. I don't know how bad it would have got if we hadn't intervened, Tonks and I, that is. Mr. Peterson was as angry as I've ever seen my uncle Vernon. He wasn't rational. And... Tonks wasn't happy. Thought we should leave it to the Muggle police. I think she's jealous, partly." Harry

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sighed and rubbed his neck, more pained about everything. “Anyhow, the bad part was when I was trying to separate Mr. Peterson and Elizabeth. I mean, they were fighting. And I got angry. I mean, how could someone do that to their daughter. Well, not like Elizabeth wasn’t part of it, but still.”

Harry faded out, remembering the scene, Elizabeth’s mussed hair and red, distressed face. The way she nursed her wrist.

“And?” Snape prompted.

“You know, I told you how I fed Voldemort, the other Voldemort, to the Rakshasas.” No response came to this. “Well, they seem to, er, expect that now. If I’m really angry at someone, that is.”

Snape stood in stillness, arms crossed but relaxed. “Did you let them into this world?”

“No,” Harry said. “No, nothing happened. I just didn’t like the... feel of it. I had more control over them before, I thought. This time I was angry enough that I could feel the Dark Plane. It was too close, and the creatures... they expected to be fed. It felt awful, their hunger did.” Harry rubbed his nose. “I don’t know how to explain it. It’s not like I had to do anything for them, but they were right there, not visible but really close by and they just expected.”

Harry sighed again and slowed his breathing. “Maybe I’m over-reacting.”

“No.” Snape stepped casually around Harry to stand by the window. The one Harry had once repaired with glass beyond which demons swam. “You are not over-reacting.” He sounded far away as he spoke and perhaps a little tired, which gave Harry a twinge because he had rendered Tonks into the same state. “I can only implore you to leave the Dark Plane alone, but I know you will not do so. The temptation of it is too strong, if only for the power it gives you to move at will, barrier or not, in utter silence.”

He spun on his heel and faced Harry down. “Did you get the sense that the creatures were angry with you as a result of your resisting them?”

“No,” Harry replied. “They don’t get anything if I don’t give it to them.”

Sharply, critically, Snape said, “You treat them too lightly.”

“I have to,” Harry argued, to growing annoyance on Snape’s side. “You don’t seem able to understand that.” Harry pointed at his own chest. “Either I have confidence that I control them or I lose myself to them, completely. That’s how this works.”

Silence fell. Harry broke it by more quietly pointing out, “I’ve tried to explain this before.”

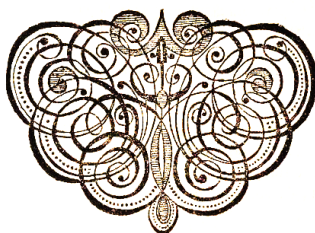
“You have. I remember. I just cannot accept that there is no middle ground where you can respect that these creatures are not tools to be toyed with by you, without consequence.”

GUARD DUTY

“I didn’t have any choice but to use them against Voldemort,” Harry said.
“You had a choice about whether to fight Voldemort,” Snape pointed out.
“Did I?” Harry asked. “It didn’t feel like it.”

Author’s Notes: Yes, very long gap. Life has been too much lately. It isn’t getting much saner soon either, but trust that the next chapter will appear eventually.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



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Ron arrived at breakfast time on Saturday and took Hornisham's place as Harry's guard. Harry was quite pleased to see him. "Let's get out, all right?" Harry said to him before managing even "hello".

Ron shrugged and took the seat beside Harry. "Mrs. Snape," he said, greeting Candide.

Candide gestured with a rasher-laden fork. "Didn't actually change my name," she pointed out.

"Ah," Ron said, "Good plan that." He paused to let his mind drift. "How shall I call you? Harry's New Mum?"

Harry coughed on his juice.

"Mrs. Snape' is fine," Candide stated slowly. "'Candide' is fine."

"Mrs. Professor'," Ron suggested in a tone of trying out the sound of it.

"You gave the right passcode, didn't you?" Harry asked his friend in dismay.

"You tell me," Ron replied. A full plate of breakfast appeared before him. "All right!" he cheered lightly.

"Didn't you eat yet?"

"I did," Ron said, eagerly picking up his fork while carefully surveying the diverse field before him.

"Guess you are Ron," Harry commented quietly.

Ron, still chewing a sausage, asked Candide, "So, what names are you thinking of?"

Harry pricked his head up. Candide replied, "Apuleius maybe. Argentio is nice

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too.”

“Ah, so you haven’t got to the Bs in the book yet,” Ron said, nodding knowingly. “I have an aunt named Argentina,” he went on between bites. “But that’s because they were running out of girls names on that side. That’s how my mum got the name ‘Molly’. They say granddad really meant to say ‘golly!’ but his mouth was full at the time, or so the story goes.”

Harry and Candide shared a silent laugh.

“Such big families,” Harry said, shaking his head. “I can’t imagine.”

“Ready for a brother, right?” Candide asked with amused force.

Harry did not want her to worry about him, of all things. “Yeah. I’m looking forward to it. It’s just a baby. How hard could that be?”

Candide seemed to freeze, but then she said, “I hope you’re right, but I somehow don’t think you are.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “What are babies like?” he asked Ron.

Ron raised and lowered his boney shoulders. “Loud, smelly. They get into things. Sometimes magic comes flying off of them and then their nappies won’t stay on... you’ll find them dangling from the chandelier in there...”

“The baby or the nappies?” Harry asked, not sure he wanted to hear which.

Ron did not reply, just went on with: “The windows will all shatter from this hyper-magic crying...” He waved his hand dismissively. “You wouldn’t believe what happened when my cousin took her baby daughter to a croquet match once. They never did find all the hoops.”

Given Candide’s quizzically alarmed expression, Harry thought it best to interrupt. “Well, we should go, maybe.”

Harry, as a quick way of coming up with a plan, mentioned that it was certainly looking like a great day to stroll up and down Diagon Alley, and he dragged his friend off to do just that.

Half the wizarding world was out that morning, it seemed, and as well as recognizing many old school chums, they encountered Aaron, window shopping before Madam Malkin’s.

“Don’t you have field work?” Harry asked.

Aaron gave the hand sign for “taking care of it”, which may, as strange as it seemed, mean he was doing his field work right then. Aaron turned and greeted Ron a bit loudly, and chummily suggested they enter the store. The shopkeeper glanced up and gave the fleeting impression that she had expected someone else.

Aaron perused the racks in the manner of a connoisseur who expects to be disappointed with absolutely everything. He made a big scene of looking for robes for a nice dinner out with his mum.

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Madam Malkin shuffled over to him, sliding the racks of robes around to better reach him. “Well, what will your father be wearing, dear?” she asked him.

“If he has the misfortune of being there, it would presumably be in the same tailcoat we buried him in three years ago.”

Madam Malkin held her hands up then placed one on Aaron’s arm. “So, sorry, young man, I should have remembered that. You are certainly in here often enough. Well, how about this one.” She held up a green set of robes with maroon lace trim. “I found it in the warehouse. Vintage, from Italy.”

Harry thought there was absolutely no chance his dapper friend would even consider those quaint and studiously old-fashioned robes, but Aaron held them up in the light of the window for inspection, and took a long time about it.

Ron nudged Harry, who also thought it may be time to move on. But Harry also suspected something more was going on, so he brushed Ron off. Indeed, not five minutes later—while Aaron stood before the triptych mirror in the back of the store, alternately studying the decorative back hem and checking the sleeve length on a set of robes for which it was frankly surprising that neither he nor they burst spontaneously into flames upon his donning them—the door chime mutely clanged and three skulky figures entered.

There was something odd about the tri-some that was not immediately quantifiable. They resembled two brothers and a sister in their mid-twenties, but Harry did not recognize them from Hogwarts as he would expect to. Aaron went on, deliberating about the robes, sounding spoiled about what he disliked, but Madam Malkin dutifully agreed with everything he said.

One of the wizards circled around, desultorily shopping, and came up short upon encountering Harry beside the mirror. He recovered and moved on with a quick gesture to the other two that would have been easy to miss if one were not looking for it. They gathered in the far corner and the woman shifted robes on a rack while they bent their heads together. Aaron’s gaze flickered over to them and then to Harry before he resumed his unsatisfiable shopper routine.

Harry bit his lip. He was in the way, perhaps. Aaron was on duty; Harry was certain now. He was staking out the shop and Harry was disrupting that. But Aaron could have suggested Harry leave before now and had not done so. Harry casually made a comment to Aaron about the green color not being flattering to him because it would imply he was proud of being a Slytherin. Aaron sent a surprised and insulted look his way, but Harry missed it; he was glancing at the group in the corner, determined to memorize their faces, which wasn’t easy; they were very ordinary looking beyond their dark, shiny hair. No particular features of their faces stood out to make note of.

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The group broke out of their whispered conversation and departed the store with a last challenging glance at Harry. Ron had started to search the business attire rack out of sheer boredom and noticed none of this. Aaron sighed at his image in the mirror and slipped off the robes like one removing a sweaty uniform after a long match.

“Oh, you don’t want those?” Ron said brightly. “Can I try them?”

Aaron peered down at the robes, bundled like rubbish in his hands, and then back up at Ron. For a second he seemed to contemplate intervening and refusing, but he handed the robes over and relinquished the spot before the mirrors.

“They do look better on Ron,” Harry whispered to Aaron a few minutes later while Ron studied himself in the mirror. Indeed the lace matched his hair and that made a world of difference.

“I have a spare Slytherin pin you can borrow,” Aaron suggested when Ron pinched the neck closed with his fingers and lifted his chin with a staid air.

“Was I in the way?” Harry asked Aaron in a whisper.

“No,” Aaron said, shaking his head while critically eyeing Ron.

“Was that part of the gang that came in here?” Harry asked.

“Probably,” Aaron replied, far more interested in Ron’s attire than Harry’s conversation.

“Well... we should go back to the Ministry then,” Harry insisted. “I remember what they look like.”

“No, you don’t,” Aaron calmly countered.

Harry stared at him. “I don’t?”

“Shacklebolt said they’d probably be Rho-Potioned and you couldn’t know what they really looked like.”

“Row-Potioned?” Harry repeated. He’d never heard of that.

“Did you see them with all black hair too?” Aaron asked.

“Yeah.”

“Hm. Kingsley said the potion had a regression to the mean effect. So maybe they are from somewhere south.”

Harry shook his head, not following at all.

Aaron leaned closer to explain. “The potion makes you appear as an average of everyone you’ve ever met. So, you can’t tell what they look like, but you know they aren’t from, say, Sweden.”

“Right,” Harry said, following that part, at least.

“I better go report in.” Aaron said. “Shacklebolt said to come right back if anything happens, and on top of that, I can’t stand to watch real Galleons get put

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down for those robes... no matter how good they look on someone. Or maybe because they are starting to look good on someone.”



Rodgers teased Harry on Monday during training. “We must not be giving Potter enough field time... he’s repeatedly went out hunting for his own over the weekend.” Harry’s fellows grinned, while Harry stared at his fingernails. Rodgers went on, “If you want more assignments, I have one for you. Fudge wants a few Aurors assigned to him half-time. I’m half-tempted to half-send you, if you are so bored.”

Harry balked. “Fudge and I don’t get along very well.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed,” Rodgers stated airily. “Fudge wants to form a permanent committee to focus on combatting organized crime.”

“Er,” Harry asked even though it pained him to support Fudge, “Don’t we need that?”

Rodgers raised a pale brown brow and glared at Harry. “We don’t have time for committees. Fudge used to do this to us all the time. Six months of pulling us one way and then tugging us to something completely different for the next six months. All the time, meetings and reports. We never accomplished anything and as soon as we turn our backs on all the other problems to jump on one alone, all heck in a handbasket breaks loose and we have to scramble to just get things under control. Minister Bones has been a god-send. If she sticks her nose in, it’s just to ask if we need anything; she otherwise leaves us alone to get things done.”

Tridant piped up when Rodgers ran out of diatribe. “The Prophet seems to think she’s asleep and lacks leadership.” It was not clear from his tone if he were baiting their trainer or just wanted to get a response.

Rodgers said, “I prefer to think she just trusts us to do our jobs and knows we can’t do them from a meeting room or stuck behind a dictation quill. Let them use their own personnel; we have enough of our own troubles.”

During lunch, upon which Harry was forced to use the slightly stinky, poison-revealing drops, Harry fell thoughtful, perhaps due to having to eat slowly while half holding his nose. It was occurring to him that he had not felt Moody following him for quite a while. Harry dumped the remaining half of his sandwich and went to find Mr. Weasley.

Harry found the department head in the file room, leaning over a teetering stack of files on a cabinet, taking notes from the top one while pressing a finger on it to keep it from spilling onto the floor. “Hello Harry, need this drawer?” he asked, when Harry stepped over.

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“I just wanted to ask you something.”

Mr. Weasley closed the top file to give Harry his full attention and said, “Go on.”

“Is Mad-Eye still working for the Department of Mysteries?”

“I think so,” Mr. Weasley replied after glancing around the empty room for anyone possibly listening in. “Fudge has been repeatedly requesting manpower from us at the same time as he’s been bragging that he has someone mysterious working for him who he claims is better than anyone we have to offer.”

“Clearly, he thinks flattery will get him somewhere,” Harry commented.

“What? Oh, yes,” Mr. Weasley chuckled. “Clearly.” He sorted through his files seemingly at random and said, “You should come for dinner this Wednesday, the whole clan will be there.”

“I’d like that, thanks,” Harry said.

Harry had started to turn back to the heavy door, but stopped when Mr. Weasley asked, “May I inquire what made you ask about Moody?”

“Oh,” Harry said, not meaning to be opaque. “I was just thinking that I hadn’t noticed him following me lately. Not that I’m complaining.”

“If Cornelius is giving him the kind of pointless assignments I know he’s expecting of us, I expect Moody is rather busy. More so now because the Department of Mysteries had one of their technicians injured in that fire Thursday night.”

“They did?” Harry asked.

“Yes. It was just announced this morning to the Ministry at large. Probably will be in the press this afternoon.”

“What started the fire?” Harry asked. “Was it an accident or a fight?”

Mr. Weasley sighed, gave Harry a firm look, and then appeared to give in, “Looks like an accident right now. Felton had taken some work home and it got out of hand. He’s expected to recover eventually.”

“What was he working on?”

Mr. Weasley smiled faintly as he said, “Too many questions, Harry.” He scratched his head, tapped the files before him and admitted, “Department of Mysteries refused to give us a straight answer to that anyhow. I expect Alastor will get to the bottom of it for them, since they haven’t told us enough to help, really. Moody is sharp enough to handle it, I expect.”

Harry was less certain. “I wonder who was following him,” he muttered aloud.

Mr. Weasley returned his full attention to Harry. “Following whom, Moody?”

Harry recovered from having spoken his internal musings. “Yeah. He accused me of doing it.”

“He accused you? I’d expect he’d realize you’ve seen enough of him.”

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Harry shrugged, which was a kind of lie, since he knew very well why Moody suspected Harry of being skilled enough to slip within Moody's copious warning barriers undetected, should he care to.

"Maybe Alastor really should retire for good," Mr. Weasley said, shaking his head. "So! I can tell Molly to expect you on Wednesday?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley winked. "Kingsley's been praising your field shadowing. Good to see you're settling down a bit, Harry." He sounded inordinately pleased. "Still more curious than you're really allowed to be at this stage..."

Harry rubbed his hands together. "I've been finding it a bit easier to follow the rules lately. For some reason..." he added despite knowing that the rules felt better now after seeing how miserable the world would be without them.

"Probably just growing up, Harry," Mr. Weasley said patronizingly, in a way that set Harry off slightly.

"Maybe," Harry said, not conceding at all to his own mind.

During the afternoon, Rodgers had to leave them for several hours to drill on their own. When this happened again the next day, Harry and Aaron just happened to slip down to the tearoom for an unscheduled break and just happened to loiter outside the main offices, listening for any clue as to what was happening.

Harry wished for a set of Extendable Ears as he sipped a cup of tea he did not really want, just for an excuse. His fallback plan was to weasel some information out of Tonks if she turned out to be his guard that night. There in the corridor with the steaming, thin tea under his nose, Harry felt a wave of general frustration that they were not allowed to help more.

Aaron cocking his ear toward the doorway pulled Harry back to their spying. Rogan was saying: "Ragnok insists that the wizards in question are just trying to cheat them. They are threatening to close the vaults except during an hour a day and force everyone through some rather unsavory screening."

Tonks voice then: "Last time they did that Diagon Alley had to resort to barter and a few merchants started accepting pounds. It was chaos. I couldn't pay my rent and had to befuddle my landlord to avoid being thrown out of my place."

Harry and Aaron stared at each other while they listened to more descriptions of dismayed Goblins. Harry wondered again what Moody was doing for Fudge. He thought about who else he might ask. It occurred to him with a chill of realization that he could slip into the Department of Mysteries to see for himself what was happening there. He stopped listening to the Auror conversation and fixated on what he knew first-hand of the Department of Mysteries. The memories were fraught with stress and bad outcomes but within that thorny thicket, the visions of it were as clear

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as the paneled wall he stood before now.

“What do you think?” Aaron asked, jarring Harry away from hatching plans.

“I have to think about it more,” Harry said, answering only to his own thoughts.

“Hm, sounds to me like the shakedown is taking in Gringotts,” Aaron said with confidence.

“What?” Harry said, wishing he had paid more attention.

“Well, you know. Extortion and fraud, that’s usually where this type make their money.”

“Er, yeah,” Harry agreed. His mind jumped to another mystery topic that he wished he could resolve. It occurred to him that Aaron would be an optimum guard to take on a mission to check in on Belinda. Harry had found it inconvenient to try and convince Tonks to make a social call to the Minister’s office, but Aaron would not mind, nor would he ask too many questions. “Hey, if you think the other three wouldn’t miss us, let’s go up and see someone I want to talk to.”

Aaron rubbed his elbow. “I could stand to skive off for a while longer. These power-building drills are really taking a toll on my quest for a bruise-free lifestyle.”

As they headed for the stairs, Harry said with a laugh, “A bruise-free what?”

“Bruises aren’t as sexy as they used to be. Healers can’t do a thing for them, so I’d prefer to abstain, thank you.”

Up in the Minister’s office, Aaron showed just how valuable he could be... he sauntered over to the other assistant, hunched over a pile of reports taking notes, and began to chat her up. Harry did not think they knew each other, but within seconds Aaron had her smiling and completely distracted from everything else.

“Hello, Harry,” Belinda said, looking up from a typewriter she had opened up before her, the letter-tipped metal arms splayed at random up and backwards.

“Hello,” Harry returned. “Er, what are you doing?”

“Muggle correspondence.” She shook her head and moved in with a tiny pick to clean out the circular letter parts. “We used to have an old witch down in records that could charm a quill to mimic a typewriter, but she retired and now we have to keep this thing running for Muggle organization-bound letters.”

Harry blinked at that and considered that a typewritten letter probably looked as out of date as a quilled one these days. He watched her work for a minute, cleaning the black gunk out of the silver letter shapes and folding each one back down, repeatedly having to unfold some because they refused to go back in if pushed in the wrong order. Harry was thinking about criminal gangs and Belinda confessing that she did not want to tell anyone at the Ministry what was troubling her because she would lose her job. Belinda sighed and rubbed her blackened fingers on a white rag.

“Muggle machines aside, how are you doing?” Harry asked.

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Belinda shrugged. She cleaned her hands more thoroughly with a spell before reaching under the wheeled typewriter table for a sheet of crisp real paper. The paper was fed into the rollers of the machine and adjusted with much clacking and rolling back and forth.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to ignore you, but I’m behind on getting these done.” She stopped and glanced at the other office assistant. Harry glanced that way too and found the woman completely involved in her conversation with Aaron.

In a low voice, Belinda said, “I’ve wanted to have coffee with you, but I notice that you are always under guard now. Makes it kind of hard to talk to you.” She said this in a way that maybe implied Harry was at fault for the situation.

Harry imagined that she had vacillated on whether to tell him what was wrong and he wished he had not missed finding out. “I know.”

The door to the Minister’s office opened and Harry stood straight, not prepared to deal with Bones right then, but it was just one of the other assistants, a skinny man with rimless glasses and a shiny bald top to his head. He closed the door behind him and moved to the shelves without once glancing at the strangers in the room.

Quiet still, Harry said, “You know, if you need anything, just owl. I’ll shake my guard if I have to.”

“You shouldn’t do that,” she said, firmly correcting him. She bit her lip. “Don’t shake your guard even if I ever do owl you saying you should.”

The male assistant took something back into the inner office and Harry had a glimpse of Bones at her desk, reading something by holding it far from her eyes.

Harry was still trying to grasp her last statement when she said, “There’s a meeting soon... so, you should probably go.”

Harry tried to Legilimize her in the last glance before she bent back to typing by poking at one key at a time, but did not catch anything beyond an image of two Goblins carrying gold-plated briefcases.

Aaron did not need to be prompted. He caught sight of Harry stepping back from the desk and immediately closed the conversation he was having. The woman said, “Hey, we should have drinks sometime.”

Aaron turned on a deadly smile and replied, “That would be lovely,” without promising anything firm.

In the corridor, Harry said out of the corner of his mouth, “I’d hate to be your girlfriend.”

“I’d hate for you to be my girlfriend too,” Aaron agreed, deadly serious, but he laughed hardily after.

On the stairs, Aaron said wistfully, “Why is it the one you’ve got never seems as nice as the ones you don’t?”

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Harry needed the whole trip down to come up with a response. With his hand on the door latch to their floor he said, "That attitude sounds guaranteed to lead to unhappiness."

"If I had your fame, I could have anyone," Aaron said dreamily.

Harry still held the door closed. "You have money; isn't that enough?"

"It does help," Aaron agreed. "My mum still doles it out. Insists I'm not ready to have it all in a lump sum yet. I think she just wants to drag me home for luncheons at will. Potential girlfriends do not like to learn that this is the case."

Harry opened the door. "If they can't handle that, you're better off without them."

That evening, Harry unusually chafed under having Tonks as a guard. He wanted to try slipping into the Department of Mysteries and could not work out a scheme to get enough time alone to do it. Candide came home for dinner, hair mussed, eyes sore looking. When the settings arrived with a sparkle, she carefully straightened the silverware and waited for the food while tapping her finger on the wood.

Concerned, Harry asked, "Are you going to make it through November?"

Candide brightened. "Oh yes. This has been an easy year so far."

"Really?" Harry asked.

When the plates of food arrived, Candide's was not only larger but piled with fruit on one half. Candide stared at it before popping a grape into her mouth. "Winky's started doing this to me," she commented, not sounding annoyed, but not sounding pleased either

"Maybe Severus should be here looking after you," Harry said.

"No," Candide denied, holding up a peach for examination. "I'm fine. Winky has her own ideas, is all."

"Hm," Harry muttered, unconvinced.

Candide nibbled a second grape thoughtfully and said, "He'd come home if you needed him."

"I don't. I just think you do," Harry returned.

"I don't, but if you are insisting, it makes me think you think you need him."

"What?" Harry asked with a sharp head shake.

Tonks chimed in, "This is the strangest argument I've ever witnessed."

"It's not an argument," Harry snapped lightly, then sighed sheepishly.

That night as Hornisham took over because Tonks was on duty, Harry sat partly reading and mostly thinking about how he might get away long enough to do some investigating. This restriction on him was making him ill tempered, which made it difficult to concentrate. There was nothing for it; he had to convince Mr. Weasley to cancel his guard. Of course he could hardly tell him why he needed the guard

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removed. And he doubted he could convince Mr. Weasley to agree. But he had to try.

Harry frowned into a small book on the history of weather hexes, specifically on a chapter covering combined spells to create storm clouds. Hornisham was knitting again, but this time the hooks and perls built up something wide and square that was unlikely to be a scarf given the heavy grinding sound of it rubbing on the hearthstone. The creak and grind of metal needle on metal cord had grown into a background noise for Harry's home life, a background noise for his lack of freedom.

Harry stared at the inexpertly typeset and crookedly printed page before him. The book would be even thinner if the margins were not so wide. He considered that he could trick Hornisham easily enough with a *Doppelgänger* or a *Memory Charm*, but that felt like too cruel a trick.

That night Harry slept poorly. He dreamed that Rodgers was unrelenting in striking him with spells. Harry refused to beg for him to stop, even when he discovered his hand empty of wand and could not find it on the floor near his knees. Battered with spells intended to improve him, Harry crouched with his hands over his head in a futile effort to protect himself.

Harry squinted around his dimly lit bedroom after Hornisham prodded him awake with a knitting needle. His trunks, against the wall where they belonged, sat in blurry stillness, as did his wardrobe. All was normal.

"Potter, Potter," Hornisham repeated in a little voice when Harry did not respond.

Harry rolled away from her to collect himself. Across the room, Kali crawled violently inside her cage for a burst, then quieted.

"Ack," Hornisham muttered and returned to her knitting.



Harry used dinner at the Burrow to begin the long impossible work of convincing Mr. Weasley to remove his guard. Several other early-arriving Weasleys were more than happy to throw their support behind Harry. Both Weasley parents insisted that Harry's arguing that nothing had happened to him was all the more reason to keep him under guard, not remove it. Ron refused to take sides, as did Bill. Harry let the topic drop when Percy arrived, new girlfriend in tow.

The Weasley family all stopped what they were doing, heads cranked around, bodies frozen in place, when the pair entered from the Floo. Percy led the woman in by the hand, except her hand remained a fist. Her brow and lip edge glittered with silver rings and her shoulder-length hair was of a black hue that reflected absolutely no light, so that it appeared a blurry hole following behind her face. Her clothing,

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with long silver chains adorning it at random, reflected slightly more light than her hair.

Percy sulkily glanced at his family members in turn and stopped before Mrs. Weasley. "Mum, this is Vespera. Vespera Eyre."

"How do you do, dear?" Mrs. Weasley managed faintly.

Vespera may have smiled, may have sneered. The others were recovering enough to send funny-faced glances at each other.

Harry did not intentionally sit beside Vespera during dinner, but at the last moment he rescued Ginny from having to do so. Percy's date was wearing something mildly cursed and it seemed to vibrate in concert with the bizarre scent of her perfume, so Harry ate little and began to contemplate going home early. Dinner was a mute affair punctuated by one or the other of the parents attempting to learn anything from Percy's date. She was entirely monosyllabic, so this was a slow, tortuous process for all present. Percy exuded an air of smugness and attempted to dote on his date whenever possible, to no reaction from her.

When Harry made to leave, he loudly expressed disappointment, Mr. Weasley started to say, "About that issue we were discussing—"

Harry cut him off. "I'll see you tomorrow about it, sir." He thought he had dodged Mr. Weasley's revelation, but Percy narrowed his eyes at his father at the far other end of the table. Harry frowned, but then considered that perhaps this was perfect. If Percy was after Harry, then him believing Harry may lose his guard could draw him out where Harry could catch him. "I'll come to your office in the morning, if that's all right, sir."

Mr. Weasley gestured that Harry could do as he pleased. Ron and Ginny and then the twins even, all jumped up to escort Harry home. Ginny was beside Harry, looking the most in need of a breather, so he chose her.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, Harry said, "I don't like the way Percy Legilimizes your dad."

Ginny replied simply, "I don't like Percy."

The house was quiet. Harry stepped into the hall and glanced around, ran the barrier detection spells, and then turned to Ginny. "I need a guard that will give me some leeway. I have some things I need to do."

"Won't Tonks give you some room?" Ginny asked, mystified.

Harry huffed. "Yeah. Good question." It pained him to wonder about it. "It involves the Ministry, so I think not."

"Harry," Ginny began but then hesitated for quite a while. "Harry, if you don't trust Tonks, you know, to tell her pretty much anything, I don't think it's going to work out, long-term."

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Harry stared at her pale, freckled face in the candlelight. He did not want to say aloud that she was probably right, but part of him had already turned traitor and had started pounding on him with that notion. He should just trust Tonks and if she did not trust him in return, well, then it was not meant to be. Standing there in the dining room, with the light reflecting brightest on the glass of the framed photographs on the sideboard, it seemed far too obvious that this issue was the problem between them.

“Harry?” Ginny finally prodded.

“Yeah,” Harry breathed. Not admitting to anything, just acknowledging that she was still there.

Ginny flipped her hair around, perhaps out of impatience. “Is your next guard here?”

Harry rose out of his lowly spiraling thoughts. “No.”

Ginny pulled out a chair and took a seat. “I’ll wait.” She drummed her fingers. “If I wish for a Butterbeer, will—” A Butterbeer bottle sparkled into place before her. “That’s lovely,” she said happily.

Harry sat across from her. He should fetch his readings, but did not move to do so. “I’m sick to death of being guarded. I can’t even remember what it was like to be alone.”

“That doesn’t sound that bad.”

Harry gazed around the room. “I wonder where Hornisham is, or Tonks, or whomever it is supposed to be.”

“You don’t know?”

“No.” Harry too drummed his fingers. “I could sneak away right now,” he said, sitting up.

Ginny’s mouth made a popping sound on the bottle top when she tugged it away suddenly. “No you aren’t.”

“What?”

“You’re staying here. We don’t know what happened to your guard and I’m not going to get reamed for losing track of you. Sit.”

Harry settled back into the chair, surprised by her.

“Where is it you want to go anyhow?” she asked.

“I’m not telling you.”

“Fine.”

Harry crossed his arms and rotated a quarter turn away from her. A second butterbeer appeared to replace Ginny’s just emptied first one. Harry pulled his wand, summoned his books and slouched far back to read.

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“Maybe you should go tell your dad that my guard is late,” Harry said after a while.

Ginny considered this suggestion. “Why don’t we just send an owl through the Floo?”

“No owls around at the moment,” Harry stated a bit stiffly.

“Boy, you are just a cheery bundle of gnome dancing this evening, aren’t you? I didn’t notice that earlier while you were sitting in the shadow of She-Who-Must-Not-Speak-In-Complete-Sentences.” When Harry expressed some chagrin at his behavior, Ginny said, “We can both go back and tell him.” She stood. “Come on.”

“You know, I may just be too early returning,” Harry said, reluctant to further discuss the issue of his guards in front of Percy, who may still be there.

Ginny settled back and took up her full Butterbeer. “I can wait.”

Harry yearned to point out that he could defeat Voldemort, single-handed, should he choose to return that evening, so he certainly did not need a guard, but he kept silent.

Hornisham arrived shortly after Candide did. She and Ginny were involved immediately in a detailed discussion of Candide’s pregnancy so far. Harry listened in, wondering at this instant connection between the two of them that seemed to spawn from nothing more than that they were both female. Hornisham was a welcome distraction. She gave the correct code word and Ginny departed with a warmer goodbye to Candide than to Harry.

That night, Harry dreamt he was attending Percy and Vespera’s wedding. The tent and the guests were similar to Snape’s wedding and everyone waited anxiously for the bride. She finally arrived, in the form of a black rat, who scampered down the aisle before transforming into a woman in a broad-skirted black dress heaped with layers of torn black lace. Everyone quieted for the ceremony and Harry longed to leap from his flimsy folding chair to shout that something was wrong, that it all had to stop. But he stayed put, stressed dearly by feeling it best he do so.

When Harry turned to his companion to whisper his concerns, he found Snape glaring flinty-eyed at him, in a manner that suggested they shared no history. Harry rose from his chair, collapsing it loudly. The surrounding guests turned in their seats to stare. At the front, the ceremony halted and Percy lifted his nose in the air and turned away.

Harry backed off, finding concerned faces where he least expected it: like upon the Malfoy family. Harry encountered the plastic window on the tent wall with his hand. The breeze snapped the side of the tent against his back, nearly knocking him forward into the nearest chairs.

He was in the wrong place, he realized with a prickly jolt. Heart racing, Harry felt

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along the wall of the tent until he found an opening and slipped through out to the damp darkness. Overhead, leaves clattered ominously, casting water droplets at him. Low clouds blocked the stars. He had to get home, even if he could not remember how he had arrived in this place.

Harry's room snapped into view when a knitting needle prodded him on the leg. Kali made a fuss in her cage and Hornisham shuffled over there and opened it. Harry sat up, groggily worried about his pet's reaction to a stranger, but Hornisham had no difficulty. She gripped the often vicious chimrian confidently in her broad palm, head pressed out between her index and middle finger, wings bundled, tiny legs flailing helplessly.

Harry relaxed and accepted his pet, who immediately crept under the coverlet and disappeared. He rubbed his tender and tired eyes and fell sideways on his pillow, determined to ignore his embarrassment. His guard resumed her usual spot by the hearth, but the clicks of her knitting needles did not return before Harry fell back into swirling sleep.

When Harry awoke the next morning, he found his room empty. He put on his dressing gown and headed downstairs where he found Candide and his guard standing in a silent tableau, clearly interrupted from speaking. With a frown he turned away to get ready for the day.

Harry's determination to ignore his embarrassment mutated into raw determination to get his way as he landed in the Ministry Atrium. He left his guard with a polite "thank you" and a quick bow, and marched upstairs to find Mr. Weasley. This was easy; the department head was in the corridor, talking to Percy and Fudge.

"You're here bright and early, Harry," Mr. Weasley said approvingly.

Harry Occluded his mind before studying anyone closely. "Lots to learn," Harry said sweetly. "Thought I'd get to it."

Mr. Weasley missed the tone and gestured at the training room opposite. "Well, don't let us get in your way."

Harry plopped down at the desk beside Vineet, who was reading to himself alone in the room.

"You're early too," Harry said to start a conversation, which failed. Harry sat straighter. "Hey, I want to check on a friend. Can you come along as a guard?" Harry asked this partly to avoid trouble, but also because he wanted the company. Instinctively, Harry thought Elizabeth would hold together better in Vineet's presence. She had still been quite upset the night of the fight when Harry had gone back to check that her friend was indeed allowing her to stay.

Elizabeth's roommate was just preparing to depart for work when Harry knocked on the door. The door opened before he could even lower his hand to his side. Diane

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smiled upon recognizing him and moved her substantial, skirted self out of the way for the two of them to enter. She scooped up her slim attaché from a chair and said, “I’ll be back sixish, Lizzie.”

Elizabeth stood from the breakfast-strewn table where she was reading official-looking papers. Harry made sure she remembered his fellow apprentice and asked how she was.

“Well enough,” Elizabeth said, accentuating her strained words with a toss of her unstyled hair. “I have to figure out how to pay for term, which starts next week. I’m a little late applying for a loan for Michelmas.”

“You’re going to manage, right?” Harry asked.

Elizabeth threw her arms to the sides. “It’s a problem I wanted to have—figuring out how to do this myself. It’s part of getting away from dad.” Her head bowed, highlighting her more than usually unkempt state.

“Do you want to come to dinner at my house?” Harry asked. “You’re welcome to, you know.”

She smiled wryly. “I appreciate that, Harry. It’s maybe a tad too close to home. Maybe some other time. Don’t worry about me.”

“You’re certain?” Harry asked, not liking the deep shade under her eyes that implied she had not slept well.

Vineet, cutting a serious figure in his dark robes with his arms crossed, stated, “Your friend appears to keep food well at hand.”

Elizabeth smiled for real. “She does that. There’s a small shop’s worth of crisps and sweets stuffed in the cabinets and in the coat cupboard even.”

It made Harry feel better to know she at least could not go hungry, but he wished he could help her more. She glanced at her watch and interrupted his wishing with: “Don’t you have training?”

Harry reluctantly departed, remembering too well a long blur of feeling badly treated by his relatives. He did not manage to corner Mr. Weasley that day, despite numerous attempts. At least that night Tonks came home as a guard, so he was happy enough to put off his determination for another day.

While Harry caught up on assigned readings, Tonks tried out various nail colors and lengths, as well as finger lengths, between perusing the archive of newspapers that Candide allowed to pile up during Snape’s absence. Harry thought that they should talk, but his uncertainty about what he should say, along with nervousness about how strained the conversation may turn, made his readings far more interesting than normal. His re-reading of a chapter on the psychology of obsessive magical animal collecting was interrupted by a three-foot long index finger tweaking him on the nose from across the table.

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“Am I too boring?” Harry asked.

“Well, now that you ask...” Tonks grinned. “Actually wondering when Winky would bring dinner.”

Harry glanced at the clock, surprised to find it so late. “If she’s waiting on it, she thinks Candide will be back in time.” He closed his books and sat back, thinking he might ask for a snack if it went much longer. The section of paper facing him had a photograph of Diagon Alley and a special sale to celebrate the five-hundred year anniversary of Eeylops Emporium.

Little has changed at Eeylops in the last five centuries, the article went. Witches and Wizards has been outfitting their owls, large and small, domestic and exotic, with the best Britain has to offer in feathered pet paraphernalia.

The article sounded far removed from the dark shadow of extortion and organized crime. Harry did not want to see his beloved Diagon Alley damaged in any way. He asked, “That gang is starting to operate on Diagon, aren’t they?”

With a crinkling of paper, Tonks turned the news around to glance at what Harry was referring to. “Durumulna? We think they are trying,” Tonks said, flipping the paper back.

“Durumulna?”

Tonks shifted again behind the paper so that just her spiked hair appeared over the top. “Yeah, that’s what they’re calling themselves.”

“So, someone’s talked to them,” Harry said.

“Someone’s talked to someone who’s talked to them,” Tonks replied.

Tonks stayed for the night and when Harry woke from a dream of crawling over the musty Hogwarts dungeon floor, trying to escape something dreadful, he could never have imagined being so simultaneously glad she was there while also wishing to be alone.

Breathing heavily, Harry clutched his middle and sat hunched over his legs. The cool air from the covers falling away helped wake him up to the reality of his room.

“Harry,” Tonks said, arm slipping around him. “Are you having dreams like this all the time?”

“Not always like this. They’ve all been different.”

“Well, but, you’ve been having a lot of nightmares, haven’t you? What’s going on?”

Harry did not know what was going on. He refused to consider it too closely, especially right now when he should be asleep. Instead he focussed on her hand stroking his back.

“Harry?” she prompted after a while.

“Hm?” he grunted, not wanting to talk.

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“What’s brought on these nightmares?”

Harry shook his head and Tonks let it drop.

“All right. Can’t force you to talk.” She flopped back down on the bed.

Harry remained sitting up, thinking. He wished that he did not need to sleep. And despite wanting not to again that night, could not resist it. He fell asleep over his knees twice before relenting and taking up his pillow again properly.

Harry was facing down Snape, a chiseled, scarred and ruthless looking apparition in coal black, high-collared robes. Harry backed up. The cryptic scent of the dungeon was overlaid by the scent of dried blood and raw fear. Harry did not know what he was doing there; he only knew that he was already tired of running away and of fighting.

Harry’s back met the shelves of colorful potion bottles and bloated creatures floating contorted in green-hued cloudy liquid. In contrast to Harry, who had no idea what he should do, Snape had a confident determination to his predatory approach. Harry’s instincts flailed at the situation; if he could get away, why was he still here?

A long finger, nail stained and chipped, reached out brushed Harry’s cheek. Harry forced himself through the floor... and awoke in the dust of the Dark Plane. His startled fear attracted a crowd of creatures.

Harry raised himself to all fours and slipped back into his bedroom.

“Harry!” Tonks shouted.

“Right here,” Harry said from beside the bed.

“Oh, Merlin! What...” Her head came over the edge, highlighted by the bedside lamp. “You must have fallen out of bed and rolled under it. I couldn’t find you.”

Harry stood and sat on the edge of the bed with his hands on his head. He needed a minute to feel safe again.

“Harry, what are you dreaming about?” Tonks asked.

“It’s too hard to explain,” Harry returned. A knock on the door saved him from trying to.

“Everything all right?” Candide’s uncertain voice came into the room.

Harry insisted it was. Candide hesitated in the doorway adjusting her dressing gown. “Well, it is almost six,” she said. “I’m going to ask Winky for breakfast if you want to join me. Maybe if I get an early start, I can get home early.”

Downstairs, at a bleary-eyed breakfast, Candide had turned business-like. She said to Harry, “I’m owling Severus today, to tell him you’re having nightmares. What are you having nightmares about?”

“He won’t say,” Tonks filled in while Harry pondered an answer.

Defensive and annoyed now, Harry said, “They’re just bad dreams. There’s nothing to say.”

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After Candide departed, Harry said to Tonks, "I need some time to myself for once. Can I meet back up with you at your place in an hour or so?"

Tonks made a face but said, "Yeah. I could stand to clean my flat anyway."

Harry dressed quickly and while still standing in front of his wardrobe, he focussed on a good mental image of the Department of Mysteries. This time the Dark Plane sat in silence. No creatures approached this time because he had no emotion beyond determination.

The Department of Mysteries slid quietly into view. Harry looked around what his adult eyes identified as a workroom. Shelves and work areas alternated along one wall. Harry had a sense of being followed as he took a few steps. He spun, wand ready in the low light, to discover the tank full of tentacled brains. A tentacle rose, dripping, out of the glassy surface. Harry stepped back instinctively and had to turn fast again when he encountered a wheeled chair that creaked when he touched it.

With a huff at himself, Harry lowered his wand. Clearly, he was too jumpy. His personal history with this place aside, it was just another Ministry department. With calmer purpose, Harry walked around and studied the room, stopping when he spotted something familiar among the densely-packed storage shelves. Just sticking out of its felt casing was the half silver cane Harry had picked up at Merton's house. The familiarity of it among the mysterious and sometimes cursed clutter made him smile faintly.

On the far side of the room, Harry turned his head quickly, thinking he heard voices, even early on a Saturday. Cocking his head this way and that, he followed the sound beyond the higher shelves to a rear corridor. Harry hovered in the doorway to the work room and listened. Footsteps approached, making Harry duck fully back inside. Teacups rattled.

"Thank you," Cornelius Fudge's voice said. Then after a pause where footsteps retreated: "As I was saying, and I feel like I have to repeat myself too much of late because no one is listening, the enemy is among us and no one cares one whit about that."

Someone grunted. "I've been keeping an eye on things," Moody's voice said. "But I agree with you in general. There are wizards worth monitoring."

Harry's jaw clenched. At the sound of shuffling footsteps he ducked farther out of the doorway, prepared to slip away completely if need be.

Moody growled, "That room's setting my eye all atwitter, as usual. Perhaps we can meet over in my office?"

"No one can get in or out of this place," Fudge insisted.

"You have a lot of trust in the people who work for you," Moody commented lowly, criticizing.

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Fudge retorted, "I am an excellent judge of character, Alastor. I don't keep people around me who are not absolutely loyal to me."

"No wonder he doesn't like me," Harry muttered under his breath.

"There are problems inside the Ministry," Moody said. "I have my suspicions about that fire that injured Felton, but I can't put my hands on sufficient evidence. I need a little more time. He is going to make a mistake one of these days that I can't overlook for the sake of his family history, and when he does I'll be right there to haul him into prison."

"If you are on about Potter, I have more pressing things to worry about. You said yourself, you talked him in to behaving himself."

Harry scrunched his face up to hear better.

"...I don't have time for these new investigations. Get someone else," Moody said.

"I've asked for more help. But for now you'll have to manage. I offered to assign you an assistant and not only did you flatly refuse you were inexcusably insulting about it." Objects were slid around inside the office. "This is what we're up against. A completely devilish infiltration. Look at this history text Hogwarts is using," Fudge said. "Published in Slovakia. What are we going to do next? Take Potions advice from the Spanish?"

Another grunt from Moody. "I think you and I have a different idea about what the enemy might be doing," he said tiredly.

"But it is all the same," Fudge said. The sound of chairs and books shifting around echoed in the still corridor. "All this foreign influence. Next thing you know magic carpets will be legal again. Then after that foreigners will be moving into England ON them. And try to tell that to the Wizengamot, not to mention Amelia. They just refuse to see it, or Merlin forbid, welcome it. Thank Merlin you are here to help, Alastor, that you understand."

"I'll be keeping an eye on the things that really matter; let's just leave it at that."

Harry set his teeth again and slipped out of the room and back to his own bedroom so that he could Apparate from there, without suspicion, directly to Tonk's flat.

Tonks was drinking tea at the small table, hair wet and scented from a shower. She looked up at him. "How are you doing, Harry?" she asked as if they had not just been together most of the night.

Harry shrugged but since she sounded worried, he sat down beside her and said, "Everything's fine aside from a few bad dreams."

"If you want a distraction, you can shadow me on duty today."

Harry would not be bothered by that at all. "I'd like that."

Tonks sipped her tea. "You may be useful today. I have stake-out and it is usually boring as heck."

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Hogwarts lay in a cloud-bank that roiled by between the hills, filling the gaps and pooling in the valleys. A persistent drizzle stained the walls and towers a gloomy slate grey. Students gathered on the soaked pitch for Ravenclaw Quidditch team selection trials. The stands surrounding the pitch faded in and out of view as they cut into the clouds. A few students hunkered in the stands to cheer on their friends, shaded under waterproof cloaks.

At the sound of claws on the tall, mullioned window, Snape raised his head and waved the lamps in the room up. The noise turned out to be his owl, Franklin. Snape removed the small, un-addressed missive from the owl's leg. It contained just three short lines.

Harry is having nightmares.
He will not discuss them with me.
He knows I am sending you this owl.

Snape gave no indication of surprise as he folded the letter into his pocket, only resignation.



McGonagall's meeting with Hermione had turned into a social call of sorts, the way most of them seemed to. McGonagall was just thinking that they would be more likely to stick to the agenda if she had Professor Snape present at these meetings when Snape himself appeared at the door. He stepped into the office, neck angled forward, hands loosely clasped before him in the shadows of his wide sleeves.

"I need to be absent this evening, possibly until tomorrow."

Treating the announcement as routine, McGonagall said, "Of course, Severus."

Hermione treated it otherwise. "What's the matter with Harry?" she sat straight to ask.

Snape ignored the outburst beyond a small flick of his eyelids. "I have already informed Remus."

McGonagall nodded. Hermione rose to her feet. "Is Harry all right?" she demanded.

Snape glared at her rather than reply, not in the mood to cater to her nosy penchant. "What makes you think this has anything to do with Harry?" he asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"Oh," Hermione uttered and backed up. "Oh, well, I hope Candide is well, then." She twisted her face and said, "But it's Harry, isn't it?"

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Snape rolled his eyes. "You may owl him and ask him about his nightmares yourself, Ms. Granger," he said impatiently.

Hermione rolled her eyes as well. "Nightmares?" She dropped back into her chair. "Harry has always had nightmares," she said dismissively. "But I'll owl him." She made just such a note on the top of the parchment before her, then raised her head as though a meeting would continue as before. With a glance at the two of them standing silent, she collected her papers together and departed with one glance back and her papers barely gathered together in her arms.

"Everything all right, Severus?" McGonagall asked, dropping the professional tone.

For a moment he teetered on the verge of simply departing with a grumble. Instead, he found the need to talk. "This is extraordinarily difficult, this finding the right balance between giving someone space to make mistakes and guiding them too closely."

"You are usually quite good at it. I would not want that role as Head of Slytherin House. It was hard enough with Gryffindor."

"This is different," he said. He tossed his head and paced once. "Or perhaps I am different. I do not know."

"I suspect the latter," she said soberly, but then gave a small smile.

Snape shook his stringy hair forward. "I fear if I try to rein him in, I will lose all influence over him, and I cannot risk that."

"I think you underestimate his feelings for you, Severus. Your low regard for the softer emotions makes you underestimate your position."

Snape considered that. He made a laughing scoff. "This is hardest thing I have ever done, this letting him make his own way with his growing powers when the stakes are so high. My influence is already slipping precariously."

McGonagall steepled her fingers, pressed them to her lips and then propped them before her on the broad desk. "Severus, if I may be so bold... I believe you are too accustomed to managing from a servile position. Harry is not Voldemort. Your roles are the reverse of how you are wont to view them."

"Ah, Minerva, you have come so far," the portrait of Dumbledore said proudly.

"You stay out of this," Snape said.

The portrait chuckled. Snape sighed. "I do not know when I will return," he admitted to the current headmistress.

McGonagall shifted things around on her desk, implying she wished to move onto other things. "Your presence here is appreciated, Severus, but not required." She stopped to stare him down fully. "Take as long as you need."

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As Tonks had warned, the day was rather boring. She and Harry sat in the Leaky Cauldron for half the day, in a position where Tonks could watch the door, and patrolled various wizard business areas around the country for the rest of the day. By evening, Harry's feet hurt, but he hoped the walking and brisk air would help him sleep soundly.

Tonks followed Harry home to wait for his next assigned guard. They had not even settled at the table before Snape swept into the dining room from elsewhere in the house.

"I will take care of the guard duties for the night, Ms. Tonks," he said dismissively with a tiny hand gesture towards the hearth.

Tonks put her hands on her hips. "Do you have the next codeword?"

"No," Snape returned.

"Call Winky in here, so she can vouch for you, then I'll get out of your way."

When that was settled and Tonks had left, Snape re-emerged from the shadows beside the hearth and half-circled Harry. "What is in your dreams?" he asked while staring at a spot on the far wall rather than at Harry. He had a whiff of Hogwarts floating around him, which normally Harry would have found reassuring, but given his dreams, he did not.

"They are just some odd nightmares," Harry said, not wanting to discuss it. "They don't mean anything."

Snape gave his fingertips some attention before saying. "You have studies, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you go do them." It was not a question; it was an order.

Harry slipped by him into the main hall. With his hand on the bannister, he turned, feeling vaguely resentful. "You know, you should be keeping a better eye on Candide," he criticized. "She's working far too hard."

Snape snapped his finger in the direction of the balcony. "Your studies," he repeated, trailing out the "s" at the end.

Harry ducked his head and went upstairs to fetch his books. But when he arrived there he sat on the edge of his bed and sorted them instead, reviewing things he already knew. Flipping through one of the regulations pamphlets made him appreciate how much better he remembered things now than he used to. He was probably as sharp as Hermione was when he first met her and felt such awe in her ability to pack information into her brain.

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Harry tried to come up with the will to start the next chapter in a book on dark wizard psychology, normally a welcome topic, but this author rendered it down into long latin words and boring tables of numbers. A soft knuckle-rap sounded on the doorframe.

“I’m studying,” Harry insisted.

“I can see that,” Snape said gently. “Is there anything you wish to talk about?”

Harry stared at the column of numbers before him showing the percent of magical British folk involved in various kinds of dark wizardry and the frequency with which they engaged in it. Most only tried it once, or so it appeared. He thought about Belinda, hoping whatever she had been involved in, she was out of now. He thought about Elizabeth and wished his vault still seemed limitless so he could help her more. He thought about Tonks, who was more than willing to give him a little space... he just needed to ask for it.

Harry shook his head.

A voice came from farther down the balcony. “Severus, if I’d known you were home, I’d have left earlier. The client insisted on ordering dinner in for us all.” She stepped into view and gave Snape a hug.

Harry turned the page where the next chapter, Dark Magic Recidivism, began.

“Long day. I’m turning in,” Candide said through a yawn and made her good nights.

When they were alone, Harry asked, “Do you have any potion I could use? The ingredients have thinned out here I noticed the other night.”

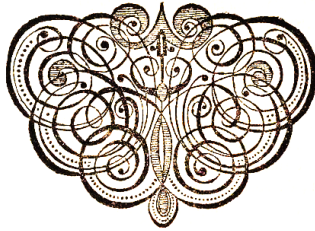
“If your dreams are so minor, then you do not require any potion,” Snape stated slowly. He sounded calculating.

Harry stared at him now, rather than dividing his attention with his book. He tried to gauge him and failed at it. His dreams and his vaguely tired mind were in the way of deciding how to take that last statement, so he gave up on doing so. “I’m studying,” he insisted, and bent back to his book until the doorway emptied of its visitor.

Author’s Notes:

I am, of course, continuing to write. Tomorrow I’m leaving for the south of India for a month. I’m not sure what kind of impact that is going to have on my output. Could go either way... I’ll keep updating the progress bars on my homepage, accessible from the author info link on this site. Next chapter the fun stuff begins again!

CHAPTER FIVETEEN



WHAT MAY DREAMS

“You weren’t a little brusque with Harry, were you?” Candide asked when Snape arrived in the room and had closed the door.

“If he indicates he wants help, I will provide it. I fear he will shut me out if I force it upon him.”

“I don’t know about that,” Candide countered, but she declined to back it up with more argument. “You know; I make more than you anyhow. You could just stay home and keep an eye on him all the time.”

“I...” He stopped and regrouped. “You are going to want to stay home with the child for the first year at least, aren’t you?”

“A year?” she sounded shocked by the notion. “Well, a while, yes. I haven’t thought about how long.” They both fell silently into their own thoughts. “But you could be home to be his guard all the time, then.”

“I did not imagine they would not have found the culprit by now. Which reminds me that I wished to owl Arthur to ask about the progress on the investigation.” He pulled a small sheet of parchment and a quill from the night stand and jotted down his question, bluntly, feeling no need for pleasantries. Franklin responded to a faint whistle from down in the drawing room, where his perch had been moved, and the message was soon off.

Snape returned to sitting on the edge of the bed and made no move to prepare for sleep.

“Severus?” Candide prompted upon noticing Snape still in his lecture robes.

“You have no sense of what his nightmares entail?” he asked.

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“No. And his usual guard, Hornisham, said they woke him several times a night. I wouldn’t expect him to talk to me or her about it. But he wouldn’t open up to Tonks either.”

“She would be the last person he would tell. He has a touch of hero worship for her.”

Candide sat up, keeping the covers wrapped around her in the cooling air. “Harry has what?” she asked with a laugh.

“It has faded somewhat, but I think it is still there.”

Candide said, “Well, that would explain a few things. They aren’t quite right for each other, but Harry is persistent, even in the face of problems he cannot solve.”

“That particular trait comes from a life of fighting evil far greater than himself.”

When Snape still failed to move after many more minutes, Candide asked, “What are you thinking about?”

At her question Snape leaned over to look for something in the bedside table drawer. “Something Minerva said.” He found what he was looking for, the baby monitor, and stood while tossing it once lightly in the air and catching it. “Perhaps I will put her wisdom to the test.”

Harry sat propped up with his pillows, reading from his lap when Snape knocked and entered. He strode over and placed the glass half dome down on the night stand and held his hand on it for longer than necessary. Harry watched this, but turned back to his book without objecting. Snape even hesitated longer beside the bed to hear any complaints, noticing during that time that Harry had not only outgrown his pyjamas but that they had been expanded at least twice with a spell to make them fit. He could tell this because the neat stripes were strangely askew at the shoulders and around the neck. They were just one of many things Harry had outgrown. He could easily be on his own, Snape considered, not for the first time. The thought chilled Snape; it would be impossible to keep a proper eye on him then.

“Well, good night,” Snape intoned. “If you do need to talk, do not hesitate to wake me.” This was a command.

Harry raised his head slightly. “I wouldn’t want to disturb Candide.”

“She’ll understand.”

Harry shrugged. “All right,” he conceded stiffly.

Harry turned down the lamp wick soon after he was left alone, and he was glad to be alone for once. He flipped to his other side, trying not to worry about the dreams that may or may not come. The glass dome glowed and flickered faintly, watching and waiting.

Harry rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. The headlamps of a passing car wavered overhead. He did not want to sleep; he wanted to talk. He wanted to

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know where these odd dreams were coming from. Harry exhaled loudly; maybe the dreams would leave him alone tonight.

Harry was back in the dungeon, some dungeon; it wasn't one he recognized. His body was shutting down from pain through his midsection that kept him from breathing properly. Someone moved on the far side of the room. Harry did not want to look up and find out who it was. Footsteps approached and a hand grabbed hold of his hair. Forced to see his tormentor, Harry met the cold, bright gaze of Lucius Malfoy.

"I put you away," Harry said, confused.

The man laughed. "I don't feel very put away, Mr. Potter. It is, in fact, you who are incarcerated at this moment."

Harry glanced around. The very stones of the place held the stagnant aroma of desperation. "Where is this?"

"Must we go over that again?" Malfoy huffed. "You are in my personal dungeon. Awaiting my master, who will be most pleased to see you, I'm sure." He began to pace and missed Harry rubbing at his scar, which was silent. "I wish to move up in the organization," Malfoy went on, happy to talk about himself. "And I can do it by handing over you. It would be a pleasure to do so even absent reward."

"You're not handing me over to anyone," Harry said.

"You are very tiresome, Mr. Potter," Malfoy complained and raised his wand.

Harry slipped away and after struggling to stand and fend off the creatures attracted to the blood on his clothing, found the strength to slip home again.

Harry came to awareness on a gritty, warped and split floor. He raised his head and took in the half-destroyed main hall of the house. He had missed; he was not home. With substantial effort against unknown injury to his gut, Harry pushed himself to his knees and sat panting in the gloom to think desperately of what to do next. A sound interrupted Harry's panicked thoughts. He turned and found a small glowing thing approaching along the floor. Harry tried to stand, but could not manage it; he was too spent. The approaching figure hesitated and looked up at him with broad, transparent eyes. It was the ghost of small child, perhaps one year old, and it gurgled at him and put up a hand before putting it back down and crawling faster toward him an inch above the floor, leaving the dust undisturbed.

A hand contacted Harry's shoulder, making him jerk and roll to face whatever it was. He snapped awake and, after finding his bedside lamp glaring in his eyes, attempted to roll back on his front and pull his pillow thoroughly over his head. But the light duvet was too tangled around him to even get both arms free. A figure rose up and bent over him and, with strong hands, tugged on the covers binding him. Harry, vexed at treatment better suited to someone much younger, nevertheless lay still until he was freed, because struggling was only drawing the process out longer.

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He rolled away while the duvet was carefully straightened over him and punched his pillow a few times for good measure.

The now cocooning bedcovers eased Harry's energized nerves. He breathed in and out through the familiar scent of his pillow.

"Harry," the expected voice finally came.

Harry grunted a reply but did not move. The bed shifted, indicating that Snape had stood. Harry did not imagine he would give up that easily and, indeed, Snape had not. Kali's cage twanged open and Harry felt her escaping those confines, only to be wrapped up more thoroughly in Snape's hands.

Snape returned to sitting on the edge of the bed with Harry's pet pressed into the crook of his shoulder. The animal had not been sleeping any better than her master, so she happily burrowed into the warmth. Snape ran his knuckles over her furred back and her wings went slack. Harry fell slack too, more deeply into his pillow, pressed there by the connection with his pet.

"What are you dreaming?" came after many quiet minutes.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Snape continued stroking the Chimrian's fur. "I insist," he said. When Harry did not reply, he said, "What was in the dream that you were having just now?"

Harry sighed and rolled over to sit up. He really did not wish to discuss that one. If the child were in this house, then it would have been Snape's child, killed about the age Harry himself had been attacked by Voldemort the first time.

"I was dreaming that I was in the wrong place. And I couldn't escape. Well, I could escape, but only to a place worse than the last. I couldn't find my way home." Harry hoped that answer satisfied his guardian.

Snape stated, "You need not worry about getting lost if you do not leave."

Harry thought over his dreams of the last few nights. "Do you think it's possible I'm seeing other Planes for real in my nightmares?"

"I doubt it."

Harry frowned and rubbed his hands over his scalp. His eyes were sore and it was late, too late to be awake let alone debating such things. "Where are these bad nightmares coming from, then?" he asked.

"Your subconscious, presumably." Snape adjusted Kali down into the crook of his elbow, and folded her wings back. The creature chirped in minor protest but stayed put. "Since you refuse to tell me the contents of them I can not help you with explaining their meaning."

"They seem like other places. Real places," Harry said.

"And they may very well be," Snape said. At Harry's confused expression, Snape explained, "Since every possibility you could imagine could indeed have a Plane of

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its own, there is no distinction between your imagining something and its existence.”

Harry stared at him as he took that in. The lamp flame cast a chiseling light on Snape’s features. Snape gave him a little time, then added, “I do not think the other Planes are the germination of your dreams.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know. It is simply more power than I can imagine you having.”

Harry snorted faintly. “I don’t have that much power. One of my dreams is of Rodgers relentlessly putting me on the floor like he does during training every day, nearly, in the furtherance of building up our spell capacity.”

Kali tried to climb out of Snape’s grasp so he handed her over to Harry, who let her make her way to his shoulder where she stretched and groomed her scarred wings.

“There is more than one kind of power,” Snape pointed out. “How well one does recreating the preponderance of prescribed spells that untold witches and wizards have invented over these last hundreds of years is only one kind, and it is the least interesting kind. Spells for object repair, Muggle befuddlement, and even self-stirring cauldrons aside, the vast majority of Ministry-approved spells are pointless as well as outdated. And any magical person with a wand can do them provided they are coached long enough. That is precisely what Hogwarts was set up to accomplish – rigid standardization of magic. We make a lot of noise about promoting and nurturing magic, but in reality it is enforced mediocrity.”

“But it makes magical people safe-” Harry began.

“Yes. It does that, by providing a structured outlet for magical power that may, if given time left to its own devices, create a more interesting one of its own. How many people do you know who travel in and out of the underworld?” He answered his own question, as if to drive the point home. “Yourself, one shaman that we know of...”

“Vampires can,” Harry said.

“Yes. Because they wield old magic... raw, pre-historic magic. Raw energy transformed and molded at will. The fabric of reality itself parted and twisted to your wishes. That is what has changed your eyes. I suspect most handed that power would be destroyed by it. You channeled powerful raw magic as an infant and it was that occasion I believe which has made you an able vessel for it.” He had been leaning forward to urge his point across, but now clasped his hands and rocked back. “This formulaic magic the rest of us do is dwarfed by what you are capable of if you work out how to put it to functional use.” His gaze shifted to the unlit lamp on the near side of the bed. “You slip between possibilities of fate the way others enter a vault at Gringotts. I watched you carve the very magic out of someone. What greater powers do you want?”

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“Lockhart was already damaged. His magic was loose,” Harry said, trying to excuse what he had done.

“But you could do it again,” Snape stated as an invitation that forced a denial or confirmation.

Harry thought that over. Kali circled his neck, pricking him. He plucked her down to the bedcovers without a glance and held her there. “Probably,” he said because he couldn’t imagine what might stop him from succeeding.

“There is no greater power in the realm of magic, in my opinion. Death is easy to bring about and requires no magic. But rendering someone unmagical is something else entirely.”

“Rodgers can put me on the floor at will,” Harry complained.

“For now, that is. And you can negate his curses later in a manner only the most accomplished Healer can.”

“I suppose,” Harry said, still doubtful.

Snape watched him for a minute as he wrangled his pet, who was keen on taking flight back to her cage now. As if pre-judging Harry’s ongoing thoughts, he said, “Voldemort was very good at maximizing the spells he found, at pushing the edge of what a spell could do – generally the dark edge of it. But he needed the spell to start with and was constantly hunting for forgotten ones. You, on the other hand, do not even need an existing spell as germination. You have an instinct for detecting and shaping the raw energies of magic that is extremely rare, and it classifies you with sorcerers. Your trainer, in a fight with no rules, would stand no chance against you.”

“I wouldn’t do that to him, though, like I did to Voldemort.”

“It does not matter.”

“Yes, it does,” Harry argued. “I’m an Auror; I’m supposed to fight fair.”

“Then work out a way to use your instinctive power to do that. Can your trainer block a Forbidden Curse?”

“No, of course not.”

Snape tilted his head with an expression of see?

“You’re saying I can work out more ways of using... non-formulaic magic against formulaic magic.”

“I don’t see any reason why you cannot. Working without a guide, it may take some careful experimentation to figure out how. I emphasize careful.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Harry asked. “Usually you want me to limit what I’m attempting.”

More resigned, Snape said, “I do not know the source of your nightmares and the only one you would relate involved what I can only interpret as a fear of being bested. Are the others like that?”

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Harry thought about his answer before shaking his head. "A bit, but not exactly."

"What do they involve, would you say?"

"Er, getting myself into trouble with these raw powers."

Snape stood and shook his dressing gown straight. "I am not troubled by your fearing that," he said adamantly. He slipped his hands into his pockets. "Something more you wish to discuss?"

Harry's eyes felt like lead. "No. Thanks though."

Snape departed and Harry released his pet to fly back to her cage, but as soon as she was free, she clambered back up his chest. He clutched her close so she would not claw him when he moved suddenly, and fell back onto his pillow.

Harry slept eventually and more dreams flowed by, murky and anxious, and in the morning, his body resisted waking up and he only went down to breakfast because he was ordered to.

"You can retire early, or nap later even, but come down now," Snape said from the doorway.

Harry suppressed a flush of embarrassment at Candide's sympathetic smile when he arrived at the table. He quickly picked up the Sunday Prophet and flipped it open as a barricade.

An article caught his eye about the Goblins threatening exactly what he had overheard Tonks mention: that increased security may be necessary and everyone should be prepared to be subjected to it next time they wish to visit their vault. The bank security staff may institute a gauntlet of anti-illusory spells and forced potion antidote consumption should a customer be deemed to be behaving suspiciously or has set off the nose of the bank's newly trained bloodhound rats. The new procedures are expected to result in an additional two hour delay in servicing vault access requests.

The interviewed Goblin stated that these procedures were necessary to sort out those being cheated by others from those seeking to cheat the bank directly. The article went on to say that lines at the bank were expected to be extremely long Monday morning as witches and wizards attempted to set themselves up ahead of any increased inconveniences.

The next article, buried under a column of adverts showing the latest mufflers and muffs for winter, also peaked Harry's interest. It read simply: Ministry Totem and Potion Technician G. Felton is still recovering in hospital from injuries sustained in an unspecified magical accident at his home. The Minister for Magic today stated that the Crack Magical Reversal Squad dispatched was successful in keeping the suspicious nature of the fire secret from the Muggle authorities despite the large amount of damage caused.

Harry's mind harkened back to the wet ground and flashing lights of the scene

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that night, feeling a small rush at knowing he was finally getting to be part of what transpired in the official magical world. He put the paper down and Snape asked, "How was your sleep the remainder of the night?"

Harry shrugged. In his peripheral vision he could see the two of them sharing a meaningful look and found himself chafing under its implication. He ate breakfast quickly and excused himself to do his readings.

The morning dragged by slowly. Harry continually thought of places he would rather be, like visiting his friends, but he would need to arrange a guard to follow him and at the moment, he could pretend he did not have a guard at all.

He sent Hedwig off to Elizabeth with a letter and told her that she could use his owl for the day if she needed to send some post. Harry wished he could do more; his friend's situation irked him whenever his mind wandered over to thoughts of it. If he only had more gold.

Harry's thoughts wandered off from the magical weather book open before him and back in time to when Lord Frelander offered to cover any expenses Harry may incur in his apprenticeship. If Harry had taken Frelander up as a patron, he would perhaps have enough money now to help out Elizabeth, at least until she could arrange for loans. He supposed that he could still go to Frelander now and ask, as hard as that would be on his pride.

Harry put his book down and dug into his trunk for some of his good stationery. But as he leaned over to write out a letter in the neatest hand possible, he decided to ask simply for a chance to speak to him about some unspecified assistance, with the notion that once he was standing before the wealthy wizard, the man would have a more difficult time saying no.

Harry had to make an envelope out of another sheet of stationery because there were none nice enough that matched. He then borrowed Candide's company owl, with the stipulation that it follow her to the office because she was to spend the afternoon there and would need him.

Harry took the weather book downstairs and out to the back garden. He had never really thought about different shapes and altitudes of clouds before and what that might mean regarding what the cloud would do. Outside, the sky was a ubiquitous grey and clouds did not so much have shape as represent a layer looming over the world. Harry paged through the illustrations, but did not see any resemblance to what he saw above him now. The breeze fluttered the page corners as he flipped them. The first diagram was the most interesting, it showed an great anvil shape with angled columns of lightning and hail ejecting from it. The sky did not contain anything this threatening, or if it did, it was hidden.

Sirius' bike leaned forlornly against the garden wall under a tarpaulin. Harry

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tucked the book away under his arm and went over to clear the newly grown ivy off it, thinking that he did not get out nearly often enough on it. Pale green vines had grown through the spokes of the wheels. Harry tugged them free, noticing for the first time an emblem on the wheel hub. It was inlaid glass in the shape of a goldfinch in flight and even on such a cloudy day it caught the light and glittered. Harry tugged the tarpaulin back over, secured it, and went back inside.

Harry opened his book again at the dining room table in hopes of lunch, which arrived when Snape and Candide did. Despite his continuing low-level embarrassment, Harry savored the feel of all three of them together.

Candide repeatedly checked the clock before topping her plate up from the heaping plates provided. She and Snape debated minor household issues in a casual manner, very unlike the Dursleys. Harry picked his book back out of his pocket and flipped it open, partly to demonstrate that he really did spend all his time reading.

The book fell open to the page with the sky-anvil. According to the text, the Goblin wars were the primary impetus for the development of weather curses involving hail and tornados. Trouble was, directing the storm at the enemy was not a certainty and surrounding areas or even one's own side were often the victim. Harry rubbed his eyes and yawned, wishing he had slept better. He wondered about the goldfinch emblem and whether it was the symbol of the bike's maker. Harry also wondered that he had never noticed it before.

Candide stood hurriedly before lunch was finished, Accioed her cloak from the entryway, and gathered her things from beside the hearth.

"I'll remain another night," Snape said in reply to a question from her, making Harry glance up again.

Candide smiled at this news and insisted she would only be absent a few hours, at most.

Harry put the book aside and stared at his lunch, at the chunks of bread soaking into the dark gravy. It was the oddest thing, Winky had never served yesterday's joint up quite like this before. It was such a small thing, but it loomed large in his sleepy brain.

Snape moved to the window to collect post from an owl, blocking the grey light for a moment before he reclosed the sash and moved away again. With a slash of a short knife from the mantel, he opened the envelope, then paced slowly to read it. Harry watched him do this with a dull, but building sense of unease. Snape stopped before the mantel and rested his letter-laden hand upon it and continued to read with his other hand propped on his hip.

Snape looked normal enough. Harry recognized the robes he was wearing with their minimalist decorative stitching on the sleeve and down the back. Snape folded

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the letter and took the seat across from Harry, the one Candide had just vacated. Harry felt cold and empty and unable to cope with the notion that was taking hold of him.

He stared at Snape while his guardian tucked the letter away in his pocket and, finally noting Harry's attention, stared back. Harry consciously breathed in, glanced around the room, then back at Snape, who now had the slightest rise to one brow.

"What if I'm not in the right place?" Harry asked because it was ready to burst out of him, not because it was the wisest thing to say at that moment.

"You are in the right place," Snape said with a quiet confidence that indicated he was ready and waiting to say it.

Harry opened his mouth but required a second attempt to form his thoughts before saying, "You've already thought of this."

Snape dropped his gaze and sat back, eyes hooded. "Yes."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Harry demanded, quickly getting upset. He propped his hands on the table, as though ready to launch himself somewhere.

"And distress you in this manner? Whatever for?"

Harry pulled his hands back. "I..." He swallowed hard.

Snape said, "I do truly believe you are in the right place."

"Of course you would think that," Harry said without really thinking it through.

"Why would I think that?" Snape challenged.

"Well..." But Harry did not have a good reason; it was just gut instinct made him say that. Many little things in the last week now looked off in retrospect. His heart rate sped up as his mind latched onto each in turn.

Snape sat back more comfortably, in contrast to Harry's elevating anxiety, and said, "Do you want to know why I think you are in the right place?"

"Yes, please," Harry said, desperately wanting to be certain when he was so much the opposite that he felt almost paralyzed.

"For starters, I don't believe there can be too many of you with this skill. Yes, there are other Harry Potters, an infinite number of them in fact, but how many of them can do as you do, that is, jump between Planes?"

Harry had not considered that. "I... I don't know," he said, soothed simply by Snape's attentive effort at explaining.

"I expect not many," Snape answered his own question. "A handful perhaps at most. As well, how many would just happened to have left and returned home at exactly the same time as you did?"

"Oh," Harry said, starting to understand. "You're saying... that if I am in the wrong place that another Harry had to have left this place and gone to the wrong

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place, my place and not returned, so that I've taken his place?" Even to Harry that sounded quite the string of long odds.

"That is precisely what I am saying," Snape intoned, sounding pleased. He waited patiently while Harry thought that over. A minute later he said, "I have another... point to make in this regard."

Harry met his gaze and found nothing strange in it, just Snape, as he understood and expected him to be. "What's that?" Harry asked.

"Before being poisoned and accidentally meeting with Headmaster Voldemort, you were not worried that you were in the wrong place, correct? You felt that you were at home?"

"Well, yes, of course," Harry said, uncertain where this was leading.

"But you had left and returned from another Plane once previous to that escapade."

Harry's flesh solidified on his arms in a wave of nervous energy and he held his breath. "That's right. I did," he agreed, remembering his visit to Weaver's End.

Snape hesitated, but finally said, "I did not intend to alarm you with that revelation. I just wished you to recognize that you returned home safely on that occasion as well."

Harry gave that due consideration. He thought about all the things he had done after that in complete ignorance of the possibility that he could be in the wrong world.

"Do you think you returned to the wrong place that time, as well as this most recent time?" Snape asked, with just the faintest, barest whiff of snide.

"No," Harry managed, still thinking things over. "I hadn't thought of it at all. Nothing strange happened to make me wonder. There's been some strange stuff since..."

"If you look for anomalies you are guaranteed to find them. But what caused you to think of it this time?"

Harry gestured at his plate. "The joint was reheated."

"Winky is doing that for Candide. Warm food is more healthful," Snape stated.

Harry stared at the meat juice pooling on his plate, solidifying at the edges into white fat. "Oh." A smile flickered over Snape's lips, prompting Harry to demand, "You think that's funny?"

"I am not by any means amused by your distress. I find it amusing that such a grand philosophical uncertainty about one's very existence could be triggered by a warm plate of food." He uncrossed his arms and sat forward slightly. "I will happily sit here as long as necessary to convince you of my certainty."

Harry bit his lip and stared out at the main hall. "You realized I may be the wrong Harry and you didn't do anything?" he demanded.

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“I realized the possibility and quickly dismissed it. I was certain that I had the right one back. That is all.”

“And you didn’t say anything,” Harry repeated more forcefully.

“No,” Snape agreed.

Harry frowned at the room in general. “Anything else you aren’t telling me?” Harry asked sharply.

Snape matched Harry’s challenging glare. “Several things. In good time I will, perhaps, tell you what they are.”

“What?” Harry asked a little smartly. “When I am old enough to hear them?”

“Age has little to do with it.”

“You’re reminding me of Dumbledore,” Harry criticized, crossing his arms and sitting back. But he could not hold onto his annoyance; the realization that Snape had left him here, alone with his pregnant wife, kept seeping in and melting his peevishness. Snape absolutely would not have done that if he harbored any doubts.

“What if I am not in the right place, though?” Harry quietly asked again. “What if?”

“If you cannot tell the difference, does it matter?”

“Of course it matters,” Harry retorted. “I want to be home.”

“If you cannot tell the difference, it IS home.”

Harry rocked forward and gestured with his arms. “But, what if something is different that I just don’t happen to know about?”

Snape smirked lightly. “You and Schrödinger,” he quipped.

Harry huffed and dropped his head. He pushed his now cold plate an inch forward and it sparkled away.

“I wish you to feel secure with where you are,” Snape said. “And I reiterate: if you do not wish to wonder if you have returned home, do not leave again.”

“I hadn’t planned on leaving again. I didn’t plan on leaving in the first place.”

Harry stubbornly argued further, but eventually grudgingly accepted that he could do nothing that evening about his situation, even if he did decide that things were askew. If he took off in search of a more rightful place, he could easily end up in far less desirable quarters; that he was certain of.

Harry sat in the library, looking through one of the heavier law books for past rulings on weather manipulation. Partly he was curious if he went out and tried some of those spells, would he get into trouble for it. He thought it better to research it himself rather than ask their trainer directly. When Snape came to the door, Harry had lost himself in this task and found it wearisome to return to his earlier anxious state. It was far easier to accept that this was home unless he encountered something truly, hopelessly amiss.

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“How are you doing?” Snape gently asked.

“Fine. I wish you hadn’t asked.”

“Not like me to do so?” Snape airily returned.

“Something like that.”

Lips slightly curled, but with a far more Slytherin smile in his eyes, Snape sat on the leather divan. “I was going to ask if there was anything I could do, but I see now that it would be best to be miserable to you so that you feel better.”

Funny thing was, every time Snape spoke so calmly about the possibility that he may be in the wrong place, it did make Harry feel better. Harry said, “So, you think most of the other Planes are worse ones? Why?”

“Law of averages. You believe things worked out well for you, do you not?”

“I’m not dead, true,” Harry agreed, thinking of his last trip to another Plane where he had not even survived his first full year at Hogwarts.

Snape considered him in depth before saying, “That is your primary criteria for whether your life is working out for you?”

Harry shrugged faintly, then laughed lightly. “This is my life, what could I have changed about it?” He frowned and amended, “I mean, there were some mistakes I could have avoided...”

“It is not just your actions that would invoke change,” Snape said, intent on interrupting. “It is everyone else’s coupled with random chance falling a different way. Cascading differences. Interacting cascades of differences, even.”

“So, are you saying that because this place is so close to what I expect, that is has to be the right place?”

Snape shook his head. “I am tempted to lie and say ”yes,“ but I won’t. There are as likely to be Planes with just a single incidental difference from what you are expecting as there are to be Planes where nothing is the same, where you and I and even Hogwarts do not even exist.”

Harry scratched his head and thought aloud: “I wouldn’t be able to get to those places, because I wouldn’t have anything to focus on.”

Snape clapped his hands down on the divan and stood up. “I do not want to urge you to explore, so I am going to leave that point un-addressed.” He stood with his hair hanging forward, looking at Harry. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

Harry put aside the book he had out. “Maybe we can work on a few spells. I want to try what you said.”

Snape’s hair fell farther forward as he nodded.

Harry quickly hovered the main hall furniture to the side and took up a position before the front wall, as far from the windows as possible. He held his wand out,

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but then lowered it. "Can you cast a spell with very little force on it?" he asked his guardian as he took up an opposing position as though to duel.

Snape raised his wand and Harry held his down. "If you are going to leave yourself undefended, then that is all I can do," Snape said. He cast a heat charm at Harry.

Harry felt the spell brush him like a passing sunbeam, then fade. The counter would be so easy through the wand, but how else could he possibly negate it? "How should I do this?" he asked.

"I do not know," Snape said, "How do you block Forbidden Curses?"

"That's easy," Harry said, not noticing Snape's amused reaction to his flippancy. "Those come from the Dark Plane. They open a crack into the underworld. That I can control. I can shut it, even from a distance like this. But a charm, where does that come from?"

"Where does any magic come from?" Snape rhetorically asked.

"Charms don't feel like anything," Harry went on. "Curses I can feel but I can't do anything about the ones that aren't truly dark magic. At least I don't know how."

Snape aimed his wand again. "We'll work with curses then for the moment." He cast a very weak Blasting Curse at Harry, so weak it merely ruffled his robes.

Harry felt the curse being generated but it came from nowhere in particular, just ballooned into being. He felt it ripple around him, both as a force of movement and as a force of magic but the two were hard to separate. "Can you cast something that doesn't flow like that one, so I can sort out what is the magic and what is the result of it?"

Snape angled his head in a kind of nod. "A Ice Spear Curse, perhaps?"

Harry could feel this one two ways more clearly, but that did not help him sort out what to do about it. He signaled for Snape to recast it several times then held up his hand because he was nearly shivering. "This is like learning Legilimency again," he complained. He rubbed his arms vigorously. "You don't know any heating curses, do you?"

Dryly, Snape replied, "There is a sunburn curse, but it will damage your eyes if used repeatedly."

"How about some other one then."

Alternating various weak spells, they worked at it for an hour or so, until Harry was bored with trying. "My readings are starting to sound good again," he said. "I'll try to work out something during drills, while also countering the normal way."

Ginny and Ron came for dinner that evening. They did not expect Snape to still be at home, and Harry had not owed to tell them otherwise. Conversation at the table was a little subdued as a result. Snape himself broke one of the lulls with: "So, Ms. Weasley, still intending to become an Auror?"

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“Yes,” Ginny replied primly. “I will apply again next year.” The way she stated this implied she expected an argument.

“Perhaps you should regularly get together for drills with Harry, in that case,” Snape said. “He roped me into it this afternoon.” He spoke with an coldly factual edge that led Harry to conclude he was up to something.

Ginny’s face brightened. “I’d love to get more practice. My brothers either pull their spells to avoid hurting me, or use some difficult and painful spell I don’t know to get me to want to quit.”

“Drills are just supposed to be easy, repeated practice,” Harry said, “so that you can react on instinct for the basic attacks and counters.”

“I’d love to get a chance to work on spells with you.”

“Get assigned as my guard in the evenings when Tonks is on duty,” Harry said. “Someone has to be here anyway. Point out to your dad that if he ends up with Vespera as a daughter-in-law, he will need an Auror in the family.”

“Yeah, good idea. I’ll ask dad to do that. I’ve been trying to work my way through the books your fellow apprentice, Aaron, recommended, but Ron usually insists we do something fun instead.” She sounded criticizing, prompting Ron to say, “It’s not like you make a fuss when I do that.”

“I need someone around the house who is also swotting,” Ginny complained moodily.

“I need a guard who is more fun than Hornisham from Control of Magical Creatures,” Harry said, thinking having his friends as guards regularly may make this rule more livable since there was no sign of it being lifted in the near future.

After his friends had departed, Harry turned on his guardian. “What was that about?”

Snape, raised an innocent brow. “What?”

“Contriving to have Ginny over for regular spell practice.”

Snape sipped his sherry and stated, “I thought you wished to work additionally on your alternative curse counter. A great deal of trial and error will be required to work out a method, assuming you can manage it at all.”

Harry set his jaw, but did not accuse him further. He suspected Snape of preferring he be in a relationship with Ginny rather than Tonks. But Snape was playing ignorant and he would not budge from that position once he was in it.

That night, Harry slept without waking from any bad dreams. Snape, doubting the monitor, went to check on him directly, just before dawn, and found him soundly slumbering with the covers undisturbed. A few hours later, Snape prodded Harry awake.

“Huh?” Harry grunted, raising his head out of the delicious depths of his pillow.

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“Since you are doing all right, I was thinking of returning to Hogwarts this morning. Breakfast in the Great Hall is in just a quarter hour.”

Harry cleared his throat and pushed himself to a sitting position. “Yeah,” he muttered, still waking up. “If you need to go back. I’m fine.” Indeed, he had slept through the night for the first time in a week. He studied Snape, studying him back. “I mean, it’s not like we don’t prefer having you around.”

“Hm,” Snape muttered.

“Look at Candide’s reaction when she found you home,” Harry pointed out.

Snape straightened. “I’ve been meaning to talk to her about that.”

Harry punched him on the leg. “Severus,” he chastised him, despite suspecting him of making a joke. “You should be taking better care of her.”

“She insists all is well,” Snape said, clearly closing the topic.

“She works far too hard. And it’s only getting worse. You need to tell her to cut back.”

“I have done so,” Snape informed him. “She is rather conscientious about doing her job well, for which I commend her, even as tedious as I would personally find her activities to be.”

“As opposed to brewing, which is just about the same level of excitement.”

“Accounting forms rarely blow up in your face and burn your house down,” Snape drolly pointed out. “And you will note, I am rarely called to brew any longer.”

“Maybe that explains your newly sunny disposition.”

“You are being sarcastic, I assume,” Snape stated. “Are you meaning to imply that I have been exceptionally unsunny?”

“No...” Harry rubbed his chin. “I don’t know.”

Snape huffed. “How many times in your life have you found things to be different than you believed them to be... found that you were mistaken about some major object or fact?”

“Loads of times,” Harry admitted.

“You will drive yourself mad if you continually assume the worst about ones you encounter from here on out.”

Harry decided to let the topic drop. “Are you going to be home next weekend again?”

“If you wish me to be,” Snape said.

Harry was torn badly between an instinct for independence and strong liking of the times when they were all home together. It felt childish to insist Snape return so soon. Instead, he said, “Halloween is coming up soon. You’ll have to be at school for that because it’s always chaos.” He then added: “I need to plan a party.”

“A small party. Too difficult to guard you at a large one.”

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Harry clasped his hands together. “That’s one nice thing about you being home: I can pretend my life is normal. On that note, who’s replacing you?”

“Ms. Tonks is downstairs, waiting.”

Parts of Harry, hitherto asleep, woke up with a wash of tingles. Harry, thoughts well Occluded, said merely, “Okay,” with what he was proud to believe was not the slightest hint of what use he intended to put the short time to before heading into the Ministry.

Snape started to leave, but paused to say: “Half of what your trainer has over you is psychological. Cease to let him have that easy advantage and I suspect you will do better against him.”

“I don’t think it’s that. He really is...” Harry began.

Snape lifted a finger toward Harry’s nose and said, “See. That precisely.”

“I’ll try.”

Harry did try, but not with much visible success. That week during demonstrations and drills opposite his trainer, he felt he was battling himself as well as the spells. Trying to battle the assumption that he would get beat was a distraction from actually trying to beat him. But his trainer became less grudging with his scant praise, so perhaps Harry was progressing, he thought, as he nursed his always sore wand elbow and returned to his seat.

It was mid-week and Harry had another distraction that day; he had an appointment with Lord Frelander and he still had not figured out exactly how to approach the man, what arguments to use, or even what to say. At the end of the day, Aaron was assigned as his guard, which Harry was pleased by because given his bearing he would make a better-than-average impression on Harry’s hoped-for patron.

“I need to run an errand this afternoon; if you don’t mind,” Harry said to his fellow as they were packing up their things.

“Somewhere we can Apparate to, or will this be shanks mare?” Aaron asked in the attitude of a polite butler with a funny accent.

“We can Apparate,” Harry assured him, smiling at his fellow’s antics.

With Harry handling the traveling, they arrived a moment later at the base of the drive leading to the Frelander estate.

“Ah,” Aaron said. “I’ve been here. Been a long while, though.”

“I was here just once, at night for a dinner party; wasn’t sure I could find it in the daytime,” Harry said, making conversation as they walked between the stone posts and up the gently curving, white gravel path.

“Lawn bowling party, I think it was last,” Aaron said in a bored tone that came out haughty. “Must have been, well, ten years ago; I was still in Hogwarts. That

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was back when my mother attended more than she hosted.” He turned a circle as he walked, taking in the grounds. “Amazing to think, no one to inherit all this.”

Harry decided to keep to himself the fact that he himself could have.

The butler promptly escorted them in and Aaron agreed to wait in the entry hall for Harry to return. Harry followed the slightly stooped and squinting butler through several shuttered rooms into one flooded with light.

“Ah, Mr. Potter, do come in,” Frelander said. He used his cane to rise from a small, white baroque desk and came around to where a pair of long blue couches dominated the floor, surrounded by an army of chairs. He gestured for Harry to take a tall chair whose cushion turned out to be softer than it appeared.

Frelander sat on a couch and set his cane aside. “Well, I expected this visit to have come a year ago, if it was going to occur at all. But, my offer of assistance was open ended and still stands, of course.” He gazed at Harry frankly as he asked, “So, what can I do for you?”

“It isn’t actually for me, the assistance isn’t,” Harry awkwardly began. “What I’m trying to say is, a friend and neighbor of mine, a witch in a Muggle household, has begun to find it difficult to remain at home. She’s attending Oxford now,” Harry rushed in to say, since he felt he was losing his audience. “And she wants to continue that, but it is difficult what with being cut off from her family’s assistance. Well, I would help her myself if I could. I know what it’s like to be stuck in a house that forbids magic, but I don’t have any funds of my own. I thought first of coming to you for money for myself and getting help for her from my adoptive father... but that seemed a bit silly, so I thought I’d come with a direct appeal for her.”

“What is this young lady’s name?”

“Elizabeth Peterson. Her mum’s a witch, but doesn’t practice magic much at the insistence of her husband. They live just down the road in Shrewsthorpe.”

“I assume the daughter did not attend Hogwarts if she gained a place at Oxford.”

“No, she didn’t. But there are loads of magical tutors around. And she does want to learn more than her mother taught her growing up, before her father decided he didn’t like it.”

Frelander stared out the window where leaf-filtered sunlight sparkled. Harry waited patiently while he pondered. Frelander finally said, “Did you come alone, Mr. Potter? I read somewhere that you were always to be under guard.”

“No, I came with a guard. He is waiting in the entry hall.”

Frelander plucked a small wand from his pocket and used it to jerk the thick bell cord in the corner of the room. Far off in the vast house a muted ringing sounded. A servant in white came to the doorway.

“Bring tea, Benjamin, and bring our other guest to join us.” He placed his hands

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on his lap and sitting a little straighter said, “We might as well enjoy a spot while we consider the problem you have brought to us, Mr. Potter.” He sat thoughtfully, until there was a noise near the door. “I have to admit I find your appeal for another to be a tribute to your character, and reinforces that I did not make a mistake in my earlier judgement of you.”

“Mr. Wickem, sir,” the servant announced from the doorway.

Frelander’s head came up faster than expected. “Mr. Wickem,” he repeated, not quite a greeting. “You are here with Mr. Potter?”

Aaron slid over to them, navigating the excessive furniture with practiced ease and gave a bow. “Yes sir. I’m the guard of the moment.” He gestured gallantly back at the doorway. “Though, I’m a little reluctant to interrupt this meeting of the Harry Potter Appreciation Society.”

Frelander colored slightly. “Have a seat, Mr. Wickem.” The statement was not so much welcoming as resigned to being polite.

Crooked grin still in place, Aaron accepted the indicated chair and said lightly, “Not that I doubt I could pass the initiation into such an able society...” He sat back, crossed his arms, but held them formally high on his chest, and winked at Harry. He looked very much in his natural environment. “Knowing Harry, it would involve demonstrable skill at Quidditch and dueling someone evil. I’m certain I could manage, given some time to prepare.” After a beat, he added: “I’m confident of a win as long as it’s a Malfoy I get to duel.”

Tea arrived, just in time, by Harry’s judgement. It came on two large silver trays, one stacked with little sandwiches, the other with biscuits.

“Please.” Frelander indicated they could start with a gesture. With a slight scowl marring his middle-aged brow, Frelander said to Aaron, “I’m a little curious how you came to be assigned as a guard to Mr. Potter.”

“I was drafted. It’s a bit like being assigned to the trenches in France, except it involves more photographers and better beer.”

Harry had learned a bit about his fellow over the last year. One of the things he had learned was that Aaron pulled out his flippant silliness when he was trying to remain aloof. Harry was not as familiar with Lord Frelander, but his growing sense of vague dismay was confirmed when he said, “Strange choice,” with clear disappointment.

Harry took a deep breath and held it. Aaron, did not take this comment too personally, or if he did, he kept it hidden in his move to sit more casually in a chair that resisted it by design.

Harry needed something from Frelander and found himself limited in defensive comments as a result. Very factually and conversationally, he said, “Aaron is in the

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Auror's program with me. We are second-years together."

Freelander froze with his small teacup poised before him. "The Auror's program?" Moving slowly, he took a sip and returned his cup and saucer to the low table between them. "It was my understanding that academic qualifications for that are quite high. You did not even sit for any N.E.W.T.s did you, Mr. Wickem?"

"Not while at school, I didn't," Aaron said, while Harry glanced between them and considered that Freelander had a pretty good memory and kept surprisingly abreast of his bowling party guests. "I didn't feel doing so at the time," Aaron explained. "But I decided it was what I wanted to do. So I hired tutors and kept retaking the admissions examinations until I did well enough to get in."

Freelander seemed be reassessing. "Fine determination on your part."

Airily, Aaron said, "I was bored. I needed something to do besides party every night."

Freelander hefted his teacup again after the servant refilled it. His finger tapped the handle as he composed what to say. "And have you settled down in other ways as well?"

"Ah, no," Aaron admitted, slightly wistful. "I haven't managed to excel at that examination yet."

Freelander considered Aaron for half a minute, before turning back to Harry. "Well, Mr. Potter," he began, sounding less himself. "I think we can make some kind of arrangement. If you don't mind, perhaps we will put your name on it. Structure it as an open fellowship and see what happens long-term."

"Thank you, sir."

Aaron glanced curiously between them, but remained silent between sips of tea and bites of biscuit and prim bites of biscuit with pinkies extended.

On the walk back down the drive, with the sparkling white gravel shifting underfoot, Harry's thoughts moved from pleasure at solving Elizabeth's financial problems to a niggling curiosity about Freelander.

Harry asked, "So, was it a bit odd to you that Lord Freelander remembered that you hadn't tried for your N.E.W.T.s?"

It was a dozen or so steps before Aaron answered. He sunk his hands in his pockets and slumped slightly before replying. "My mum used to be more in his circle when I was in school." The crunching gravel took over again until they reached the gate posts where they stopped. The breeze emerging from the trees felt chilled despite the warm day. "The expectations were so high. Honestly, it's one of the reasons I didn't take my N.E.W.T.s. Everyone expected the world out of me and my friends, and heck, my parents had enough money; it didn't matter what I did."

"Well, but, I'd think you'd want to make your own way. Wouldn't you want to?"

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Aaron lost his grim attitude. “In the end I decided that. It helped that I was attempting something no one, but no one, thought I could do. For the first few years, they thought it was funny, then they thought I was unhealthfully obsessed. Then they decided I wasn’t as much fun at parties anymore. I may have given up on my fourth try except what my father said to me a few weeks before he died. He said, he finally believed that I really could do it – could get an Auror apprenticeship.”

“You’ve never mentioned your dad,” Harry said.

“He was gone a lot when I was growing up. He was on the Continent all the time on business. I thought mum would have more trouble getting along without him, but she’s done fine.”

“Speaking of doing fine, want to try to catch up on readings this afternoon at my place?” Harry asked.

“You mean, actually do the readings for once?” Aaron asked, sounding ambivalent.

Harry grinned. “That’s what I meant.”

“You’re not trying to take advantage of this momentary weakness I’m having because of that little exchange in there, are you?”

“No,” Harry insisted.

Aaron stared off along the high stone wall surrounding the Frelander estate. “Yeah, why not? Let’s do some revising.”

Harry arrived home to find Ginny on the couch in the main hall, chatting with Winky, who stood shyly before the witch, clutching her tea-towel.

“I’m sorry, I lost track of the time, I think,” Harry said.

Ginny stood, eyeing Aaron as she sidled over to them. “No worries. I’m not assigned for another hour, just thought you’d be home early.” And, Harry could see in her gaze, she was hoping to see Aaron.

“Shall we run some drills? I’ll show you a new counter and you can help me work on something I’m trying to figure out.”

“And I shall...?” Aaron asked airily.

“You can read aloud to both of us,” Harry said. “This will be just like Hogwarts again, us all studying together.”

Aaron took up a spot on the couch, opened one of the books from his bag and began flipping through it while the two of them rearranged the remaining furniture off to the side. “Except we were stuck in the dungeon, you got a tower.”

“Are Slytherins always so whingy?” Ginny asked.

“I Am. Not. Whinging,” Aaron stated primly. “I never whinge.” He flipped a few pages more, seeming nervous maybe, which Harry took as a good sign for Ginny. “I go straight to all out fit if you must know. Shall we begin? Chapter Eight: Counters

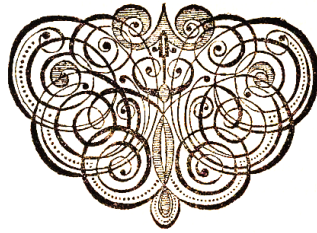
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and Counteractions,” he announced to the room. Then mumbled, “I’m going to need a pub after this.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ginny said, eyes asparkle as she raised her wand to match Harry’s.

Author’s Notes: Something about my workday having no overlap with anyone else’s has freed up some time, surprisingly... Ah, and scenes got shifted around, thought we’d have some action this round but I was wrong. And sorry for the change in format, mid-story; I’m trying to replace the scene breaks with real transitions.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



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Aaron returned from the light-haloed bar through the darkness with more drinks, sloshing some because a mug caught the edge of the high table.

“Thank you for buying another round,” Ginny said.

Harry brushed droplets of beer off his trousers and said, “We should have waited for Thursday to go out, maybe.”

Ginny shot him a look meant to dissuade such talk and Harry subtly held up his hands in surrender. Aaron regained his stool and slid the drinks to each of them over the suddenly less sticky tabletop.

“You should do fine next year,” Aaron said to Ginny, continuing their conversation after clearing his throat. “You understood more of those two chapters I read than I did.”

Ginny shrugged and dropped her gaze.

Aaron again cleared his raspy throat. “Someone else will have to read next time. Though, I’ll admit, I paid attention to every word by reading aloud. That’s why a second beer was essential.” He held his mug up for a casual clacking of glasses. “If we can turn revising and practice into a party, count me in every time.”

After a thirst-quenching lull, Harry asked, “How are things at Weasley Wheezes?”

Ginny replied, “Swimming. They still won’t let me do any mixing. I think now they won’t because they’re afraid later when I’m an Auror I’ll know all the illegal ingredients they’re using, as opposed to the few I catch an eyeful of when accidents happen, which is too often. I think at least one of the upstairs walls is just an illusion put up after one especially bad one.” She sipped her beer and waited for a group

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of Muggles to make their way past their table to the bar, bumping into them in the dimness of the pub. “If Diagon Alley ever burns down, you’ll know where to start the investigation.”

“Such a loyal sister. Makes me glad I have no siblings,” Aaron said.

“You can have a few of my brothers. I have extra. How many do you want?”

“Hm,” Aaron said thoughtfully. “You can keep the twins, and Percy...”

Ginny slumped over her mug. “Figures you’d say that. Ron and Bill work at Gringotts. You’re probably familiar with that place,” she said with a hint of sarcasm. “You probably have two vaults there, or a dedicated wing.”

“Ah, therein lies a tale...” Aaron said accompanied by a large swig of his drink. He sighed and traced his finger through the liquid on the table, which reflected ripples from the fake gas lamp light mounted on the wall beside them. “It will probably hopelessly decrease me in your eyes, but... my mum keeps me on an allowance.”

Ginny laughed. “At least you get an allowance. You’ll eventually inherit something, right?”

Aaron tossed his hand. “Presumably.”

“Your mum must trust you not to off her.”

Aaron stared at her, but said after a sip: “She knows I’m too lazy to do that.”

“Well... how old is she now, your mum?”

“The question is: how old is great-grandmum.”

“Oh dear,” Ginny said with a giggle.

“These are the sort of old ladies that stash gold in old hats, charm them invisible, and hang them from trees in a remote forest somewhere by broomstick. Usually after tipping the cooking sherry. Who knows if they even remember where the money is.”

Harry said, “No wonder you’re working to be gainfully employed.”

“Harry, my dear man, an Auror’s salary is not ‘gainfully employed’. But as a wage-based position is makes everyone my mother luncheons with distinctly uncomfortable. On that point it IS gainful.”

On the way home, Aaron insisted that he would escort Harry home. They both escorted Ginny home first, after much arguing on her part that it was unnecessary. The two of them remained standing, framing the Burrow’s hearth while they waited for Ginny, who arrived presently. Mr. Weasley sat hunched over the dining table on a stool that had been repaired with what could be a bent car axle. “Well, I guess there was no reason to worry about the late night with you two on duty.”

“Good night, dad,” Ginny said disgustedly, as she marched to the stairs. “Thanks for thoroughly embarrassing me.”

“Good night, sir,” Harry said to the accompaniment of Ginny’s pounding footsteps on the staircase.

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“Hm,” Aaron said moments later while pacing around the main hall in Shrewsthorpe. “It’s not even that late.”

“Mr. Weasley gets an early start,” Harry said.

“I didn’t mean that.” Aaron crossed his arms and looked at Harry. “So, you haven’t told me ‘hands off’, I’m wondering if or when I should expect it.”

Harry stopped sorting out which books were Aaron’s from the neat piles Winky had made on the end table. “Why would you expect it?” Harry asked.

“Not keeping her in the wings? She seemed previously to be keeping herself in the wings. I thought for a while tonight that she was trying to make you jealous. I don’t expect I could reliably out-compete you in this arena. I’m grateful I don’t usually have to.”

“I am not keeping her in the wings,” Harry said. “She’s like a younger sister.”

“Oh. That’s worse,” Aaron exclaimed in surprise.

“How so?” Harry said, handing his books to him.

The bedroom door upstairs opened. “Oh, Harry, you’re home,” Candide said.

“Yeah, turned into a late night,” Harry said. “Sorry, are we disturbing you?”

“No, I was waiting up for your guard. Due in a few minutes, isn’t she?”

Harry glanced at the clock. “Yes. How was work?”

“Alright, I should get to sleep, though.”

“Good idea,” Harry gently agreed.

When the door had clicked closed again, Aaron said, “So, as far as you’re concerned I can take Little Miss Weasley out.”

Harry felt a twinge of something, but determined it was just some residual protective instinct. “Don’t hurt her,” he blurted.

“Oh, please. You are so old fashioned. What does that mean?”

“It means,” Harry said, stepping closer, not quite in a manner of facing the other man down. “Don’t promise things you don’t intend to deliver on.”

“I’m very careful not to do that,” Aaron smugly replied.

They stared at each other until Harry said, “That’s all you’re going to hear from me.”

“That just leaves Mr. Weasley.” He paced once. “I forgot about Mr. Weasley.”

“How could you forget him?” Harry asked. “You work for him.”

“He’s just that kind of guy,” Aaron insisted. “You know... forgettable.”



Harry did not make it all the way though the week without another nightmare. After a particularly tough day of working on their power during training, Harry again

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dreamed he was fighting with Rodgers but had no wand to fight back with.

This time Candide woke him. Harry lifted his head from the mound of his pillow and saw Hornisham shuffling out the door to leave them alone. He grudgingly propped his head up on his hand and waited for Candide to say more than his name. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, which made him uncomfortable in the same way Mrs. Weasley did whenever she tried to treat him the same as Ron.

“Do you want me to owl Severus?”

“No,” Harry stated with clipped certainty. “It’s fine.”

She did not move right away, so Harry said, “I’m just dreaming about training. It really isn’t something to worry about.”

“Training gives you nightmares?” she returned, surprised.

Harry paused and considered that perfectly valid question in the private darkness of the room. The floor creaked outside the door where Hornisham waited. “Er...” Harry began, but then wondered if it was something else again that was really bothering him. The other dreams had been his subconscious fear that he was not really home. What could this one mean? It had not gone away like the others.

“Harry?” she prompted, insisting on an answer. “Why would Auror training bother you so. Don’t you do well at it?”

“Ummm,” Harry sat up, propping his back against the headboard. He tiredly scratched his head and said, “In my dream I never seem to have a wand. Or I can’t find my wand. No, I just don’t have it,” he corrected after thinking it over more. Meaning teased at the edge of his sleep-heavy brain, but he could not grasp it.

Candide stood up. “Well, other than bothering you, that doesn’t sound serious. Or should I owl Severus?”

“No, no,” Harry insisted. “I just have to figure it out,” he said, mind far away.

“Well, if you think talking it out will help, let me know.”

“Um, thanks. I’m fine right now.” He added, “Good night,” as she moved to the door and changed with the guard.



Harry decided to wait for Freelanders’ paperwork to be finalized before attempting to explain the funding situation to Elizabeth. Without the proper details at his disposal, Harry worried that he would be unable to work around any pride issues that may crop up. He did not see her again until Halloween when she made an appearance at his party, dressed as a disturbingly accurate hag.

Squinting at the dried-fruit-skinned, hairy-chinned figure that Ginny led into the relatively quiet party, Harry asked, “Who are you?”

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“Elizabeth...” she replied, partly a question.

“Oh,” Harry said. “I didn’t... you look great. Um, well, not great. Well, you know what I mean.”

Tonks had sidled over while Harry struggled. “Nice disguise.”

Elizabeth, wart hairs bobbing, said, “Thanks. Ginny helped a bit.”

“Did she?” Harry said, wondering about that.

At this cue, Ginny, bearing white horse ears and a spiral horn on her forehead, strolled casually away to the drink table. Tonks followed her off with a dubious glance at Harry.

Elizabeth leaned closer, on the side away from where Kali perched on Harry’s shoulder, and said, “I didn’t feel comfortable coming recognizable. It’s too close to home.”

“Yeah,” Harry said. “It’s a disguise worthy of an Auror, really.” He tried to hold an enthusiastic tone, but had trouble. “Want a drink? I could use a refill.”

“What are you supposed to be?” she asked on the way. “A phoenix?”

“A Griffin. I had to give up on the paws in order to open the door and serve drinks. I still have a lion’s tail.” He rotated to show off his Weasley Wizard Wheezes Trusty Twitching Tail.

“Ah,” she sounded unimpressed.

Harry, figuring if she could feel critical of him, that she must be feeling better, led the way to the snacks. “How are you doing?” he asked on the way.

“Well enough. I miss my piano, but it will be a long time before I can get one of my own or a suitable keyboard, even.”

From beside the table, Ginny scanned the room. “Where’s your guard?” she asked knowingly.

Harry replied, “Fetching his date.”

“Oh,” Ginny replied, her chipperness slipping.

Tonks said with a laugh, “Knowing him, it’s someone he met on the underground yesterday morning.”

This did not ease Ginny’s dismay. Harry tried to rub his forehead, forgetting that he wore a beak mask. He straightened his headgear and sought out Hermione, expecting her to be a safe conversation partner.

He found Hermione on the couch, leaning far forward towards Vineet on the opposing couch, hands emerging from her formal robes to be clasped vice-like before her. Harry decided it was past time to check in with her. He sat down beside Vineet when Ron shoved over.

“What are you dressed as?” Harry asked. “No, let me guess: a Hogwarts professor.”

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Hermione pulled out her wand. "The charm keeps wearing off," she said, dismayed. She tapped her chest and her robes turned purple, making the homemade felt W more obvious. "Supposed to be Wizengamot."

"Ah," Harry said, wondering if he sounded like Elizabeth just a minute ago. While he was sitting, Kali took the opportunity to crawl off his shoulder and around the couch to investigate things.

"You would be an exemplary member of the Wizengamot," Vineet stated with grave seriousness.

Hermione blushed and tried to keep her lips straight. "Maybe someday."

Lavender, wearing ragged men's clothes, came over and sat in Ron's lap. Mrs. Norris blinked at them all from her arms.

"And who are you dressed as?" Harry asked.

"Don't ask," Ron insisted at the same instant Lavender chirped, "Filch."

"Well, you do have his cat," Hermione said, straining to sound neutral.

"Mostly I wanted to drive Ron bongo," she happily explained while petting the ratty cat.

This did not stop Mrs. Norris from hissing at Kali, who raised her wings and backed away, also hissing. Kali backed off Harry onto Vineet's shoulder. Harry voiced a warning when Vineet reached a hand to her and she hissed at the Indian instead.

Vineet said, "She is an bloodheart leech, correct?"

"I'm not certain what that is," Harry said at the same time Hermione replied, "Yes."

Extending his hand within the danger zone, Vineet softly said, "Sometimes you must get hurt to prove something, especially to one with such a name." He didn't even flinch when Kali struck out at his hand. Her nose went to work immediately after, scenting out the blood slipping from two slits across the back of his hand.

Hermione cringed and looked away as the Chimrian began licking the blood away. Wounds healed, Vineet moved his hand closer and Kali climbed on, nose sniffing fiercely. She made the rounds of his robes before returning to sleep on Harry's shoulder with a satiated flop of her limbs.

Hermione glanced up at someone behind Harry, "Let me guess, Oliver, right?"

Harry turned and found Aaron, also wearing threadbare clothes, face smeared with coal.

"You got it. My favorite costume. Lets me practice my pickpocketing without trouble."

"You, a pickpocket?" Hermione asked, laughing.

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Aaron held up a familiar, colorful woven purse. “Isn’t this yours?” he asked innocently.

Hermione’s face transformed into insulted. “Yes! Give that back.”

Aaron gallantly bowed to hand it over. Hermione flipped it open and closed, saying, “I had it charmed too!”

“Not very well, Madame Charms Professor. I would suggest working out something combinatorial rather than simply strongly fixed”

Hermione slipped her purse away in her handbag. “I will; believe me.”

Ginny slid quietly over to their group. Harry, thinking to help her out, asked his fellow trainee, “Where’s your date?”

“Over there,” Aaron said, angling his head to the corner of the room.

All eyes turned that way, where a tall woman with towering blond hair stood talking with Kerry Ann. She wore a glittering, chained bodice under her velvet cloak. Ginny took on a posture of defeat and scratched one tall white ear as though it itched her greatly.

Hermione spoke first. “Who’s she dressed as, Bellatrix Lestrange?”

Harry choked down a laugh. “Maybe,” Aaron said. “I expect her teeth are not normally so pointy.”

Bill propped himself up to see better and said in alarm, “Vespera has a sister?”

This led the surrounding Weasleys to laugh uproariously.

Ginny sent one last glance at the pair of women and headed back to the drink table, downing most of a full mug on the way. Harry extricated himself, handed Kali off to Vineet, and followed her over.

She started when she found him behind her. “Hey,” she muttered, refilling her cider.

“You aren’t allowed to get drunk,” Harry pointed out, “You’re one of my guards.”

“You don’t need a guard.” She put her head down and muttered, “Anymore than Prince Wickem there needs another girlfriend.”

Elizabeth slipped closer. “You have your eye on someone?” she asked Ginny.

Ginny glanced at her, but ignored the question. “I should have dressed like you. I see the appeal of not caring to even try.” She stroked her short horn and then her pink-hued silver hair. “Kind of a stupid costume, isn’t it?” she asked.

“I think it’s cute,” Harry said. “You did a very nice job on the ears.” He pried the refilled cider from her fingers, feeling emboldened by the extra time they had been together that week. “Why don’t I drink this one?”

“Yeah,” she said and sighed.

Harry glanced behind him to make sure Aaron was out of range. “It’s him, really, I’ve rarely seen the same girl twice.”

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“That’s a bad sign,” Elizabeth agreed.

“I could have brought a date, too, but didn’t,” Ginny grumpily said. The music increased in volume and couples started to dance, including Aaron and his date.

Elizabeth took Ginny by the elbow. “Come on, let’s dance. Who cares about having a date?”

They moved off to the open area and Harry returned to the couch. He dropped down beside Hermione, whose robes had faded halfway to black again already.

A few minutes later Tonks leaned over Harry’s back, and said, “I’ve got a call. I’m taking Kerry Ann, so make sure Aaron stays as second guard.”

Harry tried hard not to rebel at the notion of needing a minimum of two guards in a crowd.

Hermione answered for him. “We will.”

“Speaking of security. Someone should have frisked Blonde Vespera when she came in,” Bill said, eyeing the full head of hair bobbing over the other dancers.

Ron shuddered. “You go tell her that. I didn’t bring any dragon skin gloves to the party.”

Bill said, “If this were the bank, she’d have been directed through the triple-long identification process.”

“Do you recognize her?” Hermione asked.

Bill and Ron both shook their heads.

After midnight, guests began to leave in earnest. Harry, Hermione, Ginny, Vineet and Ron occupied the couches, tucking into a second round of snacks. Aaron, leading his starry-eyed date by the hand, said, “Well, we’re off.”

“You can’t be. You have to stay,” Harry enjoyed informing him, due to Ginny’s deepening frown at their approach.

Stunned, Aaron echoed, “I have to stay?”

Everyone nodded while Vineet explained, “Tonks informed us of this before departing.”

“Oh.” Aaron extricated his hand. To his date, he said, “Duty calls, I’m afraid.”

In a faint accent, his date said, “You are not coming to the... next party?”

“No, I can’t. I know I agreed we’d split the evening, but I have Ministry duties.”

Her cold grey eyes took in the remaining guests. Her eyes contrasted with her strange beauty which radiated a pushy warmth. “I am supposed to bring... a guest.”

“Yeah, I know, you said, but I can’t,” Aaron insisted. He took her by the arm. “Here, I’ll show you to the Floo.” The others watched them navigate across the floor to the dining room.

“Kind of a strange bird,” Ron said. “Full security scan.”

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Bill said, "She didn't pay any attention to Harry. I was keeping an eye on that." He stood and said, "Well, my girl will be home from the evening shift and is going to wonder where I am, but I wanted to stay until the strangers all left."

Harry took a breath, prepared to yell at him, at all of them, for their care. He clenched his teeth instead, reminding himself that someone had tried twice to kill him, and they only wanted to help, just like he would want to help if the situation were reversed. It only helped a little to remind himself of this. The party was emptying out. Harry wished that Belinda had accepted his invitation. He needed to corner and talk to her again, but resisted because of the emotional strain on her last time. He expected that if she wished to talk, she could easily find him, and short of that, pursuing the issue would be cruel.

Hermione stood as well and gave Harry a hug. "I have to get back too. I only got away because Minerva expected that I could report back on how you are doing, Harry. And I have the night shift ahead, patrolling the grounds after the feast."

"Thanks for coming, especially since it made you miss out on your first Halloween Feast at Hogwarts."

"Oh, as a teacher, skipping the feasts is not a sacrifice, believe me." She gave a surreptitious glance back in the direction Vineet sat, reserved as ever even with Kali draped on his knee, tiny eyes peering up at the room.

"Have a good rest of the evening. And be careful," she commanded Harry before heading to the hearth.

"No one gives me any choice but to be," Harry complained.

She stopped to peck him on the cheek. "Poor Harry. Confined to a boring life, caged like one of Hagrid's creatures."

"Um, yeah," Harry replied. "You're sober enough to get home, right?"



"We are going to try something new today: Double-reverse counters," Rodgers said the next Monday. "This is for defending from behind, hopefully needed because you are in thick of things rather than because you are running away." He gave them each an eyeing to reinforce this opinion, ending with Harry. "Potter, come up here."

Their trainer continued, "Most counters will work in double-reverse, but for the strongest ones you are often relying on the appearance of the spell to control it, even if you don't realize it. So, to cast it blind requires some practice. Let's start with a Titan since that one is just cast with the wand pointing backward. Turn around."

Harry faced the wall, feeling vaguely uneasy about having his back to Rodgers.

"Point your wand back at me."

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Harry hooked his wand in his fingers and hung his hand over his right shoulder.

“Now I’m going to show you why that’s not right. Flibbergibbit!”

Harry felt the curse, cast a block, but the tendrils of the spell took out his feet, and he hit the floor.

As Harry picked himself up on shock-stunned knees, Rodgers commented, “For someone who lives under the same roof as a Death Eater, I’d have expected you to have more experience with getting hit from behind.”

Harry did not immediately have a response to that implied insult to his guardian. Tridant tittered from the back of the room. Harry remained facing his trainer, unable to let the comment slide. “I’ll thank you to not get too personal, sir,” he said.

Rodgers slapped his wand against his leg in annoyance. “Oh, come now, Potter. I’m trying to make you angry so you put a little bit more into those counters of yours. You treated it as routine. Turn around again.”

Biting down on more he wished to say, Harry turned around, wand over his shoulder, despite his face growing hot.

Rodgers said, “His former colleagues were put away long ago. If he couldn’t handle the hit to his reputation, he shouldn’t have kept such poor company.”

Harry hit the floor again but was jarred less this time. It reminded him too much of endless curses from Ginny in the afternoons that he also could not block because he was insisting it could be done without a wand.

“Potter, were you listening to the explanation at all? Sit down and watch for a few rounds, eh?”

Harry, stretching his back, slumped in his chair and watched Kerry Ann tackle a reversed Titan and begin the shifted phase spelling needed on a reversed chrysanthemum, this time with her wand forward. While this went on, a thought vibrated in Harry’s head, trying to coalesce into something substantial. As Aaron changed places with Kerry Ann, Harry began to feel worry, the kind that made his heart feel like clay. Snape’s voice echoed in his memory with a taint of dread, I don’t have much power, Potter. Especially now.

Harry breathed in and out, trying not to let panicked concern overtake his thoughts when he could be called up in a moment to practice something he was having trouble learning. But he could not shake his realization that he had left the other-dimension Snape to manage by himself with no patron to defend him. At the time, that had been expedient and Harry had not thought twice about it until now. He gathered his wits and repeatedly squashed his worry while Aaron got extra help.

Harry got a break from this new concern the next day when something positive distracted him. Freelander owed at the Ministry, requesting that Harry visit the next afternoon to sign some paperwork with the solicitors present. Harry, to spare

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both his patron and his fellow from another visit, thought it best to ask Ginny to accompany him. Vineet followed Harry home to wait for her to arrive for their usual Wednesday practice.

Winky appeared instantly with tea and little chocolate cakes. Vineet silently plucked two from the tray and sat on the couch with them balanced on the palm of his right hand. He stared blankly beyond the wall and the flickering hearth.

“Maybe you should be my guard more often,” Harry said, thinking they did not talk nearly enough and that it was clearly not for the best that Vineet continued to spend his evenings alone.

“I would be honored,” Vineet said.

“Well, don’t go that far...”

Ginny arrived and Harry saw his fellow trainee off with the promise to see to it that he be assigned as Harry’s guard that weekend.

“I’m worried about him,” Harry said to Ginny as they walked up the gravel drive between the ostentatious gates of the Freeland estate. “He’s too quiet and I can’t tell what he’s thinking.” Harry walked with his hands in his pockets, head down and thoughtful. Ginny craned her neck forward and back to better see through the gaps in the high fence.

“Sorry, I’m listening... Merlin’s molars this is one hell of a place.”

“What? Oh, yeah.”

Ginny’s exclamations of astonishment only increased as they were led through room after room laden with elegantly curved, painted wood framing furniture and paintings. She spoke variations on: “This is someone’s house? Jeepers. This place is unreal.” all the way through the house.

The butler was a smart man, before the last door, he took hold of the twin handles and announced, “This is the meeting room.”

Ginny fell quiet and followed Harry inside where a group gathered around a broad but dainty-legged white desk sporting excessive baroque flourishes.

“Mister Potter, please come in.” Freeland gestured at the others encircling the desk and said, “This is Gottfried, Polstar, and Contango. I have retained them to oversee the fund’s formation. Ah, and you have a new guard today, one much easier on the eyes.”

Harry introduced Ginny, who kept herself back from the desk, hands clasped formally behind her back. The solicitors, two men and a woman in identical Muggle suits, bowed or held a hand out. The men eyed Harry with curiosity. The man introduced as Gottfried said, “A pleasure to finally meet you. My grandmum was a witch but that was the end of the line for our family. She talked endlessly about

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Dumbledore and Grindelwald when we were young.” He sounded wistful, which matched his child-like, but balding appearance.

“It’s not necessarily the end of the line,” Harry said. “Some families skip three or four generations.”

“I’ve tried to tell him that,” Frelander said.

Gottfried appeared ambivalent to thoughts of magical offspring. “We’ll see, I guess.”

Frelander moved along with business, leading Harry on a tour through a stack of thick parchments that spelled out minute details of how funds would be allocated and how often and under what circumstances they could be withheld.

“For the time being, I think you can decide yourself who best to assign the fellowship to.” Frelander held up a parchment. “But this lays out the procedure for the formation of a committee to advise on appropriate recipients.”

Harry signed that one first since he understood it and it did not take effect right away. The next one required more time. While he decoded the mile-long strings of clauses, Frelander engaged Ginny in conversation.

“So, Weasley, I recall that name from somewhere.”

“There are quite a few of us,” Ginny admitted. “My brothers run a shop on Diagon Alley. So you may have seen the name there.”

“I’m afraid I don’t get down there nearly as often as I used to. I have to admit, you look a bit delicate for a magical guard, young lady, to my old eyes, that is.”

With a bright cuteness that made a startled Harry lower the densely arcane legal document he held, Ginny replied, “I’m frequently underestimated. It’s one of my best advantages. But if you’d like a résumé, I’ll gladly provide one.”

Harry feared that Frelander may find this out of line and was surprised when the man smiled, crossed his arms and indulged her by saying, “Go ahead; I am curious.”

Harry tried to return to the dry text wallpapering the long sheet before him while Ginny rocked up on her toes and said, “I finished seven O.W.L.s and five N.E.W.T.s. I’ve fought Death Eaters and Voldemort alongside Harry.” She stopped at the exclamations of disbelief and one condescending chuckle from the oldest solicitor.

“No, that’s true,” Harry said while signing the parchment before him without finishing it beyond a quick glance because the long words were all running together and seemed to repeat just to make the document look longer.

Ginny went on, “I rescued Harry from Merton. I won the first Demise of Voldemort Day Dueling competition.”

When she wound down, Harry added, “She passed half the Auror’s testing with flying colors.”

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Ginny fidgeted by rocking up higher on her toes. “That too. Just have to pass the other half now.”

“Well, good to know you are on the case,” Frelander said, sounding the chummiest Harry had ever heard him.

Harry continued through the documents, asking a few questions, mostly to keep up the appearance that he understood everything he was signing. Ginny filled the time by asking about the plentiful wizard paintings surrounding them, which Frelander, shuffled over to discuss. They made their way around the room, Frelander growing more animated as they went.

While the solicitors packed their things into aromatic leather cases and shook hands all around before departing, Frelander insisted Harry and Ginny remain for dinner. Harry may have resisted the invitation if Ginny had not lit up like a candle at it.

Ginny’s eyes glowed as she gazed around the grand dining room where the long, long table barely made an impact on the floor space. The three of them crowded one end of the table and the servants ferried one silver-covered dish after another from far away in the middle of it.

“Beatrice is at her father’s this evening,” Frelander explained of his wife when Harry asked. “When I married her five years ago, she was not occupied at all. That’s why I married her, but she runs three foundations of her own now as well as caring for her father.” Sounding wry, he said, “I seem to be last in line on her schedule.”

“Maybe you should try polygamy,” Harry said without much forethought. Ginny coughed on her soup and started laughing until she managed to stifle it with a napkin.

“Sorry,” she said shyly. “Where’d that come from?” she demanded quietly.

“Oh, Vineet. He said there are different laws in India for different groups, and some wizards there still practice it.”

Ginny stared at him and Harry wondered if she wished she knew some Legilimency. “Do I want to know what this is in reference to?”

“Probably not,” Harry replied. With a glance at their thoughtful host, he said, “Maybe we should find a better topic.” He leaned back as his bowl was exchanged for yet another plate.

“No, young man, that’s all right. Ten years ago, I’d have been appalled, but I’ve grown old enough now to find myself uncaring what anyone else wishes to do with themselves.”

“As long as witches get polyandry too,” Ginny said slyly. “I’d be all for it.”

One course later, she asked, “So, your children have moved on?”

Harry gave a warning shake of his head, but Frelander raised his glass to Harry in a kind of toast, saying, “We’ll see if they’ve all moved on.”

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Harry hurriedly clinked his glass to his host's, confused. He should not have done it, but he was concerned his asking for help may have raised the man's expectations for something Harry did not intend to provide. What he read in Frelander's eyes confused him more. He fell silent and a little panicked through the rest of the meal, which had only two more courses, and passed quickly once conversation lagged.

On the way down the drive late that evening, Ginny sleepily hooked her arm through Harry's and said, "I love being your guard. That was a wonderful dinner." When Harry did not find a comment, she said, "You have an elf and eat like that all the time, I guess."

"Not quite like that. We never have oyster caviar au gratin."

"Pureed on toast points," Ginny added brightly.

Harry laughed.

Ginny added with a grand sigh, "Man, what a way to live."

The lamps on the gate flickered on as they approached it. In the still air, their voices sounded loud. "It could have been mine," Harry said.

"You're joking," Ginny said, the grip on his arm growing almost painful.

"He wanted to adopt me."

"OH. Well, that explains his odd comment."

"It sort of explains his odd comment," Harry said, voice far away.

"What's that mean?"

"I have to think on it," Harry said, not wanting to speak ill of his patron.

Harry put aside his thoughts of Frelander that evening to worry again about the other dimension Snape. It was a dreading, semi-helpless worry, like the kind he had been a constant companion as a child and he did not like it rearing up again.

To distract himself, he went to see Elizabeth, to whom he had paperwork and good news to deliver. Ginny agreed easily to follow him on this task while Hornisham waited at home, since the nearly retired witch could not even remotely approach passing for Muggle.

Elizabeth came to the door, looking tired. Her roommate was installed on the couch, crisps in hand, watching some Muggle program.

"Ah, the boyfriend," Diane said coyly. Elizabeth cringed. And when Ginny stepped in, Diane said, "Oh, never mind."

"Sorry to call so late," Harry said, ignoring the comments. "But I wanted to bring you these things." With a happy anticipation at her reaction, he handed over the scrolls outlining the fellowship. Ginny stepped back to lean on the wall, tactfully out of the way.

Harry went on, "I have a patron, whom I've never asked anything of. He formed a fund for a fellowship for, uh, people like you to study at university." Very quietly,

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he added, "Witches and wizards, you know." Then back in a normal voice: "I get to dole it out to whomever I want."

She looked up from the densely printed parchments with round-eyed surprise. "Are you saying it's for me?"

Harry, feeling unusually nervous, jerked one hand out of his back pocket to gesture at what she held. "It's a fellowship for your studies."

She needed a moment to recover and her eyes went wet as she did. "Harry, that's so sweet of you."

Diane approached from the couch and took the parchments. "What odd paper."

Biting her lip, Elizabeth took them back. "I get to read them first," she said. But she did not open them. Instead, she gave Harry a firm hug. "Thanks. I don't know what to say."

"It's all right. I feel kind of responsible."

She pushed him away to arm's length. "You what?" she asked critically.

Harry held back his smile at her return to normal. "Well, I thought that if I hadn't, I don't know, inspired you to do more, er, things your dad disapproved of..."

"Harry," she said in a lecturing tone. "I was so overdue to get away from home. My only regret is none of it happened sooner." She unrolled the parchments. "Thanks. God, I don't know what to say."

"It's not his money," Diane pointed out.

"She's right," Harry said.

"And Frelander has plenty," Ginny tossed in.

"Yeah, but it was your doing," Elizabeth clarified. She drooped slightly. "I was in such a state yesterday, and now this..."

She sounded teary-eyed, and Harry wanted to hug her again, perhaps more than he really should, so he said, "I have training in the morning; I should go."

"Stop by anytime," Diane said with a knowing wink as she showed them out.

Candide was sitting at the table with Hornisham when they returned. Ginny headed off and Harry took a seat.

"Late evening," Candide observed, which Harry interpreted as her politely asking where he had been. She had been doing that more lately, which Harry suspected was on Snape's orders.

"I had some errands. To Frelander's, where he insisted on dinner, and then to Elizabeth's flat. I wanted to give her the fellowship papers right away."

"I bet she was happy," Candide said.

"Yeah," Harry said, remembering wanting to hold her. He felt vaguely floaty thinking about it.

"What's wrong?" Candide asked.

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Harry glanced at his guard, knitting rhythmically as always. He maybe could use some advice. "Can we talk alone?" he asked, and Hornisham, with a formal wave, shuffled out.

Harry hesitated, fearing voicing something that might make it harder to ignore. "Nothing's wrong exactly."

"You looked like something was wrong."

"I do have a lot on my mind." He fell silent and listened to the fire licking at the wood in the hearth. "Well, maybe you can answer this. How bad is it if you feel something for someone you're not supposed to be feeling anything for?"

"Depends on if you let it get out of hand," Candide said. She sounded about how Harry expected Snape would answering that question.

"Well, but, I'm not letting it do anything. It's just happening." He kept the anger he felt out of his voice since it had nothing to do with her.

"Haven't you ever been in love?"

"Er, I don't know," Harry said, sounding difficult. "Maybe."

"Are you in love with Tonks?" She waved one of the bottles from the wall and poured Harry a sip of sherry.

"I like Tonks a lot," Harry countered, flipping the glass in his fingers with out drinking from it.

"I didn't imply that you didn't. There are two different things at work here."

"You sound like Severus. All analysis. No feelings."

She held back a smile. "You don't sound like you are ready to discuss this. Why don't we do it a month from now when you are."

"What do you think is going to happen between now and then?" Harry asked.

She had returned to the newspaper, but put it down again to say, "Do you feel closer to Tonks now than you did a month ago?"

"No," Harry admitted, feeling adrift.

"Well, then—"

Harry cut her off, defensive. "But I'm not allowed to tell her anything. No wonder she's so suspicious." Harry stopped and stood up. He swallowed the sip of sherry and sighed. "Not a surprise then, is it. Any of it."

"You mean that she doesn't trust you and you are no closer?" At Harry's nod, she said, "Doesn't sound like a surprise to me."

"I should tell her," Harry said.

"You should talk to Severus before you do."

Harry scratched his neck. "He doesn't understand."

"Oh, he does. But he wants to protect you more than he wants to make your love life work out."

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Harry stalked off to bed, feeling grumpy.

Training the next day only reinforced Harry's worries about the Snape he left behind with no protection. Worse yet, he remembered clearly that he himself had demanded that Fudge arrest all the Death Eaters. Maybe he should not have done that. When he next woke in the middle of a dream of trying to fight without a wand, it felt like a hammer pounding the idea that something must be done firmly into his skull.

Harry rolled over in bed, determined to figure out a way to return and check on Snape, and the dream did not wake him again.

During field work with Rodgers on Friday afternoon, they were called to Diagon Alley for a fire at Eeylops Emporium. The Ministry swarmed in mass numbers onto the scene and put out the fire quickly, rescued the soot-dusted owls, as well as masked the smoke as it rose up into Muggle London.

"Send someone to liaison with the Muggles," Mr. Weasley said to Rodgers. "Just in case. In broad daylight like this, it won't go missed." And indeed, Muggle sirens could be heard, echoing over the buildings.

"Find the owner," Mr. Weasley ordered. "I want to talk to him, at the Ministry. Get an Auror posted at his house and bring him in."

Things were still chaotic when Harry was sent home, to his dismay, right before the shop owner was questioned. Harry had been plotting while he trailed his trainer through the confusion, commands and patrol, and felt calm sitting at home on the couch, now that he had a plan of action for the other Snape. He slept well that night for the first time in a long while.

Saturday, while Vineet was there for guard duty and after Candide had departed for work, Harry said, "I have a proposition for you."

Harry stared at Vineet's grim countenance and plowed on, "I have something I need to do that I don't want anyone to know about and you should go see Hermione. So, this is my idea: I'll do my thing and you do yours and we'll meet back here in four hours."

Vineet replied, "That would not be very dutiful of me, leaving you."

"I'm going to be far out of range of whomever is trying to kill me, believe me."

Vineet stared at him. He wavered visibly.

"Vishnu, at least go and talk to Hermione. She's as unhappy as you are. Half her last letter was spent asking about you." Harry could remember being stunned by Hermione's admission of being in love with a married man, but that was when his marriage was working out. It mattered less now than he would have previously imagined it could. In a more just reality they would be free to be with each other. And Hermione's charms would hold for days instead of minutes. "At least talk to

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her.”

“And when I return and you do not, what shall I tell your adoptive father, whom I have no interest in offending?”

He had him; Harry could tell. He was a beaten man and Harry was pained to witness it. Something had to change, and he trusted Hermione to handle his fellow with her considerate care, whatever the result of his visiting. “Tell him I’ve gone to Latvia. He’ll know what that means. But don’t say anything if I’m back here on schedule.”

Vineet thought for a minute but then stood and bowed. “I wish to trust that you know what you are doing. And if I am going to break with rules and traditions I feel less obligation to stick with others. But do, please, be back here when you say. I will be unforgiving with myself later, I am certain, even though I am uncaring right now.”

“I’ll be back here,” Harry assured him. “Go and get yourself straightened out.” He called out to Vineet before he could make it to the Floo in the dining room. “Oh, don’t tell Hermione you left your guard duty. She’d be more dangerous than Severus upon learning that.”

Vineet bowed, and stepped through the door. A moment later the rush of the Floo network sounded and Harry went into motion. Up in his room he used the strongest warming charm he could on his hearth stone, he repeated it until the floor creaked as it expanded. He was confident that it would remain warm for the necessary time. He then put out the fire, so he had more space, knowing that if he put it out Winky would not re-kindle it until he or Snape re-lit it.

Harry took a deep breath. He could not resist what he was planning to do. Once he had fixed his mind on this path, he would go mad with ongoing worry if he tried to drop it again. He would end up like Vineet, hopeless at being unable to take action. He closed his eyes and dropped through the floor.



Harry arrived in the Hogwart’s dungeon and awoke before a fire burning low in the empty Potions classroom. By the time he could move, he ached everywhere from the cold. Initially, the best he could manage was to roll over to warm his other side, and he only really got moving when he smelled what must be his robes smoldering.

With a creak of his spine and a groan Harry rolled to sit up and slapped at his robes where smoke twined off them. Part of him imagined that at least if he caught fire, he would be warm again, but his better sense prevailed... just barely. With ungainly movements, he rose to his feet and swayed before stumbling to the door.

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He checked the corridor and slipped down to Snape's office, but the door was barred with Ministry Department of Law Enforcement Tape. Harry blinked at this with dread blossoming in his chest strongly enough to paralyze him while he adjusted to the notion. He did not move until voices approached. He slipped into the Dark Plane and stood thinking. He could seek out McGonagall for information, but he wanted to avoid the watchful paintings in her tower. He slipped into Hogsmeade instead.

In the alley beside the Hogs Head, Harry applied a disguise, the best he could do quickly with no mirror and given that he could not quite straighten his cold-stiff spine. He applied a long white beard and hair and aged his face, essentially putting on the Dumbledore disguise he had used the previous Halloween. He stroked his face and, deciding it felt all right, headed around to the door of the seedy wizard pub to see what he could learn about recent events here.

Inside the pub a burly, bald man stood wiping down the bar, deep-set eyes nearly hidden under his long eyebrows. He stared at Harry along with everyone else. All conversation had stopped when the door opened. Harry limped up to the bar, not needing much fakery to manage this and ordered a butterbeer with a raspy, weak voice.

The bartender laughed mockingly but he fetched a dusty old bottle and opened it with his teeth before plonking it down. Harry tossed two Sickles on the bar, saying, "Use the change to buy a few rags that are only decade old."

Harry picked up his drink and wandered to an empty table, on the way scooping up off the end of the bar what he had come for: a ragged pile of old Daily Prophets.

As he pulled out a chair, nearly unbalancing himself, a smattering of conversation resumed, but before he could sit, Harry had to reach for his wand as his skin prickled with a curse warning. Harry put up a Modulated Block to avoid sending the reflected curse around the room. It had only been a Tripping Curse, but it raised Harry's ire. He disarmed the oversized, hooded man, which brought the man to his drunken feet.

The room's conversations stopped again with a special sound-absorbing kind of silence. Harry tauntingly held out the man's gummy wand with his fingertips as one might a dead rodent. "That was foolish," Harry said, still trying to sound old. The man tossed off his hood, revealing Goyle, Harry's old schoolmate. He had grown a bit in all dimensions, but mostly around the middle. His robes had split at the sides to make room. Harry threw his wand at him and Goyle had to struggle to bend far enough to pick it up.

"Do that again, I'll use it for kindling rather than returning it," Harry snapped.

The conversations resumed immediately this time, attention pointedly redirecting off him. Harry sat down and sorted through the papers, requiring little time to find what he needed because the papers had been left refolded and flattened to the articles

HALLOWEEN FRIENDS

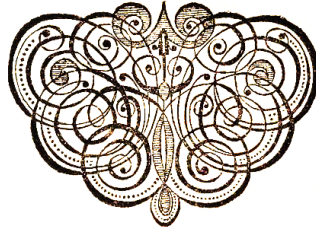
most of interest to the locals. A sequence of grim headlines and pictures showed Snape being investigated, then dragged out of the castle. Harry squinted at the photograph of his actual arrest but in the poor pub light could not see if anyone had come to his defense.

During more flipping through the stack for the most recent issues, Harry learned that Snape's trial was in five days and he was being held in the Ministry dungeon. A sidebar to this article described overdue Ministry plans to finally rebuild Azkaban after so many years of simply cursing those found guilty of minor infractions so they lost the use of a limb for a year, or simply executing those found guilty of anything serious. The sharp reduction in the wizarding population brought about by this policy was growing worrisome, according to the author of the article.

Harry stacked the papers back together, partly to hide what he had been looking at, partly to stall while plotting. He tossed back the remainder of his flat butterbeer and Disapparated away.

Author's Notes: Yes, cruel cut-point, but on the upside, most of 17 is written as a result.

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With wand drawn Harry slipped silently into the Ministry of Magic dungeon. He peered in both directions down the low-ceilinged, dank-aired corridor, at the rows of doors, each with a small barred window set near the top. Harry had to stand on tip-toe, grazing his head on the damp ceiling, to see the whole of the cell inside. He popped up on his toes to look into the nearest two but saw only a white-haired witch and an empty cell. His striding forward to check the next cells was halted by an unearthly chill penetrating his already cold-weary bones. The light dimmed on the crossing corridor ahead of him. Harry closed his eyes and tried to find the Dementor in his mind, but he had long lost the connection to them. Still, he thought he felt some strange presence. Go elsewhere, Harry commanded, hoping that might work.

The approaching darkness held steady. The ice ceased to fork and spread over the wall ahead. Harry quickly checked the next few cells, but retreated when he felt the dismal presence approaching again. Harry ducked around the closest corner where new cells had been installed, resulting in a dungeon far larger than the one he knew in his Plane. The Dementor continued to drift closer. Harry hesitated using a Patronus for fear it would set off an alarm. He tried again with his mind to distract the creature but only encouraged its curiosity, apparently, because it sped up.

Bouncing on his toes as he ran, Harry checked the cells along this wing, putting needed space between himself and clawing unhappiness. He skidded to a halt after peeking in the second-to-last cell on the right, and looked in again. The figure hunched over its knees was painfully familiar. Harry slipped inside via the Dark Plane and stood with his back pressed to the wall beside the door. The occupant of the room

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did not stir. Harry raised his wand, preparing a Patronus Charm as the air grew depressing and sucked at the already sparse light.

The Dementor's skeletal hand drifted between the bars of the little window on the door and grabbed hold of one bar. Harry shivered and had to cover his mouth to keep his teeth from clattering. Hopelessness threatened him. Another skeletal hand wrapped around another bar, but the Dementor itself could not enter the cell, apparently, because it approached no more than that. Closing his eyes, Harry found warmth inside his memories. The warmth of being wrapped up in a blissful blanket and kept safe.

Harry opened his eyes. The Dementor still grasped the bars, but the terrible unhappiness had loosed its hold on him. He relaxed a little and studied Snape, his attention caught by one hand twitching where it hung off the stone bench. It was unlikely that he slept deeply because he sat slouched awkwardly, head resting partly on his own propped up knees and partly on the wall. The position did not look at all comfortable. His hair stuck up in strange directions, accentuating his odd pose.

Snape's hand twitched again and he made a small noise of distress. The Dementor rattled the bars and Snape's head jerked. Harry readied a Patronus but tried just a moment more to avoid using it. He closed his eyes and sought out the green world where he had once found the Dementors. Go away, Harry commanded. Feed elsewhere, he insisted, imaging his own hope as a shield in that world where it would go undetected.

One-by-one, the Dementor's long digits released the bars and it retreated, leaving a puff of frozen air drifting in the cell. Relief and warmth flowed into Harry's body.

Harry stepped forward and crouched beside the bench, intending to rest a hand on Snape's shoulder to rouse him, but his hand froze in space halfway there. From this angle Harry could see bruises mottling the side of Snape's face and neck and he could also see that the reason his hair was so matted was it was pressed into shape by dried blood.

Harry swallowed against the sick rising to his throat.

"Severus?" Harry whispered.

Snape jumped, not really asleep, his reaction instantaneous. He squinted at Harry, breath held, but then looked away again, resting his head on his knee. Harry blinked in confusion at being ignored. After a glance behind him and careful listening for any approach, Harry asked, "Who did this to you?"

Still no response.

"Severus?"

Harry shifted his feet where he crouched, thought of only one possibility for being ignored, and said, "I'm not a hallucination."

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Snape raised his marred and bloodied head but did not look over, just stared straight at something to the right of the cell door.

Mood fuelled by relief that he had come to this place, Harry continued more amiably, "I'm quite certain hallucinations don't ever bring up the topic of whether or not they are, in fact, hallucinations."

Snape's head turned a quarter of the way in Harry's direction. This showed off the laceration to his scalp that had bled so copiously.

Harry again: "The Ministry must be a corrupt wreck to let this happen. Why did they do this to you?"

Snape swallowed hard in preparation for talking. "I told them. They wanted to know where the Dark Lord was. I told them," he repeated in a litany. His shoulder spasmed. "If this is a trick... it does not matter. I've told them."

Harry placed his hand on Snape's shoulder and felt a tinge of aversion through his arm. "Someone used a Cruciatius on you. Did someone from the Ministry do that?"

Snape did not respond. Harry reached a hand to his neck and felt for the tangled heat of the curse. It was not as bad as he feared, but the curse's tiny tendrils seethed, menacing with the threat of never fully letting go, of growing slowly worse forever. Harry pushed the curse down and cooled the heat of it fighting him, pressed it down and cooled it, repeating this back and forth until he gained ground. Snape's breathing grew shallow and rapid, worrisome, but it could just be a reaction to utter release from agony.

The curse ceased heating and reweaving and Harry dropped his hand. Eyes much clearer, Snape stared at him with the same stunned scrutiny he had the last time Harry had seen him. With slow care, Snape straightened and leaned back against the wall to stare at Harry more easily. His left sleeve had been torn free at the shoulder and hung like a crooked cape at his side. Harry noticed that his left forearm had a red X slashed in it.

Harry took hold of Snape's wrist and touched his wand to each of the wounds to heal them. He did not let go immediately after lowering his wand. Something was vibrating inside of him, something he did not like the feel of. Snape's arm was cursed, but worse than that, it called to something at his core, somewhere just inside his spine. His thumb tingled where it pressed on the cords of Snape's wrist. Harry moved his thumb and the resonance intensified. Harry pushed at it the way he had with the Crucio remnants and Snape's mark flared faint pink before fading to white and disappearing again.

Snape tried to tug his arm away, but Harry held fast.

"Do you regret joining him?" Harry asked.

"Regret?" Snape uttered. "I regret, at this moment, literally everything."

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“You wanted him gone though, didn’t you?” Harry persisted, feeling for the outlines of the cursed Mark under Snape’s skin. Coming here may have been a mistake, if loyalty to Dumbledore was all that had driven Snape’s actions. Harry needed to know. “It’s better with him gone,” Harry prompted.

“Better for everyone but myself,” Snape grumbled. “But yes, better. I make a poor martyr, though.”

“You told me not to give you away. Maybe I should have. Maybe I could have protected you. I could vouch for you now; it’s not too late.” Harry was not certain at all that he could arrange to return for the trial, but something had to be done.

“That would not have worked. Not being associated with you has saved me no small amount of interrogation. They tried to question me about you, but they did not know I had assisted you and I could truthfully tell them that I do not particularly like your family.”

“Or me,” Harry finished for him. Snape’s gaze grew wary. “You don’t have to like me,” Harry assured him. “But you do have to wish you never joined him.”

“How could I not wish that?” Snape snapped hoarsely at him. “There have been a few amenities, certainly, but...” He diverted his eyes. “Such a mistake I made,” he whispered, sounding drained and beaten.

“Don’t make any loud noises,” Harry said and pressed down with his thumb. Snape hissed and his leg flailed in pain but an instant later the skull and snake image on his arm rose up through his skin and, smoking, faded to ash, which immediately smeared. Harry let go.

Snape held his arm up to better peer at it. “They would hardly notice my screaming here,” he murmured. He brushed off the ash and stared some more. Without lowering his arm, Snape asked, “What are you?”

Harry stood and his knees thanked him for it. “I’m part Voldemort, remember?”

Snape flinched at the name and Harry said, “Come now. He’s dead. The real question is what do you want to do?”

Snape sneered at him. “And my options would be?”

“I can vouch for you or I take you away from here. Somewhere far away.”

Snape swayed as much as one sitting propped against a wall could. “You really are a hallucination. I am finally losing my mind.” He swallowed. “If you can take me away from here or, barring my questionable sanity, drive me well enough insane that I do not care that I am still here... I would do nearly anything in my measly, miserable power... for you. But I have nothing.”

“You don’t have to do anything except tell me where you want to go.”

“Damn you, again,” Snape muttered, building to a snarl that transformed his marred face. “Stop giving me hope.”

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A clang echoed in from far away, interrupting Snape's tormented reply. Footsteps approached. Snape reflexively pressed his back fully against the wall, bracing his hands on the stone bench.

"Recognize the footsteps?" Harry asked, thinking belatedly that he recognized them as well.

"One of the Aurors is coming. Right bastard. His miserable, domineering wife torments him all night and he comes in here most days to take it out on me."

Harry pressed himself against the wall beside the door and tapped himself with an Obsfucation Charm. "Let's do this right," Harry said, thinking ahead to freeing Snape as completely as possible. "Convince him to test for your mark."

Keys sounded in the lock and the cords in Snape's thin neck stood out through his pale skin. He only flinched faintly when the lock sparkled and slammed clear, making Harry marvel at his indomitable will.

Rodgers strode in with a cloying swagger to his step. Snape glared at him, unblinking.

"You're looking better today," Rodgers said with mixed feeling.

Snape said, "I'm finally enjoying the many amenities of your fine establishment."

Rodgers laughed cruelly. "We can change that." His wand twitched at his side, and Harry raised his but waited for a real move.

Snape sneered, restricted from fully showing it by the swollen bruises on his face, "Don't you get tired of this?"

"Tired of getting even with your kind. Never. You're a contamination on the wizarding world and need to be dealt with properly, which means without mercy."

"My kind'? And what kind would that be?" Snape asked, pulling forth his annoyed professor voice.

"You are an idiot or think me one."

Snape crossed his arms and raised his chin. "No, really, I'd like to hear you say it."

"The Death Eater kind of evil," Rodgers said, leaning forward and speaking low and slow.

"Oh really. And you are certain I am one, are you?"

This gave Rodgers pause. "Everyone knows it. You-Know-Who made no secret of it."

"You were privy to his memos, then?" Snape asked sarcastically, and Harry had to suppress a snigger.

Angry now, Rodgers said, "It is easy enough to check." He used a shackling spell to jerk Snape's arms forward and hold them there, fixed in mid-air. With no gentleness he rolled Snape's left arm over and stabbed his wand against flesh with a

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Revelatio. Nothing happened so he repeated it, tugging hard enough on Snape's arm to pull him forward off the wall. "It's a trick," Rodgers snarled, stepping back, which canceled the untethered shackling spell.

"Is it?" Snape asked. "I do believe that it is impossible to remove a Mark, is it not?"

Rodgers' shoulders fell and then he whipped his wand up aggressively. "Wait a minute, what happened to the wounds on that arm?" He started to spell something nasty, Harry could feel the cursedness of it. Harry beat him at it, using a whip charm to snag his wand, which sent the half-formed curse sizzling over the walls and ceiling like a firework.

Rodgers spun and leapt bodily at Harry, but Harry had his fist ready and being mostly invisible gave him a huge advantage. He leveled Rodgers with a punch to the jaw.

"Ouch," Harry said, shaking his hand. "Damn that smarts."

Rodgers was rolling to get to his feet. Left handed, Harry put him in a body bind and then tapped himself on the head to remove the Obsfucation.

Rodgers gaped up at Harry as he stepped over to stand above him. "Potter?!" He opened his mouth wide to shout something more, and Harry hit the door with a Silencing charm, then a series of Impenetrable Charms.

Wary, glancing at the door repeatedly from his ungainly position, Rodgers said, "You think that's the only way to initiate an alarm?"

"It'll buy time." Harry said easily, unperturbed. "Funny, regulations 721 through 724 of the Code for Handling Prisoners states that Magical Suppression Barriers shall not be removed from the Ministry Holding Area except in cases of repair or difficult prisoner movement." Harry waved his wand at Rodgers as though taking him to task. "It's your own damn fault I can do that."

Rodgers blinked at him, caught completely off-guard by having rules read at him. He recovered his bluster. "You don't stand a chance, Potter... or whoever you are."

"Oh, I'm Harry Potter," Harry said, bending over him. "See the scar?"

The door rattled.

"He managed an alarm," Snape whispered.

"You're surrounded," Rodgers stated smugly.

Harry went on, "Oh, but what you fail to realize is I'm at my best when things seem bleakest. And I have something to say to you before I go. You talk big about fighting evil, but I have bad news for you." Harry lowered his wand till it touched Rodgers' neck. He definitely had the man's full attention. "You are the evil. You're not an Auror; you're a bully. And if the Ministry is this corrupt there is no hope for it. This man isn't the enemy... you are."

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The door began to glow and sparkle. “Potter...” Snape warned.

Harry raised his hand to him. “Give me your arm.” Snape did and Harry grabbed hold firmly. “Brace yourself.” The door began to fall inward. Harry hit it with a blasting curse and grunts of pain could be heard on the other side of it when it slammed home into place. Harry re-aimed his wand at Rodgers. “You could be more than this. But all you are is part of the problem. At least get a divorce... you’d be happier.”

With that, he pulled the two of them into the Dark Plane.

Snape collapsed when they arrived and Harry thought him dead, the way he went so totally, floppily limp. Heart pounding, and berating himself for not thinking about the strain that would cause, Harry Apparated away from the creatures piling in their direction. He arrived in another area, trying to think quickly. He dropped his burden to the grey, dusty ground and knelt beside him. Snape was breathing, but shallowly, and he was nearly as gray as the dust behind him. Harry did not want to pull Snape through the other side again, worried it would finish him off. He raised his wand and tried a barrier, but it sizzled and cracked. He put his wand away and waited for the creatures to scuttle over, prepared to defend both of them until Snape recovered sufficiently.

Harry did not wait long. The creatures were soon bucking and snarling in a circle about ten feet in diameter. One giant rat-like thing with glistening scales grabbed at Snape’s shoe, and Harry had to snarl at it to get it to let loose.

A stand-off ensued. Harry glared at all of the creatures and they glared, circled and crawled over their fellows in an effort to get as close as possible, yet not too close. Harry relaxed marginally and the creatures slowed. Harry froze, breath held. He relaxed more. The creatures, bent their heads and tried to sulk in closer. Harry turned his head side to side and narrowed his eyes at all of them. “Don’t you dare,” he said. They stepped back slowly and waited, watchful.

Harry sighed. He did not want to take his eyes off the creatures, so he used his hand to shake Snape’s shoulder and failing to get a response to that, to check his breathing. Thinking about how vulnerable he was made the creatures move in closer. Harry glared at them again and they backed off again. He sighed into the stale air and held tight to that feeling of superiority.

Harry did not imagine that he could survive sitting there for ten minutes like that, but he did; he managed a draw with the creatures, which counted as a win. Snape muttered something and Harry commanded, “Keep your eyes closed. Feeling all right?”

“I’ve felt better,” came the faint reply.

Harry decided that would have to be good enough and he Apparated them and

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pulled them through the dust into the only spot he could think of where Snape could have time to recover undisturbed.

A dusting of snow covered cold-stiff grass. Snape blinked in the grey-orange sunlight as he was lifted to kneel on the unyielding grass. "Where the devil are we?" He wrapped his arms around himself as he was released to sway slowly.

Harry moved along the line of huts until he was sure which was which. The snow bore no tracks and no smoke issued from anywhere; the village had been deserted for the season, as he'd hoped. "In here," he said, tossing open the door of Per's hut where Harry had stayed before on his visit to get instruction from the Shaman.

While Snape crawled gingerly inside, Harry fetched wood and quickly cleared the smoke-hole, adjusting the skin over it for the prevailing wind with practiced ease. Inside he ignited a roaring fire with a twitch of his wand. Snape sat with his arms hitched around his knees, looking only slightly better than when Harry had found him. With surprising force bordering on anger, Snape said, "You didn't answer my question."

"We're in Finland, or Norway, er, north of the Arctic Circle anyway."

"That explains the snow and the exceptionally grim sun," he stated, sounding dubious and fatefully bleak.

"I can take you back to the Ministry," Harry threateningly teased.

"Dying here would be preferable."

Harry was running out of time. "Here, take Rodgers' wand. You can hole up here until you've recovered and then go somewhere and start over again."

That notion appeared to be foreign to Snape because he did not react to it. He stared at the wand in great detail before pocketing it.

"You'll have plenty of time to think about it," Harry assured him, his mind coming up with ideas which might work quickly enough for him to get back before his hearthstone cooled and Vineet arrived. "Let me fetch you supplies. Oh, and if you see a wolf, it might be a shaman. In any event, watch out because they go for the hands first."

Harry stood, remaining hunched because of the roof branches, and Snape watched him with a stupefied expression. "I'll be back," Harry assured him.

Harry arrived a quarter-mile from the Burrow, but what he found astonished him. The same basic house was there, but it had been built onto in all directions, including precariously sideways on the first and second floors, and several outbuildings had been added around it. It was nearly a village. A fifteen-foot wrought-iron fence enclosed the place and it sparkled, heavily charmed. Harry walked around to the front gate and looked for a bell pull. He found a Griffin-head knocker instead and used that. From within the ivy growing thickly on the gate an eyeball popped open and peered

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around. A pair of lips appeared next, strangely off to the side rather than below the eyeball. "Who is it?" a voice that could be Mrs. Weasley's asked.

Harry stepped sideways within view of the eyeball. "It's Harry Potter, I – " He did not get to finish his request as the lips let out a cry of surprise. The lips muttered rapidly then fell silent. Harry waited, the breeze blowing his hair around. The eyeball moved again and jerked in surprise and the gate clicked open. Four people approached across the yard as the gate swung wide. Two others came running from elsewhere.

Harry stepped inside a few strides, but given the ivy that slithered to block his path and the way the gnomes crept around with miniature pitchforks, he decided to wait.

He was soon surrounded. "Harry Potter?" Bill asked him in disbelief. The twins slapped him on the back, stiff-armed as though their elbows were unable to bend. Ginny stepped through the pack when it eased. She too whispered his name in a way that tore at Harry for his deception.

Harry quickly said, "I'm sorry I can't stay long. But I need some help."

Mrs. Weasley had arrived, wand out, tied-back hair completely grey. "Out of the way. Out of the way." She gave Harry a quick hug. "Come inside, dear."

Harry wanted to ask where Ron was, but then wondered if he really wanted to know. His question was answered when he came in and found Ron in a floating chair, legs locked straight.

"Cursed, you know," he said, to Harry's staring. Adding: "That incident in the Atrium with the elves... maybe you heard about it?"

Rather than answer, Harry asked, "How are you doing?"

Ron shrugged. "I try not to drive Mum crazy. She's got enough on her hands with Fred and George being in and out of curse-punishment." He was about to ask something else. Harry could see in his friend's eyes and knew that he'd have to make up a lie to answer it. The question ballooned in Ron, painful and laden with the past.

Mrs. Weasley turned Harry around before Ron could say anything. "Bill said you need help and are in a hurry, dear; what is it you need?"

Harry shook himself from the notion of a coldly efficient Molly Weasley. "I need supplies. Food and a warm cloak. Very warm gloves, for flying in the cold. And a broomstick if you can spare it. Doesn't have to be fast so much as reliable."

The room went into motion, clearly accustomed to working in a panic as a group. Harry watched, moving forward when a charmed sack was produced, by joint magic of the stiff-armed twins, for holding everything. Cans and jars went into it until Harry lost count. The evening pot roast went in as well as plates and napkins and even the tablecloth.

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Harry's deception on top of their generosity was nearly killing him. "I don't know how to repay you for this," he said, pain clear in his voice.

"No need," someone snapped fiercely, and others shook their heads in support.

Harry realized how to do it. He reached over to where Ron floated, holding jars of pickled beets that waited to be packed up. He grabbed Ron's shin and felt the curse coarse up sickeningly up his arm. Eyes watering, he pushed the curse away and Ron's leg bent, limp, and he gave a cry of surprise that brought everyone to a halt. Harry un-cursed Ron's other leg, and shook out his prickling hand. Ron jumped down from the chair and grabbed Harry's arm in gratitude.

"Can't be seen like that," Bill pointed out to his brother.

"I don't care. I'll hide in the house."

"Us next?" one of the twins sheepishly asked.

Household uncursed, Harry bundled the lip of the small sack with the twine handed to him and tossed it easily over his shoulder.

"You can't even stay a little while more?" Ginny asked. "We want to hear what happened. We all thought you were dead. What did Dumbledore do? Where have you been?"

Harry peered around their pale, red-framed faces. "I'm sorry. I can't explain, as much as I'd like to. I miss you all terribly but it... it just isn't possible."

"Thanks for getting rid of Ole-He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Mentioned," one of the twins said.

"That was the easy part. All of you have the hard part of cleaning up the Ministry."

"That's for certain," Mrs. Weasley coldly agreed, again surprising Harry.

Harry looked them all over again as he looped the cloak over his arm and took up the battered broomstick. "Thanks. I won't forget you."

A chorus of well-wishing followed Harry to the door. "Take it easy, Potter." "Stop in any time." "Don't let the Trolls eat you."

Harry waved several times as he departed, and waited until he was out of view to disappear.

Back in the Arctic, he quietly set the sack down in the stone-floored kitchen area so as not to awaken Snape, who was curled up, sleeping, looking distressingly half dead. Harry rested the broom in the ceiling of the hut and draped the cloak over Snape, which woke him. He sat up quickly, but then winced severely.

"At the risk of sounding ungrateful... I hope you have food," Snape said through clenched teeth.

Harry reached into the sack and pulled out the tablecloth, placesetting and the roast. "Here. Compliments of the Weasleys."

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Snape had taken up the fork and knife but at this last pronouncement, he stared, eyes glazed, at the food, seeming undone. Something compelled him to move, perhaps primeval hunger and, shakily, he made a jagged slice in the roast. He cleared his throat and said, "I do not think I have ever been brought so low, so humbled, as this moment."

"It's good for you," Harry said. "Builds character."

Snape snorted, but his mouth relaxed as though, minus the bruises, he might have smiled, or at least smirked.

Harry said, "Get better, and move on, somewhere far from England. Forget everything and start over again. Without the Mark no one can prove who you are."

Snape swallowed and cut another generous, juice leeching bite. "Why are you doing this?"

Harry replied, "I have my reasons. You don't need to know them if you are benefiting from them."

Snape took another bite and said, "Benefactors are far more dangerous than enemies. They expect something in return. Enemies just expect you to be yourself."

"I don't want anything from you but that you stay out of trouble so I can focus on what I need to do."

"And what might that be... mastering the Universe?" Snape asked.

"I'm just doing what everyone does. Trying to get by, stay out of trouble, learn some magic. Nothing unusual."

Eating had given Snape his old attitude back. "Why do I find that highly doubtful?"

Harry warned, "This time I'm really not coming back."

"I believed you the last time," Snape said, falling quiet and strained again. "Thank you for lying."

"You're welcome. Just make something out of this second chance, all right? Then we're even."

"Third chance."

"Who's counting?"



Vineet stopped at the base of the steps to Hogwarts castle. The path was familiar from his round of attenuation lessons the previous school year and habit had carried him well until the grass became step.

He was behaving like someone other than himself and rather than finding that alarming, he found it a relief. A gust of wind blew the great front doors against the

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latch, and that felt like a signal. He stepped up and slipped inside, tugging the door closed hard behind him against the weather. In contrast it was sultry inside. A fire burned vigorously in the Entrance Hall hearth. Students sat on the Grand Staircase, one group sharing notes, another play-fighting over something of value.

“Vishnu, is it not?” a familiar voice said, drawing Vineet from ascending the stairs upward.

Vineet turned to McGonagall and bowed formally, hands pressed together.

“Your lessons with Sinistra have not resumed, have they?”

“No, this is a visit,” Vineet said, wondering now if he were breaking school protocol that he had not needed to learn last time. Surely there were rules about visitors, even if no one had mentioned them to him before. Vineet felt dizzy with a remote part of him wishing to be sent away from this place.

She winked at him, dashing the hopes of that last sparkle of righteousness. “It’s not a problem, young man. I do keep things a little more secure here than perhaps the school has historically been. I find as soon as I relax the habit for great care, something transpires to necessitate a return to previous security. But Ministry employees and certainly Auror apprentices are always welcome.” She held back her sleeve to gesture to the stairs. “Please,” she said, sounding eager for him to continue on.

Vineet bowed just with his head this time and mounted the staircase.

McGonagall followed along with him as he travelled through the castle. Beyond the Entrance Hall the corridors held chilly air and he was glad he had not shucked his cloak. McGonagall made slow elegant small talk as they went.

Just before the door to Hermione’s office, when Vineet wished for her to be absent when he knocked, she held out a hand to the door latch and held fast. Quietly, she said, “I’m very glad you’re here.” With that she pushed the latch and slipped away.

The door creaked open an inch and Vineet, reeling from the way the world was conspiring to channel him along this path, knocked on the dense wood of the ajar door.

Hermione’s voice sounded higher pitched than normal as she called that whoever it was could enter. She was working at something with a long quill. She looked up and held still in surprise before putting the quill on the stand beside the inkwell and pushing the sheet away by the edges.

“Hi,” she said.

“I wished to speak with you; if that is possible,” Vineet said, finding refuge in that limited intent.

“Close the door. Come on in,” she said, restraining pleasure behind standard words. She fidgeted but then stood and came around the desk.

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They met in the middle of the room between the two student desks facing her larger one.

"It's good to see you again so soon," she said, pained but with eyes glowing. She glanced around, perhaps for a normal chair to offer, considered the chairs lined up against the wall, then turned away from them. Instead, she simply pulled him down into a kiss.

His wet cloak hung forward over his shoulders, feeling cold and leaden trapped between them. He pulled away long enough to drop it to the floor and wrap her up so he could feel every square inch of warmth where they touched.



Harry sat up when the latent heat of his hearthstone seeped fully into his bones. He rubbed his eyes and glanced around his blessedly quiet and familiar room. His heart ached a bit from seeing Snape in that tortured state, but he had succeeded, and that let him breathe freely. He sat with his back to the dark hearth, forcing himself to pledge to not return there again. This time he truly had done all he could. Everything else would have to take care of itself. He wanted to believe in his own pledge but felt doubt nonetheless.

When Vineet returned in the Floo, Harry, who had arrived with a comfortable fifteen minutes to spare, was lounging on the couch with tea spread on a nearby tray.

"Hungry?" Harry asked his friend.

Vineet shook his head and took the couch opposite. He appeared a little shell shocked but far more relaxed and present than before.

"How did it go?" Harry asked.

"I think we reached an understanding."

"That's good. What was that?"

Vineet hesitated, struggled to explain, then said, "I don't have words for it."

Harry rubbed away his instant grin.

"And your errand?" Vineet asked, drawing outside himself in a sign of improved disposition.

"Good. I'm glad I took care of it. It was almost too late. But it's done now."

Vineet clasped his hands together. "May I ask if it involved anything illegal?"

"No," Harry immediately replied, thinking there were no rules about inter-dimensional travel. But then he thought again about springing a prisoner from the Ministry dungeon. "Well... it depends on whose rules apply."

Vineet said, "I only ask because I wonder how seriously I need to take making up a story in the future."

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“You won’t need to make up a story,” Harry assured him. “I didn’t break any of this Ministry’s rules.”

“Just those of a different Ministry?”

“Something along those lines,” Harry said.

“The Latvian Ministry’s rules, perhaps?”

“I helped out a friend who was in dire straits. That’s all. You’re one to suddenly care about the rules,” Harry finally stopped resisting pointing out.

“I am trying to return to the habit as quickly as possible. I should not have let you convince me to leave you untended. I was weaker than I wished to be when you suggested it. But that is no excuse.”

“Sorry about that. I think I took advantage of you, even if everything worked out.”

Vineet bowed acceptance of Harry’s apology and they fell into other topics. They were still sitting there discussing minor things when Snape arrived home early for dinner.

“Candide hasn’t returned from work,” Harry explained. “We’re just having an easy Saturday here.”

“Are you? Nice to have friends available as guards.” Snape stated this flatly enough to make Harry’s brow furrow. “Any other friends around this afternoon?” Snape asked.

Harry only saw the trap after it had sprung. He considered lying, contriving something with Ginny who would back him up in a pinch but could not withstand any Legilimency. Harry exhaled broadly and said, “No.”

“Mr. Abhayananda, I will take over for the evening; if you would leave us alone.”

Vineet stood and gave a low bow. “It will not happen again.”

“I am most assured of that already,” Snape stated. “On that note, Headmistress McGonagall wanted you to know that you can visit the school anytime and in fact wishes to know if you would like to teach a session on Asian magic.”

Vineet stopped and bowed again before exiting with a clear line of relief to his posture.

Snape stood stock still until he and Harry were alone. “You are not to shake your guard. You are grounded for the week.”

Harry frowned. “What does that entail?”

“It means you will be here in this house unless you have official duties to attend to. No pubs, friends who aren’t assigned guards, or nights at Ms. Tonks’ flat.” Snape flicked his cloak and sat across from Harry. “I fear asking what you were doing.”

“Don’t ask, then,” Harry quipped.

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Snape's brow arched. "At the risk of sounding the bad parent, you were sloppy about covering yourself as well. I was certain to hear that your fellow was at Hogwarts this afternoon. He made no secret of his presence." He sat back, satisfied with this critique. "Have you shaken your guard previously?"

Harry wanted to be truthful where he could. "Once. To sneak into the Department of Mysteries. Tonks let me off for a few hours when I asked. I wanted to see what was going on there."

"Ms. Tonks as well. Goodness, is there no one to rely on at that place?"

Snape stood with a huff and slipped over to the drawing room doorway. "I hope you had plans this evening..."

"You hope I did?" Harry asked, confused.

"Yes," Snape retorted dryly, "So that you must cancel them." He disappeared into the next room.

Harry sighed, feeling bemused by getting into trouble with Snape after saving Snape. But he was loath to admit what he had been doing. Harry called down his owl to send a message to Ron telling him he would miss Sunday dinner at the Burrow. While he sat with quill poised, trying to decide whether to admit he was in trouble, Snape wandered back through.

He stopped and said, "What were you doing that required you to shake your guard?"

"Will it change my punishment if I had a good reason?"

"No."

"Then I'm not telling you." Harry dipped his quill and started to write out that he was in trouble because it was just easier to admit it instead of making something up. He finally looked back up at Snape when the other moved to lean on the back of the other couch, hands gripping tightly. They stared at each other until Harry looked down again at the letter before him. The quill had splotched ink where it rested, so he crossed out the word "trouble" and wrote it out again. Snape did not move, he stood there thinking for over a minute.

"I have a life to live," Harry said, even though this felt like a lie, given that he had used his free time to live someone else's life.

"Only if you survive to live it."

"Oh, come on," Harry complained. "You're acting like I've never been in danger before. Everyone is. I got less protection when I was eleven."

"That is not technically true; you just were unaware of the protection around you. Is that what this is about?"

"No," Harry insisted, shaking his head and abandoning his letter for the moment because he'd splotched it again. "I just have things I need to do sometimes. Why

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can't you just accept that?"

Snape formulated an answer before replying, "Because the possibilities engendered by your power are alarming in their scope."

Harry took a deep breath. "It's still my life," he said softly.

Snape kneaded his fingertips into his forehead in a gesture mimicking the one his alternative self used repeatedly while injured. Harry bit his lip.

"I don't mean to make things hard for you," Harry said, which was the truth, even though it did not change his will any to acknowledge it.



Ginny and Ron came on Sunday in response to his letter, forcing Harry to explain in a low voice that he was grounded.

"How old are you now?" Ron asked.

"It has nothing to do with that. I think I'd get grounded for shaking my guard if I were thirty. I'm afraid you can't stay," he said, when Ginny changed the topic to try to tell him something about the twins' shop.

"That's all right, Ginny's got a date tonight with his highness," Ron teased.

A blush tainted Ginny's cheeks. "It's just to the cinema."

"Aaron finally asked you out?" Harry asked, but was interrupted by Snape clearing his throat from the doorway. Harry's guardian glared at them all, arms crossed. "You have to go," Harry said, shooing his friends off.

When they were gone, he and Snape stared at each other for a few breaths before Snape returned to the main hall, leaving Harry wondering idly if he still needed him, really. In his gut he believed he did, but another voice in his head needled him mockingly that he should not stand for being treated like a child.

That evening, Harry sat in the main hall, taking notes from his books with slow, bored, grudging purpose, stalling by doodling in the margins. He doodled his pets and then the Dark Mark, remembering the ashy image of it as it emerged from the alternative Snape's arm, remembering how it had called to something inside of him. If he could shed this piece of Voldemort, he would need Snape less, it occurred to him. Harry casually slipped that parchment under the next as Snape approached. He turned the page in his book and pretended to resume reading.

"I am returning to Hogwarts now," Snape stated coldly.

"All right."

Snape appeared to relent a little. "Harry..." he began, with more emotion, but faded out and shifted to frustrated. He sat down, hands clasped as though cold.

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“Are you more worried about me than you would be if I didn’t still have part of Voldemort in me?” Harry asked, since it was flitting around in his immediate thoughts.

“That has almost nothing to do with it. I assume by now you are accustomed to living as you have most all your life, with him included. No, what I fear is trouble you do not foresee, and in fact create for yourself out of earnest heroism or simple naïveté.”

Harry thought about his previous day’s foray and said with a touch of sheepishness, “I’m getting better at recovering from those.”

“Practice does help,” Snape stated wryly.

Harry wanted to tell him that he was going to inform Tonks of his powers. That he ached to tell her so she would trust him more. But before he could work himself up to it given the tension they already had, Snape returned to a more pleading attitude and said, “I have to do what I can, Harry, even at the risk of alienating you, which I see I am doing.” Snape rose to his feet and stepped over to rest a hand on Harry’s shoulder for a second before departing with a last goodbye to Candide.

In his absence, Harry sat staring at the doorway to the dining room, wondering again with a prickling chill across his skin if he had again landed somewhere similar but new. This time it was definitely his fault if that had happened. Perhaps every time he left he returned somewhere new. If that was the case, he was lost utterly now. But he could not ask for further reassurance without admitting he had departed once again. Harry shook his head and headed up to his room to take Kali out of her cage.



Ginny sat, happily eating a meal in a white-clad restaurant she could never imagine affording to read the menu of, much less order anything in. Across the neat table and crystal candlesticks, Aaron exhibited his disarming goofy gallantness as they tucked into one course after another.

Aaron gestured at their personal waiter to top up the wine glasses. “I asked Harry for permission to take you out, you know,” he said.

“You what?” Ginny blurted, attracting glances from neighboring tables. The waiter, a true professional, reacted not at all. Ginny ducked her head and said, “Why did you do that?”

“He said you were like a sister,” Aaron teased.

“I don’t need another brother,” Ginny insisted firmly. “Especially not a meddling one.”

RESERVE RESCUE

“Does Harry meddle?” Aaron asked.

Ginny drank a gulp of wine. “I don’t know. Depends on what he said.”

“He said he was fine with it.”

Between sips she muttered, “Yeah, figures.”

Aaron’s eyes glittered in the candlelight. “Oh, I suspected your torch for him was still flickering a little.”

“Ignore it. I try to.”

Aaron, who was drinking far more than his share of the wine, held up his glass. “That’s the spirit.”

They lingered over the second bottle of wine and missed the last film of the evening.

Standing before the cinema, Aaron retook Ginny’s arm and said, “We’ll just go to my place.”

Aaron’s flat was a multi-level, high-ceilinged modern home with tall windows garnished by ivy shaped bars. Despite the copious windows and the November weather, the room was pleasantly warm as Aaron hung their cloaks up.

“Have a seat,” he said.

“Nice place,” she said.

“It’s a trap,” Aaron sighed.

“It is?”

He sat down beside her. “It keeps me in my mother’s clutches.”

“I was thinking the windows reminded me of a bird cage, actually,” she said, hiding her grin.

He peered at the windows in turn. “You think so? You know the decorator my mum hired would be just the type of bloke to make a statement like that.” He sighed and slipped an arm around her. “Well, it’s nice to have company when stuck in a cage.” He bent and kissed her fervently. And when she made a noise of surprise, he leaned back and noticed she was pressed ungainly back onto the piled throw pillows. He said, “We can move to the bedroom where it’s more comfortable.”

“Uh...” she began, putting a hand up while grasping for words.

Aaron straightened, and said, “Oh. Too soon for that, I see.”

She let out a breath and sat up. “Yeah,” she breathed like a huff.

This generated a raised brow. Aaron stood suddenly and said, “Let’s have ice cream instead.”

She managed to say, “You can eat again already?”

Aaron was digging around in the stainless steel kitchen, through the drawers and the freezer. He took out a tub of ice cream and began scooping like a man possessed.

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“Here,” he pushed a bowl over and straightened it neatly before her. “Chocolate sauce?”

“Uh, sure.”

He fetched out a full jar and poured out a dollop.

“More than that,” she said, pushing her bowl closer.

He made the white scoops swim and she said, “Stop. Thanks.” She settled onto one of the tall bar stools and accepted the spoon and ate despite not being hungry.

He put things away and settled on the next stool over, behind his own bowl.

Ginny, mouth half frozen, said, “So, uh, we’re having ice cream instead of... something else.”

Bent over his bowl, he said, “Oh yeah.”

“What’s the problem?” she asked. “You’re just too fast, is all,” she added, blushing against her will.

He cleaned his spoon with his mouth and used it to accentuate his speech by waving it. “There is no such thing as slow enough with a virgin,” he asserted.

“Yeah, there is,” she lightly snapped.

“Not with me. I don’t know what to do,” he said, now sounding almost helpless.

“If you don’t know what to do... how in the world is a virgin supposed to know what to do?”

He fell thoughtful, which he wore well because it was such an unusual expression for him. “You have a point there. But nevertheless.”

She dropped her spoon into her bowl where it rattled around. “Sorry to waste your time.”

Mouth full of white ice cream, he mumblingly said, “I didn’t say that. What makes you say that?”

She dropped her shoulders. “I just assumed.”

He swallowed and cleaned his spoon again by sucking generously on it, then re-located everything to the distant sink with a wave of his wand. “Not at all,” he insisted.

“So,” she said, partly to trip him up, “we can go out again?”

“Yeah. Why not. I had a good time.” He propped his chin on his hand and critically peered at her. “How did you get through school...”

“Don’t ask,” she snapped, but then decided to kvetch. “It’s not like there is a really big pool of possible wizard dates or anything.”

“Hm.” He pondered that. “I’ll admit I find myself extending the acceptable age range as the years pass. So, I guess I’d have to agree. I don’t remember that being a problem at Hogwarts... lack of opportunity, that is.” He sounded debonair as well as teasing.

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He then said, "If you are set, I'll take you home."

She started to go, but paused to say, "Hey, does this have anything to do with my dad?"

"What part?"

"Any of it."

"No."

"Well, that's something."

He presented her with an arm to escort her across the flat. "How about Wednesday we do something? If we knock off afternoon studies early enough we can make the kid's matinée..."

She cocked her arm as though to hit him with her free hand. "You are so in trouble," she threatened.

He chuckled. "Oh, come on," he said. "Lighten up. You'll be happier."

"I'm perfectly light, thank you."

At the hearth, he held out a crystal goblet to take Floo powder from. "Well, this way I can face your father easily. So perhaps it has a tiny bit to do with him."

She dropped her head, dejected. "Hm."

"Didn't you have a nice time?"

She didn't raise her head. "I had a great time." Then still staring at her shoes. "I like being around you."

"But not looking at me..." he teased.

"I'm horribly embarrassed here already... can we go?"



At training on Monday, Harry watched Aaron saunter in and gamely greet everyone. Vineet came in behind him, appearing more his old self, which is to say, unanimated but lacking the sad edge he had been exuding.

"How are you doing?" Harry asked him.

Vineet responded with a simple nod to the side. Rodgers hurried in and set a disorganized pile of books and notes on the front table. His presence sent a chill through Harry.

When he was called up to the front of the room, Harry tried not to show his dislike, but his seriousness generated an immediate comment.

"You don't look happy to be here, Potter," Rodgers said.

"I have a lot on my mind, sir," Harry explained.

"Not in here, you don't. One thing only." He raised his wand and hovered a mirror into place behind Harry. "We're going to try this a little differently today

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since some of you were a little slow last week in picking this up. I'm going to spell you in the mirror and I want you to block the reflection, not the initial casting."

"Only a few spells will work that way," Kerry Ann pointed out.

Rodgers slid his eyes to her. "I am well aware of that. Thank you," he stated tiresomely.

Harry now found their trainer's slightly obnoxious attitude impossible to ignore, rather than just annoying. And between his turns at practice, Harry pondered how different sets of circumstances could bring out different parts of someone's personality. He could easily imagine this Rodgers torturing Snape under the right circumstances, and that made him feel he already had.

"Still grim?" Rodgers teased when Harry came up again.

Harry felt like hitting him with a blasting curse but he did not so much as let his wand twitch in that direction. "Yes sir. This is serious business, isn't it? That's what you always say."

Mollified, Rodgers said, "I do say that. Well, give it another go. Wand up."

At lunchtime, Rodgers pulled Harry back into the room with the words. "Just a second, Potter."

Harry let Tridant slide by him in the doorway and the door swung closed.

Rodgers said, "You act like I offended you somehow. When I say leave it outside, I mean it."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. He avoided the man's gaze, but when the silence dragged on, he glanced up and found eyes more human than he expected.

"Something going on?" Rodgers asked.

Leave it outside. Leave it behind. Harry chanted to himself. It wasn't this man; even if this man seems perfectly capable. "Some stuff. But you're right; I should leave it outside the Ministry."

"Okay, then," Rodgers said. "Just the way you were looking at me back there, like you wanted a real fight."

Harry silently agreed that was true and rubbed his hair around. "Sorry about that."

"I don't mind you getting into the spirit of things, but there is a limit and I've seen that look enough times, but not, I confess, on the face of someone I may have to rely on."

Harry had no interest in explaining. "I'll keep it outside, sir," he insisted. And to himself, he pledged to keep an eye on Rodgers, but for now would stop assuming the worst about him.

"That's fine," Rodgers said. "But as well, if you have something you really need to say, just say it."

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Harry hesitated, but said, "I'd prefer you not get personal."

"Hm." Rodgers tapped his wand on the nearby table, letting it bounce. "If it bothers you so when I harangue you about your adoptive father... I think that's something you need to work on. Not me." He sounded hard as he said this.

Harry did not really want to argue. This was not the real issue, even if it was something that irked him. "I just don't like it when you're cruel," Harry said, aiming closer to the real issue.

"You think the world is always nice? Oh, I forget. To you it may be."

"You must be joking," Harry said, finding new annoyance with the man before him. "Look, we don't come in here and make fun of you and your ex do we?"

This found the mark. Rodgers eyes flared with something volatile. "You aren't in charge. It's not the same."

Harry saw no alternative to continuing. "It IS all the same. Why don't you have more respect for others around you?" Harry dropped his gaze, wanting to drop the whole conversation. This tactic was not going to help anything. "I'm sorry if I'm out of line, sir. I just... think your not being especially considerate is a sign of... something else that may need attention."

"If you aren't hard enough, this world will eat you alive," Rodgers insisted, sounding as hard as anyone Harry had ever heard.

"That's not really true, sir," Harry said, quietly, calmly and insistently. "And I think I have more than enough experience to know if it weren't."

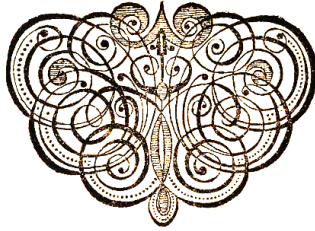
They stared at each other. Rodgers said, "Maybe you're just better than I am, Potter."

Harry replied, "I don't think so, sir. Everything we do is the result of a choice we make."

"Hmf," Rodgers breathed through his nose. With a glance up and down Harry, he said, "Well, it's lunchtime."

Author's Notes: We may just be getting back to a regular 1-2 week schedule. Hopefully.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



SECRETS SMALL AND LARGE

Harry was glad when Candide arrived home at a more normal hour and Hornisham decided to leave them alone and knit in the main hall. Harry wanted Candide's advice. She put her things away and joined him at the table, prompting dinner to sparkle in.

"You're home earlier," Harry said to open the conversation.

"Severus insisted I be."

"Hm," Harry said, forking himself pasta. "Because of me or because of you?"

She smiled faintly. "Probably both, but the excuse was you."

"I didn't get you into trouble did I?" Harry asked, prepared to fire off a sharp owl if she said 'yes'.

"No, more a frustrated exchange about none of us having any time to pay attention to any of the rest of us."

"Hm," Harry murmured, concentrating on eating because he was hungry. The fire, burning higher in the evenings due to the cooling weather, shifted, sending cinders onto the hearthstone.

Once he was no longer famished, Harry quietly said, "I could use some advice, if you can keep a secret."

"I can keep a secret, Harry." She wiped her hand and raised a finger. "Unless it conflicts with one of the house rules."

"Our house has official rules?"

"It has a rule at the moment that you are grounded." She peered at her plate. "It probably has others. But I trust you will not shake your guard again."

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“I don’t know about that,” Harry said.

She glared at him in surprise, then laughed lightly. “At least you’re honest.”

“Honesty is my trouble at the moment. I have a problem with a friend and I don’t know what to tell him.”

“Well, run it by me. I can keep secrets; it’s part of my job to.”

“Well, I suspect something about this friend that he really should know and...”

“You suspect or you know? There’s a world of difference if the issue is a sticky one.”

Harry thought about that as they ate. Filling up fast, Candide pushed her plate away, saying, “I’ll get a snack later. Can’t eat so much at a time this week,” she said, patting her rounding belly.

Dinner faded away and herbal tea arrived in Candide’s place setting. “Want some?” she asked. Harry shook his head as he laid another log on the fire and brushed his hands off before resuming his seat. He said. “I guess I only strongly suspect this thing about this friend.” He shook his head and gave up on trying to be secretive. “Well, let me run it by you. My friend Aaron... see, he’s from this wealthy family, and... well, his father’s dead, but... erm, I suspect his father is actually someone else.”

Candide shook her head. “Back up a bit. What makes you suspect this?”

“I did Legilimency on Lord Frelander when he said something that made me think I’d led him on about something. But I was wrong. See, I thought he may be referring to me because he wanted to adopt me, but I’m pretty sure I saw in his mind that he was referring to Aaron.”

Candide shook her head rapidly again. “Okay, from dealing with Severus, I’ve come to the conclusion that not knowing what others really think is a critical factor in keeping society functioning smoothly. But that aside for the moment...” She faded out and propped her chin on her hand to think. “So, Frelander thinks he’s Aaron’s father, you are saying? He may be wrong.”

Harry tapped his fingers beside his fork. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

She lined her tea bag, sugar jar, and spoon up neatly beside her cup as she talked, as though adding them up. “But, if he even suspects it, then the odds are, well, let’s say better than even, probably. Do they look alike?”

Harry shrugged. “I suppose. They don’t not look alike. Frelander’s a little grey and getting up in years, so it’s harder to tell than if he were younger. But there are other things. He knew much too much about Aaron’s past. See, Aaron was my guard the other day when I went to visit and Frelander was really hard on him, and then really surprised when he found out he was an Auror apprentice.” Harry fell thoughtful. “It’s like he was trying to get over his own disappointment or something.”

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“Hm,” she muttered meaningfully. “That does support your suspicion. So the question is: what to tell your friend.”

Harry turned pained eyes on her. “Yeah. I’m really having a real tough time with this. I know he thinks a lot of his father. Well, the person he was raised by. Even if I was certain, I don’t know what I’d say.”

“You could stay out of it.”

“That doesn’t seem right either.” Harry sighed. “Freelander will eventually decide something, I suppose, but Aaron’s my friend and I feel like I should be open with what I suspect.”

“That’s a tough one, Harry. I’m not sure I have a clear suggestion for you. Why don’t you try feeling Aaron out on the topic, just to get a sense of how he’s going to react to the news.”

Harry nodded. “That’s a good idea. I’ll do that. Maybe I can get him assigned as guard tomorrow.”



The next day, Aaron followed Harry home at Harry’s request.

“Is Ginny coming today?” Aaron asked.

“No, just Wednesday this week, since I am claiming her as an assigned guard and that’s a stretch. Why?”

Aaron shrugged. “No reason.”

“How’d your date go with her on Sunday?” Harry asked, now wondering, when before he felt he should stay out of it.

“It was fine. It was nice.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Harry asked, trying to read his tone and vaguely stiff body language.

“No, of course that’s not a bad thing,” he said, mood shifting. “She’s perhaps too serious for me, but we have another date. Come on, let’s get into the books shall we? I somehow haven’t managed to since the last time we studied together.”

They settled into the library over tea and biscuits, Harry happy to have a guard who did not feel like one. Aaron frequently stood to stretch, stopping by the window as he did so. Harry heard his pet rattling her cage upstairs and waved an Alohomora in that direction to let her come down, which she did.

“Your purple flying rat,” Aaron said, retaking his seat

“Hey,” Harry said, feigning insult while stroking Kali’s head. “She’s been good to me. She helped rescue Severus among other things.”

SECRETS SMALL AND LARGE

Aaron sighed, and changed books. "I can't read more than three pages of one at a time," he explained.

Harry laughed. "Want me to read aloud?"

Aaron sat straight to peer over the rim of Harry's book. "No. I'm too far behind you." He jerked his head to stare out the darkening window, appeared to consider standing again, but sat back with his book instead.

"What is it?" Harry asked,

"I don't want to sound paranoid, but lately I feel like I'm being watched."

Harry pulled his wand out and ran the spell to check the perimeter of the house. It flared blue with a sputter of red at the end.

"Huh," Harry uttered. "No, don't move," he said to Aaron when his friend put his hands on the chair arms as if to rise. Harry prodded his pet and stared into her eyes. "Out the chimney with you; I don't want to open a window and give anything away."

Kali flew off when released. Harry closed his eyes and tracked her flight up the blackened, gritty flue. Near the top, she pulled her wings in and crawled easily over the rough tile inside. Aaron did not speak while Harry concentrated.

From her perch upon the spindly chimney, Kali peered down around herself over the slate roof and the dark fields behind. A low light beside the garden wall caught her attention. She flapped down and around it. It turned out to be a dark cloaked figure, hunched over a faint fairy light. Kali circled again, diving low, attracting no attention from the target.

For a moment, Harry was back in the library with his hands over his eyes. He felt for the breeze in his wings and was back circling the garden as though a giant rubber band had snapped him back. The figure behind the wall was bent over a notebook and holding an extendable eyeball. Harry wondered at that, since he did not believe the twins sold them.

Kali flapped by too close, indicated by the figure crouching lower and covering the notebook with its cape. The figure did not glance up, to Harry's dismay. Instead, it Apparated away.

"What is it?" Aaron asked, because Harry had made a noise of defeat.

"He or she got away. Someone was spying on us though."

Aaron went to the window and stood there with his arms crossed.

Harry said, "Let's add some traps outside and then move to the main hall where the windows face the road."

"Sounds good," Aaron said.

The two of them, cloaked and gloved, slogged through the dead brush around the property and a corner of the neighbor's property, leaving behind trapping spells that

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grew more elaborately clever as they went. Harry wanted to say something to Aaron, but had not worked out exactly what. His suspicion that this watcher had something to do with Frelander kept him from calling in others from the Auror's office.

Back inside, Harry threw a few choice logs on the hall fire and they settled in there on the couches. Harry arranged his thoughts and asked his friend, "So, your dad wasn't around much when you were young, you said."

Aaron answered without pulling his nose out of his book. "No. He was off, frequently. He ran a wizard architectural firm for a while, then a consultancy. Most of his clients were on the continent where the laws about expanding wizard property are more liberal." Before Harry could compose a followup question, Aaron volunteered, "You know, he didn't even have to work and for a while, he lost money, but in the end, ended up making quite a bit. But what was the point? He was never home." A whiff of bitterness floated out at the end of this.

"Your mum didn't mind him going off?"

"She said he wouldn't be happy if he didn't get to be his own person, make his own way. So, I decided I should get to be my own person too."

"Do you miss him?" Harry asked, and felt a twinge as he did so, like he had crawled too far out on a flimsy tree limb.

"Yeah. Don't you miss your dad?"

"I don't remember him," Harry said, voice drifting away.

"That's a shame," Aaron said, sounding pained. "I don't think I'd know who I was if I hadn't known my dad at all."

Harry dropped the topic.

Aaron begged off from dinner when Harry's evening guard arrived. After a quiet meal across from Candide, who spent it perusing files, Harry penned a letter to Snape asking permission to come speak with him. Hedwig returned promptly and Harry opened the small missive to find a sharply worded reply saying that he mostly certainly could come to speak with him and that asking was an unnecessary delay if he needed help with something. The pen strokes of the letter spoke of frustration even more than the words. Harry folded the message away in his pocket and collected Hornisham to take the Floo into Hogsmeade, feeling like he couldn't do things right all of a sudden.

Harry insisted that Candide follow along, even after she gave him a disbelieving, tired glare at the suggestion. She stood awkwardly while patting her abdomen, and accepted her cloak.

"Sorry," Harry said. "But I can't leave you here alone tonight. Someone was watching the house earlier."

Hornisham perked up at this. "Next time I can bring one of my pets to patrol."

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“Er, we added some spells. I doubt they’ll be back. But certainly, as long as it’s something small and doesn’t breath fire.”

Hornisham’s lips curled as she nodded. “Yeah, yeah, I know just the pet. Mathilda could use some getting out. She gets cranky and the Ministry said she had to stay in a cage ’cept for official business.”

“And what sort of creature is Mathilda?” Candide asked factually.

“Monstrous Centipede,” Hornisham proudly announced. “The only registered one in the Isles.”

“She doesn’t mind the cold?” Harry asked, sort of thinking they should avoid Mathilda.

“Ach. I knitted her a woolly sweater,” she replied, patting the sack of knitting hitched over her shoulder. “Took me over a year to do it. Had to knit all the hundred sleeves out of single hairs of wool.”

“We’ll see if we need her,” Harry said. “I think for now we’re all right. By the way, have you met Hagrid, the Hogwarts gamekeeper?”

“I remember him from school and his name come up in the files often enough, but I haven’t been formally introduced, I don’t believe.”

“Well,” Harry brightly said, while reaching for the Floo powder, “why don’t I leave you two with him while I talk to Severus. I have this strange feeling you two are going to hit it off.” He and Candide shared faint smiles.



Snape, with a sharp wave, sent off the student doing detention and gestured at the visitor’s chair. The student, a tall, slope-shouldered Slytherin, lumbered off, head down, appearing to attempt to slink off without Harry’s notice.

The door closed and Harry skipped sitting. “So, someone was watching the house tonight,” he said. Bringing Snape’s hooded eyes to alert. “I left Candide at Hagrid’s hut with my guard, don’t worry.”

“You left Candide with Hagrid and I’m not to worry?” Snape stated dryly as he came around the desk to lean his hip on the front of it.

“Oh, come on. Hagrid is harmless.”

“Hagrid tries to be harmless. He rarely succeeds. But you were saying...?”

“So, I think Freeland is spying on Aaron...”

Snape sounded hard still. “Whatever for?”

“Because he thinks he’s Aaron’s biological father; I’m fairly certain.”

Snape pondered that. “That’s interesting. So, why are you here, then? Ask him yourself.”

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“Next week, I can do that,” Harry pointed out. “It didn’t feel like a topic one should send by owl.”

Snape straightened the inkwells at his side. “So, you are asking for permission to go speak with him?”

“I was hoping I could do that,” Harry said.

“It would defeat the purpose of grounding you to grant exceptions.” They stared at each other as the lamp on the desk fluttered, sending oil smoke into the air. “What were you doing when you shook your guard? If you tell me I may reduce the time of your punishment.”

“If I tell you; you’ll make it a month,” Harry said.

Snape turned away and returned to the chair behind the desk. “That illuminates the topic nicely, actually,” he said with a hiss.

“Does it?” Harry said.

“You may speak with Frelander on Friday evening. I will escort you there myself,” Snape stated. “Was that it?”

He sounded so unyielding that Harry felt a disorienting wave of doubt about where he was. Swallowing, he said, “There is something else.” He tried to feel hurt instead of uncertain, but it was a hard battle. “I want to tell Tonks the truth about what I can do.”

“I cannot stop you from doing so; I can only strongly advise against it.”

“She doesn’t trust me,” Harry complained.

Snape crossed his arms and said, “And when telling her does not solve that... what then?”

Harry honestly considered that despite wanting to rebel. It was possible that Tonks wasn’t good at trusting and he was just grasping. But he had to try. “I don’t know what then,” he admitted.

Silence fell, ruled by the wind rattling at a loose windowpane. Harry concluded with, “That’s all I wanted to talk to you about.”

With a warmer tone, Snape said, “Thank you for the warning... warnings. Is Candide working less?”

“Yes,” Harry said. “She’s mostly home at an earlier hour now.”

“Good.” They considered each other during another awkward pause. Snape said, “I’ll be home for longer this weekend, if I can manage it.”

“I’ll see you then,” Harry said automatically, and turned for the door.

He was brought up short before he could grab the handle by Snape saying, “Do take care,” in a tone that meant it.

Harry turned back, but kept his head down. Snape went on, “Despite someone plotting to do you harm, I am convinced you remain your own worst enemy. And I

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am relieved that whatever you were doing, you are safely through it.”

“I am,” Harry agreed. Thinking more, he said, “But if it isn’t Frelander spying on Aaron or the house, shouldn’t we know that sooner?”

“Owl him regarding it.”

“Not a chance,” Harry replied. “I wouldn’t know where to start. And besides, I’ll need Legilimency to figure it out if he doesn’t want to answer.”

A brow went up. “Well, at least you have learned that much.”



The next day, Harry, after three peeks into the office, finally caught Tonks between calls.

“Can I see you this afternoon?” Harry asked her, thinking he could sneak in a visit before going home.

She glanced up from the report she was scratching out. “Yeah. I promised myself for once to get home at a reasonable hour. I can take over from your guard after dinner, if you want to drop by.”

Harry bit his lips. He could use the excuse that he had to fetch her for a guard. Harry noticed that Shackbolt’s quill had stopped moving, indicating he was listening in. The notion that Snape may have informed the Order of his grounding nearly made him laugh aloud. Perhaps it was just the ongoing dating issue.

“Okay, I’ll pick you up as a guard then. I have some things I really need to talk to you about,” Harry said.

She gave him a fretful glance at that, but when he smiled faintly it went away.

“Give me until seven, and I’ll be home.”

Aaron followed Harry home, and when Ginny arrived, he stood to take her cloak with a butlerish aplomb. Her face mottled nearly maroon through the process and she took a seat across from Harry without really looking at him, leading him to wonder what he was missing.

She stood back up again quickly, saying, “Let’s drill, I have to get home for dinner.”

Harry held off on using any Legilimency on her, feeling it to be highly unfair. Wand in his pocket, Harry took up a spot across from her and had to take a step back when her wind curse buffeted him.

“Easy there,” he said, tugging his robes straight from them wanting to knot up behind him.

“Sorry.”

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After a dozen gentle breeze-like spells, Harry called a halt. "I can't work this out," he said of his attempts to block ordinary curses by feel rather than by wand. "And I'm quite tired of standing here getting hit. Let's work on something else."

She lowered her wand and considered him. "Even I'm tired of hitting you repeatedly, Harry," she stated.

"I appreciate that you're trying to help," Harry said.

"Actually, my attenuation has got quite good of late from having to tone down all these curses to harmless level," she said. "The other day, I wanted to heat a single toffee because it had got too cold in my pocket to bite into, and it was really easy. Before, I would have scorched the wrapper."

"I'm tired of dreaming about fighting without a wand," Harry complained, rubbing his hair back and gratefully raising his wand. "Let's just do regular attack-counter drills."

"You're not giving up for good?" she demanded, automatically raising her wand too.

"For now. I'm starting to think it's not possible for me to block any sort of curse without a wand. I can feel the curse, but I can't do anything about it in time."

"You shouldn't give up," she said sharply.

"Well, I won't give up, but I need a break."

Ginny said, "We'll just do less of it, but I'm not going to let you quit. It's too amazing of a skill if you think you can do it."

Aaron, who stood off to the side listening until then, said, "It's not that amazing," a little peevisly. "Someone could still Charm him to death."

"Yeah?" Ginny prompted disbelievingly, blushing again.

"For example, a Snare Charm inside a Water Bubble Charm could drown someone."

Ginny lowered her wand and said, "Only a Slytherin would think of that."

"I'm just sayin'," Aaron returned, arms broadly uncurling as he spoke.

The conversation turned to the topic of countering spells as they fell into rounds of drills. They broke for snacks after Ginny decided dinner with her parents did not sound all that interesting and Harry sat back and watched her engage Aaron in conversation.

Candide arrived some time later and immediately dropped into a chair at the table to sort her post. She did not make a note about Harry having two guards.

Harry took a deep breath and said to her, "I need to run out to exchange guards –" He was interrupted by a tray holding two bowls sparkling in before her.

Candide sighed and picked up the spoon to eat a scoop of orange ice cream. "Just what I wanted: kumquat ice cream."

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“What’s the other?” Ginny asked, squinting with a funny face at the second bowl. Candide leaned forward to sniff. “Pickled radish, I think.”

“Right,” Harry said, backtracking on what he planned to say. “Hm, maybe Ginny will stay with you while I go fetch Tonks, you know, my next guard.”

Aaron nibbled on a crisp and said, “She doesn’t get assigned as guard much, does she?”

“She hasn’t lately,” Harry agreed. Candide ate with too much vigor to notice that Harry may have concocted an excuse to leave when he was not supposed to.

At seven, Harry and Aaron waited at Tonk’s flat, but she did not show up. Despite Tonks’ poor history of punctuality, they went to the Ministry at just past the hour to look for her.

The Aurors office was busy with Ministry staff going in and out.

“Wonder what’s going on,” Aaron muttered as they dodged out of the way of another fast striding person while trying to listen in at the door.

Mr. Weasley went by, hands full of files, saw the two of them there and said to them. “Good, go fetch whatever Rodgers needs in Interrogation Room Two.”

The two of them glanced at each other and headed that way. Inside Room Two, they found Rodgers crouched before a prisoner, who sat against the wall, looking wary and confused. Harry had his wand out, as was procedure, but his thoughts were not quite on standard procedure.

Rodgers said, “Fetch me the Truth Serum Support tray. Either he’s immune to Veritaserum, or it needs a supplemental Tongueloosener.”

Harry gestured for Aaron to fetch the potions while he took up a position behind Rodgers right shoulder. The man on the floor had an average appearance in his face and hair. The only things out of the ordinary were his boot was scorched and his hand was tucked against his abdomen as if it were injured.

“How’d he get hurt?” Harry asked.

“He won’t say,” Rodgers said, tugging on the man’s arm and it limply flopped outward. His hand showed puckered streaks like a burn. “He and his companion were tied up inside the phone box and lowered into the Atrium anonymously. But I’m beginning to suspect their memories were wiped.”

The prisoner’s brow furrowed as he took Harry in, eyes flickering with recognition. Harry couldn’t read anything in his eyes beyond general wariness, surprise, and an intrepid desire to keep a secret.

Aaron returned and hovered the tray in the far corner since the room had no furniture. He brought the potions Rodgers requested and an empty glass to mix them in. Rodgers used a spell to force the prisoner to drink it, then sat back in his heels to wait for it to work. A trickle of violet potion dribbled from the corner

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of the prisoner's mouth, making Harry swallow convulsively. This was all standard procedure, but it was making him uneasy.

Rodgers patted the man hard on the leg. "So, there. What's your name?"

The prisoner thought about that and faintly answered, "Francesco."

"Now were getting somewhere. Francesco what?"

"Francesco," came the monotone reply.

They went back and forth a bit, failing to elicit anything meaningful. Rodgers stood to pace and Harry said, "He's got the look of Durumulna."

"Oh, he does. We're going to have to wait a week or three for that to wear off so we can see what he really looks like." He waved at the potion tray. "Let's try the other prisoner next. But I'm not hopeful."

Harry found Tonks sometime later. She said, "I see we are both not getting away from the office."

Harry felt vaguely relieved to be putting off telling her on top of anxious because he would prefer she already know. "I left Ginny keeping Candide company, and I think she'll not mind staying longer since they get along well enough. I do want to talk to you, if you can get away."

Her eyes flickered with renewed worry. "Sure, I'll finish my reports in the morning," she said, which was unusual for her. "Let's go."

Harry told Aaron he did not need him for a guard any longer, and he gave Harry a wink as he departed. In Tonks' flat, she kicked off her platform shoes and padded, shorter, to the table to set her post down on a teetering pile.

"If it weren't for howlers, I'd sometimes open none of my post," she said. She stared at the envelope on top of the stack and then turned toward Harry, gaze lowered. "I think I know what you are going to say," she said, mouth twisted half into a frown.

"I sincerely doubt it," Harry said. "But first." He pulled out his wand and circled the flat, securing it from everything he could think of, including forcing Animagi to reveal themselves. He returned to where she stood watching him do this, wand out still after taking care of spelling the door while he did the rest.

Harry said, "I've wanted to tell you some things, but... well, Severus didn't think it was a good idea for me to tell you... anyone, actually," he amended quickly. "But I want you to know." They stared at each other. Harry said, "Why don't you sit down? That way I can sit down."

Tonks pushed back a chair, nearly toppling it, caught it, and sat down, pushing against the table to rock back on two legs.

Harry pulled the other chair around closer and clasped his hands together. "So, the thing is... and I do agree with Severus that it would be better if the Ministry didn't know what I'm going to tell you..."

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“I don’t plan on telling anyone, Harry,” she stated a tad coldly.

“Good. Okay. It’s like this. Well, first of all, you know already how I can call the Raksashas out of the Dark Plane, but what you don’t know is that I can go there too.” When she stared at him without speaking, he went on, wanting to minimize that. “Er, what that means is that I can Apparate, in a way, practically anywhere, without a sound. That day by the windmill when I followed you and I shouldn’t have... and you thought I had my cloak. I had used the Dark Plane to travel to you.” He stood up. “Watch.” Harry went in and out, moving just a few feet.

She let her chair drop with a thud back to four legs. “That’s nice,” she said, intrigued. Then, confused, asked, “Your going where to do that?”

“Er, the Dark Plane.” He waved his level hand over the floor. “It’s just below us.”

In a neutral confirming voice, she asked, “And this is where those demons live?”

Reluctantly, Harry replied, “Yeah. But they don’t bother me unless I don’t believe I can overpower them.”

She exhaled thoughtfully, seeming to put that aside for later. After a beat, she confirmed, “And you can go anywhere?”

“Essentially. Hogwarts, Department of Mysteries, I assume any vault at Gringotts but I haven’t tried that.”

She snorted lightly. “You’re Harry; of course you haven’t tried that.” She crossed her arms and raised a hot pink brow. “Fetch something from the Department of Mysteries,” she said, challenging him, which made Harry warm straight through.

Harry disappeared straight away, entering the most secretive Ministry department in one of the back corridors he figured to be less trafficked. Being evening, he heard nothing from where he stood between a room holding shelves of books and one holding the glass prophecies, the shelves sparsely occupied since Harry and his friends had broken most of them.

On tip-toe, Harry made his way around to the work room. With the soothing bubble and hum of the Tank of the Ancients lulling him, his eyes sought out something unique that he could slip away with. The deep high shelves over one of the desks caught his eye. He’d seen Merton’s cane there, but did not see it now. He stepped closer and spied it, tucked away better, the velvet sacked cinched and knotted. Biting his lip, he carefully drew it out from under some other boxes and packages and disappeared with it.

Back in Tonks’ flat, he presented the cane to her with a little bow.

She shook her head and tested the heft of it through the sacking before handing it back, saying, “That is how you captured Fuego. You followed him, when he disappeared the way they tend to.”

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“Yes,” Harry said, relieved that she was catching on quickly.

She stood and waved at the strip of wall beside the door to the sitting room. “You can leave that there, I’ll return it later. I could use a drink I think.” She rummaged in the cabinets, swearing faintly. “They wouldn’t be able to hold you in the rebuilt Azkaban, either,” she said.

“The French prison has some special protection, since they can hold Fuego,” Harry pointed out.

“Yes. We’ve had to send them the one other vampire we apprehended a few decades ago because we couldn’t hold her.” She rummaged under the sink next, coming up with a silver bottle from behind the dusty cleaning supplies. “But we don’t have the skill to add that protection, and don’t need it normally anyhow. Apparition and portkey barriers are usually sufficient.” She sat back, legs wide and casual, and took a swig from the bottle. “Well, I understand Severus’ concern. I really do,” she said grimly, biting her lips in between. “After what happened with Sirius...” She trailed off and frowned worriedly before looking away and holding the bottle out to him.

Harry waved off the bottle. “That’s not all.”

She froze mid-putting the bottle to her lips. “That was the easy one; wasn’t it?” she asked. “You have an annoying tendency to do that: good news first.”

“That was the easy one, yes,” Harry said, plowing on, “The other thing is that from within the Dark Plane, I can go to other Planes besides this one. Places where other events have happened in the past and the present isn’t the same.” He waited for any reaction and didn’t get one. He went on. “When I disappeared, supposedly to Latvia, I was really in another Plane where I had died as a First Year and Voldemort was headmaster of Hogwarts. I could have come back right away... but I wanted to destroy him before I left.”

She blinked many times in a row and set the bottle down with a thunk. It was a minute before she ceased to appear stunned and ill. “Another place where things worked out differently?” she echoed.

“Yes.”

She leaned forward over her fists propped on the table and said, “Are you certain you didn’t imagine this? Like a dream?”

“I’m certain.”

“Harry,” she chastised. “Really, how can that be possible?” She grinned faintly and continued to sound critical. “Voldemort as headmaster?”

“Well, in one place he was, in the other he was just still alive. See, time is the same in these other places, but the events are different.”

She rocked her spiky hair, and still did not appear to believe him. She turned to

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glance at the cane in the corner. “So, you fetched that using this Dark Plane and you came back here, but you could have gone somewhere else?”

“Well, it takes some extra effort to go to a different Plane. And it is super cold in between, so I nearly freeze to death. Just popping in and out of this one, I’ve got good at.”

Her brow did not un-furrow. “How many times have you done this... going to this other place where things are different?”

“Three. A count I’d prefer you not tell Severus.”

She picked up the bottle again to gesture at him with it, still disturbed. “You have a lot of secrets going here, Harry.”

Harry glanced at the clock. “And another secret is that I’m here at all. I should get back.”

She considered pocketing the bottle, but left it on the table. She sighed significantly and stepped up close to him and stroked his arms through his cloak. “I’m glad you told me.” Her eyes crossed, before she closed them and held them that way. “Well, I think I’m glad. Yeah.” She opened her eyes and gazed at him rather closely, sounding mentorish. She said tiredly, “You are not going to be able to resist using this way of getting around, and you’ll need cover.”

Harry smiled. “Thanks for that. I need all the help I can get.”

“You may need help, but you don’t need a guard; that’s for certain,” she stated crisply, sounding slightly put-upon or jealous.

“I agree. Get Mr. Weasley to agree, please,” Harry said. “I’m so very tired of this.”

“Well, you are grounded, so let’s get you home before you get caught for that.”

They arrived in Shrewsthorpe and Candide, without pickles and ice cream as a distraction, was a little sharper this time. “Where were you exactly?”

“I got caught up at the Ministry,” Harry said. “Tonks wasn’t at her flat where we were supposed to meet.”

Tonks smoothly said, “Someone unexpectedly left the Ministry a present and we were shorthanded.”

Ginny said with a weak laugh, “Little early for Christmas.”

Tonks said, “Strange gift too. Minister is calling a presser in the morning, so I can tell you what happened if you like.”

Ginny leaned forward. “Do tell.”

Tonks, finding amusement in it, explained about the two gang members being stuffed in the phone box and sent down to the Atrium.

Ginny smiled strangely. “So, what do you think happened?”

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Tonks replied, "We suspect they displeased their masters and got punished this way, which is why the Minister is more than willing to make an example of them."

"Huh," Ginny said, sitting back. She bit her lip and Harry tried to catch her eyes, but she kept them elsewhere. She departed soon after and Harry did not want to say anything in front of the others, but he strongly suspected she knew something.

Up in his room, Tonks settled in with a book while Harry penned a letter to Ginny. He wrote simply:

I can understand wanting to keep a secret, but sometimes sharing it can prevent a lot of trouble. Trust me.

Her reply arrived in the morning:

I don't feel like telling. It's under control.

Harry frowned at the message as he tossed it into the fire, remembering with a jolt that the prisoners were burned.

"So, what do you think?" Candide asked a little sharply.

"Huh?" Harry said, spinning around to face her. He had not been listening.

She laughed lightly and glanced at Tonks tucking into a second helping of breakfast. "I said, shall I convince Severus to let us all go out, even though you will still be grounded?"

"Oh. I'd like that, but it's all right. I don't want to push him." He sat down again across from Candide and let the mystery draw burn slow circles in his head.

Candide leaned back from the table with a sigh and distractedly rubbed her belly. Tonks wiped her mouth and said, "Severus ready for a baby?"

Candide laughed lightly. "I doubt it."

Harry put his other concerns aside and listened more closely.

Candide grinned and shook her head, making her hair shift. "He'll figure it out fast enough."

Harry did not feel as certain. "You think so? Maybe."

"What are you getting him for his birthday?" Candide asked. "I haven't figured anything out yet. I thought it'd be easy, but all I see when I'm out shopping is things for the baby. Which reminds me... we have to clear out one of the other upstairs rooms for the cot."

Harry's skin pricked at the thought that she might want to use the room where Snape had performed the dark magic spell to locate Harry the night he flew off. Thinking quickly, he said, "Maybe you should use my room and we can move me over to one of the other rooms." There was nothing but molding furniture in the farthest room on the first floor. Even he would prefer to not sleep in the room where he first felt the Dark Plane, even though he now understood it.

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“You wouldn’t mind? That’d be more convenient to have the baby’s room next door.”

Relief softened Harry’s limbs. “Yeah. No worries. We can talk about it this weekend when Severus is here.” Harry blinked into the distance. “But a present,” he breathed. “I forgot about his birthday.”

“As long as you didn’t get him something fantastic that I have to top,” Candide said, “we’re fine.”

“I have to think of something,” Harry said. “And fast.”



Friday evening, Harry waited with Vineet for Snape to come home. Harry did not feel like spending Friday reading for training, so he instead read through that week’s newspapers. Several days’ commentary had been devoted to the mysterious gang members handed over to the Ministry. One letter writer, calling himself Oldetimy Occlutist, stated that he hoped the blokes’ parents themselves had finally grown fed up enough to turn them in themselves. Harry hoped that was not the case.

“What time does your adoptive father arrive?” Vineet asked.

Harry glanced at the clock. “Soon.” Thinking he heard a tinge of impatience in his friend’s voice, Harry followed with, “Have something you need to get to?”

“I am taking Hermione to dinner in Hogsmeade.”

“OH,” Harry said dramatically, while folding up the paper he had before him and selecting the next randomly off the stack. “Well, we shan’t keep you too long, in that case.”

“I will remain as long as required,” Vineet pledged.

“I’m certain Hermione will understand if you’re a tad late.”

“Oh, it is not late I am worried about being. I was hoping to be early.”

Harry raised the next newspaper up to hide his grin, and found himself faced with a photo of himself and Kerry Ann taken during one of the press visits to their training. His heart sped up when he spotted the byline of Rita Skeeter on the article below the headline Aurors in Love, but a quick read-through revealed only vague innuendo around the vastly male dominated Department of Law Enforcement. Harry folded up the paper, giving up on reading while he still had his temper.

Snape arrived minutes later and sent Vineet off with a bow. Vineet, for him, fairly scampered away.

“Ready?” Snape asked, glancing around. “Candide is not home?”

Harry stood and wandered to the front hall for his dress cloak. He called back, “I suggested she be late, so she isn’t home before we return.”

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Snape waited for him to return to the main hall before acknowledging, "Wise of you."

Harry shrugged, resisting pleasure from the compliment.

On the walk up the drive to the rambling Freelander estate, Harry slowed saying, "I haven't figured out what I'm going to say."

Snape stopped. "Difficult to confront a benefactor," he said, an eerie echo of what the alternative version of him had said.

"What would you do?" Harry asked.

In the gloomy surroundings of the gravel drive with a night bird dashing musically overhead, Snape considered that before replying, "I would choose a framing for the issue that he cannot resist."

Harry said, "Okay. I think I have one," and resumed walking, wanting to have this over with.

Freelander was getting ready for a small dinner party. Servants bustled about, walking awkwardly upright as they rushed across the unnecessarily broad rooms. The two of them were led to a parlor adjoining the main suite and Harry asked Snape to wait in a previous room, thinking that it would be too difficult with him there.

Freelander, bright cuffs and collar undone, came in and gestured curtly at a seat as he selected cufflinks from a jewelry box held out to him by a servant. The dour servant assumed a waiting position a step back, and Harry said, "Perhaps I should speak with you alone, sir."

When the servant had departed, Harry, keeping Snape's advice firmly in mind, said, "I may be out of line here, but I must ask you something because your answer affects the security the Ministry is keeping around me." Harry took a deep breath and said to Freelander's curious gaze, "Have you sent someone to spy on Aaron?"

A thick, trimmed brow went up and Freelander tossed his other cuff straight to hook it. "Yes. Not that it is any concern of yours."

"Yes, well, it was upsetting the security around myself," Harry carefully explained.

"Oh, yes, well, I told my man to forthwith avoid investigating when Aaron is in your presence."

Freelander stood and tugged his waistcoat over his round frame. "If that is all?"

It was not all. Harry wanted to know what he was up to. "Why are you having him followed?" he asked.

Freelander reddened faintly. "As I said, no concern of yours."

"It is my concern" Harry said, finding a route out of the maze of owing this man. "He's my friend and I don't want to see him hurt."

"Hurt? How could he possibly get hurt, Mr. Potter?" Freelander asked, pulling out his watch to glance at it, clearly ready to be done with this meeting.

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Harry could not understand what he had just heard and felt caution slip away. “What do you mean? You’re threatening to upset everything he understands about his father and you wonder how he could be hurt?”

Freelander deliberately slipped his watch away into the small pocket at his waist. “You’re easy to underestimate, Mr. Potter. Or did you to interrogate my man Young and he just did not want to tell me that.”

Harry shook his head. “He got away.”

The crinkles in Freelander’s face shifted as he reconsidered things. “I expect you to leave it to me to tell Mr. Wickem.” This was stated as a dismissal.

Harry said, “I will leave it to you if I can, but like I said, he’s my friend. I can’t promise you that.”

Freelander sighed faintly and picked up his cane. “I have a dinner party to host, I’m afraid. Clydeswayne will see you out.” A wave of his wand summoned the butler.

As they were led back through dimly lit room after room, clinking glasses and energetic voices emanated from deeper within the house. In the entryway, their cloaks were returned and the butler hurried off with a quick bow.

“Get everything straight?” Snape asked.

“Maybe,” Harry said with a shrug.

“Perhaps not worth granting an exception to your grounding in that case,” Snape stated.

“It WAS him,” Harry said, feeling anger. “I was right.”

“As you presumed,” Snape said dismissively.

Harry stared at his guardian, vastly out of place in the white, baroquely plastered entry hall lit by an overhead chandelier. He wondered why they were at odds again, but felt little desire to back off. “Grounding me was ridiculous anyway,” Harry said.

“I will decide that,” Snape said, taking a step toward the door, but keeping his narrow gaze pinned on Harry. Harry moved to follow, and Snape turned fully on him. “What did you shake your guard for?”

“I went to rescue someone,” Harry replied stiffly, thinking that in this strange place that roundabout would be the best way to speak. “Someone who, because of me, had no protection from the law and was suffering greatly as a result.”

Snape slowly shook his head.

“What would you prefer I do?” Harry demanded in a harsh whisper.

“You know nothing about the situation in that place. You presume everything.”

Harry met his guardian’s fierceness with his own. “I knew that he’d helped me; that’s all I needed to know.”

“You are out of control, Harry, with this power. You have no idea the trouble you could instigate.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“What are you jealous or something?” Harry asked.

Snape’s head tilted in a way that told him he had gone too far.

“Nevermind, forget I said that,” Harry muttered.

Snape’s cloak spread wide as he propped his hands on his hips. “I don’t know what to do with you.”

“Don’t do anything,” Harry said. “I don’t understand what you’re so upset about.” A rush of laughter drifting in from far away, made Harry glance around in case they were being watched. He did not see anyone and all the glittery-framed paintings looking on were of the static, Muggle sort.

Snape’s voice lowered. “I am upset about the unnecessary risks you take. You do not possess sufficient wisdom to go with your powers.”

“I do fine,” Harry insisted. “I’m an adult now, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Snape bit his lips and dropped his head in frustration. “Let’s go. Candide will be returning shortly.”

The house was empty when they arrived. Harry dropped onto the couch with a huff and crossed his arms. To himself he had to admit he was deathly tired of being guarded all the time and was taking that out on Snape.

“You’re making too much of this,” Harry calmly said, looking for a bridge.

Snape faintly shook his head in more a philosophical gesture than a reply. With matching renewed calm, he said, “As the parent, I get to decide what is to be made an issue of.”

“You’re starting to sound like my uncle Vernon.”

“Insults will not help,” Snape said.

Candide arrived home during the impasse that followed and stepped into the space between them. “Am I interrupting?” she asked.

“No,” Harry replied.

“Well, that’s unfortunate, because it looks like you need an interruption.” She waved a chair in from the drawing room and took that rather than sitting beside one of them. “So, what’s the trouble?” she asked, tugging off her long pointed boot to rub her foot while making a pained face.

Snape pondering her with an air of disbelief before giving in and saying, “Harry does not obey anything I say any longer.”

She tugged off a second boot. “Well, that’s hardly a surprise, given his age.”

Harry shot a told-you-so look across at his guardian.

“Whose side are you on?” Snape demanded of her.

“Neither,” she chirped. “That’s why I’m sitting in the middle.” She shifted her chair and stretched her toes out. “Are your demands unreasonable, Severus?”

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“I am demanding that he stick with one universe. And no, that is not unreasonable.”

Candide turned to Harry. “You jumped off to some other place again?” At Harry’s nod, she tsked a bit.

“I can handle myself,” Harry said. “He doesn’t trust that I know what I’m doing. I told Tonks what I can do and she’s completely on my side,” he added smartly. “Why can’t you be on my side?” Harry asked, feeling a tender stab as he said this.

Snape sat forward, shoulders hunched defensively. “I am always on your side. Whatever gave you the notion I was not? I refuse to allow you to harm yourself before you learn what you are doing. What part of that is not being on your side?”

Candide’s gaze came around to Harry and they both waited for him to speak. “I don’t know,” Harry admitted, flustered. “It just... It just feels like you are seeing trouble where there isn’t any, just to tell me what to do.”

Snape’s voice entered the low dangerous range. “That is not at all the case. Your powers carry unknown dangers...” He held up his hand for silence. “About which you are blithely cocky. And you refuse repeatedly to listen to warnings on a number of subjects.”

“You don’t know it’s dangerous; you’re just guessing,” Harry said.

“As. Are. You.” Snape replied. “I want to forbid you to use the Dark Plane or to visit any other Planes, but I suspect you will simply disobey me.” He stood and paced.

“You don’t understand,” Harry said. “If I fear that Dark Plane, it will overtake me. And if I don’t fear it, it doesn’t matter if I go there.”

Snape’s brow furrowed and he did not reply, but simply rubbed at the worry lines between his eyes.

“If I may say,” Candide said, half-raising her hand like a student might. “I don’t think grounding Harry did anything except exacerbate the situation. But that’s just my opinion. He’s already essentially grounded with a guard all the time anyhow.”

Harry nodded eagerly that he agreed with this. Snape tapped his knuckle to his teeth thoughtfully.

Candide slapped her hands on her lap and said, “Why don’t we go out tomorrow and do something... as a family.”

The last word shot through Harry. He did not really intend to make trouble, but he also could not control how chafed he became from his situation.

“An excellent idea,” Snape said faintly, trying to sound pleased.

“Harry?” Candide asked. “You have plans?”

“No, I was still grounded. I don’t have any plans. Going out sounds good.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The next day, a glaringly bright mid-November day where the sun starkly angled around every solid object, found them wandering York on a shopping trip. Candide stopped before the window of yet another baby clothiers and bent to take a closer look at the delicate, lacy things laid out on display. Snape wandered ahead, stopping to peer up at a sign promising dungeon tours, complete with instruments of torture, highwaymen, plagues, and Guy Fawkes.

Candide straightened and leaned close to Harry, “Your little tiff yesterday gives me hope that he’s ready to have a younger son around the house.”

“It does?” Harry said.

“Don’t you think?” she said, sashaying slowly on as if to draw out their conversation before they were within earshot of Snape. She took Harry’s arm and leaned on him slightly, making him wonder if she needed a break before lunchtime. “Are you ready for a younger brother?”

“Yes,” Harry said, thinking that he’d rather like that.

Her voice dropped. “I think you’re hoping it will fully distract your father,” she accused.

“It might do that too,” Harry agreed, not having considered that before.

She peered up at the Dungeon advert when Snape pointed at it suggestively and said, “Here I’m telling Harry to stay out of trouble.”

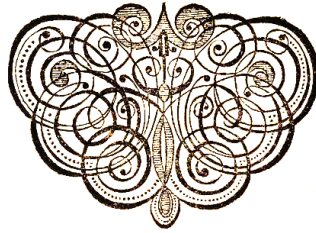
Snape airily stated, “I thought there might be comic value in the Muggle notion of horror.”

Candide ducked her head to chuckle. “My feet need a break. Maybe something else for now.”

They minced down to the corner where there was a small coffee shop. The bell on the door jangled as Snape held it open for Candide. He gestured at the neighboring shoe shop window with its array of towering, spiked-heel shoes and said, “There’s a real torture chamber there.”

They shared a grin, which erased most of Harry’s unease. They settled around a window-embraced table with their steaming drinks and Harry put aside all the mysteries and concerns he had on his mind and just enjoyed the moment. Over their mugs, Snape and Candide shared abbreviated comments and looks that spoke of unexpectedly deep understanding given how little time they managed to spend together. Harry forced himself to not worry for a time about Aaron, Ginny, Rodgers, Moody, Belinda and his unprovable suspicions about Percy. He put it all aside and with the perspective gained from doing so agreed that Snape probably was right: one universe ought to be enough. At that moment, it certainly was.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



A SURFEIT OF FATHERS

Sunday morning, the clouds hung as thick as smoke outside the window. Harry encountered Snape on the balcony and followed him down to breakfast, where Candide waited before the hearth in a dressing gown, hair still mussed. She stood in a pose that reminded Harry of McGonagall when she had reached her limit on some repeated transgression. The two of them stopped before her and she snapped out the paper she held, folded backward to show Rita Skeeter's gossip column.

The paper came down primarily in front of Snape, so Harry leaned over to get a better look.

Boy hero now Ministry darling 'Out of control' says adoptive father.

Harry physically jerked back from the paper in surprise. Snape snatched it up and paced away to read it before tossing it on the table.

"She must have been there the other night," Harry said, heart fluttering fast because he had feared they were not alone and had not taken action to check.

Snape was leaning heavily on a hand levered on a chair back, his other hand propped behind his back. He tossed his head once to the side.

"I was careful what I said," Harry pointed out, too stunned to sound critical.

Candide lifted the paper up and read: "Head of Slytherin house states he does not know what to do with Mr. Potter. Did you really say that?"

Snape sharply nodded once, which left his hair webbing his face. He was biting his lip and glaring off into the distance. He pushed away from the chair's support. "I am losing my edge." He shook his head additionally. "You were smarter than I about how to argue in an insecure location."

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“How about not arguing at all?” Candide suggested. “Or at least only at home. Or not at all? I like that idea better.”

Snape stared at her without reacting. Harry tugged the paper over and, with his back tense, read the rest of the article and the insinuations about him and his powers, complete with obnoxious I-told-you-so styled flashbacks to her earliest articles about Harry. He felt tainted after reading it and did not want to touch the paper. He gave it a flick to the side and sat down, wondering why his breath was still too quick.

Candide considered the two of them, heaved a sigh, and joined Harry at the table.

Snape strode over beside the hearth and straightened a metal box on the mantel. He was taking his slip hard, enough so that Harry felt compelled to minimize things. “It’ll pass. It always does,” Harry said, burying a flinch.

Snape turned to him and looked away again, jaw tight.

“Can I make a suggestion, Harry?” Candide asked with enough shyness that he could not help but reply that she could, despite wanting nothing more than a target for his frustration and anger. She went on, “Grant her an interview.”

“Are you nuts?” Harry blurted.

“No. I just think it’s the only way.”

“NO. I refuse,” Harry snapped.

“What are you going to do?” she asked gently.

“I don’t know. But not that for certain.”

Candide raised her chin to peer at Snape. “What do you think he should do?”

“I believe your suggestion to be a valid one, but not until things calm down. Perhaps nothing will come of it.” He let his hand slide off the mantel and took the short step to stand beside Harry’s chair. His hand landed on Harry’s shoulder and he softly said, “Sorry, Harry.”

“It’s all right,” Harry said, his anger stunned away by the rare apology. If he could handle Voldemort in under a week, he could handle Rita Skeeter.



When Harry next arrived for training, he was sent down to speak with Mr. Weasley. Harry wedged himself into the guest chair and tugged the door closed, careful not to pinch his fingers doing so.

A cut-up copy of the Prophet lay out on the desk. Mr. Weasley knitted his fingers in his lap and said, “I would have let this go, but Amelia wanted to be certain that you understand she is not pleased.”

“Sorry,” Harry said. “It was a mistake. It won’t happen again.” His mind flittered off to thinking more about things he could do to Skeeter. Trapping her into

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something seemed like the best plan, but the details of exactly how to do it had so far not solidified. The extra glances he had garnered in the Atrium on the way in had only increased his determination to get even, despite the reactions being milder than feared.

“That’s, I suspect, what the Minister wants to hear.”

His boss sounded dismissive, but Harry saw an opportunity to ask some questions of his own. “What is happening with Durumulna?”

“You make it sound as if you are being kept in the dark,” Mr. Weasley observed. “There’s not much new to report that you don’t know. We’re doing our best to combat them. But it turns out that there is a limit to what we can do without cooperation from the wizarding public at large. Bones is going to use these two dumped gang members to argue for as much public support as possible.” He filed the news article in the bin while he spoke. It ignited and drifted to the bottom as grey curls.

“Why wouldn’t people want to help?” Harry asked.

“Why not? Because they’re afraid, mostly, that the gang will take retribution. That’s the standard way they operate. Not everyone wants to be a hero, Harry.” He shifted some files around on his desk. “In this case...” Here he held out a file that rather than have a name on the tab, per the norm, read DC #12. “In this case, using the lure of a small profit, they got an otherwise law-abiding wizard involved and after that the man felt compelled to do as they said, lest they turn him in to us. You’d be surprised how little crime it takes to keep a good person quiet,” he said, mouth wry. “Ironically, it’s the desire to appear good to their fellows that is the hook the gang uses on them and their family to coerce their participation in successively worse things.”

“So, what about the Eeylops fire?”

A few carefully arranged hairs flopped off the top of Mr. Weasley’s head as he tilted it. “That was a strange one. We haven’t decided quite what happened there.”

And your daughter knows something about it, Harry thought, and decided that he did not want to say anything about that, probably much like a Durumulna victim. “Maybe you need to offer amnesty, or something,” Harry said after a beat.

Mr. Weasley nodded. “We’ve floated that idea.” He rocked his chair forward and added, “I’m quite certain you have training.”

“Oh yeah,” Harry said, standing up quickly, which caused his chair to smack against the door behind him.

“Not that I wish to dissuade you from thinking like a full-time Auror...” Mr. Weasley added as Harry opened the door, making Harry stop and realize that his department head had gone out of his way to cater to his questions.

“Thanks, sir,” Harry said with feeling.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Mid-week, Aaron sidled up to Harry after training and kicked his toe against the desk leg. "I'm going to ask to be assigned as your guard. I don't like being followed."

Rodgers raised his head at this and flicked his mustache side to side. "What's this?"

"Someone has been following Aaron," Harry supplied, when his fellow remained frustrated and silent. Harry was surprised that their trainer sounded sympathetic, but he was in charge of their safety.

"And you can't catch them at it?" Rodgers then added, canceling Harry's train of thought.

"I tried last night," Aaron said. "They had a repelling charm on them, so that I couldn't snag them with anything. Not a whip charm, a chain binding... nothing."

Harry thought that sounded rather expert for a private eye, but of course Freelander could afford the best.

Head still hanging low, Aaron said, "If I can be Harry's guard, I'd appreciate it."

"Put the two hunted parties together, you're saying," Rodgers said, "in the hopes that what? Your stalkers will trip over each other?"

Harry suggested to his fellow, "Ginny will be over for drills this afternoon, so why don't you come over even if you aren't assigned?"



On the couch, pretending to read from a book thick with eye-blurring, Gordion-worthy diagrams demonstrating every last variation of the various blocks they should know, Harry contemplated sending an owl to Freelander that threatened to tell Aaron what he knew. Elizabeth was counting on him, though, so his desire for an ultimatum was bound and gagged before it could even think about where the nice stationery might be.

Beside him, Aaron and Ginny were running drills and Aaron finally rose out of his down mood from earlier. Ginny caught onto the routines easily, but unfortunately had the same resistance to reading as Aaron.

"Maybe you should read something aloud," Harry suggested as Ginny spun on her toes from trying a reverse counter which, were she to get it, would put her up with the rest of the Second Years.

"You talking to me?" Ginny breathlessly asked.

"Either one of you," Harry said more stiffly than intended.

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The next day, Freelanders saved Harry from any difficult-to-compose owls. During lunch break, Aaron received an envelope of distinctive, creamy smooth paper. Harry focussed on his sandwich while Aaron opened the letter and scrunched up his face in perplexion as his eyes moved over the page. He scratched his head and folded the message away to finish his lunch, vaguely peeved.

Harry caught Aaron before he could leave the tea room but after everyone else had departed. “What was that?” he asked conversationally.

Aaron pulled the letter out again. “Something from Lord Freelygranders,” he said, making Harry hold in a cringe.

“A party invitation?” Harry teased, feeling more deceptive than he preferred to be.

“No, or, I don’t think so. He wants me to stop by Friday evening. Merlin knows why. So he can lecture me about the proper role for the Select British Wizard, or something,” Aaron said, assuming a posher accent as he did so.

“Do you want company?” Harry asked, not wanting to leave his friend hanging out there with a man who did not see any risk in what he intended to tell his long-lost son.

Aaron turned to Harry as they reached the training room door. “You’re willing to come along?” he asked in disbelief. “Harry, I would take Draco Malfoy along for company rather than go alone.” He slipped inside, saying, “I’ll buy you a week of fancy dinners if you will.”

Kerry Ann raised her bushy head. “What’s this? What’s this? Fancy dinners are in the offing?”

“You don’t need to do anything in return,” Harry said as he slid into his seat.

“Oh, don’t destroy the market!” Kerry Ann protested. “I was just about to bid higher than you.”

Harry wanted to ask if Aaron’s mum was around, but held back on doing so on the theory that it may later tip off that he knew something beforehand. He could feel a more straightforward, perhaps younger, version of himself admonishing him for that.

After training, Harry waited around in the Aurors’ office for Tonks. He had thought of a possible present for his guardian’s fortieth birthday, something that fit in well with recent conversations they had had, but he needed to know if Tonks still had the thing he would need.

Tonks finally hustled by and Harry followed her to the file room, which worked perfectly for a private conversation. Harry ran some security spells just because he

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felt he should all the time now. Doing this reminded him of Moody and he wondered what had become of the old Auror, as he had not been following Harry for a blissfully long time.

“Hey, Harry,” Tonks said without looking up from the ten-foot-long file drawer she had slung out and let glide to a rumbling stop before perusing the labels. Harry’s Muggle-raised brain could not help but notice that the cabinet it emerged from was perhaps two-foot deep.

“I was wondering if you had returned the cane?”

“The cane?” she echoed.

“Yeah, the one I fetched the other night...” Harry hoped she’d catch on because he was leery of speaking clearly despite checking for anyone listening in.

Her nose was buried in a file. “Oh, I guess it’s still there. I forgot about it.”

“Oh good. I want to borrow it.”

Tonks looked over the top edge of the file and Harry expected a lecture, but instead she said in a more sultry tone, “Why don’t you stop by and fetch it? I’ll owl you through the Floo when I get home.”

Harry smiled and felt an awakening vibration run from his shoulder blades to his knees. “Aaron’s my guard, so that should work. I just have to make a run to the sweet shop and I’ll be over.”



With dread unmatched in the last few months, Harry strode beside Aaron up to the doors of the Frelander estate. As per usual under such circumstances, the journey up the drive, waiting at the door, and being led inside by a butler, took place in a quick blur.

As they stood alone in Lord Frelander’s presence, Harry secretly willed Aaron to behave himself, at least until he understood the circumstances.

“Sir,” Aaron said and accepted the seat indicated by their host.

Frelander fingered a thick leather binder full of papers before setting it between the three of them on a low, stout table with lion-paw-tipped legs. He began, “Mr. Potter knows why we are here, and I am glad he has arranged to attend this meeting.”

“He does?” Aaron said in surprise, glancing at Harry, who neglected to glance back.

Frelander went on, “And I see that he has remained silent about something I thought best for me to apprise you of.”

He gazed at Harry, expecting a response. Harry said critically, “I didn’t know how to begin.”

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“Yes, well, I suppose that’s true.” Frelander reached for the paperwork and flipped it open, making Harry grit his teeth together.

This isn’t about official documents, Harry silently berated the man. He felt a wave of nausea and wished he were elsewhere, but then reminded himself that Aaron should not go through this alone.

“Where’s your mum?” Harry asked his friend.

Aaron replied, “Paris, at some show or another. She’ll be home next week.”

“Good,” Harry breathed, then pinned his eyes on the side wall in case their host wished to call him on that with a meaningful look.

Frelander said to Aaron, “There are a few things you do not know...”

Aaron waved his hand. “There are many things I do not know,” he commented dismissively in a stronger accent.

“Hmf,” Frelander muttered, but his mood held, thankfully. “As I was saying. There are a few things you should be apprised of, now that I’ve determined you are worthy of knowing them.”

Harry bit his lips to keep from mouthing the word “worthy”. Part of him wanted to shout. He would prefer to face Voldemort again than face what was about to transpire and he wondered at his nearly visceral reaction.

Frelander said, “Perhaps we shall get straight to the point. It is like this, Mr. Wickem; your father is not who you thought he was.”

“What are you blathering about?” Aaron asked. “What was he?”

Frelander frowned and shot Aaron a judgmental look. “Not what. Whom.” He waited a pause. “As in not Bertram Wickem, but myself.”

Aaron stood up and backed away from his chair. He laughed uneasily. “You’re a nutter. What potions did you confuse this morning?” He glanced at Harry, who was remembering Candide’s words of he may be wrong, and could only shrug helplessly. Aaron put his hand around the glossy wood edging the chair back and recovered himself. “No wonder you asked what my mum was doing,” he commented to Harry.

“She should be here, maybe,” Harry said to no one in particular.

Aaron said, “Yes, she should. Because I don’t believe you.” The last was directed at their host.

“It is no matter if you believe me,” Frelander commented, sounding unaffected. He flipped to a long parchment sporting a widely-bordered rectangle packed solid with flourished writing. “These are my revised wills, for your edification.”

Aaron dropped back into his chair, boney arms crossed. “Oh, so, you’ve deemed me worthy have you?” he asked, voice dripping with disrespect.

Frelander shrugged it off without a flicker. “Yes, I have.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Freelander's impermeable skin disarmed Aaron. His eyes danced down to the stack of papers. "You really believe it, don't you? No wonder you were always riding my arse when I was younger. If it weren't for you, I may have done my N.E.W.T.s," he accused.

"Just one of the reasons I deemed you a lost cause," Freelander stated. "Would you like to see a copy of the estate's inventory?"

"No," Aaron said. "I've seen the real thing enough times. Is this a bribe of some sort?"

Freelander propped his hands on his silk-clad knees and said, "Well, you may have gained enough drive to make something out of your life, but I see you still rampantly mis-ascribe motivation where your superiors are concerned."

Harry expected a cutting retort to that, but Aaron merely stared at the older man before him, face drained of expression.

"Why don't you speak with your mother," Freelander suggested, sitting up so straight as to put the papers on the table out of reach.

"I will," Aaron said after a beat. "I definitely will."

Freelander leaned elegantly forward to close the leather case. "Why don't we take care of the papers after you have done that. I think it will go better then."

Aaron frowned at this attestation of confidence. He sat forward, hands on hips. "Am I excused from your presence, then?"

Still unruffled and perhaps even amused but hiding it well, Freelander flipped his hand in the air. "By all means."

They did not speak as they departed, nor when Aaron saw Harry home. Snape had arrived for the weekend, relieving Aaron of his guard duty. Aaron managed a passable greeting to his old professor, and with one last pained glance back at Snape and Candide facing each other across the couches while sorting papers, followed Harry back to the dining room to use the Floo.

Harry continued the habit of quiet as he took up a spot on the couch beside Candide, pretending to read from a book he was already familiar with. He felt down and brushed off attempts at drawing him into the sparse conversation.

"Everything all right?" Snape finally asked. At Harry's shrug, he sharpened the edge of his voice and added, "You aren't still brooding about last week's detention, are you?"

"No," Harry tartly replied, and then whispered, "Detention."

"Grounding, as you will have it," Snape replied, but his tone softened and he considered Harry at length before returning to his own work.

Candide glanced around herself in consternation, sorting quickly though the files beside her. "I forgot the Witherhocks second quarter file. Drat." She set everything

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aside and scooted forward in preparation for standing.

Snape said, "I can fetch it for you. It is just upstairs, correct?"

"Thanks, Dear."

Snape returned with the file, unusually patting Candide on the back as he handed it over. He gave Harry a curious glance before returning to his previous seat. Harry expected that if they were alone, he would have been asked again what was wrong. Harry himself was beginning to wonder what was wrong. All he knew was that he felt vaguely annoyed and adrift, simultaneously in the mood to sulk and in the mood for an argument. Snape may very well have some insight and Harry would reach the point of availing himself of his piercing conversation, he just was not quite there yet. Watching his guardian's growing solicitousness with his pregnant wife eased his most immediate pain for some reason.

Just as Harry was bedding down his pets, Snape rapped on the door and entered without waiting to be called inside. He pushed the door closed behind him.

Said Snape, "You seem quite put-out, Harry, and I am at a loss to guess why."

Harry latched Kali's cage door and watched her burrow under her rags until only a tuft of violet showed, lost among the multi-colored fabrics.

"I'm not really in the mood to talk," Harry said while staring into the cage rather than make the effort at Occlusion. "Anyway, it's your birthday and I don't want to argue – in case it comes to that."

Shifting fabric indicated that Snape had crossed his arms. "It is no matter that it is my birthday," he observed dismissively. "It is more important to understand what is bothering you."

Harry cleared off his bed for sleep and dropped onto it, all the while keeping his gaze averted. "I don't know what it is."

"You deny that you are angry with your punishment-"

"It's not that."

"Candide believes it is."

"Really, Severus, it's fine," Harry insisted, glancing Snape's way. Snape's eyes narrowed and Harry glanced away fast enough to not give anything away.

"Why won't you look at me?" Snape asked.

Harry stared down at his bed where his feet and knees made ridges under the duvet. "Because I'm tired," he said.

Snape dropped his arms and said, "I will give you a bit more time to brood, but not much."

Harry wanted to challenge what methods he planned to employ at that time, but decided that may lead to an argument, so he said nothing but goodnight in response to the same.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



The day began with stabs of sunlight but they were soon squeezed off by low, dense clouds. Lunch was to be the celebratory meal, so Harry slipped away well before then to arrange his gifts.

In his room, he wrote out two letters in a careful hand and addressed one to Snape and one to himself. He then laid everything out that he would need on the edge of the bed, all clearly in view, all straight and deliberate. His actions felt ritualistic and strange. Perhaps there was a point to be made with what he was planning, a notion that only reinforced the idea, given how constricted he had been by his guardian's rules, and how sharply he felt the betrayal Aaron was suffering. The letters had been difficult to write, too difficult. They should have been easy, but his mind had drifted off repeatedly while he worked at them. But they were finished satisfactorily enough and lay sealed in envelopes before him, waiting.

Harry took a deep breath, forced his lips to cock into a devious smile at the surprise this would cause, and took up the cane.

Harry stared down at the strange bed before him. The room was strange too, but he had been asleep, dreaming about failing a history examination at school, and was glad to be dreaming of something else. At least, he thought he was. He automatically picked up the envelope addressed to him. Letters were never addressed to him, so this was novel in and of itself. As he opened the letter, he noticed the clothes laid out neatly to the right, a fine white shirt, sweater vest and trousers. They made Harry more acutely aware of the flopping hand-me-down pyjamas he wore, complete with tears Dudley had inflicted on them while chasing Harry himself around the breakfast table.

The letter made very little sense.

Dear Harry,

This is sort of a strange letter, I realize, but try your best to understand it. You can back out at any time by following the instructions tied to the silver half-cane you are holding. The person who wrote this letter is you, yourself, only a much older version of you, twice as old. The magic cane cuts your age in half, you see. I (or we I suppose) have been adopted by the man who owns this house. He's a wizard, as are you, turns out.

A SURFEIT OF FATHERS

Harry frowned at the letter and flipped it over to check the back of it, just for the heck of it. It was signed by himself all right. He kept reading, smooth, young brow creased deeply.

Well, I won't bore you with everything. Suffice to say you (or us) have got a bit old for having a dad, really, and he isn't quite ready to stop being a dad, so I thought to give him a younger version of us as a present for his birthday today. I know that sounds a bit odd, but I thought you might enjoy that too, as well as getting some nice clothes to wear (they are lying out on the bed) and a decent present, even though it isn't your birthday. Certainly you are owed some past presents.

Harry stared at the letter, finding it surprisingly hard to have his trials so well understood. He was intrigued by the notion of a decent present, given how familiar he was with his cousin receiving them.

I'll keep this short. If you don't mind having the afternoon with a real family, a nice lunch, and little present then take the other letter and go downstairs where the wrapped gifts are laid out on the side table and look for one with your name on the bottom of it. If you are scared and don't want to do this just follow the instructions on the cane and you'll be back to normal.

It was signed in a neater, smoother version of his own signature.

On the assumption that he was most likely still dreaming, Harry eagerly slipped on the nice clothes. He repeatedly stroked the sweater vest, amazed that it fit snugly instead of hanging down to his knees. He gazed at himself in the mirror inside the wardrobe door and thought that probably random strangers would not peer at him in sympathy or with disapproval upon seeing him like this. Attempts at patting down his hair failed, so he closed the door and steeled himself to go downstairs. The room was chilly so he tugged down the robe hanging on the bed post and shrugged it on, finding comfortable familiarity in having to avoid tripping over its excessive length.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He scooped up the letter labeled Severus and pocketed it, figuring the odd label would become clear with time but certain it was not meant for him.

Harry, adept at sneaking silently to avoid his relatives, crept down the stairs and easily located the shifting and colorfully laden table of presents. After deciding the moving figures on the paper were harmless, he leaned close to check each of half a dozen packages from people named Minerva, Hagrid, Jiggers – which gave Harry a giggle, Candide, and Harry himself, until finally on the end found one with no top label, but with his name on the bottom. He sat down on the floor and proceeded to open it with slow relish.

Someone entered the room. It was a lean man with shoulder-length hair wearing floor-sweeping black robes. He spotted Harry there on the floor and stopped suddenly, scuffing his foot. He faintly shook his head and said, “I should not even ask, I think.”

Harry fumbled in the deep pockets of his robes and held out the second letter. With confident strides, the man approached and took it from him. He tore and snapped the letter open with one quick motion and proceeded to read it. Harry went back to studying the brightly colored wooden box before him, bearing three giant interlocking cursive Ws on the lid.

When the man did not move right away after reading, Harry asked, “What’s it say?”

To his relief the man replied easily, “It says, it is better to be in trouble for something truly harmless.” He folded the letter away and stared at Harry rather disarmingly. “I do hope he does not think I prefer you to him.”

Harry lifted his boney shoulders and dropped them again, hoping it was all right to not have an answer. With the man towering over him, Harry returned his attention to the box, which opened by sliding the lid rather than lifting. Inside, neatly sectioned areas held all manner of sweets: chocolates, fruit gummies, toffees, bon bons. Harry plucked out a toffee and happily unwrapped it.

Footsteps approached and a bark of laughter sounded. Harry looked up to find a plain, brown-haired woman holding her hand over her mouth as she peered at him. Grinning broadly, she said, “Drat, that’s a good present. No wonder he wouldn’t tell me what he’d got you.”

“Don’t encourage him so,” the man complained, gliding over to sit on the couch where he folded and pocketed the letter with undo care.

“Encourage him,” she echoed, laughing.

With some effort because of a swollen belly, she sat down beside Harry on the floor and examined the sweets.

“Can I have one?” she asked brightly.

A SURFEIT OF FATHERS

Harry nudged the box in her direction and she selected a chocolate with hardy fingers. She smelled sweetly of ginger and powder, not at all like Aunt Petunia.

“Do you want one?” she asked the man, sounding to be teasing. When his eyes merely narrowed slightly, she cajoled, “Oh, come on, lighten up a little.” She selected another chocolate and stood with well-practiced awkwardness. “Well, just leave him this way, then,” she said, smile ringing in her voice.

The man replied wryly, “Tempting, isn’t it? But it won’t work. The cane’s magic wears off in two or three weeks.”

“Shame,” she muttered. She shifted over to make space between them and said, “Come here, Harry,” while patting the cushion.

Harry peered at each of them. The man’s annoyed expression was amplified by his fierce profile. The woman was still highly amused.

As Harry took the indicated seat, she patted him on the back and said, “Come on, Severus, he’ll be good practice.”

“I doubt that,” Snape said.

The woman slipped an arm around Harry, which he wanted to resist, but was not certain would be allowed, given how Dudley was forced to accept excessive affection, even when he wished otherwise.

“How are you doing, Harry?” she asked.

Harry shrugged again and waited until he had nibbled down a chewy licorice before replying, “I’m just dreaming, right?”

She patted his back. “That’s the spirit. As long as you don’t think it’s a bad dream.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder at the man, whom he felt very uncertain about. “No, not a bad dream,” he said, because there was something superficial about the man’s anger, unlike his relatives’. Harry felt like the man just wanted to make a point, rather than truly be cruel.

Harry plucked yet another toffee off out of the slot that had not grown short of any despite the number he had eaten. In fact, far from running out, the top one jostled up to the rim was yet another new flavor.

The woman said, “Hm, maybe you should slow down on those.”

“Maybe you should cease until after dinner,” the man added more sharply.

“It doesn’t really matter,” the woman said. “He’ll change back before the sweets catch up with him.”

The man stood up. “He’s always resisted obeying anything,” he said in the tone of Harry’s aunt and her neighbor friends, proclaiming him a hopelessly delinquent cause.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Harry slid the box closed. The man turned and caught his eye with his piercing gaze, and like a candle melting from rigid taper to amorphous stub, gave in. Harry was not sure how he could tell this – partly it was his eyes and partly it was the way his shoulders relaxed. He stepped back over and stood Harry up and took the seat he had just occupied so as to look him directly in the eye.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, in an insistent and wholly new tone that promised nothing beyond stalwart assistance.

Harry, who had been badly beaten up by Dudley’s friends over the last year, had finally learned to avoid them for the most part. He was only mildly bruised at the moment, from one incident where Dudley had run him over on the staircase on the way down to meet his dad, honking from the car for a promised trip to the cinema.

“I’m fine right now,” Harry replied. His skin prickled because no one had ever asked him that before, certainly not in that tone.

Harry’s shoulders were released, and the man said, using a conflicting tone of caring demand, “If you require anything, you will ask for it, correct?”

Harry nodded. The woman stroked the man on the side of the head once, lips cocked into a painful smile.

“Can I have another toffee?” Harry asked, finding the lure of the rare wooden box to be too much.

“No,” the man replied in unison with the woman saying, “yes.”

The three of them held still. “It doesn’t matter,” the woman pointed out again.

The man said, “It does matter.”

Harry found them both funny all of a sudden. The man sat back and crossed his arms. “It seems we do have a few things to work out. I will not tolerate that level of pandering.”

“But it won’t matter in the end. Why bother enforcing discipline when it won’t matter? It’s just excess sweets. Look how skinny he is.”

Harry stood there, trying to look skinnier and perhaps a little pathetic.

The man gave the woman a glare Harry now felt confident he could peg as superficial. This was confirmed when the man uttered, “Fine. Go. Ahead.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, and set the box on the floor to carefully select what to eat next, just in case the man changed his mind.

“He’ll eventually run out,” the woman said.

“No, he won’t. That is a rather expensive box of sweets that cannot actually be used up.”

Harry, sweet held out before his open mouth, stared at the man in surprise at this proclamation. “Wow,” Harry said, peering cross-eyed at his fingers sinking into the sides of the toffee he held, thrilled at this magical notion.

A SURFEIT OF FATHERS

The woman said, "I would expect that they could not afford to sell boxes of sweets that never run out; it would seriously cut into future sales."

"They are doing rather well, financially, as far as I can tell."

After a few minutes of silent observation of Harry while Harry studied each moving cartoon on the discarded wrapping paper, the man said, "He is the same as he is now."

"You think so?" the woman replied.

"I sometimes think the Muggles have it easy, raising children incapable of magic."

With too much emotion the woman said, "Do you really feel that way?"

A pregnant silence followed before the man said, "I'm not certain why it matters so," in a somewhat tentative tone. "I was simply making an observation."

"Well, it matters..." She faded out and Harry glanced up to see her face struggle while she found words. Her manner shifted to factual and she said, "You have no idea how much pregnant witches fear giving birth to a Squib, that they might inadvertently do something wrong and the child will not have magic as a result."

"I don't think anything you may do or not do could have an impact on that."

"You're rare in that case. Most of Wizardom believes otherwise."

A pause, and then the man said with a hint of accusation, "Have you been worrying about this?"

Her head pulled back, "Of course I've been worrying about this," she burst out.

Harry munched harder on the licorice without realizing it, taking piece after piece.

"Well, cease to do so. It does not matter," the man insisted.

"You really wouldn't mind if we had a Squib?" she challenged.

The man's expression retreated. That was a very hard question, Harry could tell. In a quiet voice the man said, "I'll admit I had not seriously considered that we might, but of course the possibility is always there." He fell silent again. "But rest easy that I would not blame you for it." His gaze shifted thoughtfully far away. "Perhaps partly in the interest of denying everything the bad company I have associated with in the past stood for... I will insist that I will not care if the boy is a Squib. I am amazed enough at having a son at all."

The woman gestured in Harry's direction, "Another son, you mean," she said with a hint of tease.

Snape looked at Harry. "Yes. Another son."

This made Harry's ribs hurt and for a second he could not breathe, but this was short lived as his next attempt at pulling forth a licorice felt clumsy and his hand as heavy as the time he had to pick himself up out of an icy cold puddle in his woolen mittens after Dudley dropped him there. Harry looked down and emitted a sound halfway between a squeak and a yelp. His hand was swelling rapidly, so much so that his fingers were threatening to disappear into the balloon of his hand.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Yah!” Harry said, scrambling away from the box of sweets.

The man said, “And now we know how the Weasley twins can afford to sell boxes of sweets that never run out.” He caught up with Harry, who was crabbing awkwardly away from the box with one hand while dragging the other, which now felt glued to a bowling, along beside. He made another noise of distress and curled around the cursed hand protectively.

The woman was crouching beside him as well, and she waved a stick at his hand, sending sparks at it.

“I doubt such a simple counter will reverse it. I expect the twins sell the antidote for even more than the exorbitant price of the sweets.” He peered at both sides of Harry’s globular hand then slid Harry’s sleeve up to study his arm. “I can mix a curative easy enough, but I will need to fetch something from my stocks at school.” He stood with a swish of his robes. “Keep him calm until I return, if you would.”

“Come on, Harry,” the woman said, lifting him easily to his feet and guiding him to the couch.

Harry’s initial alarm was wearing off and he felt a bit silly until he studied his hand again and had to close his eyes at the horrific proportions of it. Her mantra of, “It’s going to be all right. Just sit tight,” worked remarkably well, especially since Harry had never had anything like it directed at him.

Harry let himself be held in a loose embrace while they waited. A clock ticking occupied the silence. Harry moved his hand slightly, surprised it did not hurt given how far his skin had stretched. He resisted trusting that something was going to be done to help him, maybe it would go away on its own, if not.

The woman stroked his head and said, “You’ll be fine and then we’ll have lunch.”

Harry stomach rumbled at the thought. He propped his grotesque hand on the back of the couch out of the way. “I guess I should have listened to Mr. Snape,” he muttered morosely. Harry, who had been sleeping when this whole bizarre thing started, scrubbed at one eye with his unencumbered fingertip and asked, “So, I really have a dad now.”

“Yes.”

“That’s good,” Harry replied, feeling too many mixed emotions to contain them all, so he closed his eyes and buried his face in the velvety, mauve-colored robes encompassing him.

She patted his head, “Yup, it is. We’ll get you fixed up, have lunch and get you back to normal.”

Voice muffled by fabric, Harry said, “The letter said I didn’t need a dad any longer. I don’t understand that.”

“It’s true in many ways, and not true in others.”

A SURFEIT OF FATHERS

Harry raised his head to say, "Do you consider that a reply?"

She laughed. "You're a cheeky one. Yes, I consider that a reply. How about this: you don't need Severus any longer except to bail you out when you get into trouble..." She shook his thin forearm to make his bulbous hand wobble. "Just like this."

"Oh," Harry said, thin mouth turning downward. "But that was that magical box's fault," he pointed out.

"You are very good at getting into trouble using all sorts of magic, Harry," she said in a tone that precluded argument, so Harry offered her none further. "All sorts."

Insistence that Harry was always in trouble came as no surprise to him and even gave him a feeling of rightness with the world. He sighed and rested his head back against the couch cushion.

Someone sitting nearby, jostled Harry awake. He blinked his eyes and tried to remember his strange surroundings. The man in black was sitting beside him. He uncorked an etched glass bottle with a satisfying plomp sound. Harry's heart increased its pace as he realized that had he been dreaming, well, he shouldn't be now, because he had just woke up.

Harry rubbed his eyes and squinted into the cup held out to him. It contained a viscous orange and grey striped slime that clung to the glassy surface of the porcelain cup. The woman handed Harry his glasses, which she must have removed while he slept. Harry did not really want to put them on given how disgusting the substance in the glass looked when he could not see it clearly.

The man held the glass out expectantly. "Go on," he urged. "It will cancel the curse on your hand."

Harry wanted to point out that drinking the offered stuff had to be worse than having bowling-ball hand, but he assumed like all suggestions he made to adults, this one would not fare well and would only bring on retribution.

Harry sat forward and took the cup but moved it no closer to his nose. It sloshed strangely in the cup; the colored layers slid and snaked over one another, refusing to mix. A black-stained, thin liquid swam in between the layers, pooling disgustingly when he tipped the vessel.

"You want me to drink this?" Harry asked, voice croaking.

Candide laughed and put her arm more firmly around him. "Fraid so. It won't hurt you. It's just a potion."

"A potion," Harry echoed doubtfully, resisting more because the scent of brackish water had reached his nose, wrinkling it.

"We can leave him like this and just change him back," the woman suggested.

The man said in a questioning voice, "I thought we were going to keep him for dinner."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The woman froze, Harry could feel it transmitted through her arm. Then she laughed lightly. Harry glanced her way to find her eyes brightened by gladness.

“I guess, you have to drink up, Harry,” she said kindly, but firmly.

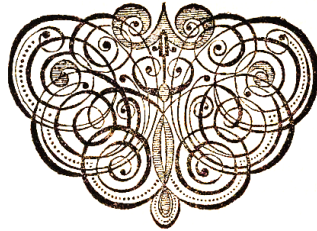
Harry, holding his breath, gulped down the contents of the glass. As the potion slipped and swam down his throat he realized he had not done it to get back his hand; he had just done it for them, mostly for her. They seemed worth the effort, too much so, because if he was not going to stay, as they implied, he did not want the burden of these feelings later when they would be of no use, and in fact threatened to haunt him.

Harry, hand normal, slid off the front of the couch and knelt before the wooden box of infinite sweets, and simply stared at it, not wishing to touch it again right away.

“It’s dinner time,” the man said. “Come, Harry,” he added, expecting to be obeyed, and Harry did.

Author’s Notes: Thanks for all the great feedback. It’s really nice to have. Hope everyone is having a great new year (for those on the Gregorian calendar, that is).

CHAPTER TWENTY



TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 1

Harry, supporting his overfilled stomach, retreated to the couches and dropped on one with a groan.

“You did eat too much,” Candide pointed out, sending an accusing glance at Snape.

Snape waved his hand in a manner that replied no matter.

Candide began ferrying the gifts from the table. “You should open your presents.”

Snape sat beside Harry and said, “Perhaps we should return this one, before opening the others.”

“Oh,” she sang in disappointment. “Well, let’s get a photo of you two, first.” She strode into the drawing room and returned presently, holding a large black camera. With a clack she slid a holder of film into the back of it and said, “Okay, smile.”

Snape subtly tugged Harry closer. Harry glanced up at him and the flash went off.

Harry rubbed his eyes, the light had filled the room and made his eyes water. Candide loaded another slate of film. “Hang on,” she said, hovering the camera with her wand. “I want to be in the next one.”

She sat on Harry’s other side and flicked her wand at her side and the flash went off again. Harry peered through floating spots now. When Candide plucked the camera out of the air, Harry said, “More magic!”

“If you wish,” Snape lazily said, and he hovered the cane down over the balcony.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It came to rest on the floor at their feet where it rolled a few inches before coming to a halt.

“Are you ready to return to nineteen?” Snape asked.

“Maybe. I’m having fun. I don’t usually get to have fun. Or have photographs taken. Can I see it?”

“The photograph has to go to the chemists,” Candide said. “It doesn’t come out right away.”

“Oh,” Harry said, disappointed. “I’ve never seen a picture of myself before.”

She said, “Oh, there’s your album upstairs.” With a wave of her wand, she brought it along the same path as the cane.

Harry’s face brightened upon opening it to the first page. “Is that... who’s that?” he asked, not wanting to dare believe.

“Your parents,” Snape replied neutrally, but he leaned in to give a tour of the photos. “Your parents many friends; they had no shortage,” he added dryly. “Yourself at school.”

“That’s a different school.”

“Yes, one you appreciated more than your previous one, I should think.”

They sat like that until the album had been fully paged through, including the numerous loose photographs stuck in the back, and Harry blinked, disoriented by everything he had seen and all his questions which had received insufficient answers. “I think it’s time to return you to that young man there in that last photographs,” Snape said, setting the album gently aside. “Take up the cane if you will.”

Harry bit his lip and unfolded the paper tied to the cane. With a last glance at each of them, he worked up some courage and followed the instructions. He grew taller in a small rush of wind.

Harry, at nineteen, glanced between the two of them. Candide spoke first. “Good present,” she said. “I had fun. Severus had fun too, but he is going to pretend he didn’t.”

Harry set the cane on the floor in case it may decide to reassert its magic because he held it too long. “Am I in trouble?” he asked his guardian.

“No,” Snape replied softly. “I AM a bit concerned that you decided that was an appropriate thing to do. Up to and including borrowing that from what must have been the Ministry Magic Artefacts Archive...”

“It was still in the work area,” Harry glibly replied with a small smile. He waved the velvet sack down from his room and began the difficult task of hovering the cane into its narrow confines without touching it. “But I should return it right away.”

“Do you think it’d be missed so soon?” Candide asked. “I think it’d be fun to see it on someone else I know.” Her sly grin stretched her face.

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 1

Harry ceased hovering the cane into the sack and grabbed hold of it through the velvet with the curved handle still sticking out. He gave his overly serious adoptive father a looking over. "That's an excellent idea," Harry said, also grinning.

Snape's gaze bounced between them, disbelieving. He crossed his arms. "Surely, you have lost your minds."

Candide stepped over and tugged on his sleeve. "Oh, come now, Severus; it would only be for a few minutes. I'd so much like to meet your older, I mean, younger self."

"It isn't my fault you don't remember me," he sniped at her.

"I was buried in books from day one. I've told you that. I certainly wouldn't have paid any attention to a grouchy Slytherin five years ahead of me," she teased. "Come on. You're so secretive, and that only makes it more alluring."

"You truly do not know what you are asking for," Snape argued, growing angry. "I was not what most would define as 'good company' twenty years ago; it is unbelievable that you would seriously suggest that I do this." He gestured at the cane with his upper hand without uncrossing his arms.

Harry lifted the cane closer to his reach. "So, get on with it, then," he urged.

Snape turned his dismay Harry's way. "Why in Merlin's name...?"

"I'm curious too," Harry said. "I think it's a brilliant idea. Don't you want to be twenty again?"

"NO."

"Well, we want you to be, come on," Harry cajoled. "Just for a few minutes. We promise to be nice to you."

Candide nodded in support of this, showing her broad teeth, she smiled so widely.

"It is not you I am worried about," Snape insisted, but he sounded worn down. "Merlin... you will regret this." He held his wand out in Harry's direction. "Take my wand."

"You don't need to do that. I could use a good duel," Harry continued to tease, pocketing the wand. "Sure yours won't just come with you? I had my old clothes on."

"As powerful as this device is, I do not expect it can regenerate a magical item from the past." He huffed and stared at each of them before shoving to his feet. "You truly will regret this," he repeated, angry again. "I am only doing this to prove it to you."

Good natured with anticipation, Candide said, "We'll take any reason."

Snape behaved even more uncertain when he turned to her. Harry interpreted this effortlessly and said, "Really, Severus, isn't it you who told me you can't run away from your past?"

"That would not have been me," Snape stated in a low voice.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Oh. Maybe it was Dumbledore then.” Harry held the cane out invitingly, face overtly pleading, which rendered it years younger.

Snape gestured and commanded of Candide. “Stand back.”

Candide moved over, putting Harry between them.

“Much better,” Snape said. He reached for the cane. “Fools, both of you,” he snarled lightly before a small woosh replaced him with a different version in exactly the same pose.

No one spoke.

A much younger Snape, sallow skinned and thinner, glanced away from Candide and glared at Harry. He noticed the cane he held, still half inside the sack. Candide took hold of Harry’s robe sleeve, not so much in alarm as in overwhelming amusement.

“Put it down on the floor,” Harry suggested.

Snape did so, slowly, eyes taking in the room without leaving Harry for more than a second at a time. He wandered sideways around the hall in this manner. His robes were reminiscent of Lupin’s, patched and faded at the seams. His sulky posture gave him a pronounced vulturish attitude as he took in the details around him.

He stopped in the dining room, the most inviting room in the house, Harry and Candide quietly shuffled in behind. “What is this place, and who are you... some Potter cousin?” His eyes narrowed, but Harry had his mind Occluded.

“Something like that,” Harry replied. “As to where you are, this is your house.”

On his younger face, Snape’s brows twisted more starkly in confusion. His eyes danced over the items on the mantelpiece, picking out two for special attention. He did the same on the back wall where decorative bottles lined a high shelf. Harry suspected they were things Snape had owned long enough to recognize them.

“My house,” Snape stated. He stalked by Harry, moving faster than expected, while still glancing back to keep tabs on Harry. While he circled the hall again, he felt in his pockets and bit his lip, presumably not finding his wand. He ranged farther, stopping in the library to stare at the shelves, shoulders falling as he grew distracted by the plenty arrayed before him. Harry and Candide stood in the doorway and watched him scan the collection.

Snape finally drew himself from the multitude of books to stare at the two of them again, still generating a glare for Harry. Winky appeared in a sparkle.

“Master is wishing for tea,” the elf said, bowed, and left a laden tray behind on the writing desk.

Snape stared down at the tray and his lips moved silently repeating the word “master”. Given how thin he was, Harry expected him to take up a currant scone from the pile provided, but he did not.

He looked over at the two of them. “I don’t understand this.”

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 1

Candide slipped in and helped herself to a scone, brushing crumbs off her belly after each bite.

Harry said, "You are twenty years out of time."

There was no appreciable reaction to this. After a glance around the room again, Snape turned to Candide. "Who are you?"

Candide was chewing, so Harry supplied, "This is your wife."

The overly expressive eyebrows came into play again. Snape looked Candide over, especially her clearly pregnant belly. No one spoke, letting him take that in. Candide grinned at him, enjoying this.

"How did I get here?" Snape asked slowly with strange care.

"We didn't use a Time-Turner if that's what you're asking. You can't damage anything."

Snape's attention redirected to Harry. "Twenty years," he repeated. "You cannot be James Potter's brother, in that case."

"I'm his son," Harry said, getting an odd stab from having to provide that information to this man.

This produced no change in Snape's expression. He slipped by Harry and circled the hall as though hunting for something, hands checking his pockets again. "So, where is your father?" Snape asked.

Something clicked decisively inside of Harry. "He's dead."

Again no change in expression occurred in their guest. "Why am I here?"

Candide wandered over by the couches to where Snape's circle would take him. She sent a sympathetic frown at Harry. Snape came up short and stared at her, bordering on undone.

"We just wanted to meet you," she said. "And to wish you a happy birthday. It would be your birthday today, even for you."

He clearly did not find this a valid answer, but his scowl faded as he read her eyes.

"Severus?" she prodded with some feeling.

It was subtle, but Harry caught it. Snape rubbed the front of his left arm. Harry, still closer to the library than the two of them, announced, "Your mark shouldn't be bothering you."

Snape's clear shift from borderline amazement to be faced with Candide to glaring suspicion of him pleased Harry. Somewhere deep inside of him, it irked him to see this Snape believing he deserved a family. The two of them locked gazes.

"Harry?" Candide queried, confused.

"You didn't ask what happened to James," Harry said, approaching them without meaning to.

"I don't care," Snape returned. "Good riddance to him."

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“Uh oh,” Candide breathed. She stepped between them, but Snape stepped smoothly out from behind her.

“Are you trying to protect him?” Harry asked her, feeling something brackish rising up in his core. “He’s nothing but...” a Death Eater, Harry held back on finishing but it felt true in a way that could not be denied.

“Harry,” Candide said more sharply. “You know who he’s going to become.”

Harry stepped closer, instinctively thinking he should get Candide out of the way, or at least get between them. Snape stood his ground as Harry came close, but it appeared to require some resolve to do so.

“It’s a wonder what Dumbledore saw in him. He doesn’t know what he’s done,” Harry said, feeling angry and like he needed to empty his stomach of a foul meal.

Snape rubbed his arm again, and Harry, without warning grabbed hold of Snape’s left wrist. He could feel the taint of the mark under his hand, calling to something deep within him. Harry heard himself say, “He’s just Voldemort’s servant, nothing more. Just an empty vessel for dark magic.” Surprising vehemence powered these words out, holding Snape from struggling despite flinching at the Name.

Candide touched Harry’s arm. “Harry, don’t hurt him.”

“I’m not hurting him,” Harry said, even though his grip was quite firm. “He just can’t stand to hear his master’s true name.” Candide let go and took a step back. Harry said to Snape, but not in a reassuring tone, “I took care of your master. He can’t bother anyone now that he’s a helpless Muggle.”

The smug doubt that flickered over Snape’s face, made heat flare into flame inside Harry. He put his thumb over the Mark and felt for the foul energy of it, lying dormant. It sang to something inside himself, which made his anger and frustration go white hot. Snape jerked his arm as his mark burned, freeing himself. Now he stared at Harry with open alarm, bent over his clutched forearm, all of which fed satisfaction into Harry.

“Harry!” Candide snapped, stepping into his face. “Back. Off.”

Harry, before he could re-assess what he was doing or regain any control of his runaway pain, let slip, “You aren’t my mother. Ask him what’s happened... what’s going to happen to my mother. It was his fault.”

His statements, which he knew could sting, found their mark. Snape’s alarm ratcheted up as he glanced between the two of them.

“Harry,” Candide said firmly, teeth clenched, gaze blazing. “Sit down.”

Harry glanced at the empty floor behind him.

“Yes, right there,” she demanded furiously.

Harry had never seen her in this full on angry mode, and never imagined it would be he who put her there. This jarred him out of angry into stunned. He sat down on

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the cool wood floor, fingers finding knot holes in the wide boards, which he grabbed hold of with his fingertips. He avoided both their gazes.

“Sorry about him,” Candide said. “He-”

“What is he referring to?” Snape asked warily, interrupting her.

“Something that happened a very long time ago.” Harry could hear by her modulating voice that she was looking back at Harry frequently as she spoke. “We should switch you back to your normal self now, I think. You’re setting him off, which I didn’t expect.”

“Switch me back...?”

She hovered the cane from the floor. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw her catch it awkwardly with the felt-covered end. “Switch you for your forty-year old self.”

“Forty?” Snape sputtered, dismayed in a whole new way.

“Come now, it’s not that bad,” she teased. “You have this house, this family...”

He must have been Legilimizing her or she had gestured to take Harry in. “Including him?” he gasped.

“Thank you very much,” Harry said, lifting his head. Their glares battled.

“Let’s not start that again,” Candide insisted.

Snape looked away first, down at her feet. Part of Harry wanted to recognize how very lonely he must be to obey her but residual anger and the awakened spirit of something that only wanted hate battled back at that understanding. He watched Candide walk Snape through the cane’s instructions.

Their Snape reappeared and blinked at them. He found Harry on the floor and asked in surprise, “What are you doing there?”

Harry did not feel like explaining. Candide said, “He was being just a bit difficult, so I told him to sit there.”

Snape paused in slipping the cane away. “Harry was?” he asked. His surprise boosted Harry’s embarrassment. They stared at each other with vastly different emotions than moments before: Harry with confused regret and relief that he had control again, Snape with with curious disbelief. Snape tugged the drawstrings on the velvet sack tight and tossed it aside. To Candide, he said, “Give me a few minutes alone with Harry.”

Candide patted Snape on the shoulder with a “welcome back” and went upstairs.

“Can I get up now?” Harry asked, trying not to sound annoyed.

Snape gestured that it did not matter to him. “Have a seat somewhere more comfortable.”

Harry rose with ease and dropped on the couch opposite the one where the cane lay. He fixed his eyes on the black-as-night, supple fabric sack and waited.

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Snape waited too, but finally asked, "What happened?"

Harry filled his lungs with a breath then let it out in a rush. "I got annoyed with him... you... him."

"Yes, but why?" Snape asked in a tone of seeking facts. Harry marveled how very different Snape seemed, standing there in new robes, posture neutral, face concerned. Harry's anger had disappeared just as quickly as Snape had changed, which worried Harry as much as it let him relax. He felt like a puppet with a string pulled by someone else, someone he did not trust.

Harry did not know what to say that would recover his pride. Needing to say something, and getting more upset as he went along the path of these thoughts, Harry explained, "He didn't know what he was going to do. He didn't care what he was going to do."

"Ah," Snape uttered.

"Ah', what?" Harry snapped. "What's this 'ah' stuff. Like you could possibly know what the problem is..."

Snape displayed only amusement at Harry's exasperation.

With less force and some contrition Harry asked, "What?"

"You cannot alter the past," Snape stated.

Harry clenched his hands together and pressed them between his knees. "I know that."

"Yes, but faced with a version of me from November of 1979, you were facing the future, not the past." He sat down beside Harry, slowly as if concerned Harry may object. He spoke deliberately as he went on, "Since I am quite certain you have forgiven me for that mistake, I think your anger was at your helplessness to change things... things which at that instant, for that me, were still to happen."

Harry thought about that. "Maybe," he uttered grudgingly and sighed.

"Are you angry with me now?"

Of all the conflicting things Harry felt right then, including pain at himself for losing control and a hint of fear at the enmity that had risen within him so willingly powered by something he could not control, he could not list anger at Snape among them. "No."

"Hm," Snape uttered. "I expected my younger self to make trouble, not you." He studied Harry as he thought things over, adding, "Interesting test."

"I think I failed it," Harry said, trying to lighten the mood. He regretted most making Snape's mark burn. Why had he done that? He did not like to think of himself as being that cruel.

"Harry?" Snape prompted after a long wait.

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“I’m glad you don’t have a mark anymore,” Harry said, moving one shoulder in a spasmodic circle. “The feel of it wasn’t very nice.”

“You sense it directly now?”

“When I touched him, yes.” The memory made it even more relieving to sit brushing shoulders with his guardian and receive no tainted sense. “I was...” Harry started to say more of what happened, but decided he would rather not.

“You what?”

Why had he been so cruel? “I wasn’t very nice to him is all.”

Snape leaned away as if to get a more general look at Harry. “I feel safe assuming he was not banking on kindness, believe me.”

He responded to Candide, though, Harry thought with a twinge.

Candide returned on quiet feet. “How is it going?” She tossed the sacked cane aside and sat across from them.

Snape touched Harry’s shoulder. “Everything is all right,” Snape said. “And you?”

“Oh, fine. It was nice to see that you. Harry surprised me, is all.”

Snape said with gentle ease, “You had yet to meet Harry in his colors of full temper.”

Harry rolled his eyes. He thought they were past the worst until Candide said, “I had never seen a Dark Mark before.”

Snape’s brow nearly obscured his eyes, it dipped so low. To Harry he said, “You did what?”

“I don’t know why I did that,” Harry said, thoughts far away.

Candide’s face contorted in sympathy. “That was the worst, when Harry made that awful snake tattoo appear, just by grabbing your arm.”

Harry held his breath. Snape’s hand slid off his back and clasped together with his other. His knuckles went white.

“Without a wand? I did not realize you knew how to do that.”

Harry shrugged.

“Harry?” Snape was going to insist.

“I figured out I could do that – when I went to rescue one of the alternate yous.”

A thoughtful pause ensued. “Anything else new you are capable of that I should know about?”

Harry leaned back to consider that.

Candide said, “What does it say that he has to think so hard about the answer?”

Snape said to Harry, “I repeat that I would like to hear about such things in a timely manner.”

“I’ll try to do better about keeping you informed,” Harry said quietly.

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Candide slapped her lap before standing. She said, "But please, don't discuss it in front of Rita Skeeter..."

Both of them looked down at their hands.

That night, Harry received the expected visit from his guardian. He had, in fact, stayed up reading in anticipation of it. The cane, in its sack, stood propped against the wall beside the night stand. Snape's eyes took it in as he sat on the bed. "You can return that without trouble?"

Harry wanted to snoop around the Department of Mysteries after returning it, so he was waiting until the middle of the night. "Yes," he replied.

"Do be careful when you do so." When Harry glanced up at this, his thoughts were snagged. Snape asked, "What do you think you will find there?" with his old kind of cold calm.

"I wanted to look around Moody's desk. If he has one."

"Why would they assign him one, he is dead... officially."

"Well then, Percy's desk. I just want to look around."

Snape reached over for the black-clad cane and held it out. "Do it now, so I know you returned safely without having to find out in the morning."

"It will be safer later," Harry insisted.

Snape set the cane back. "At five then? I want to know you succeeded and do not require rescue."

"Rescue? From the Department of Mysteries?" Harry blurted, chuckling enough to let his book slide off his knees. He laid it face down beside him and hitched his arms around his knees. He did not want an argument and really it was fine if Snape was up waiting for him. "All right."

Harry figured Snape would say more, but he did not. He looked Harry over briefly, stood up, and with a "good night", departed the room.

Harry woke from a groggy dream about playing Quidditch on flying carpets instead of broomsticks to find Snape shaking him by the shoulder. The darkened room reeled while Harry took his bearings. "Is it five?" Harry mumbled.

"Yes," came the familiar warm voice out of the darkness before the lamp flared. When Harry leaned over to grab up the cane, Snape asked drolly, "Perhaps you want to not be caught in your pyjamas?"

Limbs groggy, Harry tossed back the covers and fished some well-used robes out of the bottom of his wardrobe and tossed them on. Snape followed him over and held out the long sack that in the dim light could have been a rent in the fabric of the room.

"Thanks," Harry said. He blinked vigorously to clear his vision, swept his hair back again and slipped away.

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The Department of Mysteries sat in silence as expected. Harry slid the cane back where he had found it: at the bottom of the deeply piled shelving over a work table. He then hunted around for Percy's desk. After circling the two likely work rooms twice, eliminating desks sporting photographs unlikely to be Percy's or discarded envelopes addressed to others in the nearest bin, Harry decided the decisively neat one in the far corner of the second room must be it. He squatted and checked the floor and found two stray red hairs, supporting this. The desk radiated curse sickness, making Harry hesitate to use a spell to pull open the drawers. He may have to be satisfied with what he could see without moving anything or try out his curse negation and risk setting off an alarm. He wanted to step away more than anything, not get closer and certainly not touch it.

Harry stood on tiptoe to peer onto the shelf over the desk and nearly leapt into the air in startlement when a voice said, "Find anything?"

Harry patted his chest and turned to face Moody. Calmly he replied, "No."

The old Auror stood with his arms folded, shoulders cocked with swagger. Behind his scars it was hard to tell if he were angry or delighted at his catch.

"What are you doing here?" Moody asked.

"Looking around," Harry replied. He had no right to be here, but he found it easy to pretend he did.

Moody's glass eye roved over the desk behind Harry. "I wouldn't touch that desk if I were you."

"I figured that out. What's he got to hide?"

"His excuse is that his mates don't like him very much and were fond of leaving him little surprises until he resorted to some decent protection."

Harry stepped back and pondered the desk. "What is it that is so blasted cursed?"

Moody sauntered closer. "An amulet. In the top drawer there. I've never seen the likes. It came in on one of the sweeps of Knockturn Alley's less reputable establishments."

"They let him keep it?"

Moody shrugged. "People that work here like to mess with things like that. Otherwise they'd've found other lines o' work."

They gazed at each other. Moody with sleepy eyes that hid his expression. "Go on home, Potter. Isn't it past your bedtime?"

Harry, despite being grateful to get off without trouble, extended his welcome by saying, "You haven't been following me."

Moody strolled away. "Been busy."

"You told Fudge you were following me."

"I did no such thing. What makes you say that?"

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Harry did not want to answer that because it would prove he had been sneaking into the Department of Mysteries regularly. In the room beyond, the glow of the lamps brightened, indicating someone else had arrived.

Quietly, Moody said, "I know you can jump in and out of here without a hitch. It's sufficient for the moment that you know that I know you can." This sounded vaguely threatening. "I see from the papers that your adoptive father has let the veil fall from his eyes as well. Good."

Harry bit down his reply. A desk drawer opened and closed in the next room.

"You're right I have to go," Harry whispered. "Bedtime and all." And fell through the floor.

Back in Harry's bedroom, Snape stood before the window, hands clasped behind his back.

"It's all set," Harry said. He tossed his robes onto the floor and plonked back onto his bed with a groan at the early hour.

"No additional trouble?"

"Less than expected."

"Good."

Snape departed at lunchtime the following day, allowing Harry to invite Tonks over to replace him. Pink hair standing straight, Tonks greeted Candide first upon arriving, before giving Harry a peck. The extra attention Candide garnered continued to grow in proportion to her belly size.

Tonks sloppily saluting Snape that he was relieved, grinning at her own antics even as she toppled an empty water glass on her back-swing.

"I'll trust you are in good hands," Snape stated dryly before disappearing in the Floo. He dropped fewer hints about disapproving of them each time Tonks visited, giving Harry some relief from his previous relentless disapproval.

The afternoon passed in idle conversation, until Harry insisted that Candide put down her work and join them in a card game. Candide put up a fight, but at the end of the first game, insisted they play a second. Perhaps this was because she lost, but any reason was a good one.

Harry held his hand up close since Tonks' eyes had wandered too much the previous game and he did not want her to win two in a row. "Any progress on convincing Mr. Weasley to remove my guard?" Harry asked.

Tonks shook her head, while Candide tsked Harry.

Harry argued, "I'm so very tired of this, and nothing has happened."

"That couldn't be because you've had a guard?" Candide pointed out, accentuating her sharp tongue by snapping the corner of the card down as she played.

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Harry still had no good counter argument to that, and he wished he did. He tapped his fingers on his cards and sighed. “If Dumbledore had treated me this way, we’d still have Voldemort around, you know,” he complained.

Tonks patted him on the shoulder sympathetically.

After the second game, Candide insisted she must return to sorting through the disarrayed files from her client for the next day’s work.

“Look at this!” she exclaimed, pulling out the first slip from the file. “They are trying to expense Honeydukes purchases. We told them last year that wouldn’t fly, even if they got a Healer’s note saying it was medically required.” She put that slip aside and with a hand propped on her forehead, peered at the next crumpled and reflattened strip on the pile.

“Maybe we’ll leave you to it, then,” Harry said, standing up and thinking ahead to having some much needed time alone with Tonks. “It’s almost over, right?” he asked. “November is.”

Candide’s squint remained fixed on her work. “One way or another, yup. Except those few who risk swallowing Opix Auctoritatis potion before filing for an otherwise impossible extension.”

“What potion?” Harry asked.

“Influence potion,” Tonks provided. “Should be banned.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Because it can be dangerous if it gives you too much influence over yourself. You know, delusions of grandeur, thinking you can fly without a broomstick, or that you can convince Goblins to show you where the gold is hidden. Stuff like that.”

Candide curiously asked, “Why wouldn’t that work?”

“Goblins are immune to it,” Tonks provided. “As are dragons.” She turned to Harry. “Rodgers hasn’t covered potions on the Proposed to be Banned List with you?”

“He covered banned ones. There were enough of those already,” Harry insisted.

Tonks gave Candide a pat on the shoulder and wandered into the main hall where she sat down on the couch. She picked up Harry’s photo album and began flipping through it.

Harry sat close to smell the vaguely peppermint scent of her while peering over her shoulder. She held the album open to an old photo of the Order, finger tracing along figures. The photo had been taken in the dining room at Grimmauld Place. Sirius caught them looking and hid a large parchment behind his back with a sly smile, making Harry’s heart twinge. Moody reached over to take it away, and Sirius relinquished the partly crunched roll and stuffed it away inside his jacket.

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“Let’s go up to my room,” Harry said, torn between sleepiness from his early morning foray and wanting to get closer to her. She made a noise that probably agreed with the former.

Up on his bed, Harry opened the album again to the same picture. His parents stood off to one side, heads leaned in close to discuss something in private. Harry prodded their feet but they just high stepped in place and ignored him.

“I want to see my parents,” Harry said, mind latching onto an idea that felt so elegantly easy it made his mouth water.

Tonks sat down beside him, hands clasped together and stretched out before her. “Of course you do.”

Harry looked away from the album. “No, I really mean it,” he said, excitement budding.

“Harry, please don’t talk like that,” Tonks pleaded, sounding sad.

Harry closed the album and stared at her. “What’s wrong?”

She struggled for words and quietly said, “Please. Let’s just talk about something else.”

Harry, who wanted time to think over his idea, silently agreed, even though he wanted to grill her about what bothered her so. He pulled her back on the bed and lay beside her, staring up at the ceiling.

She was slithering closer, but Harry’s mind was flitting off elsewhere. “Do you ever see Belinda around the Ministry?”

Tonks shot him a disgusted look and climbed on top of him. “What kind of question is that, Moodkiller?”

“I worry about her, is all,” Harry said, struggling to find connections in his memory, and wishing dearly he could prove to someone that Percy needed to be watched, or questioned, or exiled, or something.

From her position lording over him, she grabbed the edges of his robe front and shook them. “Harry, all the world and all the witches in the world are not your problem. Your long-dead parents are certainly not your problem. You have enough to deal with already.”

“Will you go talk to Belinda this week?” Harry asked. “See if she’ll talk to you.”

“Grrrr,” Tonks said, rolling off him, but kept one hand fastened to his robe.

Harry rolled to the side to look at her. “Promise her you won’t tell anyone what she tells you. Maybe that will help. Well, except me.”

Tonks’ pink brows dove close to her eyes. “You are very frustrating, Harry. All right, fine. I’ll try to talk to her. Take her out for coffee or something. Can we drop this topic now?” she demanded.

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The next morning they went into the Ministry together. There was something comfortable about doing so that made him think marriage, as a general idea anyhow, wasn't such a bad notion.

Harry took his seat in the training room beside Aaron and wished he had arrived early enough to talk to his fellow, but his dark mood showed on his face.

"When's your mum coming back, exactly?" Harry asked, attracting the attention of everyone else, keen as they were to learn what had sunk their normally irreverent, smiling fellow into glumness.

"Tomorrow, maybe. I tried to send her an express owl, but she's most likely on the Baden Baden to Paris section of the Magiekehr Express, because it came back undelivered. That would get her in late tomorrow."

Kerry Ann asked, "Something going on with your mum?"

Aaron faintly shook his head. "It's nothing. Just something I need to talk to her about," he replied dismissively, confirming Harry's suspicion that he did not want anyone to know.

During drills he returned almost to normal, and Harry switched with Tridant to be Aaron's drill partner. Aaron said, "Oh good, someone I can pound on a bit more." And indeed, he put more behind his attacks than normal, with many flying wild and wide as his emotions scattered his magic.

Harry felt the curses as they flew and bounced around him, but still could not figure out how he could possibly influence them without lifting his wand against them.

Rodgers returned and shouted, "Hey there! What is this, playtime? Let's work on something serious instead. Get out your books again." They lowered their wands and pulled their desks back into position.



Tuesday, Tonks waylaid Harry in the corridor and gestured that they should slip into the file room.

Tonks began, "So, I dragged your former girlfriend out for coffee this afternoon, so you owe me." She poked him painfully in the ribs.

Harry rubbed the spot and said, "Thanks. Let me know how I can make it up to you."

"Nice dinner out."

"Anytime," Harry burst out. "Tell me when you have time."

"Yeah, I know," she grumbled. "Back to Miss Ex-Harry's-Girlfriend-"

"Why are you calling her that?"

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“Don’t interrupt me.” Tonks slid away to pace between the notice board where the filing rules hung in boldface cracked and yellowed glory and the first cabinet on the row. “She’s definitely hiding something and had no interest in saying what it was. If she’d been an ordinary witch I’d have been tempted to slip her something to loosen her tongue, and I’m not convinced that’s a bad idea even if she is Bones’ receptionist.” Her mouth twisted thoughtfully. “I got the sense she thought she should say. More annoyingly.”

“Did she say why she wouldn’t say?” Harry asked, not wanting to divulge Belinda’s fear that she might lose her job if Belinda herself had not.

“She said she’s had Skeeter jump out of nowhere on her several times in the last few weeks, asking questions. Said she’s afraid she’s listening in.” Tonks picked at her nails, making a clicking noise that sounded loud in the quiet room. “I insisted I could remedy that for a conversation but she wouldn’t budge.”

“I can understand her fear,” Harry muttered.

Tonks propped her hands on her hips and said, “I hate to say this, believe me, but I think you should take her out and chat her up a bit. I’m suspicious now.” When Harry did not comment, she went on, “Consider it your weekend fieldwork if you want.”

“I couldn’t do that,” Harry said, finding the thought distasteful.

Tonks stepped closer until their fronts touched. “Harry, the distance between your private life and feelings and your life as an Auror is like the distance between us right now. None.”

“If I decide to make her talk it will be because I care what may be going on. Honestly she’s much happier than she used to be back when she was dating Percy.”

Tonks leaned in tighter and said, “Oh, what a tangled web we weave.”

“It’s not like that,” Harry said.

Tonks back away and said, “She broke up with you, right?”

Exasperated on several fronts, Harry said, “I was having problems with the Dark Plane. I couldn’t control it then. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Nothing I suppose.” She stepped back and fluffed her hair back up. “I’m not your guard this evening but I could arrange to be tomorrow.”

“Uh, I should probably get Aaron assigned, if possible.”

She propped a hand on one angled hip and teased, “Do I have to worry you’re hoping to date him as well?”

“Not a chance,” Harry returned. “It’s our regular night to help Ginny with her drills, and readings so she can get into the program next year.”

“That’s nice of you, Harry, to do that. She’d do well, I think, and we need some more women around here.” She glanced at the door as if she heard something.

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“Speaking of which, they will notice I’m missing soon.”

Harry did get Aaron assigned as a guard the next day after training. Aaron packed his books up slowly, distracted and fussy about how they were arranged in his designer bag.

“Let’s go to my place, if you don’t mind. Candide won’t be back for a while, right?” Aaron said, and despite the question phrasing, was really making a demand.

Harry shrugged to indicate that was all right with him. “And Ginny can keep Candide company if she gets there before us. Women seem to have no problem doing that.”

At Aaron’s fancy flat, he noisily sorted through the liquor cabinet, before sighing and letting his arms rest limp at his sides where he crouched.

“Did you talk to your mum?” Harry asked, feeling the answer must be yes.

Aaron did not move, holding the pose of a young bird with useless wings as he replied. “Yes.”

“I suppose I don’t need to ask what she said,” Harry ventured.

Aaron snagged the front bottle without looking at the label and stood straight. He set it down on the glass-topped, stainless steel cabinet, but did not reach for any of the glittering array of crystal tumblers. He leaned on his hands on the cabinet instead and fell still.

“I’m sorry about this,” Harry said, feeling he should say something. His words rang true inside him.

“I liked my dad,” Aaron said with no preamble.

“Of course you did,” Harry said with a spark of defensiveness.

“All this time though...” Aaron pushed away from the cabinet without pouring himself a drink. He paced, long neck bent ungainly. He stopped, framed by one of the tall windows full of diffuse afternoon light. “I don’t know who I am,” he complained.

“I don’t think that’s changed,” Harry said when Aaron had paced back in his direction.

But Aaron gave no sign he heard him. He stared off somewhere or sometime else. Pangs plucked at Harry’s chest but he made no further attempts at soothing his friend because his own heart was churning and he could no longer see past that.

Harry fished around for something to say. “What did your mum say? Did you ask her to... I don’t know, explain?” When Aaron did not answer, Harry said. “Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“No, it’s all right. Let’s go to your place; I feel like hitting something with spells some more.”

Ginny arrived while they were working out the fine points of the Loaded Orb spell they had learned that day. The glowing orbs that erupted when the spell was executed

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properly could be filled with all manner of things, like smoke or mist. Rodgers promised that they could be filled also with fire or blinding light, but he was waiting to show them how to do that until later. That did not stop Harry and Aaron from trying to work out how.

“Did you check your copious library for a book on the topic?” Ginny asked after observing them producing endless streams of harmlessly popping orbs.

Harry dropped his arm. “I didn’t think of that.” His friends followed him into the library where the extra books from upstairs were now stacked on the floor, waiting to be properly organized or sorted out to be disposed of.

“Gosh, what’s this?” Ginny blurted, reaching down for a book with a rail-thin, cloaked figure on the cover sporting a bowler standing with feet widely spaced and grinning maliciously. The title in metallic red that could only be discerned by tilting the book repeatedly in the lamplight, read *Vile Virtuosity*.

“Watch out,” Harry warned too late. The book let out a maniacal laugh when she picked it up, and sighed in deep satisfaction as she flipped it open. “Some are worse than that.”

Ginny shot him a look of disbelief at the very notion.

“Oh excellent,” Aaron chirped upon picking up *Grotesque Grades*, oddly by the corner. He held it up that way until it ceased flapping like a bat and fell limp. “I had a copy of this once.”

“Severus is sorting through his old things to clear out the rooms upstairs.”

“Are you getting pushed aside by the new arrival?” Ginny asked with telling innocence.

“Yes, but it’s all right,” Harry said, taking up a book too, but one off the shorter “keep” stack. “Is it just me, or is there way more dark magic than good?” he asked.

Aaron said, “There is certainly more interesting dark magic than good. That’s why I was so happy to be in Slytherin.”

Ginny stared at him. “Maybe I should have been in Slytherin.”

“What?” Harry blurted. But after reassessing the way she pondered Aaron, he decided to not pursue it further. Instead, he found a spot on a high shelf for the book he held. That was another thing that had to happen: books that might fight back had to be moved out of reach. The three of them settled into perusing the grim volumes littering the room, while Harry tried to reorganize the books, grateful to have Aaron thoroughly distracted by anything enough to forget he should be moping.



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Harry waited until Friday to again broach his plans with Tonks. He had no duties until Saturday evening and she finished up a night shift and paperwork well before lunchtime. It took him a while to get the topic in because as soon as they were alone and the room was sealed against eavesdroppers, she uncharacteristically brought up the subject of Belinda.

“Did you get a chance to talk to her?” Tonks had asked as soon as she dropped into a chair at her rickety old table.

Harry sat across from her and heated his mug of tap water before hunting around for a less-overused-than-average teabag from those scattered around. “I stopped by Bones’ office twice yesterday and once this morning, but she was too busy to talk,” Harry explained. “They’re having some major meeting with officials from the French Ministry of Magic so the office was full of people both times. She seemed all right, though. Happy enough.”

“She wasn’t before?”

“No. Percy was always hanging around and would get in my way if I tried to talk to her. She didn’t seem to know how to tell him to get lost.”

“Well, if they were dating, why would she?”

“Maybe, but if, say, Ginny wanted to talk with me and you were there, I’d just ask you if I could have a few minutes alone with her. There’s something wrong if you can’t do that.” At her raised brow, he replied, “Come on, Ginny has her eye on Aaron, no worries about her.”

Tonks grinned and her eyes glittered. “Does she now? I can see the appeal of all that money. Someone might as well be enjoying it.”

“I don’t think it’s that,” Harry said. “You think it’s that?”

“I think it probably doesn’t hurt.”

“Enough office gossip,” Harry said, shifting his chair to a spot where it would not rock so much. “I want to do something but I need your help to do it.”

At first she appeared interested, but her face darkened. “This isn’t the find-your-parents thing again, is it?” she tentatively asked.

Harry bit his lip. There was a thicket here that he was going to have to sort out and he feared it may leave a few marks before he broke through. “Yes,” he answered, going for straightforward. “Remember how I told you I can go to other places where events have played out differently? Well, I realized that there is probably a place where my parents weren’t killed by Voldemort, where they would be still alive.”

Watching her face, Harry decided she still did not believe him. She said, “But how old would they be? Would they want to see you?”

“They’d be the same age they’d be now if they’d lived. I can’t travel through time. It’d be exactly the same date as today. As to seeing me. I’d put on a disguise.

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Too much to explain otherwise.”

She gazed at him in a way that made him vaguely uncomfortable. He said, “I get the sense you think I’m a bit off my rocker here.”

“I don’t know what I think. I like that I don’t sense that you’re hiding anything,” she stated with vague glumness.

“I suppose it sounds a little hard to believe.”

“A little?”

Harry frowned, rubbed grit from his eye, and sighed silently. “I don’t know how to convince you. I can’t just jump off and retrieve something to prove it to you. It’s harder than that.”

She interlaced her fingers and leaned forward to peer at him openly. “You believe you can go to other places that are like the real world, but different?”

Harry shrugged. “Yes. I did it accidentally twice, and once intentionally. I just have to imagine that place and I can go there. Like Apparition, but to another reality.” Before she could express the doubt on her face, he went on. “You don’t have to believe me, if you trust that I can stay out of trouble and will let me go off for a few hours. I promise I’ll be back on time. If I can’t find my parents, I won’t try again.” He was pleading by the end. He loathed to hear it, but with his normal guard schedule it would be nigh impossible for weeks to try, and once he had thought of it, he could not get the idea to leave him alone.

She sat straight, resisting, based on her face. “That’s what you are going to go... try to do: find your parents? Nothing dangerous?”

Harry brightened. “Exactly. Nothing dangerous.”

Her brow went up again, doubtful and perhaps accusing. “It never seems to work out that way, Harry.” She gazed at him longer. “You’re going to sneak off and try anyway, aren’t you?”

Harry gazed with overdone innocence at the floor and then the wall to the left, making her snort.

“I clearly like you too much, Harry,” she said, smirking. “If you don’t come back, though, what the hell am I going to do? If you are not delusional, there is no way to go looking for you.” Her expression hardened. “Maybe you shouldn’t go.”

“Tell everyone you took a nap – which you need after the night shift – and I went off without telling you.” Harry made his eyes sad. “Please, really, you admitted I don’t need a guard.”

“Harry you need something more than a guard. I don’t know what it would be called.” She huffed and crossed her lean arms, tossed her head and said, “I get the sense Severus is giving up on you. I wouldn’t have believed it, except you behave like he has.”

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 1

Oddly, this hit Harry's midsection harder than her disbelief. "I'm not a child," he said, but this was not the issue, he realized after hearing it. He jumped ahead to assuming she would give in, in the hopes it would help her do so. "I need a little help when I return. The space between the Planes is absolute zero or something. Colder than you can imagine. I need warming up when I return."

She gazed at him, trying not to smile. "Oh, now I'm getting some kind of come-on from you?"

Harry laughed. "Like a warmed blanket."

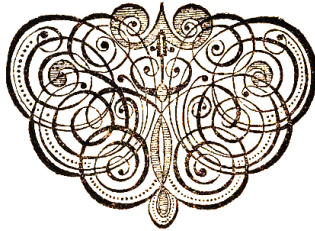
"Oh, blanket. Right."

"I'll also need a disguise. Can I look through your wardrobe?"

"Oh, I don't know. That may be going too far." She grimaced through a smile and stood reluctantly, like one doing something they expect to regret later. "You'd look right awful in pink."

Author's Notes: Thanks as always for the feedback. Some of you I will reply to on my lj after we get a little farther along. This story is very different from the others in what I'm trying to accomplish and I'll try to explain that in hopes that it will better help me manage it.

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TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 2

Harry, warmed by the grace of the sun's rays, awoke enclosed by the nodding brown grass of the field adjacent to the Burrow. Painfully, he forced his creaky limbs to push him to his feet, and staggered twice before righting himself reliably. It was a gorgeous day, just like the one he had envisioned, despite the season. He sniffed. The air smelled cold even as it stood still and warm.

Deciding these oddities were the result of whatever magic rendered the weather so lovely, Harry pulled out his wand and put his usual disguise on himself. He wanted to appear non-threatening, so he went with what he was practiced at: a long white beard, white eyebrows, and even longer, flowing white hair. A few strokes of his beard where it met his face left him confident that it was convincing, but his hands were much too young. Harry masked those with a spell for spotting and one for wrinkles. He needed several tries to get the wrinkles right, and only managed it after adding a flesh-loosening hex. Usually, he did not feel jealous of Tonks' Metamorph abilities, but at this moment, they would be wonderfully convenient. He unfolded the borrowed hat from his pocket and smoothed it straight against his leg before adjusting it on his head tightly enough so it would not topple off as he walked.

The Burrow came into view beyond a copse of trees, as tilted, slapdash and unpretentious as in Harry's world. Harry smiled just at the sight of it. Outside the door, between the Ford Anglia and the garden, the twins and Ginny were setting up a second row of tables. One of the twins looked up and spotted Harry.

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 2

“Hullo!” the twin shouted.

Harry approached at a leisurely pace, thinking quickly how he was going to explain himself. The three redheads all stopped arranging tables as he made his way, long robes catching on the unmown grass, which made him even more ungainly.

“Hello,” Harry greeted them, forcing his voice gruff, and giving a small bow of his head. “I just got into the country. I heard there was a picnic here.” This seemed a reasonable assumption, given the weather and their activities.

“Ay, in a few hours,” the other twin said. “You’re early.”

“Ah,” Harry said, disappointed, because he did not have much time. As he fumbled for what to say next, the door banged open and Mrs. Weasley emerged, hovering two sizable covered dishes before her.

“Whom do we have here?”

“Uh, Aaron, Madame,” Harry said, knowing from experience that his fellow trainee’s name often made him turn his head because it sounded similar to his own. “Totten. Aaron Totten.”

“Early for the picnic,” a twin leaned over to inform his mother, voice insinuating that perhaps Harry was a bit old and daft.

Harry smiled pleasantly despite the perceived insult. Old and daft was fine with him just now.

Mrs. Weasley was undeterred. “Please, join us anyway since you’re here. Been away long?” she asked, keen of hearing, apparently.

Harry helped Ginny hover chairs into place while they talked. “I’ve been away for a very long time. Years,” he said, hoping to explain away his ignorance with something other than senility.

The Weasleys all gathered outside to help get things ready. Introductions needed repeating each time another cluster came out. Bill had two young children, twins. Charlie sported an animated dragon tattoo down his left arm. It appeared to be trying to bite Percy standing beside him. Percy shrank away a bit, as though it might possibly manage it.

Mr. Weasley wanted to know if Harry knew how Muggle strimmers worked. Harry from using one extensively at the Dursley house did know, but pretended that he did not.

“Fascinating and clever things. I had one you know. Still do, ’cept it doesn’t, uh, do anything. Hasn’t for a while. Makes a rather painful whining noise if you plug it in. You know about plugs?”

“So, where have you been... traveling?” Bill asked, letting his father’s question lie.

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This was not a good question for Harry, who rarely left England. He had to play it safe. "Switzerland. Finland. Around the Mediterranean."

The twins wandered out of earshot and put their heads together to chat in private. They seemed to be heatedly debating something. The remaining Weasleys stood relaxed. The small children played energetically on the large lawn. The whole scene practically bled idyllic.

Ginny leaned in close and said to Harry, "Fred and George are trouble."

What would Dumbledore say here? "Young men usually are," Harry knowingly stated, holding back on a grin at clearly imagining his old mentor saying exactly that. This brought a laugh from Mrs. Weasley, who, after a short struggle, had tapped a pint of ale from a massive wooden barrel under the eave of the house. She blew the excessive foam off the top of it before handing it to her husband, who gave her a reproving look before smiling in thanks.

"So, what do you do?" Charlie asked.

"What do you do?" Harry countered. "No, let me guess..." Harry stroked his beard and squinted at Charlie and his tattoo. "I will hazard to guess that you work with dragons."

Unexpectedly, Charlie blushed with pride. "I do. I suppose that's an easy guess." He rubbed his tattoo, which rolled over onto its back to expose its less scaly belly to the attention.

"But what do you do?" Bill repeated.

The tables and chairs were all arranged, so there were no more distractions. "Me? Oh, not much. Things. I get around."

"But you must do something," Bill challenged, accepting a pint and holding it away from himself to let it drip on the grass as the foam surged over the brim.

Harry conceded, "I sometimes hunt dark wizards."

Bill nearly dropped his beer.

"Do you really?" Ginny asked.

"I try not to make a habit out of it," Harry offered in a kindly voice, grasping again for something old sounding. The reaction had been unexpected; it was as though he had said something rude.

"None around here, I hope," Mrs. Weasley said.

Mr. Weasley dabbed his mouth with a napkin, saying, "We get troublemakers around here, Dear."

"Yes, but a prankster replacing manhole covers with an illusion of one is not a dark wizard."

"Have you actually captured a dark wizard?" Ginny asked Harry.

Harry blinked at her. She sounded so... naïve. "Of course. Many."

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 2

The group again froze as though waiting in tense excitement.

“Well, tell us about a few,” Charlie insisted.

“Oh my,” Harry said. “I wouldn’t want to bore you to death with such trifles.” Harry plucked up a biscuit, thinking that he sounded alarmingly like an old man, but he would rather not have to tell a story that might blow his cover with facts in conflict with this world.

Several of the Weasley children were laughing. “Come on, now,” one said. “You can’t leave it at that!” another insisted.

Harry wanted to point out that Mr. Weasley himself worked in the Magical Law Enforcement Department, but he probably could not be supposed to know that, and it may not be true here. The ruckus continued, and rather than abating, grew louder, his audience displaying a terrible hunger for such stories.

“Well, there was this rather interesting shaman in Finland, in the far north, above the arctic circle. Like all the Shamans there he has an Animagus form of a wolf.”

“An Animagus? Really?” Ginny said, clearly intrigued.

“Oh, yes. Animagi are not as rare as you think.” Harry let his eyes sparkle as he said this, teasing. “This particular shaman was fomenting trouble by kidnapping young children from a neighboring region.”

“So, what did you do?”

“I chased him down as he was in wolf-form, leading off a young girl. I put a serious enough scare into him that he will think long and hard before trying it again.”

“But how did you catch him?”

“Like I said, Animagi are not as rare as you think.” Harry gave a wink to Ginny this time.

The twins and Ron said in series, “So, are you one? What are you?”

Harry smiled faintly. “Let’s just say... a wolf is not a problem.”

“Oh, come on!” The whole family reacted with dismay at his dismissal of the question. Except Mr. Weasley, who asked, “Are you registered?”

Harry shook his head. Bill grew sober. “Well, better not show Dad then. He’s obliged to report you.” He shot a glance at his father and bent to setting out the platters Mrs Weasley brought out and charming them to repel flies.

“Why aren’t you registered?” Ron asked.

Harry found a lie easily enough. “Because I want to surprise the wizards I am hunting, if need be.”

“And are they?” Ginny asked.

Harry sipped the butterbeer he had been handed, dragging the story out because it made them all so antsy. “Oh, this troublesome Indian witch and wizard I chased down once; they thought I was one of their god’s own servants.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Wow.”

They all hung on his every word now. “I don’t intend to create such confusion, normally,” Harry said, sounding his humblest, which elicited a laugh from all around.

“You must be a great wizard,” Ron said. “Don’t you think, Percy?” he prompted his brother, who had been eating from a bowl of nuts on the end table.

Peanut shell fell from his lips as he said, “There hasn’t been a truly great wizard in almost twenty years.”

Because he needed to know, Harry guessed, “You must be referring to Albus Dumbledore.”

Percy snottily said, “Of course I was.” He looked Harry up and down doubtfully. “There hasn’t been anyone close in all this time.”

“Oh, I agree,” Harry said.

“Did you know him?” Bill asked. “I just barely remember seeing him once, at a Quidditch match. You remember that, Dad? You had tickets to the VIP booth and he was there? He died right after that. Told everyone that with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named gone and things being quiet for a few years that he wasn’t needed around anymore.” He turned back to Harry with a soft and distant expression. “DID you know him?”

“Yes,” Harry said, unable to lie to make his ruse easier. “I knew him for many years.”

“Wow,” a few breathed again.

“So, you must know a lot of Defensive magic,” Charlie asserted.

“I know quite a bit. Don’t you?”

Several laughed. “They haven’t taught it since Dumbledore died.”

“No?” Harry prompted. Voice stern, sounding exactly his fake age. “Why ever not?”

“Don’t need it,” someone said. “Encourages dark magic,” a twin suggested, making quotes in the air with his fingers.

“That’s ridiculous,” Harry said, getting heated.

“That’s the policy,” Mr. Weasley confirmed. “There hasn’t been any concern about dark wizards since Potter destroyed You-Know-Who as a baby.”

“Amazing that,” Harry said, hoping for more information.

“Yes,” Mr. Weasley agreed, nodding so that his comb-over flipped forward. “No one knows how he did it.”

“It’s unfortunate that someone didn’t see it,” Harry mused aloud.

Mr. Weasley chuckled lightly. “Yes, well, James and Lily should have but, well, you of course know about that confusion.”

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 2

Harry nodded sagely, although curiosity pained him viciously to do so. How could he claim to not know? He took a stab by saying, “Er, yes, Pettigrew and all that.”

The faces around him grew grim. “Yes, sleazy one he was,” Charlie said, “He’s the one whose owl for help drew Mrs. Potter away.”

Ron added, “Lucky for her, Who-He had already finished Pettigrew off.”

“Now, now,” Mrs. Weasley said. “Enough with this dark talk. I need some help in the kitchen.”

Much of the family wandered off to chase down small children or to assist. Early guests began to arrive.

Ginny asked, “Can you show me some defensive spells?” She then blushed and admitted, “Some of the other students at school, we got together in secret and taught each other the few spells we knew. But I’m out of school now and we haven’t continued it.”

“Did that work out while you had the chance?”

“It helped when we had class time with the Slytherins. Removing hexes is really helpful then.”

“Certainly I’ll show you.” Harry started to stride over, but remembered that would look strange, so he pretended his limbs pained him as he moved.

He led Ginny a bit away, over by where the lawn had been rutted by the car rolling in for landings. The ruts trailed off far before the distant road. He pulled out his wand and said, “The most versatile counter, I’ve found, is a block called a Titan. Take out your wand.”

Ginny eagerly did so. Harry showed her how to hold it, flat against her palm, hooked under her thumb. “Hold your palms out like this. Your wand hand builds the spell, but the other helps stabilize it so that it is wide enough to protect you.”

The twins were loitering nearby, listening in. Harry said, more loudly, “Perhaps your brothers will help us out.”

Grinning, they ambled over. “Can we throw hexes at our sister?” one asked.

“In a moment,” Harry explained patiently. To Ginny, he said, “This spell is pushed out through your palms. Let me do it for you a few times so you can feel it. Give us a hex, could you?”

Harry walked her through the spell until she had it. By this time, most everyone had gathered to watch. Even those hitting a Bludger around locked that up and came over instead.

“Show me another,” Ginny said excitedly, when she withstood the second hex from her brother, Ron.

“What do you need protection against?” Mr. Weasley asked, sounding half teasing, half dubious. He stood nearby with his arms crossed, vague scowl upon his

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

brow.

“Well, Draco hit me with a Jelly-legs in Diagon Alley last week.”

“He must like you,” Harry said.

“Oh, please,” Ginny muttered.

“I can show you how to counter that one,” Bill said. “Why didn’t you ask?”

“I did. You said I was a girl and I should find a boyfriend to throw my hexes for me.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you did.”

Harry stepped in between them, even though they were not all that close together. “There is a useful counter that works on the Minor-Neural class of hexes like that.”

“The what of the what?” Ron stuttered.

Harry, keeping with his character, patiently explained, “It helps immensely to know a little spell theory. If you know what class of spell is coming at you, often you can utilize a generic counter or block, rather than learning a different one for every possible circumstance.”

Harry had Ron send a Jelly-legs at him to demonstrate the counter, then had Ginny try it. She collapsed on the ground, to a few hidden grins. Blushing, she stood after Harry canceled the spell for her and tried again. She fared no better the second time.

“Let’s do a different one,” she said, sounding spoiled.

“No, let’s finish this one.”

“Are you trying to make me look foolish?”

Harry glanced around at the gathered Weasleys. They did perhaps seem more amused than supportive, but they also did not take Defense particularly seriously.

“I am trying keep you from failing. You and I can work on it. The others can go off now.” Harry stated this sternly, eyeing each of them. Shrugs and grins greeted his obstinacy and eventually they were alone, except for Ron, who said, “I want to learn it too.” To his sister, he insisted, “I wasn’t laughing at you, honest. I’ve been knocked on my arse by that one at Hogwarts enough times; I wouldn’t laugh about it.”

Ginny gave Harry a pleading look. “Do we really have to work on that one more?”

“You cannot just give up on the second try,” Harry said. “I’ll show you using a different technique. I have several.”

“Did you use to teach?” Ron asked. “You should have.”

Harry found this amusing. “I tried once, but I don’t care for handing out assignments, marking, and examinations as much as just playing with magic all day until I have it perfected.”

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 2

Avidly, Ron said, "You sound like a great teacher! I hate revising, reading, essays, and taking tests."

"It is not as simple as I made it out," Harry said, finding the words flowing like a spell he was just getting the hang of. "I study a great deal, life administers the examinations, and the marking can be brutal."

Harry demonstrated the spell three or four times, adding advice as he thought of it. "Why don't we have Ron try it a few times and then go back to Ginny," Harry said, upon seeing the stress on Ginny's face. It transformed into a half-malicious grin.

When they each could produce the counter perhaps a third of the time, Harry proclaimed them done with it for now. The sun had appreciably moved in the sky and the picnic had swelled with new arrivals.

"Show us another," Ginny urged him as he was pondering the sky. "What do you think is most useful?"

Harry glanced around, hopeful of seeing the Potters. "I think we should take a break for now."

"We want to hear more about Dumbledore, too," Ginny insisted. She was actually tugging on his sleeve to convince him. She quit it and bit her lip.

"It's all right, my dear," Harry said, finding his old man character easy now. "You flatter me. You know, an old man like me doesn't get many invitations to things."

People began arriving in earnest now, popping in and landing on broomstick and room-sized carpets. The three of them wandered over to where Mr. Weasley was directing something on the roof with his wand.

Charlie said, "Want me to fly up and adjust the Weather Vain properly, Dad?"

"Nah, I think it's all right. Seem warm enough to you? Sunny enough?"

Harry blinked up at the green corroded rooster with glittering ruby eyes perched on a bent grey arrow. Sparkles flickered off the arrowhead now and then. That explained the exceptionally nice day. Harry sighed with a hint of jealousy and surveyed the mollycoddling peacefulness of it all. Blankets were being laid out, the tables groaned under the weight of heaped plates and pots of food, children chased each other on small starter broomsticks.

Harry left his new friends and circled, mixing in easily, gathering only a handful of second glances. He resisted looking at his watch, not wanting to leave when he had come this far. Tonks would wait for him, he told himself.

He didn't see his parents, so when he found the table with Ron and his sister he asked if he could join them. Ginny literally jumped from her seat and found a chair for him two tables away.

"When were you last off fighting dark wizards?" Ron asked, even putting down his fork he was so involved in the question.

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Harry said amiably. "Yesterday."

Ron leaned forward, so his elbow went into his mashed potatoes. "Really? Where?"

Harry waved a finger before him admonishingly. Amazingly, that's all it took.

"Drat," Ron muttered.

Ginny laughed. "Dad says you remind him of Dumbledore."

"Your father honors me no end by saying so," Harry said, accepting a butterbeer she had Accioed over. "Thank you, my dear." He gave her a wink.

She blushed and dabbed her mouth with a shredded serviette. "Too bad you're too old for me," she said with real regret.

Harry smiled, thinking idly that this was a side of Ginny he only usually caught glimpses of. She must not behave quite the same with him around. Maybe Snape's proposed match for him was not so unworkable. "I have a formula for a youth potion... but it only lasts a few days, alas."

Ron and she both giggled at this, making Harry amazed at how unthreatening he must seem.

"Can I stroke your beard?" Ginny asked.

Harry held it up for her.

"Wow, soft."

"Thank you, young lady, I made it myself."

Ron snapped his fingers. "That's what dad said. He said you liked to joke around the way Dumbledore did. But I can't believe such a great old wizard could be as goofy as he insists."

"Oh, Albus was quite an amusing fellow. Especially if he was forced to give a speech."

Harry recounted a few stories, altering them as needed, or averaging out several different events to avoid specifics. The twins joined them halfway through the storytelling, each bearing plates overflowing with food.

Fred said, "Hey, Ginny, your boyfriend's just arrived." He tipped his head behind him and to the left.

"Oh, get off," Ginny snapped, angry in the way that only a person stung partially by the truth could be.

"What is this, my dear?" Harry asked, teasingly stung, but trying to sooth her. He just embarrassed her more.

"It's His Royalty," George offered. "An old crush of Ginny's. She insists she's over him, but we think she doth protest too much."

Ginny appeared ready to stand up and stalk off.

Harry said, "My dear man, you lack a certain minimally desired charm when you publicly embarrass your sister like that."

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART 2

Ginny glanced at Harry's old countenance and stayed put, but sulked and drank her butterbeer, double time.

A boisterous group tramped through the picnic, turning people's gazes. Some picnickers rolled their eyes, others stood up to join the pack. Harry froze upon spying his father, leading the assembly, arm chummily around someone, to whom he was speaking directly in the ear. He released that person and turned to someone on his other side. The crowd shifted, parting and re-parting, and Harry caught sight of long reddish-brown tresses, a smiling face, glittering green eyes.

Transfixed, Harry watched the pair of them pass in and out of view through the thickly accompanying robed figures. A trailing figure split the crowd when it stopped at a table to high five some sitting people, Oliver Wood, Katie Bell, and other familiar faces.

Harry watched the vision of himself chummily greeting the table before joining it.

A wadded up sweet wrapper was tossed hard at Ginny by Fred, jolting Harry before anyone could notice how enamored he had become.

"Another butterbeer?" Ginny asked Harry beside her, nearly snarling. "My brother can get his own."

"Yes, please, my dear," Harry said, struggling to sound old and uncaring.

Ginny fetched the fresh bottles by hand. Upon returning, she glanced surreptitiously at the new arrivals, eyes nearly hidden by her hair. But Harry was well-practiced in interpreting glances through a veil of hair. He leaned close and whispered, "You are undoubtedly too good for him."

This had been an attempt to ease what he guessed was bothering her, but her reply was a silent, flat expression. She drank half of her fresh butterbeer down in one rapid set of swallows.

"He's a prat," Ron said, seemingly in support of his sister because it lacked real animosity.

Harry turned to the vision of his best friend, trying to grasp what he had said. He could not pull in a full breath right away.

Fred said, "Ron's just jealous. He wanted to join the Quidditch team, but Potter was the captain, and Ron could never convince him to let him join. 'Course, Ron isn't all that good..."

Ron frowned, but then brightened. "We should play a match today, don't you think? It's our pitch, so we get to decide who plays." He grinned slyly.

The twins chuckled. "Nice try, but I don't think you can keep Boywholived from doing anything he wants to. Besides, Dad won't let you upset them, he has to work with Mr. Potter, after all."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Harry let his focus relax beyond their red heads to where the topic of conversation sat, face bright. An animated conversation flowed around his table, buoying him.

Ron was saying, "We don't even have a Snitch. You'd think he'd be happy playing honorary Seeker for Puddlemere twice a season."

Disguised Harry shifted, suddenly uncomfortable. The twins were whispering fiercely to each other. They both stared at him as though maybe they were in trouble. "Uh, we're going to go take care of something."

Harry Legilimized them and found a prank forming in their minds aimed at his other self. "Is it worth it?" Harry asked gently.

"It what worth it?" George asked.

"The trouble you are going to cause?"

Fred's face twisted into a frown. "How'd you know?"

Ron burst out laughing. "You're always making trouble. Pretty safe bet, isn't it?"

Harry was getting more of the plan as they stared at each other. He said, "Such a plan as the one in your mind right now will cause panic, which is always harmful in a crowd of this size. Come up with a better one or wait until he is isolated."

The twins stared at him, showing him their thoughts as plainly as speaking. Harry said, "Yes, I am reminding you of a certain Potions professor." He cocked a smile at their now rather horrified faces. They slid off, at first walking backward to keep an eye on him.

Harry smiled back, holding it longer to display confidence that he could take them down.

Ginny said, "They keep begging mum and dad for Galleons to open a joke shop, but mum, especially, won't go for it. She tells them she might have if they had actually stayed on to finish their NEWTs. They've been selling their services on Diagon Alley, but haven't saved up enough money yet."

The twins finally stopped glancing worrisomely back and disappeared behind a hedge.

Harry idly asked, "What services are they selling?"

"They're installing what they call "security systems" in some of the shops. I'd call them death traps myself, but that just may be my years of living with them talking."

Harry turned to her in surprise and she stared curiously back, saying, "They need a shop of their own. I think it would keep them busy enough to keep them out of Azkaban, which is where they are going to end up when something goes really awry."

Harry rubbed his long mustache, wondering if he had learned something he needed to know for his own Plane. The twins reappeared and slunk off toward the drinks table, glancing back once at him. "If they make too much trouble here," Harry said

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standing up to better watch them and thinking of the riots that had destroyed the Ministry atrium, “I may have to come down on them. Innocents should never be hurt just because you have your own vendetta.” Harry strolled slowly around the table, which also gave him a better view of the people he had come here to see. They were eating, chatting, smiling... alive, and he stared at them without breathing.

Ginny came aside him and broke him free by asking, “How often do you have your own vendetta?”

Harry fumbled for words. “I don’t any longer. I used to.”

Ginny willingly dropped that topic, presumably hearing something in his voice. “Can you teach us some more spells. I read about one that sounds wicked useful, an Expelliarmus, but I need it demonstrated. Ron here can’t get it either.”

Harry smiled. “I’d love to, but...” Across from him, his double was changing tables to sit with some middle-aged witches and wizards that Harry recognized as working in Games and Sports in the Ministry. Harry glanced around to see where the twins had slipped off to.

“Trying to protect him, now?” Ginny asked, sounding unhappy.

Harry laughed. “He is an interesting person.”

“No, he isn’t,” Ginny snapped. “Thinks he’s the best at everything. It’s annoying.”

“Is he?”

“Is he what?” Ginny asked.

Harry innocently asked, “The best at everything?”

“NO,” both she and Ron replied.

“My dear,” Harry said, finding that phrasing so easy and natural that it stunned him. “I will gladly show you an Expelliarmus, but would you first do me the pleasure of introducing me to the honored guests; your brothers’ reactions intrigued me and I wish to get better acquainted with them all.” At her grim turn of disappointment, he reached for a better explanation, and added in a lower voice, “It gives me something to chat about with my drinking friends when I go back abroad. Old men like us have so little to talk about that we haven’t already talked about.”

Before they could reach any of the Potters, a familiar figure in deep green strolled up to his shoulder. Harry greeted McGonagall with a little bow.

“Ah, I have heard a bit about you, Mr. Totten, from Arthur. I had to admit I have not had the pleasure and I believe I should have.”

Harry gave the back of her hand a gallant kiss mid-bow. She could blow his cover if he slipped up while discussing the past, so he wanted to get her off-guard.

Flustered, McGonagall said, “Well, my, that is... you must have been out of the country for quite a while.”

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“Many, many years,” Harry stated vaguely.

“Well, please join us,” she said, glancing at Ron and Ginny a bit dismissively for Harry’s taste.

McGonagall had been sitting at the table with his parents, so he said, “I promised my young friends some spell demonstrations, but I think they will grant an old wizard a little first to reminisce.” The two youngest Weasleys reluctantly relinquished him.

As McGonagall stepped toward a group reclining in overstuffed chairs, Harry leaned over to say, “You will forgive me if my memory occasionally fails me. Unlike Albus, I have never availed myself of a Pensieve.”

“Of course, Aaron... may I call you Aaron?”

Harry merely nodded, unbalanced by the notion of being treated so reverentially. He and McGonagall sat down in great comfort for a picnic, sharing a pink and yellow flowered settee pulled up to face the end of the table.

Harry stroked the gaudy fabric as a way of not simply staring openly at his parents, who from this close were showing their forty years more plainly than they had from across the yard when they resembled a wizard photograph come to colorful life. Harry said the first thing that came into his head to explain his fascination with the upholstery, “This would have been to Dumbledore’s liking.”

“When did you meet Albus?” McGonagall asked. She now had a cup of tea, which Harry had not seen appear.

Harry took a deep breath and said, “I was very young. It was a very long time ago.” He faded out, not sure where to go from there. He decided to deflect the question. “I admit not all of those memories are worth dredging up. They were painful times.” True enough.

She squeezed his arm. “I am sorry. Here let me introduce you around.”

Harry was introduced to two moldy members of the Wizengamot who vacillated in rockers off to the left. He was then introduced to Lily and James. James gave him a momentary narrowed gaze as though recognizing him, but he then smiled faintly and got up to shake Harry’s hand before returning to give Lily a fit of giggles as he grabbed her under the arms before enclosing her in his own. Harry worked on hard on concentrating while shaking more hands, deaf to the names being related. He spent the next few minutes using nearly sport-level tactics to dodge questions he dare not answer. The table went back to previous gossip and Harry used repeated small sips of tea as a means of watching his parents over the rim. They were happy, clearly. And so alive, it continued to make breathing problematic. James teased nearly everyone who passed, until Lily tapped him on the arm as a subtle correction.

Harry stroked his beard to check that his disguise held true. Soul-deep sadness pressed in upon him. He had imagined this to be fun, but instead it felt desperate,

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and Tonks' concern entirely valid.

James behaved himself until Sirius strolled by, putting his hands on James' shoulders. His features were so much less unlined than expected it made him seem a decade younger than James. Only when he smiled did his eyes wrinkle into their familiar appearance. At Sirius' urging, Lily and James moved on to get seconds on food. Harry watched them amble over and be joined by Remus, who, of them all, most resembled himself.

A man by the name of Horace Slughorn wandered by and really began giving Harry a grilling. He acted highly and loudly perturbed to not have heard of an Aaron Totten previously. Harry stood to chat with him away from the table, thinking to shake him using the help of a few Weasleys. He glanced over to where Ginny and Ron were standing just outside the crowd, practicing the few hexes and the counters they had learned earlier.

Harry waved away the question about where "Aaron" had trained in Defense. Harry tugged Dumbledore's ideal persona over himself again and said, "I'm terribly sorry Mr. Slughorn, but your question reminds me that I promised these young people a little of my time and they are waiting ever so patiently. One does like to reward them for that."

Slughorn grunted, not wanting to disagree. Harry gratefully joined Ginny and Ron, leaving the unusually wide man frowning at his back.

"I didn't think we would get you back," Ginny said. "Ron thought maybe you had forgotten so we came over to this side to remind you."

"Oh, I would much prefer practicing the dueling of wands to that of dusty tongues. Come, let me show you my favorite disarming spell. It has saved my life more than once, I'll tell you."

He had their full attention then and the lessons proceeded, quickly becoming a game between the siblings. Eventually, a few others made their way around the large furniture, including Harry, Katie and Oliver, who stood like a matched threesome, poses relaxed, faces judgmental.

"Do some others wish to join us?" Harry in his disguise asked.

"No," Ron said. "They'll just want to duel."

"Why, don't you? Sounds like fun," disguised Harry urged.

"I'll duel someone," Ginny said, sounding very much in the mood for it.

This was overheard and Oliver said, "Away from the old-timers." He angled his head off behind the Burrow, which was empty.

"Why, is dueling illegal now outside Hogwarts too?" old Harry teased.

"No, it's not. All right, then," Katie said, stepping up before Ginny.

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This Plane's native Harry stepped in with practiced ease and refereed. "Back to back," he told them, deciding where the pace-off line would be. Visiting Harry stepped back to make space for the others gathering to watch, including the Potters. Harry slid slowly over to be three people down from his parents where he could observe them freely. The rules were relayed to the participants, with some corrections because the style of duel was agreed to be freeform rather than regimented. Harry's chest grew stiff again staring at James and Lily, but he could not stop himself. Sirius ambled up beside his father and they shared an amused exchange. Sirius perched his hands on his hips, parting his loose robes. He stood straight and with ease, a pristine, undamaged version of the man Harry held in his memories. His heart ached again.

The duel began with a loud countdown. Katie and Ginny were evenly matched, but Ginny had her new disarming spell and on the third exchange, Katie's wand flew away over the onlookers.

Native Harry fetched it with a flick and held it out to Katie. "Let me try next," he said.

Ginny's eyes grew wider. Disguised Harry saw in them that she truly did not want to duel his double, was certain she would be embarrassingly put on the grass, at best.

Harry stepped up to her, blocking her view of his alternative self. "Shall I handle this round? May I borrow your wand?" She willingly gave up her wand while biting her lip.

"The old man wants a piece of Potter!" Oliver announced, laughing.

Disguised Harry looked his double over. The other Harry was taller than himself, tanned, well-fed and stood with overt confidence. "We can skip the pacing," disguised Harry said pleasantly as he cheated with a little Legilimency. His double's eyes were filled with heat, anticipating the challenge of the duel. The only scar he possessed was the one on his forehead; his mind was utterly clear of any others as though he were merely a Mirror of Erised projection.

A Jelly Legs came at Disguised Harry when the countdown completed, easily countered. An electric eel came next, deflected to vanish in twirling sparkles against the blue sky in a purely stylish move.

"Aren't you going to come back with anything?" Native Harry demanded after two more spells were sent aside. Disguised Harry could see in his mind many rounds of practice with James and faith that he could handle anything as a result.

"I don't want to hurt you," Disguised Harry said pleasantly, affectionately, instinctively knowing exactly how to duel with this young man using words.

"Oh, please. I can take care of myself." Native Harry laughed, slightly mocking because the comment had stung, as intended.

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Disguised Harry bowed his head slightly and swung his arm around, wand tip twirling in an elastic mummy hex which, due to the force on it, could not be stopped. Native Harry was tangled helplessly until he curled on the ground, wound up so that only a few black hairs stuck out the top. The surrounding crowd gasped.

Disguised Harry cancelled the hex and watched his mirror image rise up, straightening his hair with undo care. “Huh,” he muttered, temper bottled up so that it made his wand tap faintly on his leg. He thought he gave no warning for his blinding curse, but Disguised Harry, due to the risk of being revealed, was still cheating. He had the burst of light blocked with a rubber shield that swallowed it before it travelled half the distance between them. He felt the curse grow and channel, just as he had every other curse thrown at him for months while trying to work out how to block them wandlessly. This time, though, each part of the curse’s progress felt accessible. Harry breathed heavily in excitement. He probably could have blocked that one without casting a counter.

“How’d you do that?” Native Harry demanded.

“It is a minor counter. Perhaps you need a new dueling teacher,” Harry said, finding that verbal hex rising out of his aching heart without forethought.

Young Harry glanced at his father in consternation, looking for advice. The pressed in friends began shouting encouragement. “Go on, Harry!” “Show him what-for!” and “Stop holding back.”

Native Harry tried in rapid succession a Cannon Ball, a Blasting Curse, a Chain Binding, and a Rictusempra which were all handled without disguised Harry even twitching more than his wand and wrist. He obsessively traced each curse on its journey from mind to magic, heart racing triumphantly after so many weeks of useless exercises.

Native Harry faintly stomped one foot in frustration. “You’re still not hitting back.”

“You want another like the last? I only have so many gentle spells and I truly do not wish to harm you.”

“Stop worrying about me!”

Disguised Harry, letting his own jealousy leak into his judgment said, “You have potential, but you need a qualified teacher. Clearly Professor Snape is not allowed to teach dueling or you’d be better than this.”

Old Harry felt the next curse before his rival even finished thinking it through. It was a Sectumsempra, borne on a key source of anger inside this version of himself. Disguised Harry squeezed it back into the wand before it could be cast or even finish generating. Since the spell was as close to his own nature as any Forbidden Spell could be, blocking it was as easy as turning off a tap.

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Native Harry fell with a shout. He dropped his wand and clutched his arms around himself. Disguised Harry felt anger turn his blood acidic. Still aiming his wand at the vision kneeling across from him, he said, "Don't you ever cast a spell like that... AT ANYONE." He took a few steps closer as the crowd murmured. Lily Potter moved in to assist her son and James pulled his wand from his breast pocket and stepped in to guard both of them.

Disguised Harry forced the burning in his veins out through his breath and lowered his wand. Poisonous jealousy crowded around his anger, which did not help.

McGonagall stepped out of the spectators. "What happened?" she asked.

"I turned his own spell back upon him," Disguised Harry said, slipping his wand away, only to find that he already had one, one he had not wanted to reveal the core of. He held the wand out to Ginny instead, whose eyes were as wide as ever. "Thank you, young lady."

Native Harry was getting to his feet with assistance. He shot a befuddled glance over his shoulder before being led away to sit in a comfy chair.

"How many dueling tournies have you won?" one of the twins asked, enthralled.

Disguised Harry chuckled. "I am not allowed to participate. I get assigned as judge."

The twins and Ron chuckled too. They all turned to observe the scene around the chair. Harry felt nothing for his double, who had both parents to help with one painful spell in his entire memory. "You'd think the boy never felt an abbreviated Sectumsempra curse before," he said.

Fred exploded, "He sent that at you?! Even I think that should be on the Forbidden list."

Harry regretted speaking. "Perhaps he would have held off on actually casting it."

"Too bad you couldn't let him. Think of the trouble. Boy!"

"I should not have mentioned Professor Snape," Harry mused, serene now, buoyed by his own amusement at causing so much trouble so easily.

Beside him, Ginny giggled into her hand.

"Good thing you weren't planning on staying around for long," George said.

"True." Harry was very much ready to go home. Jealousy, now released to run wild inside him, threatened to take his own self-control again at the slightest provocation.

"Have one more Butterbeer, or teach us one more spell," Ginny pleaded.

"We are done with spells for now. Perhaps just a Butterbeer."

Their little pack went to the drinks table and Fred and George heated some bottles that were still in the crate on the grass underneath.

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As he reached out to accept one, Harry was tapped hard on the shoulder.

“Totten, I’m told your name is,” James Potter said. Harry fully recognized the fury distorting the edges of the face before him. It was the same as he had just battled inside himself.

“That’s right,” Harry confirmed softly, wearisomely pulling out a pleasant voice from a past that had receded into the mists after the duel.

“What’s the idea challenging my son like that when you can clearly out-spell him?”

Harry had a hard time facing down his father – it made his chest tight – but he managed to come up with something befitting his disguise, even if it did nothing to express what longed to escape. “I am a bit old fashioned you see,” Harry rambled. “In my time one would always step in for a lady in distress.”

Ginny rolled her eyes and ducked her head.

Harry found his footing and stepped closer to the familiar anger of his father, close enough to feel the debilitating energy of it along his nerves. “You wanted me to do that,” Harry said as if sharing a secret. “If I had let him cast that, he’d have been up before the Wizengamot.” Backing off, residual anger flaring up again, he added, “Unless they are so doddered by his fame that they are incapable of it. Perhaps that’s the case.” More insinuatingly, “Perhaps that’s even happened before.”

“Oh, get off,” James said. “My son would never do anything the Wizengamot would care about.”

The surrounding Weasleys all looked away with various amused and dubious expressions. Harry stared at the man before him. James radiated protective instinct to the core – exactly as Harry fantasized about having from a father all those years when he had none at all. Harry could not feel additional jealousy, he had overdosed on it already. It could have worked out like this, Harry thought. Twisted and conflicting remorse torqued within Harry’s gut instead, trying to metamorphose into something that could escape him.

James glanced around the unfavorable audience and snarled, “Stay away from my son,” before stalking away.

Harry, untenable emotion clouding his thoughts, grabbed James’ robe, his artificially aged hands just as strong as ever. Like in a duel he instinctively struck back at his opponent’s weakest spot. When James spun to face him, eyes flashing, Harry said, “I was serious that he needs a new dueling tutor. He has potential.”

James glowered and jerked his robe free, nearly running into Sirius, who stood a pace behind him. Harry stared longingly at his godfather, unable to stop himself. Sirius stared curiously back until tugged away by James, who felt less real. The mystified look from a purely compassionate Sirius made Harry starkly aware of

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how violently jumbled his emotions had become, simultaneously detached and over-involved: a recipe for disastrous distress if there ever was one.

Harry accepted an un-spilled drink and stared around the happy picnic. “You are all terribly spoiled,” he muttered, understanding in a flash of disturbed thinking the motivations Svaha had in building spelling devices just to cause chaos. She had accused him, Vineet and their wizarding world of not appreciating the peace they had. She would go wholly berserk should she ever find her way to this place.

“You all right?” Ginny asked, when Harry rubbed his forehead.

“I am, my dear girl,” Harry said, finding the persona of kindly old man debilitating now. “I should return home, however.” He handed her the bottle back and closed her hand around it when she resisted taking it.

“Don’t go because of his His Highness there...” one of the twins protested.

“It isn’t that. I just have much too much to do.” Indeed, Harry risked upsetting Tonks and even getting caught missing the longer he remained. He was happy to get away without any entanglements, and if he left now, there would be none. Tonks would be waiting, he was confident, but bad luck could easily show him to be missing.

Harry made his goodbyes to them, touched by their pleading that he remain. He stepped away, intending to go the long way around the picnic via the ruts in the drive. He was waylaid by McGonagall before he reached the orchard.

“Aaron,” she said gently enough that Harry believed the topic was not his double and the duel.

He stopped, clasped his hands together and assumed a patient, in-character, pose only with immense effort.

“Given how well you knew Albus, I was hoping to get your advice on something.” When Harry bowed, she led him closer to the orchard and gestured for Griselda Marchbanks to join them. “This is an issue that has been restricted to the Wizengamot and I do hope you can respect our desire to keep it there for the time being?”

“Of course,” Harry said, thinking that he was never coming back, so how could it possibly matter?

McGonagall fidgeted before saying, “We have a Divination instructor at Hogwarts who for the most part is a harmless pretender. Albus hired her-”

“Sybill Trelawney, you mean?” Harry prompted, not at all liking the path of the conversation.

“Yes, of course Albus would have told you about her, I suppose?”

Harry nodded knowingly.

“Well, last week she uttered one of her rare true prophecies to me. I would be most appreciative if you could offer advice about what you believe is the wisest course and, more importantly, how you think Albus would react.”

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Harry breathed deeply and let it out slowly. He should have left sooner. "I'll do my best."

"The prophecy is as follows, and please do not tell another, we fear the damage caused purely by the reaction. A dark shadow approaches undetected, gathering the slumbering willing in its web. It will shatter half a century of peace so that the time before it will seem as if a dream."

Harry closed his eyes. There was no Voldemort here, of that he was certain, which gave him some relief. He must not have made Horcruxes in this place.

"...power indescribably heartless will wreak cold vengeance upon wizardom. All will be touched for the worse. The only magic capable of defeating it is contained within the seventh pureblood son who is not."

Harry's pure white brow lowered as he pondered that. He wondered if the prophecy were warning about Svaha and Merton again, or something completely new. If the prophecy had said chaos instead of vengeance, Harry would have felt certain.

Harry said, "I think you need to start preparing the wizarding public for some tough times. If you don't want panic, make up an excuse, any excuse, for better awareness of danger, of dark magic." Unaware that he stroked his beard thoughtfully, Harry added, "Start teaching Defense to all years at Hogwarts again. And find this person."

Marchbanks complained, "There was confusion last time, too, over whom it may be."

Harry nodded. "The future is not fixed so the prophecy cannot be certain." He stated this with such authority that McGonagall's shoulders relaxed.

"Would you be willing to consult with the Wizengamot?"

Harry said, "I was not planning on staying. I have responsibilities distant from here. I cannot shirk them. I shouldn't even be here. Nostalgia got the better of me," he admitted in a bout of full honesty. "I shouldn't be here at all," he repeated.

"I understand," McGonagall said on automatic, regretful.

"I don't wish to abandon you at such a trying time, but I must. I can offer some advice. Take the worst case plans for the worst case outcomes you can think of and triple them." She stared at him as though he had lost his mind. Harry patted her on the arm, truly saddened and trying to imagine the times they had just been through applied to this peaceful place. "A year from now, you will remember I said that, and know that I was right. I don't say that to be cruel... quite the opposite."

He stepped back and tiredly said, "My own responsibilities are equally dire. I was granted a small break from them and I should not abandon them any longer, I'm afraid."

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“I do understand,” McGonagall said. Harry could see in her eyes that she hoped that if worse came to worse, he would magically reappear to help right things.

“Treat the wizarding public with respect and let them know the danger. They are allies if you let them be or victims if you don’t.” As he spoke, he felt grateful that this wasn’t normally his role. He did not envy Dumbledore’s old responsibilities as wizened leader one bit.

Harry made his goodbyes, and strolled through the orchard, where groups of wizarding youths had gathered in their own small parties, a few around magical fires. This meant Harry needed to walk farther away before slipping into the Dark Plane. But the walk allowed him to clear his head before facing the awful transference to his own plane.

Harry woke up on the floor of Tonks’ flat, with someone playing with his ear. He giggled because it tickled. “Ger off,” he mumbled, but smiled broadly into Tonks’ worried gaze. He lay covered with warmed cushions from the couch and pillows off the bed.

“You were right that you’d return covered in ice,” Tonks marveled.

Harry, with assistance, managed to sit up. “Thanks for helping me.”

“You were gone a long time.”

“As long as I wasn’t missed,” Harry said, thinking back over what he had learned. The most important thing would take some time to settle in. As to the other thing he had learned... “I need to go talk to the Weasley twins,” Harry said. “Care to come along?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Harry shrugged. “I’d happily go on my own,” he suggested.

As they arrived on Diagon Alley and stepped through the brick wall, Tonks said, “You visited someplace far removed from here and now you need to talk to Fred and George?”

“These other places aren’t as removed as all that. Some things are the same.”

“Did you find your parents?” she asked, wanting to believe, Harry could hear in her voice.

He nodded.

“Well, how were they?” she asked, teasing as she played along, but also sounding strained.

Harry hesitated before proclaiming, “Doting. Too doting.” Jealousy threatened again, muted. “Their son Harry has no idea what he has.”

Tonks grabbed Harry’s sleeve as he moved to moved to a better spot to Apparate from. “Wait, you saw yourself?”

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“Well, certainly. Odds are a James and Lily Potter would have a me; wouldn’t they?”

She released him. “That’s really disturbing, Harry. You shouldn’t be playing around like this.”

They strolled in silence past the soot-stained shopfront of Eeylops. At the door to the twin’s shop, Harry said, “Can I talk to them alone? I may be far off base, but I have a suspicion about something.”

She parked herself on the narrow window ledge of the shop window. “Five minutes.”

“Ten.”

She peered at him. “This official business?”

“It may be,” Harry conceded.

“All right, ten. You owe me dinner, though.”

“Any time.” Harry reached for the door, setting off a series of jangles, bongs and squawks.

“Tonight.”

“You’re on.”

The shop was shrouded in grim light in contrast to the outside. One of the twins was helping a customer at the counter. Ginny popped her head up from the corner where she was straightening the shelves and tracked him crossing the room.

When the customer had moved on, Harry said, “I need to talk to you and your brother.”

The figure across from Harry made no jokes, no faces, just gestured for Ginny to take over. He gave his sister a sharp glance before slipping through the back door to the stairway. Harry pretended that the glance meant nothing to him.

Upstairs, cauldrons were lined up on the long crooked table that had been repaired several times with scrap wood to cover blackened holes or long cracks.

“George!” Harry’s escort shouted as he opened the door. “Guest.”

George looked up from the parchment he held and spelled the stirring stick he held to keep on without his hand. He stuffed the parchment quickly away in his pocket. “What’s this?”

“He insisted on a word,” Fred said.

Harry dived right in and asked, “Did you have anything to do with the Eeylops fire?”

The two of them did not move and Harry realized his error. He had left open the possibility of denial. He tried something stronger. “Come on. I know you’ve been selling security systems to at least one shop down here.”

This made them shift from foot to foot. Fred said, “What’d Ginny tell you?”

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“Your sister didn’t tell me anything,” Harry insisted, conscience clear on that specific point. He tried to think ahead as quickly as possible. If the twins were responsible for dumping the gang members then why had the perpetrators no memory of what had happened? Harry, excitement building with understanding, said, “You wiped their memories, didn’t you? Why the devil did you do that?”

George rounded on Harry at this accusation. “Why did we do that? Are you a nutter? They’d have turned us in.”

Harry leaned into his disbelieving face. “We needed their memories for the investigation! Did you even stop and think about that?”

George angrily attended to a cauldron that was sending sky blue foam in a sheet onto the table. More calmly, Fred said, “We did think of that. They didn’t know anything. Durumulna lackeys never know anything dangerous to the organization.”

“You interrogated them?” Harry asked, too sarcastically, because it set Fred off.

“Yes. With stuff we got here, which is at least equal to yours. We’re not stupid, Harry. Give us some credit.”

Harry made himself back down. “So what went wrong? What happened?”

“What went right?” George asked. “Eeylop was tired of those guys coming around, demanding protection money. He wanted them stopped if they tried anything. We set a trap, but it, uh, backfired. No pun intended.”

“Why didn’t Mr. Eeylop come to us for help instead of to you?”

“Because he’d be spelled to a state of wishing for death within the hour, Harry. Don’t be so naïve.” He took a cauldron off the heat and set it in a water bath. “People can come to us for help without risking the gang’s wrath. They’ve been doing it more and more. We can help them in ways you can’t.”

Harry fixed his gaze on the overcrowded mantel piled with ingredients and half-folded boxes and tried to decide what to do. The twins were thinking along the same lines.

“You going to turn us in?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. They all glared at each other. “You shouldn’t have wiped their memories.”

George grew ferocious again. “Their memories were already wiped. Maybe I didn’t make that clear.”

“Maybe I only have your word on that,” Harry countered.

After a space Fred quietly said, “You can help us help other witches and wizards, but you can’t do it officially.”

Harry felt the weight of responsibility settling onto him like he had in the other Plane. Turns out he could not escape it after all.

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“I reserve the right to turn you in if you mess up again.” He did not like his options and resisted being hard nosed and getting them into serious trouble if the result was as they insisted. Sounding stubborn he said, “Contact me if you get into a similar circumstance. We can work something out.”

George mumbled, “Something you get the credit for.”

Harry gaped at him. “I don’t care about the credit. I can’t believe you said that.”

Fred stepped in front of Harry, hand on his chest to hold him back. Harry realized he had overreacted. He needed a break after his excursion to the alternative Plane, clearly. “Sorry,” Harry said quietly. “I don’t care about the credit,” he stated factually this time. “I can arrange for someone else to always get it if you want.”

Fred said, “It doesn’t matter. Ignore my brother. He’s upset we didn’t get credit this time. He wanted a medal.” It was not clear if he was serious.

Back out on the Alley, Harry put off Tonks’ questions, saying with determination, “Let’s drag Candide away from the office and take her home.”

The accountancy was just a few doors down. When Harry entered, most of the activity stopped. Candide’s coworkers looked up in surprise and vague wariness. Deciding to use his bad reputation to his advantage, Harry said, “I’m here to fetch Candide.”

“Are you now?” the boss said, striding out of his office. His attitude shifted. “Oh, Mr. Potter.”

Harry gave a patently false smile and turned to his guardian’s wife, who stood still, hands full of files. “Ready to go?” Harry asked.

She glanced at Mr. Farnsworth and said, “Sure. Let me get a case for these files I have to sort.”

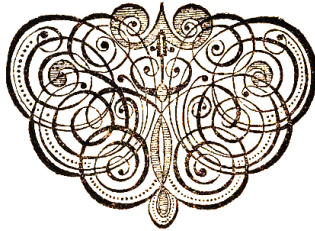
Tonks helped her out packing things and they were soon on their way. Outside, Candide said, “Wow. I would not imagined it could be that easy.”

“Your boss is scared of me,” Harry stated.

“Come by at five every day, won’t you?” Candide invited.

Author’s Notes: My betas deserve a special call out here. The criticism, especially on this last chapter, was super-useful and the chapter and the story would be a pale version of itself without you guys. So thanks!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART III

Exhausted, Harry fell back on the couch in the main hall in Shrewsthorpe. He dearly wanted to attempt suppressing a curse cast at him by someone other than himself, but he did not, at all, feel like getting cursed right then. Tonks settled in beside him, arm around his shoulders.

“You two are so darling together,” Candide said, leaning back with relish on the couch opposite. “It’s the contrast with your hair I guess. Harry’s dark and short, Tonks’ long and upright.”

Tonks’ hair drooped, darkening until it looked like Harry’s. Her face shifted too, nose and brow changing until she was a glancingly passable imitation of him.

“Oh, now, that’s just disturbing,” Candide said, eyes dashing between them.

“Tell Harry that,” Tonks opaquely said.

Candide’s face grew curiously perturbed but she withheld a follow-up question and turned to her files instead.

“Still too much work, eh?” Tonks asked.

“After Tuesday it will all be over with, for the most part. That’s the end of the month.” She looked up at them. “Why don’t you lovebirds go out for the evening?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m tired,” he said, leaving off explaining that someone should guard her as well.

Tonks said, “I’m looking forward to a proper, elf-cooked meal, I am.”

“You wouldn’t look so terribly forward to it if you actually bought groceries on

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occasion,” Harry pointed out.

“Like I have time.” She glanced around the hall. The tall clock chimed once for the quarter hour. “If I wish for a drink will Winky bring one?”

“You have to want one badly enough,” Harry teased.

She sighed and propped her chin on his shoulder. “I thought I did.”

Moments later Winky appeared in a sparkle, delivered something tall that smoked, and disappeared again.

With feeling, Tonks said, “Wow, you’ve got it so good here, Harry.”

This gave Harry pause, since it echoed his thoughts from the other Plane. “You think?”

Tonk’s propped her drink on her palm and licked the rim. “What? You don’t?”

“I suppose.” Harry considered that other place. He did not want to be that other Harry, and imagining that he could have been made him uneasy. Dumbledore had specifically made certain he did not grow up that way. So the risk had been real, even in this Plane, without his parents to help him along that path. It was Harry’s low upbringing at the Dursleys that had made him choose Gryffindor over Slytherin when the time came to do so. Although, that seemed less important a decision now than it had before. Maybe that other Harry choose Gryffindor because that’s what his father would have wanted. That Harry already believed he was “great”; the hat could not use that as bait like it had for him.

Tonks hmed over her drink, savoring it. Harry watched her sip the milky brown liquid that left foam strata rings on the glass as it disappeared. “What is that?”

“Hot Butterbeer milkshake. I just had a craving for one.”

“Uh oh,” Candide said without pausing in her sorting.

Tonks scoffed. “Not to worry.”

Harry’s heart found a semi-normal rhythm again, but it took a while to settle down completely. He found Candide grinning at him when he next looked over at her. He let her see his relief, badly needing to share it. The both relapsed into smiles and Candide returned to her work.

He leaned back and breathed in the familiar scent of home. What was he missing, he wondered. Not much, if anything. Well, his adoptive father was not exactly home often. But he should be home tomorrow. Harry felt an acute need to see him, which had not happened in a while. He was the main reason Harry’s life had sorted out like it had and Harry wanted to be reassured of that reality.

Tonks set her glass down and leaned against Harry, who distractedly slipped an arm around her and rested his head back.

“You two are very twee there,” Candide said.

“No we’re not,” they replied in sync.

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“Even that’s cute,” Candide asserted.

The clock ticked, marking the evening out. “You’re my guard all night, right?” Harry quietly asked the head resting beside his lips.

“Yep.”

“Good.”



Snape arrived home Saturday morning while Harry, Tonks and Candide sat in the main hall, each involved in their own reading. Tonks stood up just as Snape strode into the room, tugging his gloves off, a finger at a time. Her quick departure made Harry wonder if she was eager to leave. He was torn between this concern and his pleasure at seeing his guardian.

“I’ll see you later?” Harry asked the departing Tonks.

“You have field work tonight, right?” she asked. “I have things to take care of before shift. So I’ll see you then, probably.”

Snape watched her go and, appearing thoughtful, strolled over before Harry. He shook the Floo soot from his gloves and folded them away. “If you have time, I wish to speak to you,” he said to Harry.

Candide lifted her head, jostling her hastily pinned hair so that it fell. She tugged the clip free and held it while shaking her hair loose. “Do you want to be alone?”

“No,” Snape said. “Please remain, unless we are distracting you.”

Harry could not read him. He wanted to ask him to try some curse drills with him, but that idea slid aside when he fleetingly worried that he may be facing another grounding. “What is it?”

Snape checked the house for bugs and returned to the same spot before Harry. He spoke deliberately. “Meeting your younger self made me realize a few things,” he began, snapping his sleeves once before letting his hands rest at his sides. “When you were young, first starting at Hogwarts, I do not believe you were looking for a parent. Nor do I think you would have accepted one. You were far too accustomed to getting by on your own. What I think you needed were friends more than anything, which you found, easily enough.”

Harry blinked in surprise at this conversation. After his trip yesterday, he wished to share how he newly perceived his life; how he accepted now that a grim start could work to one’s advantage. He had not figured out how to broach this topic without admitting he had journeyed out of this world yet again, but he had hoped to come up with something. To be faced with Snape expressing usually close-kept thoughts struck him as flukish.

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When Harry remained silent, Snape paced once, hands clasped behind him and went on. "When I brought you home here, you were marginally willing to accept having a father, partly because you saw it as your last chance ever to have one. That and you were quite worn down and, for the first time, willing to accept a home as well as help from someone older than your friends." When Harry remained stunned silent, mind following too many trails to respond intelligently, Snape prompted, "Do you concur?"

"Yes," Harry said. He thought back to that time when the house surrounding him now was novel and everything about his life felt terribly uncertain. He struggled while piercingly remembering that the hardest thing had been trusting that this help would not be unceremoniously pulled out from under him. Rather than voice this, he resorted to nodding to accentuate his agreement.

Snape sighed and said, "But I think we have come full circle at this point. I think you are back to needing friends, not a father."

"I don't think that's true," Harry countered. When Snape did not argue, just waited, Harry tried to explain. Across from him, Candide had abandoned her work to watch the two of them, tennis-match style. "I still need someone to tell me when I'm messing up."

"Good friends do that," Snape pointed out.

"Yeah, but it's different with a father," Harry said, despite being unprepared to express in what way.

"Oh, it is," Snape filled in. "To wit: fathers expect to be obeyed... at least some of the time."

Harry frowned wryly.

"You see," Snape gently said, "you have returned to trusting only your own judgment. You give mine very little regard."

"I listen to what you say," Harry said. "I just..."

"Don't follow it. Correct." Snape shifted to cross his arms, but appeared to consciously drop his arms to the sides.

Upstairs, Harry's pet rattled her cage loud enough to be heard. Harry waved his wand in that direction to free her, and she sailed several loops around the room before settling on his shoulder.

"I do not bring this up to disturb you," Snape said, glancing at Harry's uneasy pet. "I think we need to change the situation to something more workable, so I am merely stating things as I see them."

Harry, neck sore from peering upward, said, "Why don't you sit down? Make yourself at home."

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Snape pulled a straight-backed chair over between the couches and sat rigidly in it, hands steepled in his lap. "I think you temporarily accepted a father, but that time has passed." He cut Harry off. "Yes, you wish to deny it. Which is fine, really. Touching perhaps even, but it is some residual instinct only, I feel certain."

"Severus..." Harry argued. "I like being in this family. I like living here, having your advice and to have you as, er, backup when things go wrong."

Still unerringly calm, Snape returned, "I have not disputed any of these things. All I am disputing is that you remain willing to allow me to act as a father to you."

Hearing Tonks' words echo in his head, Harry said, "You're not giving up on me, are you?"

Snape's face gave the first twitch of pain the whole conversation. "Never. That is precisely the opposite of what this is about."

"Oh, good."

Snape crossed his arms and fell into lecture mode. "This is the dilemma: You are unable to do as I say, but I insist on making certain you come to no harm." He let that lie for a moment. Harry's eyes flickered downward, partly because he had just the day before done something he knew would strongly meet with disapproval and he was not Occluding his mind all that strongly.

Snape went on, "What I am proposing is a change in how we relate. I will resist my penchant for directing your actions and you will seek me out more often for advice, as well as keep me better informed of what you are doing."

Harry did not feel certain it could be that easy. "You think that will work?"

"I don't know. I think it is up to you."

Candide's papers shuffled as she returned to sorting during the lull that followed. Harry plucked his pet up off his shoulder where she was chewing his hair and propped her on his knee instead.

Snape said, "For example. You returned again to that other Plane where you destroyed Voldemort. That was not wise."

"I didn't have any choice," Harry argued.

"You always have a choice."

"That's not true. I couldn't leave it like that, with your double in bad circumstances. Circumstances I caused." Kali began chewing on his robes as his agitation affected her. "I don't know how you could think I could just leave it."

"You believe you fixed things?" Snape asked.

Harry sensed a trap; it was something about the tone Snape used to ask the question. It reminded him of a dungeon door slowly creaking open, revealing an unlit passageway.

Harry answered honestly, "Yes."

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“You received two short glimpses of another world and you believe you knew enough to meddle so thoroughly in that place?”

Now at least, it was clear where this was heading.

“That place wasn’t so different from this one,” Harry said, no longer arguing. “I had to off Voldemort and I had to rescue that other Snape.”

Softly, Snape pointed out, “You did not answer the question.”

“I suppose, then, yes, I think I did know enough.”

Snape stood at this and produced a rolled leather satchel like a craftsman might use to tie up fine tools. Moving with purpose, he set his chair aside, hovered the couch Harry rested upon to get it out of the way, and said to Candide, “If you wouldn’t mind. I would prefer that you remain at least thirty feet from what I am going to do.”

She blinked at him. “Can I watch?”

Snape gestured at the dining room. “From the other side of the room. Certainly.”

Candide eagerly gathered up her things and vacated them to the dining room and then stood in the doorway. Snape had already moved the other couch to clear a wide space on the floor. He unrolled the satchel at his feet with a flick. Inside it, caught in neat leather loops were rolls of fine, silk twine, chalk, telescoping rods, candles and other oddments.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked.

“Without sending you away again, I wish to demonstrate your mistaken belief in what you did.”

Harry stood and came around to where Snape was fixing a dowel to the floor with a dab of wax. “How do you know it’s a mistaken belief?”

“The world, this world, any world, is far more complex than you are treating it. If I am wrong, so be it. But if I am correct, I will have proved something very important to you... without having grounded you, or shouted, or anything of that nature.”

“You haven’t shouted in a long time,” Harry said, feeling sheepish and willing to fall into to a teenage mode. He drew his lips in between his teeth as he watched Snape use twine and chalk to draw a large circle on the floor. Harry had to step out of the way of letting the broad arc of it close off. “What are you doing?” Harry asked again as the dowel was freed from the floor with a quick heat spell and placed at the top of the circle.

Snape took the twine he had used for the large circle and folded it into thirds then twice into halves. He then unwound five sections of that and made a knot. He used this length to make smaller circles around the circumference of the first. He did not answer until he had waxed down two rods at two seemingly random arc intersections and drew a blue chalk line along it, fingers positioned expertly to avoid deflecting the

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string. "I am preparing a five-sided device, with the expectation that you can use it to see into this place you visited."

Harry's jaw dropped open. He said, "I don't want you to make a pentagram; that's dark magic."

Snape gathered the twine around his wrist and held up the wooden dowel tied to it. "This is interesting, is it not? You believe this is not the best activity for me to be engaged in, but I think otherwise. I frequently think the same of your activities and you likewise disagree." They stared at each other until Harry backed down by dropping his gaze.

Harry watched as more long lines were drawn between arc intersections, slightly off from the center, forming a perfect pentagon in the middle. "That doesn't look like a pentagram," Harry said, despite seeing how it could be easily extended into one. He felt like being difficult, so the comment came out critical.

"It is actually a much more powerful device referred to as a twenty-vertex snark."

Harry raised a brow and considered making a comment about that.

"Something you want to say?" Snape eloquently asked, looking up long enough to give Harry an opportunity to do so. Harry declined and Snape returned to his attention to the diagram.

As the last of ten long lines were completed, Harry felt the floor vibrate and Kali took flight back to his room. "I don't think this is a good idea," he said. "I can already feel it activating. I don't want you messing with anything dark."

Snape handed him the chalk. "You finish it then."

Was this a test? Harry wondered. He studied the diagram without moving, and Snape said, "You need to make a string equal to the length of the distance between the outer circle and one of the pentagon vertices." When Harry had done that, he did as instructed and made arcs inward of the pentagon. Then he made more long lines, the intersections with the arcs told marked where to draw a perfect inner pentagon to the first. He was not as adept at mounting the dowels and tracing the twine for a straight line, so this proceeded slowly.

"I don't like this, Severus," Harry said again while bent ungainly over the artwork.

"Can you not control the interstice? I thought you were adept at this."

Another test. Harry was tiring of tests. "I can keep everything pressed down where it belongs," he insisted. "But you don't understand."

"Finish the points of the pentagram and we will move on. The sooner we finish, the sooner we can destroy the device." Snape levered himself to his feet, robes streaked with white chalk. "Candide. Thirty feet and if the baby so much as twitches I want you to Apparate away immediately."

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“Severus...” Harry said, nearly pleading. He felt like he moved in a dream. He wanted to believe he was in the wrong place but some base instinct screamed that this was exactly right and believing otherwise a lame excuse. He had pushed Snape into this. “Why are we doing this?” Harry asked.

“Is it not safe?” Snape gestured at the nearby wall with his arm. “You treat journeying to this dreadful place as a stroll down the street outside. This is merely a minute gateway.”

“There’s a difference,” Harry insisted. “You don’t understand... I keep telling you. There’s a big difference between traveling there and what happens when the Planes intersect.”

Snape stared back thoughtfully now rather than haughtily. “Can you control it?” This was an honest question. “If you cannot, destroy the device.”

“I can control it,” Harry said. “That’s not the problem. I just don’t like it.”

“I prefer that you don’t like it. I wish you equally disliked every aspect of it.” After a pause. “Finish the points of the pentagram.”

While Harry drew in the last two, exerting increasing force to keep the interstice closed, Snape mounted a small brown candle on a skull and lit it. He handed this to Harry. “Set it in the middle and move aside.”

Biting both his lips, Harry obeyed by leaning far over, limbs spread like a spider, careful of the chalk lines. With his fingertips, he pushed the skull to the center. Smoke bloomed from the candle, but it ceased to rise; it parted into five streams which snaked towards the vertices and disappeared, allowing only small spurting wisps of smoke into the room.

“You receive an ”O“ for this assignment,” Snape drawled. “Well, done. Fetch me the skull.”

Harry did not want to be anywhere near any of it. It pulsed and vibrated with morbid life or morbid death, or some halfway version of the two.

“Go on. If you can travel there, I do not see how this can harm you. It is the merest cracked window on that place you visit, frequently I suspect.”

Harry, stretched long, propped on one knee, one toe and one hand, and grabbed up the skull candle. “This feels much worse than being there,” he said, setting the skull aside.

“I think this is the only circumstances under which you truly can understand how foul that place is: when it is placed in stark contrast to this world.” Snape fixed a lit white candle to each pentagram vertex, straightened, and gestured bluntly. “Go on. Step inside or destroy it if you cannot bear to.”

Harry breathed deeply, preparing for a dive, and minced between the candles and over the lines until he stood in the very center of the center pentagon. Dizzying

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colorful sheets of sky and ground sailed up from the floor to disappear overhead, whispering and murmuring to him as they passed. When they passed close, they buffeted him, frosting his skin. Harry pulled his arms in and hunched over against the assault.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Snape asked.

Harry heard Snape clearly even over the wisps of noise. “Yeah. Can you see that?”

“No. What is it you see?”

Harry tried to better examine one of the fluttering membranes as it whisked by. His attention slowed the scene’s course and he glimpsed fields and a city with red banners fluttering on the towers before it slipped away. The next one he focused on bulged with smoky clouds and he glimpsed a gloomy London in a fog thick enough to hide the ground. Glowing street lamps rested atop the grey blanket flowing along the roads between the buildings. On the next he glimpsed witches sharing a broomstick while flying low over winter-bare trees.

“I see all possibility,” Harry said, then rethought that absurd notion. “I think.”

“Can you see the place you were before, the one you heroically returned to, certain you knew what was best?”

Harry opened his eyes, only then realizing they had been closed. Upward-sailing scenes continued to strike him, visible whether his eyes were open or closed. He stared at his guardian through them. “You really think I shouldn’t have done that?”

Snape’s pale countenance, floating in the frame of his pitch black hair and robes, was remarkably easy to focus on through the deluge. He said, “I believe it imperative that you understand what you are doing, what you have done, and what you could do. I do not believe for an instant that is true at this time.”



Severus Snape slept through the long nights, nursing the last of his wounds, which had gloriously faded to dull throbs that only accompanied sudden movement. The hut he had been set up in felt more like a home than he would have imagined it could, perhaps the influence of the close, companionable fire that burned nonstop. The green wood he had magically chopped and piled outside smoked terribly, but the hut had been cleverly designed to funnel everything away through the roof when the smoke-hole tarpaulin and the ground vents were given periodic attention.

More healing to his stress-worn spirit was the absolute quiet of the place. After living in dread of his tormentor’s boot steps approaching along the dungeon corridor, the deathly, white-dusted stillness acted as a balm. Rarely did anything ever stir,

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and if it did, its animal origin was always instantly clear. Reindeer trotted by, their hooves a subsonic thundering, felt more than heard. Wolf cries carried from far across the frozen lake. Birds called overhead. These were all welcome noises, reminders that the world had not been utterly drained of existence.

Snape bent to sort through the collection of possible potion ingredients from his last foraging trip. The takings were sparse, but unusual, requiring creativity to make the best of them, an intellectual lure that drew him willingly each morning from sleep deep within the bundled rough furs and borrowed cloak.

Fire stoked comfortably high, Snape sniffed at a dried pine needle, rubbed it on a dark stone, sniffed it again. That was when he heard the strange swish-swish like a sheer curtain being pulled aside and dropped again. Then came a crackle of icy snow, just outside the door. Snape silently put everything aside and stood up, wand out.

Nothing moved. The rushes under the furs that made up the floor were brittle and would snap if he walked across them, but to avoid the fire, there was no choice. Biting his lip, Snape bent low and dashed for the door, hoping to take the person outside by at least modest surprise.

Snape's exit from the small tilted door was met with a low growl. He stood to face a scrawny grey and white wolf showing every last yellowed tooth through its loose gums. It growled hard enough it had to pause and lick up the saliva that dribbled off its jowls. Startled to find an animal bold enough to venture this close, Snape backed up a step and considered retreating to fetch a burning log from the hearth, figuring this would teach the animal better than magic would that it should give the village a wide berth.

The wolf growled again, territorial instinct plain in its eyes, but oddly centered on the hut behind Snape. Snape lowered his wand fractionally. "Are you the shaman who lives here?" he asked, assuming that if he were wrong, no harm in talking at an animal.

The wolf's jaw snapped closed and it tilted its head curiously. An instant later, a man in animal skin breaches, tall rubber boots and long fur tunic stood in the wolf's stead. Snape, seeing no wand on the man, lowered his own. "I am an uninvited guest, I think," Snape admitted, trying to come up with appropriate human society noises to explain his presence. Seventeen days, by the counting of the low sunrises, he had been alone here, long enough to forget something he rarely practiced at the best of times.

The shaman, pale steel eyes glowing in the blue, otherworldly light, held up a hand to halt Snape's speech and slipped inside the hut, clearly adept at using the odd door.

He stepped over to stand among the things Snape had spread out and stared down

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at them. Snape waited in the entry area where a wedge of bare dirt was framed with logs. The shaman picked up the leaf parcels of ingredients, examining some of them with interest, and handed them to Snape with a curt gesture to set them on the other side of the hut. Snape did so, spreading out his cloak to set them, as well as himself, on.

The shaman did not speak, and when Snape tried to explain a bit, the shaman waved him off and felt in his tunic for something. He extracted a pouch and pipe, lit the pipe without a match or a wand and began puffing on it. The smoke smelled of nothing familiar, certainly not tobacco, perhaps bark.

Snape waited – for what, he was uncertain. An hour passed in this awkward silence.

The sound of Apparition outside startled Snape, but not his host. The door opened and a middle-aged woman with almond eyes and round cheeks ducked through the doorway. She sat down on the other side of the hut and shared the pipe. Despite the new arrival, no words were spoken for quite some time. Snape, who was grateful still simply to no longer be a prisoner at his guards' whim, had limitless patience for their slow pace.

It was some time after Snape laid down for a nap that the witch spoke, but in an incomprehensible tongue. The shaman replied likewise. Snape rocked to a sitting position and expressed interest even though he could not understand.

Silence fell and stretched long. Snape cleared his throat and said, "I do apologize for my intrusion. The person who brought me here seemed to know you. Perhaps you know him? Harry Potter."

The pair visibly stiffened. The shaman knocked the pipe bowl on a hearth stone and put it away with solemnity.

"Harry Potter brought you here?" the witch asked, disbelief clear.

"Yes," Snape said.

The pair glanced at each other, Snape could not catch their thoughts over the brightness of the hearth flames shielding them.

"Why?"

"To recover. I was injured."

Another impenetrable burst of conversation, then, "But why here?"

"You don't know Mr. Potter?" Snape asked, knowing well the best way to combat uncomfortable questions was with more questions.

Unsatisfactory silence met his query and nothing more was said.

Meal preparations commenced in equal silence, the only chatter coming from the implements used. By the time a wooden board with food was passed over to him,

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Snape was beginning to really like these people and especially their lack of incessant prattle.

After the meal, Snape's hosts began packing up amidst abbreviated back and forth conversation. The witch said, "We can just make it tonight. We will take you."

"Take me where?"

"To Potter."

Snape revealed more surprise that he liked when he blurted, "You're going to take me to Harry Potter?"

Nods from his hosts as they shrugged on their coats and shuffled out of the hut. Snape grabbed up his satchel of ingredients and his broomstick and hurried to follow. Outside, the two of them were strapping on skis. A pair was put down for him, which he balked at. He hovered his broomstick instead, and sat upon it. The shaman pointedly bundled the abandoned skis together and held them out. Snape perched them on his shoulder since he could not argue, as they shared no language in common to argue with.

Off they went, at a surprising pace given the age of the expedition. Snape flew along behind, sometimes holding the bundled skis out as a tow line to speed up long ascents. The first time this offer was made, it was turned down, but not the second time.

Hours glided by over the snowy, rocky landscape. In the distance to the left, deep valleys opened up, green with pines, but ahead of them the ground grew increasingly rocky and barren beneath the hissing snow.

Eventually, the broom gave out. It simply settled to the ground. Snape stood and brushed the snow off his cloak and stared down at it. The shaman gestured at the skis, which Snape reluctantly donned. The journey progressed far slower after that, especially since rather than pulling others uphill, Snape had to remove the skis and walk. An hour into this and his breath filled the air before his face with panting fog and he could not draw relief into his lungs no matter the effort he put into it.

Snape called for a rest and sat down on a rock, not caring that the cold of it sucked the heat from him. He remained hunched there until his breathing returned to normal. With a clearer head, he took in his surroundings. There was nothing here but blowing humps of white: the Sahara desert of snow. He peered at each of his companions in turn, but could detect nothing in their minds of concern to him, just a desire to move on and return home quickly.

Legs quivering, Snape stood and began breathing heavily to get ahead of it in hopes of not immediately falling breathless again. They continued their slow progress until the light began to fade, rendering the snow a slate blue-grey that masked large dips and buried rocks. Snape fell repeatedly, so he removed the skis and used them

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as walking sticks until the next downhill where he waited for both of them to reach the bottom and utilized the deeper of their two trails to follow.

The sloping ground met a rocky incline too steep to climb. The shaman pointed along this cliff-face and the witch said, "You'll have to go on alone."

Snape's tired brain did not allow him to do more than than stare at them. The skis were taken from his unresisting hands and the woman said, "Up around that way. Just a kilometer more. Go on. You cannot miss it."

"Miss what?" he asked, but they were already moving off with haste and glancing sharply around themselves, then up at the sky, which gave the distinct impression of apocalypse the way it fell in tumbling, torn flakes.

Snape pulled his cloak tightly around his body to block the wind and leaned into the path, picking his way carefully along the rugged join where the ground met cliff. The curving slope leveled off and the going became much easier even as the snow began to fall blindingly thick. As he parted the swirling wall of flakes, Snape kept the steep hill in view on his right to avoid losing his way in an endless, fatal circle.

The snow gusted first one way, then the other, alternating pelting and pushing, and then within a span of feet it slowed and trickled off to a few drifting flakes. Snape stopped and glanced behind him where the wind visibly corkscrewed the snow along the barren cliff.

Feeling more optimistic about finding something, Snape walked forward and stopped again when a glittering fortress trickled into view through the low-lit gloom, nestled in a dry gorge. At first glimpse it appeared to be a magnificent soaring ice replica of a castle, but closer in, deficiencies appeared. The turrets had melted and refrozen many times and in between had been re-grown with less skill than the original maker possessed.

Snape huffed in and out, fogging his view as he considered the scene. A sloping entrance had been cut in the side of the cliff and ice wall, leading to a high door, but below this, another door, a crack in the rock, really, led inside too. That way promised safer exploration of this strange place.

Snape made his way under the looming ice castle's gaze and slipped inside the crevice beneath it. The scent just inside alarmed him with its misplaced familiarity. He tossed a Lumos out of his wand and reeled back from what it illuminated: raw flesh. Catching himself on the wall of ice behind him, Snape gazed around at another hanging figure, half-butchered, thigh bone protruding. The thing swayed on a hook, antlers grazing the uneven stone floor. Snape patted his chest – a gesture he would have been appalled to be conscious of. Moving the wand, he examined the next figure, also partly butchered, but half-encased in the ice growing out from the wall. Beneath the glittering frozen surface, endless blood red figures hung in long rows,

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fully entombed.

Snape shook the spell from the wand and made his way back outside where the castle's splintered glow lit the gorge opening in a mockery of welcome. There was nothing for it; he could not stay down here and there was no other shelter. He could Apparate away, but the only destination in range was the place from which he had just been evicted.

Snape made his way gingerly up the icy path arcing along the cliff-face, wand at ready. At the top, the path broadened to a platform, framed by the ice columns of the doorway. There were no doors, so Snape slipped inside, shaking off the Lumos spell.

A wall blocked the entrance and, by design, the wind, but passages curled around it on either side. Snape slipped to the right, lured by a flickering hint of flames catching on the rippled, wet wall. Snape hesitated long enough to reassure himself that if this were Potter's house, he could be safely presumed to be hospitable, given his recent actions. Having seen the young man in battle, Snape had no desire to face his ire unleashed. He hesitated longer, even after establishing this logic, before reminding himself again that he had no choice.

Around the bend, indirect light mutely flooded a grand hall of ice, complete with facing ice hearths holding merrily crackling fires. The cathedral-like ceiling arched high above, interrupted only by the cliff face flattening it preemptively like a wound. A figure sat on a pile of furs, bent deeply over some sewing. Snape stood as frozen as the walls framing him as he took in the bizarrely familiar lines of the figure. The woman moved, sending clearer auburn hues off her hair. Snape ceased to breath as he watched, transfixed. Finally she raised her head to tug her work-piece around ninety degrees, removing all doubt besides that of lost sanity.

The woman froze as well and raised her gaze, alert. She stared at Snape, who could do nothing more than stare back. Lily Potter slipped her feet under her and stood straight with lean ease, showing alarm in her pose, even as her voice held something quite different. "Severus?"

Snape managed to shift one arm, the one holding his wand. He must have fallen in the snow, fallen and had lost his mind to the cold. That would explain the conflicting hallucination of ice and fire – he was hypothermic, dying. He could not bring himself to care about this conclusion – to spell himself with a heat charm to recover; he feared the vision would fade if he did and that would be another, less palatable death.

Lily stepped closer and repeated his name. Snape glanced down at himself. He wore the cloak Potter had given him – the cloak of humble acceptance. What a thing to die in.

"Severus, what are you doing here?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Snape blinked at her. Up close she no longer appeared a vision of twenty years before, but a more reasonable one of grey-sprinkled temples, crudely pampered hair, and faintly lined eyes. Why would he hallucinate her that way?

“Come over by the fire,” she invited, tugging on his arm, which snapped him from his doomed reverie.

By the time they traversed the fur-carpeted floor and reached a fur-clad ice block before the seemingly glass-enclosed fire, Snape bumblingly managed to ask, “What are you doing here? What are you doing alive?”

Her face fell at this, which was not rational; how could it be? She touched his cheek to check his temperature and he nearly fainted at the contact, barely catching himself on the unforgivingly hard edge of the ice chair. He crouched over his quivering arm, trying to comprehend what was happening, trying to establish what was real.

She hovered another ice block close by, tossed a spare fur from the floor over it, and said simply, “I asked you first.”

Snape raised his head to stare at the closest set of homely flames, at the surrounding hearth, which perpetually melted and refroze he now noticed. “I can’t possibly explain that,” he said, wondering where reality left off and his delusions began. He had to admit, it could have left off a long time ago and he just had not noticed until the small changes added up to such undeniable absurdity.

“Nothing today, Mum,” a voice announced from the doorway. “No game for miles.”

Snape stood and spun around to face the familiar voice and found himself swaying again. It was Harry Potter all right, but not at all like he expected. This young man had a boy’s stature, and correspondingly oversized head accentuated by his mop of dark hair.

Harry came to a halt and gaped at Snape. “Professor?” he blurted in sheer surprise.

“Potter,” Snape greeted him with a nod, trying to gain enough time to connect dots that had no relation to one another. He gave up.

“What are you doing here?” Lily asked Snape, emboldened by having backup.

Snape answered, “I was led here by the shaman in the village. I came looking for... well, for Harry.” That was a good enough story, he thought.

“Does Voldemort know you’re here?” Lily asked.

Snape removed his eyes from the elvin-like green ones of Harry. They were too dark as well as too large. He fixated instead on the identical feminine ones peering up at him in concern.

“Voldemort is dead,” Snape said, and started when Harry exclaimed, “I told you, Mum! I could tell.”

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART III

“He’s really gone?” she whispered. “What happened?”

“A powerful wizard came and destroyed him,” Snape stated slowly, glancing back to Harry, who jumped down to cling to his mother’s hand, kneeling beside her in a gesture that struck Snape as Victorian.

“So then you came.” Lily said. “Did you know we were here?” Her brow furrowed as her mind worked, as sharp as ever.

“Not exactly,” Snape said. “Before I can reasonably explain, I need to figure out some things for myself.” He stated this with some authority, hoping it would keep the questions at bay. “But, what-” he began, but locked his jaw when she held up her hand.

“Harry,” she said fawningly to the young man resting on one bent knee beside her ice block. “Can you go fetch more wood for the piles in here, please?”

Harry bit his lip and nodded eagerly, fairly skipping from the room. The wood piles already teetered near the ceiling, two to three deep.

Lily said, “You were going to ask again how I am alive.” She sighed sadly. “I don’t want to repeat it in front of him. It tears him to pieces.”

Snape held his breath as her jewel-green gaze faded and she explained, “Years passed before Harry could even confess it all. Voldemort, using one of his weakest servants, had defeated Harry. He had offered Harry us, James and me, in exchange for the Philosopher’s Stone. Harry said he wasn’t certain how he ended up with the stone; it just fell into his pocket when he looked into the Mirror of Erised. After that he was defenseless. Voldemort’s servant subdued him with a spell and took the stone. But after having promised him us in exchange for retrieving it, Voldemort believed he was bound to the contract of his promise or risk the stone being of no use. So he brought us to life using what Harry describes as rather gruesome Dark Magic executed in the graveyard in Godric’s Hollow.”

She drifted off, gaze pained. The lines of her face grew deeper and Snape needed time to build up the cruelty needed to prompt for more. “But, what became of James?”

The change was barely perceptible, but a shadow darkened her features. “He could not take being here. He insisted upon challenging Voldemort.” Another long gap, but she restarted on her own. “He lost of course. Voldemort dumped him here...” She gestured at a spot on the floor nearby. “Making it clear it would not be tolerated again.”

Snape tried to imagine the scene. The headstrong James Potter sitting still in an ice cage. “But he did it again?”

She nodded, drained by doing so.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“That was selfish of him,” Snape said. “Abandoning the two of you here like that.”

Nearly inaudible, she said, “It broke the rest of Harry’s heart.” She turned away, as the object of her statement, returned, hovering a load of wood before him.

Lily was biting her lower lip and fighting for control, so Snape stood and approached the young man. “How about there?” he suggested, picking an area with a small gap between the pile and the ceiling.

Harry responded to his attention with strange shyness, and moved quickly, and therefore clumsily, to comply. Snape gave no notice to the banging of logs while he occupied his time examining the ice hearth. The spells must be renewed regularly he suspected. Smoke had blackened the ice blocks, visible through the wall all the way up to the roof.

Harry glanced at his mum, brow twitching low. Snape had been watching for that. He asked, “Who renews the spells?”

“Mum, usually. Me, sometimes.”

Lily stood and came over to help hover the excessive wood to other open spots. She had recovered but the strain showed in the rigid lines of her neck and back.

“Shall we have a roast?” Harry asked as he hovered more wood into the nearest roaring hearth. He turned his large eyes on Snape. “Are... are you staying for dinner?”

“If I am invited,” Snape said, pretending he had an option.

“Of course. There’s plenty to eat.”

Snape knew for a fact this was true. “You must hunt a lot... and successfully,” he observed, pulling out a flattering tone with some effort.

Harry leaned in a little, eyes sparkling for just an instant. “I can sneak up on them in deer form and catch them by surprise.”

This time effort was not required. “You’re an Animagus?” Snape asked.

“Mum taught me,” Harry said, turning shy again, but then in a blink his face lit up. “I learned quickly, she thought. Isn’t that right, Mum?” he blurted loudly.

“Yes, of course, Harry,” she said calmly.

The evening passed with copious meat served in the high open space between roaring fires. Snape repeatedly shook himself from a reverie to find, yet again, that this unexpected place, and unexpected people, were as real as himself. While extracting the marrow from a heavy bone, he pondered the mystery of the two Harrys. By this time he had expected at least a sketchy theory to have manifested itself, but the facts refused to find any arrangement, even an implausible one. His expectations still jarred him when he studied the young man on his left. This Harry rarely met his gaze and when he did, he demonstrated clearly that he knew nothing of Occlumency.

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART III

Snape took advantage of the glimpses he got, finding a wounded and straightforward boy, whose ego spent most its time trying to guard against utter self-loathing through distraction or servitude to his mother.

Snape tried his best to be nice to him, limited in this by his resistance to sounding false. The boy gobbled up any nibble of kindness sent his way.

“Can you show me that spell?” Harry asked, when Snape quartered and cored a half-desiccated apple with one wave.

“Certainly.”

Harry grinned eagerly and drew out his wand. Snape said, “But there are far more interesting ones I could teach you.”

The short remainder of the late evening was spent on spells. The radiant walls of the hall rendered night into endless twilight. Harry proved to be an impatient student, but given Lily was the audience, Snape found patience enough and with firm but light prods of chastisement, Harry fell into better behavior. He was like a child seven years younger than his calendar age. Removed from his peers and faced with nothing of solace, he had stagnated on maturing.

To keep the wild spells from disturbing Lily, the lesson proceeded on the other side of the long room.

“You have a partial grasp of that one. Perhaps that’s enough for tonight,” Snape said after Harry managed to transfigure a cup into a capon’s wing, rather than a whole, live capon.

Harry’s eyes turned blatantly hurt, so Snape firmly said, “We will do more tomorrow. Do not worry yourself.”

With an unskilled surreptitious glance at his mother, Harry sidled closer to Snape and whispered, “How long are you going to stay?”

This was an excellent question. “As long as I am welcome.” He left out that he had no place to go. He had planned to begin a long journey, possibly to Australia, but traveling untraceably it would be a lengthy journey. Other options, still half formed, had begun to occur to him. Whispering as well, he asked, “Do you wish me to stay?”

Harry’s lips trembled, immediately overwrought. “Mum hasn’t been this, well, happy in a long time.”

Snape resisted glancing behind him. He swallowed hard, finding additional old feelings rising to life. If this was happy, he loathed to see how she was normally. He dreamed of staying, so to be begged to stay made it hard to control his voice. “If you feel that is true, I shall stay,” he stated primly.

Harry nodded, equally sober, eyes radiating gratitude. Snape put aside the cups and stones they had been using for spell work, catching Lily’s gaze when he turned. She did not practice any Occlumency either.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“Will you go hunting again in the morning?” Snape asked, thinking of when he would next be alone with Lily.

“Do you want to come along?” Harry brightly asked, keen on the topic.

Snape let his lips twitch, thinking how ridiculously naive the question was. “I am certain I would only slow you down and lead to failure. I just inquire because there are potion ingredients I could obtain from a fresh kill, and there is some brewing I would like to do.” He sized Harry up. “For example, would you like to be a bit taller, perhaps?”

Harry grinned. “Am I small?” He peered up at Snape with his deep green eyes. “Compared to you, I guess I am.”

Snape shuffled forward to better compare. “Yes, I think you should be about my height. And we’ll work on spells when you return from hunting. Lots of spells.” The eyes would be hard to fix; they would have to do.

Harry’s smile held pain it so pressed itself upon his mouth. “I’d like that!” He rushed over to his mother to share the news.

Under his breath, Snape said, “I’d like to return to England, eventually. And with Harry Potter, powerful wizard and defeater of the Dark Lord as an ally, I might just be able to.”



Harry flew his mind over snowy ranges, flat lakes of ice, tree-covered slopes, until he found Per’s village. The ground around the huts showed trampling, but there was no life about and no smoke. Not skilled at steering, Harry veered one way and then another, trying to see closer in. He found the ski trail departing the village accidentally while trying to better tune his vision. He could freeze the scene well enough, and he did so now, pondering the two tracks leading away. Uphill they split into two and downhill merged into one.

Harry swayed on his feet. He ached to quit this task. His mind had rapidly exhausted just finding this place, and now all he wanted to do was release what he struggled to keep hold of and step out of the maelstrom whipping by him. With a deep breath he leaned forward, instinctively using broomstick motions to fly, but this did not work. He had to concentrate in a wholly new way, and each time he managed it, he grew increasingly worn raw by the effort.

The ski trail rambled up and down, suddenly splitting into two with a less skilled third veering between them. He cared little for this mystery, and flew past the last of the trees and into a sharply hilly area. Harry followed mindlessly, casting ahead with dead reckoning in the spots where the trail had blow smooth, until he blinked and

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART III

froze at what he saw in the crux of two sharp cliffs. Glittering in the sunlight was an ice castle as tall as Hogwarts. This time his curiosity drew him forward without will, which was fortunate because he could not have expended even one more ounce of effort to move himself within this place.

He passed through the walls of the castle and looked down upon the ice floor. Ice-hearths rose out of the floor, facing each other, glowing yellow-orange with flame. One long wall was lined three-logs-deep with fresh wood. Ice blocks formed furniture, some draped with hides to make them livable. Upon one, two figures were curled around each other. The hair and beaked nose on the taller one was instantly recognizable. The other... Harry nearly staggered and lost the scene while he caught himself. The maelstrom buffeted him helplessly again.

“Harry?” Snape’s voice prodded in concern, disturbing Harry’s fragile reality all the more.

Harry waved him off and finding renewed strength in determination, grasped that scene out of the flow and forced that place to return to view. Determination worked well and moments later he was facing the same icy architecture. He passed through the glowing outside wall, lower down where the view would be clearer. Startled again, this time by finding a vision of himself sitting on a skin on the floor, cutting up something with a knife. Well, it was sort of himself. Almost a simultaneously younger and older version. So his counterpart had not died in this place, and his mother was alive. Harry puzzled that, stiffening in distressed surprise as Snape ran his fingers casually through his mother’s hair. When his mother rested her head on Snape’s chest in response, Harry let the scene go and simply floated there, battered without will in the surf of possibility.

“Step aside,” Snape commanded through his stunned paralysis. Harry could barely concentrate on his guardian beyond. Given the tone he used, Snape may have repeated himself several times and Harry only now heard him.

Harry rotated his head to peer down at his feet. He stood in a nearly solid upwards tunnel of rushing scenes. They felt natural now, in tune with his being, the same way one feels after floating in water too long. But his mind was dissolving, losing track of itself. If he slipped through to the Dark Plane now, he felt he could slip into all places at once and cease to exist. He was too tired to even feel alarm at this daunting prospect. Harry took one step to the side, scuffing the inner pentagon, and the scenes faded and fluttered, releasing his focus to find on the perfectly normal room beyond. Another step and he was freed from the deluge.

Snape destroyed the device with one sweeping Scourgify. Harry stumbled to the closest couch, disoriented from being released from the sensory confusion into stark solidity. He gripped the edge of the couch cushions and breathed deeply.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After several minutes of this, surprise took over that Snape had not spoken. Harry glanced up at him. His guardian stood, gaze watchful, arms across his front, wand held horizontally to the side. "Are you quite all right?" he asked in concern.

Harry rubbed one tired eye and nodded despite his shaking hand. "You were right; I didn't understand what was happening there." Overwhelmed again by what he had found, Harry flopped back and tilted his head up to stare at the chandelier, noting that the unlit candles mounted on it were all of varying lengths and that long drips of wax had formed beneath the stubby ones. This was not important, but he could not stop himself from observing it. Also the daylight from the upper windows cast broad ovals on the ceiling. He had never noticed that either.

"Safe to approach?" Candide asked from across the room.

Snape turned on his toes. "Yes."

Candide strolled over and stood beside Snape, putting an arm loosely around him. Harry watched them in the edge of his vision. The scene reminded him of another, which he thought best to wait on discussing until Candide was absent.

"What did you find?" Snape asked.

Harry pulled a dismayed face. "Let's just leave it at: I didn't understand what was going on." He turned to the two of them. "But I don't regret what I did. It still worked out," he asserted, but felt another ripple of surprise. "But, it's true I didn't really understand," he reiterated yet again and sighed.

Harry's muscles quivered from being over stressed. He pillowed his head on his arm and shut his eyes, intending to just rest them for a moment.

Candide whispered, "You didn't set him too hard a task, did you?"

Snape took a step to the side to better study Harry who was lying on his arm with his hand hanging out into space, half-closed around something invisible. Dismissively, Snape said, "He's young; he will recover."

It was Ron and Ginny's arrival for lunch that roused Harry from a light doze where he dreamed that he was arguing with a vision of himself about which of them should do what.

Ron slapped Harry hard on the shoulder as he tried to clear the stray threads of the dream from his thoughts.

"Ouch," Harry complained. "Wotcher, Ron."

Ginny said, "I thought you had the late shift tonight, not last night."

"I do." Harry said. He pushed himself to his feet and felt for his wand, but then realized he did not need it out for what he wanted to try. "Ginny, feel like a few curse drills?"

Sulkily, Ron complained, "You never ask me to help with those."

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Harry still felt weak and if he got hit with some wild thing Ron sent his way, it may knock him out. “That’s because your attenuation is non-existent.”

Ron tossed his hands out, fingers spread. “I work with Trolls, Harry. Do you know how much spell it takes to get a Troll’s attention?”

Ignoring his sore body, Harry took up a position opposite Ginny, whose face was already deep in concentration. When she sent a weak Jelly Legs his way, it did not feel the same as when he had been casting at himself in the other Plane. But, of course it would not be the same, he told himself, holding frustration at bay. But he still knew now how things worked, even if he could no longer touch the spell all along the way. He could feel a curse being generated at the beginning, and he could see it come out of the wand. Maybe he could just guess on the timing in between.

Ginny changed to a blinding curse. “No,” Harry said, “go back to the other one.” She obliged without comment. Harry thought through the steps. He could feel the curse forming, then it had to be cast, passing down the arm and into the wand, where it was focused and modulated, then it came out. If he wanted to crimp the curse off as it entered the wand, that was about three quarters of the way along.

For several rounds, in the manner of a musician, he counted out the rhythm between generation and emission, estimating the stages and on the fourth time, he squeezed down, blindly it felt like, on the spot where her hand met the wand.

Ginny dropped her wand, habitually stooped to reach for it, then brightened and left it for a moment. “Harry! That was excellent. My fingers went limp.”

Ron bounced off the couch. “Can I try?”

“Let me try a few more rounds with Ginny. Same spell.”

Snape wandered out of the drawing room and leaned on the doorframe to observe. The extra audience was a distraction, and it required more tries to get the timing right again. Too early and the spell still came out as if his crushing it down failed because it met no resistance. Too late and he still got hit, but with less power, and Ginny could still hold firm to the wand.

Harry’s heart beat faster and his focus grew farther inward as he counted and crunched each casting. When he had that spell stopped reliably, Harry said, “Try a different curse.”

He counted again against a Blindness Curse, feeling like he had it just right, but he missed, and his vision flickered out. “Drat, that one’s different.” He asked her to repeat it until he could find the right timing on that spell as well.

After uncountable dozens of rounds against both his friends and many dropped wands, Harry waved them off and looked over at his guardian. Daunted by the task before him, he said, “I need some help on spell theory. I don’t want to have to learn them all individually.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Snape stood with his arms half crossed, thumb thoughtfully grazing his lower lip. His expression was inscrutable. "Of course," he said.

After lunch, Harry and his friends walked around the village to take advantage of a warm shift in the weather. Harry thought about that other, unbelievably peaceful place where the weather could be nice all the time with the right magical device. Ron and Ginny argued half the walk. This proved a distraction to Harry, who wanted more than anything just some quiet time to think.

When they were approaching the house again, Harry said, "You know, I have a ton to do, and—"

"Ah," Ron interrupted. "Harry needs to assemble his plans for world domination, now that he is unstoppable."

"I, uh, what?" Harry rolled his eyes. Trouble was, really, which world, a darkly humorous part of his mind supplied. "I have field work after dinner and I can't take over the world if I haven't done my readings."

"I understand," Ron said. "Plus, Ginny's got a date to get ready for and if she doesn't start six hours ahead of time..."

It was Ron's turn to rub his arm where he had been struck. "It's true," he argued, veering out of range.

Despite Harry's prior insistence that he needed to do his studies, when he returned alone to the house, he sought out Snape instead of his books.

Snape stood over the small trunk he used to ferry things home for the weekend. He was sorting things out of it into either a pile or the low-burning hearth. "Do you want help with curse negation?" Snape asked.

"I do," Harry said. "But I have something else I want to talk to you about."

His glance out the door prompted Snape to say, "Candide has gone to the office for a few hours."

"I'm surprised you let her."

"She insisted that you could liberate her on your way into the Ministry, if need be."

"I'd be happy to," Harry said.

Snape gestured at a chair and set the trunk aside on the floor, giving Harry his full attention from the seat behind the desk.

Buying time, Harry said, "I'm still thinking about what you said, about you acting less like a father." He stopped, startled by how hard it was to hear himself say it. "I wish it didn't have to be that way."

Snape gave a marginal, crooked nod of acknowledgment and waited for Harry to go on.

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART III

“But you are probably right.” Harry rubbed his fingers together and fell silent. Snape was correct that Harry could no longer find the will to obey him.

Snape said, “I am quite curious what you found in that other place and I am wondering if you will tell me.”

A prickle went through Harry. He looked up again and tried to gauge how to explain. Words failed him and he snorted lightly. Diving into the safer waters of this topic, he said, “Well, that place’s Harry wasn’t really dead.”

“No? Previously you were confident on that point.”

“That was based on Voldemort’s reaction. But he knew something I didn’t know: that he had that Harry helplessly under his thumb.”

Snape’s brow rose and his chair creaked as he leaned back and steepled his fingers before him. He waited.

Harry hesitated. Finally, he said, “I once accused you of having a thing for my mother and you said you didn’t.”

Snape’s expression did not change, but he fell into stillness. “I did say that.”

“But was that true?” Harry asked, finding he could not let this question lie unanswered.

Snape’s face shifted an iota into confusion without losing an edge of hard challenge. “What does it matter?”

“It might,” Harry insisted dramatically. “You never know.”

At this, Snape’s brows came down and he stared at Harry with obvious scrutiny. Trouble was, every time Harry thought about this issue, his emotions landed somewhere else. He was starting to feel that he should not let them settle anywhere, for fear of where that may be. If Snape had lied, maybe that was why: to simplify things.

Snape hmfd. “Perhaps I withdraw my question.”

But Harry’s emotional merry-go-round had just stopped somewhere else, and without thinking he said, “So, if you liked my mum a lot, why were you so cruel to me when we first met?”

The answer to this came easily. “Because you were nothing like her.”

“I wasn’t?” Harry challenged.

“You were just like your father,” Snape insisted, voice snapping lightly.

Harry, who knew for verifiable fact that this was not true, hesitated for fear of revealing his evidence. Given how much he resisted that thought, he felt stung. “Are you certain of that? I don’t believe it.”

He was hiding his thoughts, so something must have come out in his voice. Snape backed down. “Perhaps not,” he conceded softly.

“I don’t think I’m anything like him,” Harry muttered, dismayed.

This brought the edged eyes back again. “I fear you speak from experience.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The chill returned along the flesh on the back of Harry's neck. "So what if I do?" he replied with a cocky edge of his own.

Snape pointed at him, dragging his broad sleeve over the loose papers piled on his desk. "That's your father, right there."

"Oh."

Silence fell. Snape sat back again and did not take his eyes off Harry. "Are you speaking from experience?" he asked outright.

Harry stared down at his fingers. They were young fingers. "Yes." And then before he could be interrupted, he added with feeling, "But I learned something super important."

"Shall I hazard a guess what that may be?"

"Er, sure," Harry said, awkwardly derailed from speaking something from the heart.

Snape leaned forward and said, "You learned that it is highly unwise to jump around into different existences?"

"Um, no."

Snape sat back yet again. "Pity," he snipped.

Harry stared at Snape, who was holding firm on his display of disapproval. Harry found himself grinning and unable to stop. The man sitting before him was responsible for most of the difference between himself and that offensive version he had dueled.

Snape sighed audibly. "What in the world is that about?"

Harry shrugged knowingly. "It's just that... I wouldn't have wished for things to turn out a certain way. How could I? But nevertheless, they may have turned out for the best."

Snape lost all of his edges in the face of this. He pondered Harry openly. After a time he sighed again and asked, "So during the time that I was plotting how best to prove to you that your actions in leaving this Plane were unwise, you had already left to visit yet another place?"

"Yep," Harry replied.

"For what precise purpose?"

There was nothing for it. "I wanted to see what my parents would be like if they'd survived."

Snape closed his eyes for an instant while he took that in. "And?" he reluctantly asked.

"They were all right. But I didn't like what I'd become, at all. I was spoiled and miserable and not friends with the people I care about here."

"What... had you turned into your father?" Snape immediately returned.

TWENTY YEARS LATER, PART III

Harry held back on a retort. Oddly, despite agreeing, he still yearned to strike back at that.

Snape said, "Sorry," with real feeling. "I should know better. Tough to compete with such endless possibilities."

"Merlin, don't be jealous, Severus."

A harder tone now. "Did I say I was?"

Harry smiled faintly. "There's no reason to be." He stared far away, feeling a painful metamorphosis churning inside him. "It all worked out for the best," he stated with certainty this time.

"Very odd to hear you say that," Snape said, undone.

"I saw them," Harry explained. "All three of them. Not a care in the world. And... well, my dad – James was raising his Harry like some kind of Dudley. I didn't want to be him, or even change places with him. I wouldn't've traded for anything." The truth of that freed up something in Harry's midsection and he took an easy deep breath. "Although I wish my mum... but never mind."

Quietly, Snape said, "I will always be sorry for your mother, Harry."

Harry knew that to be doubly true now. "I know that."

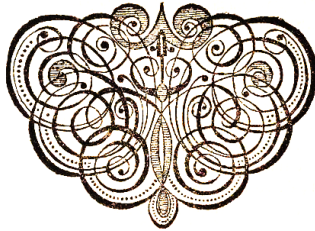
Harry turned what he had seen at the picnic over in his mind. "But, you know, she let James spoil their Harry terribly. He didn't have to take care of anything himself. And his friends, well, they were all right, but not my friends. My friends didn't even like him." Far away, Harry said, "Can you imagine, not ever having a single bad thing happen to you?"

"No, I cannot." They stared at each other. Snape slowly and clearly said, "Harry, do please come and warn me that you intend to do these things, whether it be trying out a new magic, or... simply running off to find a place where Dumbledore still lives. I have given up on punishing you for exploring your skills. If you are going to learn better it will have to be learned the hard way. I want to keep you from harm, not force you into a box too small to contain you. I reserve the right to advise you, but in the end you may do what you think best. I have no power over you in that regard – I admit that now. But I wish to know, to be kept informed. Is that equitable?"

Harry stared at him. "Do you think there could be a place where Dumbledore is still alive?"

Snape closed his eyes and rested his forehead on his long fingers in a pose of defeat.

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WORTH A WEIGHT OF GOLD

Ten minutes ahead of schedule, Harry checked into the Auror's office for his field work. The office exuded a quiet intensity, the kind where it was so busy only one highly engaged person was left to man the office. Tonight, that assignment was covered by Shacklebolt, who stood hunched over the log book, sorting through the assignment slips with fingers too large to easily handle them.

The sight bolstered Harry, who was hoping to get out on a real assignment. He was feeling confident due to partly working out how to squelch curses and hoped to make himself useful rather than going out on regular, usually mindless, patrol. Harry slid over beside the stand holding the log book. When Shacklebolt put down the slips and glanced up, Harry asked, "Can I do anything?"

"Who are you assigned with tonight?"

"I don't know," Harry admitted.

Vineet stepped into the room, hands clasped behind his back. He stopped just inside the door, the picture of innate patience until the Auror said to him, "Tonks said for you to meet her in Scunthorpe. You know how to get there?"

Harry's heart sank a smidgen that this instruction was not directed at him.

Vineet said, "I have knowledge of an Apparition spot in Dragonby..."

Shacklebolt, keyed up by the busy night, did not let the Indian finish. "Good, then take a broom." Harry watched his fellow depart, remaining as patient as possible.

There was nothing beyond filing for Harry to do until Rodgers arrived at half past the hour. He rubbed his hands together vigorously and said to Shacklebolt. "You called me in. Luck for you, I didn't have a date."

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“Things are busy. Do you ever have a date?”

This made Rodgers’ eager gaze slip into insulted.

Shacklebolt rubbed his eyes and sorted through the slips from the beginning. “Busy weekend. We sent Mr. Wickem and Ms. Kalendula home late last night, both complaining about being late for dates. In their case, I believe it was honest.”

Something thumped against the stand. Shacklebolt picked up the small chalkboard chained beside the log book. “Tonks has requested backup before forcibly going in to investigate an MCC.”

“I get Harry?” Rodgers asked.

Shacklebolt shrugged his broad shoulders. “I’m assuming.”

Harry jumped up from Tonks’ desk, eager to go. “What’s an MCC?” he asked.

Rodgers took his arm. “A mysteriously charmed construct.”

A minute later, they arrived in a world of twilight and looming piles of twisted metal parts. Upon arriving Harry, with a thudding heart, imagined that they had leapt into the Dark Plane. But the ground was pitted tarmac rather than dust and the metal stood in sorted piles.

Before Rodgers could slip out of view, Harry ducked down to follow, leading with his wand and enjoying being out in the night air. They crept a long way down an aisle cutting between piles large and small, crossing similar rows that stretched to the sides as far as the dim light could reveal.

A building came into view and Rodgers gestured over his shoulder for Harry to halt. Harry crouched low a few steps behind his trainer’s back and glanced around the greyness, instinctively training his wand on a spotted cat that darted stealthily between an old railroad car and a double stack of sagging lorry trailers. He exhaled hard, glad he had held back on a spell that would have given them away.

Rodgers made a nightbird sound and a count of ten later an answering call came from two stacks over. Two figures approached and crouched beside them, both with dark-skinned faces, one with rusty-red hair standing up in a Mohawk.

Tonks whispered, “Nothing on the grounds, but the large metal shed is sealed.”

“Magically?” Rodgers asked.

With an air of gripe, Tonks said, “Any other kind of seal would not present a difficulty.” She relented on her attitude and said, “The large sliding doors are around the other side. Should be easier to get open.”

Following along her lead, Rodgers said to Harry and Vineet. “You two watch the back. Don’t make any moves unless the fireworks start, you’re signaled, or someone makes a break for it.”

They crept off, melting into the background with what must be Obsfucation Charms.

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A minute later, Harry, feeling confident, said, "Let's get a little closer than this."

Harry was glad he could not see his fellow's expression in this light. He did not wait for a reply, just slipped ahead to hide behind a pile closer to the small rear door. The painted metal of the long shed glowed in the ambient light of the nearby city. It looked quiet and innocent enough. Harry felt nothing ominous.

When Vineet came aside him, Harry asked, "There was no guard or anything?"

"The dogs sleep most soundly with some assistance," Vineet stated.

Crickets chirped. A car rolled by on a nearby road, its headlights appearing to float.

"How are things with Hermione?" Harry asked, mind wandering after ten minutes of waiting.

He heard rather than saw Vineet swallow hard. "As good as could be expected under circumstances of this nature."

"You don't talk to her like that, do you?"

A pause. "She seems to appreciate this."

"Yeah, I suppose she would."

Far off a dog barked. Another car floated by, stereo thumping. A breeze that threatened to grow chilling drifted through.

"Why this place?" Harry asked, wishing they were kept a little more informed, annoyed that they were not.

"This location was given up by one of the prisoners, after sufficient potion was applied to him."

Harry heard a noise, or he thought he did. His attentive imagination was straining to sense things.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

Vineet nodded. Harry rocked forward off his heels onto his toes. "I wonder what's going on."

Vineet said, "We could not get in."

"Even with you helping?"

"It was not an ordinary barrier. It was something else."

The small noise came again, still too low to give a hint of what it might be.

"I can't stand this," Harry said, gauging the distance to the door in the side of the shed. "Hey, was that open before?"

Maybe it was a trick of the oblique light, but the door appeared to be hanging a few inches open now, based on the wider shadow it cast against the ridged exterior wall.

"It was most definitely not open previously."

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“All right, I’m going to stay here,” Harry announced in a whisper, wishing he were trusted enough to actually do something directly. He felt more eager tonight than usual, and his wand responded to this, electrically charging his hand. But he may not need it, he thought with excitement; he could squelch two curses for sure, although an angry organized crime wizard was unlikely to resort to a Jelly Legs.

“We were instructed to remain here,” Vineet said. “This is a strategic location. We will see anyone depart and will have warning of attack.”

“Not if they’re invisible. Oh, shit.” Harry dashed forward, mind spinning to bad possibilities, such as the perpetrators slipping away under cloak, leaving a deadly booby trap behind.

Harry reached the door and pressed his back up beside it. This made the side of the shed creak just at the edge of hearing. Harry used the tip of his wand to push the door open farther. It swung easily. Vineet had moved to cover him from behind the closest stack, composed of tangled, ropey wire.

Harry pushed the door open further, listening hard to the echoey inside of the building. Their multi-person coordination training made him resist going in. The others would not know he was there. He made himself wait where he was, listening with the door completely open. Inside, loomed ceiling-high racks, barely discernible in the red light glowing from the light switches.

A crash sounded from the other end of the shed, and Harry immediately imagined Tonks had tripped over something. But then a small voice came, speaking something he could not understand, followed by another crash. A high-mounted light flicked on in the distance, outlining the building roof in shadow over the scrap yard.

Harry felt a touch on his arm and found Vineet beside him. Harry, in the lowest voice possible said, “Maybe stall the Muggles if they are coming. I can guard the door.” Harry would have offered the other a choice if Tonks had not been involved. Vineet moved off and Harry was just stepping in when something darted in front of him. He had a vision of uplifted, low but oversized palms facing him and then he was airborne. He struck the door and landed in a half-roll, half-skid on the tarmac outside. There had been no warning at all.

Harry scrambled to his feet and pressed himself beside the door, noting with accented stabs in various places that the light metal door hung crooked now, still swaying from his body striking it. He used his toe to move the door out of the way and stood waiting with his wand out. A small, light figure moved inside, and Harry instinctively cast a Netting Charm, followed by a full force Mutushorum. The dim light made it hard to tell, but it seemed like the netting bulged over something.

There may be more than one. Harry thought he should wait until the Aurors inside swept the space. The freezing spell would hold for a while. Content with that

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mature decision, Harry held his wand at ready and waited for a signal.

A few minutes later, Vineet reappeared and from inside, Tonks said, "Did you do this, Harry?"

Harry stepped inside, guided now by a Lumos from Tonks' wand.

"Yeah."

Under the net lay an elf, albeit a strange looking one with unusually coarse, long hair and black finger nails. Rodgers crouched close and examined it. "Looks like a Caspian elf, or a close relative."

"They don't have the same restrictions on elf powers, I take it?" Tonks asked, rubbing her elbow and frowning painfully.

Vineet interrupted, "The Muggles are delayed, not stopped."

Rodgers stood and waved his wand at their prisoner. "Let's go then. That back door looks like an ordinary break-in, so we are covered."

In the light of the Ministry department, Harry's injuries even attracted the attention of the busy Aurors.

Tonks said, "Take yourself to St. Mungo's, Harry. Skip the next call."

"I'm okay," Harry insisted, using a damp cloth to gingerly soften the caked blood gluing his brow hairs together. His skinned knees stopped hurting when he used a quick healing charm on them. The skin covering his kneecaps looked strangely mottled after the spell, which he was not so adept at. He ignored it till later and tugged his torn trouser legs down. Candide was good at clothing repairs of that sort, so Harry did not attempt to fix them himself.

His body complained when he was summoned to head out again, and he wondered how he could have started the evening so eagerly.

This time they were called to a brawl in a wizard pub in Maidstone. Tonks walked through the melee and straight up to the red-nosed owner. "Why didn'tya close down sooner?" she asked over the noise of smashing chairs and sizzling hexes. The abandoned Harry and Vineet pressed back against the heavy door, partially protected by an alcove, hoping for an opening in the confusion to get across to join Tonks.

Harry stunned a rough looking middle-aged man about to throw a curse at someone two tables away whose back was turned. The stunned man's friend turned and shouted, shaking a fist at them. For a moment the crowd noise eased and the apprentices made a clean dash for the bar.

"It's opening day of Quidditch tomorrow, I can't possibly close down early," the owner was explaining.

The spells and projectiles started up again, bouncing around the hard stone walls like a pinball game. Harry's bruised limbs flinched every time one flew near. He and

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Vineet took up positions guarding Tonks' back while she talked to the man behind the bar. The man was arguing against arresting everyone since they were his best customers.

A short figure was hurled across the room, and Vineet caught him, or possibly her, with a Hover and lowered the person to the beer-sopped floor. A large wizard muttered, "Bloody Pakki," and rushed at Vineet with no wand in sight. The man was on the floor an instant later, no spell needed. Harry adjusted to better cover Tonks while Vineet set this person aside out of the way. The room had divided itself by colored accessory, mostly scarves and hats: yellow and black on one side, blue and gold on the other. Harry tried one of the crowd control spells they had learned, putting up a wall that stretched to the door. His wand shook as he held the spell and the door across from him rattled in a rich low tone. He should have aimed the spell at the solid wall, he realized, shaking his head at forgetting the rules of a spell they had learned half a year ago. The fighting eased as the parties drunkenly sensed they could not penetrate the barrier to get at each other. One large wizard pressed his forehead against it and futilely swung his arms in loops.

A young man with hair like unmown hay staggered over someone else and pulled his wand on Vineet, who was checking someone draped like a broken doll over an overturned chair beside the wall bench along that side. Harry shouted a warning. Behind him, he heard Tonks spin around. Harry, wand otherwise occupied, scrunched the curse down just as it sputtered from the troublemaker's wand. The man shouted and tossed his wand, holding his sparkling hand, then running around holding it away from himself as though it were on fire. He ran in a panicked circle until he met Harry's wall and then knocked himself out striking it.

This scene shook the crowd to its senses. They all stopped to stare dully at the fallen wizard, so Harry dropped the barrier. The room remained quiet, until someone else staggered and fell. This was a cue for the conscious to start hunting for their possessions amidst the rubble.

The owner came around and cast a Reparo at the first broken thing on the floor. Parts flew in from everywhere to reassemble into a table. Harry had never seen anyone better at that spell. He was sure that was a footstool moments before the parts were so small. Someone cursed and held a shin that had been struck by a flying table leg. The owner said, "Get on out then! I got work to do here and yer in the way."

Tonks stepped down the bar and Harry turned and found her filling a mug from the tap by leaning far over the bar in an unladylike manner. She poured out an inch or so and slid back down to the floor and handed the pint to Harry after taking a gulp. "Vineet?"

The Indian shook his head. Tonks took Vineet's share and gesturing with the

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mug, said, "You were lucky that pillock's wand backfired."

Harry turned to her a little sharply. Snape's instructions to him about seeking advice and keeping him informed bled over into that moment. "I did that."

Tonks grew hard. "Was that a Forbidden Curse?"

"No, just a... what was the incantation?"

Vineet said, "I believe it was a Morey Eel Curse."

"Something minor," Harry assured her.

"Depends on where it latches on," Tonks stated with insinuation. "So, you're getting better at blocking things sans wand," she said. "You been practicing during training?"

"No. I can't always use it on someone I like, since the spell backs up into their arm."

She appeared doubtful and with a snort, said, "I think any spell someone is willing to throw at me, I'd be willing to make them eat."

"We shall keep that in mind," Vineet stated.



Harry shed the heaviest of his clothes and dropped into bed. His shoulder and several other spots complained bitterly when he shifted, as if they had been holding back on their grievances until just that moment. He rubbed his eyebrow and found it tender and stinging and crusting over with a scab. Perhaps he should not have resisted suggestions that he see a Healer. Had it been daytime he would have willingly visited the Ministry's own Healer, but he could not avail himself of that after hours.

The late hour and the release from stress let him fall into sleep despite his aches, which followed him into his dreams. He dreamt that he again stood before his own defeated double, wand held out, his mum and dad attending to his rival. In the dream he wanted to argue that he was hurt too and deserved some attention, but his mouth refused to move. He stood frozen in place, wand aimed, peering out of locked eyes as everyone diverged around him like a rock in a stream.

Someone shook Harry's shoulder and with a flinch of pain he was back in his room, blinking in the glaring lamp flame. He rolled to sit up and reached for his glasses, only to have them placed in his hand.

Harry wearily fitted his glasses onto his head and looked around. The world was still well inside night beyond the window. He asked, "What time is it?"

"Half past four. What is in your nightmare?"

Harry had only been asleep an hour. The Monitor did not rest on the night stand. "How'd you know I was having one?"

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Snape remained still an instant before tugging the night stand drawer open. The half globe of swirling glass threw its eerie light around the contents of the drawer.

“Ah,” Harry muttered. “Don’t worry; the nightmare is nothing.”

“No?” Snape prodded doubtfully. But he distracted himself from that line of questioning with, “What happened to your head?”

“I got thrown out a door. I was a little overconfident, I think.” He frowned, remembering getting hit with no warning. “Here I thought I had worked out something really useful, but it turns out elf offensive magic is something I can’t sense, even it if feels like a curse when it hits.”

“You were battling an elf?”

“A strange elf. Rodgers said it looked like a Caspian elf.”

“Interesting,” Snape said. He reached to prod Harry’s forehead, making Harry flinch away. Snape continued talking as he held Harry’s head steady. “They are bound to their masters differently than our own elves. I have heard it theorized that this is because they have more rogue power than our own elves, since they were domesticated more recently.” He tapped Harry’s brow with his wand and let him go. “And even in this day are sometimes taken from the wild.”

Harry rubbed his brow, finding only a faint sensitivity there. “Thanks,” he said, trying not to feel chagrin.

“Need a Healer?”

“Not anymore.”

Snape slipped his wand away into his dressing gown. “So, you learned this evening that understanding the limits of your power is more powerful than having new and unusual powers?”

“I did better at the pub brawl.”

“Busy night.”

“Yep.”

Harry settled back under the duvet, undisturbed by dreams until the scent of breakfast drew him from a deep slumber.

That afternoon, Harry found a few books on elves among Snape’s collection and took them to his room. In the back of his mind he thought he behaved too much like Hermione, but such knowledge did not seem trivial anymore. Perhaps no knowledge seemed trivial to Hermione. It was not until Hornisham came for her shift, that he realized how long he had been reading. He arrived downstairs just in time to find Snape making his goodbyes to Candide.

“You’re not staying for dinner?” Harry asked.

“McGonagall prefers I make an appearance on Sunday evening. Remus fares well enough as a backup Head of House, but he is too easily fooled by those who do not

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wish to put in the effort to complete their assignments for Monday morning.”

Snape accepted a peck on the cheek from Candide. “Owl me, Harry,” was the last thing he said, before stepping into the Floo.

Hornisham was pleased to join them for dinner after some urging. She had unlimited stories about magical animals and tonight told them one about an old wizard who brought in a boa constrictor to Control insisting it was the spawn of Nessie. The boa ate a fire chicken and burped hard boiled eggs for weeks after, which one of her colleagues insisted tasted fine.

With Candide suitably engaged and thinking sheepishly of unfinished assignments for Monday morning, Harry headed up to his room to start his readings. He stacked the elf books aside, amazed at how far he had read into them based on the bookmark locations. If only he had started in on his assigned readings instead, he considered with a long exhale as he leaned back onto a stack of pillows. Hornisham joined him a short time later, and the ticking of her steel needles made for an accelerated marking of the time.

A light tick sounded against the glass, nearly lost in the clicking of knitting needles. Harry thought it must be his owl, but Hedwig was already asleep in her cage. The sound made her ruffle her feathers. The noise came again. Harry stood to go to the window, but Hornisham gruffly gestured him back.

Harry backed up with a roll of his eyes, head lolling to the side in frustration. Hornisham levered the sash open and leaned out. Ginny’s voice came floating up, “I need to talk to Harry.”

When Harry moved to the window a second time, his guard’s rough hand blocked him. Used to handling large animals, he had no chance. “How do ya’ know it’s her?” she growled.

Harry ducked as close to the window as he was allowed to. “Ginny, fly up here,” he shouted down to the figure in the road.

Seconds later a redtail hawk alighted on the sill and hopped inside, transforming smoothly back into the youngest Weasley.

“See,” Harry said. “Has to be her, no one could fake that.”

Hornisham gave in with hmf of approval and resumed her seat.

“Why didn’t you come to the door?” Harry asked.

She peered at him in disbelief. “Do you know what kind of night-activated spells this place has on it? I didn’t even dare touch the gate.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Harry said. “The spells don’t bother me.” Harry glanced at Hornisham who was enjoying watching them. “Er, what do you need?”

Ginny paced to the wardrobe and back, fitfully. “I had a date... I was supposed to have a date with Aaron last night, but he stood me up.”

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“Oh,” Harry said. “Sorry about that.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Ginny demanded.

“I don’t know,” Harry helplessly said. “I just thought I should apologize for him.”

She appeared confused by this, but went on. “So, I thought, fine, his loss. But today, I thought differently and went to go see him. But I can’t find him anywhere. I sent an owl to his mum and she sent me this reply. See.”

She held out a letter, which was strangely crinkly. It basically stated that she could not reply. “That’s odd,” Harry said, turning the letter over to stare at the blank back of it in case there was more.

“Those are tear stains, Harry. I checked.”

This gave Harry pause. “You have a spell to check for that?”

“I have drops from the twins that check for that. They didn’t sell the same stuff to the boys at Hogwarts as they did to the girls.”

Harry stared at the letter. “What’s going on, I wonder?”

“I was hoping you knew her well enough to go over and ask.”

Harry vividly remembered his luncheon with the worshipful Mrs. Wickem. “Yeah, I think I do.”

After some negotiation and a quick chat with Candide, Harry convinced his guard to let him head off with Ginny while she remained behind. “After all,” Harry said in a whisper. “Who needs more protection, me or the woman with child?”

Hornisham nodded sagely and returned to the hall where Candide sat working. When Harry turned to face Ginny, pleased with the results of this argument, he found his friend fixing him with a glare.

Arms locked across her chest, she said, “Oh, a ‘woman with child’ needs more protection?”

“Er, well, I convinced her, didn’t I? Come on, it’s getting dark.”

Harry Apparated them both to the empty stables, which he remembered from the Ministry party the Wickems had hosted. Unlike that cheerful night, the lawn beyond the stable door lay in impenetrable darkness canopied by old, long-limbed trees. A light glowed deep inside the rear of the house. Harry took Ginny’s hand and led the way across, tripping repeatedly on half-buried bricks used to border the trees and lines of shrubs. He almost pulled Ginny down with him one time.

“I’ll just fly, thanks,” she said after that, and assumed her hawk form, changing back to wait for him beside a white pillar topped with a carved capital that held up an overhang on the side of the house. Harry changed to his form and tried to follow, but the trees were too closely spaced, forcing him to tuck in his broad wings and canter, but at least he did not trip again. He came up beside her and changed back after a windy flap for good measure and perhaps some showing off. He decided that

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the nearby door would work enough for an uninvited guest, so they knocked there, finding no bell.

The light came on over the entryway and the butler came to the door, dour as usual. His expression shifted as he recognized Harry, his unexpressive face doing a complex dance of twitches. "Come in, sir," he simply said.

"This is Ginny Weasley," Harry said as the butler held the door for her to enter as well. Ginny sheepishly slunk in, eyes taking in the grand foyer with its domed ceiling and plaster accents.

The man took a step and turned. "Are you expected?"

"Not exactly," Harry said.

The man hesitated, but appeared to come to a decision and led them farther in, footsteps echoing. Ginny remained quiet, even falling behind as she craned her neck everywhere, stutter-stepping when they passed two Chinese vases taller than her. She came to herself and plowed on with purpose after that.

Mrs. Wickem sat in consultation with someone Harry did not recognize, a witch whose dress reflected the style of Trelawney's robes. They had little metallic stars scattered on the fabric and overlapping layers that floated about her. They both blinked in surprise as Harry was introduced by the butler.

"Mr. Potter," Mrs. Wickem said in the mode of an accusation.

"We're just looking for Aaron," Harry explained.

Mrs. Wickem shifted her substantial frame in her chair and looked about the papers before her, flustered. "Oh, I uh..."

The other woman clasped her hands before her and serenely stated, "He isn't here."

Ginny asked, "Do you know where is?"

When no reply came right away, Harry held up a hand before his friend to stall her next comment. Ginny had the letter in her hand. She pocketed it and huffed.

Calmly, in the voice he had heard the Aurors use in countless similar situations, Harry asked, "What is going on, Mrs. Wickem?"

Mrs. Wickem raised fleshy arms, her elbows like indents, rather than points, to blow her nose daintily. Harry held up his hand again, since Ginny had twitched, threatening to approach closer.

"I just don't know what I'm going to do," Aaron's mother muttered into her hanky.

"Is there a reason you can't explain?" Harry went on still as smooth as glass with his speech.

Despite his calming voice, this triggered something. Mrs. Wickem's beefy fists came down on the small table with a bang, making the papers upon it jump in unison.

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"I cannot explain; don't you understand? Terrible things will happen if I do." She buried her nose and mouth in the hanky again, the picture of misery. "Terrible things. The letter contained a curse they said, just reading it seals the spell."

"What letter?" Harry asked.

Mrs. Wickem gestured at the white lacquer box beside her. Harry walked over, prompting the other witch to put her hand on it. "Why are you interfering when you are clearly not welcome?"

"I don't think we were introduced," Harry said.

Mrs. Wickem lowered her hanky to her breast long enough to say, "Heather Feyther, this is Harry Potter." She covered her hiccup with her hanky.

Ginny had slipped up beside Harry, "Don't you write a column for Witch Weekly called Portents and Providence?"

The bob-haired woman gave a stiff little bow. "Yes, I do young lady, and what would your sign be? No let me guess..."

"Don't we have more important things to worry about?" Harry interrupted sharply. He pointed at the box, which was now unprotected. "Can I just see the box? I won't open it."

Mrs. Wickem handed the box over. Harry held it out before him and emptied his thoughts to concentrate. "This isn't cursed."

"How do you know?" Feyther asked.

"I can tell when something is. Like your bracelet there. That's cursed."

She held out her jingling arm and demanded, "Which one?"

There was quite a choice. Harry leaned close and pointed at a black and white one that resembled a chess board stretched long.

"Really?" she asked. "Rita gave that one to me for my birthday."

Ginny snorted and had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing aloud. With a jangle, Feyther tossed her arm to her side and glared at them.

"Please, Hettie," Mrs. Wickem said. "You mentioned you could help."

"I expect I can. I need a lock of hair and something he kept with him often."

Ginny said, "Where is Aaron?"

Feyther turned on her in a huff. "If we knew that we wouldn't be trying to scry for him, now would we?" She put her hand over her mouth, eyes wide, showing the whites all around.

Harry put the box down. Mrs. Wickem started to speak and Feyther said, "Mitzy, you can't. They explicitly said not contact the authorities."

"We're not the authorities," Ginny said. She glanced at Harry. "Well, not really."

"We're certain the house is being watched," Feyther insisted primly.

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Harry turned to Ginny. “Let yourself out an upstairs window and circle around to see if anyone is skulking around.”

Ginny strode off to do this, and Harry was glad for her absence a moment later when Mrs. Wickem opened the box and held it out to Harry, hand shaking. Inside was a letter, spotted with red and an ear, just beginning to shrivel. Despite all the death Harry had seen in his life, he still shied from it. He used a spell to make the letter float out of the box and unfold. It was a ransom note, signed with three vertical lines in the shape of an upside down triangle, like the slits in the masks worn by Durmulna. He waved the letter back away and gestured that he was finished. She closed the box and set it down, then rested her face on the table, arms outstretched, still holding the box.

Harry had thought taking responsibility for the twins by not reporting them was too much, this was ten times more difficult a predicament. What would Dumbledore do? he wondered. He repeated the question again, like a mental mantra.

His brain latched onto the letter. “They demanded how much... five-hundred thousand Galleons?” Sad affirmation followed. “That’s rather a lot.”

Mrs. Wickem nodded with more tears. Harry asked, “Have you contacted Lord Freeland?”

Feyther perked up at this, gazelle-like neck stretched out in curiosity. Harry realized he should not have said that in front of her. He quickly amended, “He has been generous in the past with me. Of course that was a pittance compared to this...”

More tearful nodding, but Mrs. Wickem had fallen thoughtful, which was an improvement. What would Dumbledore do? Harry thought again. Then he answered himself, he would be very prudent, not rash in the least unless death were imminent. He would wait to see what everyone would do. He would observe everyone’s reactions and even their thoughts until he had a good picture of the situation and who could be counted on to help and who not.

Ginny returned. Quietly she said, “There are two watching from a house two doors down, though at the moment they are playing a card game and not paying so much attention. Should we nab ’em?”

Harry shook his head. “We have to be very careful. If past prisoners are any indication, they probably don’t know enough to help, and it will tip off the leaders.” Harry cast his mind ahead, finally finding some purchase in his thoughts rather than just spinning helplessly. To Mrs. Wickem, he said, “Aaron will be missing tomorrow at the Ministry. I want you to send an owl first thing in the morning to the Department Head, Arthur Weasley, telling him Aaron is... I don’t know, ill or something, or his uncle in Albania died. It much doesn’t matter what you say as long as it sounds convincing.”

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Ginny broke in, "But why don't you-"

Harry cut her off by touching her arm and holding it. "The owl is for your watchers to intercept."

"Ah," Ginny said, and Harry felt her relax through his grip on her.

"I'll talk to Arthur myself in the morning, Ginny, if she thinks it's safe to, can explain tonight, but I think no one should do anything unusual tonight. I think we slipped in here unnoticed, hopefully. I'll explain in a second," Harry said to Ginny.

To the Witch Weekly astrologer, Harry said, "If you find anything scrying... let me know by sending an owl through the Floo from your house, not from here." He could not generate any faith that she would find anything, but he could not justify turning away any help, and he did not want her accidentally tipping off Durumulna if she believed she had found something.

Feyther nodded and kept her gaze down, making it impossible for Harry to see if she had any faith in herself.

"If you think you know where he is. Don't tell anyone else. Just me. I can fetch him if I know where he is." Harry said this with such force that all eyes came his way and held there. To Ginny, he said, "If we slipped through any barriers undetected, it's because we were in Animagus form when we crossed them. Let's leave that way from the window you just used."

Harry turned back to the lady of the house. "I'll be back tomorrow Mrs. Wickem."

She nodded. Her tears had dried, or perhaps she had run out. There was nothing else to say. Harry could not think of anything else that should be covered so it could not go more wrong.

Back in Shrewsthorpe, he and Ginny huddled in Harry's room, scheming. Harry explained what he had learned and mentioned the ear, only because Mr. Weasley would need to know.

"Oh, Harry this is awful," Ginny said, sounding very much like Aaron's mother.

"I expect your dad will know what to do. I don't have very many ideas right now." Quite the opposite, his mind was going in spirals, imagining his friend subject to all manner of horrors, some of which he had personal experience with.

"Half a million in Galleons," she muttered several times. "Harry, that's insane."

Harry said, "Go on, your dad needs to know."

Ginny stood and said, strained, "Hopefully he doesn't do anything daft that gets Aaron killed."

"Your dad was in the Order, Ginny, and he is department head. He knows what he's doing." She disappeared, and Harry breathed, "I hope."

Harry called down from the balcony that he was home and was going to bed. He dumped his books on the floor and quickly got ready for sleep. He needed rest now

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while he could get it. He may not get any again for quite a while.

Sleep did not come right away. Harry kept thinking that Aaron was most likely not in a comfortable bed like he was. He could only imagine he was huddled anxiously on the floor somewhere, wishing he were anywhere else.



The next morning Harry was awake and ready to leave more than half an hour early. But he should not break his routine, he knew, even though it wrung his heart to not get started. He used the time to write an eyes-only letter to Snape that he felt confident added no risk to the situation.

Harry read the letter over while stirring the ash-stained wax he would use to seal it. The letter had stretched long, the facts written out stark and cold, interspersed with guesses that Snape did not need to read but Harry had needed to write to make himself feel better. Harry assumed Snape would ignore them, and he need not start again. His suppositions, upon a re-read, painted a pretty accurate picture of his current frantic state of mind, which Snape would like to know, Harry was certain.

Harry sighed and magically charmed the letter before burning it and casting the spell to reform it, locking in the destruction that would render the letter unreadable to anyone but the intended recipient. Of all the people Harry knew, Snape would never make a wrong step for having been informed of what was going on. Harry fingered the rolled parchment, checking that the ring of fouled wax was intact, thinking that there really was no valid excuse for holding back with his guardian on any matter.

Harry arrived at the Ministry five minutes early. Before he could step into the training room, Rodgers gestured out of the office door for him to come that way.

Rodgers led the way to the tea room and closed the door. “Did you hold back anything from Ms. Weasley?” When Harry shook his head, Rodgers said, “Drat it all, we were hoping for a little more. All right.” He rubbed his mustache back and forth before smoothing it down, a rare nervous gesture for him. “Your training is cancelled for now.”

“Are we being allowed to help search, then?” Harry asked, hopeful his black thoughts could be eased by action.

“You four are going to help Rogan cover the calls while we investigate and search... with great care.”

“We can search with great care,” Harry said.

Rodgers shook his head. “More care than that.”

Harry’s settled into an open desk in the Auror’s office, glad to be helpful in any way possible. Tridant was assigned to him as a partner for the day, which Harry took

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as a compliment implying that they had confidence he could cover for their youngest apprentice. Before their first call, after Tonks joked about sending the babes out, Harry aged Tridant to appear something around late-thirties.

“Wow,” Tridant said, peering in Tonks’ small mirror. “Is that what I’m going to look like? I better find a bird and get married, right quick.”

“If you don’t come on...” Harry said from the door. “Next time, I’ll make you look like a crone.”

Harry’s last glance back revealed Shackbolt and Rodgers grinning at him with more confidence than expected. It buoyed Harry’s heavy spirits just enough to get him through the day.

Their calls were easy ones, as if fate intended to help them recover Aaron. Harry and his partner only had to cast a spell once against a wizard who insisted on continuing to argue, wands out, with his business partner in the back of a Muggle shop, long after it had attracted the attention of passersby.

While they made their way along the pavement to find an Apparition spot out, Tridant said, “Are most days like this... with just useless calls? Old witches who forget that their money tin was always cursed... wizards who don’t trust each other and decide to duel in an office the size of a closet?”

“Most stuff is pretty lame,” Harry agreed, feeling like he had been doing this longer than a year and a half as he went on. “Showing up for these things isn’t useless; it reminds Wizardom that we’re here. And there are times like these when you want easy calls, because you already have too much to take care of. But this easy stuff can be bad, too: you lose your edge and one comes along where someone is intent on killing you and you aren’t expecting more than drunken Quidditch fans playing with a Bludger on some Muggle High Street at three in the morning.”

The day passed quickly and, to maintain appearances, two of them were sent home for the night, including Harry, who would have complained louder, but he wanted time to think and to make his promised visit to Mrs. Wickem. Harry contemplated dropping by the Burrow to bring Ginny along, but decided his visit would be quick.

Mrs. Wickem flowed over a divan in a dim room surrounded by windows letting in the late sun and the street lamps which had just flickered on. Harry hung back, not wanting to be seen from outside. Feyther perched across from her friend on the edge of a chair, bony knees out to the sides, long neck bent. Behind her sat a collection of crystal balls and a heap of shiny painted bones.

“Any news?” Harry asked.

Feyther shook her head when it became clear she was the only one willing to respond. Mrs. Wickem did not take her eyes from the window. “And what of the Ministry?” Feyther asked.

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“We are proceeding very carefully, but there is no news yet. You haven’t received any more letters?”

Mrs. Wickem did not turn. She said, “We have until Thursday, Mr. Potter.”

“I know that, ma’am. Believe me, there is nothing I wouldn’t do to get him back.”

At home, it was difficult for Harry to settle into his books, so he settled into the last week’s worth of Daily Prophets, hoping for any kind of clue. He wanted to go out searching, anywhere, even just from one horse barn to the next, but the risk of tipping someone off and triggering retribution by Aaron’s captors was too much, even for the impatient Harry to risk.

Feeling like a prisoner himself, Harry planted himself on the couch across from Candide and went through each paper, every line. He learned all kinds of things, such as the fact that the long-whiskered owlet had won best of breed in the Eastchester Cage Club Show. It was a tiny owl, bred by South American witches to carry messages through crowded barrios without being seen. It escaped into the wild in the seventies, to the delight of Muggle bird watchers.

Harry put the paper down with a disgruntled rustle, wondering how anyone could worry about such trivialities with so many terrible things going on. This attracted Candide’s attention, which he had not meant to do.

Harry said, “I thought I’d catch up on the papers, but it’s... boring.”

Candide bent back to her work. “It’s tough when people at the office are talking about some recent event and you don’t know anything about it.”

“Er, yeah,” Harry said. He eyed her tall piles of files. “Last night before deadline,” he stated. “Can I help you out?”

She peered doubtfully at the wave of paper washing over her lap from tall piles on the left to shorter ones on the right, with a side creek lapping onto the floor. “I suppose you could sort one of these. If you really don’t mind.”

Harry would be happy to do anything to keep his nervous hands occupied but leave his mind free to wander.

Harry did just that for many hours on end, beyond midnight when he probably should have insisted Candide go to bed. He stared at invoices and receipts, numbers and more numbers, all but a few rare ones stretching for four digits or fewer. They needed a hefty six to ransom Aaron. It seemed impossible. It had never occurred to Harry to think about money at that scale before. It was enough to buy every item Harry had ever seen for sale in a shop, put together. How would one get that much money in one place even if one had access to it?

Harry had been staring at the same small receipt for Never-Out quills and Ink ‘B’ Gone for many minutes. Candide leaned over in question, and Harry put it down on the wrong pile before correcting his error.

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“You should go to sleep,” she said.

“You should too,” Harry countered, blinking to moisten his eyes to better read the exceptionally decorative cursive columns of numbers on the next slip.

But Harry gave in soon after, knowing his duties could grow to twenty-four hours a day without warning. “This is your last night of poor sleep?” he confirmed before departing for his room.

She smiled at his tone and nodded. Harry sighed. If Snape could not intimidate her, how did he imagine he could possibly have a chance?



The next morning, while filling out the fourth report of the day and thinking wryly that Auroring and Accounting bore remarkable similarities to one another, an owl arrived for Harry, delivered by a grand old bird that Harry recognized as belonging to Lord Frelander. Harry accepted the letter and pocketed it until he had finished. It reminded Harry that he had not received a reply from his guardian.

Harry stared at the long form before him; he really needed a file out of the file room to look up an address and case history, but he was the only one left in the office so he could not fetch it. He sighed that files were charmed so as to not be hovered out magically. Mr. Weasley wandered in, heading immediately to the log book. Harry thought of asking him to cover, then decided it could wait.

“Any news, sir?” Harry asked

Mr. Weasley shook his head. “Rodgers thinks we should limit contact to Mrs. Wickem through you. Feel like heading over there to get a report?”

“I can go when my replacement comes, or right now, if you prefer. I assume I can go without a guard?”

“This afternoon after Ms. Kalendula returns with Mr. Abhayananda you can go.” He peered at Harry with underslept eyes. “It feels like we need to guard all of you. But I think you are safe to go without a guard, Harry. No one should know where you are going.”

Harry opened his mouth to say he felt confident it should be no problem and decided that was completely the wrong thing to say. “I’ll be careful, sir,” he said instead, garnering a nod and small smile from his boss.

An owl caught Harry as he crossed the Atrium, thinking to make an exit from somewhere tracked less carefully by Transportation. Harry uncurled the letter from Snape. It simply said: you can not be too careful, nor too wise.

“Thanks Albus,” Harry muttered before stashing the letter in his pocket with the other one.

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Lunches felt like snippets of immorally stolen time. Harry ducked low over a bowl of soupy Asian noodles heated unevenly with a distracted wave of his wand. His mind had been in overdrive all morning and despite having no work before him, it kept working at high speed. “The seventh pure-blood son who is not,” he murmured.

“What?” Tonks asked, holding out a soggy chip left over from someone’s take-away order from the night before. “Is that a puzzle?”

“Sounds akin to prophecy,” Vineet said. The only thing he had volunteered all day.

“Know something we don’t, Harry?” Tonks asked, sounding quite concerned.

“It’s nothing important,” Harry said, “Just something I was thinking of.” He bent back over his loudly-printed styrofoam bowl, thinking that he knew who that must be. He wondered if he should owl McGonagall to double check that there were no new prophecies in this Plane. He hoped not. He especially hoped that someone would tell him if there were. Just in case, for the future, he should ride Ginny harder to make sure she got into the Auror’s program next year. All of this flitted through Harry’s mind in two eye blinks.

“If you say so,” Tonks remarked, doubtfully assessing Harry’s far away expression. With a loud crackling, she bundled the brownest bits up in the grease-spotted basket liner and tossed it in the rubbish bin. That was the cue for everyone to get up and return to duty.



At the Wickem residence, Harry found Lord Freeland, hat in hand, speaking with the lady of the house.

“Ah, Mr. Potter. You did get my owl.”

Harry resisted patting the pocket where the unopened letter rested. He greeted Mrs. Wickem and asked if there was any news.

Freeland shook his head. “We cannot possibly come up with the requested funds by Thursday. Mitzy’s holdings are even less liquid than my own. Properties in far flung places would have to be sold or put up as collateral, holdings in corporations divested, carry trades unwound... A month would be unreasonable, let alone four days!”

Harry who had been doing accounting the night before, almost followed along with this tirade. “How much can you get together?”

“Ninety-thousand, perhaps ninety-five.”

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Harry thought that quite a lot of money for being so far short. For the first time he resisted the notion of giving thugs that much money for any reason. There must be another way.

Freelander said, "I expect we could negotiate down to three-hundred thousand or a quarter of a million..."

"I will not barter over my son!" Mrs. Wickem burst out, her arms spasming in anger.

Freelander's shoulders slumped. Speaking in a hush, he said, "I did not intend to devalue Aaron... I am trying to be realistic."

The air showed no sign of warming after that, and Harry took his leave after spouting more of what felt like empty assurances that everything was being done.



At dinner time Harry's department again insisted that he go home. When he resisted, Tonks said, "Harry, of all of us, you are the most likely one to be watched. Things have to look normal."

Harry thought ahead to going home, knowing Candide would not be home until after the midnight deadline.

In a commanding manner, Tonks said, "Harry."

Harry stood up. "All right. All right." He stared into her changeable eyes. "Are you going find him or not?" he asked, finding that his patience with how things were supposed to work had run perilously thin just over the course of that day.

She rested her folded hands over her crossed knees and said, "We hope to. We intend to."

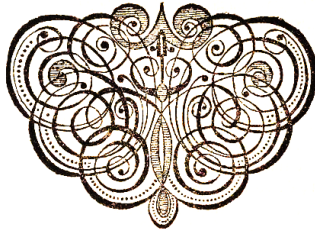
Harry remembered so many years of empty help from the Ministry when things were desperate for him. He tried to shake that off by reminding himself that he was part of this now and knew better what the department was up against.

"Harry?" she questioned, sounding quite concerned. "If you have ideas you should tell them to someone rather than going off on your own."

Harry bleakly shook his head. His only ideas involved dark magic and he did not think he need share them.

Author's Notes: Sorry for the delay, had to finish 24 before posting this. So we are on track for 24 to be posted at the regular time.

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Snape looked up from his notes; Harry stood with his back pressed to the door, arriving with no sound, but nevertheless choosing to arrive near the entrance so as to not interrupt too rudely, and to have a chance to pretend he had entered the normal way if Snape were not alone.

Harry's voice came out strained as he asked, "Can I talk to you? Do you have class soon?"

Snape backed up his chair and stood. He cast a silver streak through the ceiling with a blurred motion of his wand, and slipped out from behind the desk. He gestured crisply for Harry to approach. Harry had remained still, already sucked back into his relentlessly circling thoughts. He made his feet move until he stood before the desk, unwilling to relax and take a seat.

A knock came on the door and Lupin put his head in. The knock jarred Harry from his reverie. His eyes narrowed at the Muggle book on Snape's desk. The brightly printed and shiny paper cover made it stand out from the hundreds of hand-sewn books in the room. Musings on Existing, the title read.

Behind him Snape said to his colleague. "Can you take my next session?"

Lupin said, "Yes, of course. Seventh Years, right?"

Snape did not reply aloud. Harry assumed he had nodded. Harry felt bad making Snape rearrange things and turned to Lupin to see his judgment on this. But Lupin appeared only pleased. He gave Harry a nod of hello and an understanding smile

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before departing.

“I want to do the Beacon Spell,” Harry said the moment they were alone.

Snape took the two steps to the window and peered out rather than reply.

Harry went on, “I mean, we may not know for certain who Aaron’s father is, but we certainly know who his mother is.”

He watched Snape exhale slowly, face and shoulders lit softly by the cloudy day.

“That is extremely unwise,” he stated without turning.

“Why? You had McGonagall run it when I went missing again,” Harry accused, unable to contain any sharp edged emotions.

“I should not have allowed her to do so. She insisted the spell was not so dark to put her at risk, given her past avoidance of blood magic. Afterwards she agreed it was not wise.” He crossed his arms, still peering out. “I’ll confess, I find her a better manager of the students since she has done the spell. She yields to pity less than she used to.”

Harry took in that notion, wanting to argue against it, but Snape’s judgment of people’s behavior was generally spot on. “But what about Aaron?”

Snape turned with a snap of his head. “If you do this spell and succumb to dark magic there will be a thousand Aarons.”

Harry’s shoulder’s fell and his eyes burned with moisture. In a lower voice, he said, “I have all this power, but I can’t even rescue my friend. It’s useless!” He waved his arms in a helpless gesture. “You keep insisting how potentially dangerous I am, but I can’t even do this one simple thing!”

Calmly, Snape suggested, “Come over here.”

Harry stared at him, arms limp at his sides. There was no reason to deny so basic a request. He joined his former teacher at the tall window. Snape took his shoulder and made him sit on the stone sill.

“Look out there.”

Harry hitched his knee on the sill and twisted to look out.

“What do you see?” Snape asked.

Harry wanted to resist, but he said, “Hills. Clouds. Trees.”

“That’s all?”

Harry shrugged. Snape looked out too, his expression implying that he saw something else.

Snape spoke, sounding like one quoting, “The world waits, appears to slumber, but she is awake and riotously plotting, simply doing so on a scale too broad and patient for the small mind of man to grasp.”

Startled, Harry blurted, “What’s that?”

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Snape crossed his arms tighter. "I have spent my life thinking only of immediate things, partly because my survival depended upon it, and partly because I felt derision for such broad views. But your explorations of parallel worlds has forced me to re-evaluate my limited perspective. I think that you may benefit from broadening yours as well. McGonagall lent me a few dubious books of poetry along those lines and I have been forcing myself to read them."

Harry took Snape in. "Are you sure you are you?" Saying this made Harry slump additionally, burdened further.

"I'm quite certain about myself. How about you?"

Harry could hear he was being needled, so he did not answer, just sighed. He stared back out at the mountains. Something large flapped clumsily from one tree to another in the Forbidden Forest. A light mist pooled in the deeper gaps in the thin foliage.

Harry said, "What are you hoping I'll conclude... that even if Aaron is suffering, it doesn't matter because people are suffering all the time? That I can't save everybody, so why try to save anyone?"

Snape's brow furrowed. "No, that is not where I am going with this. That is an even more worrisome viewpoint than your usual penchant for sacrificing the future for the present."

"What?" Harry demanded, cutting Snape off.

"Short term thinking is a product of your short years. That was not a personal criticism." Snape turned back to the window, tenser than his pose indicated. "I have been contemplating these other worlds. All of those small decisions and random chances that tally up to form a completely different place, every jagged path drawn along spindly branches resulting in its own existence."

"Maybe you should write poetry," Harry criticized, feeling uneasy with this conversation.

Snape let the bait lie. He said, "There are many places where Voldemort never existed. There are places where Hogwarts is a Muggle school. There is probably at least one place where you really are my son."

This notion drew Harry to the present. He scoffed in amusement, but it lightened his mood. He added, "There is at least one place where you end up with my mother."

After a pause, Snape began, "Undoubt-" and stopped, eyes slitting.

"You wonder if I speak from experience?" Harry needled back, glad to get even.

Snape shook his stringy hair. "We have a here and now to worry about that already exceeds our abilities." Snape touched Harry on the arm. "I know it is a lot to ask of you at this age, especially since you have had more than your share of responsibility for the state of the world, and most certainly deserve a break from that,

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but you must keep the larger picture in mind.” He pondered Harry intently before saying, “At the risk of suggesting another use for a five-sided device, I wonder if you could see where Aaron is using your abilities to peruse alternative Planes?”

“I already tried that,” Harry admitted. “I couldn’t find him that way. I saw him all right, but only in the kinds of places I already know him in.” After a pause, he added, “I did find Dumbledore still alive, in one place.”

“Did you? And what, pray tell, was he doing?”

Harry gestured at the glass before them. “Sitting in an old tower. Staring out the window, like you are now,” he added critically.

Snape laughed through his nose, then grew grim again. “Please, Harry. No blood magic. I cannot forbid it, so I am reduced to pleading with you to forgo it. There must be another way. The darkness does not care that you perform the spell for the right reasons. It will take something away from you that you, and the world, cannot afford for you to lose.”

Harry drew in a breath past a constricted ribcage. He felt sadder and even more helpless than when he had arrived seeking help.

“There must be another way,” Snape repeated. “You are clever. You have many friends who would do anything for you. Think of something else. If it falls short; you did the best you could.”

Harry swallowed hard. “I can’t fail,” he pledged. But it was true that he had not asked for much help from his old friends beyond jokingly suggesting Ron steal enough gold from the vaults in Gringotts to suffice. He could steal it for himself, in theory, if there were that many Galleons to be had in Gringotts. Aloud, Harry said, “Why did they ask for so much? It’s an unreasonable amount of money, even Freeland can’t come up with that much. There may not be that much to be had in all of England. They want us to hand over the full wealth of the wizarding world.”

“Has anyone attempted to negotiate a lower ransom?” Snape asked, his clear concern a salve to Harry’s frayed nerves.

Harry nodded and swallowed hard before saying, “Mrs. Wickem finally did. They sent her his cursed-off nose in response.”

Snape bowed his head over his crossed arms.

Harry said, “If this goes on much longer, I’m going to find someone safe enough to do the Beacon Spell.”

“That will not fully exempt you. Dark magic is an entwining and clinging pollution that leaves all involved touched in some way, no matter how remote they be.”

“More poetry?” Harry asked.

Snape shook his head, “More experience.”

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Friday had arrived and the quiet intensity of the Aurors' office had turned to frantic. Mrs. Wickem and Lord Frelander had missed the deadline to collect together the necessary funds and had been punished for doing so. Harry was beginning to believe that at least part of the purpose of all this was to sow fear in the Ministry, to make a point about who had power over whom. This point was not lost on anyone Harry encountered that day. The language had degenerated and nicknames for their opponents sprang up as fast as others could learn them.

"Bloody hell," Rodgers said while reading a memo.

"Sir?" Harry prompted, not wanting more bad news but unable to hold back.

"Scant help from our foreign offices is all. Potter, weren't you supposed to go home hours ago?"

Harry stared painfully at his trainer. It was true that he did not have field duty until the next day. "I can't do that, sir. Don't you think they realize by now that we know?"

Rodgers frowned. "Possibly. But when we make it clear they will most likely punish everyone by cutting something else off their prisoner. Go on home."

Harry tossed his head but he obeyed. At home, lunch was just being served and the scent of it filled his head like a spell. His mood brightened more when he found Ginny and – even less expected but welcome – Hermione had joined Candide at the table.

Hermione said, "We were just starting a pool on whether you'd make it. "

Harry took the last open seat, more grateful for their presence than he would have imagined. He accepted a steaming cup of tea, but merely stared into it, at the oil playing on the surface.

Hermione hesitated before saying, "Ginny caught me and Candide up."

Harry tossed his shoulders up and down uncaringly. He now felt numb to the ruse that had so driven them early in the week, yet had come to nothing with their adherence.

"What are you going to do?" Hermione asked.

"Cast a blood magic spell," Harry replied, not having decided until that moment, but confident of his plan now.

Hermione dropped her cup, spilling her tea over her rice. "Harry, you can't."

"That's what Severus insists. I need to find someone less dangerous to actually cast it." He stared at Hermione. He trusted that she could remain untainted for one spell.

Her eyes went wide. "Harry, really," she snapped.

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Ginny leaned forward with her hands gripping the table edge, her food untouched before her. “What spell is this? I’ll do it.” She ignored Hermione’s sharp look.

Harry, thinking of prophecies, shook his head. “No. Not you either.”

“Why not?”

Harry felt more like Dumbledore than he ever had in his life when he was forced to reply, “I have my reasons.”

This reply stunned Ginny into silence. She pushed her food around with her fork rather than throw her disappointment back as anger.

Harry put his forehead on his fist, saying, “There’s got to be another way.”

Candide, sounding grim, said, “You really need half a million?” When Harry nodded, rocking his head side to side over his fist, she exhaled in a rough whistle. “That’s a lot.”

“Is there even that much in Gringotts?” Harry asked her.

She studied him a long time before replying, “Probably.”

Harry guessed that she knew what he was contemplating. Ginny bit her lips. “Thinking of stealing it?” she asked.

Hermione juggled her newly freshened cup of tea, burning her hand. “What is going on with all of you?” she demanded.

“I think there’s a better way,” Ginny said. “I was talking to my brothers this morning about an incident where they had far more money than they really had.”

Harry shut down his chaotic thoughts and turned all of his attention to her.

Ginny said, “No one can say anything though.” Everyone readily agreed to this, so she went on. “When my brothers wanted to start up their shop, they got some money from Harry, but it wasn’t enough. It was enough for the lease on the shop for a year, but not the ingredients, which were ten times that just to get going. They didn’t have any collateral, so they... they went to Gringotts for a loan to buy ingredients. They showed them twenty-five thousand Galleons that they already had, and lied and said they needed that to buy the property for the shop, which they were actually only letting. Gringotts gave them the loan, so then they had real Galleons for stock ingredients.”

“They used the property as collateral, but they didn’t own it?” Candide confirmed. “Glad I’m not their accountant.”

Ginny tried to cover. “They own it now. They just needed more money to get started, and the Goblins will only give money to people who already have too much already. That was their excuse for pretending they had more.”

Candide said, “They managed to fool the Goblins with fake coin?”

Ginny nodded.

Trying to feel hope, Harry said, “How did they do that?”

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Ginny replied, “You need some real Galleons to make the spell work, and metal disks of the right size for the fake ones.”

Hermione, eagerly rising forward in her seat said, “It’s some kind of Metamorphic Protean Charm? So each real coin can have its qualities pressed onto maybe twenty others?”

Ginny nodded. “Fifteen was all they thought safe, and even then some refused to hold for more than a few hours. It was your Dumbledore’s Army coins that made them think of it.”

Harry said, “If they were convincing enough to fool the Goblins, who are very hard to convince, then they should be convincing enough to fool Durumulna.”

Ginny said, “We need tons of metal disks.”

Harry thought back to his field work of last weekend. “I think I know where we can get some.”

The four of them skipped finishing lunch and went into motion.

Harry asked Hermione to stay with Candide while he and Ginny went to speak to the twins.

They found Ginny’s brothers in a meeting with four AWOL Hogwarts students who sold their wares inside the school. The students had not even removed their uniforms, but had pulled their cloaks firmly around themselves. They glanced nervously at each other when Harry appeared.

They shuffled to their feet and the Slytherin, biting her lip asked, “Are you going to turn us in to Professor Snape?”

Fred put an arm forcefully around Harry’s shoulder. “Nah, he wouldn’t do that. Would ya’, Harry? This is our second-best sales channel here.”

Harry glanced at the four of them, memorizing their faces. “I don’t care what you’re doing as long as you don’t get hurt doing it. But right now I need to talk to Fred and George.”

The students hurried off, fighting to get out the door. Harry glanced at those remaining. “Ginny, can you watch the shop while we talk?”

She nodded grimly, and rubbed one tired eye as she took a seat behind the counter.

Upstairs the twins paced nervously before offering Harry a chair, a cup of funny colored tea and a deluxe box of BouncySweets: an excellent gift for pet owners.

Harry set the box aside. “Look I need a favor...”

George swooped the box away back to the shelf. “In that case...”

Harry laughed, then fell sad again. “I need your help. I need to fake a lot of money, really fast.”

The twins gaped at him. “What business are you getting into?”

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“The wrong business,” Harry said. “But other than filching the money, I don’t see any other way.”

“We need slugs, you know,” Fred said. “You can’t make money out of thin air.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll get those. Can you help me?” He held off on informing them that Ginny had informed on them.

Fred, arms swinging loosely – a sign he was feeling up for a challenge, said, “How much do you need?”

“Half a million.”

Fred fell to his knees in shock. George burst out laughing and had to support himself on the litter-strewn mantelpiece to stay upright.

Harry said, “If I get the slugs and thirty-three thousand Galleons, will you help me?”

The two of them fell completely silent, eyes goggling. “You are a nutter. You’re serious!”

Harry spent the afternoon collecting things they would need. He borrowed a triple-expandable magical trunk from Freeland, already containing the necessary number of real Galleons. The man behaved surprisingly insistent about the trunk as if driven by guilt that he wanted to be rid of along with the money. He stood distractedly while Harry verified that he could figure out how to use the trunk’s magical compartments. Before he departed, Harry wished he had something hopeful to say to the grim man, but he could dredge nothing up out of his own worries.

While he waited for night to fall, Harry sent another letter to his guardian, but this time thought it best to simply speak in code and make the letter seem innocent. He wrote: There is a Lumos Charm in the darkest part of the forest now. Trust that I’m going not going to do anything you advised me not to do.

After dark, Harry went to the scrap yard and carrying a real Galleon, found fat rods of the right diameter. Moving stealthily so he would not have to deal with the dog, he used a welding spell to split them in half and silenced and hovered them into a neat bundle so he could Apparate into the Wheezes upper room with them. The bundle regained its weight when he arrived, landing with a deafening, thudding crash on the floor. No one complained about the noise, including Ron, who had covered his ears and winced. Everyone remained serious, barely speaking as the chopping began. They argued briefly over what chopping spell would work best, finally settling on the one used by cooks for root vegetables.

On long, cleared tables, real Galleons were laid out along one edge and fresh, hot disks of iron were laid out in long lines beside them. Fred, with much flourish, performed the spell to make them all sparkle golden and the process was repeated.

Long into the night they did this, until everyone’s head nodded despite a dozen

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pots of tea. Ginny went to change places with Hermione guarding Candide and in the end they all returned to help. Even with the efficiency of magic, the process proved laboriously long. Like some reverse sorcerer's apprentice spell, horde after horde of golden disks were swept up in flocks and dumped with a rich clatter into the fancy trunk and more iron slugs laid out in long regiments, headed by a gold captain.

Early the next morning when it became clear how long the project would take in total, Harry headed off to Mrs. Wickem's house. It would be Sunday around five in the morning before they had the right number of Galleons, and the ransom would have to take place quickly after that. After the first missed ransom drop, the second had been left unscheduled, as far as Harry knew.

Harry flew in an upper window that was left unlatched for him. Downstairs he found Mrs. Wickem alone with the butler standing off to the side, looking like he wished he could provide more than the usual silence.

Harry skipped the niceties beyond a quick hello, far too tired for them. "Have they given you instructions for a second drop?"

Mrs. Wickem sniffled and handed over a letter. The deep red ink used to write it out did not bode well. Harry swallowed and asked with a wince, "Did they send anything else?" When she nodded, Harry muttered, "Oh dear."

"Just a little finger," she said with a gasp into her hanky.

Harry breathed out in relief. "Could be worse," he heard himself say. He really needed to sleep. "It says one of your servants is to come at noon to Down Street tube station. Just one, who will be magically verified as being in your employ." Harry handed the letter back. "That's easy enough. Write up an employment contract and I'll sign it. I want to make the trade myself."

Mrs. Wickem peered at the letter, her face sagging with the weight of sadness. "I'm afraid the Ministry is going to try something and my Aaron will come to harm."

"The Ministry isn't going to do this, I am. I'm just going to fetch Aaron, nothing else."

"But we don't have enough..." she stated slowly, as though he were the dim one.

The twins were adamant that the more people who knew the money was fake the shorter time it would remain convincing. Harry doubted that, but it was easier to say, "We have the money. Just don't ask where it came from."

"Alfie must have..." she began.

"Lord Frelander helped a lot," Harry confirmed, eager to get away again to help so they would be finished in time. "I have to go. Write up the contract and I'll be back in a few hours to sign it."

They each in turn took a three hour break that day when nerves took over and patience grew short. The room, with only one heavily-curtained window, remained

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the same night and day, giving the place a relentlessly timeless feel. When Harry closed his eyes he saw only fluttering gold coins. Eventually they sparkled across his vision even when he kept his eyes open.

Candide insisted she had done nothing but rest since Tuesday but Harry insisted she take a break before him. Her help was invaluable, as she was one of only three of them, including Hermione, who could get the entire table worth of iron slugs to change, everyone else needed several cancellations and re-tries, which often left a handful ruined and in need of sorting out.

Candide returned at dinner time to replace him. When Harry arrived in the main hall in Shrewsthorpe, the first thing he noticed was the silence, the disturbing absence of clattering coin. The second thing was the fresh air; the work room of the Weasley twins was not exactly lightly scented. Harry fell into bed, with an alarm spell added to his pocket watch set for exactly his allotted three hours of break time before he had field work for his apprenticeship. With his pocket watch tucked against his breast where its shaking would certainly rouse him, Harry dropped into a hard sleep.

Harry's watch woke him to a dream of the Wheezes work room full of swarming cold metal and a shadow skulked around the edge of the walls holding forth a dark wand trailing smoke. Harry snapped awake and groggily rubbed his head. He felt more tired than when he had laid down, but his rumbling watch insisted that three hours had passed.

Harry yawned and rocked forward and back to gather the momentum to get out of bed. He had not taken off his robes, for which he was glad because he could not raise his arms to change his clothes, he was certain. With a snuffle, Harry wondered if it would have been better to not sleep and simply taken more of the twins' strange wake-up concoctions.

The stairs down nearly defeated him because his toes seemed numb to the notion of walking. Perhaps the twins' concoctions were the problem. Harry caught himself with the bannister and descended slower after that, unwilling to take a fall on limbs that felt sleepy and brittle. He found Snape in the doorway to the drawing room, peering at him in surprise. He wore a heavy robe as though the fire were not burning high in the hearth behind him.

"Oh, you're home," Harry said, scratching his head.

"Yes," Snape replied. "I thought I would... see to some things." He appeared dubious of Harry's state.

Harry's mind was not working well, only half of it had come even partially awake and the other half was mired in dark thoughts about his friend. He did not feel like trying to explain what was happening, but he should say something, for backup at least. He strode around the hall, running a few eavesdropping prevention spells.

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When he came back around to the drawing room door, he said quietly, "I'm going to fetch Aaron tomorrow. Alone, because that's what they insisted."

Snape stood with his arms crossed, looking strained and a mirror of Harry's poorly slept state. "All right," he said, studying Harry intently.

Harry had expected an argument, and he was glad he did not have to hold up his end of one. "I've got it all arranged, I think," he assured his guardian. When Snape did not reply, Harry slumped slightly, feeling increasingly frustrated and angry as he spoke. "This has to work. Mrs. Wickem keeps receiving body parts. Pretty soon they are going to be major ones. It's really terrible." Really, Harry thought, he should have had the power to do something before now and that helplessness gnawed hard on him, making him want to lash out.

Snape glanced away, and Harry wondered suddenly if he had not at sometime in the past been a witness, or worse, to the other side of exactly this. Harry felt forceful ambivalence about that possibility. He bit his lips to keep from saying something he may regret. Feeling antsy on top of sleepy, Harry said, "Well, I won't be back until tomorrow. Will you be here?"

Snape stared at him. "What time?"

Harry shook himself. He should have said. "Noon, or right after."

"I'll be here," Snape stated flatly.

"Good. We may need your help."

A pause and then a nod. Harry felt uneasy but could focus on nothing beyond getting through his field work and then getting all the gold finished. So much gold... an inconceivable amount. He Disapparated for the Ministry with a groan.

By ten the next morning they had everything finished. Harry had sent Candide home hours before even though they missed her help almost immediately. The remaining six of them knelt around the trunk and peered down into the vast, cone-shaped pile rising from the depths.

"Mother of Merlin that's a lot of money," Ron said.

"It is," Hermione agreed, sounding disgusted.

Harry picked up on that and said, "I'm glad we're not giving them that much real money."

Hermione raised her head to look at Harry. "Did you tell the Ministry what you were doing, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. The other five glanced at each other. Fred said, "I wouldn't tell them."

Ginny said, "This is dad we're talking about, though..."

"All the more reason," George agreed.

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Harry had been half-planning this morning to tell someone at the Aurors' office what was happening, but at the moment, he felt very much like going it alone with no interference. In fact, he wondered now why he had intended to tell them at all. He could do this better alone.

Fifteen minutes before the prescribed meeting time, Harry wheeled the trunk along Down Street, toward the blood-red brick façade marring the shopfronts. He peered inside the grimy window and tugged his mitten off to pretend to fix his laces until the road cleared of Muggles. The road was most likely being watched by someone from Durumulna, but Harry could not sense it if it was. He checked one more time to see that it was clear before Apparating inside the station.

Harry immediately pulled his wand believing he had been struck by a Blasting Curse. He caught himself from completely tumbling over the trunk and levered himself up against the brass edge of it. It was only the wind howling up from the staircase before him. He shook his tired head and jumpy body and hovered the trunk to tackle a flight of stairs, only to then be faced with a dauntingly deep spiral staircase.

Harry considered and then dismissed using a Silencing Charm as he went; he had no need of stealth and in fact did not want to surprise the other party. Realizing he should have left more time, Harry jogged downward, the endless turning rubbing raw his overwrought mind in the same way the endless repetitive spells of the last few day had.

The trunk bumped along ahead of Harry, carried by magical momentum to the concrete floor at the bottom. The lights glowed brightly down here, providing pretend normalcy rather than abandonment. With a wave the trunk leapt airborne again. Harry jogged along a tiled tunnel until he stopped to blink at a carefully painted sign that read Enquiries & Committee Room with an arrow below. A rumble built and receded, vibrating the floor, moments later a gust rushed through the shiny confines of the tunnel. Harry looked both ways along the old tube station corridor, but he could not piece together what the sign might mean so he hurried on, following the wind. The fanciful Way Out signs provided much-needed reassurance. Harry wanted to imagine leaving again, as soon as possible, with his friend safely in tow.

Harry proceeded from tunnel to tunnel until he met another staircase up, this one darkened, the electric lamps doused. Shadows shifted and slipped out of view around a bend at the top.

“Remain there,” an echoing voice commanded. Harry let the trunk drift. Another rumble built and receded as if the very earth were sliding by, seconds later a rush of air lifted his hair and robes one way and then the other, as though he stood before the gaping maw of a great animal.

“Touch the railing. If you are not in the employ of the Wickems this will render

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you senseless.”

Harry rested his hand on the iron pipe railing that split the stairs, amused as well as worried to think that his trunk was full of the same cheap material, and he was going to ransom a life with that.

“Send the trunk up.”

Harry had not taken the time to think ahead. Instinctively he said, “I want to see Aaron first.”

More shadows shifted, outlined by a weak light somewhere on the other side of the tunnel bridge. Another rumble passed by, teasing Harry’s toes with vibration and sucking at his clothes a breath later.

A hunched silhouette careened toward the wall of the tunnel, manhandled into stopping at the lip of the top step. A single electric lamp came up for an instant before darkening again. Harry blinked at the afterimage smeared on his retinas. He had received a glimpse of a shiny stripe of blood red tile and a hooded figure that certainly resembled Aaron.

“Not much of a look,” Harry sharply complained, one part of him thinking he should get on with it as another thought he should try to punish these criminals as much as possible by being difficult.

“We can simply take the money and kill him.”

The hooded figure fell to its knees, or was pushed, it was hard to judge. With a malicious grin Harry said, “I’d like you to try that,” with a tone that caused murmurs to slip along the hard walls from beyond the bend. Harry leaned more casually on the railing, wand flicking playfully, and added, “It certainly wouldn’t be the first time I was the only survivor.”

More murmuring.

Harry jumped ahead of their thoughts. “Aaron knew the risks when he signed up to be an Auror. I’m sure at this point he’d be more than happy to know his death let me take you out. Every. Last. One. Of. You.”

Things moved along faster after that and more cooperatively, Harry was pleased to see. He could find no patience for their games. An unmasked figure with the typical generic look of the organization came down the steps to escort the trunk to the top where another figure waited, wearing their trademark netted mask. Harry followed, hoping to get a closer look at Aaron. The figure restraining Aaron lifted a wand to Aaron’s ribs, so Harry diverted to face down the figure who seemed to be in charge, noticing the person wore platform shoes. Harry glared up at the slitted face and said, “Let me guess, costume shop was out of Death Eater masks?”

The figure took a physical swipe at him. Harry caught the figure’s arm, and found less muscle there than expected. Many wands came in out of nowhere and aimed at

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his heart. Aaron, left to lean against the side of the tunnel, made a rather pathetic sound of distress. The sound shook Harry out the derisive mode he had slipped into.

He let go of the leader's arm, noticing the person wore something cursed around their neck, under their cloak where he could not see what it may be.

The unmasked man verified the money, dipping far into the magical cavern of the trunk for samples of coin and running spells upon them before dropping them into a colorful liquid with audible plops.

Aaron made another noise and slid farther, unable to prop himself up with his hands bound behind him and his returned guard offered him no help. "We're almost there, Aaron. Hang in there," Harry said.

"They're good," the man kneeling beside the trunk declared after drawn out minutes of testing.

Harry worked very hard to not release the breath he held. The eyes of the leader were certainly fixed firmly upon him and he wished to give nothing away when he was so close.

"Take him. Get out of my sight."

Harry grabbed up Aaron and helped him quickly down the steps and around the corner before trying to Apparate him away. Harry fell to his knees instead, struck by a barrier, and pulled his wand and waited to make sure he wasn't followed with the notion that he may stupidly try just that. Watching behind him, he helped Aaron along the tunnel. A chorus of pops reverberated over the hum of another train passing. Two bends later and many spells laid behind him, Harry stopped and started untying the hood hooked around Aaron's chest. But Aaron fought him doing this, making noises like talking through a gag.

"You don't want that off?" Harry asked.

The hood shook its head.

"Aaron, I have to know I've got you and not someone else," Harry insisted, even though he knew his fellow's lean physique well enough that he had not doubted who it was.

Harry untied Aaron's clutched hands, noting that his friend had a fresh stub where the ring finger on his left hand should be. Again, Harry tugged at the hood and his friend resisted. Aaron pushed away with an elbow and reached under to untie the gag. He tossed the wet thing away on the dusty floor, where it left a clean smudge.

"It's me," Aaron said, voice breaking, hand still holding fast to the edge of the hood.

"All right," Harry said, giving in and taking his arm. He Apparated them both to the main hall in Shrewsthorpe.

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Ginny, Hermione, Ron and one twin waited for him there. Harry guided the blinded Aaron to the couch, where he promptly curled up, one arm around his covered head and the other hooked on his knees, seemingly chased inward by the rush of voices welcoming him.

Harry waved the others away and forced Aaron to give up the hood. His sense of cursedness was bothering him and he wanted to remedy that. "Come on, Aaron, it's all right." Aaron ducked inside his arms, turning away from them to hide his face.

Ginny said, "I'll go fetch Mrs. Wickem."

"No," Aaron moaned piteously, "I don't want to see my mum. I look horrid."

"Aye," Ron breathed.

Ginny moved in closer to sit beside Harry, who was trying to figure out how to best handle this. Snape slid over behind the couch, observing with a hard expression. Harry considered that as a last ditch effort, they could potion Aaron into cooperating.

"Aaron, come on," Ginny urged, tugging lightly on one arm.

"Aaron, we're just trying to take care of you," Harry said, trying to sound patient.

Muffled, Aaron replied miserably, "No, it's cursed. I'll be like this forever. I look like bloody Voldemort," he added, voice breaking.

Ginny shot Harry a look of dismay. Harry leaned closer, moving Aaron's hand so they could see where he had lost an ear.

"That's not cursed off," Harry said.

Eagerly, Ginny said, "I can give you an ear. Let me see your other one."

Hermione leaned on the couch arm. "Maybe you should take him to a Healer...?"

Aaron ducked back down into his vice-like arms. "No... I don't want to be seen."

Harry gave his old friend a dissuading glare, and she stood upright, realizing her mistake.

Ginny half teased, half criticized, "Your students must love you at Hogwarts."

Snape's robes rustled as he glanced at his colleague, who visibly sighed. At the attention, Hermione said, "I'll get some stuff to purify the wounds with. You shouldn't heal them if they aren't clean."

"Thanks, Hermione," Harry said to her back as she departed for the toilet. They had grown too snippy with each other and that needed to stop.

Harry pried Aaron's arm free again so they could see the uneven hole with a curved red ridge that was all that remained of his ear.

"I need to see the other one," Ginny said. Still ineffectual at getting cooperation.

Snape leaned over the couch from behind. Sharply, he said, "Mr. Wickem, shape up and act your age. I am quite certain your friends are only trying to help, which you are fast losing any deserving of."

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Harry froze and stared at his guardian, but he did not have much chance to react because Aaron had shifted his long legs to sit properly on the couch, head bowed and limp, but cooperating now. His nose did resemble Voldemort's, just two high slits between his eyes. Harry fought a cringe. Aaron kept his hands at his sides, tugging nervously on his robes. Apparently a sharp word from a former Head of House was exactly what he needed, as much as it stunned Harry under the circumstances.

Ginny turned Aaron's head one way and then the other, gauging the spell. Hermione handed over a cloth smelling of disinfectant and with much gasping in pain, Aaron let that be used on him. Face laden with concentration Ginny checked Aaron's right ear one more time and tapped, wove her wand in quick loops then tapped again.

"Nicely done," Harry said, surprised how perfect the new ear looked.

Aaron jerked his hands up to feel both ears all over with no little desperation.

Ginny said, "Yeah. Remember my long unicorn ears at the last Halloween party? I learned a quick spell to make them and then I did some serious damage getting rid of them later. By the time I got my own ears on right, I had the spell perfected, that's for sure." To Aaron, she said, "I can do a nose too. At least a temporary one." She tapped between his brows with her wand but the spell fizzled.

"It's cursed off," Harry said. "I can take care of the curse. But you're going to have to hold your breath or breathe through your mouth while I do." Snape leaned over the back of the couch, interested in the procedure.

Even after Aaron's cursed nose was replaced by one that did not quite look like his old one but worked well enough, and his hand was de-cursed and bandaged, Harry could still feel something accursed about him.

"Do you have anything on that they gave you?" Harry asked. "Jewelry or anything?"

Aaron shook his head. He sat up straighter now, but his face still hung long and disconsolately. "I could use a bath. Maybe that's what you're noticing."

Harry laughed lightly. "Maybe. We have to take you to your mum's before you'll get a chance."

Whinging instantly, Aaron said, "I want to go home. To my flat."

"Yeah, all right," Harry said. "But mum first."

Aaron, visibly cringed, which Harry could understand. Mrs. Wickem was a lot to take even whole and healthy. Half broken, she would be a painful experience.

"I promise it'll be quick," Harry said. "Then your flat. You weren't kidnapped from there, were you?"

Aaron shook his head. "Tricked by my date."

Ginny theatrically rolled her eyes.

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“Oh,” Harry said. “Well, we’ll take you home, then I have to go to the Ministry.” He stood and tugged Aaron to his feet. “And get reamed, I expect.” A glance at his stony guardian made him wonder if he was not in trouble on two fronts, as usual. Harry had a thought. “Ginny, can you go into the Ministry and tell them what happened, then meet me at Aaron’s flat?”

Ginny nodded. She glanced around at the rest of the crew, dismissed each of them in turn until she reached Hermione, and said, “Mind going with me?”

Hermione pulled herself straight. “Of course not.”

Harry took one last eyeful of his guardian, standing behind the couch, unreadably grim. Harry had tried to keep Snape informed this time, as much as possible under the circumstances. Feeling at a loss, Harry sighed and Disapparated for the Wickem residence with an arm firmly around his friend in case he did not land perfectly.

Fortunately, Mrs. Wickem attacked Harry as much as her son. Aaron withstood a lengthy, cheek-pinching inspection with stoicism.

“Oh, my baby, you look fine. A few good meals and you’ll be good as new.”

Harry, who could still see the haunted depths to Aaron’s eyes, thought that a bit optimistic.

“Look at you... is that your nose, or Harry’s nose?”

“It might be my nose,” Harry said.

“Does it look funny?” Aaron asked his mum, rubbing it.

“No, it looks fine, Dear,” Mrs. Wickem said falsely. “We’ll get that straightened out. Don’t you worry.”

Lord Frelander, who had remained beside his chair at the small tea table, finally approached and shook Aaron’s hand. “Good to have you at liberty, young man,” he said.

Aaron nodded broadly. “I have to go,” he said, before his mother could swoop in again. “I have reports... and things.”

“Long debriefing,” Harry said in support. “I expect.”

Mrs. Wickem said, “My poor dear. Why can’t they leave you be?”

Aaron put a hand out to stop her approach. “It’s all right,” he said with the most strength than he had shown yet. “I want to get it over with. Let’s go, Harry.”

“But... you aren’t going to stay?” Mrs. Wickem exclaimed.

“I need a bath and some sleep,” Aaron pleaded. “I’ll visit tomorrow, when I’m rested.”

“Well, a bath for certain,” Mrs. Wickem said with a twitch of her nose. “Well, all right. Just don’t be a stranger to your worrying mother.”

Aaron rocked his head away. Harry grabbed hold of his arm and took him home.

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The serene silence of the flat was accented by the sun beams angling in through the tall, pointed windows. Aaron made his own way to the leather couch and fell on it, on his face.

“You all right?” Harry asked.

Aaron nodded.

Harry said, “You want me to get a bath ready?”

Aaron’s head cranked down to peer at him, upside down. “You are offering to draw me a bath?” he asked in disbelief.

Harry chuckled. “I don’t mind.”

Aaron levered himself to half sit up so he could stare at Harry with a tilted head hooked to a tired neck. “If you would. You’re rather tall for a house-elf, you know,” he added to Harry’s back.

Harry wandered the large open flat until he found the bath, which was a veritable Greek temple of marble tile. Harry started the gold plated faucets running and returned to check on his friend.

“Really nice place you have here,” Harry said.

“For now.” Depressed sounding, Aaron said, “You gave them all my money. From both my parents.”

Harry said, “The hell I did.”

Aaron stared at him, strangely free of expression. Harry did not leave him waiting long for further explanation. “We tricked them,” Harry said. “I have friends with dangerous knowledge, like how to fake large amounts of Galleons.”

“They checked them,” Aaron said. “I could hear them running the spells.”

“There was just enough real money to magic the fakes to pass the test.”

“How much for real?”

“Thirty-three thousand, three-hundred and thirty three, or four. I don’t remember how we decided on that in the end. Hermione and Candide argued about it for a while, but I don’t remember how it turned out.” Memories of the last few frantic days swooped over Harry, leaving behind overwhelming exhaustion.

Aaron moved aside and patted the couch. Harry accepted the invitation and collapsed beside him. “Still some serious coin,” Aaron said, “but not half a mil, thank Merlin. I’d like to take half a mil out of their skins, personally.”

Harry rubbed his tired eyes. “You may get the chance. When they discover what happened, they’ll probably come looking for us. Or me at least.”

Aaron’s eyes filled as he grew hotly angry and his neck leaned outward. “I relish the chance... just as soon as I get a bath and some sleep in my own, much-fantasized-about bed.”

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Harry could feel the extreme anger in his friend, like a poison that dimmed the light of his bright demeanor. He put out a hand to restrain Aaron from rising, and said, "Taking revenge will hurt you more than them. Really it will."

Aaron pulled free and glowered down at him. "What are you on about?" he sputtered, so unlike himself, it hurt to watch.

Carefully, Harry said, "I'm not belittling what happened to you. I'd be the last person in the world to do that." Harry stood, trying to sound older and wiser and, hence, more convincing. "Justice is fine, Aaron. Revenge is not." Aaron merely stared at him, so Harry added, "I've been where you are, right now, more than once. You've been hurt, but you're not letting the damage stop. The damage going on now is caused by you. The kind of emotion you were feeling just now – it's like a curse. It poisons you from the core outward. Whatever happens, it's not worth losing yourself to."

Aaron sighed, perhaps accepting this for the moment, perhaps falling victim to his own over-tapped spirit. In the distance the sound of the tub overflowing drew them both that way.

Aaron tip-toed over the overrunning stream and stretched out to tweak the faucets off. Harry pulled his wand, but the excess water was neatly heading for the drain in the corner. Aaron sat on the wide, square edge of the tub and scrubbed his eyes.

"I'm glad for the break from Rodgers and Mr Weasley," Aaron said, slipping off his shirt. "I'm getting the notion that this wasn't a Ministry operation."

Harry shook his head. "I was off probation," he said teasingly, garnering a painfully quick smile from his fellow.

Aaron finished stripping and slipped into the tub, sending more cacophonous sloshes onto the floor. Harry saw quite a few bruises and gashes before the water engulfed them, and Aaron washed with trepidation.

"I'll wait for Ginny out here. Want me to make you something to eat? You look like you could use it. Something light or heavy? How much did they give you to eat?"

Aaron dropped the arm he had been scrubbing into the water with a splash. His gaze slipped off into the distance. Voice low, and swallowing often, he said, "They wanted me to beg for scraps." He pulled himself together after saying this and more calmly said, "So I haven't eaten much. It depended on who was left guarding me."

"Something light, then," Harry said easily, leaving him to his bath.

Ginny waited in the kitchen, sitting on one of the tall stools beside the counter. "How is he?"

"Doing better. He needs to eat."

Harry went to the fridge, but Ginny's deadpan voice halted him, "You need to go into the Ministry, Harry."

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Harry closed the fridge and said, “Yep. You didn’t get into trouble, did you?”

Ginny nibbled on a gilded chocolate from a dusty, five layer deluxe box on the counter and said, “I told dad if he wanted me to work within the Ministry that I couldn’t do that unless he made me an Auror.” She gave up a tired grin.

Harry sighed. “It’s tough to work inside the system. Useless sometimes.” He gestured at the range. “Can you make Aaron some soup or something light and easy on the stomach.”

She jumped down off the stool. “Yeah. ’Course.”



Harry strolled down the corridor to the Auror’s office with far more confidence than he felt. Trouble was, he had lost track of why he had gone it alone. He had planned to say something that morning, but completely changed his mind. Perhaps exhaustion had something to do with that.

As he stepped into the Auror’s office, Rodgers directed him down to the tea room and into a chair. Harry obeyed silently. Moments later Rodgers returned with Mr. Weasley. Harry fortified himself by imagining that he was delaying Aaron from facing this.

Rodgers stood with his arms crossed, studying Harry curiously. Mr. Weasley seemed at a loss for words. He leaned on his palms over the table and angled his head at Harry, disappointment clear in his gaze.

“Harry,” Mr. Weasley started, but stuttered to a stop.

“What Arthur is trying to say, Potter, is what the hell were you doing?”

Harry decided stating the obvious would be childish, so he said nothing. Rodgers went on, “I might have to reassess whether you really are just a glory freak, even though you convinced me otherwise.”

“I don’t care if I don’t get any credit,” Harry assured him. “Really I don’t.”

“Why Harry?” Mr. Weasley asked. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Harry wondered if he could use the notion of a security leak inside the Ministry as an excuse, even if it had not really been a reason for his behavior.

“I actually don’t know, sir. We got sort of caught up in it all. It’s not legal to make fake Galleons...”

“The Galleons were faked?” Mr. Weasley said.

“Er, didn’t Ginny mention that?” Harry asked, wondering if he should have held that back. He decided he did not need to. “Yes, your sons worked it out,” Harry said, feeling confident in that not going any further than it had to.

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Mr. Weasley sighed musically. Rodgers said, "That's better. The Minister nearly had a aneurism believing you'd given Durumulna that much money."

"We gave them thirty-three thousand. We needed those to fake the rest convincingly."

Rodgers appeared vaguely amused. "There's a spell I'd like to see."

Mr. Weasley rubbed his eyebrow. "Maybe we shouldn't tell the public that Galleons can be faked."

"What?" Rodgers blurted. "There are lots of ways to fake Galleons. Nothing new."

"It'd be nice to have a few weeks rest before Durumulna realizes..." Harry shyly suggested, not hopeful for any favors.

Rodgers grew increasingly interested. "What will they turn into?"

"Disks of iron that we cut."

"Ah..." Rodgers said, excited. "We can track the bastards this way, by how they spend those Galleons."

Mr. Weasley glared at Rodgers. "Are you encouraging him?"

Rodgers shrugged. "He was on full duty, remember? We changed their status temporarily."

Harry's spirits lifted at that. Firstly because his trainer was not angry with him, and second because he did not want to be back on probation.

Mr. Weasley leaned over close to Harry again. "Did you tell Tonks what you were planning?" When Harry shook his head, he challenged, "Really?"

"No, I didn't tell her. Why?"

"Well... because she insisted she was not involved and I didn't know whether to believe her."

Harry leaned back in the hard chair and stretched his arms out before him, palms flat on the table top. "I meant to say something this morning... I'll be honest, after it would be too late to change plans. But I just, got caught up in things, I suppose. I don't know why I didn't. I meant to. What's going to happen?"

"Well, you are certainly back on probation."

"With Aaron," Harry clarified.

"He's at his flat?"

At Harry's nod, it was decided that Rodgers should accompany Harry back for a debriefing. Mr. Weasley stalked from the room, shaking his head in grand disgust. Rodgers asked, "How is Mr. Wickem?"

Harry replied, "Not so good. But he may bounce back quickly... it's hard to tell. I do hope he bounces back." Harry silently pledged to avenge his quick-witted and

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gentle friend if he turned out to be permanently damaged. Harry did not think that a fair thing to steal from someone.



Aaron reappeared from the bath wrapped in and trailing a regally cut maroon dressing gown. Ginny slid the hot soup on the counter over before one of the stools.

“Or do you want to sit at the table?”

“This is fine.” Aaron took up a spoon and stared into the bowl. “Nothing nasty floating in it. That’s good.”

An owl came to the window, and Ginny fetched the letter it carried. “It’s from your mum.”

“Wonderful. Read it to me.”

Ginny opened it, but before she could start, Aaron corrected, “No, never mind, just tell me what it says; I’ve been tortured enough for one day.”

Ginny read over the neat hand writing. “She wants you to come to dinner when it is convenient for you,” she quoted aloud. Ginny moved her lips, holding back on an opinion.

“No, go ahead and say it,” Aaron growled.

“I was going to say your family is nuts, but I thought I shouldn’t say that.”

Aaron bent back over his soup, managing to eat it in complete silence. Ginny had not seen him use a spell and wondered how he did it. He paused to say, “That would be a fair assessment.”

Ginny took a slouched seat on the couch and closed her eyes. Aaron said, “Are you staying for a while?”

Ginny jumped forward as if to leave. “Do you want to be alone?”

“Not really.” Aaron pushed the remainder of his soup away.

Ginny came around to the kitchen side of the counter. “Are you done already? Do you want something else?”

“You’re behaving like my mother,” Aaron accused.

Ginny froze on going to the fridge again, dropping her arms. “I really don’t mean to.” She remembered the surprising way Aaron had responded to Snape’s tough commentary and said, somewhat stilted, “Well, if you want something. I expect you know where to find it.” And went back to the couch.

Aaron felt in his pockets and then put his head in his hands. Ginny felt at a loss how to deal with this new mixed message. “I lost my wand. Those bloody losers kept my wand.”

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Ginny normally would have offered the use of her own, but that might be mothering. She looked around at the well-appointed flat, full of all kinds of extra, high-quality things. “You don’t have a spare?”

Aaron rapidly raised his head. “Yeah.” He looked about the broad room thoughtfully and pointed. “In there.”

Ginny went to a fancy little darkly varnished desk and pulled open the incredibly light drawer. A ceramic wand case rested inside along with other odds and ends. She brought it over, feeling it too bold to open the strange thing.

Aaron slid the long top off the case and lifted out the diminutive wand. It was a narrow wand with an amber hue to the wood. “My dad bought this for me on one of his trips.” More sadly he added, “One of his many trips. It’s Egyptian.”

He hovered the teapot over and poured some out. “Works just fine. I’d forgotten all about it. Thanks for the reminder.”

Ginny resumed her spot on the couch. “You’re welcome.”

The doorbell chimed and Ginny, wand out, went to answer it. She escorted Harry and Rodgers inside. “Didn’t expect you to use the door.”

“Mr. Rodgers wanted to be polite,” Harry said, in a high-minded tone that could have been poking fun.

“How are you doing, Aaron?” their trainer asked with about as much kindness as he ever used. He gestured for Aaron to retire to the couch, which he did with an obedient dip of his head. Rodgers pulled a chair around to face him, leaning his elbows on his knees. He tugged out a notebook and said, “It’s storytime now, I’m afraid.”

Aaron nodded bleakly as memory sucked him in.



Harry left Aaron in others’ hands and went home, hoping to catch Snape before he departed for Hogwarts for the week. His getting out of trouble easily at the Ministry made him want to make sure there was no trouble at home. But Snape was already absent.

Candide sat at the dining room table in a dressing gown, sipping from a vast mug of tea.

“Hello, Harry,” she greeted him vibrantly.

“Wotcher,” Harry said. He was tired, but he took a seat across from her and nibbled on a triangular mini sandwich from the platter in the middle of the table. “Severus left already, it looks like.”

“Yep,” she said, brow furrowing. “He seemed eager to go.” She shook her head.

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“Do you think I’m in trouble? I haven’t got used to this new setup we have. I tried to keep him informed, but everything moved too fast. And you got dragged in too. I hope you didn’t get any flack.” The last was a question.

Candide shook her head and flipped the page of her magazine. “He was quite surprised to find me asleep in the middle of the day, but then he didn’t even mention it again.”

She put the Better Gnomes and Gardens Winterfull Wonderland issue down and said, “Where’s your guard?”

Harry’s eyes moved around the room. “I don’t seem to have one now.” The prospect of losing his guard relieved him greatly until he considered that lately he had been maneuvering to get his guard shifted to Candide, whom he believed should have one.

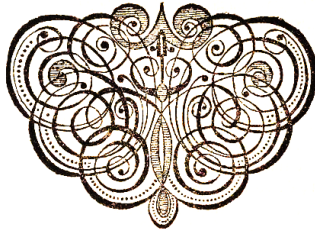
Candide said, “Is Aaron going to be all right? You didn’t leave him alone, did you?”

“There were people there when I left. Our trainer and Ginny. I’ll check on him in the morning.” Harry nibbled another sandwich. “I don’t know how he’s going to do. He seems... fragile. I don’t know what to do about that.”

“You can’t give someone else strength, Harry.”

“Well, Severus knew how to brow beat him out of feeling sorry for himself. Not something I would have tried. We’ll have to do whatever works, though.”

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“He probably shouldn’t be left alone,” Rodgers said after Aaron’s back had disappeared into his bedroom.

Ginny swayed on her feet, certain that she would collapse any second. “I can sleep out here on the couch. Tell my dad that I’m here, okay?”

“Keep your wand close at hand,” Rodgers stated in a voice of serious instruction.

Ginny’s wobbly brain could not decide if he were teasing, or not, or implying something, or what. She chose to treat it seriously. “I always do,” she returned as though to suggest otherwise was ridiculous.

Rodgers had turned to go but he stopped. “You’re hitting the books, right?”

Her mouth worked before she replied. “Trying to.”

“Good.”

The Auror Apprentice trainer was gone, then, with a pop! and a flash of gathered cloak. Ginny had somehow forgotten who he was while he was here. Her insides warmed at the thought that he wanted her to get into the program. “That’s a treat,” she muttered happily to herself.

She decided to check on Aaron and maybe try to get him to eat something more. He had twice turned away his soup after just a few bites. Now she worried he may be ill and in need of a Healer.

Aaron lay on his front, bare-backed, clutching his substantial pillow around his head. The room smelled of wood finishing oil and something floral like a laundry scent from the bedding. Ginny doubted he was asleep already. She said, “Do you want something else to eat?”

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Aaron rolled over and scratching his new ear. The covers made a crinkling sound as he shifted his legs. “Mmm, no.”

“You must be hungry.”

Aaron propped his head up with an arm behind his head and glowered into the dimness of the room.

Ginny asked, “Why don’t you want to eat?”

Aaron gave a huff while exhaling through his nose. “You wouldn’t believe the stuff they tried to get me to do for food.”

Ginny pushed aside the overflowing duvet and sat on the edge of the bed. “Yeah, but you aren’t with them any longer.”

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to be a prisoner like that, at the whim of some mad wizard or another?”

“Yes.”

Aaron’s breathing fell quiet. Ginny went on with some reluctance at dredging up old memories. To her own ears she sounded remarkably detached. “I was Voldemort’s prisoner... inside my head.”

He stared at her, mouth twitching side to side like a rabbit. “That’s right. We all blamed Harry for that.” He laughed lightly.

Ginny felt a smile twitch at her own lips; Harry may have deserved that, she thought now with dark humor, but the scent of Aaron from the bath pulled her back to the here and now when he shifted his knees and neatly folded the edge of the duvet at his waist. Training had put muscle on Harry, but Aaron’s chest and arms looked merely wiry from what must be comparable routine. He was lean enough that his ribs stood out the way he laid.

“Let me make you something. I noticed the panini press in the kitchen. I can probably work out how to use it, even though it’s electric.”

“You don’t have to make me anything. I ate enough; I can wait for breakfast.”

“Change your mind, let me know. I’ll be on the couch.”

Aaron snaked his loose hand around her wrist. “Why?”

Ginny could not straighten out her lips; they might as well have been hexed into a silly grin. “Aren’t you tired?”

His hand slid up to her shoulder. He closed his eyes and said, “I can’t imagine sleeping. My mind is stuck in a loop.” When she did not move, he added, “Bed’s big. Come on.”

“I will admit... I have not seen larger.”

“Well,” he huffed, feigning affront, and holding the covers tight up to his chest. “I did not expect you to be so forward.”

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“What!?” she balked, but her complaint was muffled by his pulling her down for a kiss.

His spasming hands fell limp within moments and Ginny lay resting across his chest, which rose and fell without rhythm. Voice distant, one finger trailing through red strands, Aaron said, “I didn’t think I merited you before, but... it’d be nice if you stayed... here, close.”

“Merited?” she echoed, lifting her head. “Was that why you leapt away last time?” When he shrugged faintly and looked away, she added, “That’s silly.”

“I was too silly,” he stated grimly, shifting his shoulders jerkily. “Too shallow to be someone’s first time.”

She climbed up to better meet him eye to eye with him averting his gaze. “I like that you don’t take things seriously. My whole life has been nothing but fear and responsibility and since I’ve met you, I’ve been trying to enjoy things more. Things are much nicer that way.” Boldly, she ran a finger over his prominent collarbone. “I like you the way you were.” She put her head back down on his chest, flooding her nose with intriguing layers of scent.

“You are much too serious,” he said sternly.

“Well,” she said with a sigh, “I’m trying.”

He said factually, “You’d be much less serious with those clothes off.”



The front door chime woke Aaron and Ginny from deep within dreamless sleep. Ginny raised her blurry eyes and looked around in confusion.

“It’s Harry,” a voice said, echoing clearly over the top of the partition wall of the bedroom. Daylight from the windows poured into the white-walled sleeping area even with the door closed.

“Eep,” Ginny squeaked and leapt up, but then had to grab the covers.

Aaron stretched an arm and rolled over, bare to the raw air. “Ah, yes, Harry won’t get nearly as much entertainment out of seeing me in the buff as you...”

Ginny, with some fumbling, found Aaron’s dressing gown from the night before and had just wrapped herself in it when Harry knocked on the bedroom door and immediately opened it.

“It’s late, so I... uh,” Harry stopped, fingers still clasping the door handle. He took in the scene of Aaron stretched out under the skewed duvet, of Ginny fast reddening, holding an oversized dressing gown around herself.

Ginny straightened her shoulders and it became Harry’s turn to blush nearly as fierce a red. “Sorry, I didn’t think...” No one spoke. Ginny’s brows had risen up

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under her hair; Harry held the door handle for balance; Aaron looked to be falling back to sleep but with a sloppy grin. Harry pointed behind him, over his shoulder. "I'll be out here. I'll make some coffee."

The door closed. Aaron sat up in bed and ruffled his hair so that it stuck up equally in all directions.

"Oh Merlin," Ginny whispered.

Snapping from curled grin to overly concerned, Aaron asked, "What's the matter?"

"Uh, nothing, I suppose." Gathering the crumpled gown closer, she said, "I'll just go shower and dress." In a more reassuring tone, she added quickly, "Nothing's the matter, Aaron."

Aaron slid onto one of the stools at the counter bordering the kitchen, wearing grey jeans and a shirt which he buttoned as he said, "For someone who's faced Voldemort multitudinous times, you sure stun easily."

Harry stopped what he was doing and turned to meet Aaron's mischievous gaze, relieved to see it, even as short lived as it proved to be. Aaron's brow furrowed and he rubbed his shoulder in a manner that clearly pained him. His next glance at Harry was wry. "Can't kvetch to you, really," Aaron pondered aloud.

"You may if you like." Harry set a small cup beneath the spout on a rather large, boxy, and mysterious coffee maker with just a few buttons marring its smooth brushed-metal face. He had seen Aaron use it before, but his memory of it blurred too much to glean the details of how it worked.

"Need rescue from that?" Aaron asked a minute later when an angry hiss of steam made Harry leap back. Aaron sat with his arms crossed, appearing wearily amused.

"I grew up in a Muggle household," Harry reminded his friend.

"Not the right kind. That cost more than your uncle's last car, I bet."

Harry took the cup away and cradled it in his hand. "Well, I definitely don't want to break it, then."

"Oh, don't worry about that. It's been worth every pound already, watching you."

Harry normally would have glared at this, but he did not think Aaron was quite up to taking it the right way. "Well, as long as you don't want any coffee..."

"Good point." Aaron slid down off the stool and came around the floor-to-ceiling column that anchored the end of the counter.

Seconds later two steaming cups were set on the counter and a third placed beneath the spout. Harry stared at it and then noticed the shower running. He had forgotten about Ginny. "Er, sorry about barging in like that. I didn't think..."

Aaron, in a corrective tone, but with a flash in his eye said, "That much was obvious."

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The coffees went down in silence, with Harry lost in thought over what Durumulna's reaction may be to having been cheated... or cheated as they would see it. Harry's thoughts darkened at the notion of holding someone hostage. No one deserved money for that, only punishment. If he expected and prepared for their retaliation, maybe he would get a good chance to get even.

Ginny was a long time appearing, and when she did, she kept her eyes on her coffee cup more than anything else. Harry too, found the objects on the counter more interesting than before. He touched a letter that had been left off to the side, then realized he should not read it and pushed it away.

Ginny said, "Oh yeah, Aaron, you have to go visit your mum today."

Harry, thinking Aaron did not look ready for stress of any kind, said, "Do you want someone to go along?"

When Aaron hesitated, Ginny added, "Someone who could help distract her?"

Aaron stalled replying. He refilled Harry's cup before setting it down with a waiter's flourish. He said, "I'm not sure the Wimbledon Boys' Choir would be enough to distract her today."

Ginny said, "And how many of your birthday parties did they sing for?"

"Eh, just one."

Ginny shook her head.

Aaron slipped his hand into hers and leaned over to peck her on the cheek. "They ate two pieces of cake each, so mum didn't have them back."

"Big cake," Ginny said while blushing again. "So, who's making breakfast?"

Harry slid around into the cooking area. "I will." As he assembled things, he glanced back at the two of them.

Ginny shifted the topic and asked Aaron, "Are you going into training today?"

Aaron pulled a gold watch from his dressing gown pocket and tilted his head to read it. "Harry must be skiving off this morning."

Harry came over with toast on plates and said, "You should take today off."

"That the official word?" Aaron asked a tad sharply.

Harry, familiar with the rapidly sea sawing emotions that followed bad experiences, said calmly, "Not exactly. Rodgers said to ask what you preferred. You can have all week off if you need it." Harry watched Aaron for any reaction. Aaron stared through the cabinets on the floor behind Harry, still clutching his shoulder. With care, Harry said, "I think it'd be better if you went back tomorrow if you are at all up to it."

"I'm not really in the mood to get knocked around," he stated distantly.

Harry, despite not having been informed of such, said decisively, "You can sit out the defensive drills. You shouldn't sit here alone, even if all you do is work on readings at the Ministry."

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“I’m not alone, I have Ginny.”

Ginny snapped her toast off sharply, setting off an explosion of bread crumbs. Harry gave her a single waggle of his eyebrows when she glanced his way in shy surprise.



Harry had indeed lost his guard, it seemed. No one was assigned to follow him at lunch, so he took himself off to the Minister’s office. Belinda glanced up at him in surprise and dropped her gaze immediately.

Harry had other things on his mind today beyond wondering what her secrets may be. Perhaps when he finished with the Minister. He asked, “Is the Madame Bones in?”

“Her lunch was just sent in.” Belinda waved at the door without looking up. Harry took it as an invitation and slipped over there to knock.

“Harry, I don’t think...” Belinda was saying as Harry opened the door in response to a muted summons from inside.

Bones left her fork standing upright, puncturing layers of salad piled in a plastic box, and wiped her hands. “Mr. Potter, what a pleasure; what can I do for you?”

Harry shut the door behind him. He felt a clarity of purpose today that he could not resist the call of. Surely a band of random ruffians could be brought to heel; how hard could that be? He asked, “Is absolutely everything possible being done to combat Durumulna?”

She took up her fork again. “Ah, a business call.” When she finished that bite, she said, “Yes, Harry, it is.” She waved for a chair to set itself closer and indicated it with a flat palm. “Please.”

Happy to be treated with such automatic consideration by someone so high, up, Harry took up the chair and sat upright with his hands interleaved. Finding the words easily, Harry stated, “It seems insufficient, the Ministry’s actions to date.”

She spoke through her napkin. “If you have any ideas, Harry, please share them and we’ll consider them.”

Her tone came across too pat to believe her. Harry took her in, wondering what the best approach may be. He felt more calculating than usual, and remembered with a jolt sitting in precisely this spot across from her, analyzing her and her office under the influence of Voldemort. Stroking his hair back, Harry composed his thoughts. “You are not making the best use of the public. The average witch and wizard do not wish to cooperate and they should.”

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“Of course they don’t,” she said, setting her lunch away. “The cost is too high. Curse and hex treatments on patients at St. Mungo’s are up forty percent this quarter already and we have another month to go.” She pulled out a file. “Magical Fire Equivalents up thirty-five percent.”

Harry cut her statistics short. “But if you made it clear to them, through some kind of campaign, that they would get protection if they helped us...”

“Trouble is, Harry, people remember the previous leadership all too well. They are hard to convince.”

“But you aren’t even trying,” Harry came back firmly.

This gave her pause. “Your department is part of the outreach, I’m quite certain, Harry. Every wizard shop in Britain is supposed to be contacted personally by someone from Enforcement by the end of the year.”

“Yes, but that’s just as secret as Durumulna. They survive in the shadows, on secrecy, so it plays to their strengths.” Masks, cloaks and whispered threats, Harry thought with a strange thrill of comfortable familiarity. He composed himself again, covering his unease. “We need a public campaign of... shaming or something. Make the public resist them harder. People who hide behind masks, slinking about, lazy and conniving, taking what’s not theirs...” Harry had built to a crescendo and found he did not recognize himself. He backed down. “It just seems... not aggressive enough,” he finished weakly, feeling slightly dizzy.

Bones had stood to pace, which Harry only now noted. She picked up a long white quill and ran her fingers over it. “Are you here at the behest of someone in your department, Harry?”

Harry shook his head, wondering belatedly if he should have come only at such behest, but then putting that concern aside as unimportant; something had to be done. This had gone on long enough; someone had to take charge. Such minor thugs could be brought to order by simple enough application of bait, whispered words and threats of pain and humiliation. He could not understand why that hadn’t happened already. It would be so easy – the cloaks and masks would make it even easier, keeping everything in the shadows.

She said, “Your rescued fellow is faring well enough, I am informed.”

Harry focused on her words. “He’s... not quite himself.”

She smiled sadly. “I expect not, for a while at least.” She sighed. “I’m afraid, Harry, that I have meetings to prepare for this afternoon... and if you are here on your own initiative, then perhaps you should sneak back before you have gone missing.” She gave him a wink.

This understanding shook him from his introspection by cutting through his confused concerns to the clearer core of him. He felt humbled: jarringly the opposite of

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moments before. Why was he thinking this way, he wondered with suddenly clammy hands.

In the outer area of the suite he strode to the door deep in thought. With a half-wave at Belinda he headed for the back stairs at a shuffling, distracted pace. A dark shadow approaches undetected, gathering the slumbering willing in its web, the prophecy came back to him. Minutes ago he was imagining how childishly easy it would be to bring Durumulna to heel. Maybe he should stop imagining that.

As he made his way back to the training room, he considered that Durumulna was not exactly slumbering, but this was little consolation. Harry pulled out his books, wondering if he should go speak with Snape that evening. Something seemed to be waking that chunk of the Dark Lord he still carried or, at least, he expected that was the explanation.

Harry forgot about his half-planned visit to Hogwarts when Ginny and Aaron arrived for dinner that evening, followed closely by Ron, who did not hide well that he was only checking up on his sister.

In the corner of his vision Harry noticed Ginny leaning away from Aaron, and putting her hands in her lap. Ron ambled over and took a seat beside his sister, sitting far forward to half turn toward the two of them. He appeared to want to speak, but could not find words.

Harry filled in the silence with, "How are things at the bank, Ron?"

"Er, less trouble, and a lot fewer customers, with the new security schemes. Quiet."

"Too quiet?" Harry prodded, simply to distract him.

"No. Er... whatcha mean by that?"

Harry was not certain what he meant by that. He looked over his friend, his mussed hair, the spray of freckles across his nose, fading with the onset of winter. He would be an easy pawn, some inner instinct told him.

Harry stood suddenly. "I'm just going to make sure that Winky knows you're staying for dinner."

Ginny laughed. "I'm sure she's already doubled everything she's cooking," she called over her shoulder to Harry.

In the darkened corridor leading to the kitchen, Harry stopped and leaned on the wall. Ahead of him, through a low doorway, he could see the cookfire fluttering hot, casting pots and cauldrons and baskets into gilt-edged silhouettes. What was happening to him? He had not dreamed of Lockhart/Voldemort in a long time. On the other hand, what was wrong with trying to get things moving at the Ministry? The masked figures of Durumulna again passed before his mind's eye. It would be so easy. Each of them would have a weakness or two; something they would do anything

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to get. It started out about money, but it always turned into something else. Harry could taste taking charge of them as an astringent stain on his tongue.

He pushed away from the wall, heart speeding. If this was the prophecy, was he trapped into following this instinct? It couldn't be the prophecy, he assured himself. That was for another place. Or was it?

"You know Ron is here for dinner, right?" Harry asked the house elf.

Winky turned her large, slowly blinking eyes on Harry. "Winky is knowing this, yes."

She looked concerned. Harry managed a small smile and said, "Thanks," before turning away.

At dinner, Harry snuck extra glances at Ginny, unable to shake the implications of the prophecy. She played expertly coy with her brother; even Harry, if he did not have absolute knowledge otherwise, would not have known how close she and Aaron had grown. Aaron for his part would become lost in the conversation for longer and longer periods of time. But every time he bordered on a flippant comment, he fell quiet and rubbed his shoulder or his arm, turned again inside himself.

At the end of the late evening, after Candide had retired, Ron nixed the idea of Ginny taking Aaron home to guard him. Harry intervened before it could grow ugly between the siblings.

"I'll take Aaron home, Ginny, if you stay here as guard."

Ginny looked around, seemingly for the first time. "That's right. Where's your guard?"

"Don't have one. And I'm glad for it enough to not ask about it. But I'd feel better if someone is here with Candide."

Ginny hesitated, lips twitching with the desire to argue more with Ron. "All right," she agreed.

Ron glowered at them in turn, reluctantly mollified.

Harry took Aaron home where he plunked down on the couch with a groan. Harry wanted to allude to his clearly feeling better, but held back, remembering how much he always hated that comment in similar circumstances.

Aaron stretched and with a weak attempt at humor, asked, "So, am I getting a massage from you tonight or are you trading at some point?" He lowered his arms and rubbed one shoulder, face pained, head angled away from Harry.

Harry swallowed. "You seem to be avoiding being funny."

"What good's it do?" Aaron snapped at him, eyes brightening. "Pathetic anyway."

"No, it's not," Harry gently disagreed. "You're always so cheery and lighthearted. People need that."

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Aaron did not reply, and Harry sensed he should wait and push on the issue later. Harry sat back with a sigh of his own. Caring about Aaron's state of mind had freed him from darker instincts, another bad sign. Harry shook his head.

"Wha's that?" Aaron slurringly asked.

Harry decided to be honest with him as he had in the past. "Something's going on with me. Like I'm thinking like Voldemort again... in a minor way. It just started. Maybe I should ask Mr. Weasley to check that nothing is happening with Lockhart in prison."

"Happening like what?"

"I don't know." He looked at his friend, glad he had pulled him out of his funk. It felt good to feel like himself, so when Ginny arrived at one to change places, Harry was a little disappointed, but he left the two of them and went home.

Harry immediately went to Kali's cage and released his sleeping pet. She happily crawled onto his arm and investigated his pocket, finding nothing amiss with him.

Relieved by this, Harry crawled into bed, but found sleep elusive. He kept thinking about the Ginny he knew and the other Plane's Ginny. The prophecy could not be about him, Harry assured himself, but that meant the other Ginny was naively living with dark fate stalking her, failing to prepare properly.

Harry turned himself over and pulled the duvet tighter, forcing his mind to clear so he could rest.



Harry repeatedly told himself that he had far and away enough to worry about in his own world without traipsing off to involve himself in another one, but by mid-week he began to have second thoughts about this. He considered that once Durumulna discovered the ruse about the Galleons, he would have approximately zero chance to get away. He also found it reassuring to worry about his friends, since it kept other less savory notions and instincts at bay.

Wednesday evening, Harry sat across from Candide, who now spent her evenings buried in bawdily-covered romance novels rather than accounting files. The miniature novel she held up to her nose tonight had an animated picture of a hunchbacked and tattered young man stretching up into a prince just in time to catch a swooning woman in a tall white hat and veil.

Harry decided he should do as he was instructed and ask for advice from his guardian. He dearly felt he should warn the other Ginny. Just warn her. After that it would be her responsibility to see to getting prepared. Relieved to take any action,

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even just planning, Harry liberated a clean parchment by tearing a used one in two and penned a couched letter.

Dear Severus,

I believe this is my only chance to take care of something I feel I must complete. I expect you to object, but things will only become more busy soon enough after more is discovered. I feel strongly about this and don't believe it will take long to resolve. What do you think of this?

Harry sent his owl off right away bearing the letter. Later that evening as he straightened his room, he heard Hedwig scratch at the window.

The reply was short and on the back of his own letter.

Do as you will, it read. Harry peered at it, tried a few revealing spells, read through his own message and again pondered the reply. Was he giving in, despite his earlier insistence that he never would? Was he expecting Harry to fail and therefore learn on his own? Whatever Snape was thinking, it surely was making Harry think a lot more.



Hermione brushed her hair from her eyes but it immediately fell back, catching on her eyelashes. She bounced her knuckles on the smoky finish of the Defense Against the Dark Arts office door and entered when a voice sounded from inside.

But what she had heard might not have been a request to enter. Hermione stopped in the doorway while taking in the slightly heated conversation between Professors Lupin and Snape.

Lupin barely glanced up before going on. "Severus, we've been over this before. I don't mind your deciding what is taught as part of OWL preparation, but I'm already in the middle of Wee Nettlesome and Vexing Creatures and I want to finish that before moving onto a new subject." He wound down and turned to Hermione. "Ah, you have a meeting."

At his desk, Snape lifted the dark brown cover of his large desk journal and glanced into it before letting it fall closed.

Lupin turned back to Snape, arms conciliatory. "It's true; I'm here at your convenience, but I put a foot down at changes mid-lesson."

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“As long as it isn’t a paw,” Snape muttered. “Ms. Granger, I believe we have a meeting.”

Lupin, taken aback by the comment, hesitated moving, as did Hermione.

Snape sighed audibly. “Fine, Remus. But I do want to go over the syllabus before we get any closer to the end of the year.”

Lupin gave Hermione a wide-eyed glance of disturbed surprise as he passed her. Hermione, feeling more like a student than she had since becoming a professor, took the visitor’s chair.

Snape, as usual, was right to the point. “And your last week of teaching went how?”

Hermione dove right in, upbeat. “Better. Things are feeling more natural.”

Snape glanced over parchments that she assumed to be notes of their previous sessions. “You aren’t just saying that because you have Sixth and Seventh-Years immediately before this meeting, are you?”

“No, sir,” she said automatically. “They actually aren’t easier. Well, they are easier to teach, but the expectations are much higher, so really, success is just as difficult to achieve. The younger students, well, they can be maddening at times, but one good session can catch them right up.”

Snape tilted his head as though acknowledging this observation and Hermione relaxed marginally. She was trying too much to please, but knowing this did not make it easier to stop doing it. Remembering Snape’s uncalled-for comment to Lupin, she put down her own notes and took a closer look at the man across from her. He seemed hard and withdrawn. Well, he always seemed that way, but it had an edge to it today. It was true that something had gone magically awry in the Slytherin Dungeon two nights before and quite a few students were in detention. Even Hermione had been assigned two young Slytherin girls for the next weeks’ late evenings. They were the most well-behaved students she had ever had in detention, subdued into keeping their noses down in the books she had assigned them, and answering her followup questions about the reading with undo care.

When they finished discussing the best means of occupying the brightest students and Snape was putting away his notes, Hermione asked, “How’s Harry?”

Snape did not exactly glare, but he gave no indication that he may answer. Hermione said, “Yes, I know: Owl him if I want to know.”

“I should think.”

Her papers gathered to her chest, she hesitated beside the desk. “I think you were a little harsh with Remus, Professor.”

With a flickering of his lids, Snape rolled his eyes. “He turns into a werewolf approximately once a month. If he hasn’t accepted that yet, there is nothing for

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it.” He pulled out other papers and files, needing to rearrange his unusually crowded desk to do it. “As his potion brewer, I believe I am at liberty to be snide about his situation if I desire to be.”

“Still,” she said, finding herself on better ground once she had begun to stand upon it.

They stared at each other. “Anything else?” Snape demanded.

He looked busy. “No. Thanks for the review. When’s our next meeting?” she added with less than relish.

Snape opened his desk journal again.



Harry spent much of the rest of the week trying to decide what to do. Aaron had returned to full training, even if he had not returned to his usual joking self. Perhaps as a way of avoiding traveling to that other place until he had thought about it longer, Harry invited all of his fellows over for dinner Friday.

Kerry Ann, Ambroise in tow, arrived early because she would depart early for field work. Ambroise held an armful off flowers and a magnum of wine.

“Those are for us?” Harry asked. “You didn’t need to do that.”

Ambroise bowed with a crinkle of the plastic cradling the flowers and held them out.

“Thanks,” Harry said. Winky arrived then with a vase full of water, and Harry handed them on without hesitation.

“What a lovely elf,” Ambroise said, perhaps regarding the timing, but Winky squeaked in surprise, and flushed purple around the edges of her ears.

Kerry Ann gave Harry a kiss on each cheek and then Ambroise did the same.

“Erm, why don’t we have a seat,” Harry said, hoping he wasn’t blushing too, and gestured at the couches.

Kerry Ann made a circuit of the room while her date stood patiently beside the couch, refusing to sit before she did. Harry found himself observing all of this, wondering if he should be trying to emulate any of it if the occasion called for it. Ambroise’s natural, alien gallantry and style he probably could not copy. His hair looked as wild as Harry’s but it was parted far on one side and cut in a wedge that suited his deferential posture.

Kerry Ann finally sat, with a delicate assisting hand from her beau, asking, “Where’s Candide?”

“Still at work,” Harry replied, thinking that these Frenchmen would spoil the women and good thing there were not more of them about.

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Vineet arrived, also bearing a gift, and the table by the couches began to resemble a birthday. After five minutes of sitting across from the attentive couple, he stood and said, "I'll return shortly. Excuse me."

Candide came home, and Harry tried to get her to join, but she said she needed some quiet time before dinner. Ambroise saw her to the stairs like one guiding an invalid, and released her there with a bow and a quaintly accented, "Madame..."

Candide looked them over Ambroise's shiny haired head and said with certainty, "I'll be back down for dinner."

Aaron and Ginny arrived and again the gift pile swelled. "Let's open this," Ginny said of the magnum. Ambroise stood up to do it, tying Harry, who also got a hand on the bottle. Winky arrived in a sparkle and made a small ehem. They relinquished the bottle to the elf at the same moment, staring at each other, and Harry realized only then that Ambroise was also competing here.

Tridant arrived and Vineet returned, from the Floo in the dining room, tugging Hermione along by the hand.

"Harry, I didn't get an invite," she complained from inside a hug.

"It was last minute. I didn't know you could get away so easily."

Hermione casually transfigured the spare end table into a chair and sat upon it beside him when he offered his spot on the couch. "Minerva insists I work too hard. And in case I end up as Head of House next year I should take advantage now while I can."

Harry introduced Tridant to his friend and Tridant complained about not knowing he could bring a date. Kerry Ann from across the room, over the din of conversation, said loudly, "Oh, yes. By all means. We'd love to meet her."

Tridant looked around the room. "Well, maybe not. We've only been seeing each other a few weeks and she's from out of town and..."

"Not a friend of Aaron's evil date, I hope," Harry said.

Aaron looked over and levered himself off the tightly packed couch, pain back-stopping his gaze. "What's this?" he asked quietly.

"Maybe you should bring your new girl over sometime," Harry said.

Hermione said, "Aaron had his troublesome date over for your Halloween party and no one noticed her."

"Oh, we all noticed her," Ginny chimed in, then wrapped her hands around Aaron's elbow.

"I have to have my dates approved?" Tridant said in annoyance. "I don't have a wealthy family, what would anyone want with me?"

"I don't know..." Kerry Ann said knowingly. "I think you should bring in her vitae for us to check over."

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“You are such a gossip,” Aaron said.

Tridant held up his hands and backed out of the group that had gradually surrounded him. “I can take care of myself, really.” And from someone his size, this sounded reasonable.

Harry plunked down on the couch with, “I’ve said that before.”

Kerry Ann pressed on, leaning closer to Tridant, “You’re the only one dating someone questionable, you know.”

“Yeah, you’re tight with the French-Flaired Foreign Lege-wizard, here.” Tridant stepped up behind Harry and towered his large frame over him. “And Harry’s dating another Auror, which he’s not supposed to be.” He then gestured at Aaron, still with Ginny attached to his arm. “You’re dating the boss’ daughter... are you supposed to be?” he asked in disbelief.

Harry sipped his wine and gave a wink to the two of them, standing there, clinging together like lost puppies. “I don’t think the boss has acknowledged it yet.”

With a swish of her robes, Kerry Ann returned to her seat and proclaimed, “You’re safe for a year, at least. Mr. Weasley is always the last to know anything.”

With that, Winky arrived in a sparkle and announced that dinner was being served.

Harry made the mistake of sitting across from Ginny, who was trading whispers with Aaron in a way that helped to keep the other’s spirits propped up and involved in the party. Harry had no problem with this. He was pleased that someone had taken his fellow’s mental health into attentive care. His difficulty came from the constant reminder of the plight of the other Ginny, a plight that stemmed from an ignorance that would be easy to fixed.

At the end of the night, after his friends had departed, Tonks arrived from her late shift and cuddled up with Harry on the couch where he had been sitting, thinking.

“Kerry Ann does well on field work. She knows just everybody, and people she doesn’t know personally, she still knows something about. Bloody useful.”

“She was giving Tridant the third degree about the strange woman he’s dating.”

Tonks stretched, changed her hair to flat, and found a comfortable spot for her head on Harry’s ribs. “She’s clean. We already checked her out.”

“Already?”

“While Aaron was still missing. We’re not taking any chances.”

Tonks felt pleasantly warm pressed against him in the cooling air of the hall with the scents of the guests fading. Harry said, “I need to take care of something quick in another Plane...” He stopped because Tonks was pounding her head against his chest. “I just need a warm up when I return. Come on, I just have to go talk to someone.”

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She raised her head to look at him, eyes slitted like a cat's, but it faded to normal. "Harry, going to see your parents again is not a good idea."

"I wasn't going to do that," Harry argued. "I have to go talk to that Ginny, to warn her."

"Hm." Tonks put her head back down, wiggling around to find a good spot to rest it.

"Tonks, do you think a prophecy in another place like that could have any bearing in this one?"

She reached up to scratch her head. "I have no idea. What's the prophecy?"

Harry quoted, "A dark shadow approaches undetected, gathering the slumbering willing in its web. It will shatter half a century of peace so that the time before it will seem as if a dream... power indescribably heartless will wreak cold vengeance upon wizardom. All will be touched for the worse. The only magic capable of defeating it is contained within the seventh pureblood son who is not."

"Seventh pureblood son who is not? Oh, that does sound like Ginny. Have you told her?"

"That's what I'm going to go do."

Tonks lifted her head again, "No, I mean, this Ginny."

Harry stared at Tonks, the tips of his fingers going numb. "I didn't think it applied."

"Well, but you know it. You're here now with it. Doesn't that make it apply?"

Harry's unblinking eyes widened more. "Do you think that could be true?" he asked in alarm. "Wait, we haven't had a half century of peace," he argued.

"Oh, true," Tonks said, putting her head back down. A moment later, her voice drifted up, "Well, but the Muggle world has."

Harry held his breath. "It can't count," he insisted after a minute. Tonks shrugged in his arms.

"At least you know it's Ginny. We have to get her into the program," she added with confidence.

"Yeah, I was thinking that. Just in case."

Author's Notes: Yes, very very late. Driving cross-country took out more than the week required, I had to then catch up on work. We are back on schedule though. 26 is more than half done.

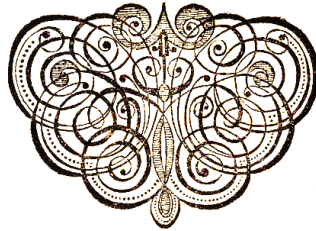
Next 26 Ginny said shakily, "Why don't we both just sit down, hey?"

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Harry did so, dizzy with something, perhaps just lack of control over himself. He rubbed his forehead, found he still held his wand, and set it down. Ginny scooped it up and said, "Professor, may I have yours too?"

After a long pause where he searched her gaze, he relinquished his as well.

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Early the next morning, as if fate had decreed it, Candide gathered up her cloak and bag and announced she was spending the day with her parents.

“Severus isn’t coming home?” Harry asked.

Candide ducked her head to free her hair from the collar of her cloak. “He hasn’t owled saying he will. I’m not going to wait around. I didn’t have time to visit at all before the accounting year closed.”

She wore fuzzy warm robes under her cloak, and tugged on thick woolen mittens, just to travel by Floo.

“Going to be warm enough?” Harry asked of her gear.

She held up one tan and grey mitten, which flopped off the ends of her fingers. “Frankly, I used these to breath through. Floo dust is bad for people who are pregnant.”

Said Harry, “Floo dust is bad for everyone.”

She took up her handbag with a chuckle and said, “Yeah. Funny the things you don’t worry about until you’re pregnant.”

“Are your parents excited?” Harry asked. “I would think they’d be.”

“Eh, what’s one more grandkid? This will make five.”

“Are they all magical?”

Candide rested her handbag on the table, still hooked on her shoulder. “Mostly. There is one still in question, the youngest. We’ll see when he turns eleven at the latest.”

“I can probably tell,” Harry said. Then thinking back to the crowded tent and all

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the guests added, "I don't think I noticed at the wedding."

"We'll have to have them over for dinner, then, so you can." She patted her belly. "I hope this little one is. But it's all right if he's not," she added quickly.

"Course it's all right," Harry said.

She sighed, "Well, if you get an owl from Severus, owl it along to me. Maybe my mentioning wanting to visit my parents is the reason he isn't here."

Harry replied, "I don't think that's it; he knows that he wouldn't let you talk him into going."

She bundled her cloak tighter and stepped into the Floo. Harry thought that if he were going to travel to this other place, he should do so soon too. He went to his room to prepare a warm landing area, just in case he was gone long enough to worry that Tonks may be on duty.

Harry arrived in the other Plane, and discovered a major downside to traveling in the morning: the weak sun did not warm him much. Harry lay on the cold, matted field, barely able to breathe or move except in spasms, fumbling with his wand to warm the ground beside him so he could roll over onto it and remain alive. By the time he was able to stand, his bones ached and his head pounded. He could hear Snape in his snidest voice telling him he had been overconfident.

"Yeah, yeah," Harry replied to the empty air.

Harry applied his disguise and needed no acting to hobble, bent-backed, up to the hedge surrounding the confectionary architecture of the Burrow. The Weather Vain on the peak of the roof must not be operating today since it was bone cold and damp like only December could be. Harry did not particularly desire to rouse the whole household.

Stretching his stiff shoulders back, Harry transformed into his Animagus form and took wing for the roof just above where Ginny's room should be. He may be guessing wrong, but with his keen sense of animal smell he expected he could tell just by getting close.

Three long flaps brought Harry to a delicate landing on his knuckles because he feared knocking shingles loose with his claws. The roof beams creaked with his weight but not loudly. Harry unfurled each foot in turn and placed them carefully where he could lean over the peak and look down into the window. It smelled of Ginny, and many other things, like mice and bats and faintly of illicit potion ingredients, which must be something of the twins'.

Harry scratched on the window frame, then scratched again. The second time, the bedspread used as a curtain jerked aside. Not wanting to scare Ginny, Harry took flight and landed just on the far side of the hedge where he could quickly check his disguise and step out.

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Mouth agape, Ginny leaned far out of her open window, the makeshift curtains draping out beside her hands. Harry waved. Her head popped inside and a minute later, she emerged on broomstick and swooped down beside him.

“Hi!” she greeted him warmly, adjusting her hastily thrown on cloak. “You’re an early riser.”

“It’s around nine, I believe,” Harry said in his older, plodding voice.

“That’s early for Saturday. We always sleep in.”

“You have it very easy here,” Harry commented. When Ginny shrugged, Harry said, “I need to speak with you. If you would accompany me on a short walk?” He held out a hand to invite her to lead the way.

She flipped her broomstick over to use it as a walking stick and stepped through the hedgerow. Harry followed along beside, remaining quiet until they found a trail bordering the orchard and followed it.

“Has anyone spoken to you?” Harry asked.

She seemed younger than the Ginny he knew. Her hair trailed a strawberry-scented haze and she walked with an unnecessary bounce to her step. “Lots of people talk to me. Like who?”

“Minerva McGonagall or someone else from the Wizengamot?”

She choked a laugh. “Are you joking? No, no one like that has talked to me. I’m not sure they know I exist.”

Harry stopped and she turned her freshly curious gaze on him. He stroked his beard, mostly to keep it from blowing around in the wind so much. “Then they haven’t realized the truth then,” Harry thought aloud, setting Ginny back on her heels with a quizzical expression.

Harry said, “There’s been a prophecy about the good times ending here. That a dark wizard... or witch is going to start making trouble and lots of people are going to get hurt.”

“A prophecy?” The wind had a hold of her thick hair, tossing it back and forth behind her.

Patently, he said, “Yes, like with Harry Potter and Voldemort you know.”

“Huh,” she muttered. “And why are you telling me this?”

Harry recited the prophecy to her and gave it time to sink in. He closed his eyes and felt for the shadows. There was no Voldemort, but his followers certainly were all there, scattered like dark stars around Britain. “See, I think the seventh pure-blood son who is not, is you.” And I think the slumbering followers are Voldemort’s old Death Eaters, long since forgotten.

Her face twisted into a humorous expression that Harry had no desire to laugh at. She giggled uncomfortably. “What is this magic I am supposed to have?”

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“I don’t know. No one knows. It’s likely not something obvious or expected.” He took her shoulders. “But you must prepare for this, or you may not survive to fulfill the prophecy.”

Harry miscalculated badly with this. Ginny stepped back with a jerk, out of reach. With a hint of distaste, she said, “I think Harry might be right, that you’re a doddering old showoff.”

Harry drooped slightly, chastising himself. He had rushed things and now faced a poorer prospect for convincing her of what he believed should be done. With more emotion, he said, “Ginny, look...”

But this made her back up another step. He could see in her eyes she was recalculating being there at all with him, alone, could see her memory of the duel with his counterpart, flashing before her mind’s-eye. Her wariness ratcheted up and she was preparing to Apparate away.

Harry stepped back, hands out in plain view. “I don’t mean to alarm you,” he said in his humblest tones. She gradually relaxed as he held that pose, head slightly bent. Harry was considering that it was no wonder that Dumbledore had left him to his own devices for so long without telling him the truth.

“Ginny, I cannot stay long. I should not be here at all. You must ask Minerva McGonagall for advice. Tell her I believe you are the one in the prophecy. Will you promise me that you will do this?”

Ginny’s flexible face twisted into series of unlikely shapes that did not promise much.

“Please, Ginny,” Harry said, pinning his beard down with one hand on his chest in entreaty.

“Why are you doing this? Saying these things?” she demanded, recovering some spunk.

Gently, knowing with ironic pain that he sounded like his old mentor, Harry said, “I’m not doing anything. I’m trying to help you.” He needed a new tactic, as her eyes indicated imminent departure again. “You enjoyed my lessons in Defensive magic, right?” he asked, as though of someone much younger. How was she ever going to survive without growing up?

“Of course. They never taught us any of that and it’s fun to learn stuff the teachers don’t think we should know.”

Harry’s mind worked fast. “All right then. What if, just in case, you were to find an instructor in Defensive magic.” He laid the endearing salesman mode on as heavily as he dared. “Someone who could teach you all kinds of things that are not generally known and in some cases are forbidden?”

He had her attention, so he went on. “You could learn all kinds of spells brothers

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have never seen. You don't have to believe in the prophecy to find that appealing, I'm sure."

She crossed her arms and considered that. "But why can't you teach me, then, if this is so important?"

"I cannot remain here. For reasons that I cannot tell you, but believe me they are real and dire."

She frowned, but appeared to yield. "So where do I find this great teacher?"

"You know him already. The person I have in mind is Severus Snape."

She physically stumbled backward upon hearing this. She righted herself slowly as though expecting attack and laughed in a nervous burst. "That's nuts. I'm not going anywhere near that slimy dungeon bat, not for all the Galleons in Gringott's." She took a few steps away, back down the trail. "Take your crazy ideas somewhere else. What an awful thought."

Harry called lightly, "Ginny, this isn't about gold, this is about surviving. It's about making sure everyone you know and love survives."

She stopped, shoulders bent. "What if I don't believe any of this?"

Harry resumed his earlier placating pose. "You may simply ask Minerva and she will confirm it."

Pained, she stared down at the ground. Harry tried to decide if he had accomplished enough here. It did not feel very settled, and he did not want to return again. He needed to be done with this for good.

"I'm not going anywhere near that greaseball of a Potions teacher," she stated firmly. "The best thing about finishing at Hogwarts was never seeing him again." She shuddered for effect. "He hates me. He hates everyone, really." She laughed.

Harry's mind ruffled through his options. He wanted to personally put Ginny in Snape's hands. If he did that, then he could leave in good conscience. "I wonder if Professor Snape is at Hogwarts," Harry said.

With clear disdain, she said, "I have no idea. It's not something I regularly contemplate. Quite the opposite." Relenting slightly, she said, "Many of the teachers go home on the weekends."

"They do?" Harry couldn't imagine it.

"So do loads of the students. If they want."

Harry stared at her. "What an odd thought."

She did not understand his confusion and sounded corrective as she said, "Why not? It only requires a few minutes to get home by Floo. And wouldn't you rather be home with your parents than stuck at school?"

Harry rubbed a hand through his beard and took her in. Growing strategic, he said, "You know, Harry rather hates Professor Snape. If you got lessons from him,

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you could face Harry down in any duel and imagine his annoyance when you beat him. Every time.”

Ginny wavered and bit her lip. Unrequited, adoring love, grown poisoned by time showed from her eyes. She appeared strategic too. “He won’t take me as a student, you know.” Her lip curled unattractively as she spoke. “Not that I could stand to be within ten miles of the overgrown Slytherin bat.”

Airily, Harry said, “I’d recommend finding a better title for him. At least until you learn to counter more curses.” She expressed mocking amusement at this, but then seemed to find it genuinely funny. Seeing the best opening he was going to get, Harry said, “Wait here, all right? I’ll be back in five minutes.”

“You’re not bringing the Dungeon Dungbomb back with you, are you?”

That one Harry almost could not let slide. Stiffly and with his annoyance clear, he said, “No. I’m just going to check where he is.”

Harry, wanting to impress her, slipped silently away and arrived moments later in the Hogwart’s Dungeon, inside the Potions office. The room sat in stillness, hearths and candles cold. Harry walked around to check the classroom. Two students were brewing something on the floor, whispering. They panicked when Harry approached, tripping on robes and nearly upsetting the cauldron.

“Just looking for the Professor,” Harry said kindly to the Ravenclaws.

The boy’s Adam’s apple bobbed rapidly as he swallowed between words. “He’s... he’s supposed to be home.” Both his and his friend’s eyes glared out as big as saucers. The potion smelled like Memory Magic.

Harry gently said, “I’m assuming you’re selling that since, given your house colors, you certainly shouldn’t need it yourselves. And it’s frothing over, so you should get back to it.”

They dropped back to a crouch and returned to brewing. Chuckling lightly, Harry stepped out and slipped away to Shrewsthorpe, wondering if in this perfect place Snape did not live somewhere nicer. Unwilling to invade the privacy of the place by slipping inside, Harry arrived beside a hedge across the street. While he waited for the cars to clear, a woman came by, walking a pug. Harry asked her if she knew who lived in the house across the way, and she replied, “The Snapes: Professor and the missus.”

The Snapes, Harry thought with a small grin as the dog’s claws clicked in retreat. He returned to Ginny, who abruptly said, “How do you do that? Not make a sound?”

Harry gave her a finger to the lips and wink. “It took me such trouble to learn that. But let me take you for a visit and make a proposal. I think with a little illumination of the situation, the good professor will see things my way.”

He took her elbow, but she raised it. “Where are we going?”

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“Professor Snape’s house.”

“He has a house? He doesn’t just live in a hole somewhere?”

Harry corked his anger, but each time it grew harder to bottle up. “Let me give you a little advice, for your own good. That mouth is going to get you taken down to about an inch high if you use it that way in front of Professor Snape.”

“Good reason not to go,” she commented, but lowered her arm into his hand and slouched. “This is all on your head, you know,” sounding honestly blameful and a tad spoiled.

They arrived at the garden gate. “I know that, my dear,” Harry said, returning to his more raspy voice, which he had let slip while arguing with her.

A knock on the door made it open almost instantly by Tidgy’s hand. Harry gave the elf a small bow and asked, “Is your master at home?”

Tidgy did not have a chance to reply before a familiar voice brought an instant smile to Harry’s lips.

“Who is it, Tidgy?” Candide came into view, mauve robes filling the corridor as she approached, moving like one not in the least pregnant.

Harry gestured for Ginny to answer. “Uh, I’m a student of Professor Snape’s, er, I was, I’m, er, wondering if he’s here?” She sounded as displeased at the prospect of a yes as she possibly could.

Candide smiled wryly. “Why don’t you come in for tea, and we’ll see if we can rouse him from his books.”

Ginny strode in behind Candide with a pose of defeat and wary hostility. The main hall was brighter and cheerier than Harry was accustomed to. The wood had been stripped and re-varnished in a lighter shade and woven hangings adorned the outside walls. While Harry admired this, Ginny sharply whispered through clenched teeth, “I don’t know how I let you talk me into-”

“What is this?” Snape hissed from beside the doorway to the drawing room. He hadn’t made a sound coming into the hall.

Pleasantly, as if this were a game, Candide replied, “Your former student and... I didn’t get your name?”

“Aaron Totten, Madame,” Harry said with a bow that he tried to make look creaky and painful given the eyes upon him.

“...and Mr. Totten are here for tea.” She turned to the elf. “Tidgy prepare some tea in the dining room.”

Snape eyed Ginny suspiciously after a sharp glance at Harry, who had his mind Occluded. Harry, wanting to explain things himself, turned Ginny’s eyes away by taking her arm to lead her in the direction indicated by their hostess.

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As they settled at the table, Snape stood in the doorway and said to the elf, “Tidgy, the smallest teacups, mind you.”

Harry, in his best Dumbledore impression, said, “Ah, that will make the pot require even longer to consume. Such gracious hosts.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed, and Harry had to swallow a laugh by biting into a biscuit.

“Severus,” Candide said in a long suffering but superficially annoyed tone. “I don’t mind at all if we on rare occasion have someone over for tea. Frequently would be even better.” She sat down across from Ginny and clasped her hands nicely. “So, you must be a Weasley.”

“Yes,” Snape answered from his cross-armed position by the mantel as Ginny opened her mouth. “One of far too many of them.”

Candide asked, “Severus, are you going to sit down, or are you just going to loom?”

“He prefers to loom,” Ginny said at exactly the same time as Snape said, “I always prefer to loom.”

Harry bit hard into his treat and had to scrunch his eyes against a laugh. But he quickly fell more serious when he considered what he had to accomplish.

Snape tugged out a chair and sat on it, arms crossed. “To what do we owe the displeasure of this visit?” he asked in a falsely genteel manner.

Harry glanced at Candide. “We have something we need to discuss.” He considered that the Candide he knew was the model of discretion, partly because of the habits of her job. Lips cocked, he said to her, “My dear lady, you must be an accountant, am I right?”

This drew newly vigilant, narrowed eyes from Snape. Harry went on, “I only suggest it from the ink stains on your hand and a bit on your sleeve, almost removed by your elf, but not quite, and the strength of your hands, presumably from moving the rolls and files around the office.”

Unlike Snape, she found his guess less than surprising. “Yes, I am.”

“Well, then,” Harry said, sipping his tea. “I think I can speak before you.” He turned to Snape, who was analyzing him more closely than the disguise would probably withstand if not for the backlighting Harry had intentionally chosen when he picked this seat. “Professor Snape, I wonder if you are aware that Professor Trelawney has prophesized again.”

Snape’s attention fell into a strange stillness. His head tilted to the right and held that way, like a giant parrot.

“I was not certain if you would have been told.” Harry slowly recited the prophecy and, as he finished, Snape reached out two long fingers, which he placed on Candide’s shoulder.

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“This is to not leave this room,” he said to his wife.

Vaguely stunned, but more curious, she replied, “I understand.”

Snape sat back, clutched his hands together and touched the steeped index fingers to his nose as he sank into musing. His eyes drifted over to Ginny. “I see where your thoughts are leading,” he said with little enthusiasm.

Harry nibbled his fifth biscuit, not because they were particularly good, but because they rekindled memories of when Tidgy was still alive. “I am here with the suggestion that you train this young lady in Defense.”

Snape turned a baleful eye on Ginny. “Oh, are you now?”

Harry had thought this would be easy. He expected Snape to see the wisdom of the idea and agree without argument. Snape was not giving any indication of that, quite the opposite.

Snape said, “You think I have time for such things?”

Candide said, “You don’t think it is a good idea, Severus? The prophecy does pertain to Ginny, does it not?”

“Who knows?” Snape muttered coarsely. “And in any event, she was one of the most horrid students I have ever faced. I certainly do not want her back again.”

Ginny tossed her hair and crossed her arms to match his. “For the record, I don’t very much want to either.”

Snape turned to Harry, “And what is your interested in this?” he asked with suspicion. “I have never heard of you, yet you come in here setting things up like you expect to be next in line for Minister.”

“I’m an old friend of Albus’. I’ve been out of the country for rather a long while.” They stared at each other, Harry certain his disguise was not going to cut it if Snape’s suspicions were roused for long. “Are you refusing to do this thing?”

“Yes. Are you as doddered as you appear?” Snape returned.

Candide rolled her eyes and sighed. Ginny pushed her heavy chair back with a noisy rumble and stood. “Well, I guess that’s that,” she said happily.

“Sit down,” Harry commanded.

“Why should I?” she retorted, her voice pitching higher. “I hate this creep to the bottoms of my feet. I always have. He did nothing but mock and secretly ruin the assignments of anyone who wasn’t Slytherin.”

Harry, wanting to regain her attention in one go said, “Dark wizards do not play nice, so you might as well have got used to it. If you don’t sit down, you are going to wind up dead.”

This bluntness shocked everyone. Chastened for the moment, Ginny sat, but she pinned her eyes on the wall beside her.

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Harry huffed in frustration, sounding old to his own ears. He did not feel like playing nice anymore, himself. "Professor... like I said, I am an old friend of Albus'..." Harry glanced at Candide. "Perhaps your lovely wife has errands or something she needs to take care of. There are few things I want to say and they should perhaps not be said... in the presence of a lady." It was the best excuse Harry could come up with; he was tiring of this role.

While Candide glanced to Snape for advice, Ginny said, "What about me?"

Harry turned to her. "You've proven you're not a lady with that mouth of yours."

When Snape gave no signal to Candide, Harry said, "Professor, I think this conversation should be between you and me. She's heard a lot already. Prophecies being what they are..." he trailed off and sent Snape the most meaningful look he could. And the first crack in the man's stalwart attitude appeared, for just a flicker.

"You said you needed to run to Diagon, did you not?" Snape asked Candide in a far less cocky voice.

Harry helped her along, "He can fill you in later, if he wishes. You can make an old man's visit easier... my brains don't always plan ahead as well as they used to."

With a grumble, she gathered up her cloak and baskets with a wave of her wand, and moments later disappeared in the Floo after terse good byes.

Snape's fingers traced a whorl in the tabletop. "You were saying?" he prompted with zero warmth.

Beside Harry, Ginny shrunk down in her chair to make herself smaller. Harry said, "I thought I could convince you amicably, Severus, but was mistaken."

"Dumbledore was often mistaken as well," Snape stated.

Harry suspected the comment was a test. "Yes, he was. You think I'd argue with that?"

Snape tossed his tea back and poured out more for himself. "Well?"

Harry struggled to find the best tactic. "You of all people should understand the position wizardom is in right now given the prophecy."

Sneer in place, Snape stated succinctly, "I didn't even know there was one."

"This time," Harry returned with ease.

Snape's fingers began to vibrate as they stroked the lip of his teacup. This was a deep secret Harry was hinting at. There was not time to work at this slowly. Moments past. Snape said, "So, this is blackmail?"

Ginny's head snapped to Harry, drawing Snape's unnerved glance.

"That's such a dirty word," Harry said.

Snape spoke in rapid fire. "I do not wish to do this. Why me? If you know so much about me..."

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“That is precisely why you,” Harry countered. “And I do know rather a great deal about you. For example, you look in need of a drink and I believe that silvered bottle up there has sherry in it, does it not?”

Snape froze. Of all the personal things to have revealed, that one caught him utterly by surprise. When he held still longer, Ginny asked, “Does it have Sherry in it?”

Sounding drunken already, Snape asked, “Yes. Would you like some?”

“Course,” she replied bluntly.

Snape slid out of his chair, which was easy to do since he had not pulled it to the table fully. “Why don’t we have a round, then?”

Harry felt a bit bad for Snape; he sounded rattled and like everyone else here, he had grown soft, even if he kept up a convincing front otherwise. Harry talked as Snape polished small crystal glasses and poured dark red liquid into them. “You’re the perfect choice, Professor, because I believe the slumbering followers to be Voldemort’s former associates.”

The decanter hit the table hard. “Do not speak that name in my presence,” he hissed through his teeth with a threat that Harry did not doubt.

Harry sighed. “His name is meaningless. But if you insist. Fine. Dark Lord would be your preferred term, then?” Harry tossed out, knowing it was the preferred term for a Death Eater to use.

A ripple ran along Snape’s jaw. He sat down and downed his sherry in one shot.

“Maybe this isn’t such a good idea,” Ginny said, while tugging on Harry’s sleeve.

It seemed very right to Harry; things were so unfinished. “Fate has not unwound here so I think there is no choice but to at least try this. Professor Snape is unequalled at Defense and other things you will need to know, like Occlusion.”

Sounding unconvinced and wanting to talk out of nerves, she asked, “What’s that?”

“The skill at hiding your thoughts from others who might see fit to penetrate them face to face or even in your dreams.”

“Who can do that?” she blurted rhetorically.

“Professor Snape can.”

Ginny turned an alarmed gaze Snape’s way. Snape raised his head and snarled faintly, “That’s why I know exactly what you miserable Gryffindors think of me. You get exactly what you deserve in my class.”

Ginny’s shoulders were pulled back in surprise. Harry said, “Now, now, we’ll have to have less of that if this to work out.”

“This is not going to work out,” Snape growled at Harry, and pounded his empty glass once sharply on the table.

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Harry ignored him, as Dumbledore had often done when he stubbornly stuck to his own track. Harry asked the ceiling, "So, I'm curious, how many Death Eaters are roaming free, outside Azkaban?"

"I don't know," Ginny answered.

"I wasn't asking you." Harry lowered his eyes. "I was asking someone who would know."

Snape did not stun this time, nor did he grow warier, he just stared through Harry, thinking.

"Why would Professor Snape know?" Ginny asked.

When Snape still resisted, Harry saw a way to set this up better. "Professor Snape knows too well, in fact. That makes him invaluable, as I suspect there are Death Eaters in all kinds of bad positions, even in the Ministry. At Hogwarts even."

Ginny blinked a few times and shot Harry a questioning look. "Uh, you sound like you're saying..."

"Shut up," Snape said.

"That's pretty plain vanilla from you," Harry said, concerned by Snape's lapse into the mundane. "Usually you go for something subtle and twisted."

Snape rose partly out of his chair. "How do you know what I would usually go for? We have never met."

"Oh yeah, true," Harry said, going for old and fickle again to cover.

Ginny was tugging on Harry's robes again. "You aren't saying..." she whispered.

Harry addressed his comments to Snape. "People forget, don't they? Especially things they don't want to think about."

"I definitely don't want to think about this, or do this," Ginny said. "I'm backing out." Unconvincingly, she added, "I think I hear my mum calling me." She scooted her chair out farther.

Snape's fingers were tracing the grain of the wood again. "Severus?" Harry prompted.

Snape regained himself and said, "I will do it on two conditions. Sit down, Weasley, or the next time your dear mummy is calling you it may be from beyond the veil, and you will hear her everywhere."

Ginny did not sit, but she did not move either, even to breathe. Harry said to her, "Ginny, things are going to get very bad before they get better. Death and violence are new to you, I realized, but you are going to have to get inured to them to survive this. Sit down, please."

Ginny sat, appearing very sad and alarmed, hands locked under her arms, shoulders nearly touching the table edge she slouched so.

"What magic could she possibly have?" Snape pleaded with Harry.

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“It could be anything,” Harry said, “Loyalty to her family perhaps, or simply a resistance to evil’s pull. I would tell you if I knew, but I don’t.” Not wanting to dwell there, Harry asked, “What were your conditions?”

Growing vaguely angry, Snape said, “First, I expect full cooperation. When I assign reading and practice, I expect it to be done, memorized from start to finish, and impeccably fine-tuned if it is a spell practice assignment. None of this half-effort nightmare of your schooldays.” The first he addressed, to Harry, but he turned to Ginny as he went on, a good sign.

His voice softened as he added to Harry, “And the second thing is, I want to know who you are. You have on an expert, but hastily applied disguise, and you look vaguely familiar as well as act familiar.” He sat back like a man who finally won a round and said, “Those are my conditions.”

It was Harry’s turn to freeze and try to quell his panicked thoughts. Swallowing, Harry said, “I can’t do that.”

Snapping quickly into heated anger, Snape said, “Than I cannot either. Take it or decline it. I do not honestly care which.”

Harry bit his lip. “Ginny should go,” he said, thinking that was the very least.

“I do not think so,” Snape said with a note of triumph at gaining the upper hand. “You have been acting as manipulative of her as my old mentor at his worst. I think she deserves to see who you really are.”

Harry schemed quickly, wondering if he could layer on a different disguise as he removed the first.

“Come, come, it cannot possibly be that difficult a decision. Have another drink.”

“Thanks I’ve had enough,” Harry said, thinking that he had not seen anything get slipped into it, but he would not put it past Snape to do so.

Harry had trapped himself, he saw now. And he could not see a way out of it. Ginny had recovered slightly and peered at him worriedly. He gave in, thinking he would just have to explain. He had explained once before and nothing bad had come of it; he could just do so again. He stood and said, “All right then. We have a deal. You will train her and help her along.”

Ginny sat up and grabbed at Harry yet again. “But, I don’t want training from a... didn’t you say he was a... a Death Eater?”

Harry calmly took her hand from his robes and held it loosely. “Yes. You have a better suggestion for who can help?”

“Wha... well... uh...” She choked a bit more, then shut her mouth.

“He’s the best for now, and when he ceases to be, should you have the luxury of doing so, he should find you others to help as well.” He glared at Snape. “Right?”

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Snape nodded crookedly, once, and waved down a different smokey bottle to top up his drink. "I am still waiting for your half of the bargain."

Harry stepped back and ducked to apply some quick wand taps. When he straightened back up as himself, Snape leapt up as well, and faster than Harry could have ever imagined, had the hover spell canceled and his wand re-aimed. The abandoned bottle shattered wetly on the floor. The hand aiming at Harry shook with rage.

"Potter!"

"Harry?" Ginny blurted in utter confusion.

"What the devil are you doing?" Harry spouted at Snape, alarmed at his attacking him. "You're going to what, curse me? I'm not who you think I am."

"I know exactly who you are you conniving little bastard." Snape sent a curse his way.

Harry had not reached for his wand, too surprised to be faced with this man threatening him. Harry didn't managed to scrunch down the whole Leather Slap Curse, but he cut it short, enough that he held his feet. Snape's wand struck the ceiling then clattered to the floor. Snape clutched his hand and stared at Harry.

"Why did you do that?" Harry yelled, rubbing his face and feeling something rising in him, responding to the man before him. Voice low, Harry demanded, "What makes you think you could get away with that?" Stung by a vision that generated such strong feelings, Harry couldn't contain his wounded anger, not with this thing inside him reaching for it, stoking its energy. The light in the room dimmed slightly. Snape retrieved his wand and Harry had his out in the next second. Ginny dove under the table and crawled to the other end of the room under its protection.

Snape and Harry exchanged spells, nasty ones that sizzled along the furniture before dissipating. "You always were bright only when it involved being a obnoxious brat," Snape accused. "If you had applied that a little better, you could have made something out of your pathetic fame."

The light dimmed more, Harry felt something sucking away at his core. He felt dizzy. The next curse he Squelched again, wand lowered. Snape held onto the wand exploding with magic in his hand, but he doubled over, clutching his middle.

Angry beyond what was safe, Harry hoarsely said, "You don't know who I am. Or what I can do." It was half a plea for the other to stop and half a threat should he not obey. Snape had not recovered enough to aim his wand. Harry readied something to take him down, but hesitated using it on a defenseless Snape.

"I don't know how you are doing that... but..." Snape finally straightened and held his wand out, uncertainty clear in his pose, head tilted with suspicion and hate. Harry shouted, "Stop it! You don't understand anything."

The light dimmed even more and the others noticed it, noticed that the corners of

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the room were in total darkness, that the sunlight filtered in the window as yellow-grey beams. Ginny glanced this way and that, trying to find the source of the problem. Harry willed it to stop, but could not find the shutoff in his mind. Snape lowered his wand, glancing around with his eyes, head fixed.

Harry leaned on the table. "I'm not who you think I am," he said, grappling with what had risen within him – this need to control others, especially one of his Death Eaters, by force if necessary, by manipulation, preferably. He shook his head broadly between his propping arms. They weren't his Death Eaters. Trouble was he could feel something within Snape calling to something deep inside Harry and his part knew it dominated, or should.

Snape glanced at Harry's wand, then at his own.

Ginny said shakily, "Why don't we both just sit down, hey?"

Harry did so, woozy from something, perhaps just lack of control over himself. He rubbed his forehead, found he still held his wand, and set it down. Ginny scooped it up and asked with shaky politeness, "Professor, may I have yours too?"

After a long pause where he searched her gaze, he relinquished his as well. Harry said, "He'll have another."

With one brow cocked, Snape pulled a wand out of his sock and gave that to Ginny, who dangled it out like it were a drowned rat until a sharp look made her bundle the three together and take a seat too, wands clasped in her lap.

Snape spoke first, to Harry. "You are correct. You are not who I think you are. The Potter I know doesn't have a tenth of your magic. Perhaps less."

Ginny said, "Yeah, and at the picnic you dueled Harry, yourself, um, you dueled someone who... oh, I don't know how to explain it."

Harry sat forward just enough to pour a splash of sherry out for himself before sitting back again, holding it shakily. He still wanted to punish Snape for his actions and the desire sickened him.

Asked Snape, "How did you do that... counter a curse without moving or even taking out your wand?"

Harry said, "The answer to that wasn't part of the bargain," and part of him cheered his regaining ground. "But I'll tell you anyway..." He put the glass to his nose, making himself smell the thick, rotted fruit essence within. Nauseated by it and remembering it was probably doped, he pushed the glass forward out of reach. Tiredly, he said, "I'm not a wizard... I'm a sorcerer. And you made me angry, which is not a good idea."

Snape and Ginny considered that until Ginny asked, "Can we get the light back. The sun?"

Her childish plea snapped him out of the spiral. "What? Oh." Harry leaned

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his head back and let go of his distress at being attacked by the vision of his adoptive father while simultaneously craving control over him as a follower. The room brightened.

"Thanks," Ginny said.

"How did you do that?" Snape demanded.

"I don't know," Harry admitted. "That just happens sometimes. I think I'm pulling another reality on top of this one without really trying. A reality where there is no light."

"Oh, right," Snape said, sounding unlike himself by his mockingly friendly tone. He and Ginny shared a glance.

"I didn't know who he was, honest," Ginny insisted, but then ducked when Harry looked her way.

"I didn't mean to make trouble," Harry said. "I was trying to fix things. It's so peaceful here and it won't be for long and no one understands what's coming. I thought I should do something."

"Well, you definitely sound like Albus Dumbledore," Snape muttered. "But who are you?"

"I'm Harry Potter... just not the one you know." He stared at Snape to see if he understood.

Ginny said, "I don't get it."

Snape considered that at length, giving away nothing of his musings. "You travel that way, do you?" he asked Harry all of a sudden.

"Sometimes. I should quit it. I really should. It does me no good." Harry stood up. "On that theme... I need to go." He started to walk by Snape, then stopped, realizing it did not matter if they saw him slip away. "You are going to take care of things here?" he asked Snape.

"As best as possible. You have exposed me," he added, with a slit-eyed glance at Ginny.

"I didn't mean to make trouble," Harry repeated, too mentally deficient to say anything else.

"You have a very odd way of not making trouble," Snape said, standing as well. He looked Harry over from close range. "Those eyes from playing around with raw magic, I suppose?"

Harry nodded.

"They are going to be white if you keep it up." He gestured for Harry to exit. "You are my worst nightmare, a Harry Potter I cannot hope to fend off, so if you would prefer to be on your way, I would not complain."

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Ginny followed behind Harry to the main hall where he stopped and looked over the decor again. The bright, almost fashionable room held promise. He turned back suddenly and closed the gap with Snape. “You know; there is redemption for you, if you want it.”

“I don’t care,” Snape stated.

“Yes, you do,” Harry countered.

“And you would know that too?” Snape asked mockingly.

Harry cocked a smile at him. “In my world, you’re my adoptive father, so yes, I would know.” He turned from Snape’s re-rattled expression to Ginny and said, “Good luck. And remember that you can’t be too careful. Good luck to you too, Severus... Dad.” With a chuckle, Harry slipped away.

Harry woke on the floor before his own hearth, after deciding it was best to use his magically warmed hearth stone given how long he had been absent. Tonks could easily have been called away to the Ministry and he did not fancy struggling alone on the floor of her flat.

Feeling vaguely unsettled but warm enough to move, Harry sat up and brushed off his robes. The hearth had only recently gone out from the overnight fire and his movements induced floating curls of ash to lift into the air. Harry rubbed his head, which ached just behind his eyes. He really had to limit this kind of travel. Leveraging himself to his feet, he promised his aching body that he would do just that. He had done all he could in that place; it would have to take care of itself from here on.

Too stiff to lift his feet properly, Harry scuffed his way over to Kali’s cage and raised her to his shoulder since she too creaked when she tried to climb. “Sorry,” Harry said to her. “Didn’t mean to make you suffer too.”

With evening fieldwork looming, he really should do a little exercise to loosen his muscles, but instead he fell onto his bed with one of his assigned books. Kali curled up under the hair on his back collar as he read, making him loath to move. Her sleepiness infected him, and in the middle of a page listing potions to detect magically arranged dust, Harry fell asleep.

Harry woke to a familiar voice, in the middle of a very strange dream where he was arguing with Snape about Ginny, but in the dungeon at Hogwarts back when they were both still students.

Ron strode into the room just as Harry raised his disoriented head. “Hey, do you know where my sister is?”

Harry shook his head while combing his hair with his fingers. “Nuh, haven’t seen her.” He sniffled and blink broadly, feeling tethered still to his dream. He closed the book he had left open on the bed, feeling regretful that his intention of finishing his

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readings early looked to be falling short.

“Help me go look for her. I want to find her before dinner.”

Harry pulled a muscle jumping in surprise at what time it may be. “I...” He fumbled hurriedly for his watch. It was only four. Harry stashed his watch back away and imagined Ginny planning on dinner with Aaron. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

Ron kicked the bed post. “Where’s that smarmy bloke in your program live? I want to make sure she’s not with ’im.”

Harry stood up and slipped by his friend, not wanting to give that information away.

Ron went on, “It’s not a listed address.”

“No, and it’s got a lot of protection on it. What does it matter if she’s there... she can take care of herself.”

Ron poked Harry in the chest when he next came in range. “She’s my little sister that’s why it matters. I don’t like that bloke much.”

Harry pushed Ron’s finger away, finding a little agreement with the first part. “Look, Ginny’s like a sister to me too. But what are you going to do? She can do what she wants. And Aaron’s okay, if that’s who she’s with.”

“You know what Dad’s going to say when he finds out?”

Harry worried a bit about that too. “Don’t tell him.”

It was early by two hours to leave, but Harry said, “Look, Ron, I gotta go. Training, er, field work. I’ll see ya.” With that, he Disapparated.

Tonks was manning the Auror’s office when Harry arrived, scratching out a report with a battered quill. Since they were alone, she stood mid-word to give him a kiss. Harry tugged a chair over and sat near her, knees bumping.

While she wrote, she said, “Quiet night so far. Kingsley’s out on an easy one. Seems our friends in Durumulna are taking a holiday.” Then a minute later: “Getting by without a guard?”

“For now.”

She stopped and looked up. Harry explained, “When the gold starts to turn back to iron, I worry a bit what they may do. I liked having a guard for Candide.”

Tonks tugged over a sheet covered in cross-outs, arrows, and sideways writing and made a note in a slice of white space. “I can have Hornisham assigned on nights when you are here.”

Sincerely, Harry said, “Thanks, Tonks.”

“I want to reward you for not only being on time, but early.”

“I had to escape from Ron.”

Winking, she said, “You’re afraid of Ron, now?”

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Harry snorted tiredly. “I’m afraid of rampaging older brother of sister who is seriously dating my hard-to-judge friend, yes.”

She laughed aloud. “I’d think Ron would be happy about that. Aaron’s no slouch in the gold department.”

Harry chewed on his lips while he considered how grumpy Ron could get about these things. “I think that makes it harder for him, actually.”

“Hm.”



After a long evening of patrol, Harry thought he would sleep solidly, but he woke at least twice from an odd dream of masks and chases where at one point he finally captured a black-cloaked Durumulna member only to discover Snape skulking beneath the disguise.

Kali rattling in her cage roused Harry from his sleep-drunken stupor. The glare of mid-morning light from the small window made him blink, so despite his heavy head, he thought it best to rise for the day. He had to fumble around the teetering stack of his assigned books to find his glasses. The cloaked shadow slipping around him in his dream followed him to the wardrobe while he pulled out clean clothes and tugged them on. Harry tried to shake the impression of the dream as well as the fresh memory of desiring to control the Snape in the other Plane.

On the stairs Harry knotted the sash of his dressing gown against the chilly air and stepped into the dining room. A familiar, stringy-haired figure stood bending over the sideboard, sorting post. Harry stared at Snape’s back, a vague dis-ease washing through him, making his feet tingle. Candide poured Harry coffee and handed it to him.

“Didn’t sleep well?” she asked.

Snape glanced backwards sharply and Harry felt a jolt of utter wrongness, but he covered it quickly. With a rumbling rasp of wood on wood, he pulled out a chair, but merely leaned on the back of it. “Yeah, tough night... at the Ministry,” he lied, trying to gather himself. The steam of the coffee burned his face, so he set it down and verified that he had his wand in his pocket.

Harry watched the man sorting through the letters on the sideboard. He exuded the taint of a Dark Mark.

Candide, dripping concerned, said, “Sit, down, Harry. Or maybe you should go back to bed.”

Candide’s gentle worry made Harry risk sliding into a seat out of a more defensible standing position. Harry rested his forehead on his palm, thinking frantically. He must have returned to the wrong place... a place where his guardian was still Marked.

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Snape collected his post and sat beside Candide to open them. Harry tried not to stare at him doing this. He instead stared at Candide's hands, wrapped around her cup, wondering with a tractionless circling of thought what he should do. If Snape and Candide believed him in the right place, and there were not two of him here, then his counterpart – and clearly he had one as skilled as himself – was in his Plane. Was it possible they would both recognize the mistake at the same time and both decide to switch at the same time? Was his counterpart sitting in exactly this place, thinking exactly the same thing? Or was he unaware that his guardian could be unmarked. Surely if he had the same Plane-jumping power than the other would be aware of the Mark or lack thereof.

Too many thoughts. Harry calmed his heart because the discordant thrumming of it was not helping his thinking one bit. He tried to sip his coffee and coughed on it.

“Harry?” Candide prompted, sounding disbelieving.

Harry put on a false smile and pretended all was as it should be. He did not want to reveal what had gone wrong, it just wanted it sorted out as quickly as possible. “I’m just thinking,” he said. “Lots to worry about.”

“Like what?” she asked, sounding the kind inquisitor.

“Well...” Harry struggled and plucked the first thing that came to mind. “Ron isn’t happy that Ginny and Aaron are together.”

Snape snorted and rolled his eyes. Breakfast appeared in a sparkle, and Harry decided to eat it because that was what he would normally do – on a normal morning where his appetite had not fled due to transcendental panic. How had he messed up, he wondered? He had done exactly the same as every other time he had returned. Well, except he had taken for granted this time that it would just work out and had not been trying quite so hard. Should he go back and try again?

Harry’s cold-sore bones resisted the notion with a dissuading twinge. But he had little choice. If he did find home and he found another Harry in it, he would just have to explain. As he ate, suddenly voraciously hungry, Harry promised himself he would stay put after this – for certain.

Harry felt Snape’s gaze return to him yet again over the letter he held up. Harry needed to behave normally, but could not manage it. He was grateful when Candide asked, “How is Aaron?”

“Better. Ginny seems to be, er, helping him along.”

Candide chuckled, almost a giggle, at this, and Harry thought: is that really true here too? He had to be careful, not everything was going to be the same. Patrol had been the same, and Tonks had been the same... perhaps even unusually attentive. That made Harry wonder what his counterpart was doing differently and he felt a

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bizarre jealousy of his counterpart. Harry gulped his coffee, antsy to get home again, refusing to dwell on the worry that he might not manage to.

Stalling while he gathered his meager strength, Harry poured himself more coffee and put his cold-stiffened hands around the mug. So many things about this place were right.

“My sister says hello, by the way,” Candide announced.

“How are your parents?” Harry asked, hoping that was safe.

She smirked. “Non-stop nagging about this and that.” She glanced at Snape beside her. “Just as well, I didn’t insist you go along, Dear,” she said, and reached to pat his nearest arm. Snape jerked out of reach, immediately relented, and sat rail-stiff until the petting withdrew.

Harry, who had been avoiding looking directly at Snape, froze while fixing his attention on him out of the corner of his eye. Harry waited for Snape’s laser-vision to divert down to the next letter. Harry swallowed hard. Candide shot him an uncomfortable smile and returned to the Prophet. Harry sat back and stared openly at the man sitting diagonal from him. What if it wasn’t he who was in the wrong place? He needed a test to find out.

As soon as Harry pondered taking the upper hand, his instincts fell in line behind it. The last piece of Voldemort sang within him at the opportunity.

“How was your week, Severus?”

Snape lifted his bored eyes and said, “Same as the others.”

“Surprising,” Harry softly returned. And when Snape’s eyes narrowed, Harry backed off this direct attack and added with a casual smirk, “Well, I don’t remember it ever being uneventful. The students saw to that.”

Snape rubbed his fingertips together, put down the letter he held and folded the stack away to give Harry all of his attention. “The Gryffindors were their usual obnoxious selves, the Slytherins exceptionally creative, to their lasting regret.”

Harry’s mind churned over several times. The man before him was so wrong, and everything else so right. “Maybe you’d help me with some spells,” Harry said. “You said you would when you were home next.”

Candide sighed loudly. “Good thing I’ve never had the chance to redecorate in the hall.”

Harry gave her a sympathetic smile. “When we move my room, we can do more to the hall. I’d like that. Something bright and flowery.”

“Please,” Snape sneered.

“You’re never home,” Harry prodded, baiting Snape and enjoying it immensely. A ripple passed over the man, aversion or possessiveness suppressed.

Snape’s coffee was empty. Harry stood and invited, “Spellwork?”

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Snape followed him out. Harry would have expected him to pat Candide on the shoulder, but he did not. Far too aware of the cursedness of the other, Harry waved the main hall furniture aside and spun to face Snape.

They exchanged a few basic drill spells and repeated them in a sequence, building in power. Candide strolled in to watch. Harry, preferring her not to be there if his suspicion was correct and he had to confront Snape outright, said, "Why don't you go to Diagon and get some tapestries for the wall in here? To hang between the upper windows. And for the walls of the nursery."

"I suppose I could."

Harry did not modulate his next block, so that the rebound rattled around the room.

"If I do, will you stop this for the day?" Candide asked. "I'd hate to see them burned to a crisp right off."

"Sure," Harry eagerly said, glad that had worked.

"I'll be back later then." On her way out with her cloak and basket, she said, "You two should take that to Hogwarts; it's built for it, unlike this creaky place."

As soon as the Floo faded, Harry waited for Snape to reach the Blasting Curse in the drill sequence. He lowered his wand and Squelched instead of blocking it. Snape's wand went flying and he gaped at Harry.

"Weren't expecting that, were you?" Harry asked crisply.

Snape took a step in the direction of his wand but stopped when the room darkened. Night dropped over the house and the air grew dank. Snape glanced around, but Harry's wand still hung at his side. Chattering sounded from the nearby wall. Snape glanced at it, not comprehending that either based on his posture. Harry waited for his eyes to come back around to him as the source of the shift in the environment. His eyes held wary surprise.

Harry helpfully stated, "You should be yelling at me about now."

Snape's shoulders fell an iota, supporting Harry's suspicion about which of them was displaced. He opened his mouth, but Harry filled in with, "Too late." He snagged Snape's wand from the corner.

"You have another?" Harry asked. "Let's see it."

Snape reached into his robes for another wand. He hesitated with it half pulled out. Harry said, "Try anything and you will regret it."

A draw ensued. The light darkened more and the stones of the house groaned like an animal in pain. Winky appeared in a sparkle. "Master Harry is doing bad things," she said, hunched over to make her plea.

"Master Harry is almost finished. Hand it over," he demanded of the man across from him. "And don't think I can't follow you if you Apparate away. You taught me

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how.”

Snape put the wand away back in his robes. “I’ll keep it, if you don’t mind.” He glanced at the windows and his brow lowered as he noticing now that they were not darkened but that the sunlight itself had gone slate colored where it struck the floating dust.

Harry let a little light in. “Better? Sit down.”

“You are doing that,” Snape stated, resolve fading as he took a seat on the arm of the nearest couch. He sat with his hands propped beside him, tense. He stared at Harry. “I didn’t... realize how powerful you were.”

Harry paced behind the other couch, keeping one eye on the alien wizard sitting tensely across from him. Winky, hands rubbing over one another squeaked miserably, “Master Harry...”

Harry let the light in. It was like turning off a source of anger inside himself, and he felt giddy in the wake of it. “Bring us cocoa, won’t you, Winky?”

Winky hurried off.

“I asked you a question,” Harry said, re-channeling his anger and feeling the thing inside him happy to sop it up.

“And I don’t feel like answering,” Snape returned, eyes challenging, pushed beyond care.

Harry felt around himself for the focus of the cursedness and pushed at it. Snape grabbed his forearm with a cry, making Harry smile faintly. If someone was going to invade his home, they were going to pay for it. “You continue to underestimate me.”

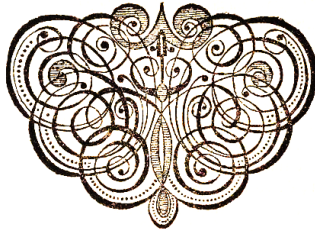
Snape had bent partly over his arm, but he straightened with a snap of his spine and glared at Harry. “You were not like this...”

“I was not what? Have we met?” Harry had not considered that this stranger may not be so strange after all.

Snape clammed up, and Harry realized who he was, recognizing the depths of despair the man slipped into with such ease.

“We have met,” Harry said, filling in for his guest. “I saved you from Voldemort in Weaver’s End; didn’t I?”

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“Where is my father?” Harry demanded, flicking his wand at his side impatiently, itching to take action.

“Your father?” Snape managed with a single sharp sputter. “Unimaginable. This whole place is unimaginable.”

“Where is he?” Harry demanded again, raising his wand and staring along it at the impostor before him.

Snape’s lips twitched. “Do you really need that magical stick you are holding?” he said mockingly.

Harry smiled. “It’s hard to limit the damage if I don’t use it.”

Snape’s gaze faded at this. “I assume my counterpart is where I departed from. That was how the gateway was purported to work.”

Harry stilled his wand, thinking fast. He would have to fetch him back, somehow. “Where is this gateway? How does it work?”

“Why should I tell you?”

Harry stepped closer, wand still held out, angled down, arm arched, because Snape was sitting on the couch arm. “Because that place is where you belong.”

Snape crossed his arms, but they slid down until they hugged his torso. Voice low, he said, “It is hopeless there. I could not do as you asked; I could not get close to Potter let alone get him to forgive me. Beyond Aberforth, I have no allies of any kind. I was hunted by my associates and tormented daily by my master.” He scrubbed at his forearm. “Just as you just did.” His bluster disappeared as quickly as it grew.

“I can do that again,” Harry pointed out.

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Bleakly, after a long pause, Snape said, "I could not stop thinking about the place you had described, where the Dark Lord was no more, where I did not have so many enemies. I remembered a partial, half-burned book from Dumbledore's collection, believed to be written by a deranged and delusional wizard who raved for thousands of pages about portals and gateways to parallel realities."

Snape straightened his robes and lifted his chin, gauging Harry before continuing. "And when you told me where you were from, I realized he was not, in fact, a raving lunatic, but a genius. So, I constructed a gateway by piecing together instructions from his ravings. It was supposed to take many moon cycles to open, but it latched on easily to the Inbetween, anchoring the book called it, to that horrible grey-skied place you took me to escape. Once that was set, the mirroring of the spell cast into this place was simple repetition. Then it was a simple matter of waiting for my alternate to step into the gate to engage it." He glared, hunched and grim, at Harry. "I am not going back. Only death awaits me there and I am not ready to die."

Harry considered the worn man before him and contemplated threatening to kill him, but he could not find it in himself. "You are going back," Harry insisted. "And in the meantime, not a word to Candide. I don't want her to know what's happened."

Snape's chin rose again at this.

"What?" Harry queried. "You like having a wife?"

"I would not have thought so... before."

Harry perched his fists on his hips and said, "You didn't make this place what it is. You don't deserve to enjoy it."

Snape retorted lightly, "If I had made this place, I certainly would not have put you in it in your current position."

Harry did not take affront at this. "No, I don't imagine you would have. If I'd told you, would you have come?"

Snape rocked back and forth slightly. "I would thought harder about it, I admit. I also did not comprehend what you really had become."

Harry paced away, slapping his hand on his thigh in frustration. He had to check on his guardian as soon as possible, make certain he was all right. His bones groaned at the thought. But from the other place, it should be clearer how to arrange for them both to return to their rightful place. He would have to try taking something alive through with him. Perhaps he could just drag both of the men to where they belonged, one at a time. He considered taking Kali as a test, but her dislike of the Dark Plane made him decide otherwise.

He glared at Snape, and said, "Be nice to your wife while I'm gone."

"I need to depart for Hogwarts soon, anyhow."

"Be nice to my friends then," Harry corrected.

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Snape's lip curled into a sneer. "If they are Gryffindors, not a chance."

"Typical," Harry muttered.

Snape matched him. "Slytherin is not much better. My counterpart has grown dangerously soft. That and frequently leaving the house in Lupin's hands, of all people, has rendered my House unrecognizable."

"You must have left it in Remus' hands, to come here now."

"I realized I was expected to go home," Snape replied, bored sounding as he pulled a desperate haughtiness around him.

"You still are," Harry snapped, and Disapparated.

Harry fished agitatedly in his pocket for his coin purse as he strolled with over-charged energy along the narrow shopfronts of Diagon Alley. It was Sunday, so only every fifth shop was open, and the chill wind swooping through the length of the alley left the pavements clear of loiterers.

Eeylops was still being repaired from the fire, so Harry walked down further to A.J. Furriers, a far less savory animal dealer. Several warped cages had been parked out on the pavement. The animals inside them were crowded into the corners for warmth, their fur blowing backwards in the wind. One cage full of young chickens had a wired-on rusty sign reading Python Poulets. The next cage held small white Hat Rabbits Guaranteed to Hide as Required. Harry bent down to look more closely at these. One of them had a crooked black stripe along its snout, parting its oversized pink eyes. Harry put his finger through the bars and prodded it in the haunch and it shuffled closer to its peers.

"You don't even wear a hat," a familiar voice said from behind Harry.

Harry straightened and slipped his hands into his pockets. "Hello, Belinda."

"I saw you from the window of Phantasmic Phoot Phasions," she said with a nod farther down the alley at the glittering new shop which had a bay window display crowded with dancing pairs of patent leather shoes in a variety of gaudy colors. Harry could not remember what shop had been there before.

Belinda glanced up and down the alley, in a behavior that gave the otherwise occupied Harry pause. A little nervously, she asked, "So, I was wondering if you wanted to do something, come over for tea or something. It's Sunday, you know, and we haven't had time to get together."

"I don't have time right now," Harry said. "I have something I really have to take care of."

She sighed and appeared frustrated or strained. Harry did wish to know what was troubling her, but he could not delay in finding out what had happened to his guardian.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "Some other time."

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Belinda stepped closer and straightened his robes for him by shaking the collar out and turning the lapels out. "That's better," she said. "We should take you shopping sometime." She started to let go, then stepped closer, making Harry take a quick glance up and down the alley, expecting Skeeter to jump out any moment. "You're certain you don't have time?" she asked again.

Harry gently plucked her left wrist off his lapel, skewing his robes again. "Yes. Positive."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "I need help with something," she said quietly, then bit her lip. "There is so much going wrong right now."

Harry tried to Legilimize her but she glanced away. A trio of generic looking, dark haired wizards strolled by and Belinda stepped closer again, executing a dance move so she was partly behind the cages. When the strangers had passed through the gateway in the wall to the Leaky Cauldron, Harry took Belinda's wrists again, but this time did not extract them from his robes. "Are you mixed up with them?" he asked, disbelieving.

Sounding overly casual, she pushed away and said, "No, of course no- Who do you mean?" She backed up more, glanced back at the shoe shop, and then down at her feet. "I know that you are serious with Tonks now, really. I just thought, you know, tea or something."

What Harry got was that she was really in need of help. "I'm willing to help, just not right at this moment. I really have a personal emergency I have to take care of." She nodded without looking up, and Harry added emphatically. "I'll call as soon as I can, all right?"

She nodded again and stepped away, bony shoulders bent forward, head low.

Harry did not have time to review this conversation in his head as he liked. He slipped into the shop to buy the smallest Hat Rabbit they had. The shopkeeper plopped the snow-white animal down on a sheet of vellum that read Certified Bunny Obscura and slid it over in exchange for Harry's four Sickles. Harry pocketed both items and strolled to Knockturn Alley. Once he stepped down into the dingy, crooked place, he lifted his cloak and spun a half turn as though slipping an invisibility cloak over himself, and before he stopped moving, he slipped away into the Dark Plane.

The creatures there must have smelled the rabbit because they followed Harry in parade formation at a respectful distance as he wove along between hillocks, kicking dusty grit up onto his shoes. Harry needed the walk to gather his memories of the place he wished to return to and to clear his thoughts from all other worries. He remembered the place clearly, even though he had, upon first returning, assumed it to be a hallucination of striking his head.

He went along until he stood opposite his own house in Shrewsthorpe, and stopped

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beside a tangle of saw grass and vicious rusty wire. He glanced down and stared at the pentagram in the grit before him. He had made that pentagram with his foot as a focal point for returning home from that other place. But he was home now, or opposite of home now. There was only one Dark Plane, it seemed, and how one left it depended upon how one entered it. Harry stepped carefully around the Device and a little away so the throng of following creatures did not muss it. Although, now that he studied it, the lines of it looked far cleaner than he would have managed with the point of his shoe. Harry stepped closer, crouched down beside it and touched it with a finger. The grit forming the pentagram felt like sandstone, and it definitely had a straighter structure imparted to it since his trainer toe had scratched it out.

Harry growled lightly. He himself had left the gateway open that let this alien swap for his adoptive father.

The rabbit, despite the hordes wishing for its sweet flesh, sat calmly in Harry's hand when he pulled it from his pocket. Alert life shined from its dilute-blood colored eyes but it gave not a twitch of a white whisker. Its far-set gaze focused on nothing and everything at once in the grey light of the underworld. Harry took close hold of the creature and imagined a place he wished he did not know.



Severus Snape came to dulled awareness in an oppressive haze of hot beeswax. Quivering, icy pain radiated dully but insistently out from his joints to his fingertips and toes, and a burning sensation sizzled on the inside of his left forearm, filling him with alarm that somehow his Mark had returned. He twitched his arm and the pain faded to a dull ache and trailed around the top of his wrist, catching on the hairs of his arm. When he moved farther the new pain faded to the same persistent throb as the rest of him.

Snape raised his head. Angled rows of glowing, off-white candles filled his vision, their glaring radiance warming his chilled core. He rolled over as far as he dared and peeled the translucent blob of beeswax off his wrist and tossed it out of the pentagram of candles surrounding him.

Careful to avoid igniting his robes, Snape stood and stepped out of the Device and onto the thoroughly dilapidated rug. He lifted his head and stared around the hall, at the boarded up broken windows, the sagging balcony, the white-edged stain down the wall where the roof had been leaking for some time. Cobwebbed desolation encased him. It felt like a bad dream except for his complete wakefulness. It was as though his long-term memories were a lie, or a delusion. He breathed in the dusty

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air and lowered his head to consider the illuminated pentagram. No decent meaning offered itself up to him and he was desperate for any, no matter how unlikely. Had he attempted some dark magic to escape from the past into the future, for reasons he could not recall? Or had he simply forgotten, at some point, the clearly dismal present in a hallucination?

Confusion and alarm swirled through him as he paced, shaking the cold-stiffness from his limbs and, finally, movement exercised his faculties and he knew what had happened. Somehow, Harry's journeys through alternative Planes had come to snag him, and he suspected with slowly gathering dread that this empty, decaying house was just the first glimpse of a miserable, dark world.

Vaguely heartened that the home attached to his memories most likely still existed, Snape made a search of the house. What had not been removed had been chewed away by rodents, who had left their droppings in the mildewed drawers of the desk, the one remaining piece of furniture, although it sat crooked because one corner had been sheared off.

"Master?" a faint voice prompted, giving Snape a bad start.

A small ghost floated beside the desk, feet bent behind it so that it hung, half kneeling, but not any higher off the floor than it would have been if it were standing.

"Tidgy?" Snape said to the small apparition, whose long ears hung to its shoulders. "What happened?"

"Bad people is coming, Master."

"Yes, I perceived that. Some time ago, it looks like," Snape dryly stated, tracing each line of dark spell burn on the drawing room wall facing him. His mind worked quickly, trying to narrow in on the likeliest possibilities. "Was someone here recently? Who set up the candles?"

Tidgy cocked his head. "You is having done this, Master. Is Tidgy being tested?"

"Hm. Did I?" Snape's eyes narrowed and moved side to side, taking in the room for clues. "Did I have a book I was working from?"

"Yes, Master."

Hope swelled where there was none previously. "Where is it; do you know?"

Tidgy's ears swung as he shook his head. "Master is taking it away somewhere."

Snape swore, making Tidgy put an arm up for protection. "I am too smart for my own good." To the elf-ghost, he said, "No one can hurt you, Tidgy; you're dead."

"Tidgy is knowing this," the elf said sadly.

"Well, I best go look for the book. Fortunately, I know where I would be likely to hide it. Unfortunately, I was presumably aware of that when I hid it. What did it look like?"

"The book is being large, Master, with purple ink. And half burned."

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“Purple ink? I know another author who favors purple and the Dark Plane. Very good, Tidgy, thank you.”

Tidgy wiped away a ghostly tear with the corner of his ragged towel. “Master is thanking Tidgy?”

“Yes. Why not?” He waved the elf away. “Go and haunt the kitchen why don’t you.”

Snape returned to the hall and extinguished each of the Device’s candles with his fingertips, careful not to disturb their positions. He would need the Device to return home, if hope of that were rational, and he could not risk damaging it. He paused, crouched before the arm of the star where one of the candles had spilled wax onto his forearm, rousing him with bad memory, if not pain. Circumstances threatened to suffocate him along with the dust and mold of the rotting house. Raising his eyes to the poorly lit, damaged hall did not help. Grey sky showed through the gaps in the planking over the windows and through the hole in the roof.

Snape gathered a lifetime of plodding, yet vigilant, attitude about him and stood straight. Survival was the first order, and he needed to understand his situation better to manage that.

Out on the road, a ragged newspaper had plastered itself to the neighbor’s chain-link fence. The usually welcoming house beyond the fence had a neglected air about it. The next house over appeared occupied, but had a pair of vicious dogs patrolling behind a crudely erected sign warning about same. A quick survey of the houses within view confirmed his fears that the magical population had departed Shrewsthorpe or wished make it appear as though they had. Snape gathered up the loose newspapers from the neighborhood with a broad, powerful spell and rolled them roughly. They made a sound not unlike fine parchment except for the film of pervasive grit that rubbed off onto his hands.

Snape crushed the newspapers under his arm to rub his left forearm where the wax burn stung with momentary eye-watering pain before easing. The rusty-hinged door squeaked tortuously as stepped back inside, leaving the neglected, dusty garden to the wild ivy intent on taking it over. Inside was slightly more appealing than outside, mostly because it was out of the wind. Out of a stash of spare Device-making materials dumped in the corner of the hall, Snape pulled out a candle stub and a torn rug and took them to the center of the floor where the light was best. Unable to bear sitting at the damaged desk, he folded the rug and sat cross-legged upon it to read the collected papers. Tidgy’s ghost floated in and out of view, hands clasped in the mode of waiting for instructions.

The first two broadsheets were from the same Muggle newspaper edition and at first Snape thought the weather page would not be useful, but the article occupying

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a full half of the sheet spoke of a resurgence in extremely rare derecho windstorms along the coast off Yorkshire and East Midlands. Various experts were quoted discussing stationary warm fronts and dismissing as mass hallucination, sightings of giants tossing trees and electricity pylons aside as they rampaged through the affected countryside.

The torn pieces of Wizard paper, titled *The Irreproachable Intelligencer* but carrying the layout of the *Daily Prophet*, spoke of rules and edicts about what spells and topics of public discussion were additionally limited by the Ministry. Snape frowned most deeply at an interview with the Hogwart's Headmaster on the eve of his one year anniversary in the position: Lucius Malfoy. The last triangular corner of the most dilapidated page explained the newspaper's name change – prophecy had been declared an illicit word both in public and private. And the staff at the paper Formally Known as the *Daily P...* could not responsibly continue under that banner given the risk to their staff.

Snape gathered the papers up and laid them in the hearth before holding the candle flame to a corner. The flame hesitated before it took hold, forced to burn through the dirt coating. Snape set the candle on the hearth and sat close to watch both burn. He was in one of those places Harry seemed always to end up in – one where Voldemort had not been defeated.

As the fire burned down and the thin black ash limned with orange glow crinkled away, Snape pondered the remaining light of the sagging, distorted candle stub. If this Plane's version of himself had changed places and was now in his home, Harry would eventually notice given his counterpart's likely active Mark. At that point Harry would come seeking him out. How long this would require was not clear. If Snape were lucky it would require mere hours; except that Harry had not been at home – he had been busily working day and night on plans to rescue his fellow apprentice. Snape fancied himself rather good at hiding where he did not belong, and he expected his counterpart to be the same.

Snape shifted to lean back against the wall beside the hearth as the candle melted lower.

The wind picked up through the broken windows, fluttering the single flame. Snape roused himself, stiff again with cold. It seemed Harry would not be arriving immediately. He stood and paced until his limbs ceased to creak. Somewhere out there were Voldemort and Malfoy and all the others, free to generate misery as they wished. Snape wondered where this Plane's Potter was. Given the ban on discussions of prophecy, it seemed unlikely Potter was dead. And if he was not dead, he must be most desperate by now.

The candle faded to a tiny blue orb hovering over a pool of clear wax that shed

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no discernible light. Snape stood in the murky light filtering through the holes in the ruined roof. He better appreciated Harry's desire to assist in these situations. He too felt strained imagining how the Harry here may be faring. Snape stared up at the grey sky, which seemed unnaturally bright to his dark-adapted eyes, and wondered where this Harry may be.

Snape wondered hard enough that he finally simply Apparated away to the Leaky Cauldron to consult with a long-time reliable associate on Diagon Alley. The Cauldron fell silent upon his arrival but gazes quickly turned back to their hushed conversations. The room felt as normal as ever, if a tad edgy. Strange to imagine this was not his Leaky Cauldron, but another, one of an infinite number.

The wall in back opened onto a smaller Diagon Alley than Snape knew. The shops leaned inward along a narrower passageway, and brown grime covered everything, including the windows. Snape turned toward the Apothecary shop and started when figures melted out of the brick wall behind him and one put a restraining spell on his arm.

The wizard, a thuggish man with cratered skin stretched thin over his cheeks, said, "You will submit to a check. You are not carrying proper identification." He wore bright green robes sporting a patch with interlocking Ps.

Around him, the shoppers that had been approaching the wall diverted with an attitude of suddenly remembering they needed to make one more stop, far at the other end of the alley. Others approached timidly with intent eyes, drawn to the promise of spectacle.

"Name," the second wizard demanded, pulling a thick scroll out of his robes and preparing to open it.

"I don't have to give you my name," Snape said, thinking that if his counterpart saw fit to exert such effort to depart this place, there was most likely a good reason for it.

The first man bodily threw Snape against the wall and placed his wand under his nose. "We can do this the 'ard way, Mate. I was gettin' bored anyway. Give 'im the test Herbie."

Handling the heavy scroll made it difficult for Herbie to manage his wand as well. Snape saw this as a possible opening for escape but decided to let it pass given the wand nearly up his nose.

"What test?" Snape asked. "Who are you?"

"We're the Pureblood Police, we are. Where you been?"

Dryly, Snape replied, "I don't get out much."

"Well, then, yer overdue," the wizard said. "Give me the doohickey, Herbie."

Herbie gave up on managing his wand to pull a silver cylinder out of his pocket,

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which he handed over. The Police Wizard snapped it open with one hand and extracted a balance. The mechanism unfolded neatly and swayed in the breeze.

Herbie leaned closer and whispered helpfully, "You should give up your name, that's easier." He glanced at the scales teetering in the wind a little nervously. "If you come up short in the measure, it'll not go well. Just give us a name, eh?"

A figure sauntered over, blonde hair flashing over a smug sneer. "His name's Snape, but finish the test anyway."

Beyond Draco Malfoy hovered two bulky, dark-robed figures, faces invisible in their deep hoods, wands out and aimed. Herbie bit his lips at the sight of them, agitated.

The policeman took his wand off Snape's nose to stack translucent squares on one side of the scales. Transfixed by curiosity and the additional guards, Snape did not move.

"Little finger, left hand right here then," the Policeman commanded, indicating a little platform on the scale's base. Snape obliged while he looked for an escape. Apparition would be traced in a place like this, departing would only buy him a very short time. The metal under his pinky warmed and the empty tray of the scale shifted of its own accord.

Herbie had found the right entry in the scroll. "Says here halfblood." He tsked with his tongue sadly.

The scales clanged, the cubes rising to the maximum they could. The first policeman said, "Scale says pure."

Draco's smile faded. "That's not right. Father said..."

"And your father of course knows everything," Snape stated, bored. He retrieved his hand.

Herbie helpfully said, "You should get your record set straight, you should. Bad confusion. Mudbloods 'n' halfbloods only allowed on the Alley here after ten and before eight."

Draco leaned in closer, pointing emphatically. "The record is straight. Look, Muggle father: Tobias Snape."

The first policeman disregarded this as he carefully packed away the scales. "Book's no matter, scales 'ave the final say. Come one, Herbie." He stepped back into the brick wall and melted away.

Herbie extracted himself from Draco and hurriedly set himself to rights before following his fellow. In the absence of the police, the hooded figures approached. Snape waited until just the right moment and used his off hand to spell Draco with a Blasting Curse so that he flew into the other two. Then he Disapparated for the countryside and Disapparated again for yet another spot of equally remote country-

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side, before landing in a Waterloo station cupboard and stepping out into the crowd after applying a quick disguise. His care turned out to be fully warranted; he could hear the pounding on the supplies cupboard door he had sealed shut even before he got out of earshot. He continued walking the same as before, keeping to the thickest stream of passengers heading for the tube lines. He didn't Apparate again until he was stepping into the Leaky Cauldron. This time he headed directly for the Apothecary, arriving in the back corner of the shop.

Content with hiding mere feet from where he had first been chased down, Snape waited calmly for the hunched witch in a battered hat to scuffle her way from the counter to the door before approaching the shop owner. Jiggers did not hide his surprise at seeing him there after he removed the disguise.

The Chemist glanced avidly around the empty shop. "Severus," he whispered. "What is it you need?"

"Information," Snape said.

Jiggers did as he always did when he got nervous, pulled out a stained rag to clean the mixing and pill molding area of the counter. "Don't have much of that, I'm afraid." He glanced sharply at the door, but it was just a passerby causing the light from the window to flicker.

"Is Harry Potter still alive?"

"Far as I know," Jiggers replied, falling mystified. The rag smoldered under his hand so he rinsed it out and hung it up more neatly than the holey and stained thing deserved to be. He leaned in, right eye giving a twitch. "You aren't thinking to patch things up with You-Know-Who by capturing the Prophe—" He stopped, bit his lips, and swallowed hard. "...the Devined One, are you? I've known you a long time, Severus, and I could never see you stooping that low, given what's at stake."

"That wasn't my intent," Snape said. "I would like to assist, in fact. My loyalty has always been to Dumbledore."

"Hm. Right." Jiggers straightened his board and pestles. "You got a funny way of showin' it," he muttered, turning to shelve a bottle of white powder. Without turning back around, he said, "Potter's hiding himself well, behind magic stronger than He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named can break through."

"Dumbledore's magic, you mean?" Snape stated, knowing exactly where to look. "Thank you, Jiggers."

Snape Disapparated for 12 Grimmauld Place, landing lightly on the porch in the waning evening light. Safely out of view, he scrutinized the surrounding alleys and shrubs, looking for watchers. Only a few crooked or flickering street lamps glowed on the square, providing for numerous hiding places. Snape expected that the house was watched, it certainly felt watched. If it was, that would be to his advantage if

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an argument were to start when he knocked on the door; the occupants would feel obliged to keep things contained.

Snape composed himself before pulling the bell cord. He had a feeling his presence was not going to be welcome.

Ron Weasley, his face as doltish as ever in stupefaction, tried to close the door, but Snape put his foot in the way.

“You should hear me out,” Snape stated succinctly to the hunched over young man, who was making small surprised noises with each breath. They glared at each other. “No wonder Potter is getting nowhere with Voldemort,” Snape muttered.

Ron finally tried to spell the toe impeding the door, but the hex was blocked easily. Snape let the young man keep hold of his wand, for now. Ron’s freckled face shifted from startled to astonished. “You said his name.”

“Did I?” He regrouped. “Don’t you even have an alarm to raise to bring others to help you?” Snape asked, disbelieving.

Ron’s head ducked inside slightly and then back out again while he pushed harder on the door.

“Oh, you are alone then,” Snape stated. “I see.”

Ron’s face fell into stillness, a sort of giving in to fear.

“Look, Weasley... let’s be reasonable. I don’t intend to do you any harm.”

Ron grabbed the edge of the door and stopped pushing so hard against Snape’s toe. “Well, what’re ya doing here then?” he demanded.

“I am hoping I can assist.”

Ron peered at him, utterly mystified. “With what?”

“With what else?” Snape snapped. “With the destruction of the Dark Lord.”

Ron puzzled this as a breeze caught his hair. “But... why would you do that?”

This was going to be a little harder than Snape first thought, and that was saying a lot. Perhaps he should just retreat to Shrewsthorpe and await his Harry’s arrival. It was hard to give in so utterly, though, to a fight that was woven so firmly into the fabric of his being. While he pondered this, a pop! announced the Apparition of Hermione Granger, who, due to space limitations, teetered on the edge of the porch. Snape grabbed her arm and tugged her to safety, spelling a block as a nasty disemboweling curse came sizzling out of the darkened shrubs across the way.

Hermione gave a yelp and Ron gave a tug and the three of them tumbled inside the house. Hermione recovered first and stood against the corridor wall with her wand aimed, brushing her hair nervously from her eyes. “Professor... I mean...”

Snape picked himself up and dusted off, making no move for his wand, which he had stashed away as they fell rather than risk losing it. Ron stood to lock the door,

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but hesitated, hands seized around the brass knobs, clearly not wanting to be locked in with him.

Snape displayed his empty hands and said, "You should most certainly lock it, given that it strengthens the spells on this place."

Hermione inched her way along the wall. "What are you doing here?" she demanded breathlessly.

"I've come to assist."

"With what?"

"Are you as daft as your boyfriend here?" Snape demanded, glad at least that the direct approach was getting him a hearing.

Ron said, "He says he wants to help bring down You-Know-Who."

Hermione with a breathy huff, said, "You have a funny way of helping with that."

This gave Snape pause, given that it was the second time someone reasonably intelligent had said that in just the span of ten minutes.

Fortunately Ron, the slow one, believed the obvious needed to be stated, "Harry said you killed Dumbledore, and I know others don't believe it, but I believe him."

Snape turned to him and the young man shrank back against the door. When all else fails try Socrates... or Dumbledore. "And why do you think I did that?"

Ron, clearly panicked as always by a question from Snape, shook his head overly much from side to side. "I don't know."

Snape dearly wished he understood the situation himself. He had committed a Harry-style error of charging in without proper preparation.

Hermione, wand still trained on him, steady now, said, "He always trusted you."

The truth of that still felt like a weakness. Snape turned to her and said, "And I never let him down. Ever."

Hermione's wand wavered. "Ever?"

"Well, I did not do so well teaching Potter Occlumency." He waved his hand. "But that is in the past. For the present, Potter has a task to finish that he can't seem to get on with. At risk..." He indicated Hermione's wand. "To my own life, I am here to help."

"But why did you kill Dumbledore?" Ron asked, distress in every line of him. At least he had his wand out now, but he was not aiming it very well. Snape considered chastising him for that. He wished he knew the answer to the question. The mystery of it made his personal worries much more acute.

Hermione answered for him, "Well, he was really ill."

Bolstered by that, Snape took refuge in the easiest possible answer. "There are things I do not expect any of you to ever understand."

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The three of them stood there in a stalemate until Kreacher came slinking down the stairs, muttering to himself. He spied Snape there and, with one eye twitching, said, "Mistress will be pleased with this visitor, yes..." His shadow lengthened as he crept around the banister and headed to the back of the house. "...not like those worthless Mudbloods and, mistress forbid, Werewolf..."

Hermione clamped her hand over her mouth before blurting out: "Remus, I didn't find Remus! I completely forgot when I came back and..." She raised her wand at Snape again, who gave her a tiresome roll of the eyes in return.

Snape stood with an attitude of disregarding the threat she represented. "And what trouble has he got himself into?" he asked.

Hermione replied, "He didn't come back last night, and I need to... I need to meet someone else now. And Ron has to stay here... we don't want to leave the house empty."

"Wise plan, given the history you have with this house elf," Snape said, trying to ingratiate himself a bit, and seeing the only possible chance at gaining some trust, he asked, "Do you want me to go look for him?"

Sounding threatening in a way only long-term strain could have hardened her, she asked, "Do you know where he is?"

"I have no idea where he is. So, if you wish me to fetch him, I will need some kind of clue as to what his mission was."

Hermione chewed her lip and glanced at the horribly ugly clock skulking halfway along the corridor. "What do you think, Ron?"

"What do I think? I say we throw the git out. What's to think about!"

Hermione did not appear to take this advice very seriously. "I'm worried about Remus, he's not been well and he really wanted to find... well..." She glanced anxiously between Snape and Ron.

Snape crossed his arms. "Suffice to say, I know more than you think I know. But if it makes you feel better to pretend I don't that is fine with me. What was Lupin looking for... in general terms, if you must use them."

"He went to look for something Bellatrix was rumored to have. But I'm afraid he may have been caught looking for it. I just went looking for him and he wasn't at the ruins of the Lestrage estate where we thought the... this thing would be."

Snape gave a small bow of his head. "With your permission, then, I will see if I can locate him."

"And...?" she asked, pained.

Holding in his temper and a snide tone that fought for a hearing, Snape replied, "And... bring him back here. Is that not what you wish?"

"Yes." She nodded emphatically.

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“You have nothing to lose,” Snape pointed out.

“Harry’s sanity,” Ron offered. “When he finds out.”

“One thing at a time,” Snape breathed as he swept out the door.

Snape applied a disguise and Apparated for York, to the edge of the wizarding area. The Ministry could not trace exactly who had Apparated, but they could certainly trace where, precisely. The only way to shake a trace was to get lost, by broomstick or on foot, in an area where there was more Apparition activity. As he strolled, Snape tried to settle his thoughts. He was getting involved against his better instincts. Surely, Harry would not be more than a few days in seeking him out. Snape would have to leave a clue behind in Shrewsthorpe, so Harry would know where he had ended up.

Each in turn, Snape systematically checked Bellatrix’s hiding places. On the sixth destination, he found her in a Muggle-inaccessible cave branch of Llethryd Swallet. All but a narrow corridor of the twisting and branching cave was Apparition blocked, and the noise of anyone arriving would be heard throughout the connecting chambers, so his arrival would not be by stealth. But because of the obscurity of the location, Bellatrix had laid no traps and expected only friendly visitors, so Snape had the advantage of surprise.

By the time Bellatrix raised her wand in his direction, Snape had already struck out with a Blasting Curse, sending her toppling over a stalagmite-mound, which also shattered the brighter of two lamps that had been hooked there. Taking mental note of where the miserable lump that must be Lupin was resting, Snape moved to his right, to get into position for a clear shot when Bellatrix stood up. He peered through the bars of slick rock sheeting from the wall beside him. A deadly blast of green shot by Snape’s ear, making him duck.

“So, you dare show your ugly face, Severus?” Bellatrix taunted. Her voice echoed too much to localize it and the room’s many shadows moved with the quivering lamp flame. “Master will be pleased when I present your severed head to him, which is the only way you will leave this place, Severus.” She laughed heartily and another blast struck the rocks behind Snape, sending shards of limestone into his back.

Snape crawled on his elbows to a better position between two high mounds of glistening, veiny rock. Hoping he correctly remembered where Lupin lay, or that the man had managed to crawl away, Snape used a narrow, invisible Cutting Curse on the domed roof of the cave. Then spelled a basic Blasting Curse to force her to defend forward. The faint whistle of plummeting missiles accompanied Bellatrix’s next taunt about what she would do to some other sensitive area of Snape’s anatomy. This was cut off by a fleshy thud and a sad sigh.

Snape, fearing her faking injury, waited in silence, listening to his own breath

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in the trapped air. In the distance water plonked rhythmically into a resonating pool. Snape searched silently around on the floor of the cave for a loose rock, which he tossed towards the wall to see if it attracted attack. When it did not, he crawled carefully toward the flickering light, keeping to the shadows. Lupin's head was raised, his strained face peering into the gloom beyond. Snape gave him a silencing gesture and crawled on.

He found Bellatrix in a heap, impaled by a spear of rock. Not dead yet, but looking close to it. Snape raised up the lantern and found that the stark shadows were not from the light, but from the blood. Dizziness rocked him as he stood there, the angled cave floor tilting more and then back again. He stood on a precipice of choice for a world in which he had no meaning. If he stood here reeling in that long enough the choice would be made for him and knowledge of that only made him dizzier. What was he doing here, messing about with such things? He must be mad.

Snape eradicated the spike of rock and crouched to tug Bellatrix's robes aside and seal the twisted wound that made a mockery of ribs, sinew and humanity.

"What are you doing?" Lupin asked. He had dragged himself closer and clung to a fleshy-formed mound of slick rock to pull himself upright.

"Would you prefer her to die?"

Lupin had always been too soft hearted, but the question nevertheless stumped him. Snape used the silence to seal off the bleeding, but without a Healer it would only matter temporarily. With a swish and flick, he hovered her toward the narrow cave branch where Apparition was not blocked. Her robes snagged on stalagmites as they went, tattering. Lupin did not follow, and Snape turned to find he had collapsed, dull gaze reflecting the lantern light as it moved away.

"I'll return shortly," Snape said to him, noting grimly that Lupin failed to react to this promise. He set the lamp on the cave floor and Disapparated.

Snape abandoned Bellatrix on the floor of the lift inside the casualty entrance at St. Mungo's. Her wild hair had tangled hopelessly over her face, which saved him from a last sight of it.

Uncaring about being tracked at this point, as long as he evacuated Lupin quickly, Snape returned directly to the cave. Lupin lay where Snape had left him, ashen faced in the lantern light. "You came back," he said, voice weak.

"I said I would." Snape hovered him as well and Apparated him through a misdirection sequence that did not include a crowded wizarding area, but would have to do. Next trip out he would have to carry a broom, which would make interrupting Ministry tracking much easier.

"Remus!" Hermione squeaked in sympathy when she opened the door.

Snape supported Lupin more fully as he swayed, half dragging his toes over the

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threshold and inside the door. Hermione efficiently led the way up the stairs and Snape followed after getting a better grip on his burden.

Lupin's room was lined with disorganized brewing apparati but it sat cold. Between the two of them, they had Lupin cleaned up and laid out in bed in short minutes. Hermione rushed off to fetch soup and soda bread, while Snape remained behind, carefully tracked by bloodshot eyes as he perused the potions tables.

"Looks like you tried to brew Wolfsbane and failed."

Lupin cleared his throat. "Fred and George attempted to brew it for me. They halfway succeeded." Then after a beat. "What are you doing here, Severus?"

A very good question, Snape thought like a bell tolling through him. "I don't feel like explaining myself to you," he replied, moving to the shelves of ingredients, taking stock there, mind working out what could be made as a means of ignoring the broader question. It was the kind of answer that felt natural to an older version of himself, but it did not make him feel good to use it. Somewhere along the line he had started to care what others thought.

Snape was contemplating backing out of getting involved. He had already changed too much. If he were using a Time-Turner the world would have snapped already, gnarled into a ball of twitching, twisted fate and collapsed into itself, and that notion made him ill and uneasy.

Lupin sank back, exhausted. Snape sat on the stool beside the bed and checked his health with a Indicator, making Lupin's eyes open in surprise. "It was rumored that you had a falling out with Voldemort, that he believed you a traitor." Lupin stopped to clear his throat and gather some strength for his voice. "Everyone assumed you'd been killed."

Snape pulled a veneer of cold around himself. "Yes to the first. No to the second. Obviously."

"After everything that's happened, hard to believe you are not just changing sides because you have no choice."

"Believe what you wish. It is no concern of mine."

Lupin coughed lightly, expressing pain at doing so. "It's not quite that simple."

Snape stood and mixed a quick palliative, which he brought back in the stone cup intended for the Wolfsbane – the only clean cup in the room. Lupin took a sip, and the next second the cup thudded hard against the wall as a curse shot across the bed, knocking Snape to the floor and ricocheting around the space, shattering glass potion bottles.

"Harry!" Hermione's voice rang out.

Snape, trapped in the corner anyway, dared to raise his head over the edge of the bed. Glass tinkled and liquids dripped behind him, sizzling as they mated randomly

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on the floor. Harry stood in the doorway wand out, gaze wild and furious.

Snape raised his wand in time for the second blast. He held his ground, but did not retaliate.

“Harry! Don’t fight in here, are you mad!” Hermione shouted. The rug began smoldering acridly and the air grew smoky. Lupin ducked away from the line of fire as best he could, cringing. Hermione moved in to help him, still yelling at her friend. “Harry, Lupin is hurt. Stop it.”

“Oh, Merlin,” Hermione breathed, gazing at the destruction. “Tincture of rose petal mixing with sea wasp stingers.” Headless of getting in the way of the battle, she moved around beside Snape’s feet and shifted things in the broken glass, spelling piles of ingredients to hover in the air in cycling globes of reddish brown and bubbles of glittering liquid.

Harry’s grip on his wand eased, given that his friend was in the way, but the hatred pouring out if him did not. “What the hell are you doing here, you murdering bastard?”

“Trying to help,” Snape replied calmly.

Harry snorted. There wasn’t even the slightest sign of good nature in him. “Get away from there so I can kill you properly.”

Hermione froze and turned. “Harry, he rescued Remus.”

“A trick,” Harry snapped. “Easily planned.” He waved his wand. “Get out of there, away from those two.”

Snape glanced at the floor and stepped around Hermione, taking care not to trail any ingredients into any others. Before he stepped completely around the bed into the open, he said, “Killing me isn’t going to accomplish anything.”

“It gets me a lot of satisfaction,” Harry said.

Snape hesitated on the verge of safety. “Maybe you’ve forgotten the prophecy.”

“Maybe you don’t know the whole bloody thing,” Harry snarled. He was in full on, temper-lost mode; Snape recognized the headlessness of it.

In his local persona, Snape did not have enough room to placate this young man. “I do most certainly know the whole bloody thing,” he stated, letting some heat through, since he was well aware that interminable calm simply drove Harry further over the edge. “That’s why I am also well aware that the prophecy would be null and void if the Dark Lord never heard it. Our joint mentor Dumbledore would have had to tell him himself, if I had not. He was saved the sin of doing so himself.”

Harry stared at him, anger trying to derail on this new idea. “Is that why you killed him?”

“NO,” Snape returned as though Harry were a First Year.

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“I saw you kill him. Don’t deny it,” Harry shouted, pained. And Snape saw it too, in sketchy memories flickering over Harry’s eyes. Snape pinned him there with a whispered spell, trying to get a better sense of what had happened.

A tower and flashing spells. Why was Dumbledore pleading so? Was he pleading with Snape to kill him? There certainly were not a lot of options for the old wizard at that moment, as far as Harry’s fluttering memories showed. Had it merely been arranged to maintain Snape’s reputation? That seemed a pale reason. Mercy killing and the former? He must be missing something critical, something Harry did not know.

“Harry?” Hermione prompted, making Snape release him.

“I don’t deny it,” Snape said, trying to find footing and distract from what he had just done. He had never killed anyone directly before, and to come up with the right dark energy for a Killing Curse against his old mentor, as frustrating as the man sometimes was, seemed inconceivable. “But there is much you don’t know, too.”

Harry returned to shouting. “All I know is that you keep going around killing people that I care about.” He slapped his chest once, anger boiling over again.

“I did not intend to kill your parents,” Snape retorted, seeing no benefit to holding back. “The prophecy did not apply to Lily and James as far as I knew. I was hardly on the announcement list, as you might imagine. Your father’s oversized ego aside, the Longbottoms were far better known as defiers of Voldemort.”

Growing wary, Harry said after a gap, “You said his name.”

That had been a slip. Snape took a deep breath. “Why not? I’m not beholden to him any longer.”

“What? Your arm doesn’t hurt anymore?” Harry taunted, more mocking than Snape ever would want to hear him be.

Snape resisted rubbing his burned forearm and answered honestly. “It does, but I can ignore it.”

Harry’s wand came up to point at his head. “I don’t trust you. I don’t care who you rescued. I want you to leave.”

Snape relaxed slightly. “Hm, I’m moving up. A minute ago you were going to kill me.” To Harry’s darkened gaze, he added, “I don’t think you can get by without me. The prophecy should have been finished by now. I think you need my assistance.” Harry did not argue, merely held the aim of his wand steady. Snape went on, “Given the things you need to collect, I think I can be invaluable, just on my knowledge of where Voldemort tends to keep things.”

“I think he’s right, Harry,” Hermione said.

Harry’s lips twitched nervously. “I think he’s a plant. I think Voldemort gave him one last shot at redeeming himself since he’s the only one who can get in here.

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That's what I think. I think we should make him regret doing that, then make him forget everything, and then dump him in the street for his friends who are always on guard to pick up and do with as they please."

Snape sat on the foot of the bed but he kept his wand at hand. He crossed his legs and looked around at the blackened, cold cauldrons lined up along the wall. "At least you aren't being foolish," Snape said. "That's something." When Harry had no reply to this, Snape went on, "How about I give my wand to Ms. Granger, whom I trust because her temper is a little more predictable than yours, and you give me a chance to prove myself?"

Harry thought while Snape waited. When Harry nodded at Hermione, Snape said, "Oh, I'm not giving up my wand until you agree."

Harry grew thoughtful, which was a definite improvement. "It's still a setup. Whatever you do will be designed to work out and then you'll turn on us."

"Well," Snape said, sitting back slightly, making himself at home. "In that case, you get a freebie don't you? And you can decide to give me another chance ad nauseam, until such time as it becomes clear that it can no longer be a setup because Vo- the Dark Lord would never relinquish a Horcrux, even to capture you. You are just a puny, upstart boy, and the Horcruces, well... they are immortality."

Harry blinked at him in silence, surprised by this openness and by how much Snape knew. "Well..." Harry said, hesitating, anger dissipating.



Snape stood before the cauldrons in Lupin's room, all of them bubbling now.

Harry skulked in, wand in hand. He sniffed at the first one. "That doesn't look like Wolfsbane."

"It isn't. It is the precursor to Veritaserum, which I thought would be useful to you. There are many potions that could be of use to you." Snape finished stirring one viscous pot and set the silver stirrer on the rest before the cauldron so as not to mix it up with the others. "I am willing to do things that are more helpful than brewing, but if that is all I am limited to, I will try to make myself as useful as possible."

"I don't trust you enough to let you do more. This Hermione can double check."

"As you wish," Snape stated, bored.

"You still haven't explained why you killed Dumbledore," Harry said, raising his wand and looking fierce.

Snape fished for yet another diversionary line. "If he did not see fit to explain to you, why should I?"

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Harry's frown deepened, taking this as an insult. "You're saying Dumbledore kept you informed. You, who had no prophecy?"

"Hardly." Snape said, sounding firmly like he meant it, "If you think for one minute that I am not as trapped by circumstances as you are, you are sadly mistaken."

Harry relented marginally and went back to sniffing cauldrons.

Snape's Harry, when he brought him home had been hungry for an authority figure to respect. "Sit down, Potter," Snape said with an edge of command. When Harry merely glowered, he added, "You have been fighting Voldemort a mere eight or nine years. Some of us have been fighting him for twice that. Sit down and listen for a moment."

Harry sat on the edge of the bed, looking difficult.

Snape leaned back against the bench and said, "There is not much I can tell you that you do not already know, but perhaps hearing it spoken aloud will be of use to the rut you are in."

Without looking up, Harry complained, "You sound like Dumbledore. What happened to you?"

"If we can leave off with the insults, that would be preferable," Snape commented. This garnered a raised brow, a good sign. Going on, Snape said, "You have grown too careful... wait, let me finish. You let your losses lead you to a sort of paralysis where you too fiercely fear losing other members of the Order, and as a result risk losing even more because you keep letting the enemy regroup and grow stronger. Every rule the Ministry adds on that goes unchallenged, every death that goes uninvestigated, all of these things weaken your position."

"You want me to risk everything. Throw it all away? I knew you were still on Voldemort's side."

"You need to be bolder; I said nothing about being stupider." Snape tended to a cauldron and then fetched the stool over to sit on. He was heartened to have the young man's attention and wanted to make the most of it, even if he lost a potion doing so.

Harry said, "I'm tired of everyone getting hurt, or killed. Especially for something that was my idea. It's my fault then."

"It isn't your fault. It is Voldemort and his followers' fault. And these friends and associates that do as you ask are doing it because they believe in what they are attempting. They have already decided that the outcome is worth the risk. That isn't for you to decide for them. Have some respect for them."

Harry mulled that over, instinctively needing to offset some guilt. Falling ever more glum, he said, "Things have got so bad that more and more witches and wizards want to volunteer, even though they don't really have the skills to help."

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“The war is going quite badly,” Snape said, feeling he needed to say that to someone, anyone. The newly delivered newspapers gathering in the kitchen had alarmed him more than he ever imagined he could be. They had missed this utter chaos in his world, something he was eternally grateful for... assuming he would one day return there. The Muggles were inextricably involved now, and the grand excuses for the destruction became more elaborate and unlikely, magic and mundane churning and over-spilling poison across Europe.

Harry raised his eyes and studied Snape, and Snape realized he had broken character too far. That had been a problem the last two days, trying to remain nasty when the outside world had that well covered had proved impossible for him.

Harry said, “The war is going so badly that my worst enemy is trying to help.” His eyes did not waver from studying Snape. “There is something very wrong with you.”

“So you say,” Snape retorted, recovering some attitude. “I reserve the right to reach my personal limit on things. Just like everyone else.”

From the doorway, Hermione said, “I’ve been wondering if you are really you.” She stepped inside and held out a clear glass marble. “I borrowed this from Feorge. Hold out your hand.”

“What is that?” Snape asked, glad to have the leeway to behave paranoid.

“It’s a Truth Teller,” she lectured him. “Easier than Veritaserum, except that it can’t make someone talk.”

Snape held out his hand and Hermione dropped the marble into it. “Say your name,” Hermione commanded.

“Severus Snape.”

The marble flashed white. Hermione turned to Harry. “Could there be more than one?”

“Merlin, I hope not,” Harry said, exhaling hard. “Are you helping Voldemort?”

Hermione interrupted before Snape could answer. “It doesn’t work very well that way. It’s too easy for the person to answer some other question he or she silently asked him- or herself in between. You have to make them say a statement. Say: I’m helping Voldemort.”

Snape peered at her. “You want me to say that?” He studied the marble, not trusting it. But in the end, he repeated the statement. The marble flickered pink and black. He insisted in a huff, “I would not help Voldemort,” and the marble flickered white. He dropped the marble back in her hand. “Enough of that.”

“Something to hide?” Harry taunted.

“Many things. Especially from prying Gryffindors.”

Harry muttered, “I still don’t trust him.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Snape said, “I don’t care. It is better if you remain untrusting when planning. Given the powers being used against you, anyone can be turned at any time.”

Hermione said, “Like the other day, Ron had a fantastic idea and I felt I should check him for an Imperio.” She gave Harry an apologetic half-smile.

Snape took the opportunity to study Harry better. Usually when they occupied the same room, he kept an angry scowl fixed on his face. With his attention diverted by his friend, Harry’s face softened with humor into a strained and beaten down mode.

Hermione read Harry’s face too, “I made lunch. Are you coming down?”

Harry nodded vaguely. “I want to ask Snape one more thing.”

Hermione glanced worriedly between them turned with a bounce of her hair. Harry slunk around the potions one last time. “Is the Wolfsbane going to be done in time to help Remus next week?”

“Just barely. He will have a supply three days before the full moon, which is not optimal, but should help with the drain on his psyche.”

Harry swallowed. “Yeah, he’s not been doing well.” Clearly this burden draped heavily over his shoulders as well. Slowly, Harry got to the point. “What you said just now... about people doing what I say because they want to do it – they think it’s right. Did you mean that?”

“Have you held some piece of blackmail over their heads beforehand? Held a family member captive on the side, for example?”

Harry’s face contorted in confusion. “No, of course not.”

“Of course not,” Snape echoed. “The situation is dire. Many who volunteer now have already lost all they have to live for. They are trying to make the best of it. That isn’t your fault.”

He could see Harry’s chest expand and relax as he took that in. “You are the last person who would say that if it weren’t true.”

“I expect,” Snape replied, feeling terribly bad for this young man despite that weakness being identical to the pitfall he had just warned about.

Harry stared off into space and shook his head faintly. “I can’t see the trap you are laying here. Nothing makes any sense.”

Snape thought wryly, If I told you the truth, it would make even less. He concocted something likely sounding. “Like everyone else, Potter, I’ve grown deathly tired of the way things are going. Egos aside, something much change, and quickly. Even I, as accustomed to darkness as I am, cannot take any more.”

As plausible as this sounded, it appeared to pile on to Harry’s psychic burden, and his face fell into the distant bleakness of his inner vision.

TANGLED THREADS

Snape struggled for something else to say. This wasn't his Harry; he knew what to say to his Harry. "You would not be named in the prophecy if it was not possible for you to succeed at this."

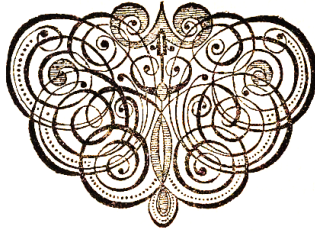
Quietly, as though fearing being overheard, Harry unburdened himself, "It feels impossible."

"It isn't," Snape said with immense confidence. "That I'm certain of."

Author's Notes:

Opting for sleep instead of finding a preview. Trust that it would be an incredibly cruel one anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



DECEPTIVE DEVICES

Harry woke to the discomfort of his head lolling on an uneven surface while he fought to draw in a much needed breath. His hands fumbled for the wand in his pocket, scattering what felt like gritty ash and sticky damp shards over his robe-front. He had difficulty pulling his wand out, as though it had burrowed down too deep into his pocket. Spasmodically brushing off his cold-clumsy hands, Harry finally gained a grip on his wand and used it to warm the floor beside him. He used a spell strong enough that the heat seeped over to him without him having to move.

Eventually, with many preparatory deep breaths of rotted air, Harry sat up and peered around the decrepit hall. If this was not the right place, it was at least an equally miserable place. The oversized, candle-lined pentagram in the center of the floor, as creepy as it was, reassured him that this was the right place. Harry brushed his hand off again and froze as he spotted red flecked chips of bone amongst the fine ash clinging to his hand – the Hat Rabbit. Harry looked around the floor and then back at the destruction evidenced on his hands. The animal had not in the least survived passing in between. The paw Harry had held was the most intact part of it, but its frozen-into-dust remains spoke plaintively of the unforgiving harshness between the Planes. Harry could not even blame the rabbit's demise on its lack of magic, because it had been a magical creature.

Harry sighed and cleaned himself off with a spell before standing creakily to inspect the pentagram, which represented his next best hope. The Device exuded a distinctly Snape-like precision. Question now was, where was his Snape? Harry circled the unlit shape, an angled forest of warped candles glowing faintly with the light leaking in the

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partly boarded windows. As he came around to the hearth side of the room again, a translucent form wafted out of the kitchen door.

“Harry Potter...” Tidgy said, the ghostly sound seeping right into Harry’s bones.

“Tidgy,” Harry said in surprise.

“I is having a message for Harry Potter.”

“Oh, do you?” Harry could barely believe this luck. “Good.”

“Master says you will find him at your godfather’s house, Harry Potter.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Harry said, letting relief carry away the worst strain from recent events. “Thank you, Tidgy.”

The elf gave a long sniffing whine, like a gas leak, and dabbed at a transparent tear. “Everyone is thanking Tidgy.”

“Well, you deserve it. And please keep an eye on the house, eh?”

Harry donned his usual disguise and Apparated for Grimmauld Place’s porch, wondering exactly what he was going to find behind the dark old door. Delaying finding his adoptive father, just to find out the details of recent events here was not something he could withstand; so there he stood, unprepared.

Neville Longbottom opened the door, peaking through the crack with his wand tip sticking through. “Who are you?”

“I’m an old friend of Dumbledore’s...” Harry began in his plodding old manner, barely managing to hold it through his impatience.

Neville interrupted, “Well, you’d have to be to get this far.” But he failed to open the door wider.

Harry said, “I’m looking for someone I believe is visiting here: Severus Snape. Is he here?”

“Hang about.”

The door clicked closed. When it next opened, Hermione was there, a harried, permanently-stuck-in-examination-revisions Hermione. “Who are you?”

“Aaron Totten is my name. I was made to understand that Severus Snape is here, and I need to see him. I’m an old friend of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore’s.”

Hermione’s narrowed eyes peered at him, judging him. “What do you want with Mr. Snape?” Her head disappeared and the sound of harsh whispering leaked outside. A piece of “...but I don’t want to leave an old man just standing out there in the cold... well, but he has to have been given an invite at some point, right?”

The door opened wider. Hermione said, “Come on in, but you’ll have to excuse our assigning you an escort. Standard procedure.”

“What is?” Neville asked in confusion, and Hermione elbowed him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Harry put on a kindly attitude. "It's no trouble my dear. I understand." He dearly, painfully, ached to point out that they should be checking for a disguise, but decided it best to not do so.

Hermione led Harry upstairs to where an aura of brewing hung in the still air like a curtain. She opened a bedroom door and led the way inside, saying, "Mr. Snape, someone is here to see you – an Aaron Totten."

Snape turned and looked up from the notes in his hand. Harry knew instantly he had the right man; there was a firmness, a stability, beneath the depths of this Snape's gaze where the other possessed only frantic strategy and suspicion.

"Harr-on," Snape said in surprise, correcting mid-word. Hermione closed the door behind her with just a quick mutter about leaving them alone to talk.

Hermione slipped away quickly because she had just surreptitiously made sure the twins' crystal ball was well positioned on the stand by the door and that was a much better way to eavesdrop than hanging around, obviously in the way. Down in the dining room, Neville had already pulled out the other half of the pair of connected crystals and placed it on the table, and was forcing Ron to be quiet as he asked too many questions about what was happening. Lavender crept out to fetch Harry and Ginny, who were in the kitchen.

Hermione doused the lamps and knelt on a chair to lean close to the sphere to hear. Ron reached more easily with his long neck. Back in Lupin's room, disguised Harry said, "Took me too long to find you."

Snape, over his surprise, calmly stated, "I left a message."

"That worked fine. But it took me too long to figure out you were gone."

The two of them stood stock still for a breath with Harry washed limp by relief. He crossed over to Snape and gave him a firm hug he was so grateful to be standing before him.

Down in the dining room, Ron covered his eyes and said, "Make me un-see that!"

Hermione hit him on the arm and whispered harshly, "Quiet! Sometimes the crystal balls go two-way."

Snape snorted a faint laugh and said with false sternness, "You disappoint me. I thought an hour, at most."

Harry released him to pace, disgusted with himself. "Yeah. Things were a little mad at home last weekend."

"How is... your fellow doing?" Snape asked. He made a motion to scratch his neck below his left ear, one of several Auror signals that indicated they were being monitored.

"Better. He's not the one I'm worried about right now. It's you."

Snape did not respond immediately. "I am doing all right."

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Harry glared back. "I don't like the sound of that. You need to come home."

Snape turned to tend to a cauldron that was frothing hard, mimicking the rushing sound of a small waterfall. "Severus," Harry said in a threatening tone.

"Yes, I agree. But it is not easy."

Harry had to admit that he was not sure how to make it work out, but the spell must be repeatable. "You can't be resisting coming home. You don't belong here. It's too dangerous."

Snape waited for Harry to meet his gaze. "I realize it means going back on things I've said to you, but there are tasks only I can do here."

"I don't care," Harry snapped, heating quickly. "You have responsibilities at home, if I'm not mistaken."

Snape's brow rose in surprise. "Sensitive topic, I see."

Harry bit his lip. Snape cut in with, "Is my colleague behaving himself?"

Harry paced again. The room smelled of potions and sour sweat and it keyed him up more. "Well enough. I made a point about him doing so. I don't think he could have misunderstood."

"Are you behaving yourself?"

Harry studied the colorful stains running down the shelves in a pattern that implied there had been a serious accident recently. "Of course," Harry said in his best false voice. A bit of blackmail felt good.

Down in the dining room, Hermione asked no one in particular, "Who is this wizard? How did he know Dumbledore and how does he know Mr. Snape?"

Ron, whinging faintly and backing away from the crowd around the crystal, said, "Sounds like they live together. What a thought."

Ginny said, "That would explain why he's not married."

Harry said, "It would? Like being a hopeless, evil, bat-like git isn't sufficient reason?"

Hermione shrugged as if to concede that point. "I guess everyone has at least one person who cares about them. Sounds like Totten cares. 'Though he's awfully old for... well."

Ron ducked his head into his long, boney arms. "Aaaarg, stop it!"

Harry leaned into the space Ron made. "I just want to know if he's yet another enemy we need to worry about."

Hermione whispered, "Doesn't... seem like it. He wants to take Mr. Snape away, doesn't he? Well, except that might not help."

"It would help me," Harry muttered stubbornly.

Back in the bedroom, Snape methodically stirred a grey, gruel-like potion and sprinkled in some long dried twigs that were immediately swallowed up. He said,

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“You’ll have to locate something for me to be able to leave. I’m a bit of a prisoner here.”

“The half-burned book. I know.”

Snape turned to him sharply, despite his hands staying busy. “You must have made quite an impression on my colleague.”

“I tried to. It wasn’t difficult.”

Snape bent over to sniff the cauldron before turning down the heat on it. “I don’t like you doing that.”

“I don’t like you being here. You don’t owe this place anything.”

Snape hesitated replying. “I would have agreed until I got here. Now it is not so clear.”

Harry rolled his eyes, and huffed in frustration. “I’ll find the book and figure out how to get you back. Are you going to be all right?” he asked, placing a hand on Snape’s arm and gripping it. He hated leaving him here. “I can take you somewhere safer.”

Snape studied him closely. “You have not been following the news, have you? No place in Europe is safe. I do not think even you can travel easily farther than that.”

Harry’s hand slipped off his arm, trying to take that in. “It’s like last time, with Grindelwald.”

“Where has this bloke been?” Hermione blurted in the darkness. “Living in a cave?”

Snape said, “By the time it is finished, it may be worse.”

“All the more reason to leave,” Harry said.

With no rancor, Snape pointed out, “You are quite a fickle person in this regard, aren’t you?”

Harry’s only reply was a thoughtful frown. “You have other responsibilities, as I said. You aren’t trying to avoid them, are you?”

Snape shook his head slowly, but with less conviction than Harry would like. “But once one is steeped in a place like this, it becomes difficult to remember there is another, more real one... waiting.”

“Well, it is waiting,” Harry criticized. “Don’t forget that.”

“I can’t,” Snape stated, strangely flat. “I killed Dumbledore for a reason, remember?”

Harry stared at him, realizing after a beat that this was a message regarding his counterpart. “Yeah,” he muttered doubtfully, trying to digest that.

“Not for reasons anyone can understand here,” Snape went on, eyes intense. Harry got the sense that Snape was asking him to find the answer.

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Harry swallowed. "Then, I really have to go, but I'll return as soon as I can." He gave Snape another quick hug and departed.

When he made the bend in the corridor, Harry saw himself waiting at the bottom of the stairs. His counterpart stood with head cocked suspiciously, but his attitude appeared patient, as though he would wait all day there.

Harry stroked his beard to reassure himself it was intact and started down, slowly, pretending to be pained. "Hello, there, young man," Harry rumbled, trying to sound less like himself and more like a doting old uncle.

Hard as granite, slippery as glass, the other asked, "Who are you?"

"Not your concern," Harry replied. "No threat to you, I assure you. Just looking after my family."

This caught the other by surprise and his suspicion relaxed, making him appear far more vulnerable. "Oh."

"Times like these, we have to all stick together right?"

The other nodded vaguely, mind diverted elsewhere, an unshielded mind from which Harry caught a jumbled scene of helpless paralysis on the ramparts of Hogwarts, hated Death Eaters arriving, then Dumbledore, blasted off the tower in a wash of green, but it was too jumbled and fraught with disbelieving panic to piece together.

Harry said sympathetically, "He wouldn't have left the task to you if you could not do it."

The other's head snapped up sharply. Harry winked at him. "You need to learn some Occlusion. Perhaps while Severus is here."

The other went from wary to disgusted. Prompting Harry to add firmly, "There is no sacrifice too great at this stage."

Hermione slipped into the hallway, apparently to listen in better, or provide moral support. She had her wand out but her arms wrapped around herself.

The other Harry asked, "How do you know Dumbledore?"

"I knew him my whole life," Harry replied. "But never as well as I should have. He always kept something back. Obviously he did that to you too."

The other said smartly, "That doesn't answer the question."

Kindly, Harry said, "I'm not going to answer the question. It's irrelevant to you." He stood there longer, wanting to say more. The vacillations in his counterpart's emotions spoke of far too much stress and long-term damage, and Harry could see why Snape hesitated leaving. "Just keep in mind the things Albus told you."

Spoiled sounding now, the other said, "Been so long... it's hard to remember."

Harry had turned to go, but now turned back. Finding annoyance worming its way in, he said, "He told you what your greatest weapon was, did he not?"

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The other backed off in renewed wariness, and Harry tried not to grin. “Maybe I knew Albus too well, after all. Just keep it in mind.”



Harry did as he said he needed to, and hurried home. He woke up before his hearth, which Winky had started early for the cloudy afternoon. Harry lay there with the fire burning dangerously close to his hair, listening to the crackle of the fresh wood turning to ash.

Kali called from her cage, and Harry found the strength to strain his weary limbs and get up to fetch her out. He paced around the room, holding her in one hand and petting her with the other, remembering the Hat Rabbit with some regret. With a deep sigh, he stroked his pet one last time before raising her to his shoulder so he could free his hands to write a letter.

Harry had to go down to the drawing room to find clean parchment. Snape’s desk felt violated, but Harry found everything in the usual place. He tugged out a sheet of the best, creamy-white parchment, opened an ink bottle and began:

Severus,

I hope you are not getting too comfortable there at our illustrious and quiet school, and that you are behaving as your colleagues expect, rather than as you wish to. I am going to assign a few of your students the task of keeping an eye on you. I expect you to ignore their activities if you discover them, which I’m certain you will, given that they are mere children and you an evil wizard’s associate. If I hear any negative reports, trust that I will not be pleased.

Harry read through what he had written. It sounded like the words of someone who expected to be in charge. One part of him wanted to go straight there and threaten him again, it squirmed at mere letter writing. Harry suppressed that instinct, and dipped the quill again.

*I have one question for you and I expect an honest and prompt answer.
What did you do vis-à-vis Dumbledore?*

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Harry triple-underlined the word “prompt”, pulled over a candle to work through making the letter for Snape’s eye’s only, and sent it off with Hedwig. He then composed three more letters for his old friends there including the only Slytherin he trusted fully enough: Suze. He made up a poor excuse for the task that family life seemed to be taking a toll on his adoptive father and he wanted to know that Snape was not taking that out on the students. Harry did not like that excuse, but it was the best he could think of, and anyone with an already doubtful view of the difficult Hogwarts professor, would be quick to believe it. Harry did not send the same letter to Hermione, in this case his overly sharp friend would be too difficult to assuage once her suspicions were aroused. Harry would have to hope she was too tied up with teaching to notice a shift in Snape’s behavior.

Harry went to his training the next day, distracted and with his readings only partly absorbed. The workout and drills gave him a much-needed distraction from his problems until lunch when he meant to head to the Minister’s office to see Belinda.

Aaron waylaid Harry before he reached the stairs. He took one of Harry’s arms, like he needed the support more than to stop Harry. “I need to talk to you. Do you have plans this evening?”

“I don’t have plans,” Harry said. “Stop over after training, won’t you?”

Aaron immediately brightened. “Great. Cheers.” Hands in his pockets, he sauntered off down the corridor.

Harry headed up to the top floor and found to his dismay that the Minister’s outer office contained Fudge and quite a number of other important people gathered in clusters, talking. Harry did not see Belinda in the crowd to catch her eye, so he retreated – to his stomach’s delight – it was not pleased about the prospect of missing lunch.

Harry opened his reading as he ate the meat pie Winky had prepared for him. Mr. Weasley told him he would prefer Harry not buy anything, even from a Muggle shop in the area. Harry bit into the middle of the pie, surprised to find his heating spell had not made it all the way through. He definitely needed to clear up some of the distractions in his life, especially if his magic was going to suffer for it.

At home that evening, Harry took a seat with his books beside Candide. An owl arrived, one of the plain brown ones Hogwarts kept so many of. Harry put the letter away in the back of his book rather than risk Candide even seeing who it was from. If it had an Eye’s Only charm on it, it would burn up before he could read it.

Something about his actions or his attitude caused her to ask, “Everything all right, Harry?”

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Harry held the book *Monsters Too Small To See* open in his lap and gave her his attention. How to answer that?

“Things have been better,” he admitted.

Taken aback, she patted his arm and prompted, “Really?” in disbelief. “What’s troubling you?”

She sounded like the question really mattered, so Harry worked harder on a good answer. She brushed his rampant hair back. “I’d suggest a hair cut, but I realize short hair isn’t the norm in this household.”

Harry peered back at her open gaze, discovering for the first time that such a gesture, unlike Mrs. Weasley’s in years past, did not bother him. He wondered now why it would do so.

Mouth curled in amusement, she said to his silence, “You’re much too thoughtful for someone your age.”

“I wouldn’t be if I had a choice,” he pointed out, smiling too without trying.

She put her book down. It was a soft-covered pale green book of rule changes for the new accounting year. “Maybe you are looking for trouble now?”

Harry emphatically shook his head. “No. If only that were true.” He sat back and sighed. Part of him wanted to tell her that her husband was an impostor, but another more careful and strategic part held back. Harry may not be able to switch his guardian back, or his Snape may be killed before that could be managed. This fear kept Harry silent by itself. He cast his mind ahead, trying to accept that outcome because he knew from past experience he must plan for every possible eventuality, no matter how grave. In that case, Harry thought with grim determination, he would stay in this house and make sure this interloper took over and assured that Snape’s son did not want for a father.

“Hm,” Candide muttered. “You are definitely far away, somewhere.”

“Sorry,” Harry said, feeling vaguely depressed. “I have a lot to think about.” He excused himself to go and read the letter in his room. His stuff had been packed away in trunks in preparation for moving to the other, more distant bedroom, something he had resisted doing until Snape was truly back, preferring to stay closer to their room.

The letter read:

Potter,

If you were not so straightforward in your small-minded thinking, you would realize that it is perfectly in my interests to behave predictably.

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But, that said, I refuse to restrain from getting Slytherin House in order or retaking my class from a soft-minded interloper.

As to your last question, I cannot earn your understanding in this. Suffice to say, with little consolation, that he was dying anyway, and he commanded me to do as I did. Though you may not believe it of me, I did not wish to and I argued against it. The old wizard died of sentimentality for a lost cause and forced me to be the vehicle for it. That is all I wish to say on the matter.

Harry destroyed the letter and felt a wave of relief that he did not have a truly evil version of his adoptive father on his hands, assuming what the man said was true. It felt like the truth, which bought Harry a little more time to work things out. But to fix things, Harry really needed the book printed with purple ink. There must be a copy in this Plane as well as the other one.

Harry went back down to the main hall and said, "I have to go to Hogwarts to look for something. Aaron is supposed to come over; I'll go to Hogwarts while he's here to keep you company."

"I need company?"

"I want you left alone as little as possible." He said this in a tone of finality, feeling like the old-man version of himself. She did not debate further, just tilted her head noncommittally, opened her rule book again and went back to taking notes in it while Harry returned to his reading.

A quick double knock sounded on the door. As expected, Harry found Aaron waiting in the garden, his impeccably embroidered, shiny, unwrinkled cloak draped fully around himself in the chilling air.

"Ello, Harry," he said breathily, before striding in at Harry's gesture of invitation. Aaron greeted Candide and took a seat opposite her, head hanging a bit low.

"Can I get you something?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I could really use a... never mind." He waved his hand. "I better not."

Harry resumed his seat beside Candide. "What's going on?"

"I need to talk to someone."

Harry glanced at Candide quickly and asked Aaron, "Do you want to move to the drawing room?"

Candide uncurled her feet out from under her saying, "I can go upstairs."

Aaron waved dismissively again. "No, it's all right. Please stay. It's your house, after all." He scrubbed his hair, then smoothed it carefully, managing to make it

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

look even better through this process. He clasped his hands between his knees and announced, "I uh, I asked Ginny to marry me."

"What!" Harry blurted, glad he had not fetched a drink for himself because he would have spilled it right then. "You did?"

Aaron sighed loudly. "I did."

Harry could not find any words. Candide eagerly asked, "What did she say?"

Soberly, Aaron replied. "She said she had to think about it."

"I would say," Harry managed. "What... what made you ask her?" he sputtered.

Aaron's brow twisted to perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." Harry paused, regrouping. "I don't know. Just seems sudden."

Aaron pointed at him. "That's what she said."

"Well, it is, isn't it?" Harry returned.

Aaron shrugged his boney shoulders. "I don't know. I've never done this before."

They both turned to Candide, who glanced between them before laughing lightly. "Don't look at me."

"You're the only married one here," Harry pointed out.

"That does not make me an expert," she replied while marking her spot and setting her her book aside on the end-table. She clasped her hands over her knee and said, "If it feels right. Time isn't the issue. You can know someone for years and still not know everything about them. Until you see them in the right circumstances, some part of their personality may never come out."

You are about to learn a lot about Severus, Harry grimly thought.

Candide went on, speaking to Aaron. "If she didn't say "no", outright, you're still okay."

Aaron bleakly peered at the metal-railed staircase off to his right, eyes tracing up it to the balcony. A knock sounded on the door, and everyone stared at everyone else until Harry jumped up.

Ginny stood at the door, bundled haphazardly in her rough woolen cloak. "Can I talk to you, Harry?"

"Er, of course. Come on in."

Harry expected to find Aaron in the hall, but he was absent. Candide pointed surreptitiously toward the drawing room door, which was open just a crack.

"Want anything?" Harry asked Ginny while he tried to decide whether to reveal that Aaron was already here.

Ginny shook her head, gaze lost far beyond the stone walls surrounding them.

Harry tried for a normal voice, "So, what's going on?"

Ginny pulled her cloak tighter. "Uh, Aaron asked me to marry him."

"Did he?" Candide asked, not sounding very authentic, but Ginny failed to notice.

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“Em... what did you say?” Harry asked.

Winky arrived in a sparkle bearing a cup of cocoa. Ginny accepted it and sipped it between sighs. “I told him I didn’t know.” Then a moment later. “Crazy.” She shrugged off her cloak and fell back, slouching nearly horizontal with her fine-boned hands out before her, clutching the steaming mug.

Candide reassured her, “You can’t make that sort of decision quickly.”

“I really do like him and all,” Ginny said.

Harry could see movement through the crack in the drawing room door and he disliked the deception of letting Aaron overhear. Fortunately, Candide seemed content to run the conversation.

“And he has money; that should make the decision easier.”

Harry spun his head to look at her, wondering at her bluntness.

Ginny replied, “It doesn’t really; it makes it harder. The money is... like a third person you have to get to know and figure out if you can live with. No, it would be easier to decide if he were poor. He thought he was, briefly, when he believed you’d used all his money to ransom him. Said he was glad he wasn’t, otherwise he couldn’t ask me.” She shook her head again. “Crazy.”

“And you would decide what in the case of his being poor?” Candide went on, like an interview.

Like watching Beater practice, Harry turned back to Ginny.

“Oh, I don’t know. I just know it’d be easier.” She bit her nails for second before dropping her hands to her lap. “I just hope he gives me some time to think about it.”

“I’m certain he will,” Harry said, loudly enough to carry across the hall. Harry stood. “I have to go Hogwarts, care to go along?”

Ginny stood as well, but because her head hung low, she did not see the shifting of the light through the drawing room door. “No, I should get home. I told mum I’d help with cooking more.”

“She doesn’t even have that many to cook for,” Harry said.

“Yeah,” Ginny said. “I’m getting the idea lately she thinks she’s done enough cooking for a lifetime, and I need to learn better.”

Candide from her relaxed seat said, “Not if you marry Aaron, you won’t.”

Ginny pondered that a second before saying, “All the more reason to learn. I don’t want to rely on someone for literally everything.”

Harry suppressed a smile and with a thanks, Ginny Disapparated. Aaron immediately slunk out of the drawing room with a guilty curve to his back. Harry did not have the heart to give his friend trouble, so he said, “You were saying?”

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“Maybe it was a little sudden,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. With a sigh, he let his arm fall.

“Want to have a seat?” Harry asked, worried his friend was slipping into a funk.

“I don’t want to take up any more of your time,” Aaron politely replied.

“It’s not a problem,” Harry insisted.

Aaron appeared unconvinced. Candide said, “Have a seat. You can do Harry a favor. He needs to run an errand and wants me to have company.”

Brightening slightly, Aaron said, “Cheers then. Thanks.” He sat back and propped his hands daintily in his lap. “I could use the company too. Since my troubles with the date I picked up at my favorite club, I haven’t much for going out.”

Harry shot Candide a grateful look, fetched his cloak, and Apparated away as the conversation moved to Candide asking, “What does your mum say about your choice?” and Aaron flinching with a mumbled answer about him not informing her yet.

Harry landed on the railroad bridge, still shaking his head. Maybe Candide could sort Aaron out; Harry certainly had no chance at it.

With the wind tugging and ballooning his cloak, Harry peered along the mist-lit valley emerging from below the trestle at his feet. He needed to think things through before rushing into Hogwarts. He did not want Snape to know he was there so he should head directly to the library to speak with Madam Pince to inquire about the book. Harry had another book by the same anonymous author, but it was short and contained only theories, not any facts and certainly not instructions for a device to travel between worlds.

After settling his mind and drawing his uplifted cloak close around him, Harry slipped into the Dark Plane and directly into the Restricted Section of the library. The tall shelves towered over Harry as he stood and listened to see if his arrival had been noticed. Students whispered as they worked at the tables, vellum pages shushed as they slid over one another, a binding slapped closed and footsteps sounded far on the other side of the room. Harry peered up and down the nearby shelves. He had already once before checked all of these books for help with the Dark Plane, he doubted he would have missed the one Snape described. Harry slipped out of the row and through the gate, casually, as if he had every reason to be there and just had been hanging around for a while.

Madam Pince sat at her desk, holding her bifocals at just the right angle to read the tiny print on the verso of the book she held open. Whispers of surprise followed Harry across the room as the students noticed him. The room fell silent and attentive as he reached the desk.

“Uh, ah, Mr. Potter,” Pince whispered in surprise. “What can I do for you?”

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“I have question for you. Can we talk in your office?”

“Ah, yes, of course.” She gave the library’s student occupants a critical eyeing before retreating and inviting Harry into her office with a kind bow.

Inside the high-ceilinged, heavily shelved room, Harry said, “I’m looking for a special book. It’s a thick one.”

“Well, I do hope you have more description than that,” she said scornfully. “You sound like a patron at the Wizard Public Library in London, I have to say.”

“It has purple ink,” Harry helpfully added.

Madam Pince’s attitude changed. She gave Harry a piercing gaze. “Professor Snape was just looking around for a similar book early Sunday night. I’d forgotten my reading glasses and found him skulking around in the Restricted Section as though he weren’t a professor here, or something, and free to come in any time.”

Harry kept his face level. “Did he find the book?”

“Not that I know of. If he’d given me an author, I could have helped him. I sent him off and told him not to disturb the books any more than necessary. At midnight, of all times.” She scoffed. She took a seat at her desk and adjusted her glasses. “So, purple ink, you say. Do you have the author’s name?”

Harry shook his head. “How many thick, purple ink books could there be?” he asked, trying to stay hopeful. He imagined himself traveling endlessly from Plane to Plane, asking this of every single Madame Pince, and felt queasy in his stomach.

She removed her glasses and glanced around the rough wooden shelves sagging beside her under the weight of wide, shiny leather volumes. Harry took the cue and also glanced around, wishing Snape had not been able to Occlude his thoughts so that Harry could have glimpsed a vision of the book. When Harry’s eyes came back to the desk, Madame Pince quickly shut the book she had out. It was bound like any other, in leather with marbled paper inside the cover, but the writing indicated it was being used like a notebook.

At Harry’s curious attention, she said shyly, “Just a little story I’ve been working on.” She put the book away in a drawer and shut it rather loudly for a librarian. “But you were saying...?”

Harry thought more and said, “Dumbledore maybe owned the book at one point. Did Severus mention that?”

Madame Pince raised a brow. “No, he did not.” She slid her chair back to get to her feet again. “Let’s check the Bereft Book room, then. Many of Professor Dumbledore’s books ended up there,” she said, reaching to open the corner book case that turned out to be a shelf-covered door, where the shelves were screwed directly into the stout, Hogwarts wood. The door did not open far before the shelves struck each other. Harry squeezed in behind the librarian, forced to duck to keep his shoulder

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getting stabbed by the wall shelf.

Sparse light filtered in through a window blocked by stacks of trunks. A long narrow desk occupied the other wall, with narrow drawers and shelves of materials like leather hides, large marbled paper sheets, threads on spools and heavy needles. A book lay open with its pages sewn together in bundles but not glued into a binding.

“Dumbledore’s books needed repair?” Harry asked. “I guess they were probably all very old.”

Pince waved her wand to shift the stack of trunks, saying, “Many of them needed repair because of some accident he had in his office.” She popped open a trunk and used a spell to make the books hover in a nice display orientation, waved them back and went to the next. “He never would say what happened. It was just at the end of the school year a few years back.” The trunks thunked together as she shifted them and popped the next open.

Harry’s chest tightened. That had been him that had damaged the contents of the headmaster’s office.

Pince saying brightly, “Ah, here it tis,” broke Harry from his guilty reverie. The books were flying back into the trunk... all but one, or... half of one. Pince reverently held out, with both hands, the limply bound, but still heavy, partial book. The flopping binding showed how very long the book had been before half the pages had been burned away. The border pages had scorched edges but the rest were bright and undamaged even by smoke, indicating spell damage rather than real fire.

Harry thumbed the pages, daunted by the small print and obscure diagrams contained within. “Thanks,” he said, trying to sound bright. “Can I keep it?”

Pince perched her glasses farther down her nose and took the book back for examination. “If you want it. Bit of an odd duck, that author. Not sure why Professor Dumbledore kept it around at all.”

Harry thanked her and said, “Please don’t tell Severus I found it. I, er, want to surprise him with it as a present.”

She waved him off as they exited the Bereft Book room, indicating that she cared little either way. Harry was so pleased to have the book, he nearly absentmindedly slipped into the Dark Plane from her office. He tripped over his feet when he turned for the door instead with a jerk of his limbs.

“Careful there, young man,” she said in her patron-correcting voice.

“Yes, I will be,” Harry said, adding to himself: as soon as I get everything set to rights.

Out in the corridor where the beveled glass wall to the library threw star-shaped bright shards of light into the shadows, Harry waited until the echoing voices and footsteps receded before slipping away.

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Harry brought two more lamps into his bedroom to better read the tiny print of the book. At first he was dismayed by the missing the first half of the book but after straining to read just a page, he decided it was just as well to be spared the pain of having to make it through so very many pages.

Hours later, eyes heavy and his Auror books untouched, Harry considered what to do with the book. If he kept it here at home, it could easily be found. The same if he took it to any likely hiding place. Harry considered hiding it in his locker at the Ministry, but Snape may find his Evanescent Deputy badge and look even there, and he certainly had the stealth to get away with it. Harry stretched as he stood and took himself to the place Snape was least likely to expect Harry to hide it.

Stone-frames surrounded glistening black glass windows and the dip worn in the center of the corridor floor showed more obvious in the light of the low burning wall lamps. Hogwarts castle was the best place to hide the book. Harry stepped over to where the hump-backed statue of Grunhilda stood and put the book inside her. He could easily slip back to fetch the book for reading when he needed to and, in between, feel secure that Snape would never find it.



Tired from a tedious, late night, not to mention daunted by the task of absorbing so much obscure knowledge to rescue his adoptive father, Harry left the breakfast table immediately after Candide left for work. Foggy-headed, Harry had trouble pulling out his wand for his turn at drills.

Rodgers did not fail to note his clumsiness. “Your power isn’t much either, Potter,” he criticized. “Try again and leave your distractions at the training room door.”

Harry did, but he could not even come up with anger to meet his trainer’s mocking tone, let alone a better attacking spell.

“Potter hopes he won’t be facing anything tougher than a five-year-old with a licorice wand. Sit down; Aaron, let’s give you an easy chance to shine while topping that sad effort.”

Sighing, Harry sat down, quickly slipping off into his greater problems while the drone of mixed grudging praise and advice was heaped on his fellow apprentice in his stead.

Anxious to take care of something after a long day of harassment from his trainer, Harry headed immediately off to see Belinda. At the Minister’s office, Harry was informed that the staff had been allowed to go home early because they had to work late the previous evening. Not believing his break in luck, Harry stepped back into the

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corridor and around to the stairwell to slip away to right before the door to Belinda's flat.

As soon as he arrived, Harry pulled his wand, believing he heard something in the direction of the stairwell. He waited, tense and listening, before waving a tracer spell that direction. The spell, no brighter than a sun-ray glinting on a dust mote, wove a spiral path through the air and disappeared down the stairs. Harry waited, but it did not return, indicating it had found nothing.

Harry relaxed and knocked on the door but received no answer. He knocked again, louder, before deciding she must be out. He knocked on the neighboring doors, thinking to interview them the way they did on Auror duty, but those doors remained silent and closed as well.

Dismayed, Harry headed away directly for home, thinking it best not to be seen leaving Belinda's flat through the front door, not fancying having a picture of that show up beside Skeeter's gossip column. Harry arrived directly in his own room and had to pull his wand again in the face of finding Snape digging through the bottom trunk from the pile beside the window.

Composing himself, Harry asked, "Looking for something?"

Snape twitched in surprise, but turned with calculating calm. Their eyes locked. Harry wanted to get angry, but that dark instinct spilled out amusement instead at his servant's predictability.

"You don't need the book unless you are planning on going home voluntarily," Harry stated, finding power in simply locating the Mark in his mind, even as he held off on using it.

Snape glanced over Harry's face, thinking. Harry could not pick up his thoughts, so he took a guess. "You aren't going off somewhere far away to hide, either."

Snape raised a brow, recovering some of his obnoxiousness, indicating Harry had guessed wrong. "You think not?" he mocked.

Still the picture of calm, restrained power, Harry said, "You are going to stay here and take care of your wife and your counterpart's other affairs until I can arrange to send you home and get him back."

"Hm," Snape muttered, appearing to consider his options as he analyzed Harry additionally. He was going to test those boundaries, Harry could feel like a vibrating tug on an invisible leash and he wondered, given how clear that was, how Voldemort could have been fooled for so long.

Harry stepped closer and noted Snape consciously standing his ground. "If you try to leave... I will hunt you down, and drag you back here." At the derisive doubt that flickered over the black eyes, Harry added, "You can't hide from me. I can find you anywhere." He pushed on the Mark as he said this, making Snape contort with a

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jerk before overcoming the pain and standing firm, defiant. Part of him felt sympathy for this man, but another felt only annoyance and insult at his machinations.

“You are not capable of working out the spell,” Snape snarled faintly.

“Then why are you looking for the book?” Harry asked brightly.

Snape breathed faster than before, gathering himself for something. He said, “I do not like leaving anything to chance.”

“There is no chance you are not going home,” Harry snapped. After a breath he added more calmly as a test: “Aren’t you happy enough here for the moment?”

Snape lost his defiance and fell thoughtful. “This place is acceptable. Although you are an unexpected addition to it.” He stared at Harry, gauging his reaction. “Since I prefer to remain alive, I certainly would prefer to not go back. No reason to lie about that.”

“That’s not under your control,” Harry pointed out, and waited to see if Snape had given in.

Without Harry pushing on it, Snape rubbed his forearm. “Nothing ever is, it seems,” he observed softly, making Harry’s sympathetic sense win out.

“Go back to Hogwarts,” Harry said, moving to let his pet out, who had been watching their exchange between bouts of grooming her fur. “And behave yourself.”

“I suspect that is what my counterpart would be saying about now,” Snape stated slyly.

Harry lifted Kali to his shoulder, trying to shake a twinge of confusing affection. “Don’t pretend to be something you’re not,” Harry said stiffly, jerking his fingers out of reach of his pet’s jaws, which had nipped at him.

Snape peered at Kali as though understanding she was projecting Harry’s mood and said, “You must realize, I rarely ever have the opportunity to do otherwise.” With a last glance at Harry, he swished out of the room, leaving Harry to disentangle from his pet, who was now aggressively chewing on his hair.

Tonks arrived after her shift, and Harry felt compelled to slip the book away when he rose to give her a perfunctory kiss. Mostly he hid the book because he did not have the energy to explain why he was reading the strange old half-burned thing. He needed to take out his Auror books for an hour anyway, or risk looking the fool again tomorrow at training.

Tonks read over Harry’s shoulder for a while before curling up at his back to sleep. The meaning of what he was reading began to tip-toe out of reach, and Harry tried another book before giving that one up as well with a sharp closing of the hard cover. Tonks stirred and said, “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Harry muttered, his concerns rushing back in.

“Yeah, sounds like it,” Tonks returned.

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Not wanting to discuss Snape and knowing discussions about Belinda made her jealous, Harry propped himself up on a pillow and kept his mouth pressed closed.

With a faint huff, Tonks burrowed under the duvet and went back to sleep. After a time, lulled by the sound of her breathing, Harry did the same.

Harry woke in the middle of the night. He stared at the fuzzy grey ceiling for a while before slipping on his glasses and staring some more at the details of the white plaster bisected by dark, rough-cut timbers. When he closed his eyes and drifted with difficult-to-achieve calm, he could see the shadow of the impostor Snape floating in the midfield of his mind. The other Death Eaters were a distant knot of darkness that he had to strain to sense. He wished he could feel none of them.

Worried about his adoptive father, Harry rolled over gingerly to turn up the lamp and pull out the clunky book. The complicated words and abstract ideas made more sense on a second reading in the unchallenging stillness of the night, and that gave Harry hope. He had no choice but to understand the book before he could move on. His guardian would be able to help him some with it, but given the difficulty of talking at Grimmauld Place and how unsafe it was for Snape to leave, Harry needed to be down to just a few questions to have a chance at getting as much as possible resolved at the next visit, which Harry intended for the next weekend. He was placing a lot of faith, he knew, on being able to activate the existing Device. If that proved impossible, Harry dreaded imagining how long it may be before he could swap them to their proper places. Long before it came to that, Harry imagined he would break down and force the impostor to teach him how to do it, by dire threat if necessary. Sick feeling at the notion of losing himself to that mentality for the time required, Harry doubled his efforts at understanding the complicated Pinhole-Bridging spell diagram on the page open before him. He knew instinctively how this worked – he could do it by himself – so he certainly should be able to understand this crazy old author and his drawings.



To his relief, Harry did passably well at training the next day, implying that his mind was adapting to the rigors of studying, even short on sleep.

The door to the Minister's office was closed and when Harry knocked, the cleaning witch explained that the Minister had taken her staff out to a ribbon cutting at a new broom manufactory. Harry thanked the witch and the delicately carved door closed with a click. Harry stared at the stern faces peaking out from corners of squares defined by ivy. That dark instinct inside him told him to slip into her flat

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to investigate. When he resisted that invasive idea, the instinct pointed out that his enemies cared little about such niceties.

Deciding that it would be acceptable to take a peek since he had been invited in before and he only had her best interest at heart, he slipped into the Dark Plane and directly to her flat. He circled the main room, poking carefully into things after checking for spells, making satisfying use of his training. In the kitchen stacks of unclean dishes stood in piles that indicated either guests or long-term neglect. Harry considered skipping searching there, but heard Rodgers chastising him for sloppiness, so he stepped in and checked around and under things, finding little of interest. Despite the unwashed dishes, the floor was sparkling clean. The full sink gave off the odor of garlic-spiced food. Harry circled slowly around by the dusty-screened television, installed, he knew, at the Minister's insistence that her staff all keep abreast of Muggle events and opinions. The bookshelves were also faintly dusty in back. Harry pulled out every book, looking for anything hidden behind or inside before returning the dust with a spell.

When he finished the large shelf he began to feel silly for what he was doing and wished he had some idea what to look for. If Durumulna were troubling Belinda, what evidence would their be of that? The dishes in the sink were the strangest thing so far that he'd found, and that wasn't very specific. Harry gave up on thinking and let habit take over and returned to his methodical searching, wondering if he could hold onto that mode through a survey of her bedroom.

Following his trainer's absent voice urging him on, Harry crouched low, head to the floor, to see if anything interesting had fallen under the couch. As he did this, the lock clicked. Harry snapped straight and stepped into the nearby bathroom, caught momentarily by the sight of the men's shaving kit on the shelf above the sink. A glance through the crack at the door's edge, showed Belinda setting down her handbag and slipping her wand away. Harry slipped out of the bathroom and into the building corridor where he waited a count of fifty before knocking.

Belinda answered his knock promptly and expressed surprise at seeing him there.

"Hi," Harry said, expecting her to start where she left off on Diagon Alley the previous weekend.

Instead of asking for his help, she seemed vaguely annoyed. She said, "What are you doing here?" while glancing both ways along the corridor.

"I thought you wanted to talk."

Her brow lowered. "I did, but I got it straight now. It's okay."

"Really?" Harry blurted.

She glanced both ways again. "Yeah, really. Things are okay now."

Harry mimicked her glance. "Who are you expecting?"

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“No one. Just didn’t, er, notice you approach the door. You know, the alarm spells didn’t go off.”

Harry did not like this. She did not have alarm spells before. “Can I come in?”

At first, he was certain she would say no, but she stepped back and waved for him to enter.

When she turned, Harry wasted no time. “Look, I want to know what’s going on.”

His pushiness hardened her. “Nothing is going on.”

“You were trying to hide from what I expect were Durumulna members just the other day on Diagon.”

“Wouldn’t you try to hide from them?”

Harry Legilimized her, and found nothing deceptive about this sentiment. “You worked everything out since then... the troubles you were having?”

She looked away. “Yes. It’s fine.”

She sounded honest, but Harry wished he could prove it.

“It’s fine,” she repeated. “And really, I’d rather not have you seen here. You aren’t the only person in the world who can help people out, you know.”

“Who’s helping you?” Harry asked, intending to not leave until he knew at least this much. He dearly hoped she did not say “Percy”.

“Why do you need to know?”

Harry fought a wave of frustration. He was starting to find keen appeal in using Veritaserum more judiciously, or one of several other tongue-loosening potions. That darker side of him reared up and mocked him as well for being too weak to simply force out the answers he wanted. He had an expert servant at his beck and call, free to help, how could he let her avoid explaining?

Harry took a step back, distracted by the notions he was having. Snape had become a tool in his mind, rather than an enemy, in just that instant, and the switch disconcerted him. Harry really needed his guardian back – the one who did not feel like a pawn to be moved around a personal chess board at his whim, then maybe these notions would lack such strength.

“Please tell me who’s helping you, so I know you’re in good hands.”

She glanced around and said softly. “Alastor Moody.” At his stare, she went on. “He comes by an evening or two a week to check on me. Has for a while, now.”

Harry did relax at that. He dropped his hand from rubbing his head and straightened, bringing himself back to examining her. The flat’s indirect light made her eyes appear poorly slept and her cheeks hollowed by strain. Through it, her eyes revealed worry for him overlaid with guilt and murky thoughts centered on someone insisting

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she do something, or face some undesirable outcome. She turned her head and Harry released a deep breath.

“If you are in too deep, you can ask for more help,” Harry insisted. “Before you are cornered into doing something you may regret. Something that would threaten Bones for example.”

Eyes on the floor, she mumbled, “I would never let anyone talk me into doing something that would put her at risk.”

“I’d expect not.” Harry needed some space to sort out his conflicting instincts, but he stayed put to gauge her better.

She repeated, “I don’t want anyone to see you here.”

“Like whom?” Harry asked, thinking he could corner her himself.

“Anyone. Skeeter, even Alastor.”

Harry sighed. She had him there.

At home Tonks and Candide were both waiting at the table with a bowl of crisps between them, reduced to a few crumbs. Harry was glad to see Tonks, especially since it meant Candide was not alone while he was taking far too much time nosing around. Dinner sparkled in the moment he sat down.

“Didn’t know you’d be late,” Candide said.

“I, er, had some shopping to do,” Harry said, thinking that an excellent excuse for his absence, given Christmas’ fast approach, and the fact that it would be rude for them to ask more, in case the presents were for one of them.

“At least you try, Harry,” Tonks said with a wink. “Blokes don’t generally shop well.”

Not wanting to get her expectations up too high, given that he could not foresee time to shop at all, he said, “I may not manage anything too fancy, but I do try.” As he ate, he wondered with some dismay what in the world the impostor Snape may try to get for the two of them. That imagining made the luscious scented beef and gravy on his plate nearly inedible. It simply could not be allowed to come to that.



The next day at training, Harry barely registered the questions his trainer aimed their way.

“Potter, you’re acting as lovesick as Wickem here. I can’t handle two of you living on cloud nine. Snap out of it. The Minister is due down here for a surprise inspection with some of the Wizengamot and I intend to impress them with our sharp skills, not our tendency to have our collective thoughts wandering off.”

“Yes, sir.”

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Vineet raised his hand and asked, "If it is a surprise inspection, how is it you are knowing about it ahead of time?"

Rodgers propped his fists on his hips and raised a depreciating brow. "If they did not at least give us a hint, they may be sadly disappointed in the outcome, which they do not wish to be."

"I am grasping this meaning," Vineet replied. "I think."

They broke for lunch and Harry went to his locker to collect what Winky had prepared for him. He was reminded about how unwise a hiding place this would have been for the purple-inked book by the presence there of Percy and Fudge's other two assistants. Harry did not want Percy to see him execute the protective spell negation on his locker, so he waited while his fellows opened theirs and filed out of the room, all but Aaron, who glanced between Harry and Percy as though expecting something to happen.

"No place else to wait?" Harry stated pointedly to the trio.

The other two assistants: one a man with a neck even longer than Percy's and the other a short-haired woman with a square head that would have fit better on a bulky body rather than her lithe, flowing one, made a move to leave. Percy sneered at them. "Oh yes, let's do whatever Boy Wonder wishes of us."

"It is our changing room," Aaron pointed out, plucking at his workout suit. "We would like to do some changing before lunch; we've been working hard this morning."

"Come on, Pers," the man said, heading for the door.

Harry whispered, "Purse?"

Percy took a step forward. "No, I'd like a word with Boy Lightning Bolt here." His companions rolled their eyes and the woman left, leaving the man hanging in the doorway uncertainly. Percy leaned close enough for Harry to note he had already had lunch, something with pickled onions. He said to Harry, "You're not going to fool them forever, you know. When they see what you really are, it'll be all over with." He gave Harry a small shove, and Harry tried for his wand but missed, as he had been lately, as though his fingers were still clumsy from the cold in-between or something. Percy swung his arm just as Harry got hold of it and his wand clattered to the floor and Percy kicked it out of reach under the bench before diving to make a grab for it. He stood swarthily and dangled it before Harry.

"Too bad this isn't Hogwarts. The things I could do to you..." Percy mocked.

Harry restrained his temper and held onto his dignity by not reaching for it. Aaron had his wand against Percy's temple less than a second later, complete with arm lock.

"You mean like the things we did to you, Percy?" Aaron mocked. "You remember Slytherin House, don't you?" He did not relinquish his hold until Percy gave over Harry's wand, even though he still had a hold of Harry's robe-front. Fudge's other

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assistant had approached but did not intervene.

Percy managed a smirk for Harry's fellow as he tossed his hair straight. "Yeah. You think you're everything too. Got everything you want, compliments of mummy."

Aaron required an unusual extra two beats to retort, "Compliments of your mummy, actually."

Percy's eyes turned dark. He pointed a long finger at Aaron. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Harry did not like the turn this was taking. He stepped between them, even though Percy's hold tried to keep him away. Harry said, "Percy, I'm going to use the most painful martial arts move I know on you if you don't let go of me and get the hell out of here. I will gladly go on a year's probation with your father just to put you in St. Mungo's with at least three things broken."

Percy said to Aaron, "If this has something to do with my sister..." he faded out and turned back to Harry, red in the face. "As for you..." He relinquished Harry with an ineffective toss of his wiry hands. "Some of us know what you really are. Remember that." He stalked off and his colleague followed with an apologetic glance back at them.

After lunch the official contingent poured into the training room. Pinned to the Minister's hip, Mr. Weasley was assuring Bones of the improvements in their department. Bones spoke over him, saying, "I was reminded the other day of how I had not arranged a surprise inspection since taking office, unlike the frequent ones arranged by my predecessor." She said this with a nod to Fudge, who gave her a simpering smile as he slid along the wall for a good observation spot, followed by his assistants.

Harry ignored them all and focused instead on what he had been told the demonstration would entail. His mind would churn out of control otherwise.

When the entourage had settled in, Rodgers announced, "We have been working of late on spell power. Vishnu, come up here for a demonstration."

A shuffle sounded from the wall and Fudge said, "No, let's see your star... Mr. Potter."

Rodgers took affront at this. "All of our apprentices shine. We don't allow stars here. At least I don't."

The apprentices nodded in agreement with this assessment. Pleased by this, as indicated by a crooked smirk, Rodgers relented and stepped back. "Potter, you and Vishnu."

Harry's spells had not been up to his usual level, so he approached the front of the room with dismay. Vineet exhibited the best control Harry had ever seen, and Harry held onto his blocks with only a little vibration of his wand. On attack he blotted out

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all other concerns and struck out, full force, surprising the room with the fireworks. The two of them traded off for Kerry Ann and Tridant, who did their best to appear to nearly kill each other, further impressing the visitors.

Soon enough, they were left to their training as Bones' contingent filed out with a rumble of commentary from those trying to convince the Minister of their view of how things looked.

The door snapped closed and Harry's shoulders fell in relief. He was apparently still too sensitive to having to prove himself to Fudge after all this time because the demonstration had left him agitated. Vineet slid over to him as they took their seats. Harry said, "You were trying to make me look good by holding back."

"I do not mind doing this," Vineet said, sounding fully at peace with the notion.

"I mind you doing it," Harry complained.

"Let's try to get something meaningful accomplished," Rodgers announced, louder than necessary. "And go over the readings for today."

Harry fetched the purple-inked book on the way home and curled up on the couch with it, determined to read it until he slept that night. Worry about his guardian kept his attention on the pages for many hours, and through painstakingly copying out the diagrams onto parchments to take with him that weekend. Harry ached to make another visit. This visit, he planned leave early in the morning, so as to have to time to help out a while if that would help keep Snape safe.

"Good to see you working on your books so religiously," Candide said when they curled back up with their respective work after dinner.

Harry nodded faintly. "I have to be prepared."

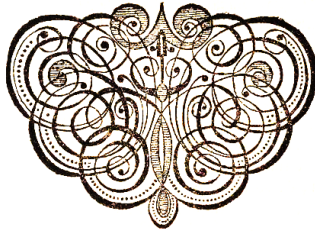
"Severus wanted me to keep an eye on your studies, but I don't know why he always insists that. You get to it fine on your own."

Harry nodded faintly again, wanting this ruse over with so badly it made his eyes hot.

Author's Notes: I've started a new mailing list of people who want to be notified only when the entire story is finished (in addition to the one for chapter notices, which you can also sign up for). you can get on it by sending a message to darkirony at gmail (.) com

I'm on the road. Depending on how exciting Latvia is next week ;-) we'll see if we can get the chapter posting down to 10 days.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



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Harry arrived at the Ministry a little early, thoughts circling around his weekend plans. His fieldwork was scheduled for Friday afternoon, which would allow him to get a good night's sleep before going off to visit Snape early Saturday. By then he should have worked out what Device diagrams were likely the ones relevant from the book, and therefore which accompanying spells. It felt overly optimistic to hope he could fetch Snape so quickly, but the following week, when they were released for Christmas, there would be more opportunities. That would work well with the other Snape being home; Harry could be assured he would be nearby to step into the Device. That just left Candide to work around. At least Harry's disappearances, as needed, could be attributed to last minute shopping. As the lift doors opened, Harry vowed to have his guardian back for Christmas, even as difficult as that would be. It pained him too much to imagine celebrating Christmas with the impostor.

Distracted as he was, Harry did not immediately notice Mr. Weasley standing in the middle of the corridor, just beyond the training room door.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley, said, just as Harry's attention came to rest on his boss' solidly planted figure.

"Sir." Harry had been hoping to get a last glance at his unfinished readings before their session started, but Mr. Weasley's posture indicated that was not going to happen.

"Come in here, Harry," he said soberly. "We need a word with you."

"I'll just drop my bag in my locker," Harry half asked, wanting to follow procedure to secure his lunch from tampering.

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Mr. Weasley nodded and then led the way down to the tea room. Harry forced himself to exhale, wondering if somehow Percy's threats were already coming to fruition. The chair's metal feet squeaked gratingly across the floor when Harry pulled it out to sit. Mr. Weasley did not sit; he leaned on the back of the opposite chair.

"What did you do this last Tuesday, Harry? After you left training?"

Harry kept all reaction off his face, or he hoped he did. His investigations of the Minister of Magic's receptionist's flat would not sit well with many, he now realized. A flicker appeared at the edge of the door and Shackbolt came into view. Harry returned his gaze to his boss. "I went to talk to Belinda, Bones' receptionist. At her flat," he added, trying to sound helpful, then stopping himself because they all operated under the notion that overly helpful was a red flag in an interview.

Sounding honestly mystified, Harry added, "What's going on?"

Shackbolt's blue robes slipped away from the door. Mr. Weasley said in a patently reassuring voice that was not in the least reassuring, "We're not certain yet, Harry. But why don't you stay here for the time being."

"Here in the tea room you mean... not just here in the Department?"

"In the tea room." He departed and Harry blinked in the wake of it, mind flying faster than his best broom in a hopeless bid to work this out.

Harry's fellows arrived for training. Their voices came down the corridor, gossiping about the Falcon's captain and his being seen the night before with the girlfriend of the Harpies' captain. Tonks poked her head in, but it appeared to be simply a check that he was still there. By the time Harry opened his mouth to ask something, she was gone.

Harry sighed, wondering what the penalty was for illicit investigations. They HAD made them pseudo full Aurors and had not reversed it, as far as Harry knew. If he were a full Auror, he only needed to justify his actions, which seemed easy enough given what he had observed about Belinda.

Mr. Weasley returned long after the training room door had boomed closed and the corridor had fallen silent. He returned to his previous pose over the chair, leaning heavily on the back of it. Shackbolt slipped in behind him and took a seat, long parchment and pen in hand.

Mr. Weasley said, "Harry, do you have a solicitor?"

Harry's heart fell as silent as the corridor outside the door. His mouth was too dry to speak immediately, but he managed to stammer, "I... not really. Hermione gave me a name once, but I don't have now." He patted his pockets for no good reason, really; the slip of paper had not been magical or anything and would not reappear after all this time.

Mr. Weasley nodded and turned to Tonks who had arrived, face thinned by strain.

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“Go up to the Minister’s office and get a reference from Bones.” With a toss of her brown hair, Tonks nodded briskly and slipped off.

Harry opened his mouth to ask something, he was not sure what may come out, but Mr. Weasley held up his hand. “No speaking, Harry, till the solicitor arrives.”

Harry breathed instead, needing it badly.

Shacklebolt sat with his hands in his lap, the picture of calm, but Harry knew he always did that, no matter how bad the actions of the perpetrator they were interviewing. Harry reassured himself that if this were truly serious, they would use an interrogation room, so this must be something to do with his unauthorized search, which, apparently, was bad enough. Harry clasped his hands between his knees and wondered morosely if the French would still take him if he were kicked out of this program.

The lift bell sounded and Mr. Weasley went out and closed the door behind him. An argument sounded beyond the door, louder and softer as others came into the room – the whole department aside from Rogan, who must have been left manning the office.

Mr. Weasley was arguing with Fudge. “We will handle this internally. This is our jurisdiction.”

“You are soft on that boy, always have been, I will not allow him to make a mockery of my authority again, look where it’s got us.” Fudge’s voice rang with the strains of apoplexy, making Harry’s whole body go on alert.

Mr. Weasley said, “You’ll get your turn, but right now this is our matter.” He came inside then and closed the door and held his hand in front of the handle a few seconds as if expecting it to pop open.

“All right,” he said, sounding relieved. He took a seat too and no one moved until a knock sounded, which Mr. Weasley stood to answer.

A hulking, broad figure slid confidently around the full table to the empty seat on Harry’s right. Harry gaped in surprise as deBenedictus, the vampire’s legal counsel, crisply set down his brief case. Of Harry, he asked, “Said anything?”

Harry shook his head.

“Good.” He sat his square frame in the undersized tea-room chair and popped the latches on his battered, but carefully polished, case to pull out a narrow roll of parchment and a gold stand. Harry got a glimpse inside the cavernous bag lined with tall shelves of oversized books and scrolls and even a shelf full of lamps and oil.

Harry wanted to ask something about whether the man held a grudge, but deBenedictus was rolling smoothly on. He set his miniature quill to record and surveyed the table while stating the date and getting the names of all present, including describing their appearance and where they were sitting, all of which the quill scratched dutifully

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out in a script too small to see without the lens attached to the arm of the stand.

Preliminaries finished, deBenedictus sat back ever so slightly, which did not make Harry feel any less dwarfed, and said, "You may proceed."

Mr. Weasley began, clumsily and Rodgers took over three words in. "Tuesday, Harry. Tell us what you did."

Harry's chest hurt, but before he could answer, deBenedictus rumbled, "You don't have to answer that."

Harry turned his neck to stare up at him. "I don't?"

"Have they arrested you?"

"No."

"Then you certainly don't have to answer that."

Harry wished his mouth had some saliva in it, talking would be so much easier then. "But I can answer that," he insisted, despite wishing he did not need to say anything.

In a darkly neutral tone, the solicitor said, "All I can do is advise."

Harry turned to the rest of the table. "I went to speak to Belinda." But before he could decide whether to skip over the part about searching her flat, Rodgers interrupted again.

"That was the first thing you did after leaving training?"

"Uh, no, I went up to the Minister's office to catch Belinda there. But the cleaning witch said they were off at a ribbon cutting. That they'd left early for that."

Mr. Weasley leaned forward. "What time was that?"

"I don't know. Right after training."

"Quarter past four," Rodgers supplied to Harry's relief.

Tonks confirmed, "You spoke to a cleaning witch?" At Harry's nod, Tonks left the room, making Harry miss her presence immediately.

"Then what?" Rodgers asked.

"I went to Belinda's flat to wait for her. I didn't want to miss her." That sounded good, and Harry invisibly patted himself on the back.

Rodgers again. "How did you get there?"

Without hesitating, Harry replied, "I Apparated."

The quill caught up during the follow-on pause. On a side parchment, deBenedictus' oversized hand was making notes in a curly, yet sparse, print Harry could not decipher.

"Did you speak to Belinda?" Rodgers asked.

Harry nodded. "She had asked me for help the other day, on Diagon Alley, but I didn't have time that day to talk to her." Harry hoped they did not ask what he

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had to do instead, as he did not relish having to make up yet another lie. “We talked for... a while,” he stumbled, given that he had arrived home late for dinner.

“What did she say?”

“Nothing really. Insisted she’d straightened things out on her own, which I doubted, given how oddly she was behaving.” Harry imagined mentioning the uncharacteristic dirty dishes but thought that would sound lame, even as strange as it seemed standing there in her flat.

“That’s all?” Rodgers asked, sounding doubtful too.

Harry shrugged. “I kept trying to convince her to tell me what was going on, but she wouldn’t. She said someone else was helping her.”

“Who?”

“Alastor Moody.”

A ripple went around the table, making Harry wonder if not everyone knew that the old Auror was really alive.

Mr. Weasley, with strange care, said, “What did she say about him, exactly?”

“That he checked in on her once or twice a week.” Harry gave in and did what he should have done a long time ago. “I think she’s been compromised, so I’ve been worried about her.”

“But you haven’t said anything,” Rodgers followed on.

“I thought that if things were going that badly, I could convince her to say something herself. She always says how much she cares about the Ministry.” He added quickly, “And I wasn’t really certain. Am not really,” he corrected. So far he felt okay with his performance and relaxed fractionally.

Tonks returned and handed a note to Mr Weasley before sitting with her head down. Harry wished her hair was not so plain.

Rodgers glanced at the note and asked Harry, “Do you have your wand?” When Harry pulled his wand out, holding the point because of the circumstances, his trainer went on, “You’ve had that with you all along, right?”

Harry glanced at the wand and shrugged. “Yeah.”

“Didn’t misplace it at some point?”

Harry shook his head.

“Can we check your wand for a spell, Harry?” Rodgers asked.

Harry began to reach out to hand him the wand, but deBenedictus clamped his bear paw-like hand over his wrist. “I strongly advise against that.”

“Why? There’s nothing on it.”

“May I have a word with my client?” deBenedictus asked, in a rumbling, bear-like voice. When the assembled shuffled in their seats as if to stand, deBenedictus added, “It need not be in private.” He made an failed effort to turn his body to face Harry.

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“Mr. Potter, despite your employment in this department, I feel obliged to explain some basic principles to you, so that you may better act in your own interest.”

Harry set his wand so it would not roll away and clamped his hands between his knees again to listen.

“You need not cooperate at this stage as you are, and in fact it is highly unwise to.” He paused.

Harry said, “But why shouldn’t I?”

“Because you do not even know what you are suspected of.”

That was quite true. Harry glanced around the table. “But if I don’t and I’m suspected and can prove otherwise, nothing will happen.”

Patently, the man went on, “It is much harder to prove otherwise under such circumstances. If you simply hold back, and force them to appeal to the Wizengamot for a hearing, we will be on far better footing. They will have to inform us of the evidence against you, for example, which we can then prepare a rebuttal to. At the moment, we have nothing.”

That all made sense, but Harry appealed to him, “But I didn’t do anything.”

“That does not matter. You are making their job too easy.”

Harry considered that most people they brought in here did that, perhaps not knowing any better. But Harry could not imagine not cooperating as the solicitor suggested. It felt too alien. Arguing for helping, he drew on his experience in the office and said, “They might put me in the dungeon if I don’t.”

deBenedictus put his lower lip out slightly. “No matter.”

“No matter?” Harry echoed. “I... er... I have things I need to do.” The notion nearly panicked him. He had to return to Snape and get help with the diagram and spells, make sure the Device still worked, help out so Snape would be safe. And he wanted his guardian home for Christmas. Returning to his early tactic, he said, “I didn’t do anything. There is nothing on my wand.”

deBenedictus held up his great hands in a motion of giving in. “All I can do is advise.”

Harry’s mouth worked, then stopped. He studied his wand more, something he did frequently when he was in school, but rarely did now given that it acted as a natural extension of his arm. It was the wand he had ordered for himself, had fetched the feather for it and everything. “I haven’t done anything,” Harry repeated to himself, remembering the last time they went through this and Moody had tried to argue that Harry could have removed a firestarting spell, making the lack of one no proof of his innocence.

Harry handed the wand to his trainer, expecting some reaction from the solicitor, but the man sat still, pen poised over his notes, letting Harry relax.

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The spells of the morning and then the previous evening came off, just a few ghosts of reheated tea and hovered books, then the demonstration from the morning before and their drills, endless, repeated drills that made Harry want to rest his head on his hand. Then some more minor spells, a dehovered Auror book, and then the room dimmed and a flicker of that noxious green emerged from the floor, swelling as it sucked in snaking spirals of itself. The color alone made Harry's soul quiver with revulsion. The spell unwound and the ghostly figure of MadEye Moody, caught by surprise rose up from a heap and turned away from the wand and stood straight before fading out.

Harry stared at where the apparition had disappeared, hands vibrating despite his claspings them tightly. "I didn't kill Moody," he insisted when things clicked into place in his head. He closed his eyes tightly while the last few minutes of conversation unwound in his brain like the spells had. He muttered to the man next to him. "I should have listened to you. It's a trap."

The others in the room fell matter of fact, which made Harry feel even more isolated. Tonks kept her head down.

Harry breathily repeated, "I didn't kill Moody. Someone else did and is pinning it on me."

"Not many people knew he was alive," Mr. Weasley pointed out kindly.

Harry opened his mouth to point out a choice suspect, but deBenedictus cut him off. "What is this?"

Shacklebolt crossed his long arms and explained, "Alastor Moody is officially dead."

deBenedictus scratched out an aggressive extra note. "Well, isn't that interesting," sounding almost upbeat. He correctly gestured again that Harry should remain quiet, just as Harry opened his mouth again.

Shacklebolt asked Harry, "You're certain your wand has been in your possession?"

Harry thought back, imagining Percy dangling it before him. But he had picked it up off the floor just a second before after Harry dropped it. He should mention it, though, despite that. "Percy knocked it out of my hand before the demonstration, in the changing room. Other than that I've had it as far as I know."

deBenedictus softly said, "I feel compelled to remind you, despite your clearly functioning memory, that you need not answer anything."

"Doesn't matter now, does it?" Harry glumly pointed out.

"It may."

"Well," Harry returned, feeling better for exercising some control over the situation, "in that case they will simply arrest me and then make me answer."

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“Willing to submit to Veritaserum?” Rodgers asked. Unlike the others who were all leaning forward, he was sitting back confidently, one hand reaching out to tap out a random rhythm on the table.

deBenedictus gave a squeak, a noise that seemed impossible from one his size.

“Yes,” Harry replied.

The solicitor’s briefcase flapped open without his touching it and he rapidly pulled out a thick sheaf, which he shoved across the table’s stained surface.

“What’s that?” Harry asked, feeling life slipping away to the sound of paper sliding rampantly over a tabletop.

“Limitations they must agree to. You do not wish to let them ask you absolutely anything; do you?”

Harry shook his head, appalled by the thought.

The solicitor’s calm was underlined now by aggressiveness, which Harry was grateful for, due to his losing all of his better sense somewhere along the way. To the Aurors the solicitor said, while handing over a pen, “State in the blanks on page twenty-seven exactly what you plan to ask him, including any expected followup questions, initial each question and sign page thirty four.”

A tiny vial had been fetched and now sat beside a piece of dissolving blotter. Tonks handled putting the soaked square on Harry’s tongue for him while he sat on his hands to keep from fidgeting madly. He then sat back and waited as passively as possible for it to work. The room grew melty and streaky immediately indicating it was a fine batch.

Rodgers handled the questioning with reassuring confidence. “Did you kill Alastor Moody?”

Harry’s mouth handled the answering as though submerged deep in water, “No.”

“Have you ever wanted to kill Alastor Moody?”

“No.”

“Have you ever been angry with Alastor Moody?”

“Yes.”

“Angry enough to get even?”

“Yes.” Harry remembered that vividly, even through the drug. Moody’s shift from paranoid Order member helping against Voldemort to paranoid Harry-doubter felt like betrayal, and he had the magical powers to make Harry pay for his change in allegiance.

“Did you plot to get even at any time?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

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“I assumed a chance would come along on its own some time. And he claimed that he helped out in the battle with Merton’s associates.”

“But he was following you around; he repeatedly told Fudge you were going dark.”

Harry could not answer since there was no question.

Rodgers leaned forward, smearing across the left side of Harry’s vision. “Are you going dark, Harry?”

Harry’s remaining willful part of his mind wondered why that question was allowed. Shadowy pawns and masks swam before him. Dark marks sang in his gut, just below his heart, pressed in like burning marbles. He could touch them now and make them all suffer, no matter where they were. It did not feel very white-wizardy. “I don’t know.”

The room sat back, shifting in their seats.

Rodgers tried to concoct a followup, tugging the Limitations document over and reading it before sitting back with a frown. He grabbed up the document again and, reading off, asked, “Barring this interview, is your life in any way easier now that Alastor Moody is dead?”

“No.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

“Yes.”

“Anyone other than Voldemort and his followers?”

“Sirius Black,” Harry heard his dream-voice say, like an announcement.

“Harry,” Tonks blurted, voice going teary as she spoke. “Bellatrix killed Sirius. You can’t possibly believe you’re responsible for that.”

Mr. Weasley had interlocked the fingers of his clasped hands and pressed them to his lips. He pulled back after several seconds and said, “I think we’re done.”

They gave Harry a sip of antidote, and he sat staring at his fingers holding the empty little glass vial, oddly thick sided and heavy relative to its size.

deBenedictus broke the silence. “So, you have a counterbalancing evidence here.”

“Not as much as it looks,” Rodgers said. “I’ll do you a favor, Mr. deBenedictus and give you a heads up. There were no cleaning witches in the Minister’s office until after eight; there is no record of anyone Apparating near Belinda’s flat until she herself did – to a block away from originating from where the Minister was; and she also denies receiving a visit from Harry that day.”

“What?!” Harry snapped.

“I will handle this, Mr. Potter,” his solicitor said. “Sit back. Did you expect otherwise given the state of your wand?”

It occurred to Harry that he had not received his wand back. He crossed his arms and slouched, a spectator to the final paperwork of his own official demise. Dizziness

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washed through him, most likely the potions, but as the room wobbled, he wondered with a wrenchingly helpless alarm if he had not slipped into the wrong place, a place where his counterpart really had done away with Moody. Harry propped his forehead on his hands and found that a better place to listen to the official words pass over him.

Inside his own racing mind, Harry wondered with a icy chill if it had not been Snape who had framed him. Was it possible his guardian's impostor could have arranged such a thing, so quickly? Had Harry pushed him too far?

The paperwork passed in a blur interspersed with scratching pens. Tonks stood, and sounding plodding, said, "I'll take Harry."

Mr. Weasley stepped over beside her. "We'll both take him." They both turned. "Harry? Time to go."

Harry raised his head from his hands and stared at them. They had no idea how very important it was that he finish taking care of his guardian. Maybe he should have told Tonks what had happened with Snape. She certainly knew about his strange skills, but not about how much trouble they had caused. And he had been desperate to keep it a secret and secrets told too broadly were impossible to recapture later, so he had said nothing and now he had no help.

He considered simply slipping away, out of their grasp. He could go anywhere and they would not be able to track him. He could escape to the Plane where his adoptive father was trapped and help him stay alive until he could be brought home. That plan reverberated through him as entirely feasible.

Rogders grabbing up Harry's arm and hauling him to his feet, jarred him out of his plotting. Harry met each of their eyes, Tonks, Shackbolt, Mr. Weasley, Blackpool. Their faces were full of duty and, surprisingly, affection. Each one met his gaze full-on, promising and reassuring him at many levels.

Harry let his feet carry him to the door, unable to willingly abandon these people and his own duty to them. deBenedictus followed close behind. He said to Harry, "It is unfortunate that you are not free to help prove your innocence, but all is not lost. I am quite certain the legal ramifications of killing someone already dead are murky at best."

Harry turned his head around the room again. "They don't believe I did it," he said with certainty.

This caught the solicitor by surprise. He took in each of the room's occupants one at a time. Upon concluding this survey, he said, "Ah, well then. I will see you before the Wizengamot and you should hear from me by owl before then."

Harry nodded vaguely and let himself be led away, unable to grasp anything more than putting one foot before the other as they went to Mr. Weasley's office to fetch

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the portkey that would transport them to L'île de Cachot Méfait – the French wizard prison.

Harry wanted nothing more than to yell for it all to stop. He swallowed hard while Mr. Weasley fiddled with the fleur-de-lis-shaped portkey. Tonks leaned close and said, “It’s going to be all right Harry, we’re more worried about you than anything. We decided if we take you away, you’ll be safe.”

Harry had only managed to invite that notion partially into his churning thoughts before his boss grabbed his arm and the world he knew jerked out of view and grey took over until the wave-swept quay of the prison spun up at them through a heavy mist.

Harry landed and held Tonks from stumbling. The monolithic entrance loomed over the end of the quay, the door a tiny notch in the bottom of it. Harry had faced this grim façade once before with very different intent. This time, he felt nothing but doom. But he could still get away, could still slip off and take care of his family. Harry swallowed hard, and blinked salt mist from his eyes. If he left, it would be an admittance of guilt and he would have lost this life here. His guardian would not be pleased by that.

Harry stumbled this time, in a bid to delay reaching the door. Tonks wrapped her lean fingers around his arms and waved Mr. Weasley away with a shout over the surf. In Harry’s ear, she said, “Don’t go. Don’t escape unless your life is in direct danger, all right? Promise me. Trust us to take care of things. You won’t be here long. We’ll find Moody’s real killer and fetch you home.”

“For Christmas?” Harry asked, sounding difficult, a tone that did not survive over the crash and hiss of the foam on the quay. The waves ebbing over the edges made the solid quay seem to rock on the sea.

“Probably not for Christmas, but soon after. Harry, we don’t want anything worse to happen. Durumulna wants to get even and we can’t protect you, it seems. It will be loads easier if they believe we bought into their ruse. You’ll be safe then.”

Salt spray escorted them to the door, which opened just as they stepped on the great slate slab leading up to it. Harry knew that beyond the bridge in the atrium, he could not return, even by using the Dark Plane, and he hesitated again, until Tonks pulled him along. The guard, complete with fancifully feathered helmet and spike, led them mutely to the lift.

The air changed as they descended, growing chilly and thin. When the platform ground to a halt, the guard gestured for them to exit before impatiently poking at the lift controls to return to his post. Another pair of guards snapped to attention and led them to the brightest lit doorway on that corridor where warm air poured out.

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Harry had been invited to come back to this place for a tour, so this was not at all how he envisioned returning. His face burned when the warden's office door opened and Mr. Weasley began introductions and explained that Harry was to be incarcerated.

The warden was strangely convivial. "Ah, Meester Pottar, such change in fortune you 'ave had. Well, we will see to it that the best is made of your situation."

Tonks, her hand clamped on Harry's elbow, said, "We are very concerned about Harry's safety. I noticed on the prison map you sent us that you have an outdated and unused cell block. We are..." Here she glanced uncertainly at Mr. Weasley, apparently not clearing this ahead of time. "We are hoping that Harry can be housed there, to eliminate any chance that he interact with the other prisoners. Many of the ones we sent here, Harry helped capture, and we are worried about what may happen if they can get access to him."

The warden nodded deeply, then gave a snug twist to his long mustache as if to straighten that too. "I assure you, things very carefully are run here, but nevertheless, given the celebrity of our guest, we can open old Section Bey, just for Meester Pottar."

Tonks gave Harry a meaningful look that he could not translate.

Harry took a seat across from the paperwork and sat, half-aware, through that, followed by the spells to register him. Strained by needing to go home and take care of things there and beyond, he barely perceived what was happening. He looked up at Tonks, ignoring the latest sheets placed before him. "You'll keep an eye on Severus and Candide, right?" he pleaded, wishing she knew what had happened, but it was impossible to explain now.

"Yes, Harry. We will. Extra guards and patrols and everything. Don't worry."

But Harry could not help but worry. The Ministry had said such things before and, even knowing from the inside how things worked, the promises did not feel reliable against real evil. Reading his face, Tonks insisted. "Really Harry. I'll see to it myself."

The warden himself announced he would escort Harry, Tonks, and Mr. Weasley to the cell. They took a second lift and followed along a corridor that resembled the dungeon under the the Ministry, only on a much larger scale. The prisoners they passed could not be seen – the barred windows were too high on the doors and the eye-level viewing slats were locked closed, but the occupants could be heard, reacting to the cluster of footfalls going by. Some pounded metal cups, resulting in a startling racket. Others whispered and muttered, audible through the cracks between the iron-reinforced planks. The noise in the first block made the subsequent quiet blocks, where only a whisper of movement sounded from within, all the more un-nerving.

At the end of the third block, they went around half a curved staircase and through

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another door. The warden shouted something in French and an office door flew open. More instructions followed before they continued on into the darkness.

The air grew colder. Torches fluttered weakly when commanded to by the warden. They reached a T intersection where the corridor widened into a real room, complete with chairs and a table supported only by magic, before crudely narrowing into crooked rows of hand-hewn cell doors. Stray newspapers and cigarette ends littered the area.

“Dis is sometimes used as a breaking room,” the warden explained before unlocking a block of cells with a rattle and chatter of resistant metal and leading the way inside. Harry hoped that he had misspoken.

They stopped before a door about three quarters of the way along the block. Pounding footsteps preceded the breathless arrival of a guard carrying pads and blankets. With some ceremony the pads, less than an inch thick, were stacked upon the bench, which like everything else, was carved directly out of the unyielding rock. The opposite wall had tilted shelf of rock with a groove cut in the middle. Water trickled along this and down to a channel where it dropped away into a bottomless hole that also served as the facilities. The place was so grim, Harry did not move immediately, even after the explanatory tour ended. He tried to speak, but Tonks cut him off, saying to Mr. Weasley, “Let me talk to Harry alone, please.”

Mr. Weasley sadly nodded his ascent and after bowing several times, the warden followed him out, gesturing to the uncomprehending guard to do the same. The door thudded closed and bounced slightly, unlatched.

“Harry,” Tonks said with firm appeal and a tight grip on Harry’s sleeves. “I had them put you in this cell block so you could escape if needed to. I expect you can.”

Harry’s mood brightened considerably, and it must have shown in his face because she sharply said, “I don’t want you to use that route unless your life is in danger. Do you understand?” Her voice dropped to barely audible. “They’ll know that a prisoner is gone the instant the cell is empty. Their magic is very good here. If you leave, and the press finds out, we’re going to have a much harder time proving you innocent.”

“What if you never do?” Harry said, heart sinking precipitously.

“Don’t be daft, of course we will. Just give us a little time. Like you said, there is only a rather short list of people who knew Alastor was alive.”

“Percy,” Harry said, feeling darker just stating that name.

“I’ll be on his case, Harry, if that’s where you want me to focus my part of the investigations.”

Harry thought that over. He could be wrong, but that did not feel wrong. “And Belinda. She’s got in over her head in this. I’m not certain she meant to.”

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“She’s a given for a closer look, Harry. And Transportation. They should have seen you Apparate.”

Harry shook his head.

Tonks twisted her head and glared for an instant. “You’re not making this easy, Harry.”

“And if you tell them now... you know... how I get around.”

“It’s not going to help your case,” she finished for him.

The stared at each other until Tonks pulled him down for a deep kiss. The door squeaked open and the Warden said, “Ah, such is a most important reason for delay.”

Tonks stepped back and patted Harry on the cheek. “We’re doing this for your own good, Harry. Behave, please.” She sounded truly pleading. After another quick kiss, she joined Mr. Weasley in the corridor. The door closed again, this time with a clang and the rusty scratch of the bolt sliding into place. Footsteps scuffed on the floor and then receded.

“Please,” Harry murmured to the dank, empty air. “Please, no one do anything for me for my own good.”



“What did you do to Harry!” shot out over the crowd-murmured air, powerful enough it echoed around the high ceiling of the atrium before vanishing. An instant later Ginny collided hard with Aaron and grabbed hold of the front of his crisp designer robes.

Aaron stepped back to retain his balance, and glanced around at the atrium’s full attention on them. He pulled her closer to quietly plead, “I didn’t do anything to Harry.”

Voice toned about halfway down, Ginny insisted, “I just read that you took him away, to prison.”

“I didn’t. Personally.”

“Yeah, but you’re in that department,” Ginny said angrily, continuing to behave as rigid as a metal spring in resisting his attempts to shift them to a more delicate, and publically palatable dance. “I was just on my way to giving my dad what-for, for me and the twins and anyone else I know.”

“Look,” he said, glancing around the burgeoning lunch-time crowd. “Let’s discuss this elsewhere, okay?” He Apparated her away to his flat.

When they arrived in the brightly lit sitting area, Ginny stepped back and propped her arms akimbo, her elbows as pointed as swords and looking just as dangerous if

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well-aimed. Aaron wondered if somehow her hair became redder when she was angry, or if it was just the light.

“Look,” Aaron said, “I don’t have any control over what the department does.” He started to tell her more, then decided he best reseal the room from eavesdropping, which he proceeded to do, ignoring her complaints until that was finished.

Aaron ended up near the long leather couch. “Have a seat,” he said, feeling drained all of a sudden.

Ginny strode over to the end of the couch and stood firm, arms crossed, face sharp.

“All right then, I’ll sit.” Aaron let the couch absorb him. It was the kind of couch where your bum nearly reached the floor by the time you finished sinking in. He waved over a foot stool and sat back, making a point about relaxing in the hopes of getting her to do so too. But this failed.

“How can you sit there like that?” she accused, eyes burning.

“Because there is nothing to be done. If you’d sit down and listen for half a second I can explain.”

She pulled the footstool out from under his legs and sat there, looking ready to disbelieve everything.

Aaron propped his legs on the armrest instead. “Magical Law Enforcement put Harry in prison pending his hearing because they feared if they did not do so Durumalna would find some other means of getting even or simply getting Harry out of the way. They killed Moody. They went to all this trouble to set Harry up. They are serious about this.”

Ginny did not budge from her stiff posture. “They set him up because they know they can’t kill him.”

Aaron had to concede that. “Possibly. But Harry has others around him who could be hurt. And some bad blokes are determined to get even with him. I’m sure by now they’ve discovered that they’ve been cheated. Those metal disks have started showing up in the shops and it’s had the positive side effect of getting the shop keepers to talk.” He crossed his hands behind his neck and stretched back. “Nothing like feeling cheated to loosen them up their tongues and get some cooperation.”

Ginny fell thoughtful. “We just have to make sure nothing happens to Candide while Harry is away.”

“She has a guard assigned now. You can sign up for double shifts if you like.” His mouth twisted into a silly grin. “I can come serve them with you if I’m not on duty.”

She flushed and stared at the ceiling.

Aaron went on, “Training has been cut to three hours so they can assign us all to the investigation. And Professor Snape will be home from school for the holidays

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shortly.” He sat forward slightly. “But no one is to know that Harry is not considered to be the primary wizard of interest. Don’t let that slip to anyone.”

“I won’t,” she snapped, recovering from embarrassment with another dose of offended anger. “I know how these things work.”

“You didn’t sound like it two minutes ago,” he pointed out, teasing with false exacerbation.

“Well...” she hemmed. “It just struck me as terribly unfair.”

Aaron stared at her blushing, noticing it did not fade immediately. “You still like him, don’t you?”

She looked away and shrugged. “Everyone likes Harry.” But she could not hold her mouth still.

Aaron, sounding clever, said, “I like Harry just fine too, but there’s a limit to my like.” After a pause, he said more soberly, “Is that why you don’t want to get married, because you are still hoping...?”

“That isn’t it at all,” she insisted. “Ask me in a year, all right?”

Sounding childlike, Aaron echoed, “A year?”



Harry sat pensively on the stone bench that served as a bed in his cell. The constant trickle of water was the only sound in the cool air beyond the range of his breathing, which he consciously had to keep slow. He had no idea what time it may be, only that the total time for which his current reality felt solid was much shorter than the total time he had occupied it.

He tried to believe he had fallen out of place, because it would wipe out all of his problems if true. But beyond his bad circumstances, nothing felt truly out of order. He was home, in his own Plane, albeit with the wrong man for a guardian.

Harry’s thoughts seized up and then spun away in a mad review of the past week. What if he had pushed the intruder too far and he had arranged to get Harry out of the way? Perhaps Harry had underestimated this version of Severus Snape and his ability to scheme and play the double agent. What if Snape had played Harry the way he played Voldemort, pretending to be meek and cowed when in reality, working for his downfall?

Harry did not move, but the rhythm of his heartbeat changed, speeding his thoughts along faster. He should go, he thought, and challenge Snape, just in case his fears were correct and this Death Eater was all enemy and no friend. That was when Harry felt them; before that moment he had been too caught up in his own distress to properly perceive their presence. But there they were, dozens of Death Eaters,

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hovering so terribly close, in rows, even, like soldiers waiting for orders. Harry's hand twitched where it lay beside him on the bench, longing to hold a wand. But did he really need a wand? He had these followers; weren't they better than a wand?

At the moment, he was safely separate from them. They were in one area of the prison and he in another, and clearly they had not escaped before now and likely would not anytime soon. One of the shadows must be Voldemort himself, trapped as he was in a Muggle existence. He, certainly, represented no threat.

Harry's thoughts ran through this, then reeled back to concern about leaving a double-crossing Snape free to do more harm. He could not allow that. He gathered his wits, preparing to slip away in the long gap between regular corridor patrols. But the clacking noise of the viewing plate in the door sliding aside stopped Harry cold.

"Monsieur?" Came a startled sounding voice through the gap. Only a pair of eyes could be seen, hovering beyond the slot, moving constantly about to see around inside.

"Yeah?" Harry replied, thinking it silly now that he had not moved at all for hours. Although... what would he do, instead, really?

"Très bon... az you were," the voice said, and the slat closed with a slap.

Harry blinked at the wall across from him while he took that in. As a test, he stood and shook his robes straight. He thought of Snape at Hogwarts, of wanting to visit him for a serious talk. Nothing happened. He prepared to slip away. The slat clattered open again.

"You zink dere is escape, Monsieur Pottar?"

Harry scratched his head. "There is a way out of every prison," he replied, finding a jovial tone. "If one dreams hard enough of it."

"Ah, a poet!" The eyes widened with delight.

"Not really," Harry mumbled, acutely disappointed that as soon as he prepared to escape, someone would notice. Magically, he was being watched too closely to sneak off. As Tonks depressingly insisted, he should only go for an emergency. The slat closed again. Harry was not truly certain it was Snape who had arranged this, in fact, he wanted to believe otherwise.

Harry sat down, having nothing else to do. Even the three pads were not all that thick and his bum complained. Unable to contain the energy inside him, he slipped off his robes and proceeded to jog in place until his breath steamed the closed-in air, then he did push ups against the bench, then he did sit ups, then with muscles burning he repeated it all until he could barely move to flop on the bench and sleep, kept company by a forest of shifting shadows whispering promises.



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Severus Snape re-read the first part of the letter he held. He had subconsciously moved closer to the stone-framed window to better see it, but the words remained the same the second time. Arthur Weasley's handwriting read straight and simple on the page, no flourishes marred his message. He had arrested Harry for the Murder of Alastor Moody, but... and here the letter grew careful... investigations are continuing and I will pay you a personal visit as soon as I can get away. The oath of the Order is still in force.

The foolish boy, or perhaps more accurately, young man, had walked into a trap that he should have foreseen. Snape shook his head. His cleaner-than-normal hair did not sway the way it normally did, part of keeping this ruse intact. He stared out the window. The Hufflepuffs were practicing on the pitch, earnest but barely competent, a description that fit the Harry he knew, and apparently this one as well, despite first impressions otherwise.

A whistle drifted over the lawn and the figures at the pitch gathered in a cluster again, one figure gesturing at the rest. It would be convenient to have Harry out of the way. He had kept Snape's secret until it was too late. Were he to attempt to reveal Snape's origins now, his accusations would sound shrill and too far-fetched to credit.

A fierce knock sounded on the door, and Snape instinctively crumpled up the letter and stuffed it away in his robes. The door opened without further pre-ambles. Snape had been forced to leave it unsealed, a necessary vulnerability he would never grow accustomed to.

Hermione Granger burst into the room, wild hair appropriately framing her frenzied face, voice half an octave too high. "Did you hear what happened to Harry?"

What should his reaction be, he wondered. "Arthur sent me an owl." He needed her on his side; she was smart enough to catch him up, so he added, "One promising further explanation and action, presumably in Harry's best interest."

Hermione stopped in the middle of the floor, just at the edge of the worn rug and exhaled what sounded like the last of her strength. "We knew they'd get even, or try. But how could Harry be accused of killing Moody when he's already dead? I don't understand that."

"Presumably he was not."

She blew her fringe off her forehead with an overdone sigh. "Yes, presumably." Her gaze narrowed to his, heavy with sweet hope, something he viscerally disliked having aimed his way. "What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

Snape thought quickly, pulling out and smoothing the letter to gain time. "Arthur promises to visit when he has a spare moment, but I will turn my duties over to Professor Lupin and pay the Ministry a visit instead, right now."

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Pleading pathetically, she said, "Let me know how it goes, will you? And get Harry's post address there, so I can send him a care package and have my students send him letters of support."

"Yes, I'm certain he will appreciate that," Snape managed to say, only because he should.



The Ministry's security had grown to be rather like that in Snape's world, surprisingly like it, except for the lack of Pureblood registration. Snape submitted to extra tests and questions, and in the end, his former house student, Aaron Wickem, came and fetched him because he required an escort.

As they walked briskly to the lifts, Aaron said, "I'm glad you're here, Professor. We need all the help we can get."

Snape's better instincts told him to stymie the investigation, if possible, but his promise to Dumbledore fought it down. Snape wondered if his pledge really should apply here, and tried to hold that thought, but it slipped away like an eel, leaving him resigned but unenthusiastic about his duty.

"Severus", Mr. Weasley said breathlessly when he turned and found him standing off his escort's elbow. The Department of Magical Law Enforcement hummed with overactivity, with personnel invading from other departments. "Let's go into my office," Mr. Weasley said, waving the others off.

Snape wasted no time after the door snapped closed. "You mentioned the Order Oath."

"It was the safest way to tell you we don't think Harry did this."

Snape nodded silently. He was mostly here because it was expected that he be here, although curiosity helped him along. "How long do you think?"

"Before we can realistically let him out?" Mr. Weasley took a seat and smoothed the wispy hair on top of his head. "I don't know. They've got him pretty good; I'll give them that."

Snape felt annoyance at this, just on principle, and used it to say sharply. "Come now, they cannot have left no holes in their plot. And you must have a suspect of your own."

Mr. Weasley grew agitated, making Snape wish he would look up so he had a chance of seeing why. He considered insulting him for his incompetence, but decided that he personally needed to retain this man as an ally, so he kept quiet, but it was a hard fight holding back. His own dismay came across clearly when he said, "Is there anything I can do?"

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“Keep an extra layer of spells around your house, at a minimum. Although, we expect things to quiet down now that they believe their ploy successful.”

“How are you proceeding from here, may I ask? This is my... family,” he managed with a slight choke on the word. “Son” was right out. “...we are discussing here.”

Mr. Weasley shuffled some files around. “Alastor was doing his own investigations for Fudge in the Department of Mysteries, so we are trying to track backwards what he was doing.”

“What have you learned so far?”

Mr. Weasley’s hands fell still, limp. “That he was investigating Harry. According to Fudge, that was his primary job.”

“Ah,” Snape uttered.

“Fudge is livid. Harry isn’t going anywhere unless we have something rock solid to get him out with. We’re going to delay the Wizengamot hearing as long as it takes to generate that evidence... that we have the political power to do, but not to pull him out of there until that time.”

“What about the Ministry Dungeon. Why have you sent him so far away?”

“Because we aren’t certain of keeping him safe here. I can’t bear to think of him trapped in a cell without a wand to defend himself.”

“He hardly needs a wand to defend himself,” Snape pointed out, mostly to keep arguing, which he felt like doing after a week of being overly nice to everyone.

“True, but you’ll recall he was poisoned right here in the Ministry.”

Snape did not recall that, but he had no reason to doubt such a confession. After a gap, he said, “Seems you have more problems internally than you can cope with.”

This made Mr. Weasley look up and now he revealed the side Snape was more familiar with: the lined and world-weary face of a man responsible for too many lives beyond his skills, a man whose adherence to principal gave him a naïve intrepidity that should be mockable, but Snape, who had no difficulty openly criticizing Dumbledore’s attitudes, could never quite manage to.

“We can handle this, Severus,” Mr. Weasley assured him.

Snape was not reassured, but one part of him hummed with strategic pleasure at that belief. While Mr. Weasley made more assurances, Snape began laying out his next moves. He should visit Candide at her office. He had seen the address on her papers, and such a visit would be expected. He escaped the Ministry with that excuse, and as predicted, it worked well to get him away.

Candide was far more distraught than Snape imagined.

“Look at the papers!” she shouted, seeming to have waited for his presence to vent this. The papers were scattered around her sizable desk, mangled and forlorn.

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Her office mates, bent over their work, flinched at her voice; outward emotion and cold numbers mix poorly.

A robustly bellied man in a waistcoat with two watch chains gestured behind Candide's back that Snape should vacate with the woman. It was late in the day in any event.

"Why don't we go?" Snape said.

This halted her tirade. She pushed her hair back and turned hopefully to her boss, who had the sense to smile graciously and gesture that she could depart.

Candide's harsh vocal complaints about the Ministry specifically and fate in general did not re-occur, fortunately. Once home, she took her overburdened body to the couch and sat back with undue care, leaving Snape standing nearby, uncertain what was expected of him. He decided it best to wait for a cue. As difficult as Harry was to handle, this part of his borrowed world left him feeling far more uncertain. Being pushed around and abused by a mad, powerful wizard Snape was accustomed to, even if he had gone to great lengths to escape it only to end up back in the thick of it. He knew well how to placate and lie and act appropriately and do even a bit better than survive. But facing the reality of a very pregnant wife and a veritable mile-deep snake pit of emotional expectations and responsibilities left him feeling inexperienced and short of the willpower needed to sustain the needed artifice.

Candide tipped her head back and sighed, then sniffled. "Poor Harry. I can't imagine him there in prison. It's just awful." She dabbed her eyes and looked over at him. "You're just standing there."

"I'm thinking."

"Of how to get him out?"

Snape did not answer. The will to lie was gone, and he had no desire to reveal his torn emotions in this area.

She patted the couch beside her expectantly. "I assume you are staying a while since I don't have a guard yet. Home too early for once."

Trapped, Snape stepped that way and sat down, knowing if he behaved as stiffly as he instinctively wished to, he was going to have questions if not an argument. He brought his over practiced willpower to bear and brushed her shoulder. He intended to leave it at that, but she tugged her feet up and turned casually to lay in his arms. He fumbled while adjusting his hold, but this went by unnoticed. Snape tipped his head back and held perfectly still until his heart slowed. He silently shook his head, far too aware of the pressure on his arms and chest, and wondered with no little alarm how any version of himself could find this casually normal.

She sniffled again, but he did not even move to roll his eyes as he would have liked. Yes, truly this part of his borrowed world was the hardest to cope with.

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She sighed for a fourth time and rubbed an eye, but Snape took little notice. The scent of her was impossible to ignore this close. She smelled of love potion brewing, overlaid by something strangely both sweet and animal-like, which could be the pregnancy. Then there was that. His child. Or essentially his. The pit under his feet widened so that he stood on air, suspended helplessly over a seething mass of impossible circumstance and expectation.

“Poor Harry,” Candide said, breaking the spell of doom holding Snape captive.

“He’ll survive,” Snape murmured, far less certain of his own fate.

“Yes, but it’s so unfair.”

Snape could not censor himself. “Life is unfair.”

She slapped him lightly on the arm. “You always say that. It isn’t always true.” But she was not angry, just teasing to lighten her own mood. Snape was surprised he could recognize that so easily.

She settled in better, head shifting to the crux of his shoulder. Snape’s arms were aching he held them so rigid, so he was grateful for a chance to relax them. He had not felt he could move without her moving first.

“I hope the guard is late,” she said. “They’ll go to the office first so that will delay them somewhat.”

The implication of that was clear, even as unbelievable as it seemed; she wanted to be alone with him like this as long as possible. There was only one person Snape had ever wanted to hold like this, but her haunting presence had never felt so distant as it did this moment. Something about that strange scent, the scent of a future faced with hope rather than constant fear and strategic panic, the scent of someone willingly desiring to share that future, sliced a gash in this festering pain. Some morbid instinct in him wanted to gather it up, to hold it from escaping, to cherish it. But with the weight of Candide compressing his chest and the scent of her making his thoughts flutter, he realized that he had only cherished that pain because there was nothing else to cherish.

Something of his inner turmoil must have shown, because she patted his arm and asked, “Are you going to be all right, Severus?”

Again, he could not lie. If she chose to ask the right questions, he would tell her anything. He was bleeding stagnant, poisonous pain and in its absence found that he was not empty without it, as he had feared he would be. He was perhaps lost and drifting, but not empty.

“I don’t know. Possibly,” he said softly. He was thinking for the first time that Lily was long enough dead that what used to feel like betrayal no longer did. He had sworn he would never do as she did and betray her in return after she had left him with an empty life. He let those old memories run through him, finding himself

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more like a stone in the stream of them than the tossed leaf he normally was. She had chosen his worst enemy, and that still burned, but in the end maybe his empty life had been his own doing, a thought that felt far safer in his current, cramp-armed position.

The patting on his arm continued, finding a rhythm. "Taking Harry on as a responsibility was a very noble thing to do."

He tried to imagine that without hope of comprehension. "Yes, so unlike me," he said, finding better footing and maybe even strength in self-depreciation. He still felt purposeless and did not particularly like it.

She hit him firmly, but in a philosophical tone, said, "I expect you thought it would get easier."

"I would never think that," Snape replied, absolutely certain, within and without.



Harry woke to the dimness of his cell, reminded firmly by the dank dungeon scent where he was. The shadows tried to follow him out of his dreams to hover around him there in the cell, but he firmly pressed them away. He sat up and slapped his face lightly to rouse himself better. The thin air made it difficult to come to quick awareness.

He sniffled and immediately blamed it on the musty air, rather than emotion. Needing a concrete task, he used the facilities and spent some time washing up as well as he could with a trickle of water, a chained metal cup, and only a faint fairylight to do it with. If he wanted company, he need only prepare to depart and the guard would appear. The magic of this place immediately gave away his escape, but that also made him feel less alone. At the moment, Harry wanted to be alone to think, so he folded his pads and his three ratty blankets and made a comfortable seat at one end of the bench. Then he propped his chin on his hands and did just that; he thought over the last few months of his neglected real life in as much detail as possible.

Clearly Belinda had fallen in with Durumulna, even as unlikely as Harry thought that to be before now. She had always been so positive about what the Ministry stood for and really believed it could accomplish things. Harry shook his head at the conundrum of that. Perhaps she was not involved willingly, but under an Imperius Curse. But for certain she had not shown symptoms of that during their last few meetings. Harry thought back farther when he would go visit her in the Minister's office and Percy always seemed to be lurking about. Had she shown symptoms then, he now wondered. That would implicate Percy. Then with giddy mockery, Harry

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considered that perhaps that was how Percy got her to date him in the first place. This cruel humor faded quickly as the possibility of that grew in plausibility and his stomach turned sour.

It was possible, Harry decided. Those times she had given Harry nothing but stiff responses, may have had nothing to do with her breaking up with him months before. But she had warmed up after that, so she must have been released from the Curse at some point. Balanced with her insistence that Moody was keeping an eye on her, Harry now wondered it that had not been the old Auror's doing. But if so, why had Moody not reported it? Or, maybe he had, to his boss, Fudge.

Harry pulled the knuckle of his thumb out of his mouth before he chewed it through to the bone. He needed paper to write a letter. And ink. And a pen. Some light would help too. They told him his post would have to be screened coming in, and he wondered if that meant they would have to be screened going out as well.

Harry sat thinking until breakfast arrived, and unlike lunch and dinner the previous day, which he had turned away, this tray he readily accepted through the slot in the door, to the guard's obvious delight.

"Très bon. Très bon," the man said. "Zee warden will be most plea-zed."

Even as the delicious scent of salt cod, bacon, eggs and hollandaise reached his nose from the tray, Harry found himself dismayed to imagine the warden taking an interest in his meal consumption.

The guard went on. "He wishes to invite you for dinnar zis even-ing. If you are will-ing. 'E does not wish to interrupt your five stay-jes, 'owever."

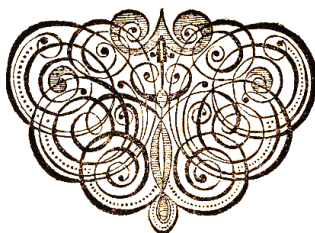
"My what?"

"Your five stay-jes of grief. All ze new prisoners, you know, zey 'ave to go through this."

"Ah," Harry said, finally understanding. But Harry was not staying here long term; he did not have any grief. In fact, what he had instead were quite a few captive followers willing to do just about anything for him. And he had letters to write, and really, he could leave anytime. Not a terribly grief-generating situation. "Yeah, tell him I'll be there for dinner."

Author's Notes: No preview this time. Make something up, post it in the comments if you like. There will be some humor in the next chapter. I get to use my Monty Python Frenchmen a bit more extensively. Such fun!

CHAPTER THIRTY



PRISON SANS BARS

Harry paced most of the day, wishing for even just a foot more space to do it in. He worried about his guardian, who would not know why Harry did not come to assist him and would worry in turn; that was, assuming nothing bad happened to him in the meantime. Harry worried too that the impostor Snape could be at least partly responsible for framing him, even if Harry could not work out how he might have managed it.

Harry scuffed his feet to a stop and rested his forehead on the stone wall. A film of dank moisture came off onto his skin. He could go and take care of both Snapes, but it would mean throwing everything else away. He could do that; Tonks had seen to it that he could leave. What he would do after it was all straight was far less clear, but at least he would not be standing here in such a state, worrying.

Harry heaved a sigh that was eaten up by the imprisoned air. He really should stay and trust that others would take care of things. His guardian had made it clear he could take care of himself, even in that muddled place. From Harry's perspective, his guardian seemed to fall into his new, or perhaps old, role a bit too easily. He would be more than a little unhappy with Harry when he found out how much Harry had sacrificed just to help him with something for which he had spent a decade and half fine-tuning his skills. As to the impostor, well, he wanted to stay, which meant he would not do anything to harm his reputation, or he would not do so until his position was more secure, so for the moment, he was not a danger.

Despite being unable to piece together how the impostor might have managed to set up the evidence that led to his arrest, Harry imagined it to be well within his

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skills, even if he could not imagine him killing Moody. Although, another niggling part of his mind pointed out, he did kill Dumbledore.

Harry pounded his head lightly on the rough rock. He wanted a future, but he also wanted a present, and to have those two desires so viciously in conflict made him want to scream.

Harry sat down hard. If he had paper, at least he could be doing something. The guard who brought his meals insisted that his personal effects would take time to get through screening – days even. Harry growled and stretched his neck back to stare at the low ceiling. If he were susceptible to claustrophobia, he would have gone mad in this place already. As it was, his breathing occasionally faltered, especially if he thought too hard about the solid square miles of rock above him, poised to crush the cell and him into wet dust.

Harry rubbed his face and paced some more, trying hard to avoid looking inward at the army of shadows close by. Dwelling on their presence brought on that dark strategic thinking where he felt certain he could take over and control everyone, easily – the mode where his enemies would regret being his enemies in some fashion so gruesome his mind averted from the notion and blanked it out.

When the guard came to take him to the warden, Harry nearly leapt up off the bench with joy at the prospect of leaving his cell, even as badly as he had wanted to retain an air of detachment. The guard led Harry back down the long, uneven corridor. The carvers of this place had lacked not only the tools to work along a straight and level line, but apparently the desire to as well. The floor rose, fell and faintly corkscrewed.

They reached the wide area where the guards' unofficial break room had been set up. Another guard sat reading a ragged magazine. He stood and eagerly shook Harry's hand, spitting out a string of harsh French, at which Harry could only nod politely in turn. As they stepped away and the guard gave him a hearty, salute-like wave, Harry began to suspect he was currently being treated better than he would have been in Azkaban. This thought disturbed him with its implications and he mulled it over until reaching the warden's office.

Harry waited through a round of spells to verify he carried nothing dangerous before the door was opened. The warden waved off the guard, who did not even hesitate in departing. They know nothing about me, Harry thought in a kind a remote alarm. Or, maybe they did: Harry did in fact have zero intention of making trouble.

"Meester Pottar," the warden said warmly, leading Harry inside by the hand he pumped up and down, despite their having been introduced again just the day before.

A marble and iron cafe table had been set up in the warden's office, complete with

PRISON SANS BARS

gold-edged dishes that sparkled in the flickering lamplight.

“Ave a seat. Please,” the warden insisted.

“Thanks,” Harry said, taking the more distant chair. Even though the office was not appreciably larger than his cell, the candles and the signs of normal life made it feel far more welcoming.

The wine poured itself and the warden raised his glass in a toast. “To you, Meester Pottar.”

“To me?” Harry echoed wryly. “If you insist...” Harry drank up, figuring that if they wished to potion him, they would not have to go to this length to do it.

A knock sounded upon the door and a guard with a chef’s hat stretched down over his unyielding helmet slipped in with a large pot of fish soup that filled the air with a heady simulation of an ocean breeze. Harry’s thoughts tried to whirl far away with the scent.

When they were alone again, the warden put his elbow down beside his bowl and leaned forward eagerly. “Zo, I am dy-ing of curiosity. What was eet? A lov-er betrayed you?”

“What?” Harry responded, not following.

The warden paused to slurp soup before trying again. He held up one pinky and used it to point at Harry while also twisting his long curled mustache around between his fingers. “I am a-zuming that you, zo passion-ate, that you were driven to this by love betrayed, no?”

“No,” Harry said. “I actually-”

“Ah! No, no, let me guess. I am close, though. I must be... I am zer-tain.” This time he gestured with his oversized soup spoon. “No, it was a rival-ry and you stood up for your ’onor... or your lady’s ’on-or. Yes, that would be more to your styling.” He gave a great sigh. “This life it is zo full of trial for one such as you. Always so many wish to share in your spot-light and if they cross the line, you have but no choice but to crush them, am I right?”

Harry had abandoned eating for the moment. “I didn’t do it.”

The warden appeared not to hear. “Or... blackmail. Such fam-ous peoples make such easy targets.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “Or so zey think. But you showed zem, eh?”

Harry tried again. “I didn’t do it.”

The warden stared at Harry and sniffed sadly. “You still defend your own reputation, even so late in the game.”

“I really didn’t kill him,” Harry said in his most honest and calm voice.

“Ah,” the warden excitedly gasped in a breath. “Magnifique! You ’ave been framed!” He kissed his fingertips as if expressing delight for the soup. “Oh, I have

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not imagined this. It iz wonderful, zeez intrigues.”

Harry had put his spoon down and now sat back, hand on chin, to stare at the man across from him.

The warden waved his fingers. “You have no worries about poisoning. My chef is most careful. He must eat ’alf before he brings the rest. Zee kitchen is all zee way at zee end of zee hall. If ’e makes it to the table wiz it... we are okay.”

Harry, not wanting to be rude, picked up his spoon and continued eating. The soup was still boiling hot; the bowl must be charmed. The conversation fell off in the interest of eating, punctuated by noises of delight from his host that may or may not have been related to the food.

In the middle of the terrine course, which made Harry begin to worry seriously about how many courses might be forthcoming, the warden returned to his earlier topic. While tearing bread into chunks to eat with the terrine, he said, “Zo, what ees your strategy for re-solving your zituation?”

Harry sighed. “I don’t know. I’ve been framed quite well, but the department is trying to prove I’m innocent.”

“And your pink-haired lady-friend iz on your side for certain? If she is part of the con-spirazy you may be ’ere a loooong while.” This prospect sounded pleasant to him.

“I don’t think she is,” Harry said.

“Ah, but it would be perfect if she were,” the warden pointed out, clearly intrigued.

“Not for me it wouldn’t,” Harry replied glumly.

The warden noticed that Harry had stopped eating. “Oh, I ’ave taken your appetite. My apologizes.”

“No, I think the previous six courses took my appetite,” Harry stated, worried if he moved more than to breathe his stomach might rupture.

“Oh, but we are only ’alfway true zee meal. Perhaps you need some digestif.” He rang a bell beside his plate and the guard in the chef’s hat came hurrying in.

Harry slowly sipped the proffered liquor while his host ate the next courses alone. He wondered how in the world the man could more resemble Lupin for physique rather than his Uncle Vernon.

During the second dessert course, which Harry managed to nibble at, grateful that enough hours had passed that he had managed to digest some of the earlier courses, the warden reached over to his desk for a thick folder.

“Your file. Or a copy of ov eet,” the warden explained.

Harry balked at how thick it was. “What... have they put my marks in there from school, even?”

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The warden flipped some pages around. “Yes, your ‘Ogwarts’ file ees in here, of course.” He read a bit. “You were quite fond of detention, I zee.”

“It was fond of me.”

The warden flipped some more, tugging out a familiar page. “And your adop-tion. Most interesting. Same professor as your detentions.”

“Funny that,” Harry said, just to say something. His stomach was making him sleepy and the wavering candles made the room seem to rock gently, like a moored boat. Through a haze of food fatigue, Harry felt a painful stab of worry about his adoptive father. Here he was having a twelve-course meal with a crazy Frenchman while Snape struggled to fight Voldemort. At this point, even if he could leave, Harry felt unfit to do more than drag himself slowly away to his bed, certainly not battle anyone. He rubbed his eyes, wanting nothing more than to fall flat on his poorly padded stone bench, but he resisted asking to go back to his dreary cell, so he held out... through the subsequent coffee course and follow-on cheese course. The chef, after all that, behaved disappointed in the news that they were finished. He hung his helmeted head and pulled off his starched hat, which he crumpled up as he shuffled off in a posture of defeat.

Harry thanked his host for the nice dinner and said, “I wonder if I can get parchment and pen and ink from you, rather than wait for it to arrive in my care package. I need to write some letters right away.”

The warden spun a mustache and let it snap back into place, eyes glittering. “Ah, you wish to unwind zis mystery, no?”

Harry hated to admit it, but he said, “I don’t think I can from here.” He ached again, thinking of Snape, trapped so very far away. “But I want to warn my friends to be careful.” That sounded safe since he did not want to give them any clues to help them decipher the double meanings he would be using should they be reading his post.

The warden pulled several sheets from his desk and found a pen and inkwell, which he bundled up with string for Harry to carry off.

“Thank you,” Harry said, finding unusual gratitude in receiving something so ordinary.

The warden went to the door. “Your post will be slow, I’m afraid, we must trans-late it, you understand.”

“Even going out?” Harry asked.

This stopped the man. “Ezspecially going out,” he stated knowledgeably.

“Ah,” Harry said, disappointed.

“I vill ask around the cell-block poetic if there is a bilingual prisoner who can ’elp speed dis up.”

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Harry faintly shook his head. "What? You have a cell block just of poets?"

"But ov course," the warden said, gesturing toward the door. "We cannot put zem with anyone else."

The warden called out in the corridor to one of the guards, whose helmet visor fell closed when he snapped to attention from stealing tidbits off a tray of un-served courses hovering beside the door.

"Take Meester Pottar back to 'is cell, Marcel."

When the guard bowed, his visor fell forward again, and he left it down as he marched off. Harry followed, thinking ahead so intently about whom he should write to first that it startled him when the guard stopped to disengage the long locking bar for his block of cells, not with his crystal-tipped spear, but with a wand from his pocket.

"'ere we are, Monsieur," the guard said with a bow when they reached the right doorway.

Not ready to be left to the solitary stillness of his cell yet, Harry asked, "Why did you have to arrest so many poets?"

"Zee poets? We 'ave to arrest zem," the guard blurted. "Zo much trouble." He slowly shook his helmeted head, making it rattle with each pass. "Zey had a war, you know, of words. You have no heard of zis?"

Harry shook his head.

The man sighed and scratched an invisible pattern on the floor with the handle of his pike. "It vas a terrible time. No one could open zere post, and everyone, zey took the zides. The poets, you zee, zey got jealous ov each ozer. Zey began to write poems zat were not zo much poems, but spells, zome quite nasty. And zey zend zeese to each ozer." He pointed at Harry accusingly, as though he may have been involved. "ZAT would have been ac-ceptable, but zey began also zending zeese poems to colleagues and family who came out in zupport of zere poet. Zoon, everyone was in-volv-ed."

"Poems that were spells," Harry repeated, working hard to hear through the accent.

"Exactamondo," the guard said, highly pleased Harry understood. "Zis is not allow-ed, zis magic is not. To let it continue... it would be zee end of ma-gic. Words 'ave such power, zey cannot be treated so lightly."

With a little bow that for once left his visor in place, the man closed the cell door and left Harry alone, to compose carefully worded letters in the cold, thin air, starting with his ersatz father. If he wrote carefully enough, perhaps his words would carry enough power to loosen his worry.

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Severus Snape stood in the hallway outside the dining room of Grimmauld Place, observing Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom charming Christmas decorations onto the curtain rods and a crooked, two-foot high tree propped on the corner of the long table. Hermione directed and Neville obediently followed and soon the room glowed and sparkled with spell-generated gaiety. The scene threatened to roll over Snape like a great wave. For all his instinct to remain where he could be useful in aiding Potter in defeating Voldemort, a less well-cultivated instinct longed to be home, to be where the most serious redecorating issue was moving his oldest son to a different room to make space for his newest son. His oldest son... whatever had become of him.

Hermione glanced up and fell still and wary upon spying him there. Snape took advantage of that impetus to move on, upstairs, to check on Lupin... to do something.

He found Lupin bent to the task of carefully packing his one spare set of robes into a backpack that had extra straps sewn onto it to prevent him shedding it in wolf form. Without comment, Snape moved to mix a restorative potion with the honey and egg white he had just fetched from the kitchen. He poured this into a bottle spelled to be unbreakable and handed it to Lupin to add to the pack.

Lupin studied the bottle rather than put it away. Milky liquid strands swirled within as he turned it to study every side. "If you are here under false pretenses, Severus, you are doing an excellent job of hiding it." Before Snape could compose a response, Lupin added, "But then you must always have been good at that, fooling your master all those years."

Snape did not want to cast his mind back to that time in any detail. He said, "Do you have everything you need for tonight?" in as hard a tone as he could manage.

Lupin wagged a finger at him mockingly. "Dodging questions is one good way to avoid getting trapped into an unacceptable answer."

"I do not need to answer to you."

"No, funny that you only needed to answer to Dumbledore and we know what happened to him."

Snape ignored this, since it only stressed him more about the double who was living his life. "Where will you be at dawn? In the event that you need assistance returning..."

Lupin laughed, but his smile faded quickly. "If I keep arguing with you, I suspect I could get you to say anything, no matter how uncharacteristically kind-hearted." He cinched the pack closed and swung it over his fatigue-bent shoulder.

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Flatly, Snape stated, "I will fetch you if you require it."

Lupin flinched, perhaps remembering the last time he needed to be fetched home. "I'll be on the Dartmoor, near the Bowerman's Nose."

"Fine," Snape snipped. His rancor for this man had faded, but he found it phenomenally easy to pretend it had not.

Lupin trudged over and opened the bedroom door, letting in a cry of "Harry's back!" from down below followed by pounding footsteps originating from all corners of the house. Reluctant to lose face, but as curious as the others where Harry had gone off to that morning, Snape followed Lupin downstairs at a discreet distance.

The dining room swelled into a hive of activity as everyone in the house gathered there. Fortunately for Snape, Ginny's approaching Harry with her arms crossed held everyone's attention, so they did not notice their unwelcome guest hanging in the doorway.

"Why didn't you tell me where you were going?" Ginny demanded.

"Because you would have followed me," Harry pointed out, trying to tease, but falling flat. He sat at the head of the table, beside the flickering tree, his heavy cloak still draped over one shoulder.

Ginny's hair caught the orange light from the hearth as she stretched her neck toward him. "Like we aren't all in this together," she mocked, rapping him on the shoulder.

Ginny's light touch made Harry's jaw tighten. He shifted carefully in his seat, holding his cloak around himself with one hand. Voice oddly bright, he tried again with, "I can only hide myself safely with the invisibility cloak. I wanted to check on something. I thought I'd figured out how to find the cup and I wanted to bring it back as a Christmas present for everyone."

Hermione leaned over the table in Harry's direction. "Did you get it?"

Harry smiled faintly. "No, but I know how we can get it." He glanced across the room and accurately out the door where Snape stood. Staring thusly, Harry fell pointedly silent.

Snape stepped away to the staircase. Lupin, almost as though pretending to the room that it was he who had halted Harry's story, waved faintly and said, "I have to be going."

This pulled Hermione out the door. "Got everything?" she asked. Lupin assured her that he did as she saw him to the door.

By the time the outside door was fully re-bolted, Snape was upstairs, standing far from the railing in a position where he could not be seen from below. He was certain Harry was injured and intended to hide it from his friends. He waited there, picking up the trickle of low conversation.

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Down in the dining room Harry said, "With Bellatrix in hospital for the foreseeable future—"

"Thanks to Mr. Snape," Hermione pointed out.

"Yeah," Harry uttered. "With her out of commission, protecting the cup has fallen to the Malfoys, which means Draco. I realized that all we have to do is make Draco think we already have the cup and then we can follow him when he goes to check if it's really gone."

Ron said, "He's a pretty simple minded git, should be easy to fool."

Harry said, "And he's scared, which makes him easy to manipulate. Close the door, so I can tell you my plan."

Footsteps sounded and the door clicked closed. Snape remained where he was, staring at the soot-stained, gold and green fabric wall-covering across from him while the house creaked and settled for the night. He pulled aside the thick drapes beside him and looked out into the square. A solitary crooked streetlight cast a pittance of light over the cracked pavement, neither of which did the Muggles have the wherewithal to repair. Sirens wailed in the distance then faded. The orange city glow over the dark roof-line across the square could just as easily be the city burning. If tonight it was merely extra-low clouds picking up the myriad electric lights, then it was just putting off the inevitable. Dropping the curtain back into place, Snape went back to doing something concrete.

When the door opened after a sharp rap, Snape sat, hunched, on a battered old bar stool, mixing a general restorative. He looked up to find Harry standing in the doorway, cloak still covering his right shoulder.

"I have a question for you," Harry said, in the tone of making a demand.

Snape bowed faintly and continued stirring. Hermione and Ginny followed Harry inside, each standing just behind a shoulder.

Harry said, "The Malfoys have a secret hiding place in their house. I know this because I overheard Lucius describe it once. So don't try to claim they don't have one. Where is it and how do we get into it?"

Calmly, Snape said, "There is a dungeon hidden under the second and third to last floorboards on the wall opposite the hearth in the drawing room."

Hermione said, "A dungeon hidden under the floorboard?"

"It is a wide pair of floorboards," Snape commented, directly at the smartest of them. "And it is the most significantly warped piece of magical space I have ever observed. It exceeds the Tossfet Maximum Actual to Experienced Ratio by a factor of at least two."

Ron came up behind the trio, out of hiding. "Blimey, the Ministry's dug around their place completely at least twice and never found anything."

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Retaining his patience with effort, Snape said, "That's because it is not really below the house, simply between two floor joists."

"How do you open it?" Harry asked. A scattering of sweat beads glittered on his upper lip, a symptom of fighting pain, Snape was certain, since the room was cool.

"I will tell only Potter. He can tell the rest of you if he trusts you enough." He glared at the lot of them in turn, pleased with this excuse.

Harry, with an abbreviated movement of his left hand, sent them out. "Hermione has his wand," he pointed out to Ginny to finally get her to depart.

With the door closed, Harry sat carefully on the bed. "So?" he asked impatiently after a gap.

"Precisely what I was going to say to you." Snape stared him down before turning to quench the burner. He took his time, giving the mixture one last stir. He turned back and asked, "How badly are you hurt?"

Harry's face lost its shape, unable to retain the ruse if it did not need to. "I don't know, really. Is it that obvious?"

"To me. Your little friends are even more dunderheaded than I ever gave them credit for if they cannot see it."

Harry lacked the strength to defend his friends, because he said, "They don't want to see it. And I don't want them to either. I'm barely holding them all together as it is." He wiped the sweat off his lip and stared at the moisture now glittering on his palm. "Compared to my scar, it's nothing."

"What'd you get hit with?"

Harry shook his head. "There wasn't an incantation."

Losing patience, Snape asked, "What color was it? Did it make a sound? Did it pulse or waver?"

"It was violet and red and it may have waved a little."

"Let me see it." When Harry failed to move, Snape said, "Going to check yourself into Mungo's instead? Get a bed beside Lestrangle's perhaps?"

Harry moved ultra slowly to shed his cloak. Snape had to keep his hands fisted at his sides to resist helping, which would be too far out of character. The fabric of Harry's shirt had melted to the skin of his shoulder, and had to be tugged free, which Snape did help with, but since it made Harry gasp the action did not come across as solicitous.

"How deep does it go? Raise your elbow."

"I can't," Harry said.

"Because it refuses to move or because it hurts too much?"

Softly, Harry said, "Hurts too much." He studied his mottled shoulder. "What'd I get hit with?"

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“I wasn’t there; how should I know?” Snape said, venting his angst over Harry’s condition in the only appropriate manner available, back at the young man.

“You can be a right bastard when you want to be, you know that?” Harry complained weakly.

Snape handed him a clear liquid in a small cup. “Drink this, then raise your arm.”

Harry sighed even before he lowered the cup of Painaway. “That’s good stuff.”

“Arm,” Snape insisted.

Harry obeyed, moving easily.

“You are very lucky your shoulder joint is not seized.” He began digging through the cupboards and pulling out old clothing that given the pink frills and stains not even Lupin would wear.

Harry said, “But what was the spell? I know you know.”

Snape, crouched beside the lowest cupboard under the window, looked up at Harry sitting on the bed. With no rancor, he prodded, “Do you now?”

“You’re transparent, you know that?”

For a moment, Snape could not move – an intense homesickness paralyzed him there in that spot. He stood with effort and laid out an old flowered skirt on the bed. “Let me borrow your wand, or cut this into strips for me, if you can manage that difficult a bit of magic.” He intended that to come out more mocking than it did, which twisted it into grudging affection.

Harry tossed the skirt on the floor and used a less-than-efficient cutting spell that also damaged the rug. Rather than bend, he gathered the strips up with a hover charm and handed them over like a bundle of dead snakes. Snape soaked them in an astringent potion and without comment began bandaging Harry’s shoulder, reminded starkly of needing to do similarly to his Harry. With his pain taken away, Harry sat stoically through this process before pulling his damaged shirt and cloak back on.

“Leave that on at least two days,” Snape said, turning to put things away.

“Yes, Professor.” Sounding less than grateful, and perhaps even begrudging, Harry asked, “Where’s your friend? I thought he’d be back before now.”

Snape took care to set down the bottle he held. Harry, as usual, had hit a sore point, intended to, it seemed, as a means of putting proper distance between them again.

A knock sounded on the door and Hermione called out. Harry answered that everything was fine. Snape quickly whispered, “Twist the left horn on the goat’s head under the mantelpiece and use the spell I will write down for you to open the floor itself.”

Harry nodded as the door opened. Hermione said, “We wondered what was taking so long.”

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Harry replied, "I was just asking Snape here about his mysterious friend and why we haven't seen him back."

"Oh," Hermione said, in a tone that indicated she wished to know this too. She shifted to staring at Snape with interest rather than suspicion.

"Yeah," Harry said with quickly recovered bravado, "I was just asking how long Totten had been his boyfriend."

Snape nearly dropped the box of beetle carapaces he had just taken off the shelf. He glared at Harry in disbelief before turning to the mortar and pestle while broadly shaking his head.

"Well then, is he your cousin or great uncle or something?" Hermione asked.

Snape, pestle in hand, grumbled, "You would not in your entire miserable little lifetimes understand what he is. Go away."

Harry said, "Well, we thought he'd be back before now. He sounded worried about you." Hermione gave Harry a dissuading nudge, and he added, "You know, as unbelievable as that is." This garnered Harry a glare from Hermione.

Snape rolled his eyes and let his hair fall into his face. "I certainly knew you were listening in. What do you take me for?" He held up a finger. "No, don't answer that."

Harry was tenacious. "But aren't you worried that he hasn't been back?"

Snape stared at the other that looked so much like his own. In truth he was so worried that to dwell upon it would render him useless. "That is not your problem," Snape commented, low and threatening.

Hermione gave a tug on Harry's elbow, fortunately for Harry on his left elbow. "Come on, Harry."

But Harry stood his ground. "I want to know why, if he's not a dark wizard, this Totten didn't stay to help."

Snape was growing angry like he had not in a long while – driven into black rage by a helpless, gutting pain. He wanted this conversation finished before he did something he would regret. "There are other things in this universe to attend to; your little world isn't as big as you think it is."

Oddly, Harry did not appear to take this as an insult as intended; his eyes indicated that he took some kind of hope from it. This time when Hermione pulled on him, he relented and followed her out.



As the clanging footsteps of his morning guard approached, Harry jumped down off his bench and went to the food slot to receive his post. This guard did not speak

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any English and Harry did not know his name, so he had named him Steeltoe Pierre, due to the loud metal boots he wore.

“Thanks,” Harry said, catching the string-bound bundle when it fell through the slot.

“Je t’en prie,” the guard said, and then hesitated. He had tried several times already to speak to Harry in French on the previous day, but had finally given up. Harry suspected he wanted to try again, but he let the flap on the slot slide closed and a second later the latch clicked. Harry listened to him walk away, the crisp echoes making him sound like multiple guards.

Harry took his prized letters to the bench to sort out. Word had made it around and now every letter included a sheet of parchment for Harry’s reply, well, the letters from friends did. At home when less-than-favorable news was printed about Harry, Candide used a charm to drop the nasty post outside as needed, but Harry did not have the benefit of that here. He could usually tell by how the address was written out that the letter was going to be an angry tirade. This certain wasn’t the first time he had received hate mail, and he would prefer that it not bother him, but he had grown tentative about even glancing at these letters. When he had read one the previous day, out of sheer boredom and lack of other unopened post, the shadows had drifted in, whispering dark reassurances of revenge for the insolence.

So, Harry tossed aside the letters with dubious writing, although sometimes his judgment about the envelope was mistaken. One letter yesterday, where the address was slanted and the nib had torn the paper, was a tirade against the Ministry in Harry’s favor, from someone he did not know. It had buoyed him quite a bit, that letter. His friends he expected to be on his side, but to have a stranger believe in him, despite all the evidence against him, made him feel rather hopeful and touched.

Harry sighed and tossed another letter on the questionable pile, despite the lavender hue to the envelope paper. The next was from Suze, and Harry dropped the packet and opened this one immediately.

Harry,

I hope you are doing alright. Do let me know if you need anything. I’m home for the holidays now and can go to Diagon Alley whenever I like. Just name it. I’m sure you could use loads of things to pass the time. The Prophet ran a special set of articles on the L’île de Cachot Méfait where you are being kept. It didn’t seem like it could even have a place to get outside at all! You must be terribly cooped up. I tried

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to imagine what it must be like when we were having our last House Quidditch practice and it made me feel most sad for you.

You asked me to keep an eye on Professor Snape, which I have been doing. He is very suspicious lately, but I think he does not suspect I have been walking by his office several times a day checking who is there if the door is open. He is quite disturbed by your being arrested. He has been short with everyone and our House punishments have been stricter than anyone remembers. I hope he doesn't think you really did what they said and is trying to make up for it, somehow. I tried to ask him the other day if he thought you really did it, but he sent me off, and threatened me with detention. Ouch! Which my parents would be really unhappy about. I've stayed out of trouble all year so far.

I've tried to tell the other Slytherins that there is no chance you are guilty, but I don't think they believe me, but fortunately, they are too afraid of Professor Snape to say anything too loudly. I'm not even sure what my parents believe, I have to confess. I'm working on them too.

*I will send you some sunshine if I can find a spell for capturing some,
Suze*

Harry folded the letter up and put it under the foot of his mattresses with the others he wanted to keep. Imagining that somewhere up above in the real world people were playing Quidditch, with the breeze in their cloaks and the clouds dancing with the sunbeams, rendered him utterly depressed. He dropped the letter packet onto the floor, kicked the sorted out nasty ones aside, and lay down on his bench to try to think about nothing.

Harry had no idea how much time had passed, but did not wish for a clock. Watching the hands of a clock creak in a circle would push him over the edge, he was certain. Better to go by his stomach and when meals arrived. In between those events the uncertainty helped keep him grounded in his own head.

He wrote a letter back to Suze that he hoped would move quickly through the censors.

Thanks, but short of getting out of here, I have everything I need. Have an excellent Christmas.

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The next letter was from Rita Skeeter and given the envelope:

The Formerly Illustrious Harry Potter
The Prison of Misdeeds, Dreariest Cell Block B
Relentlessly Pounded Island in the English Channel

Harry suspected she had used her Quick Quotes Quill to address it. He glanced rapidly through the letter. As always, she wanted an interview, and this time, she seemed to think Harry would fall victim to her dubious charms simply because he was bored and was allowed few visitors, of which she would of course be among the privileged few. She was not informed enough to include a blank sheet, so Harry used the back.

He wrote:

Fat chance.
P.S. Lucky for you the poets are in Cell Block M or this letter would be longer.

He addressed the envelope by crossing out his address and writing in hers, taking the high ground by resisting making an insulting version of her address in return. There were other, better, ways to deal with her, the shadows reminded him.

Since it would be opened by the prison staff anyway, Harry tucked the flap of the envelope in rather than re-wet the gum. Setting this one with Suze's letter, Harry took the next off the pile, from Neville, and read it slowly. Neville was confused, Harry could tell. He believed in him, but he also had a tendency to be influenced by others, and it showed in his letter. It reminded Harry that, trapped here like he was, he could not effectively argue his case, and that if this went on long enough, many would believe all kinds of untrue things.

The letter to Skeeter sat beside Harry, mocking him in this regard. Harry sighed and reconsidered his reply while tapping it on his thigh. But the shadows and he both agreed that she could not be trusted, so he put it back on the "out" pile, unaltered.

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Harry flipped through the newly arrived letters and leaned back against the dank wall. The chilly damp soaked into his robes, waking him up and making him vaguely cross. He wanted to be home. He wanted to be somewhere there was noise, of any sort – the silence now threatened to crush him long before the solid rock did.

Harry found a letter from the twins and the resulting burst of affection sent his constant dark companions scurrying. With relish he pulled the letter out of the already unsealed envelope, hoping with a smirk that the censors got a little Weasley surprise when they opened it originally.



Severus Snape sat in a drawing room that was so quaint and pristine he still had not grown accustomed to it. He held Harry's letter, a couched affair full of so many trite phrases it seemed clear he knew there were censors on his post and as well, that he was practiced at coping with them.

I'm disappointed about missing Christmas at home and I hope you can make Candide's holiday happy enough alone. SHE deserves it, even if you do not think much of the holiday. I've told all my friends to all drop by, to make up for my absence. Please do manage some present shopping, even if you dislike doing so. Pick out something you hate, but think Candide will like, and put my name on it for me, if you would.

I want to believe you were not aware ahead of time that the Ministry would take this action to "protect" me, but I'm not certain of that. If you did know, or were involved in the planning, be aware it is something I intend to deal with when I do get out. There is not much I can do from here without serious repercussions later, as I'm certain you're aware. I'm used to suspecting the worst, but if I try hard enough, I can hope that you are free from involvement.

The letter went on with more disguised worry and suspicion, squeezed out through words unsuited for carrying proper force. Snape put down the letter after reading it through again. Harry requested extra parchment in the postscript, as much as could be wedged into the reply envelope. Snape pulled out the copious stash from his desk to count out ten sheets and something came out with the package and tumbled to his

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lap then the floor. He had carefully gone through every drawer to learn the contents, but he had not previously noticed this particular beribboned scroll, crushed as it was between unopened packages of parchment.

He scooped the roll up and untied the pastel velvet ribbon. It was a marriage certificate, with his name on it. Shaking his head faintly, he started to roll it back up again, but he stopped and rapidly unwound it again. The dratted and bizarre thing was signed by the Supreme Mugwump, of all people. He stared at that for over a minute, trying to conceive of that, before giving up and wrapping it up more tightly, so it could not be so easily damaged.

A figure moved in the doorway before knocking on the frame. "Are you going to change?" Candide asked.

Snape tossed the scroll away in the drawer where he had found it. "Do you think I should?" he asked, unflappable in the face of little knowledge. His calendar had only read Dinner 7p.m., in overly slanted and heavily grooved writing.

"Well, my father usually wears dress robes when he comes, you know."

Ah, Snape thought, wondering what his counterpart would be thinking about now. The writing made him suspect disgust and annoyance. "I could change, but that would imply I was trying to please and that would be a distinct disadvantage."

Her brow went up. She was good at conveying a lot with just that. "Still," she said, sounding like one trying to cater to some harmless but persistent foible.

Snape bowed his head once. "All right, then. Something slightly more appropriate." It wasn't as if the closet lacked for robes. More frighteningly, its full state implied someone shopped regularly.

Dressed in the simplest dress robes he could find in the wardrobe, Snape returned to find Candide entertaining a middle aged man and woman in the main hall. They turned to him with the kind of expressions he was accustomed to: masked discomfort and wariness. He pointedly shook hands with the father and took a seat across from the portly man, feeling more in his element than he had since arriving.

"How IS Harry?" the woman asked.

Snape would presumably know her name if he had taken the time to read the witnesses at the end of the marriage certificate he had just found. Or, given the dubiously studious looks they were giving him, perhaps not.

Candide hesitated replying. "His letters are starting to come through now... they have to be read by someone at the prison first... but he sounds like he is coping well enough."

The man grunted, making his belly rock up and down. "So, did he do it?"

"NO, of course not," Candide snapped.

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The man glanced at Snape and gruffly said, "Just had to ask, given the influences abroad in this house."

Snape held back a grin that came out in his voice as warm ego. "If I had assisted Harry, he would never have got caught."

Heads turned his way, but the man's thick brow furrowed thoughtfully. "I suppose there is that," he conceded, proving he was a typical bully that would back down if challenged on his assertions.

"Severus," Candide criticized. If she meant to say more it was interrupted by Winky bringing drinks before quickly disappearing again.

Snape rattled the ice in his glass before tasting it. "Harry is not the killing sort... at least not intentionally."

Candide sat back and huffed before sipping her butterbeer. "Forgive Severus, he has been in a mood since... well since Harry's troubles." Her brow furrowed too as if thinking over that ordering.

The older woman glanced around the hall. "No decorations, I noticed."

"It didn't seem right with Harry stuck in that awful place," Candide explained.

"Doesn't feel like Christmas without them, does it?" the woman asked wistfully, perhaps goading.

Candide, without losing her slouched, belly supporting posture, seemed to rise up. "It isn't Christmas without Harry here." She glanced at Snape for support. "You want us to celebrate without him?"

"I didn't mean that, dear," the woman said, getting huffy. "It is just so unfortunate, the whole thing."

Snape waited a beat before saying, "It wasn't unfortunate; it was planned." When everyone stared at him mutely, he said, "He was framed. That requires planning. Someone wished him to be out of the way and they succeeded. Fortunately for Harry, it merely resulted in relocation, not something worse."

"You sound so cold about it," the woman complained. She leaned across toward her daughter. "Is he always so cold, Candy?"

"Harry is safe at present, is he not?" Snape rhetorically asked, ignoring Candide's frown. "At the moment, there is nothing to be done." But as he said that, it rang untrue, and partly to mollify Candide, he said softly, "At least nothing I have thought of yet."

Candide patted Snape's arm before crossing hers and taking on an anxious posture. Her mother said, "Don't stress yourself too much, dear. It's a critical time for the baby."

"It's fine, Mother. I'm not overly stressed."

Snape said, "Indeed, she gets quite a bit of sleep."

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The woman patted Candide's knee. "Well, that's good, dear."

Candide turned a sharp look at Snape and he innocently cut her comment off with, "Sleeping for two?"

Amusement relaxed her scrutinizing him. "Yes, actually. Tough to sleep while getting kicked repeatedly. Too bad wizards don't play football more. I think this one is working on trying out already."

"Well," the woman said brusquely, directly at Snape, "I do hope you warm up some before the baby arrives. You act far too cold to deal properly with a child."

"Comes from being part reptilian. Or so I'm told," Snape informed her calmly, and like most woman who saw themselves as proper, she sat back, properly disturbed.

Candide made an attempt at defending that with, "I'm confident Severus will do fine. But no more reptilian talk or he may have to show you his Animagus form."

This halted Snape's taking that thread further, since that was most certainly a skill he lacked. He managed an uncomfortable shared smile with Candide and changed the topic to one he had been holding in reserve. "I'm certain Candide would like to show you the baby's room."

This overly delighted the woman. "Oh, yes, we'd like that. Wouldn't we, dear?" she asked her husband.

Candide explained, "I was reluctant to finish off the room with Harry gone, since it IS his old room, but he said in his letter that it would be fine, that he wouldn't mind. So we moved his room to the other side."

"This room?" her mother asked, pointing to the first door off the balcony on the other side of the hall.

"No the last one, that one, well..."

Snape chimed in helpfully, "The first room is reserved for dark magic incantations, and Harry, being the hopelessly white wizard he is, expressed a preference for the unadulterated room on the end."

He gleefully accepted their gaping looks, which migrated questioningly over to Candide, who said, "Well, that's essentially true."

An uncomfortable silence followed before Candide levered herself to her feet, saying, "Maybe I should have Winky serve dinner."

"So early?" Snape asked with pointed innocence.

"It's not early," Candide insisted. She returned from the kitchen and said, "By the time I show you the nursery, dinner will be ready."

The baby's room was roundly declared too Spartan by Candide's mother, who insisted on dropping by that very week to decorate. Or, after further thought, perhaps the week after, when Hogwarts resumed... so as to not be in Snape's way.

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Dinner passed even more awkwardly than the evening began, which was fine with Snape, since it gave him time to think. Candide frowned rather a lot, which he disregarded for the time being.

When they were alone again, Candide sat down on the opposite couch and patted her belly. "Well, that could have, maybe, gone worse."

Snape leaned back with a fresh drink and asked, "How is it possible you convinced me not to simply poison them?"

She stared at him, beyond him, then back at him. "You are really different tonight."

Certain it was safe to say, he countered, "Did you expect us all to get along?"

She frowned and flipped her hair out of her eyes. "Well, no, but... you were baiting them, making it worse."

"They do not matter," Snape stated as though it were obvious.

"Yeah, you've said that before, but it always seemed like a lie, or wishful thinking, until now. And it isn't quite true, for me, which normally would make it not quite true for you too."

Snape stared into his glass, at the crazed facets bisecting the ice cubes without actually breaking them apart, and wondered with a burst of introspective honesty if he wasn't really the boor Lily Potter insisted he was. But those people... there was zero chance he would ever in this lifetime submit to their judgment, to build around himself a prison of their expectations. Hers though, that was different, in a way he could not yet define.

"Have I offended you?" he asked.

She paused to consider her answer. "No. I'm just making an observation. I know that just the notion of trying to please them is abhorrent to you. You just weren't passive in your dismissal of them, I guess, like usual. You didn't have Harry here to use as a tool to make your point this time, I guess is why you behaved as you did." She pushed to her feet and gingerly stretched her back and flinched. "Well, we're good until sometime in February."

"You're certain I haven't offended you?" he asked again, wondering if that was the point he had missed with Lily: that he was supposed to change not for others directly but because she would prefer it. What an empty, trapped existence in that case.

"Severus," Candide said, starting out corrective. She shook her head and brushed her tired hair back, adopting a caressing tone. "I didn't expect better, tonight, really, but I don't know what is going on with you lately." She stared down at him, leaning slightly backwards still, hands reversed on her hips. "Want to give me a hint? I'm not so good at that mind reading you do."

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“It’s not really mind reading, exactly,” he muttered, lecturing.

“Oh, that tone. Well, that’s a ”no“,” she quipped with strange affection.

She stalled departing and they watched each other. She did not expect him to change, apparently, which surprised him with how much space it gave him. It left him nothing to fight back against. He had been left to define himself for the first time, without risk.

How much could he lose, truly, giving in to such small issues over dinner? When he arrived here, he would have sworn he had nothing whatsoever to lose. Was being polite to people he inherently disliked any different than what he was doing otherwise: adapting to survive by being a companion to her and serving McGonagall? He did not feel he had lost any of himself doing so, perhaps even the opposite. The fact that he even had a opportunity for introspection about these things spoke volumes.

Candide smiled wryly. “You’ve got a lot to work out, I see. I’ll leave you alone to do it.” She started to shuffle away.

Snape said, “And you claim no skill at Legilimency.”

She snorted faintly and returned to kiss him. He realized too late that he was expected to raise his mouth, but she adjusted smoothly and kissed him on the cheek before heading upstairs. Snape propped his fist on his chin and pondered the unexpected power of raw acceptance as the hearth fire at the end of the hall burned down. Candide made it clear what she preferred and left it at that, his choice. Somehow he could not imagine Lily, with all her perfection and high-mindedness, ever leaving it at that, and the realization made him a bit queasy. He had not at all understood what he had been trying to obtain all those years ago.



“I’m glad you came,” Aaron said, stepping back to open his flat’s door wider for Ginny.

Ginny stepped inside and stuffed her mittens into her pockets. “So am I. I nearly got in a killer row with my dad. I needed to get out of the house.”

“Well,” he sighed dramatically. “I hope someday a visit to Chez Wickem Refuge and Emporium can be marginally better than mere escapism-”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she said, giving him a one-armed hug as she passed. “You know that.”

He closed the door and stood there expectantly. “I’m glad you’re here because I have something for you.” He pulled a small wrapped box out of his pocket and held it out.

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She stepped back. “You can’t give me my Christmas present yet, I didn’t bring yours with me.”

“This isn’t your present; that is.” He nodded over his shoulder toward the front corner of high-ceilinged sitting room.

Ginny choked on what she was going to say and gaped at the tall, multicolored box sitting where he indicated. “What’s that?”

“Your Christmas present,” he explained with bright quaintness. “That means you can take this now.” He dangled the box enticingly.

“No, I mean, what’s in it? It’s huge!”

“Well, the present isn’t quite that big, I find the biggest box I can so you can’t tell what’s inside, since the box would fit anything,” he explained, clearly proud of his cleverness. “Here.” He dangled the small box closer.

“Yeah, that would fit a giraffe,” she said, still discussing the other one.

Aaron pulled the little present back and tucked it against his chest. “Did you want a giraffe?” he asked in all seriousness.

“No, I... wouldn’t know where to keep it,” she replied, hiding vague alarm.

“Ah, good. Now open this.”

Ginny sighed again and took the box, which was rather heavy. Under the wrapping the box was covered in distinctive blue felt. “This isn’t what I think it is, is it?”

He glanced from her to the box she held. “Probably.”

“Aaron, really, you are nothing if not persistent,” she complained while opening the box in a fit of curiosity that could not go unquenched. Inside was a smooth ring with seven red and white striped polished stones inset in it.

“What do you think?” he asked, leaning forward with hands elegantly clasped behind him.

“No diamond?” she teased.

He tilted his head knowingly. “Didn’t seem like your style. Plus, this way you can wear it as an ordinary ring if you like, thus you cannot reject it outright on the grounds of refusing an engagement.”

The ring was quite attractive in an elegant, understated way. She slid it from the holder and held it better in the light over the bar counter. “What are the stones?”

“Your birth stone, sardonyx.”

“That’s not my birthstone, it’s peridot.”

“Well, technically both are, and I had no interest in getting you a ring the color of my main rival’s eyes.” He stepped closer. “Here, try it on.”

She frowned at mention of Harry. Any kind of fun seemed to make everyone think of Harry, stuck away, not able to have any. Everyone kept expecting he would

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be released soon, but it never seemed to happen. She sighed and returned to the present. The ring fit perfectly.

“You’ll accept it?” he asked.

She spun the ring around to align the stones on top. “Aaron, if I said ”yes“ now, I might just be saying that because I feel sorry for you.”

“That’d be all right.”

She laughed and shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t have an answer yet.”

He lifted her fingers to kiss them passingly. “Well, wear the ring so it reminds you to think about it more often, in the hopes of speeding things up.”

Her eyes fell on the tall present across the room, a box so big it gave little clue to the worth of what was inside, kind of like the ring.

“Thanks. I don’t want to seem unappreciative.”

“Do you like it, at least? I had Finicky Fitters design something I thought you would like to wear all the time.”

She spun the ring again. “It’s perfect. It won’t get caught on things at the Wheezes when I am working.”

He kissed her hand again and dropped it distractedly. “On that topic of the hourly shop clerk and the family scion, I have another favor to ask: Christmas dinner with my parents.”

She glanced down at herself. “I may have to go shopping for some decent robes.”

“Amazingly, I don’t care what you will be wearing; I just need the moral support.”

She dropped her hem and held up her hand, fingers wagging. “Shall I wear the ring?” she asked suggestively.

“Yes, why not. It matches your hair and It will keep the topic off me and put it firmly on you. It will be the best dinner with my mother ever.”

She stared at the ring. “Did you get Harry a present? I tried but I received a note back saying the contents weren’t allowed to prisoners. It was only a case of butterbeer.”

“The glass would be right out. I read the rather lengthy rules and worked out something to send that should make it by the guards.”

“But will he like it?”

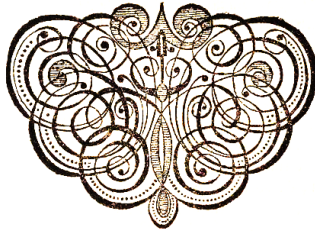
“I expect. It has a griffin on it. I had to grit my teeth and close my eyes to buy it, but I managed.”

Author’s Notes: All I can say is if you know how busy life has been, the delay would be understandable. As of last week, in the last 7 and a half

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months I've been home 13 days. But things are getting saner now, so more writing. Yay!

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



THE EVE OF SOMETHING

In the days before Christmas a few presents trickled into Harry's cell via the post. One present from Aaron, a griffin banner, Harry spent over half an hour working out a method of hanging. In the end toothpicks hoarded from his dinner trays tied into a bundle with a loose thread from his robes, and jammed into a crack in the mortar served as a workable hook.

Harry sat back on his bench to appreciate the effect of brightening just part of one wall. Not that he did not appreciate the gesture, especially from a Slytherin, but the overall contrast was more depressing than uplifting. He sighed and forced himself to stop fidgeting, which he had been doing too much of lately.

Lunch arrived with his post and Harry turned it away, having only barely picked at his breakfast. Steeltoe Pierre did not argue because he could not. He did tsk excessively from beyond the slot before walking away. Harry took the newly arrived post and nearly tossed it aside on his not-to-open pile. Even correspondence held little interest now where before it had been a lifeline. He resisted opening even the ones from his friends, wary of the pleasant things that would escape to mock him. The letter from Snape, however, that one called to him when he found it in the stack.

Potter,

The Ministry has nothing meaningful to report. I wonder at your state of mind for even requesting that I enquire. Arthur tells me your solicitor

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filed for permission to meet with you and his visit may precede this letter, but if it does not, know that is in progress.

Harry read that through again, thinking that either the impostor sounded remarkably like his guardian, or his view of the world had skewed far enough to make a true Death Eater sound normal and well-adjusted.

Your friends have visited in droves as you warned they would. Most wished to know how to get your presents through to you, as the French have rejected most all of them as unsuitable.

Candide said to wish you well, in case this letter arrives before hers. She insists I inform you that there are no decorations and no parties here and will not be until you return. All is quiet here now that the in-law visits are dispensed with. There are no threats from within or without.

Snape

P.S. I do not shop for anything that cannot be put into a potion, period.

Harry marveled at the letter again. Was Snape somehow himself again? He would have inserted a clue, or ten, if that were the case, Harry was certain. He always was too good at kowtowing to power, a thread of acid thought pointed out, both impressed and annoyed with the letter.

Harry closed his eyes while still clutching the letter, trying hard to force the black wraiths away. It had grown increasingly difficult to do so. They were like Dementors in that way, requiring happy thoughts to combat. But unlike Dementors, the shadows did not suck him dry; they instead pumped him full of strategic notions and a sense of power.

Harry opened his eyes; the letter had fallen to the floor. Time had passed but he did not know how much. He stumbled to the other side of the cell to wash his face in the metallic water. Bent over the stone basin, with the water dripping off his nose, he breathed deeply, trying to find himself again. He disliked the flat, stale water. He disliked this claustrophobic place. He needn't be here, and he certainly needn't worry about the repercussions of escape. With his loyal followers from here and the easily warped Durumulna, he could do whatever he liked. Worrying about repercussions was silly if you had absolute power.

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Harry bit his lip and dried his face on his robe sleeve, scrubbing hard. The slot on the door clacked open and dinner emerged through it. This startled him badly about how much time had passed when he had blacked out.

A concerned voice said, “You must eat, or we will ’ave to do zee force-feed-ing. Zat is not pleasant for anyone.”

Distracted by his inner fears, Harry mutely took the tray and set it on the bench. His stomach growled painfully at the scent but he ignored it and took up a precious sheet of blank parchment and began a letter to Ginny.

Harry poked at his food enough to satisfy the guard when he returned for the tray, or at least enough that the guard did not mention it. He also accepted the letter, which Harry sent off alone in the hopes it would go out faster that way. Harry liked the guards, as much as one could, but he knew well that the shadows hated them and he did not want a confrontation that would exacerbate those conflicting feelings, even if it meant eating when he did not particularly want to.

Harry sat on his bench, stroking his face and nose with the backs of his knuckles, a behavior he had adopted without being aware of it. The cell air hung in absolute silence, leaving him alone with his heartbeat and the rush of his blood, which his ears used to fill the void. He felt marginally better knowing the letter was on its way; Ginny deserved to know what she faced.

As he usually did when boredom overwhelmed him and he did not know the time, Harry lay down for a nap. His major muscles ached from doing this too frequently, but the pain reminded him that was alive, so he did not mind, and sleeping passed the time better than any other activity. When he had first arrived he had frequently exercised as best as possible in the small space – endless pushups on the bench and jogging in place. Now it seemed a waste of time and he could not imagine bothering, even to relieve the aches.

As he lay there, in a half-sleep state where he led his shadow friends through a merry chase in the forest of his mind, Harry heard an unexpected noise.

He woke fully and wondered if he had imagined it. It sounded like the cell block locking rod shifting, but there were no footsteps approaching, so that seemed unlikely. Mostly because he had nothing else to do, Harry stood and went to the cell door, which to his surprise, yielded to his touch and swung open without effort.

Maybe he was dreaming; Harry considered. It felt like a dream with the door drifting open into the cold, dim corridor. As he stood there in the open doorway, glancing around in an effort to work out what was real, he heard banging and shouting from the exit end of the cell block.

Harry’s soul woke up at this, his mind went from adrift to focused as his feet carried him along the uneven floor, from the cover of one cell door alcove to the next.

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He ducked fully out of sight just before he reached the wide join to the staircase containing the break room. A fight was in full swing, based on the sound of armor clattering against stone and Harry glanced out just in time to see a tattily robed figure smacking the guard, helmet and all, over one of the couches and jumping on him.

Harry rushed out as another punch fell. The attacking figure exhibited the maniacal violence Harry knew from field work, so he approached cautiously, ready to move at the first safe opening. The guard's hand flew out to the side and his wand tumbled and rolled to Harry's feet. The attacker sputtered something in French and when Harry stared at him incomprehensibly, the man said, "Grab 'is wand you eediot!"

Harry picked up the wand and felt a rush of magic, long absent and hungered for. Without hesitating, he raised it and hit the attacker with a mummy curse. The man toppled to the floor and rolled to a stop while Harry approached the guard. It was Steeltoe Pierre, and he appeared to be out cold, despite his head being incased in metal. Harry did a Revelatio on him and it sparkled healthy.

Footsteps and shouting trickled down the curved staircase connecting the cellblock to the rest of the prison. Harry did not think it wise to be caught there, holding a wand over a guard. He put the wand in Steeltoe's hand and pressed his fingers around it, hoping that would hold. He stepped back and was just considering whether it would save him a nasty spell strike if he crouched down with his hands on his head when the warden appeared behind his guards.

"Ah, Meestar Pottar," he said, clearly pleased.

Steeltoe sat up and straightened his helmet, and the arriving guards helped the mummified prisoner to his feet to unwrap him. No one was behaving properly, returning Harry to a dreamlike state.

A grey-haired man with an equally grey walrus mustache sweeping his collar emerged from the stairs. The fine material of his suit reflected the light, black pretending to be silver. He joined the warden in pondering Harry.

"Zee, as I tell you," the warden said, rocking up on his toes.

The grey-maned man tilted his head side to side.

"Meestar Pottar, zis is our Ministre des Affaires Magiques, César Morel."

The man gave a formal little bow. Harry looked between the two of them, mind blank.

The warden explained, "I wished to in-vite you to dine with zee two of us, but Monsieur le Ministre did not sink it wise - 'e does not trust in you, you zee, so I arran-ged a little test to prove I was cor-rect." He rocked on his toes again, pleased.

Harry slowly exhaled, finding annoyance where there had been numbing adrenaline before. "I see."

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The warden wiggled his mustache by twisting his face back and forth. "I 'ope you are not upset." When Harry declined to reply during an awkward pause, he went on. "Would you like to come to dinnar?"

"I think I'll pass," Harry said, trying to not let annoyance transform into the more potent betrayal.

This clearly was not expected. "Ah."

The Minister's hairy white brow raised in a kind of disdain. The shadows were very close here, surrounding them. In the corridor above, beyond the staircase, someone rattled a cell door, someone else joined in. The guards ceased their teasing conversation and rattled up the stairs in their armor, all but one, who remained to monitor Harry.

Glancing back at Harry, the warden said, "If you prefer your cell..."

"Tonight I do."

The cell door beyond rattled again followed by a spell flicker and raised voices. The commotion did not ruffle the Minister, but the warden colored.

"Take 'im to 'ees cell, Gaspard," the warden commanded, more perplexed than insulted.

Harry turned deliberately when the guard gestured for him to lead, and pushed his anger outward one more time, making the cell doors rattle again, even though the noise was cut off abruptly.

"Sacre bleu, what is 'appening up zere?!" The warden marched away, trailing the cool headed Minister whose eyes followed Harry until he was out of sight.



The next morning, as indicated by the guard arriving to wake him, Harry rose rigidly like one who has rested without sleeping. But the guard had not brought breakfast, he instead opened the door and gestured that Harry should leave his cell.

"Vite, vite," he said, smacking his spear on the floor. Harry did not recognize this guard. He definitely behaved stricter than the others. His stern attitude was accented by his coarse skin and the scar that bisected his jaw.

They strode quickly to the end of the cell block and through the next two and up several turns of stairs to an unfamiliar corridor where warm air flowed. The guard opened the third door on the right and Harry stepped in and stopped when a surge of rare joy startled him at the sight of Tonks. He approached her, arms raised, but a crystal-tipped pike swung between them with a magical sizzle, tossing Harry back and making his clothes crackle.

"No frater-neye-zing!" the guard ordered.

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Harry righted himself with his fingertips caught on the doorframe, and turned a glare on the man. The guard stood unimpressed, his pike at ready.

“Harry?” Tonks said to get his attention. She sounded worried.

Harry, his precious happy mood shattered, had no interest in relenting on the darkness sinking around his mind. He put on a falsely dutiful attitude and took one of the heavy chairs at the small table, noticing only then that deBenedictus already sat at the end, notes piled beside him. He sat in stillness, watching Harry.

Harry gave him a nod and ducked his head to stare at his crossed arms. The shadows paced around him. Harry wished he could feed the guard to them. So did they.

“Harry?” Tonks prompted again, alarm creeping into her voice. She was leaning over the table, violating the yellow line painted down the middle of it. The pike tapped on the table top and Tonks stood straight to take up a chair, surprised wariness in every move.

The guard took up a position at the door as rigid as his pike, ready to level it along the barrier line. Harry raised his gaze and took in Tonks’ wide worry. He did not relent. He was not happy about being here and he would not pretend otherwise.

Unnecessarily, Tonks said, “I, uh, brought your solicitor. I arranged to escort him.” Her voice fell off and her hair drooped. With a sigh, and hanging of her head, she gestured that deBenedictus should start.

The man did after a hesitation. “Mister Potter, I have been preparing for your inevitable hearing, which the Department of Magical Law Enforcement informs me will be delayed for at least another week.”

His calm droning about organized things drew Harry up out of the depths he was drowning in, perking him up to care about what was happening.

deBenedictus noted this, and went on. “Barring significant new evidence we have a number of options, the most obvious being the undisputed non-extant status of the victim. That creates both the opening for a technicality as well as grounds for a reduction in charges. It does not rise to the level of a dismissal, I’m afraid, but it is a start.”

Harry abruptly turned to Tonks and asked, “Have you been following Percy?”

Tonks nodded. “But he’s like a church mouse... barely does anything. Goes from work to home and back again. Except he slipped away from me once, right after I was certain he was too clueless to know I was there. I don’t know if it was a coincidence or an astoundingly well orchestrated ploy to distract me. But other than that one time, I’ve got nothing but a sore back out of it.” She held his eyes. “Are you sure about him, Harry?”

THE EVE OF SOMETHING

Harry scratched his chin. At one level it was hard to care at all. “I thought I was. He gives me a bad feeling when I’m around him. And he’s such an annoying git.”

deBenedictus shuffled his parchment around. “If only all the annoying gits were murderers, then we would no longer need tolerate them in polite society.”

Harry did not know him well enough to read his tone and the darkness in him took umbrage at what could be mockery. Without being aware of it, Harry rose from his chair.

“Harry!” Tonks’ sharp voice snapped at him, knocking him off of his anger. Harry lowered himself to his chair and sat slumped, glaring at her, seeing two worlds, the tiny meeting room and the forest of shadows.

Guards ran by on a crossing corridor, perhaps unrelated, but Harry suspected not.

“What’s wrong with you?” Tonks asked, sharply panicked.

Harry wanted to say that he did not like it here, but some part that liked communing with shadows stopped him. With more time he would understand them utterly.

Tonks explained to the solicitor, “I don’t know what’s wrong with him.” She swallowed hard and asked in a slow cadence, “Harry are you just trying to make a point or are you really this far gone?”

Harry blinked at her, wondering abstractly how he appeared to her. He could not explain, was barred from doing so by strategic instincts that had as full a hold on him as he had on the shadows.

“It’s Christmas,” Harry said, thinking that might explain. The grim statement of it summed up his mood nicely.

“Yeah, I know, Harry. I didn’t think you’d still be here. I’m sorry.”

In truth, he did not mean to worry her. Felt detachedly bad for doing so. He shrugged to try to dispel her concern.

deBenedictus’ droning started up again, describing his legal maneuverings while Harry forced himself to listen and remain interested, which worked only for a few minutes at a time. Fortunately the solicitor repeated every major point he wanted Harry to grasp. In the end it was all only hopeful in the way knowing someone was working on it could be.

Eventually, deBenedictus wound down, closed the file before him, and asked, “Is that all clear to you? Do you have any questions?”

Harry sat back and with a forced level voice, said, “It doesn’t sound very good.”

They studied each other. The solicitor said, “It is a process, Mr. Potter, and it has not yet run its course, so its course is not yet fixed. Nor is the landscape fully revealed. I’m very good at this. Everything that can be done is being done. Trust in that, for now.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Harry pursed his lips, bit back on a retort, and turned to Tonks more sharply than he intended. “Did you bring the papers?”

Regret clear in her movements, she pulled out a rolled newspaper. “Just one. It’s all they would let me bring in.” She did not hold it out. “I’m loath to give it to you, given your mood.”

“You aren’t going to like my mood if I can’t have it,” Harry stated, flat and sober which lent it more force.

Tonks set the paper down and it partly unrolled itself. As he reached for it, Tonks carefully said, “I have to take it out with me again.”

“I know,” Harry snipped, reading quickly about his ruined home life. He felt he read about someone else. Some poor sap whose life was completely out of their own control. He stuffed the paper back at Tonks. “Someday I’ll get even with her.”

deBenedictus cleared his throat. “Perhaps best stated outside the presence of your legal representation?”

Harry slid his eyes that way, a faint smile relaxing his face. “Perhaps. Depends on whose side you are really on.”

As Harry was led away to his cell, his solicitor remained sitting, carefully filing things away inside his case. Tonks waved at Harry one last time before the guard led him through the door at the end. She returned, closed the conference room door, and leaned back against the wall, spent and distressed.

deBenedictus said, “I’m contemplating filing a motion to have him removed to St. Mungo’s.”

Tonks rubbed her face and peered at him, considering that. “That would be a public motion.” This was half a question. When the solicitor nodded, Tonks said, “That would be the end of his career as an Auror I expect.”

Speaking frankly, he pointed out, “He demonstrated a rather drastic shift in personality between his arrest and just now.”

“Well...” Tonks struggled to explain. “You haven’t seen Harry angry before, I’m guessing.”

Repacking abandoned, deBenedictus asked, “He gets like we saw just now frequently?”

Tonks tried to belittle that notion. “Not often, but sometimes.” She pushed away from the wall and stepped closer. “You have to understand that Harry’s been through a lot without breaking, but partly that’s because... well... he has this hard edge to him that once it’s loosed... well... you saw.”

“You have seen him like that on a previous occasion?” deBenedictus asked, clearly aware of the specificity of his question.

Tonks grimaced faintly. “Not exactly like that, I’ll admit.”

THE EVE OF SOMETHING

The latches on deBenedictus' case snapped closed and he tugged it to the table edge, fingers around the handle. "You still believe him innocent?"

Tonks tossed her hand in the direction of the door. "That has nothing to do with that," she said dismissively.

"Interesting," deBenedictus muttered. He moved to heft his case, but only pulled it to the table edge. "Can I expect the prosecution to call witnesses to that sort of behavior?"

Tonks contemplated that. "If Fudge gets to lead the prosecution then probably, yes."

"I should not ask, but I am already extended beyond such concerns already here. What are the odds of that?"

Tonks huffed through her lips. "This has been the worst time for a Ministry turf battle, but we are fighting one anyway. I dearly hope Fudge isn't. But how about this, off the record... if Fudge is leading it, it means he managed to incapacitate me before I got to him."

Tonks escorted deBenedictus back to the Ministry, barely aware of the man's considerable presence. They had both fallen silent, including parting in the atrium. Tonks went straight to Mr. Weasley's office and closed the door, which had the advantage of giving her an excuse to tower over the boss because of the confined space. He held out his hand expectantly.

"I'm keeping the French Portkey a little longer," Tonks informed him, still a little breathless with alarm.

"Ah. Why is that?"

"I'm loaning it to Severus so he can pay Harry a visit. Someone needs to go talk to Harry, right now, and he's the best one for the job."

Mr. Weasley put his hand out again. "You're on duty. I can escort him there if you think it so important. He can't arrive alone."

Tonks resisted setting Harry up to be seen in his current state by this man, but on the other hand, sending Harry there was Mr. Weasley's idea.

"Harry isn't doing well," she explained.

"So I'm aware."

"You are... how?"

Mr. Weasley held up a sheet of crisp white parchment. "Memo from his solicitor. It arrived just before you did."

Tonks pointed behind her, then at the desk, befuddled. "How did it beat me down here?"

"The man writes a fast flying memo." Mr. Weasley pondered the sheet. "Wouldn't want him as an enemy."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“What did he say?”

“He said Harry is in a bad way, and if we don’t take action, he will.” Arthur tossed on his cloak from the hook behind Tonks. “Which I think you will agree, would not be best, since his actions would limit ours.” He nodded to Tonks. “Give me the key; I’ll take Severus to see him.”

Tonks dropped the decorative charm into Mr. Weasley’s palm, hoping for the best the way one would dropping a penny into a fountain.



“Hello, Arthur. Do come in,” Candide’s voice drifted out from the entryway.

Snape rose from where he reclined on the couch with one of many irresistible books from the house library. For him this was a rare and wonderful kind of Christmas Eve – one where nothing special happened.

Arthur clutched his pointed hat in his hands and bowed in greeting. “I’m afraid I need to draw Severus away on a bit of an errand... to the French wizard prison.” He turned to Candide. “You could go visit Molly, if you like. The Burrow certainly wouldn’t notice yet another guest. Unlike here, I’m afraid we’re celebrating a bit at our place... but just a bit.”

Snape turned to her. “Yes, why don’t you do that. I’ll fetch you when we are finished.”

Candide asked. “What is happening? Is Harry all right?”

Mr. Weasley hesitated, crumpling his hat down smaller. “Harry is perhaps not coping as patiently as we hoped.” He glanced around. “I don’t know if you’ve run any debugging spells so we should perhaps not talk here. I’ll tell you more on the way.”

Candide went off to don her cloak and mittens while Snape wondered about Mr. Weasley’s comment, which he was clearly expected to understand. He gave no indication of his confusion, and waited keenly for an opening to induce clarification. After Candide disappeared in the Floo, Snape, with a formal air, took put a finger on the gold charm Mr. Weasley held out and they were both jerked away.

Snape lost his balance in the brutal wash of wind that greeted them upon landing and had to put a hand and a knee down on the water-sloshed pier to steady himself. The sun reflected blindingly on the wave caps as the sea crashed onto the straight-edged rock on either side of them. Dizziness stole his breath as for a disconcerting moment it was the stone island that surged up and down in the surf rather than the opposite.

THE EVE OF SOMETHING

Mr. Weasley's hand felt warm when he used it to take Snape's wrist to help him up and lead him forward. At the end of the pier towered a great black monolith of solid rock, with a tiny door in the base of it. When they approached, the door itself loomed, several men high. It opened silently and the guard that appeared within gestured unmistakably for them to enter.

The lift plummeted for minutes on end and the air grew clinging, still as death and just as rarefied. Endless carved rock sailed by the platform, swooping far upward to a tiny square of darkness high above. Snape decided that remaining sane in such a place would qualify as a kind of insanity.

They were led to a room with a well-used clerk's counter where they both signed paperwork they could not read, led expeditiously through it by a guard practiced at flipping to and pointing out where they should sign. Then they were urged along a series of dreary, small doored corridors, some stained by a trickle of ocean that could not be denied, even by magic. Behind the doors, the inhabitants banged, rustled and moaned, all of it rolling together and building into a crescendo that surged and receded like a massive, barely discernible heartbeat and exhalation.

"You all right there, Severus?" Mr. Weasley asked when they had reached the top of a spiral staircase that curved away into darkness and Snape had paused to put a hand on the wall while trying not to visualize all that rock and water pressing in upon them.

Snape straightened. "Yes. Just needed... a breath. Air's a bit thin, don't you think?"

Mr. Weasley shook his head, not understanding, making Snape consider that possessing a simpler mind could sometimes be an advantage, at least in those few cases where the active imagination would otherwise run to distraction with monstrous possibility.

The guard returned up the stairs to fetch them before gesturing for them to wait in an area unexpectedly sporting couches, old magazines and an aura of bitter cigarette smoke.

He returned minutes later, leading Harry, who halted upon seeing Snape despite the metal clad arm continuing to urge him forward. Harry shook his guard's grip and slumped an approach at a wary pace. When he got close, his nostrils flared, perhaps breathing in the fresh sea air carried in with them.

"Hello, Harry," Mr. Weasley politely greeted the young man, as though at a picnic or a pub. His spray-darkened cloak hung heavy on his low shoulders, giving him even less presence than usual.

Harry's head jerked that way as if just noticing his boss that moment. "Hello, sir," he said flatly.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Mr. Weasley smiled pleasantly and paced away, making an opening for Snape, who would have preferred more time to observe from the side.

“Potter,” Snape began, trying to sound imploring. He had some other meaningless words lined up behind that, but he was cut off from the bother.

“Why do you call me that?” Harry lashed out, causing Mr. Weasley to spin around.

Snape stepped rapidly closer to Harry, while the young man went on, clearly lacking a regular outlet for his anger.

“You make it sound like you’re talking to my dad,” Harry went on, seething with heat eager to boil over once it found an escape.

“Harry...” Snape said, face to face now. Heat sizzled over his Mark as Harry sized him up, looking for an excuse to rant more. Snape did not give him an opening. “Calm down, if you would, for just a moment.”

It was most likely not his words that worked, but the tone – a soothing warmth he could only manage in a fit of true desperation. He shook his hand at his side, wanting to rub the pain from his Mark. The gesture drew a flicker of Harry’s eyes in that direction and the pain faded.

Harry looked away, at the wall. Snape said, “I realize it is difficult here.” That was the truth; just coming down here had unsettled him. “But you must be patient... restrain your instincts a little longer.”

Harry’s pose shifted to a cocky one so very reminiscent of his father that he could be a projection of his memory. He mockingly said, “I don’t know why I can’t enjoy myself here. I have so very many friends.”

Snape felt something terribly disconcerting then – like hot water running under his skin. It made him dizzy with prickly sensation the way an overdose of Invigoration Draught would. A moment later, a cell door on the corridor above began to thud against its bolts. With an abrupt rattle of his armor, the guard started that way, stopped and reconsidered, then went up the stairs after a glance at Mr. Weasley.

“Po... Harry,” Snape said, voice tightly controlled. Mr. Weasley wandered closer, orienting himself to face both the stairs and the two of them. Snape softly said, “Most of the inhabitants here will not make particularly good friends.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “You know, I bet they’d make particularly obedient ones.”

A bit lighter, Snape quipped with a knowing attitude, “There you would be mistaken.”

His more bantering tone worked, Harry backed down. He looked around at the floor and muttered, “I don’t like it here, and I’m not convinced you didn’t have anything to do with it.”

THE EVE OF SOMETHING

“You are not supposed to like it here,” Snape pointed out. Then, with voice pitched very low, added, “And you flatter me if you think I could have managed this.”

Whispering too, Harry said, “I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Snape stepped closer, leaning almost to Harry’s ear, “I don’t even know who is alive or dead here, let alone have the allies required to set this up, certainly not this fast.”

Accusingly, Harry said, “Having a nice Christmas with your lovely house and wife?”

Snape raised a brow. “Nice enough.”

Voice almost too low to hear, Harry said, “Just nice enough? That’s all? That should make it easier for you when you do go then. As soon as I’m out of this place...”

Harry paced away from Snape, sending him a glance full of lingering suspicion. “What am I being punished for?” He asked louder, taking both of them in with that question.

Mr. Weasley started to answer, but Snape cut him off. “For not paying sufficient attention to the details around you, so as to get caught up in such a thing.”

While Harry frowned at Snape, Mr. Weasley said, “Oh, now I wouldn’t go so far as that. We’re trying to protect you, Harry.”

Harry glared at him. “I don’t need protection. If you kn-”

Snape stepped into Harry’s line of vision to his boss and said in a tone that implied deeper meaning, “You need protection from yourself, I would say.” He took Harry’s shoulders and backed him farther out of earshot of Mr. Weasley, ignoring the prickling in his Mark as this gesture drew retribution.

Snape shot his hand out to the side in an attempt to shake the sensation. He leaned respectfully close, hands behind his back, and drew forth a tone he formerly reserved for the only other being who could pain him so. “It is understandable that you are displeased by this situation. Realize, if you will, that it will not go on much longer.”

Harry raised his gaze, looking hopeful. He gestured in Mr. Weasley’s direction. “They said they haven’t made any headway with the...”

“Quieter, if you would,” Snape pleaded, cutting him off.

Whispering, Harry said, “They said they haven’t made any headway with the investigation. Tonks even admitted it.”

“If we rely on that, you will be here rather a long time.”

“What does that mean?” Harry asked.

The guard clanked back down the stairs and ordered them out with firm gestures. “We ’ave to go to lockdown on zees cell blocks,” he said, partly out of breath.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Snape turned back to Harry and quickly said, "Do try to remember that you have more friends outside this place than in." He accented this with an intense look. The guard had drawn his staff, so Snape had to move that way, he glanced back and said, "If you remember nothing else..."



The portkey dropped Snape and Mr. Weasley back in Shrewsthorpe. Snape immediately paced the hall, glad for Candide's absence so he could think in silence rather than waste time recounting events. Mr. Weasley swung his arms and clapped his hands before him, his statement jarringly out of line with Snape's worries. "Well, as I expected, just feeling stubborn and out of sorts."

Snape stared at the table teetering with the presents Harry's friends had sent, gathering firm control around his reaction.

Mr. Weasley prodded at his reeling thoughts with, "Don't you think? Much ado about nothing."

Snape, facing the prospect of a burgeoning resurgence of the Dark Lord within a far more eclectically skilled Harry Potter, could only manage a shrug, a mocking one at that. "He should not be there," he managed to say with some levelness. He had to say something.

Mr. Weasley straightened his hat and put it on. "Well, yes. And that is at least partly our fault, I'll admit. Harry has a temper on him, but when he calms down I'm sure he'll understand."

Obliquely, Snape said, "There are many things Harry does not understand. Fortunately for you, power is one of those things."

Mr. Weasley puzzled that before shrugging his cloak straight in preparation for departing. "Well, we'll have things straightened out soon enough, I'm confident." He waited for some kind of response, and Snape half-nodded, again mockingly, but this was again lost on his audience.

Awkwardly, Mr. Weasley asked, "Do you appreciate our position, Severus?"

Distantly, Snape replied, "I appreciate far more than you realize."

Again, this generated a puzzled expression before Mr. Weasley said, "Well, I'll be on my way. And I'll send Candide along."

"No rush," Snape muttered, mind elsewhere, plotting. "If she wishes for a nice holiday dinner, she should remain there."



THE EVE OF SOMETHING

“Aaron, dear. Do come in,” the apparition that was Mrs. Weasley in her best unmatched flowered dress, robe, and apron invited.

Aaron hesitated at the sight, but made his feet move. The entire Weasley clan and many others filled the ground floor of the Burrow. Bill sat in a close circle with some cousins. Charlie’s wife, starting to show a rounder belly herself, was deeply engaged in a conversation with Candide. There were so many people the lamps had a hard time spreading their light around the room.

The twins took the most interest in the new arrival. They teamed up on either side of the finely attired guest and asked, “How are you, then?”

“Getting on all right?”

“Smart robes.”

“You look like you’re sleeping well.”

Aaron shifted his gaze back and forth between them, before waving them both to silence. “Are you looking for a favor?”

The twin on the right leaned in closer to say to the other, “Slytherins can always be counted on to catch on quickly, as needed.”

“What is it you want?” Aaron asked, but the matriarch swooped in and swept the twins aside with an apology for their behavior.

When she returned, Aaron frankly said, “I do owe them.”

She waved her finger before her face, denying that. “Ginny’ll be down in a twink-
le.” She surveyed her magically stretched table, with too many seats to count in a glance. “It’ll be the first Christmas Eve dinner she’s missed.”

“Er...” Aaron began, caught fast by her wistful tone.

Ginny appeared on the staircase and bound adeptly over the crowded floor and through two different games of Exploding Snap to stop just before him. “I’m ready.”

“You’re sure you can come?” Aaron asked.

Ginny’s bright eyes narrowed. “Of course.” With a dark glance at her mother, she pointedly stated, “It’s better than risking sitting next to Percy, like I always seem to.”

“Now, young lady, we’re a family here and we will always be together as a family. Especially during the holidays.”

Aaron gave Ginny a look that said see?

Ginny took his arm and, turning for the door, said, “I don’t know what time I’ll be home.”

“Don’t you now?” Mrs. Weasley called back.

Aaron stalled their progress and said to Mrs. Weasley. “It won’t be late.”

“Why not?” Ginny demanded.

“Because... there are only so many hours I can take my mother at a time...”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Oh yeah. There is that.”

Mrs. Weasley tut-tutted Aaron, which he ignored. “We’ll come back here for afters,” Aaron said, returning a wave hello from somewhere in the room before swooping Ginny out of the house.



A fine snow gritted on their cloaks as they walked up the drive to the Frelander Estate. Under the blindingly lit overhang supported by carved capitals, Aaron paused to properly order his overlapping collars, then inspected Ginny. He was biting his lip when he gestured for her to spin around.

“Are you sure I’m dressed all right?” she asked, working very hard not to sound hurt or exasperated. “I picked this out pretty carefully and borrowed a scarf from a friend with a much better wardrobe than mine.”

Aaron had hold of her shoulders, thinking. “You look fine.” But he did not move.

“What’s the matter then? Shall we ring the bell?”

His voice sighed as he said, “I’m just thinking.”

She waited. He bit his lip harder. She said, “Care to clue me in?”

Aaron dropped his hands. “My... father... is literally impossible to please. I’m just trying to brace myself for tonight.” He sounded truly at sea.

“It’ll be fine – ” Ginny began, but the wide door with the big round brass handle in the middle creaked open then and the butler bowed them inside.

Ginny took up Aaron’s hand and was able to hold it while a cavalcade of servants unhooked and took their cloaks and even bent to give their shoes one last polishing.

Ginny held up one shining black toe. “You weren’t kidding.”

Aaron pushed his shoulders back. “It’s only one night,” he whispered to himself.

They were led to the dining room, a mere four rooms away, beyond the grand ballroom which sat demurely this evening with only a tenth of the lamps lit in the massive chandeliers. The long table was set for four at one glittering end and a bouquet the size of a small car sat hulking in the center, many feet away.

The butler led them beyond to a small drawing room where Mrs. Wickem overflowed a sizable settee and Lord Frelander sat swirling a crystal glass filled with something dark. Lord Frelander stood as they approached.

“Aaron,” the master of the house greeted him formally.

“Sir.” Aaron, slightly breathless, started to say, “And this is...”

But Lord Frelander had Ginny’s hand clutched between his own two coarse ones. Brightly, he said, “I am quite aware of who this is. How are you Ms. Weasley? It is good to see you again, I despaired at ever again having your natural charm grace

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this house. Do have a seat.” He led her away and found her a chair beside the settee. “A drink for the lady,” he commanded one of many vaguely penguin-like figures circumscribing the room. He bowed to his charge as a tray was offered. “And once you’ve settled in, I have taken some paintings out of storage after our conversation of last. I’d be delighted to give you a tour of them.”

Aaron, abandoned in the center of the floor, gaped at this scene.

Mrs. Wickem raised herself from her chair. “If you aren’t coming over to greet your mother, the mountain will have to come to her son.” She gave him a hug. “How are you, Aaron?”

Aaron pondered her, then pondered Lord Frelander who was pouring on the charm with Ginny, explaining the origin and process that led to the liqueur she had just been served. “Uh, pretty good, all said,” he uttered, still trying to accept what he was seeing. His mother pressed his hands around a drink, which he sipped at.

Another figure sailed in, draped in a long, simple dress. “You are early,” Mrs. Frelander said, sounding gracious.

“This is my wife, Beatrice,” Frelander said, starting the introductions with Ginny before moving more awkwardly to Mrs. Wickem and Aaron. “And, uh, this is Aaron Wickem.”

Aaron felt himself coloring, even though he had promised himself he would not. “Madam,” he said, greeting the woman who was studying him most closely, as if looking for some sign in his face.

“Charmed, I’m sure,” she said before accepting a drink from a servant who had followed her since she entered the room. “Alfred tells me you are training to be an Auror...”

Aaron nodded. “Doing my best at it, I suppose.” He felt unexpectedly shy with her, pressured by the awkwardness of it all.

Frelander said, “I’ll let you get acquainted,” and stepped back with a bow.

Mrs. Frelander’s wizening face smiled reassuringly. Voice lower than needed, she said, “I’ll confess I did not know Alfred in his younger days to know if you resemble him or not.”

Aaron could merely shrug. His mother sized him up while brushing a lock of his hair back. “He’s got a lot of my father in him. It’s hard to see much else.”

Aaron snipped, “Let me know when the Best of Show portion of the competition starts, I’m really hoping to win that.”

While his mother rolled his eyes and Mrs. Frelander nodded that they were perhaps out of line, Aaron slid over to Ginny and Lord Frelander. “I didn’t realize you two knew each other...” he began.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Ginny explained, “Oh, yes, I escorted Harry here one day when he had an appointment. Back when he always had a guard.”

Lord Frelander took a healthy swig of his drink. “Turns out he continued to need one.”

Ginny’s face fell. “Yeah... Yes,” she corrected herself. “Maybe if he’d had a witness that said he’d been somewhere else that day.”

Lord Frelander took a nearby chair, but remained on the edge of it, leaning forward. A servant filled his glass without his notice. “I read that he has exceptional legal representation already, or I would have offered someone I have on retainer.” He glanced up at Aaron, and voice cheery with alcohol said, “Do sit down, my boy. Unless you are too thin and hungry to wait for dinner and are hoping to move that way.”

Aaron took the chair beside Ginny’s. Pointedly, Frelander asked, “How is the investigation progressing?”

“I’m not authorized to say, I’m afraid,” Aaron said, noticing the others coming close to listen. “We’ve had some horrible leaks already, no one knows where from.”

“Yes, you have,” Mrs. Wickem accused. “That poor boy. After everything he’s done, too.”

Authoritatively, Lord Frelander stated, “In the court of public opinion, that does not help. It makes it worse. Too many are too eager to see heroes, or great men or women, brought low. And that paper of ours. It’s enough to make me want to buy it out and fire them all.”

Ginny straightened. “Why don’t you?”

Frelander sat back and dismissively said, “Terrible investment. It’s run at a loss already.”

Aaron said, “It’s half adverts. How can that be?”

“That’s what the accountants tell me.”

Sounding like one treading carefully, Aaron said, “Are you certain they weren’t lying to you? Maybe to keep you from being too interested?”

Frelander huffed and thought that over.

Ginny said, “I’d love to see Skeeter fired. The article she printed today, I couldn’t even finish reading it. I threw the paper in the fire instead.”

Mrs. Wickem waved her hanky, which she had pulled out upon lamenting Harry, but had yet to put it to use. “Yes, the one where she claimed his family was happy enough without him. Where does she get the nerve?”

“Where does she get the quotes?” Ginny asked. “Professor Snape is usually really careful. And I can’t imagine him saying those things.”

THE EVE OF SOMETHING

Mrs. Wickem sniffled. "If the boy is not wanted at home, he can come live with me, anytime."

Aaron raised a disturbed brow, but let it go when Ginny squeezed his hand hard enough to hurt.

They moved to the table and a feast was conducted in as if on cue to the last of them sitting down. The conversation lagged into trivialities while everyone ate. With the rest of the lamps in the area extinguished, the servants moved in and out of the light, shifting from shadow puppet to solid and back again as they moved around the table, trained into silence when there should be noise. The massive silver branching candelabra looming over the roast platter glowed so brightly, Ginny had to squint across at Aaron. But he could see her merely picking at her food, because he said, "Not hungry?"

Ginny's shoulders drooped. "It's a lovely dinner," she said in the direction of their host. "I'm just thinking about Harry. Makes it hard to enjoy celebrating." She set her fork down and took up her glass, but only sipped at that too.

Aaron bit his lip for an instant, before taking up a more rigid posture. But his face remained doleful and his eating stopped as well.

Ginny sighed and clasped her hands together in her lap, where her fingers encountered the ring. Straightening up, she raised her hand and said, "I should show you the ring Aaron gave to me."

"A ring?" Frelander echoed with heavy meaning and a glance at Aaron.

Ginny held her hand out so he could better see, and continued to hold it steady while he pulled out his glasses.

Frelander observed, "That's a unique ring. What is that, seven stones?"

"Seven is a very lucky number," Mrs. Wickem proclaimed, while waving to the waiter that she would like a top up on her soup.

"It didn't feel lucky growing up," Ginny said. "That's too many older brothers for one person to have to take." She held the ring out for the lady of the house as well, who winked at her knowingly.

Frelander folded his glasses away, "Nothing the matter with that many guaranteed allies, my dear."

"They weren't allies, though. They were always telling me what was best, and never letting me do much of anything." She spun the ring to straighten it, and added quietly, "By the time you get to seven no one gets around to asking you what you want."

Aaron's eyes had narrowed thoughtfully through this and his face did not hang quite as long now.

Mrs. Frelander said to Aaron, "You have plans perhaps we should know of?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sounding too neutral, he replied, "I will when Ginny puts enough thought into it. She's taking her time."

"Someone should," Frelander said. He turned to Ginny, his face looking far older highlighted by the stark candlelight. "But, someone should also inherit this place. Otherwise who knows what the state will do with it."

Ginny froze, blinking rapidly. "Inherit this place?"

"Well, yes." Frelander said, sitting back to let his stack of bowl and plate be taken away. "Aaron, now that he has shown promise at making something of himself, will inherit this estate, of course."

"Ah... I hadn't thought of that."

Frelander sent a hard-to-interpret look at Aaron, one that appeared dubious, perhaps. Ginny bristled and said, "I do understand how these things work, of course, I just hadn't thought about it." She uneasily glanced around the grand dining room. The entire Burrow would fit inside just this one room if you cut it up and arranged it right.

Frelander patted her hand and signaled for more wine to be added to everyone's glass, even those who had not drunk much yet, like Ginny. "I wasn't implying you were slow my dear. It's that your comment seemed to indicate that you had a stunning case of irreproachable motive. A rare thing." He raised his glass casually before drinking from it.

"Can't see yourself living here?" Aaron asked, the flickering light on his angular face giving no clue to his thoughts.

"It's hard to imagine living like this. No offense, I hope. It's just, uh, too much of everything, I guess. Too far from what I'm used to."

Frelander smiled faintly. "You have plenty of time to get used to the idea. I'm not going anywhere anytime soon."

"I certainly hope not," Ginny said.

"In the meantime, we'll have to teach you how to spend money," Aaron teased.

Mrs. Wickem sat forward energetically. "We can do some shopping my dear. That would be divine, just us girls."

Ginny shifted her shoulders uneasily, and managed to say, "I'd like that."

Aaron scratched his ear and leaned toward his mother beside him. "She's not a very good liar."

Mrs. Wickem grinned as though they shared a long-standing joke. "So I noticed. Not the worst quality in a wife."

"I am so a good liar," Ginny argued, then came to awareness of what she was saying. "Ehem. Right," she muttered, glancing around the table.

THE EVE OF SOMETHING



Snape paced the quiet house, his movements startling the candles as he passed. He had the outline of a plan and itched to begin executing it. But there were too many things he did not know, the most curious one was Mr. Weasley's comment about bugs or bugging. That was a distinctly Muggle notion involving electronics, which despite his deepest desire to understand, Mr. Weasley was hopeless at, so why would he use that word?

Snape distinctly disliked this state where important things were obscured from him and not others and he did not have an ally to ask for clarification. He could have asked Harry, but there had not been an opportunity, and now post would take days back and forth, at best. Snape passed the side table where the newspapers had been tossed, the day's paper still rolled up from delivery. The angry-letter conveying owls were sorted out with a spell that often caught the news owl, given the content of the paper. This particular one had made it through. Turning the roll revealed the headline: Harry's "Family" Thinks Prison Will Do Good for Wizard "Hero".

Snape slid the string off the paper and began reading the article.

This reporter has heard from a most reliable source that Harry Potter's household has not only moved him out of his own bedroom, but they profess that he is better off as a jailbird. For one thing, his incarceration has restricted his access to the dark magic that normally occupies his free time. He is now kept company by the far more wholesome, prison-censored correspondence of his friends rather than by the gruesome illicit books and device experimentation of his uncontrolled home life.

Snape tossed the paper aside, behaving uninterested in it. They were clearly being watched, in a way his nightly spell reinforcing was not blocking. Given that, he had to assume he was being watched right that moment. Still moving casually, which nicely focused his emotions into plotting, Snape went up to Harry's new room in the far upper corner of the house. He let Hedwig out of her cage. She gave a trembling shrug and stretched her wings while he wrote quickly on a small card curled in the palm of his hand. He folded it up without opening his hand, wrote Tonks on it, and gave it to the bird, who hopped on his shoulder to wait for the window to be opened.

The rarely used window stuck open and had to be closed with a spell. During the delay, the room's air frosted from the cold wind. In the ensuing silence, a plaintive chirp drew Snape to the other cage in the room. The Chimrian put a tiny paw through the cage bars and clawed in Snape's direction with a long-needled foot. Snape had instructed Winky to care for Harry's pets, since he himself had no interest in wrestling with something so nasty only Hagrid could love. Even Winky had seemed reluctant to accept the care duties, but the cage was clean and the water dish full, implying she

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

had followed instructions. The Chimrian chirped again and clawed more frantically. Snape stepped closer, but well out of reach. Such a creature would viciously attack anyone but its blood master, Snape well knew. The fact that Harry had such a thing attested to some truth to Skeeter's article. But this one was less than healthy, most likely from the long absence of her master. Tufts of her bright fur littered the cage, and where it had gone missing, the black, leathery skin of her lithe body showed through.

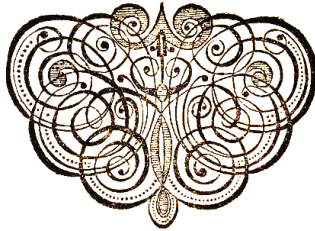
The chirping grew more frantic as Snape stood there, and he found himself reaching for the cage door. Chimrians reflected their master's mood, but what if that worked both ways? Could calming this creature improve Harry's dark demeanor, buying Snape some much needed time? The creature scuttled like lightning to the door when his hand reached it and he instinctively jerked back. The next cry from the creature was gratingly plaintive. It certainly was not behaving like a murderous protector of one master, unless it played far more coy than expected.

Curious more than anything else, Snape unhooked the cage door, and pulled his hand back. The Chimrian balanced on the threshold bar an instant before leaping at Snape, who only had time to tuck his hands away. The violet, four legged bat latched onto his robe front and held tight, burrowing into him with its fox-like nose.

Snape exhaled and slowly raised a hand to touch the tiny form. What fur it had left was stunningly soft. Snape petted it additionally, just in surprise at that. Was it possible that he was this thing's master as well as Harry? He did not know such a thing was possible; there must have been a rather interesting extra spell involved if so. The creature responded to his petting by burrowing into his breast pocket and curling up inside it.

Tentatively, because he still feared losing a lot of blood should the creature decide to turn the flesh of his hand into ribbons, Snape lifted the thing out to put it in his side pocket, where the lump of it rested more conveniently. A muffled chirp sounded through the layers when it was safely away – a far less frantic sound. Presumably the creature had a name. Snape found himself wondering what it may be.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



CORRUPTION

Christmas day passed like every other day in the house in Shrewsthorpe. The piles of presents went untouched until Snape had an idea and went to sort through them. Kali crawled up onto his shoulder to better observe these doings, reminding him that her claws could again use a trimming. Snape found what he was looking for and tucked the beating-heart-covered box under his arm and went to the library where Candide rested in a belly relieving, twisted position on the divan, listening to the wizard wireless on low.

“Merry Christmas, Severus.”

Nodding awkwardly, Snape said flatly, “And to you.”

“What’s that?” She coyly asked. “We aren’t opening presents until Harry’s back, you know.”

“I am quite aware,” Snape said with no little relief, since he had not purchased anything for her. “I need to deliver this elsewhere on Harry’s orders.”

She sat up with some effort. “Ah,” she said knowingly. “I can go visit my mum and dad while you’re gone. Unless you don’t mind my coming along?”

“Ms. Tonks is on duty today-”

“Christmas day? Her guilt must be running quite deep, in that case.”

Snape paused, not having considered that. “In any event, I may have some difficulty in catching up with her, so perhaps it would be best if I go alone.”

Amiably, she said, “I’ll visit mum and dad, then.” More sadly, she added, “Give Tonks a Happy Christmas for me.”

“Of course,” Snape said, nearly nauseated by how truthful he sounded.

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Snape set the present aside and waited in a heavy gloom cracked into slices by sunlight slanting between the rotted boards on the windows. His exhalations chased dust through the air to swirl in the knives of light. Kali tried to crawl out of his pocket, but he gently dissuaded her, not wishing to chase her down should she decide to investigate too far afield. Snape had arrived early to assure himself the place still existed and was still secure. Nevertheless, when Tonks arrived, he gestured for her to remain silent, and said, "I ran some protective spells but I want to be certain... if you would do me the favor of running them again?"

Tonks paced around the old Order safehouse, an abandoned rowhouse in Newcastle under Lyme. She ran the same spells, but finished up with one to force Animagi to reveal themselves.

Not wishing to risk revealing his ignorance, Snape suppressed his curiosity and moved on. "I saw Harry yesterday, as you probably know."

"How is he, do you think?" Tonks blurted. "Arthur dismissed my concerns after the visit."

Snape said, "I believe your concerns are well founded. Arthur did not comprehend Harry's mood."

Tonks' shoulders fell, drooping as much as her murky brown hair. "I thought so." She sounded strained and her face looked sleepless.

Snape said, "My concerns are why I asked you to come here."

Tonks paced, looking up to study the cracking and peeling paint surrounded by water stains on the ceiling. "Yeah, and it needs to be quick. I'm on duty."

"I will be as brief as possible, but I must be complete. I do not want any more contact between us than is absolutely necessary."

Her curious gaze fell over to him, and he went on, "Harry must be removed from prison as soon as possible and that can be arranged straightforwardly enough, but I need your assistance."

Her gaze grew more puzzled. "Harry can leave anytime he wants..."

"Not without repercussions he is clearly unwilling to face."

She paced again, kicking up dust. "Well, true..."

"I want to have him cleanly removed, with no unnecessary baggage. To that end I need something from you."

He waited while she decided to take that bait. "And what might that be?"

"I need to you to deliver a Durumulna member to me. Someone freshly captured, whom no one knows you have captured."

She shook her head as if to clear it. "Huh?"

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Testily, Snape, his voice emanating from the stark, dusty shadows, returned, "I'm quite certain you heard me."

Voice raised, she said, "You want me capture someone and rather than taking this person to the Ministry dungeon, you want me to give him to you?"

"Or her, I am not choosy."

"Or her," Tonks echoed quietly.

"The only criterion I require is that this person harbor some kind of major guilt. Beyond that I don't care who it is."

Wary of the answer, Tonks asked, "What are you going to do?"

Brightly, Snape said, "Get Harry out of prison. I presume you wish that to happen as well, no?" He was mocking her by the end of this, and backed off to pace as well.

"Yes, but—"

He spun, feet gritting on the grey-dusted floor. "But what? How difficult could this be? I don't require a member of the leadership, whom you've presumably been unable to locate. I assume at any rate. I need one of the lackeys I am certain you are leaving free to track in hopes of catching someone higher up."

Tonks swayed as though in a trance. "Yeah, we are... but, I don't think—"

"Don't think," Snape stated crisply. "That is not what is required of you in this instance." When she continued to hesitate, he said, "Perhaps I was mistaken and you do not understand Harry's state of mind."

"No, I do," she sadly said.

"No, I do not think you do, or you would not be hesitating. Perhaps you failed to notice how his anger made the Death Eater's restless in their cells, making them bang on their doors."

"He what?" She fell far away again. "Is that what happened? The guards, they ran by for something, just as Harry was at his worst."

"Most likely."

She tipped her head back and let it hang with a nearly broken looseness.

Snape softly said, "I am not certain what he is turning into, but I know it must be stopped. You are aware of the full range of his skills, I assume? How very dangerous he would be if he finally decided he had had enough of being a proper wizard?" He let that sink in. "He needs to be free of the influences of that place and steeped again in the company of his friends who can provide a badly needed moderating effect on any dark instincts he has picked up. He responds well to that, I have observed. If that isn't sufficient, something else can be tried."

Tonks looked up. "He responds well to you."

Snape let that pass. Tonks paced to the hearth, brushed the dust off, and rested her head on the mantelpiece, only then noticing the box there wrapped in paper

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covered in pulsing heart shapes. “What’s that?”

Mildly, Snape said, “Harry’s present to you.”

Tonks shoved away from the mantelpiece. “I just can’t... what? Let you frame someone for the crime?”

In his favorite speaking-to-a-daft-First-Year voice he said, “Then make it someone whom you feel deserves to be in prison. I don’t care.” When she merely stared at him from her tilted head position, lost in thought, Snape added, “I assumed you cared about Harry enough to help, but perhaps I was mistaken.”

Face twisted in pain, she turned away and pounded the mantelpiece once. Staring at the present, which in the poor light appeared to be spotted with spreading blood, she said, “There has to be another way.”

“Yes, and when you think of it, I’ll be happy to assist in kind, but in the meantime...”

She swung her arms in unison and paced the bare floor. “I just don’t know, Severus.”

“You don’t know what? You don’t know what is happening to Harry? I suggest you visit him again, every day, until you are convinced. Unless you are blind and deaf I expect you will come around in, say, two visits, at most. And during that delay, we may lose him irrevocably.” He waited. “Shall I map the rest out for you? How he will not stay put in that place. How you will be hunting him down for deeds he really did commit. How you will be unable to capture and hold him, forcing you to resort to-”

“Stop it!” she snapped at him, pained. Taking up the present, which she gently turned in her hands, she said, “I get it already.”

He held back on appearing smug. “In that case, when you have this person – and I suggest you not dally given the circumstances – leave them at the ruins of the Shrieking Shack and send me a post owl from another location with the message I finally have a Christmas present for Harry. I will take care of the rest.” He paused and watched her breathing heavily. “Clear enough?”

She stalked off without a word, leaving only her restless footprints in the dust on the floor.



Snape returned home and immediately ran an Animagus revealing spell, but it generated nothing of interest. Glad to be alone, he went to the divan in the library and reclined there, thinking. The wireless was still on, he noticed once his head was close enough to the gold filigreed speaker. A holiday tune drifted out extolling the

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vapid joys of the season. In his world such lyrics could only be perceived as mocking and satirical, describing that which existed only in the mists of time. Disturbed by its unrealistic call to virtue and sentimentality, he tweaked the knob so the wooden box fell silent.

That night as he lay down, still distracted by finalizing his plots, Candide leaned close and said, “Not much of a Christmas.”

“It was lovely,” he deadpanned.

She cocked a smile. “You have managed the impossible – becoming less romantic.”

Snape continued to stare at the ceiling. As one might expect when sharing a bed, she lay so that they touched all along one side of him. By concentrating he relaxed into it. Her fingers began playing with the hair at his forehead, which distracted him terribly from plotting. He could feel her breath when she said, “You’ve been pretty standoffish.”

She played with his hair longer before asking, “Did I finally get too huge to be alluring?”

His mind had been elsewhere. “What?” Contrary to what he would have expected of himself before all this, he found her quite appealing. Her blatant acceptance, the powdery scent of her, and the knowledge that she already carried, essentially, his child added up to rather a lot of allure.

She continued to curl his long fringe around her fingers. “Not feeling guilty about Harry, are you?”

“Certainly not.”

He sat up and grabbed his wand up from the night stand to run an Animagus revealing spell. The room stood as before.

“Great Merlin, you don’t think she’d be in the bedroom at a time like this?”

He gazed at her, eyes peering about, looking ready to do battle against an unseen enemy, and he found himself amused.

“Are you laughing at me?” she demanded, quick to take offense.

“No,” he replied, easily finding a soothing tone. He set his wand back aside. “I would hope Skeeter would not be here, but I do not trust her.”

“And why would you?”

She lay back down, turned slightly away as if giving up. He felt a stab like regret. He did not want her to give up. He considered her a moment, then rested a hand on her upper arm. “You are not displeasing.”

Sounding moody, she said, “You’re just saying that.”

Snape needed a moment to recover. “You truly think I would just say that?”

She rolled toward him, onto her back, and scoffed with light humor. “Eh, no, maybe not.”

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He stroked the fleshy arm under his hand, trying hard to seem casual about it. Her skin felt too soft to be real. He let the backs of his fingers drift over her neck, along the lace collar, to the buttons of her nightgown. She made a noise that he added to the list of things that made her alluring and bent to follow his fingers with his lips.



In Grimmauld Place, the distinctive atmosphere of a feast – silverware clattering, serving dishes thudding, chairs moving, accompanied by the drifting odor of roasting meats – greeted Snape as he moved along the balcony. He had not eaten all day and felt dizzy with the scent alone.

Closer in, the voices revealed attitudes of forced gaiety that tempered his separateness somewhat. He stepped into the chaotic dining room just long enough to toss an unwanted overcooked turkey wing and potatoes on a plate. Glances rose sharply, then disregarded him, an improvement over the norm.

Back in the bedroom he shared in shifts with Lupin, Snape set the plate on the brewing counter and buried his nose in a stained and holey Potions book. If he did not focus on something his mind would head off to imagining his counterpart, eating his food, off his plates, sitting at table with his family. Had he not been famished, the thought might have made him lose his appetite. As it was, he ate as slowly as he could bear to to best relish it all. House meals at Grimmauld Place had grown paltry in the days of hoarding leading up to the feast. The previous day the meals were so unsatisfying that Snape suspected Hermione had simply magicked them into being out of desperation.

The object of his suspicion knocked on the open door just then, her other hand buried in her pocket, looking strangely guilty. “There’s more to eat,” she said. “You should have seconds.” She hesitated, but started forward while drawing her hand out. “And I brought you-”

“What are you doing up here?” Harry asked, slipping in from behind.

Hermione put her hand back away. Something square glittered in her grip before she released it to gesture. “I’m just telling Mr. Snape there is plenty of food tonight.”

“He can figure that out for himself,” Harry stated flatly.

Hermione shrugged broadly. “What are you doing up here?”

“I want to talk to Snape. Shut the door.”

“Can I stay?” Hermione asked, clearly challenging.

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“Yeah, okay.” Harry pulled over a battered chair and turned it backward before straddling it. Facing Snape, he said, “Ravenclaw’s diadem. Do you know where it is?”

Snape shook his head while he resumed eating.

“I don’t believe you,” Harry stated.

Snape stared at him for effect. “I can only guess, and those guesses will waste your time and patience, I am certain.” When Harry rested his chin on his hands curled around the chair back, Snape added, “I would tell you if I knew.”

“I was going to check the library,” Hermione reassured Harry. “Just haven’t had a chance.”

“You think that will work?” Harry mocked.

“Yes, why not?” Huffy, she went to the door. To Snape she said, “You should come downstairs to eat.”

When she was gone, Harry grumbled in annoyance. Between nibbles on the paltry but tender meat between the wing bones, Snape said, “May I offer you some advice, which you are dearly in need of?”

“I doubt it will help,” Harry mumbled. “But you can try.”

Snape set his empty plate aside. “You are misusing your people. Ms. Granger should have no task but researching what you seek. She is singularly suited for that task and she must not be distracted from it.”

“But we need to eat,” Harry said, standing up and putting the chair aside.

“Others can procure food.”

“Not as well.”

“That does not matter; they can do it.”

“An army marches on its stomach,” Harry quoted, sounding miffed and defensive.

“This one will falter for lack of information long before it starves bodily.” Snape bundled up his napkin and considered his decimated plate.

“There is more food,” Harry grudgingly muttered.

Unable to deny that idea, Snape followed Harry downstairs. Perhaps because he clearly accompanied Harry inside, the room disregarded Snape’s entry. He eagerly helped himself to the copious leftovers and stood in the corner of the room to observe.

Lavender sat discussing the latest rumors with Ginny, who was the only one to frequently eye Snape as he stood in the shadow of the curtain, relishing filling his stomach.

A bang! brought silence to the room. Harry, closest to the door, was the first one out of it to investigate. Snape set his plate down and reached futilely for his wand, cursing under his breath and balling his empty fists at his side. Ginny stopped in the doorway, gesturing authoritatively for the others to remain where they were.

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Snape considered it a telling measure of his situation that he found reassurance in the confident way she held her wand.

The others returned, carrying what appeared to be a dead goose sporting a red ribbon around its neck.

“What is it?” Someone asked, sounding appalled.

“A message, I presume,” Harry said, tossing the animal aside. “And not from a friend.” By the limp way it moved and the lack of rotted scent, it must have just died.

When it hit the floor, something golden rolled free of it – rolled unpredictably, like an egg.

“Don’t touch it,” Snape and Harry both said when a few bystanders moved toward it.

Harry bent over the egg, wand at ready, and nudged it with his foot.

“What is it, do you think?” Harry asked.

At this, it cracked open, making him twitch back. Clattering started and a ticker tape emerged straight up from the egg, fell over itself and piled onto the floor. When it abruptly stopped, Harry bent and ran his fingers along it to read the flowing writing stamped out in holes on it.

“It really is a message,” he said. He ran his fingers along it and found the beginning. “You have something I want. I have something you want. I propose an equitable trade: Sword of Gryffindor for Hufflepuff’s Cup. Meet at the Three Broomsticks at 9pm tonight. Draco Malfoy.” Harry dropped the tape.

Hermione said, “You DID get the cup?”

“Not exactly,” Harry said. “Or I wasn’t certain I had, but I guess I did. Turned out there were a thousand cups or so. Every time I took some, more appeared. I took as many as I could and stashed them away somewhere safe to see what happened.” He grinned. “Apparently the real one is in the stash.”

He went to the bookshelf and hunted around behind the books, eventually pulling out a golden cup.

“Is that it?” Ginny blurted hungrily.

Harry shook his head. “Odds are not. It’s just one I grabbed from the stash to show everyone. The spell ran its course after creating like a million of them. They nearly crushed me.” He held it up. “Merry Christmas.”

Hermione took the cup from him and held it this way and that. “We’ll have to come up with a way to find the real one. Where are they?”

Harry did not glance around, he just said quietly. “I’ll tell you later.”

Hermione nodded like one suddenly remembering herself. “But someone could go trade this one for the sword,” she said.

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Harry peered at the cup. "I could go do that."

"Not wise," Snape intoned, stepping out of the shadows of the tight-knit gathering, but not so close as to seem challenging. "It is undoubtedly a trap."

"So?" Harry asked, scoffing.

"So? That is the best you can offer in return?" Snape mocked. He had an uneasy sense of altering things, of standing where he could force the rivulets of time and event to diverge off course. Without him there, the young man would go off and do as he wished. He breathed deeply, plunging in. "It is undoubtedly a trap specifically for you, that makes it imperative you do not go. You can always rescue others later, but who will be there to rescue you?"

Harry frowned while thinking. Hermione said, "I'll go."

Harry turned to her. "No. You research how to tell the cups apart and how to find the diadem. I don't want you doing anything else. Let someone else take care of everything else; you do only that, okay? From now on."

Hermione, ever pragmatic, did not argue, just frowned, appearing strained. Ginny, beside her, said, "I'll go. I can deal with the little blonde snake."

"I'll go with you," Neville said. "You shouldn't go alone. We'll take the cloak."

Harry glanced between his friends, hesitating. Snape took advantage of this and said, "The cloak can only hide one of you and both of you are wanted. No one will be expecting me, so I should go, and the other of you can use the cloak." He glared directly at Harry. "That will be far safer."

Harry stared back, but actually focused beyond Snape. The room stood in stillness, barely breathing, waiting for Harry.

Snape calmly added, "I believe I can best handle Mr. Malfoy, having been in a position of authority over him for years." He held up his hands. "But it is your decision, Potter."

"I don't trust you," Harry said, stepping close to get right in his face. The others backed up to make way. Snape noted that he had to rock up on his toes to get to his own Harry's height. "Realize that if anything happens to my friends because of you I will take it out on your skin as slowly and painfully as I can muster the patience to do so."

The threat felt like half show, half real. Snape nodded. "I would expect nothing less," he quipped.

Harry searched his face seconds longer. "Fine." He spun and glanced between his friends. "You two draw straws... Or maybe not. Neville you tend to get too nervous around Snape. Maybe you should go, Ginny. Or maybe I should, after all." He spun on Snape again, looking for a reaction.

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“And if I refuse because I can see you RE-injured your shoulder...?” Snape innocently asked.

Harry colored. A few in the room burst into questions and the rest looked at the floor. Harry overrode them. “I’m fine. I’m just bruised from having ten thousand cups fall on top of me is all.”

Lupin, previously unnoticed in the corner, said in a weak voice, “Then perhaps you should be on the injured list and stay, as Severus suggests.”

“Whose side are you on?” Harry demanded of him.

Sounding inordinately tired, Lupin replied, “I’m on the side that argues that the Prophecized One should be reserved for the key task only he can complete.” Lupin shuffled forward and leaned heavily on a chair back, appearing small inside the thick robes he wore against the chill. “Harry, you have much to do yet. No one is going to accuse you of shirking. I know you dislike sending your friends off into danger, and that’s noble, but they want to do it for you because they can’t finish this in the end like you can.”

“However I’m supposed to do that,” Harry grumbled.

Lupin tilted his head back and forth. “One thing at a time. The critical thing is that only you can do this last thing. Everyone here knows that and is willing to sacrifice so you can reach that point. Even Severus here is, which just shows how important it is.”

Snape shot him a look of dismay, but let it go. That had not exactly been his thinking. His thinking had more been along the lines of shaking his oppressive helplessness with a bout of recklessness. And he was tired of being trapped in his dead enemy’s house.

Harry paced in the space left by the group watching him. “Given it’s a holiday, it should be a temporary armistice day. So, Ginny, why don’t you go. I think it should be safe enough. I hope.” He sounded bold at the beginning, but by the end his eyes rested sadly on her.

Snape pointed out, “I’ll need my wand. At least for the evening.”

Glaring at him, Harry gestured for Hermione to give it up to him. It gave Snape less reassurance than he wished as he slipped it into his pocket.

Harry puffed up then and marched from the room, pausing only to say to Snape, “Bring her back safely or I’ll kill you.” He did not look back to see Snape’s reaction.

Snape found Ginny as the crowd dissipated. “We don’t have much time,” he said.

Without a word, she went to get ready, returning minutes later bundled warmly and carrying two broomsticks. Snape joined her at the map on the wall which marked the paths people had taken last to travel to various common places. Circles and colored arrows marked landing areas and Apparition points. She said, “We should

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start southward, to throw them off. I know we don't have much time to get there by nine, but can't risk getting predictable."

With his eyes, Snape followed the course she plotted and nodded, eager to leave this place for any reason. Ginny found him a cloak, flying gloves and a scarf from a trunk by the door. She carefully brushed off the dark plaid scarf before handing it over, muttering sadly, "We didn't use to have so much extra stuff, but... we've lost so many people..."

Snape wrapped the anonymous dead man's scarf twice around his neck and tucked it firmly into his robes. Harry stepped over and gave Ginny a kiss. "Be careful," he said to her before striding away again, ignoring Snape.

"Ready, sir?" Ginny asked, eyes far away and determined.

They Apparated, then flew some before Apparating again and flying some more. Snape took charge of the last Apparition, taking them into Shrewsthorpe in the fields behind his house. He stopped there, transfixed by the gaping windows and bowing roof marred with holes.

"Sir?" Ginny prompted as she rewrapped her scarf in preparation for flight.

Snape dropped his borrowed broom while saying "Up," and let it bump his leg as it hovered beside him. He resisted going. He wanted to simply step back into his house the way it should be. Ginny was already twenty feet in the air. Keeping his face averted from the decaying visage of his house, Snape followed.

They landed on the hilltop overlooking Hogsmeade. The rutted street was busy enough that the snow had been trampled down to mud and warm light shown from every window.

"Everyone's taking advantage to get out," Ginny said, tossing the cloak over her head and disappearing.

Snape led the way down to the alley beside the Three Broomsticks. The scent of stew and rotting beer permeated even the snow-covered ground. Snape could track Ginny by her footsteps in the snow and he made a half-blind grab for her shoulder when he heard cries of dismay from the roadway ahead. Ginny willingly backed up behind him as the walls iced over more and gloom descended on them. Snape pushed his charge behind him, between stacks of empty barrels. "Don't move, no matter what happens," he commanded, then released her.

Torn wraiths flickered by on the road outside their hiding place and for a moment, dread released them. But the gloom crept back and hooded shadows peered around the crumbling brick edge of the building.

Snape looked away, not wanting to look inside the approaching tattered hood. The Dementor both creaked and slithered closer. Snape could not run because there was no point in running. There was nowhere safe to run to. This place, this world,

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was an endless kingdom of doom and chaos. There would never be any real hope here. His bright house and wife and son were nothing but a cruel dream. He would never see them again. His Harry would never return and he would be trapped in this place forever, lucky only to survive, or perhaps not so lucky.

Snape clutched his wand, yearning to cast a Patronus to send the demon off, but it increased the risk of their being investigated. He ducked low, trying to shut down the flow of despair, the flow of all his emotion, in the hopes it would lose interest. The earthy, decayed odor of the Dementor's ragged robes wafted around them as a hooded head passed close, sniffing like a predator. The air hummed with perverted joy at his pain. He worried for Ginny crouched nearby and ducked lower into his arms trying to find any small hope inside himself, but there was nothing but bleak expectation of permanent emptiness. Torn robes brushed Snape like dried leaves one came so close, and then a whistle sounded and the Dementor jerked back and turned. The whistle repeated and the ghastly pair slipped away without a sound.

Snape rested his head more firmly in the crook of his arm, leaning heavily on a barrel, trying to school his rampant grief. He could not grab hold of it, let alone wrestle it out of the way, it permeated every fiber of his being.

"Sir?" Ginny said, then fell silent. By the sound of it, she took a seat on one of the barrels to wait. She sounded like she fared better than he, which annoyed him as much as it relieved him.

He had a task; Snape reminded himself from the absolute darkness of his robes. If he had a task, there was hope. He had lived exactly this way for an awfully long time, and it should be possible to return to that mentality, but somehow the past made it harder, not easier.

Snape raised his head, rubbing his forehead, trying to focus on the task, the purpose.

"Sir?" the invisible voice came from beside him again.

Snape stared down at the barrel he leaned on. Ice crystals had formed on the lid. Sharp, clear shards of the kind that accompanied Harry through the Planes. Harry would come. He had to come. Snape straightened, grabbing at that hope like a lifeline.

Sounding apologetic Ginny said, "I was about to scare the Dementor away even though I knew I wasn't supposed to reveal that I was here. They didn't seem to notice me under here."

"No, you did right," Snape managed to say, voice as unsteady as his heart.

Even though they were late, Snape took care putting on a disguise. Just taking any action released him from the debilitating effects of his grief, which made the spells work better, so he did them over twice. He bolstered his shoulders and neck with

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added muscle, greyed his hair, and fattened his face, spells minor enough that they might go undetected by a disguise-revealing device.

“Let’s go. Stay close to me so I do not have to move as one being trailed. If Dementors cannot see you, that is not an ordinary invisibility cloak, but I do not want to push our luck, as thin as it is.”

They transformed their brooms into barrels, stacked them with the others, tossed snow on them, and walked around to the front door.

As expected, the pub was full of revelers making the most of the holiday. Snape scanned the room for Malfoy but did not see him. He moved to the bar for a butterbeer and asked Madam Rosmerta if she had any rooms free for the night, just to get a chance to look at the register when she pulled it out. She did not need to; she nodded towards the empty key rack behind her and said, “Nah, been booked solid since a month ago.”

Snape took his drink and stood against the wall with it, careful to always leave space for his companion to follow without bumping anyone.

The bright, borderline cheery voices filling the air were a balm and Snape began to feel himself again. He sipped his drink for show and froze when he heard one voice that vibrated through him as if his heart were a drum struck by a mallet. Snape peered desperately around the smoky haze. He found his mark with difficulty because her back was turned and her hair was different. She sat at a table with her officemates and her boss. The person beside her got up and disappeared down the corridor where the toilets were. Snape could take the chair – if only until her companion returned and demanded it back. It would be something, even as small as it was.

Snape began to move without thinking, drawn, then hesitated. In the end, the decision was made for him. The side door down the corridor beside the bar banged open and figures in Death Eater hoods slipped inside, wands in hand, but lowered. Snape slipped over to the seat and moved it closer to Candide to make room for his transparent shadow to crouch beside.

Candide turned to him in amused surprise. “Hello?”

“Greetings,” Snape intoned, feeling strangely at ease.

“You look familiar,” Candide’s boss said.

Snape drew his gaze away from Candide’s thinner than expected face and introduced himself. “Phineus Polstar, I used to play for the Wasps.” He was saved from having to worry if this man were an ardent fan who would see through this lie by the room falling silent as the Death Eaters spread through the room.

Candide started and moved as if to stand. Snape leaned close. “Doing anything at all will get you singled out,” he hissed at her before backing up and putting on a grin. “Someday we’ll be playing Quidditch again,” he said, giving a mock toast

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before pretending to just then notice the invaders.

Ginny bumped his leg as she crawled fully under the table and near disaster happened – The man on Snape’s right shuffled his feet and ducked slightly to look under at what had brushed him. Snape leaned closer to Candide to say, “Just stay calm,” but it was really an excuse to move his legs and give Ginny more room. His grim humor suspected she was debating which was worse: hugging his shins like she was or giving herself up. The man thankfully decided to ignore what was under the table and his movement went unnoticed, but it was dumb luck.

The room fell utterly still as the hooded but unmasked figures moved through, gazing challengingly at everyone in turn. Snarling at some for no reason, shoving others. They circled the room using their bulk to bully their way around, then as quick as they had arrived, they were gone.

Beside him, Candide deflated in relief. “They had to ruin a decent night, didn’t they?” she complained. She sucked at her beer and said, “Thanks,” to Snape. “You’d think I’d be used to them.”

“You should never get used to them.”

Candide’s friend returned and cleared his throat. Snape stood, in a rude, body blocking way that gave Ginny space to get out too.

“Scuse me,” the man snipped in false pleasantry.

Snape bowed to both of them with overdone graciousness and with one fleeting glance back at Candide, returned to the wall to watch the room where his back was protected.

Over at the bar, Rosmerta, with suspiciously mechanical movements, handed a key from below the bar to a figure that had just entered, hooded as well, but smaller than the others who had just departed. Snape turned away before the figure could look his way, trusting that with his alterations he would not be recognized from behind. When the figure moved off, Snape whispered to his shadow, “Follow him.”

He himself wandered casually behind examining the sporting photographs lining the corridor that led to the alley and the stairs to the rooms. At the foot of the stairs, he heard a disembodied voice breathless with excitement say, “Room four.”

Snape led the way up the stairs and intending to not give Draco any time to prepare, burst into the room. He caught the young man exchanging his scratchy Death Eater robes for a richly woven dressing gown. Snape knocked the young man’s wand away and snagged it for safe keeping. He then moved to a chair and sat crosslegged, as if he owned the place. “There, now we can talk.”

Draco stood still with his robes half over his head. He came to himself and tossed them aside and slipped on the gown.

Miffed, Draco asked, “What are you doing here?”

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“I have what you want.”

Draco blinked at that.

Snape had no interest in giving away who he was working with. “Your message was ridiculously easy to intercept.”

Draco fell relieved. “Then at least you understand that I have to get the cup back. You really have it?”

Snape reached into his pocket and gave Draco a glance of just the lip before securing it away again. “But I want the sword.”

Draco paced while straightening his collar. He stopped before the free-standing, snake-edged mirror to brush his hair in place before facing Snape again. “Why? What good will it do you? You certainly aren’t a Gryffindor, so it will be of no use.”

Finding snootiness from somewhere, Snape replied, “The cup is nothing to me, but with the sword I can torment others. With the cup I can only torment you, which is a paltry game, really.”

“You’re awfully confident for a man literally everyone would like to kill.”

Airily, he said, “No one seems to actually have the time to bother. Other priorities, I suppose.” They stared at each other. “The sword?” Snape demanded.

With a rumble on the rough wooden floor, Draco pulled a trunk over from under the bed and opened it from his side of the table. He pulled the sword out of it and set it out. It was tethered with a chain to the trunk. Draco re-closed the trunk and gestured that Snape could inspect the sword.

Snape inspected Draco instead, looking for any deception, but there did not seem to be any, just wariness and certainty that he could pull off this transaction and that once he did, all would be well again. The sword certainly looked authentic to Snape. He touched it, but it felt like ordinary cold metal.

“The cup,” Draco demanded.

Snape set the cup on his side of the table. Draco pulled a silvery drawstring purse from his pocket and tossed glittery powder from it at the cup. The powder passed through the cup as if it were not there.

“That’s not the cup! That’s a copy,” Draco snarled, after glancing inside to see that the smooth metal bowl held no powder.

“Is it, then?” Snape said, laying a hand on the sword hilt, wondering if he could break the thin, decorative-looking chain. Draco was wandless, so he had an advantage there. “Understandable, you must admit, given how very many cups there were in your secret cellar.”

Draco kicked the trunk and an answering thud echoed from inside it. A second later a Bludger broke free and flew straight through the flimsy plastered wall, dragging

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the sword behind it and painfully out of Snape's grasp. Snape ran to the window to look out, feeling a breeze behind him as Ginny joined him there.

"Ha!" Draco said. "You think I'm that stupid."

"Where is it going?" Snape asked, Ginny perhaps, but she was smart enough not to answer. The Bludger had been heading in a straight line, toward the castle. And if it were a Hogwart's Bludger, it might just head to the changing rooms where it was normally stored... eventually, anyway.

Snape ran for the door, Draco yelling, "Give me my wand back!" followed them out.

Two sets of feet pounded down the stairs, Snape tried to get the two of them in sync so they would sound like one. They burst out the side door of the pub into the alley and, as if trained to it, efficiently transformed their brooms back to normal. Shouting followed them out of the pub and running feet approached from several sides. Snape pointed straight up and took off, hoping Ginny would follow. He got a glimpse of her feet poking out from the fluttering cloak before the night sky blotted everything out, and knowing she followed, he accelerated for the school grounds.

Snape slowed high over the lake, something had disturbed the pristine snowy surface. A bursting line in the shape of a comet bisected the plane of icy snow and at the end of it, cracks radiated out. Snape turned and dropped down to hover over that spot. He flew farther out where the ice was thicker and landed. Another set of footprints appeared beside him.

"Why not just Accio it out?" A voice asked.

"That particular sword will not come that way. But you may try if you wish."

She did so, but nothing happened. A party of Death Eaters gathered on the shore near the village. They were slow to muster and organize and he must put that time to good use. He put a featherlight charm on Ginny and had her do the same to him. Then they both slip-walked over the crunching ice to where the cracks started.

"Stay back. I'm lighter," Ginny said, and started inside the real danger zone.

Snape said, "Give me the cloak. You do not wish to lose that."

She bundled it up and tossed it to him. He wrapped it around his neck like a scarf. More shouting drifted over the flat surface. "They're coming," Ginny said.

"They are in trouble if they come that way. The ice is thinnest near the village where the sewers dump in."

Ginny, who was on all fours, inspecting the hole said, "Oh, wonderful." Her weight caused the ice to darken and water to slip over the top. She backed up by crawling and began quickly removing her cloak.

"What are you doing?" Snape asked.

"Fetching the sword. I think I can see it. Does it glow?"

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“Not that I know of, but it is hardly ordinary, and you are a Gryffindor. Perhaps it wants you to fetch it.” Snape looked up at the approaching mob of Death Eaters. A spell sizzled across the ice but Snape had plenty of time for a Counter. “Perhaps you should hurry.”

Ginny was already stripped down to her shirt and trousers. She slipped off her shoes with vicious tugs and tossed them toward Snape’s feet. With just one deep breath, and perhaps before she could think too hard about her actions, she dove in, shattering the ice more. She bobbed to the surface an instant later, gasping like a death rattle and flailing. “Merlin! It’s cold!” She grabbed for the edge of the ice, but it simply broke it off to float about her in jagged pieces.

Snape used Draco’s wand in his other hand to fetch her clothes closer to him out of reach of the spreading stain of water.

“Do hurry,” Snape said.

“You think I’m not?” she weakly gasped, her eyes tightly closed as freezing lake water rivulleted from her hair over her face. With great effort and a thrown back head, she took three hoarse breaths, and ducked under the liquid slate surface again.

She was gone much longer this time. Their pursuers split up; some came over the ice and others came along the edge of the lake to get closer. Once they were tossing spells from both of those angles, defense would become difficult if not impossible.

Snape was just about to Accio Ginny herself from the depths when something burst from the water – a pale hand clutching a sword. The sword and hand crashed down on the ice as Ginny emerged. Snape had to back up as the surface gave way across a large area, staining with water and tilting ominously. One crack extended to the nearest pursuers taking the short path and cursing sounded as they fell through in the shallows.

With a careful whip charm, Snape dragged Ginny from the hole and up a thicker sheet of ice that groaned under her weight, but did not crack more. On his knees, Snape backed up to firmer ice, pulling her and her dry clothes along. She had gone limp beyond clutching the sword but because of the cold he had more time to revive her, so he moved carefully, rather than rush and potentially send them both into the freezing arms of the lake.

Their pursuers were extricating themselves from the water and coming around where the ice was sounder. A whistle sounded and Dementors emerged from the bare-limbed forest and floated along the snow down to the ice. The gathered Death Eaters stumbled back to let them pass. Snape tugged the chilled Ginny close and tossed the cloak over both of them.

Ginny’s shallow breath reassuringly moved over Snape’s neck, and she struggled blindly until he whispered that she should stop. Under the invisibility cloak, he

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unfolded her woolen cloak and helped her slip it around her neck, resisting simply wrapping her in his arms as would be reasonable, but completely out of character. She began to shiver so violently her teeth rattled together. In the small space, her jumper and robes could only be bundled around her from the front. Her shirt began freezing solid.

Above them the Dementors swirled in confusion. Their pursuers had found a boat and were pushing it out onto the loose ice chunks.

“We have to make a dash for it,” Snape said.

Ginny nodded amidst her violent shaking. Even in the dim light, her face was ghostly pale.

“Can you keep ahold of the sword?” Snape gently asked. “I’m not certain it will accept me.”

She nodded again and used her robes to protect her hand to grab hold of the blade with one hand while tangling the fingers of her other hand in the guard on the hilt.

“Now,” Snape warned her. He lifted the cloak behind him and Accioed the broomsticks over. The brooms slammed into them with stinging speed. Ignoring the pain, Snape bundled them together, and hovered them with a painful jerk on his shoulder. With one arm under Ginny, and one leg barely over the broomsticks, he launched the two of them into the air with bone jarring acceleration, and skin freezing speed.

They flew so fast, the grief of the Dementors merely brushed them as they blasted up through them. But the creatures were in pursuit immediately, and Snape had no hand to spare for a spell. His cold hand clad in a worn borrowed glove, cramped from holding two broomsticks and his other arm could barely hold Ginny over the the wood and his lap and she had no hand to hold on either.

Ginny began to slip. Snape halted their rise fast enough that for an instant she became weightless. He adjusted his leg grip on the paired brooms and while keeping a grip on her, better caught her in front of him so they were flying normally. Her loose robes and jumper fluttered in the wind as they gained speed. Snape was not going to fly far; they would be far better off Apparating away despite how easily it could be traced. He landed them in the forest beyond the Apparition block and took her away in a sidealong.

“Quickly now,” he said, unfolding her jumper so she could don it, but she was too numb to move and she refused to release the sword.

A noise made the both jump, so Snape Apparated them away again. In the alley of a small Muggle town Ginny swayed while he slipped her robes over her head and arms, and tied her jumper around her neck.

“We need to fly a little bit more to make it hard to trace. Can you make it?”

Her lips were blue, but she nodded.

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“Never mind; let’s just get you home.”

She nodded again.

Snape took them through two more Apparition rounds before landing them on the stoop at Grimmauld place, where he had to hold her up to keep her from falling. The door opened immediately and many hands came out to take Ginny inside.

In the painful light of the usually dim front hall, Harry got a look at Ginny and demanded of Snape, “What happened?” He grabbed hold of Snape’s robe front with his fist.

Snape grabbed Harry’s arm in self defense. “What did not happen? would be an easier question to answer.”

Ginny struggled with her arms caught inside her robes. “I have it. I have it,” she muttered deliriously. Harry paused in his attack on Snape to hear her out.

Her struggles loosened her robes by raising them up enough for her to toss them back like a large hood. She held the sword out for Harry, who, stunned at the glittering, glowing sight, still held Snape.

“You have the sword,” Harry whispered, finally letting go to take it by the hilt. He peered along its length while giving her a one-armed hug. “You’re brilliant, Ginny. But you’re soaked and freezing!”

She laughed with effort. “Well, yes...”

Harry released his awkward hug reluctantly as Hermione and others hustled Ginny away for a hot bath. The hallway fell quiet and Snape exhaled. “I don’t think she is seriously injured. She just jumped into the lake for the sword.”

Harry rested the point on the floor, looking like a statue of a knight. “The lake in Hogsmeade? It must be ice right now.”

“Most definitely.”

“How did it end up there?”

“Long story. The short explanation would be something like: it wanted to be there since its magic requires that it be earned.” Snape felt in his pockets. “I lost the cup. But Draco believed it wasn’t the real one. Let’s hope he was correct and that we did not fool each other.”

“Odds are it wasn’t.”

Snape smiled faintly, which felt good. “And better yet, I saw the spell he used to test it.”

Harry’s eyes glowed. “Excellent,” he breathed. “Things may finally be turning around for us.” He squinted up the darkened stairs, where the sounds of hurried bath preparations issued forth. Then he looked down at the sword he held, biting his lower lip while adjusting to grasp it in a proper two-handed grip. “It’s her sword now, I suppose. She earned it.”

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“Perhaps,” Snape softly said and felt compelled to add, “I suspect it will honor your will as well.”

Harry slipped one hand free of the guard and stepped lightly forward to thrust out in the direction of the stairs, blade flashing unnaturally in the low light. He smiled. “Yes, I suppose it will. But it is hers.” He stared along the blade’s length again and as though sharply compelled, said, “And I should take it up to her.”

He ran lightly up the stairs, leaving Snape alone to worry that he had changed something significant.



Boxing Day, Tonks rested her head heavily on her palm as she filled out a report. She took extra time now filling out reports since going out on duty with her magic unpredictable just strained her nerves more and they were close to fraying away to nothing.

Rogan stood at the log book, going over assignment slips. He scooped one off the floor and said, “Disturbance at the warehouse in Scunthorpe... did someone take this one?”

“I did,” Tonks lied without hesitation.

Rogan hesitated. “You took it alone?”

As reluctant as she was to get involved in what Snape planned, the lies flowed easily. “It was just an old charm hanging around confusing the Muggles. Even I could handle it.”

Rogan tossed the slip in the finished box and went on with sorting.

Tonks waited ten minutes, just long enough to deflect suspicion. She moved without will, watching herself travel along a path she despised but could not change. “I’m going to grab a late dinner,” she said to Rogan.

He gently said, “Good idea.”

She slipped her gloves on before Apparating away. His sympathy did not help. They were all worried about her and at this point did not bother to hide it, nor could they hide the accommodations they were making for her.

She Apparated to the perimeter of the site where they had found the rogue elf guarding what must have been a Durumulna meeting place. As she walked closer in, wand barely glowing for light, she hoped the call was a real one as much as she hoped her lie was closer to the truth.

Her detection spells revealed someone was inside. Tossing out the glow on her wand, she spelled and slipped inside the back door. Taking positive action to help

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Harry, even as morally dubious as the action was, made her feel much stronger and her magic worked as it should, propelling her more surely along this bad path. She changed her face and hair and clothes to mottled grey and tip-toed along the rows of metal racks. As usually happened when she got confident, her clumsiness got the better of her and her sleeve caught a long metal rod. But fortunately, it rattled on the far end, not near her. A spell shot out of the darkness, along the parallel row, and Tonks immediately shot a chain binding where the spell had originated. Someone grunted followed by the rattle of heavy links hitting the cement floor.

Tonks scuffed her feet before approaching, overcome by a rabid and paranoid tumble of thoughts about how she should proceed. She changed her appearance again, to make herself taller and to make it look like she wore a black mask. She marched over to the victim with unreal confidence. By the light of her Lumos, she examined the young man, probably mid twenties, shiny dark hair sticking straight off his head. He tried to spit on her and she found herself laughing out of nerves at what she was about to do.

The stranger fell silent and fearfully watchful; her laughter echoing around the warehouse did sound unnerving.

Tonks stood above the perpetrator, wand aimed, wondering how in the world she could tell if the man harbored any guilt. Snape may be able to do that with a man pinned under his spell like this, but she certainly could not. What did he expect her to do, take him out for drinks and chat him up until he opened up a bit?

A large dog broke out into fierce barking just on on the other side of the metal wall, making them both jump. Tonks scoffed and quelled the adrenaline quake coursing in her limbs. With a silencing and a hooding spell, she took her charge away, but not directly away. There could be no traceable trail. Fortunately, she knew how to do this without thought given how many times she had worked the other side of the procedure.

Tonks propped her hands on her hips and surveyed the scene. She had the ramshackle room soundproofed, the house propped up somewhat because it looked beyond ready to collapse, and the man bound with ample water in reach. The anonymous wizard had sat, half sentient due to repeated spells, watching her make the preparations for his prison. His puzzled and worried brow never relaxed.

Yup, Tonks had thought to herself more than once, you count on us playing fair, but not this time, I'm afraid.

She resisted wishing an honest good luck to the young man as she departed, wondering how long his confused gaze would haunt her memory. Maybe it would not matter, she thought as she put a snowshoe charm on her feet to leave no trail out of the ruin of the Shrieking Shack. Maybe Snape would wipe this all the next time they

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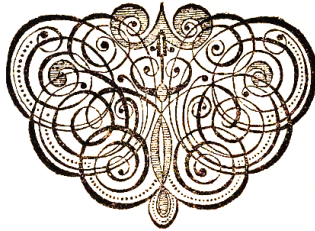
met. She kind of hoped he would because just the chance gave her a depressing kind of hope for herself.

Author's Notes:

Well, this almost happened before but I managed to prevent it by making a super-long chapter, but that wasn't feasible this time, so the previewed scene did not get in. It's been pushed into the next one. So, you get another preview scene. A two-fer.

On another note, I have to give the betas their due. They work really hard and man the last two chapters have really needed some serious help. I don't know where I'd be without you guys. A million, gazillion thanks!!!

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



ACE IN THE HOLE

Harry paced across stone cage, turning in one corner on a toe before marching three steps to the opposite corner and turning again. His thoughts flitted onto a notion and off again without landing anywhere solid for long. Keeping his thoughts unraveled seemed to be the best way of avoiding plots involving dark, sniveling servants. It did not make him feel more like himself, but it did keep him from feeling like someone else entirely.

Harry tired of the repetition and stopped, breathing hard in the poor air, staring down at his meager excuse for a bed. Shoving the blankets aside he pulled out his most recent letters again and wished for more news, wished for a newspaper, even one full of Skeeter's lies, anything to tell him what was happening. Neville, perhaps because he had trouble thinking of things to write about, tended to ramble on about trivial things, which to Harry served as welcome news. Harry read his letter again. Madam Malkin's shop had been cursed so that their stock of wizard cloaks had turned pink and all their witches' robe's had grown needle spikes all over. And a gang of broom riders in leather cloaks had been reported harassing the elderly coven of the Solstice Sisters during their moonrise rituals just before Christmas.

When Harry started to think that this was a pathetic use of such an organization, and that there were much more profitable ventures, he put the letters away and went back to pacing.

The rhythmic padding of his footsteps became maddening rather than meditative, so he stopped again. His eyes felt heavy and that gave him hope for some good, solid time-killing sleep.

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The blankets piled on his bench were tattered and full of holes. Harry methodically picked each one up and held it by the corners, turning the next one so the holes would not line up and increase the draft. Finished with this neatening, he climbed under the scratchy things and Occluded his mind, something he had been unable to do previous days.

Harry curled up more for warmth, finding the bench strangely comfortable, as if he floated above it on a softer, cradling bed. His sense of where he was drifted loose as if sucked away by the security of the weighty blankets and he sank into a blissful, dead sleep.



Mrs. Weasley called up the worn and rickety staircase for her daughter to come down. Ginny emerged from upstairs, one deliberate step at a time, nose in a book entitled *Barrier Blocking Basics*.

Mrs. Weasley, expression pleased and anticipative, held out a letter from Harry. It had two decorative, swirling postmarks on it: one from the prison showing a tower island with water flowing around it and one from the French magical post office showing a woman in a limp pointed cap, her hair flowing into the water of the mark beside her.

Ginny took the letter and turned back to the stairs.

“Oh, read it here dear. I’d like to hear it.”

Ginny groaned and tore open the envelope. It was a good thing she read ahead two lines before reading aloud.

Dear Ginny,

Do not discuss this letter with anyone else, if you would, unless you have no other choice. I have something that is very difficult to tell you at the best of times and would be hard to explain even if I did not have to write it in the white space between the lines of another letter.

“Um, it’s kinda personal, mum,” Ginny said, shuffling away with the missive folded over her thumbs for safety.

Her mother had waved the dishes to begin rinsing and had to shout over the sound of the water. “I’m surprised he did that given the censors.”

ACE IN THE HOLE

“Me too,” Ginny said, heart thrumming fast. She slipped away to her room and put an Imperturbable charm on the door and the window before sitting where the sunlight made reading easier. Lack of light was not the problem in understanding the letter. She quickly began to wonder if Harry had lost his grip.

There exists another place, like ours, but where things have been going along much better, much happier – my parents aren’t dead there, for example. In this other place there is another Trelawney with a habit of telling people things they maybe don’t want to hear. She’s been telling people things, and it isn’t supposed to be for us, but I fear it has become ours. I’m not sure if this is my fault. I suppose it has to be since it was me who carried these words from that place to this one.

Anyway, she warns of a wizard (not a particularly nice one), taking command of idle dark servants, and peace being shattered. I don’t want to believe this warning. Trouble is, I’m not feeling so stellar in here in the company of You-Know-Who’s old friends. Actually, that’s not quite true. Sometimes I feel very good here, and that’s worse. I rarely feel much myself at all now, and so I thought I should write and tell you, just in case. See, the warning says that only the “seventh son who is not” can properly bring an end to the bad goings on and overcome this not particularly nice wizard.

I’m sorry I can’t be more straightforward. I hope this letter doesn’t take too long to reach you. Please stoke your fire with it, if you would.

Harry

Ginny read the letter again, faster, then again slower. Was he really implying that he was the dark wizard who needed warning about? Was he really talking about a prophecy? What was this about his parents being alive still? She had about a hundred questions and no way to ask them. She stared at the walls of her room, not seeing them, before starting for the door, letter in hand.

Huffing, she stopped and tossed it on the fire after one more quick read-thru.

Downstairs she looked around for her father. “Where’s dad?”

Her mother did not look up from where she was bent over a plate that refused to mend, even with a spell. Ginny suspected it had been broken one time too many for even magic to repair. “Outside in the shed, dear.”

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Ginny headed out the door, ignoring her mother saying, “He said he was working on a surprise and didn’t want to be interrupted.”

At the shed, she knocked and did not wait for a summons. The wind blew brisk and cold and she wished she had put on a scarf, at least, before marching out of the house. She slipped inside the shed where her father was quickly trying to hide a rounded metal box surrounded by piles of gears and wires and curved metal pieces.

“Yes?” He composed himself, but went on rambling too fast, “I don’t have much time, I’m afraid. I thought I’d have this working before Christmas... just a little surprise, the Muggles are quite good at... well, spells don’t work so well for bread... anyway, what is it?”

“You have to take me to talk to Harry.” She spoke with clear, calm determination, holding her father’s gaze through the steam her speech poured into her face.

He turned back to his project, giving up on hiding it. He held a little panel with buttons like “Stop”, “Start”, and “Timer” on printed on them; wires dangled off the back of it like thick hair. “That’s not really possible, Ginny.”

“Why not?”

“You have to apply for permission, or fill out rather a lot of paperwork, and really it is only immediate family or representation who are allowed outside of law enforcement.”

He put down the little panel and picked up a tiny screw, which promptly flicked off his fingers onto the floor. He ducked under the little workbench and not seeing it, waved his wand, causing a hundred little screws to fly up and pummel the tabletop, mixing with the screws already there.

“Blasted,” he muttered, then sighed.

Ginny crossed her arms against the cold air. “It’s really important, Dad.”

“Many things are really important.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “This is more important than everything else. Someone has to talk to Harry... I have to talk to Harry.”

“People have been talking to Harry,” he said in overly soothing tones. “I, myself, talked to him. Severus talked to him. His solicitor, even, had a meeting with him.” He fell quiet at the last as if losing certainty.

Ginny crossed her arms. “But I haven’t. And I don’t trust the lot of you.”

He shook his head and blew on his cupped fingers. “Well, I suppose I’ll leave this for tomorrow.” He stared at the disarray of pieces. “Doesn’t look likely to be finished today, anyhow.”

“What is it?”

“It’s, uh... don’t spoil it for your mum... a breadmaking machine.” Brightening, he said, “See, here’s the paddle, it goes here, and it kneads all by itself and then

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bakes. Does everything. Really very clever.”

It looked like a pile of shiny metal rubbish to Ginny. “What will it take to get you to listen to me?” she asked, disliking the squeak rising into her voice.

“I am listening to you, Pumpkin.” He gestured that she should back out the door.

“Not very well,” Ginny criticized, stalking to the house. At the door, she said, “If you were listening better, you’d take me to see Harry.”

Mrs. Weasley opened the door for them, and closed it quickly behind them, pushing against a gust. Glancing from one face to the other, she asked, “What’s this?”

“I need to go see Harry,” Ginny insisted.

Confused, Mrs. Weasley said, “He’s in that Caché de... well, he’s in prison.”

“I KNOW that,” Ginny retorted. “If he weren’t, I’d just pop off and go see him myself. I don’t know why he’s there. He hasn’t done anything, but for some reason, Dad, and others, thought it a brilliant plan.” She exhaled hard, wishing she could avoid falling back into arguing with them as a teen rather than an adult. It would help if they would actually treat her as an adult.

Mr. Weasley beat the snow off his winter cap and hung it up. Firmly, he said, “You can’t go, Ginny. And that’s final, I’m afraid.”

Ginny had just returned to calm, but it broke with a long growl of frustration and to accompany that she had to stamp off. The stairs were good for this, given their hollow state and long history of others doing the same, which long since loosened all the nails.

Ginny paced her room, feeling trapped. She had to do something; she could not bear to just remain in place. She tugged the trunk down from her wardrobe without magic, so it would bang onto the floor more satisfactorily, opened it, and began filling it with the contents of the shelf behind the bed, including some old stuffed animals: a dragon, a griffin, a winged sheep that when its magic was new would sing her to sleep. The sight of them there in the deep box of the trunk depressed her, and besides she did not need them. She tossed them away onto the floor and ignored them.

She wanted to hurry to make a point, but decided, given the limited space in her un-magical trunk, to sort out and take only the nice clothes, her Auror study books, and her favorite photo album. Trunk latched, she looked about the shambles of the room and smirked at the mess that she did not care about now. She pulled out her warmest, oversized jumper and her heaviest cloak. The weight of them made her feel invulnerable.

Ginny grabbed her broom up from where it stood propped on the wardrobe and was prying open the window while standing on the cracked lid of another trunk when a knock came on the door.

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“Yeah?” she asked rudely while working at unjamming the crooked window.

Her mother opened the door. “Ginny dear, what are you doing?”

Ginny paused to come up with something better, but in the end just mockingly said, “I’m leaving?” The air blowing in took a bitter bite of her exposed fingers, making her grateful to find her old Quidditch practice gloves in the pocket of her cloak.

The window sash finally yielded fully to a spell and flew open hard enough to crack a pane. Mrs. Weasley shuffled closer while taking in the state of the room.

Ginny repeated herself. “I’m not staying here with people who think it’s fair sticking Harry in prison for his own good.” Gesturing downstairs through the floor, she added, “He won’t take me to see him. He doesn’t even know when he’s going to let him out. Harry’s going mad and Dad doesn’t care!”

“Harry’s not going mad, dear, he used to live in a cupboard, I’m sure he’s doing fine.”

Ginny gaped at her mother. “I don’t believe you said that. Isn’t he always your favorite when he’s here?” Ginny stopped to catch her breath from shouting – and sounding jealous. The prophecy felt like a heavy, sodden blanket over her, making it hard to get air. If it was Harry in the prophecy, what were they all going to do? Realizing that she held her broom, and her trunk was at her feet and the window wide open, she said, “I’m going now.” She tore down the decorative sash from the curtain rod and tethered her hovered trunk to the broom with it, glad she would not have to use her scarf because she needed it to keep warm. “Don’t tell Dad goodbye for me,” she said as she climbed onto the window sill.

Mr. Weasley stepped into the doorway of the room and frowned deeply at the scene. Ginny wanted to stiffly wave goodbye, but needed both hands to get on her broomstick as it floated half out the window. She ducked under the sash and kicked off the wall of the house to get her and her luggage moving.

Before Ginny could pick a direction, which she needed to do because towing a heavy trunk required careful and deliberate maneuvering, her mother came to the window and leaned out, ignoring the cold air.

“Ginny,” she said, sounding disappointed.

Her tone reminded Ginny of being a child and that made her more angry. “Give it up, Mum,” she snapped, and pushed the end of her broom down just enough to take the slack out of the sash cord, then pushed harder to tug the trunk along behind.

Back in her bedroom, her father gazed grimly through the window with its crack like a lazy path through fields beyond. He had his wand out. “Where do you think she will go, or shall I put a Tracer on her?”

“What do you mean: where will she go? And put that away... she’s feeling

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betrayed enough as it is.” She tapped the stubborn sash with her wand and closed it easily.

With a sigh, Mrs. Weasley said, “Trying too hard to keep them only sends them off faster. She is too old to placate.”

“What was her reason for leaving? She must know I truly cannot take her to see Harry.” Mr. Weasley said.

“It must have been the letter. He must send very different letters to his friends than to me. The last one I received from him sounded rather reassuring.” She pulled it out of her dressing gown pocket. “He said he was enjoying the holiday from his duties. Sounded rather pleased that so much was being done to get him out. Almost did not sound like him, at all, actually, sort of poetic, in fact.” She frowned.

“May I see that?” Mr. Weasley asked.

She handed the letter over and, after a squinting glance out the window to check on his daughter’s progress, he pulled the lamp closer to read the letter. “Hm,” he muttered, quickly closing the letter along the worn fold.

“What is it?”

“Do you mind if I take this?” he asked, already putting it away into his pocket while peering out the window again.

“Not at all.”

They continued to watch the speck fade in the sky, veering in spirals because of the load. Mr. Weasley asked, “Are her friends close enough for her to fly to like that, do you think?”

Mrs. Weasley turned from examining the cracked pane to stare at her husband. “You really don’t know where she is going?”

“No... do you?”

“I have a pretty good guess,” she replied knowingly while stepping by him out of the room, leaving the window broken.

Ginny flew toward no where in particular, the broom straining out ahead of the trunk like a leashed animal. Taking great care not to allow the trunk to slide sideways out beside her, she turned gently while gaining altitude. She tapped her own head with a Obsfucation Charm then slowed slightly so the trunk drifted closer to tap it too, satisfied with its appearing to melt into the sky.

She considered going to Shrewsthorpe where Candide might be in need of a live-in guard, but with the Christmas holiday Professor Snape would be home and Ginny did not fancy trying to move in with him present. It would be an all night flight in any event. Ginny sighed and turned a little more toward London.

Two hours later, bodily exhausted from flying while steering something heavy in tow, Ginny sat down on her trunk in the corridor outside the door to Aaron’s flat.

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Only two flats led off the outside door and someone had gone to great effort decorating even here, with dark-stained carved wood framing carefully sculpted plaster. Ginny let her eyes trace the polished, ridged wood as it arched and branched over the narrow ceiling, giving one the impression of sitting beneath a copse of young trees in winter.

She had not knocked but the door opened and Aaron stood there in his velvety dressing gown, wine glass casually in hand, projecting himself as a cross between Adonis and Bacchus. Ginny did not remove her head from where it was propped on her hands because looking up at him made the effect stronger, and it was not a bad effect. Everything about him screamed a lack of want for anything. Although... Ginny was learning that was not entirely true. She sat up and brushed off her robes. "Hey," she said, trying to sound casual. "Can I stay for a bit?"

Aaron gestured skillfully with his half-full glass and stepped back to make room in the doorway. When she had first met him much of what he was thinking made it to his face, but since the kidnapping, he often pulled a flat mask over his thoughts, which gave him more an air of mystery than previously.

He pulled out his amber-colored wand and waved her trunk in behind her, letting it come to rest against the wall opposite the bar.

Ginny resisted sitting without being directly invited to. "You haven't asked why I'm here, or teased me about being here unannounced or..."

"Have a glass of wine," he said, pushing a freshly poured one into her hand.

She stared down at the glittering liquid like thinned honey and realized with a stab that she was going to have to sort out whether she loved him or just loved his lifestyle. How would one go about sorting that out, anyway? She took the cool leather seat he steered her to and drank down half the wine in one go.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes," she admitted, sinking farther into the couch.

"Good," he said, sounding pleased. He put his arm up on the couch back and leaned in her direction.

Swallowing hard, Ginny said, "Something's wrong with Harry. We have to get him out of prison, like fast." While Aaron considered that with little clue to his mood, she went on, needing to talk, "I got angry with my dad because he wouldn't listen to me about Harry. I stormed out when he refused to take me to see him. But I have to see him; he's not well."

Aaron stiffened. "What do you mean: he's not well?"

"I got this letter from him. Well, he didn't want me to tell anyone some things in it, but... it scared me. He's talking crazy stuff."

"Do you have it... the letter?"

"I burned it."

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Aaron rubbed his chin, which made a scratching sound that Ginny sort of liked, and made her wish she had sat down closer to him. Moving over now would send a stronger signal than she wanted to send. “Can you tell me anything in it?” he asked.

“Well...” She hesitated, dearly wanting to protect Harry, but her need for help made her say, “He has this problem where if he is too close to the Death Eaters, he starts to think more like... well...”

“Voldemort, you mean?” Aaron finished for her. “He’s had that trouble for a while now.”

Ginny was stunned. “You know about that?”

Aaron nodded. “Harry’s told me... warned me is perhaps the better word.” He scratched his chin additionally. “And there is no shortage of Death Eaters where he is.”

“No, there isn’t,” Ginny agreed emphatically. “What are we going to do? Poor Harry.”

Aaron pulled down the hand he had put across the couch-back, withdrawing slightly, and Ginny realized she had made him jealous.

Aaron fell serious. “Other than finding out who really killed Alastor Moody, I don’t have any brilliant ideas. We’ve been working at that non-stop and haven’t come up with much of anything. Whoever killed him knew how to hide their own trail while leaving us only one, leading to Harry.” He clasped his hands and leaned over his legs. “The department’s a mess. Tonks is at the breaking point, especially. I’ve never seen her like she is now, her magic’s got so bad the department can’t send her out without a full Auror partner.” He shook his head.

They sat in silence, cradling their empty glasses. Ginny looked around and said, “You don’t mind if I stay here, do you?”

Aaron’s face scrunched up comically, more like his old self. “I asked you to marry me, and I think I just heard you ask if I mind you staying. Which of us is plastered drunk because it’s gotta be one of us?” He peered into his glass in abject curiosity.

Ginny smiled. “Must be you, I’ve only had one.”

Aaron produced the bottle from nearly thin air by sweeping it up from the floor beside the couch. “We can remedy that.”

Ginny accepted a refill and thought she maybe should not finish it if she hoped to come up with a plan. She sat forward and set the wine on the low glass table at their feet. “I should go talk to Professor Snape.”

Aaron sighed and leaned forward to match.

Pleading for understanding, she said, “I don’t think I can rest without doing something.” She stood, torn a bit by knowing Aaron would feel jealous and may in

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fact feel she was choosing between him and Harry. But even with that risk, she could not sit still. Softly, she promised, "I'll be back as soon as I can."

He stood with her, seeming overly casual. "Want me to come along? You know, so you don't have to face my tetchy old Head of House alone?"

"I can face him alone. Thanks though."

Since Ginny visited often, she tried to take the Floo into Harry's house, but got redirected to the node in the nearby train station. The walk cleared her head in one way, but also gave it time to color in with more shades of worry.

Moving the innocuous crooked wooden gate aside to enter the garden sent a sparkle of spell energy along her arm. Ginny paused to see if anything worse happened but the dormant vines shrouding the garden walls sat in frosted stillness. Winky answered the door.

"Don't get up," Ginny quickly said to Candide, who was propping herself up in preparation for standing from the couch in the main hall. "I just need a word with Professor Snape."

"He's in the library. Go on in."

Ginny knocked on the door frame. The figure in the corner straightened and turned in one fluid motion. Snape had been bent over an open book, head nearly touching the bookshelf in a pose of benediction.

Sounding doubtful, he said, "Ms. Weasley."

Ginny slipped inside and slowly shut the door so as to not seem rude. "Can I speak with you, sir?"

He did not put the book down. "If you must."

"I'm worried about Harry. He sent me a letter that makes me think he's over the edge. I have to find out if there's anything I can do to help get him out of there."

"I sincerely doubt there is anything you can do..."

Rambling in frustration, she said, "There must be something. I'll go mad if there isn't anything I can do. I'll do anything."

Snape closed the book and set it on a small writing desk. While staring at the ceiling he abstractly asked, "Do you feel guilty about anything?"

Taken by surprise she stuttered, "Well... no. Should I?"

"It was just a question. I have others, such as do you know why he is there?"

Ginny stared at him, noticing a few things she had not before, like the fact that he had bursts of stress lines around his eyes and that his temples were scattered with grey. It was eerily difficult to distinguish the pupils of his eyes, lending unneeded intensity to his unwavering stare.

"Some reason other than the one my dad gives, I'm assuming? No, I don't."

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She felt relief from his scrutiny when he turned away to peruse the shelves. "This is difficult to navigate, Ms. Weasley. There are people whom, even still I believe, Harry wishes to protect."

She interrupted. "He's losing his mind. Do you think any of that matters?"

He made it to the end of one shelf and started back, reading the spines on the next row above. "Incarceration does strange things to some people. Harry is apparently one of them."

"I think there's more to it than that," she said, but stopped because Harry's letter had been clear on how little she should say, to anyone. Growing angry, she said, "I wonder if the Prophet isn't correct, that you aren't happier with him gone."

"Is that what you think?" he asked, putting his hand in his pocket, which was strangely full.

Thinking he was going for his wand, Ginny pulled hers out. "I beat you in a duel once, I can do it again."

"You think?" He did not have his wand out, but a blink later he did. Then it was gone again. "Put it away, Ms. Weasley," he said in such a tiresome voice that she blushed as she obeyed. He said, "I want Harry removed from there more than your tiny mind can imagine."

She ducked her head, "Of course, sir. Sorry."

"Note also there is very little I won't sacrifice to achieve that."

Ginny swallowed. That sounded more like a warning than a pledge. "That include me?" she asked, head swimming.

"Smart girl."

Ginny, with some effort, drew in a breath. "I don't think Harry would like that very much," she said, trying to laugh lightly while saying it. She thought farther. "But, that's assuming he found out." That eerie gaze was back again. She drew in a better breath and her thinking cleared. "If I might say, Professor, I don't think anyone really understands what you are."

He had not moved. "A distinct advantage, no?"

"That's my motto," she commented weakly.

Silence fell until Snape asked more lightly, "Still wish to assist?"

"Yes. But I don't particularly want to be sacrificed," she added forcefully.

He nodded like a twitch, seeming amused. Speaking in a hypnotic tone, he said, "I will let you know if there is anything you can do. It may be as simple as being a more regular companion to Candide, as I have some things I must attend to at a moment's notice. It may be something more that I ask of you."

She swallowed again, wishing she did not have to since it gave away how nervous she was. "Thanks." The door beckoned and she stepped to it, but stopped before

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opening it. “Does Harry know what you are?” she asked, feeling dizzy with how bold the question was.

“Most definitely.”

“Well, okay, good,” Ginny muttered, then shook her head to clear it.

Before she could turn the knob, he said, “Given your reaction to Harry’s letter, I assume you know that action is imperative. Once things are imperative, understand clearly that I do not flinch. If you are to assist, I expect the same of you.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, staring down at her hand clenching the door knob.

“In which case, keep your wand in your pocket for just a moment.” He took his out and ran three anti-animagus spells. “Good,” he breathed in clear relief before resuming his intense posture. “Why do you think I needed to do that?” he asked, sounding the perfect teacher reviewing the reading for the week.

“Er, because Skeeter has been sneaking in again?” she asked, thinking that a stupid answer.

“Go on,” he invited.

Ginny shrugged, confused what answer could possibly be meaningful here. “She’s a bug, so she sneaks in easily?”

“Do you like her?”

“Bloody Merlin, no,” Ginny blurted, then remembered her manners. “Not in the least.”

“Good,” Snape muttered. “You may go.”

Ginny departed, spending far less time chatting with Candide on the way out than she expected to on the way in. She found the contrast between Snape’s inscrutable strategizing and his wife’s cheery demeanor intolerably bizarre.

Back at Aaron’s flat, Ginny dropped onto the couch, wondering if she were way too far over her head or just utterly drowning. Aaron handed her another drink, frowning sadly.

“Thanks,” she said. “After talking with Professor Snape, I could use a whole bottle. Maybe you should have come along. Next time would you?”

He sat back, making no move to close the gap between them. “That bad?” When she mutely shook her head, he said, “He was a Death Eater.”

“Yeah,” she agreed wholeheartedly. They fell silently into their respective thoughts. Aaron finished his glass and topped it up again.

“Do you believe in prophecies?” she asked suddenly.

“I try not to,” Aaron quipped. He finally slipped over closer. “Not unless they say something magnificent will imminently happen to me.”

She raised a dubious brow in his direction, glad to see him lighten up.

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Aaron walked a pair of fingers over Ginny's shoulder and played with her collar. "Do you have a prophecy that says anything like that?"

"I may," she said, blushing.

"Mm," he said, but his fingers stopped and he put his arm back up on the couch back. "But you were saying something important, I think..."

Ginny shook her head. Apologetically, she said, "There's too much I don't understand, so I can't explain."

His fingers found the fine hairs at the nape of her neck. "Well, in that case... I personally always find that actions speak louder than words."



Snape circled the dim upstairs bedroom of the shrieking shack. The slitted mask covering his face caught the moist heat of his exhalations and quickly became uncomfortably sticky inside his hood. The Durumulna-mimicking costume felt too familiar and he shrugged inside of it, trying to shake the sense of entrapment by reminding himself of the power and liberty of anonymity.

He paced to stand over the wizard Tonks had chosen. If Snape timed the potion right, the man would awaken momentarily, but just now he lay on the bare floor, one arm outstretched from under the rude heavy blanket Tonks had provided.

Snape turned away from the scene, robes swishing, hood making the room seem even darker than it was. He pulled the mask loose to dry a bit before resettling it, trying to wait with patience. The costume cast him back to other unsavory but necessary tasks – some Dumbledore himself had pressed upon him – and his mind came into clear, unhesitant focus just as the man on the floor stirred.

Snape stood unmoving in the corner by the window, waiting to verify what state his victim had been rendered into. Durumulna had done part of his task for him by removing much of the man's identity already. Through a potioned session of hypnosis the previous day, he had found what he needed, a youthful mistake that had festered into adulthood pain. By leaving it as one of the few vestiges of the man's ego, Durumulna's leaders left the man highly susceptible to what Snape intended to do.

Snape stepped out of the shadows, careful not to make a sound beyond the creak of the wide old boards. The man turned at the noise and started upon seeing the masked figure peering down at him. He quickly fell resigned and passive. After a pause where Snape did not move, the man said in a lilting accent, "I... I don't know what I did wrong."

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Snape turned away to pace a few steps. Casting his voice deeper and layering on an ambiguous accent, he said, "Yes, you do."

The man, strain showing in his posture, appeared to think harder. He rubbed his eyes and head with a clumsy hand. The potion would make it difficult for him to reach any conclusions on his own, which is exactly what Snape wanted. Conclusions were something for him to deliver.

"You claim to not know, when Armando's ghost tells us otherwise?"

The man, alarmed, glanced around the decrepit room, with its peeling faded wallpaper, still marked with dingy halos where the furniture had previously been placed. "Wha... What do you mean?" He recovered some bravado, as much as the potion would allow. It would have been considerable bravado otherwise, given how strong the potion's will was. "I've never seen his ghost." He frowned, puzzled, and looked to want to say more, but the drugging kept him from coming to any useful suspicion about why his overseer might actually care.

"I've seen him," Snape assured him. Which was true; he had seen him in his mind. An overly eager boy, trying with all his small might to keep up with his older brother and his brother's best friend, to the point of taking on a task too difficult for him to complete. And when he balked and failed, the punishment was too spontaneous and fierce for one so young. His last plea for mercy had been deeply engraved on the man's memory, one of the few memories that still was, conveniently enough.

Snape intoned, "Armando still does not understand."

The man looked away, annoyed, but he lost the battle and fell passive. "I didn't mean it," he explained defensively, but the potion won again and he repeated the phrase with great regret.

"You do not have to live tormented by this guilt. You can escape and travel beyond it."

The man's mouth worked. Too many questions vied for too little awareness, so nothing came out.

"You are trying to ask why, are you not?" Snape said. "You were left with this memory for a reason, it shapes you into something useful, but now it is time for it to serve in a new way. Would you be living this life now if those events had not happened?"

The man gave the barest shake of his head. Snape gave him space to think, a slow process given the chemicals working on him. Sounding vastly saddened and stung, the man said, "I didn't mean to... we were just sick of him tagging along. And he wanted to. Begged..." He stared off into space, and Snape assumed he was remembering again. Without much else to remember, it seemed a safe assumption.

The man, his accent growing harsh, said, "They never forget, do they?"

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Behind his borrowed mask, Snape fell dumb with the truth of that statement. His victim, went on more angrily, “Never a second chance, even if you regret what you did.”

“I’m going to give you one. Of a sort.” Snape held out a potion bottle inside of which swirled in the colors of ink and silver. “Drink that.”

The man stared at the proffered bottle without moving, perhaps without comprehending. Offering it was a test more than anything; Snape could easily knock him senseless and force it upon him. Snape patiently said, “Which weighs heavier: the guilt or your grim future?”



Harry sat with his letters in his lap. Elizabeth had sent him a rather long and heartfelt message which practically bled faith in his innocence. He read it through twice. She also spent inordinate time talking about a future hinging on the assumption he would be out very soon – she insisted he come over for dinner now that she had a flat of her own, gave him a menu even. Her letter came across as naive, but he needed naïveté about now. The postmark was the day after his arrest; the length of the missive must have slowed it down. The pale pink stationary was well worn as was the envelope, hinting at extensive handling before it was delivered to him. Harry frowned at that, thinking he had not properly appreciated having his post to himself before this happened. The times back in Hogwarts when he had to mask his messages to Sirius felt like a childhood game compared to this.

Harry slipped that letter to the back of the pile and reread the next one from Ron. He did not feel like responding to any of them. A kind of grey lethargy had overcome him and within its dispassionate confines he could maintain a wall that kept the whispering shadows at bay.

Footsteps approached, heavy boots gritting on the stone floor, and Harry set the letters aside under the mattress. He did not go to the door since it was not time for post or meal delivery. He waited instead to see what the guard would do.

The door swung open with a protest of unoiled metal and the guard, the steepler guard, who had taken him to meet Tonks and his solicitor, gestured with his gauntleted hand that Harry should come out.

Unsure why he was being removed, Harry took his time, standing slowly to approach the door. He must have pushed the thin patience of his guard too far because he was given a shove down the corridor that made him skin his hands on the wall when he tried to slow his careening. Harry spun into a natural fighting stance, but

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turned to find a crystal tipped spear pointing at his heart. The spear smacked him on the shoulder.

“Allons-y!”

“Right,” Harry said, rubbing his shoulder while he started down the corridor. “Don’t suppose you could tell me where we are going...?”

He did not get an answer and he did not like walking with his back to the guard; it felt horribly exposed. He should not have to worry about guarding his back – he had followers plenty for that.

The corridor was long. Harry slowed and started to turn, but his guard was faster. The pike tangled Harry’s feet and he fell, headlong. Re-abraded hands stinging, Harry pushed himself halfway up and turned, glaring. “What do you want? I’m going,” he snarled, inordinately angry, not just at the guard, but at the entire world.

The pike leveled at his eyes. Harry deliberately raised himself up fully and pressing his raw hands to his robes for some relief from the stinging in them. He did not feel like going anywhere; the pain, even as small as it was, cut through him, releasing deep-seated stubbornness. When he resisted the next clearly gestured instruction, another spell came at him. But this one was a curse. Grinning faintly, Harry squelched it, and the guard dropped his pike with an exclamation of, “Calice!” Well trained, he had it picked up again in an instant and made ready to use it as a club.

Harry gauged him an instant and walked on before the man had an excuse to do more, but Harry went only a few steps before he slipped away into the Dark Plane. The wide open quiet of the place blew through him, loosening every nerve, but he could not stay. He counted to five and returned, just behind the guard, who as expected, had grown alarmed at losing track of his prisoner.

Harry tapped the man on his chain-mail-covered shoulder. “Looking for me?”

The guard turned, but he was not one of the stupid ones. He stared at Harry from the inside of his helmet for almost a minute, thinking. With a small gesture of his pike, he indicated Harry should continue on, in the lead. Harry did so, turning to walk backwards every so often, feeling pleased, like some kind of equality had been reached between them.

The guard did not harass Harry any more, and when they reached the warden’s office, the guard stood inside the door, even after it was clear the warden expected him to wait outside. The guard eventually relented after repeated commands interspersed with reassurances – all very clear just from the tone. The guard gave Harry a last threatening glare before the door closed.

“Ave a seat, Mr. Pottar,” the warden said. He casually went through the file before him before looking up and saying, “I ’ave zee sense zat your Ministry did not eggspect you to still be ’ere at sis late date, Mr. Pottar.”

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“I like to think they didn’t,” Harry agreed.

“Would you like tea?”

Harry would very much like tea, so he nodded. Moments later Steeltoe Pierre came through the door with a tray. He smiled at Harry and handed him a cup and saucer before handing one to the warden. He looked like he wanted to stay, but the warden shooed him off with, “C’est bien,” and went back to perusing the file, which had been fattened even more with newspaper clippings.

“It is curious, Mr. Pottar, I sought I understood zis situation.” He sat back and closed the file.

Harry rapidly sipped his tea, wondering if he could get a refill. Realizing that a reply was expected, he put his cup down and put on an attentive expression.

The warden casually said, “You know, we ’ave quite a bit of security ’ere.”

“It is a prison,” Harry said, just to say something.

“Hm. You are not fully understanding.” The warden picked up a folding frame that held a mirror, one of a row of them that sat on a low shelf behind his desk. He run his finger along the side of the frame before setting it on the edge of his desk where Harry could watch it. The mirror, which was not reflective when viewed head on, showed a fuzzy oval view of the corridor outside Harry’s cell. He and the guard moved into the frame and the events of his being led played out on it.

Harry’s heart froze. It was true, that he was not fully understanding the security. He met the warden’s gaze without shirking, part of him glad for the revelation, for the challenge to the warden that it represented.

The warden put the frame back on the shelf and held his finger up to stall Harry from speaking. “It ees no matter at one level. You are only ’ere at the convenience of your ministry. At another level... I do prefer to run zis place without mistakes.” He interlocked his fingers and set them on the desk, in a pose much like McGonagall’s. “But I am curious. I was curious, zat is why I ’ad you brought ’ere. But now I am extrem-ely curious.” He leaned forward. “Why ’az your ministry inzisted that you be placed here in a manner that spezificaly will allow you to ezcape?”

Harry pondered how to answer that, wondering if he could just skip doing so. He did not want the warden to pass on what he had seen.

The warden sighed. “Well, I do not know what to be making of zis.”

He sounded disappointed and Harry found himself regretting what he had done because it had not been particularly well-mannered. The regret made him feel far more like himself.

“You ’ave nozzin to say?” the man asked, even more disappointed.

Harry wished he were angry; that he could work with. “I don’t want to be here. I have things I need to do. Very important things. And I don’t like that guard much.”

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“Ah, yes, ’e provokes you.” He sounded amused, which made Harry frown. The warden went on, “Of course, you are tired of being wissout power. Zees is understandable, especially wis what I saw.” He gestured over his shoulder at the mirrors.

Harry raised his head to look down along the row of them, but could not see anything in them.

Sounding strangely pleased, the warden said, “You ’ave solved one mystery for me, which I am plea-zed about. I see now how you captured zee the vampire, alone, no less.”

Harry dropped his gaze. “Yep.”

A long pause, and then, “Your history here, she does not have this detail.”

Softly, Harry admitted, “They don’t know.”

The warden’s hand smacked the table, making Harry jump. Then the warden held a finger up, excited more than anything. “Interesting,” he said, sitting back again and lacing his fingers together.

They pondered each other until Harry said, “I don’t think I understand you much either.”

Eyes twinkling, the warden said, “Keeping zee magically powerful criminal mind in check is my role. It is one I enjoy. And I like to keep learning.” He paused. “Would you like more tea?”

Harry nodded and Steeltie returned just long enough to pour him more. Harry thanked him and the guard bowed.

“Zee, you are quite civilized, even when cornered. Not at all typical. One wishing to learn everyzing about a topic, must closely examine zee eggszeptions, not zee norms.” While monitoring Harry, he reached into a desk drawer for a flask out of which he poured a shot into his own teacup. “Not in zee rules to offer you any, I am afraid, unless wis a meal.”

Harry shrugged, quite happy with a decent cup of tea.

The warden grinned crookedly. “Interesting. See zis here, even. I observe zat you are capable of escape, of defeating my guards, but I find, surprisingly, zat I trust you. Zis is also a first.” He toasted Harry with his teacup.

Harry sipped his tea, unable to return the toast, undone by wanting to be trusted, even here.

“Opefully your ministry returns you home soon, no?”

Harry nodded, tired in the wake of losing his anger, which safely put aside that other self, that part that seemed to have all the fire. He wondered how long this mood would last. He felt powerless, like he were twelve again, and he did not really like it. It gave him control over himself, but not of much else.

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The warden drained his teacup. "Shall I assign Gaspard to take you back?" He gestured at the door. "My tea brewer? He does not provoke you, I sink."

Harry felt even younger to be offered such consideration. He took a deep breath and nodded. "Thanks."



Snape stretched his notes while continuing to stir a cauldron. It all would be much easier if he put a spell on the metal stirring stick to free up his hands. He felt at his robe-front where the stolen wand lay flat against his chest in his most inner pocket. He turned to Lupin, who had been reading, to ask him for a spell, but found the man sleeping, the book pushed aside, pages providing a crumpled backdrop to his ragged hair.

Pulling out the wand, Snape put a spell on the stick himself. The wand felt greasy in his hand, not something he would have expected from someone as meticulous as Draco Malfoy. Checking again that Lupin slept soundly, Snape blocked the lamplight with his body and turned the wick up. The wand felt waxy because it was covered in something like shoe polish, rendering it mutely grey, but some rubbing with a brewing rag revealed pale wood underneath. A noise made Snape stop his investigations and quickly put the wand away again. He grabbed the stirrer, letting it guide his hand in circles.

Footsteps creaked by the door and went on their way. Snape let go and returned to his notes until the potion finished. With care he decanted the Noble Nod Sleeping Draught into a metal tin to cool and extinguished the burner.

In the bed Lupin snored softly, in need of no such potion. Finished for now and not wishing to disturb the usually poorly rested Lupin, Snape slipped out of the room and downstairs to see if the day's newspapers had arrived.

"You have to do better," Lavender insisted as Snape approached the dining room. "I can see what you have without even trying."

Angelina Johnson laughed heartily. "Come on, let me deal this time."

The two young ladies and Neville were clumped around a table corner, playing cards. Snape stopped with his hands on the newspapers stacked beside the door and watched. Neville neutralized his expression and picked up his cards, his face remained mostly blank.

"Better..." Angelina said. "But I bet that's a middling hand."

Neville frowned and put the cards down flat.

Lavender looked up at Snape. "We're trying to give Neville poker face lessons."

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Angelina laughed again. "Yeah, he's pants at it."

Snape, finding it easy to play his part said. "Do not ruin him for that; it is convenient for me to know what you are all thinking."

Angelina, who might have had more than the one beer that sat open beside her patted the table and said. "Is that a challenge, then? Got any money?"

Snape glanced down at the top newspaper, which had an article about expanded city cordons and security checkpoints. It went on to warn that witches and wizards must apply for Muggle papers or risk arrest. He had little desire to read the article. "No, I'm afraid I haven't."

Angelina measured off a stack of knuts before her and shuttled them closer to the empty chair across from her. "Here, I'll spot you a sickle's worth. Neville needs the practice."

Willing to take any distraction from his worries both worldly and personal, Snape slipped into the offered seat. For his own amusement, he gave Neville a sharp glance, making the young man's face pickle up.

Lavender giggled at Neville and gave him a half-hug. "I'll deal ya' a good hand. I promise."

"But, but, I'll just give it away," Neville muttered, nervously taking up his cards one at a time as they were dealt.

"What are we playing?" Angelina asked, sounding impatient.

"Just five-card stud. Keep it simple." She glanced at her hand and put it down. "You bet first," she said to Angelina.

Ten minutes later, Snape had quite a bit more money in front of him.

"I think 'e cheats," Angelina said.

"'Ar 'Ar 'Arry said he reads minds," Neville managed to say, face scrunching up at the sight of his cards, which he folded up and put down. "I pass."

"It's not your turn," Lavender said. "You dealt."

"I still pass," Neville insisted with a sigh.

"What's this about mind reading?" Angelina demanded.

Snape looked at his cards, which only had strength if he drew to an inside straight. "It's less about me, and more about what astoundingly slow learners you are." He put his cards down and called Angelina's bet of two knuts.

"Yeah, well, pay me back what I loaned you," Angelina insisted.

Snape pushed a stack of knuts to her. "Gladly. And in that case I raise you two."

"What's this?" Ginny said from the doorway. She tugged off her hat and scarf, flashing flushed cheeks.

"Well," Angelina began in the mode of telling a long story, "we were innocently giving Neville lessons in keeping his thoughts to himself, when this, this, punter came

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along and insisted on joining us.”

Snape stared at her, blinking a few times for good measure. “Oh, is that how you remember it?”

Harry stepped up behind Ginny, interested in the scene, but moving around the table to pour out glasses of water from a pitcher.

“No,” Neville said, sounding confused and sincere. “You asked him to play.” When Angelina rolled her eyes, Neville said, “Oh.” Then a second later: “Did I already say I folded?”

Snape leaned toward him. “Longbottom, a losing hand is just as valuable as a winning one, or it can be. You must only make your opponent believe in what you hold. That is all that matters. In fact, a winning hand often is not, for exactly that reason. If you give away that you have unbeatable cards... as you did two rounds ago... no one will call your bet and the pot will contain nothing for you to collect. You recall that little incident, correct? It was just moments ago.”

Neville’s puzzled expression went through a variety of transitions. “A losing hand is just as good?”

Trying to sound gentle rather than exasperated, Snape replied, “Yes. In this game, and in many areas of life for that matter, you seek not to control the available riches.” Here he gestured at the thick deck sitting in the middle of the table. “But to control others by misleading them, to direct their behavior to your advantage.”

“But if they know you are doing that...?”

Snape held up a long finger. “Ah. You do not let them know that.”

Neville stared at his cards. “So, if I had a good hand, I might... actually pretend that I had a bad hand because you... any of you... would expect me to give away that I did, and then if I bet, you would call, or even raise and then when I revealed my great hand, I’d actually win? For once.”

“Correct,” Snape said, relieved more than anything to be getting through.

Neville sat up straighter. “In that case I raise you ten.”

“Neville! You already folded,” Lavender blurted.

Angelina patted her arm. “No, no, let him go. I need to win some back.” She glared at Snape. “Someone’s taken half my money.”

Snape called as well. “So Longbottom,” he said, when the young man simply sat there. “You have to show your hand.”

Neville laid his cards down. “Three kings!” Lavender shouted. “Why in the heck were you folding?”

Neville grinned and sat back as Angelina shoved the pot in his direction. “I wanted to win, and it worked. Thanks for the lesson, Professor.”

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Snape stared at the boy, then shook his head while reminding himself not to underestimate any of them.

Harry pulled out the chair beside Angelina. "I'll play," he said eagerly. "Kreacher, bring us some butterbeers!" he shouted to the ceiling.

Kreacher appeared with an armful of dusty bottles. He gave Snape one first with a deep bow. "Master is saying Kreacher must serve the Mudbloods, but Kreacher will serve the ones his old Mistress would have preferred first."

Harry stood to grab up Snape's bottle. He sat down, opened it with a spell and took a relishing sip of it. Kreacher shot Harry a dirty glance and graciously gave Snape another after dusting it off on his tea towel.

Smirking, Harry said to Snape, "Yeah, old woman Black was your sort, wasn't she?"

"Deal me in too," Ginny said, sitting down beside Harry, which put her far down the table.

Lavender, who was dealing, said with playful seriousness, "Get yer money out if you want in. Threes're wild."

Harry and Ginny dug in their pockets and dumped a cascade of small coins out on the table, some of which they had to catch from rolling away. Ginny giggled when the two of them hit heads trying to catch an errant sickle.

Rubbing her head, Ginny asked, "What's the bet up to?"

"Give me a chance here," Angelina said, rearranging her cards. Snape gauged her expression and decided she had a promising hand. Hermione stepped in and walked behind each person on the other side, giving Snape another evaluation of the hands on that side. Her brow furrowed just faintly upon seeing Harry's cards.

Snape's own hand was a natural flush. Behaving with the slightest edge of disgust he put the cards face down and looked to Harry, and found his stare hard upon him. Snape raised a brow.

"You've been cheating all along, haven't you?" Harry asked, disgusted.

Snape crossed his arms and sat back. "You state that so judgmentally. It isn't cheating if your life is on the line, which mine very often is, I'll have you know. But no, I haven't been. It has hardly been necessary."

Harry looked at his cards and called the bet of three Knuts before putting his cards down and avoiding meeting Snape's gaze after that. Ginny folded. Snape bet five. Neville raised him to seven.

With an overly broad smile, Neville said, "I think I'm getting the hang of this game."

Snape gazed at him and tiredly said, "Perhaps you are. I have actually no idea whether you have a bad hand and are pleased to realize you can pretend it's a good one

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or whether you realize that by pretending you have a good one we will automatically assume you have a bad one.”

Neville paused and said, “What?”

Snape held up a hand. “Never mind.”

The betting went around until only Harry and Snape were still in. Harry leaned forward to count Snape’s remaining coins and deliberately put down a Knut more than that.

“Classy of you, Potter. But I should not be surprised.” He folded his hand into his fist and rapped it on the table. Angelina said, “I can spot you one.” She glanced between them, dreadlocks swinging. “Well, if you’re going to win that is. Otherwise I’m not spotting you nothin’.”

Harry taunted, “Come on, don’t you have a watch or a ring you can put in the pot?”

“I have the robes on my body, that is it, Potter. Pleased to hear that?”

“He has the wand,” Ginny said, as if just thinking of it.

Harry’s face shifted from mocking to serious. “What wand?”

Snape froze as well, surprised that she remembered, or that she was choosing to reveal him now after saying nothing. He gave her a dark look.

Explained Ginny, “I don’t trust you any more than Harry does.”

“Remind me of that before I save your life next time, will you?” Snape retorted.

Harry had his wand on his own wand pocket. “What wand are we talking about?”

Ginny said, “Draco’s wand. Mr. Snape took it from him at the Three Broomsticks when his Blond Highness’ hands were busy... you know slipping into something more comfortable.”

“What a nauseating thought,” Lavender complained.

Harry faced Snape plainly. “You have Draco’s wand? You gave your wand back to Hermione but kept Draco’s?”

“You think me a fool? Of course I kept it.” Snape pulled the wand out and set it on the table before him. “You are going to take it from me anyway, so I’ll put it on the pot to raise you, certainly.”

Harry frowned at the funny colored wand. “Ew, Draco’s filthy wand. Yeah, I’ll spot you a Knut for that.”

Keeping his hand on the wand, Snape said, “If I win this hand, I get to keep the wand.” Under his hand, the wand felt warmer than it should, like it resisted being released.

“Yeah, sure,” Harry said, and put down his cards, revealing a straight flush using two wild cards. He reached out for the pot, and Snape shoved the wand in his direction. “Don’t like losing?” Harry taunted.

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“I do not like being defenseless,” he sneered, angry. “A perfectly reasonable motive for wanting a wand. Especially in the middle of a war.”

Harry picked the wand up and instinctively rubbed his fingers on his robes. Snape relished saying, “It’s been finished with shoe polish it appears.”

“That doesn’t sound like Draco,” Ginny said.

“It’s not the wand he used at school; it’s pale colored,” Harry said, holding it up to show the clean edge he had revealed.

Hermione grabbed up the wand and cleaned it by putting a spell on a napkin then passing it over the wood. Holding the wand this way and that in the light, she exclaimed, “This looks like Dumbledore’s wand!”

Harry turned in his chair and said, “He was entombed with his wand. It can’t be.”

Hermione shrugged and gave it back. “I’m just saying.” Her eyes found Snape’s. “Mr. Snape would recognize it for certain.”

Harry hesitated handing the wand back over, but did so with a sudden gesture as though battling with himself over doing so. Snape took in the subtle carving on the handle, now standing out starkly with the stain filling the recesses.

Mystified, Snape said, “It does look like his. Which would imply someone has opened his tomb.”

“Lucius, I bet,” Neville said. “He’s always been a real winner, pretending to be all refined. I can see ‘im grave robbin’.”

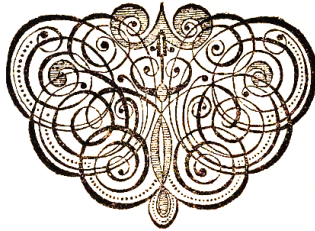
Harry said, “And as headmaster it’d be easy for him to do it whenever he liked.”

Hermione borrowed the wand again to look at it in the light of a lamp. “Why would Lucius want it?”

“He didn’t want it,” Lavender pointed out. “Draco had it.”

Hermione gave a shrug and handed the wand back to Snape. Snape turned the wand in his hand and held it out to Harry, handle first. “Yours now, I believe.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



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Professor Snape strode along in a shuffling cluster of other shoppers bundled heavily against the cold. At the door sporting three overlapping, gold edged Ws, he stopped to pull his scarf down, which sent his next breath in a blinding cloud against his face. The door chime clanged dully, the sound made by a bell that has been smashed and reformed too many times.

Five Slytherin students stood bent conspiratorially over an overflowing barrel of Bagshot Bombs: every color of the rainbow and then some! They went silent at Snape's approach and fell away, hands slipping casually behind their backs. Their faces tried for neutral, but their eyes remained revealingly wide. One whispered hoarsely to another, "Is this a bust?"

The Weasley twin restocking the nearby rack glanced up at the students curiously; then his eyes alighted on Snape. His mouth formed an "O" before he bit his lips, and systematically set the precariously stacked crates aside. He recovered his self-assured attitude and slid over to Snape to smoothly ask, "Something I can do for you, Professor?"

Snape glanced around and found Ginny paging through a ragged stack of papers in the cramped area behind the till. He announced, "Just taking the opportunity to survey exactly what you intend to unleash upon our unsuspecting school in the new year."

His narrow-eyed glare at the students brought them up straight. The students shoved their full little hands into other barrels, onto shelves, dropping everything they held. They then shuffled sideways by him and out, their small bodies barely

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forcing the door open enough to make it chime.

The twin beside Snape sighed. “Good thing you weren’t hanging around ruining the Christmas shopping season.” He tiredly looked Snape up and down. “You joining the shakedown operation? I admit we did not foresee this particular kind of blackmail threat.”

Voice low, Snape said, “I need a word with Ms. Weasley.”

Ginny, who had been listening in, put a broken brick chunk on each crinkled stack before her and started to lift the hinged counter to come out.

Snape restrained her with a gesture. “In private. We’ll use your back staircase.” With one last glance at the empty shop and the passing, disinterested shoppers out on the alley, Snape slipped by the other curious twin and gestured for Ginny to open the door in the far wall.

Ginny went up a step to make room and flicked a Lumos out of her wand as Snape pulled the door shut. The staircase was colder than expected. Snape shrugged his cloak fully around himself and pulled out his wand to put several privacy spells on the door, one of which caused someone on the other side to shout, “Ow!” and stumble into something that fell with a cascade of noise. Snape’s next spell blocked out that noise too.

By the light of her wand, Ginny’s face appeared gaunt and uncertain, but she stood with her shoulders firmly back, determined.

“I’ll be quick,” Snape said. He reached into his pocket for a ribbon-tied bundle of letters and handed them over to her. When she began to examine them, bringing the tip of her wand close, he said, “Do not untie them; they are quite particularly arranged.”

She moved her wand high to the side where it could provide more general light.

Snape said, “I want you to visit my house this evening, ostensibly to keep Candide company. Bring this packet of letters with you, stored in a way that the lump of them is not visible. I’m certain your brothers can assist you with a pocket spell for that. When I give you this signal...” Here he scratched his right temple. “I will excuse myself to go to the drawing room. You will follow, saying that you wish to discuss something with me in private.”

The light of her wand dimmed as she slipped the letters away in her inner robe pocket. She remained dutifully quiet while Snape went on.

“I want you to say exactly the following to me: I don’t know what to do. I was given some things to hide, but I don’t know if I can keep them safe.” He stared at her. “Can you remember all this?”

Ginny’s intent eyes blinked rapidly. “Yeah...” she said, sounding intrigued.

Snape went on. “You must be precise in your words. I want you to clearly hesitate

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as you say all this, by the way. Pace and fidget and such. I want you to tell me that someone wishes you to hide these letters for her, but you have no good place to do that. I will ask you why she does not simply destroy them, and you are to reply that she wants to have them as mementos. They are important to her, even though they are very dangerous. Still following?"

Ginny nodded, taking out the packet again to examine it, turning it this way and that. The addresses were bundled inward, so nothing showed.

"Good. You will then ask me to hide them for you. I will resist the idea as an annoying inconvenience-

"Sounds like you," Ginny quipped while pondering the parchment, which appeared blue-grey by the light of the wand.

"Yes..." Snape growled, but let it slide. "But I will give in. I will put them in my desk drawer with the promise that I will take them elsewhere later that evening."

A breeze whispered through the bowels of the ramshackle building, taking their breath off in rapidly dissipating wisps. Snape said, "If I do not give you the signal tonight, you are to visit each night, until I do." He paused. "I assume you can manage all this?"

She slipped the bundle away again. "Yep. This is nothing. I worried you were going to ask me to harm someone."

"Oh, I am asking you to harm someone... or, more accurately, asking you to help someone to do harm to themself."

"As long as they deserve it. Anyone I know?" she asked knowingly.

Snape could see in her eyes that her suspicion was spot on. "No questions. Just do as you are told."



Snape stared out the window of Grimmauld Place. Bare tree branches swayed silently in and out of the streetlights across the square, distant skeletal hands waving. He had the room to himself as Lupin had been sent out on a mission. He stared blankly out at the night in an effort to keep from wondering what had happened to Harry. It was not working. And there were no other useful distractions remaining; the potions were completed and every one of them and the leftover ingredients were meticulously organized behind him on freshly dusted shelves.

He had spent many evenings in the dungeon of Hogwarts meditating just like this, first on whether the Dark Lord was truly dead and then later on worrying what the

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machinations between his two masters would next demand of him. This involuntary return to a helpless past mode of existence was not welcome.

At the moment, the only thing he felt truly grateful for was the loss of his Mark. Were it not for that, his life would be a constant, grinding misery. Sitting in this place, perched on a crooked stool before a wind-leeching window, looking out over the sleeping, battered city, he felt for the first time that he may actually have earned the loss of his Mark. That made him feel slightly better, in a way that bought him no additional future hope, just more satisfaction with the past.

A soft knock came on the door and Ginny entered, slipping inside after a last glance back at the balcony and stairs.

"It's late," she said after groping for words.

"Does Lupin need rescuing again?" Snape asked derisively. He had no idea what mission the man had gone out on, and half hoped for an excuse for action as little as he wished more difficulty on his previous nemesis.

Ginny shook her head. "No, he's not due back for a while." She stepped further in, glancing around. "I just wondered, well, if you needed anything."

Snape pondered that. So easy to sound rude with, "Such as?"

They had grown immune to his rough side, unfortunately. She ignored his tone and remained kind sounding. "Well, that old wizard, you know. If something bad has happened. I was just thinking... do you want help looking for him... that wizard Harry calls your boyfriend?"

"Harry should not call him that," Snape stated while trying to figure out her motivation. Was she truly simply being nice? "Why the offer?"

She shrugged awkwardly with her hands anchored in her back pockets. "We think he could help. Too. I'll admit."

"He undoubtedly could. But apparently he has insurmountable difficulties of his own to navigate at the moment."

She touched the book of potion notes on the counter beside the neatly lined up cold cauldrons. "Where is he? I mean, do you know where he is?"

This conversation was not helping Snape's state of mind; helplessness was leeching into him along with the cold draft from the window. "In a sense," he said, sounding dismayed even to himself. "But I cannot follow. Not without more knowledge." Not without the book, which he had not been able to locate.

Her red brow furrowed. She was not as silly as she acted even scant years before, as indicated by puzzling that answer rather than coming back with another question.

"Well," she said, sounding more nervous. "Just thought I'd ask."

"Does Harry know you are asking?" Snape inquired, wanting the upper hand again.

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She smiled nervously, coyly. “He’s planning on coming and asking you, himself.”

He considered her standing there in jeans and a blouse, clean, but worn to threads around the cuffs and collar. “Why don’t you have the sword?”

“What do you mean? Carry it around the house?”

“Yes. Given the age of this place, there is undoubtedly a scabbard or a dozen stashed somewhere.”

She stared at him. “There is one in the decorative set over the hearth in the sitting room.”

Speaking frankly, he said, “The sword is a powerful magical object with properties no one has fully documented. It has a habit of disappearing. You should keep it on your person.”

She smiled like he had thought of a quaint game that sounded fun to play. “Okay.”

When she opened the door Harry was standing there, poised to knock. “Oh.”

“Just asking Mr. Snape something about the sword,” Ginny quickly said, and slipped away.

Her light footsteps pattered down the stairs and faded out. Harry shut the door and wandered to the window. Despite clearly having a mission there in the room, he said nothing, so Snape said, “At the risk of sounding the spy trolling for information, how are things with the diadem progressing?”

“Hermione is off looking up information tonight.”

“Ah, sneaking into the London Magical Library is she? I hope you gave her the cloak.”

Harry frowned wryly. “That obvious?”

“Even in your reflection I can see that in your thoughts. As ghastly as the idea sounds to me, I am willing to give you more lessons in Occlumency.”

Harry’s mouth worked. “Maybe we could try that.”

Snape saw his next thoughts too. “Then the dreams would ease.”

Harry quickly looked away from the window. “Sometimes the dreams are helpful.” He flipped open the potion manual and notes. “The potions you brewed us worked well. The Insentience Draught is really good to use on guards. They don’t even realize later that anything happened.”

Snape paced the shelves once and stood with his hands clasped behind him. “Depending upon what other restricted ingredients we can procure and how much, there are many other potions and some rather clever delivery mechanisms.”

Speaking jokingly, Harry said, “Can we knock out the Ministry for a day?”

Snape stepped over to join him again by the window, glad the young man was opening up. “With enough material, we could give them a good nap.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

This brought Harry's chin up to face him. "I'll keep that in mind." He sighed and looked down again; this time he straightened the cauldrons, rubbing his finger over the rainbow edge to the tarnish on a brass one.

The flash came before the noise, like a dream where the mind has to catch up and justify an errant vision. The sound approached as the shifting of countless stone blocks. It came up through the floor, cracking the plaster. They both froze in place and stared out the window, blinking through spotted vision at the flickering red rising up between the roofs, perhaps five streets away. Harry grabbed hold of the window sill and leaned closer to the glass. Smoke poured up, billowing as if trapped in a giant sack before catching on the wind and drifting, limned by the burgeoning fire. Another flash came, farther away and to the left. This rumble delayed and muted by distance.

Footsteps pounded on the stairs and shouting could be heard both within and without. Snape leaned close to the window also, trying to see what Voldemort's guards outside on the square were doing. But the power flickered to the street lamps and went out.

By the light of the oil lamp beside the cauldrons, Harry rested his head on the window, face scrunched up in pain. His hair pressed into the fresh fug as he rocked his head back and forth.

Footsteps pounded closer to the room and Harry suddenly backed into the corner beside the door hinge waving "no" at Snape. The door opened and Neville breathlessly asked, "Seen Harry?"

Snape shook his head and the door snapped closed again and the footsteps stumbled off.

Harry had sunk back into the corner between the door and the book shelves as if he wished to be swallowed up. "Go ahead and say it," he muttered, voice wavering. "I haven't done what I was supposed to. If I had, none of this would be happening. All those people would be alive, instead of dead."

"Potter," Snape said, stepping closer, wanting to lift the burden, or at least the heaviest sense of it. He stopped. There was so little he could do here.

Harry pressed himself back harder, hunched over with his hands on his head, breath coming in heaves: the picture of agony. Snape could not remain where he was. He stepped closer and reached out to brush Harry's arm, just a feather-light touch. "Potter," he said, more firmly, succor clear in his voice.

This vastly unexpected gesture shocked Harry out of his self-inflicted pain, as hoped. Harry, hand cupped over his nose and mouth, peered at him.

Snape, working to keep his tone level, said, "You're making progress, Potter. Don't give in to despair now, of all times."

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

Harry rubbed one eye and lowered his hand. He glanced out the window where sirens sang out and flickered in concert with the smoky glow. Strained and low, he said, "Sometimes I can't imagine how he thought I could possibly do this."

A knock sounded on the door and Harry quickly swept both eyes and straightened his shoulders. The door opened and Hermione rushed in, arms around books that looked too big to hold let alone carry.

Harry drew out of himself. "You all right?" he asked her sharply.

"Yeah. Fine." She put the books down on the bed. "With all the commotion I decided to bring things back to read."

"Good idea." He glanced at the top book. "Great Wands of History," he read out.

"Yeah, sorry. I got distracted a bit with wondering why Lucius or Draco would want Dumbledore's wand." She quickly scooped the books back up. "But I'll do some reading and let you handle other things." She glanced out the window and said sadly, "Doesn't look good; does it?"

Harry shook his head, face long.

She exhaled hard. "Hang in there, Harry," she said gently. "Things really will get better." And with that she hefted the load of books in her arms and tottered out under their weight.



Tonks let Rogan go on ahead as they circled the building to which they had been called. Like the surrounding Muggle office blocks, the windows of this one gleamed deep black from their decorative stone surrounds. Night reversed the shadows on the carved decorations making the color-washed world of London appear in negative.

Tonks shuffled along in the disguise of a night watchman. Laughter drew her attention across the wide boulevard, where two leggy women in skirts far too insubstantial for the season stumbled along, aided by one man in a suit, tie askew. They stumbled when they saw Tonks there.

"Aw, not a bobby," the man slurred, urging his friends along while they all laughed.

When the echo of high heels clattering faded around the bend, a voice made Tonks stop.

"Not exactly a bobby."

Tonks stopped. Wedged at the uneven bevelled edge of a building stood a shadow in a cloak, only discernible once he spoke.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“Severus.”

At the end of the pavement, Rogan had stopped. Tonks swung her nightstick, the signal that he should go on.

Tired, Tonks said, “Did you make this call?”

“Yes.”

Tonks rolled her eyes into the cold clinging air. “We’re pretty busy, you know. We have another kidnapping to deal with. We would’ve ignored this call, but it was strange enough we thought it could be related.”

Snape ignored her complaints. “This is important. I need to know what information about Moody’s murder was never released to the public.” A faint breeze lifted the corners of his cloak, merging his form with the oscillating shadow of the tree growing beside the nearest streetlamp.

Tonks breathed out heavily, adding to the mist. “He was hit from the front first, not in the back as we told the press. It was definitely someone he knew since his wand wasn’t actually in his hand as we said. Mad Eye was wearing a leather cloak, not a woolen one. A heavy thing I don’t think he could have carried if his leg hadn’t been fixed.”

“You adjusted quite a few details.”

She huffed. “Yeah, we get a lot of crazies confessing to this kind of thing, or trying to turn in a brother in law, so that makes it easy to sort them out.”

Tonks could not see Snape’s face, so his voice floated out, disembodied. She shifted from foot to foot, hoping Rogan kept going around rather than come back. Snape asked, “Anything else? What spell was used?”

“We don’t know for certain. He had burn marks on his clothes, in a large star pattern, almost. Strange.”

“Excellent,” the deep voice breathed with pleasure, sending a chill down Tonks’ spine. “Give me two more days and I will be ready. Unless you receive a message from me otherwise, I will drop him where you picked him up. I want you to arrange for Fudge to be involved in the arrest.”

“You aren’t asking a lot or anything,” Tonks snipped. “Fudge?”

“You’ll manage something; I have every confidence.”

“That all?” she asked, annoyed and eager to go.

“Yes. Your unhesitant cooperation is refreshing.”

Tonks stared at her feet. Her shadow showed her hair had drooped without her knowing it. Stressed, she said, “The French Prison warden sent a message; he suggests moving Harry to a more secure area. Says he cannot guarantee he can hold him otherwise.”

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

When there was no response, Tonks looked up, but the dark figure was gone. After a quick glance around, she hurried on to catch up to her partner to convince him there was nothing here worth bothering about.



Arthur Weasley shuffled down the corridor of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, head bent over the stack of letters he had collected. They were all letters from Harry sent to various people around the Ministry, or Weasley family members. He shuffled each letter to the back of the pile, examining the addresses, pausing at the ones written straighter than the others.

At the corner, he ran headlong into Tonks and the letters scattered.

“Sorry, Arthur.” Both of them bent to scoop up the envelopes. Tonks straightened while staring at what she held. “What’s this? Harry’s?”

“Yes.”

She held out what she had retrieved. “Are you monitoring his post?”

“Not exactly,” Mr. Weasley said, bunching the letters together again. He flipped through the pile and held an envelope up for her. “Look like Harry’s writing?” When Tonks nodded, he held up another, where the lines were straight. “This?”

Tonks nodded again. Mr. Weasley said, “Written a bit too neat for someone without a desk to write on.”

“What are you saying?” Tonks asked, hackles raised.

Mr. Weasley put his finger to his lips. “Not a word. I have to do some more investigating.” And with that he shuffled into the Aurors’ office, Tonks close on his heels.

Mr. Weasley went straight to the senior Auror. “Kingsley, a call went out before Christmas for translators to help the censors at the French wizard prison. Do you happen to know who volunteered?”

Shacklebolt put up his hands in surrender. Arthur turned to Tonks and got a similar shrug. Kingsley said, “Maybe try the Foreign Liaison office in IMC?”

Mr. Weasley snapped his fingers. “Brilliant. Of course.” He stashed the letters into his pocket and strode away.

Shacklebolt turned curiously to Tonks, who had dropped into her chair, legs splayed and lifeless. “I can’t take much more of this,” she said.

“Maybe you should arrange a breakout for Harry,” he teased gently. “It would give you something to do.”

“Maybe I will,” she said, sounding defiant.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Shacklebolt smirked faintly. "Don't tell me the details if you do. I might have to ruin it for you."

"Oh, I won't," Tonks said, feeling slightly better for joking about it.



Down on the fifth floor of the Ministry, Mr. Weasley smiled sweetly at the receptionist, an ancient wizard whose curly beard hid all but his eyes and nose. "Who would I speak to about a French translation?"

The wizard reached under his desk and pulled out a form and pushed it across the desk. It was an official Document Language Alteration Request Form. Mr. Weasley pushed it back. "I just want a minute of this person's time."

The wizard pushed the form back at Mr. Weasley. If he had an expression on his face it was buried in his beard.

"No, you don't understand," Mr. Weasley said. "I don't want something translated, I just want speak to the translator."

The wizard peered dubiously at him. "In what language?"

"English," Mr. Weasley replied after a beat, a little baffled. "It's the only one I know."

The man pointed his thumb back over his broad, rounded shoulder. "You'll be wanting Mrs. Wraithwright, then. Office's on the right."

Mr. Weasley found a portly witch in faded pink robes, surrounded by shelves full of dictionaries and style manuals. She greeted him with a broad smile and went back to penning something with a peacock quill. "Hello, and what can I do for you?"

Mr. Weasley shut the door to the office and slipped up to the desk. "I'm wondering if you happen to know who has been assisting the French prison with translating Harry Potter's post?"

"You mean L'île de Cachot Méfait?" she asked lilting heavily, but let him off by smiling again and not waiting for a reply. "I have been helping. As has another staff member."

"Someone from this office?"

She shook her broad head. "No, no, someone from the Department of Which We Don't Speak."

Mr. Weasley stood straighter. "Do you know who?"

"Yes, of course. I frequently see him there."

"At the prison?" Mr. Weasley said. "I thought Magical Law Enforcement had the only two keys."

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

She spoke soothingly. "I'm certain you do. They send an escort for us." Leaning in conspiratorially, she said, "One of these days I'm going to talk the guard into a quick diversion to a Parisian café for lunch. You'll see." Smiling to herself, she sat up and said, "Yes, he's a bit brusque, young Percy is. Could use a tad more personality, but as long as he keeps quiet so I can work without unneeded distraction—"

"Percy? Where did he learn French?" Mr. Weasley blurted.

Chuckling, Wraithwright said, "Why don't you have a seat? Your feet might not hurt, but mine do just imagining standing that long. Name's Wilimina, by the way. Call me Winnie."

"Arthur. Pleased to meet you." Mr. Weasley tugged a chair over and sat upon it, thoughts moving through his head too quickly to amount to anything. They settled into an official groove and he said, "I'd like to ask you not to discuss our conversation with Percy, if you would. It's sort of important that he not know we talked."

"If you wish. As to your question, Percy told me he learned his French because he had an eye on a girl at school one year. Took a correspondence course, aided by some memory sweets his brothers cooked up." She crossed her broad arms and clearly enjoying herself added, "I asked him if it worked out with girl and he finally admitted he never got the nerve to talk to her even once. Just as well, his pronunciation leaves, shall we say, a bit to be desired."

Mr. Weasley slipped fully into professional mode. "When you and Percy are at the prison, are you given access to any areas beyond your work area?"

"We can go to the tea room, of course, whenever we like. Percy does insist on fetching the tea. Someone taught him his manners, I must say, to a fault, perhaps, even."

He narrowed his question. "If you wanted to go into the areas where the prisoners were housed, would you be able to do that?"

"I've not had the notion to try," she exclaimed. "The very thought. All manner of humanity and beyond in that place."



"I'm going to teach you a very nice spell," Snape said, bending over the foreign wizard sitting on the floor. The morning's doping left the man slow and passive, safe to hand a wand to. Because Snape need not concern himself with damaging other memories, he could employ rather brutal, identity-weakening potions. Normally this sort of reprogramming required delicacy and a great deal of time to wear down resistance.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

With typical slow movements, the man examined the wand he held, fascinated by it.

“The incantation is *Stellifera*. It has a rather nasty result if used with enough force, so I think you will like it.”

Crouching and taking the man’s pliant hand, Snape repeated the motion several times while whispering the incantation in his ear. Using an accent he had adapted to match his victim’s, Snape said soothingly, “You’ve been using violence to paper over the guilt of that first uncontrolled act, trying to overcome it by making it part of you. You’ve failed at that... it’s only become worse. But you no longer need pretend. You will be purified from that old act very soon. You wish to be, don’t you?”

The man nodded sadly, eyes fixed on the floor as though too ashamed to even look up. When first brought there, his hair had been shiny and would have bounced as he nodded, but now it lay around his face, dull and flat.

Snape lifted the wand out of the man’s fingers. When he reached shakily for it, Snape said, “You may have it back presently. Very soon, in fact. But first a bit of sleep, so you remember the spell.”

He did not actually put the man to sleep; he put him under hypnosis. On top of the psycho-tropic potions, this resulted in a dreamy, drool-inducing state.

Snape waited ten minutes before rapping the man on the shoulder to rouse him. He put a *Lumos Charm* on his wand and moved it before the man’s sagging eyelids to hold his attention. In the manner of a soporific chant, he said, “Remember, the guilt will wash clean away the moment you confess what you did to someone in high authority. The higher the authority the purer you will become. Nothing will matter after that. You will be serene and safe from your own conscience.”

Snape waited again for that to worm its way in, biting his jaw to keep from rushing. One last test, and everything would be ready. The man’s eyes blinked slowly, but erratically, almost a code. Careful to keep all eagerness out of his voice, Snape chanted on. “When you come face to face with this authority figure, what will you do?”

The man swallowed, reluctantly, which was fine, as it would add to the realism. “I’ll tell them what I did.”

“And what did you do?”

“I killed the Auror.”

“Why?”

“Because I was told to.”

“By whom?”

The man struggled for an answer, finally stressfully admitting, “I don’t know.”

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

No Durumulna foot soldier ever knew the answer to that, which made this all so very easy. Snape slipped the man's wand into his hand and said, "And you did it with the spell you learned just for this job."

The man nodded sagely and thought it all over. Snape, with the aid of a hallucinatory potion, had given the man his own imaginings of the scene of Moody's death using a pensieve. Only in snippets, though, and only disjointed. He had then led the man to perform walkthroughs of the event to smooth over the edges of the fake memories, to connect them to the man's muscle memory.

Snape hovered the ratty old blanket into the air against the blackened hearth and said, "Why don't you show me the spell you used?"

Moving dreamlike, which gave the spell very little force, the man curved and swished the wand. He skipped speaking the incantation, but it did not matter; a ripple like a heat wave emitted from the wand and when it encountered the blanket it bunched up on itself and flared white hot, leaving behind a star pattern burned into the fabric.

"Hm," Snape mused softly. "Silent even. No wonder they hired you for the job."



Mr. Weasley sat at his dining room table, wearing his index finger raw rubbing the chipped edge of the tea cup he held.

"Something the matter, Arthur?" Mrs. Weasley asked. When she did not receive a reply, she looked up from her embroidery.

"I don't know yet," Mr. Weasley replied. "Not for certain, at any rate."

He sat awhile longer, trying to overcome base instinct to think only the best of his son. Rather than thinking, he should be taking action to find out the answer – treat it like any other investigation. He noted that Molly had her wand in hand for her needlework, mostly for undoing parts of it. She worked at adding a pattern of daffodils to the tablecloth... while it was on the table. It was pretty much the only thing left in the house unadorned.

He stood. "I'll return in a bit."

"It's getting late. Are you off to the office?"

"I just need some fresh air," he reassured her, not wanting to give anything away, lest they be monitored somehow. Harry's warnings about Legilimency made it easier to be extra careful.

Moments later Mr. Weasley knocked upon the heavy door to Aaron's flat. The young man uncharacteristically stuttered upon seeing him, "M- Mr. Weasley, sir." But he recovered his usual gallant style and bowed him in.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“Dad?” Ginny said in surprise, standing up from the couch where she had been reading Aaron’s Auror books.

Mr. Weasley cut off her questions, by taking her shoulders. “No time. Do me a favor and go keep your mum company. Both of you, if you would, Aaron, my boy. I have something I need to do and I may be out a while.” When she tried to interrupt, he ignored her and said, “Don’t say I sent you. Pretend you went spur of the moment.”

Aaron sidled over. “We can say we came to see you, even.”

Mr. Weasley pointed at him. “Good thought. And whatever you do, do not let Molly give you any of Harry’s letters to read. Well, gotta run.” With that he Disapparated.

“What-?” Ginny began, but she was asking the empty air. “What in Merlin’s name is that about?”

“Let’s go see your mum,” Aaron eagerly said. He scooped up her books and tossed them in his satchel before heading to the cupboard for their cloaks.

“Why are you in such a hurry?” Ginny complained lightly. “You want to get grilled by my mother about how we are getting on? As if I want to talk to her, anyway.” She huffed.

Aaron hooked her cloak around her neck and attractively bit his lip while hooking it. “I’ll admit, I’d like to get it out of the way. Not so much that I’m looking forward to it, exactly.” He patted her shoulders. “Come along. Duty calls.”

She stretched her shoulders back. “Yep, I suppose it does. Are your assignments always this mysterious?”

He grinned as he said, “Do they treat us like mushrooms all the time... you are asking? Absolutely.”

Molly Weasley was thrilled enough to see them that she asked no difficult questions at all and in return Ginny held her tongue about Harry. Her mother hooked her arms through one each of theirs and led them to the table. “So good to see you both. Have a seat.”

The two of them joined her around the daffodils blooming along the edge of the cloth piled up on the table top.

“Found something else to decorate, I see,” Ginny said. “Flowers are good.”

Aaron bent down and blinked in alarm at the bright yellow and green congregation already crowding his side of the table.

“A bit nicer than gnomes,” Ginny added firmly, mostly to keep Aaron’s commentary in line.

He nodded sideways in agreement with that.

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

Mrs. Weasley grinned at them in turn. “I have a surprise for you. Something I’m working on. Just practicing on mine first.” From a bag at her feet she pulled out a brand new shimmering tablecloth and with frantic movements to contain the slippery fabric, lined up the edge along above she was working. “Nice fabric, don’t you think? I’m going to use the shiny thread to match. I’m sure it will look lovely at Aaron’s place.”

Ginny swallowed. “Er...”

“You know,” Aaron said, jumping up to look at things from her angle. “Do you have thread with, er, more muted colors?”

“Muted? Why on earth would one use that?” But she dug around in her basket as she spoke.

Aaron’s jaw worked a second before he recovered. “It would go better with the existing décor.” He reached around her and slid the cloth over. “Here, put a single daffodil. But in, ah, these shades of green.” He rummaged through her collection. “And this yellow.”

“That’s grey.”

“No, that’s got a tinge of yellow. And put a vertical bar of a warm grey. Like this one. Here.” He held up a spool of thread to show her.

“A grey bar?” Mrs. Weasley repeated, mystified.

“Yes, beside the flower, extending up and down.” He drew with his finger on the fabric as he spoke, as though seeing it already. “One here and just one other on the other corner. I have some tall square vases and the combination will be divine.”

“Sounds quite plain,” Mrs. Weasley said. “But if that’s what you like.”

Aaron make an okay shape with his fingers. “Minimalist, is the word you are looking for. Minimalist.”

“Ahhhh...” she said, picking up the grey thread for the needle, and winking at him.

As Aaron settled back beside her, Ginny grinned and mouthed, “Good job.” Remembering herself, she sat up and said, “So, where is Dad?”

“Went for a walk, or a little broom flight or something. Wanted some air.” She sounded down. “Don’t know why.”

“Huh,” Ginny said, sounding mystified, which expressed how she felt. This felt too much like Harry sending her to guard Candide. Who did her dad think could get through the Burrow’s protective charms anyway?

At the French Wizard prison, Mr. Weasley found that the night warden did not speak enough English to answer his questions about the translators. The best he could communicate, with lots of sign language, was that he wished to speak with Harry.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The guard, who made rather a lot of noise when he walked, fetched Harry to the break room area at the end of the cell block. Harry crossed his arms upon seeing Mr. Weasley there, and blinked in the lamplight like one woken up moments ago.

“Sir,” Harry said after a snuffle.

Mr. Weasley turned to the guard. “If we may speak alone?” But the guard simply stared at him.

Harry said, “We are alone... he doesn’t speak English.”

“Ah. Yes.” He stepped closer. Harry appeared gaunt on top of poorly slept. “Are they feeding you all right?”

“Is that what you came to ask in the middle of the night?”

Mr. Weasley held up his hands to ward off his anger. “No. But I’m asking anyway, after getting a look at you.”

Harry shrugged. “I’m not always hungry. Believe me, they regularly try to stuff me full of fancy French food.”

“Well, good, at least you aren’t being abused.”



Harry resisted answering Mr. Weasley just to be difficult. This whole situation felt, if not abusive, then at least lacking in consideration of his rights. But honesty won out, and he said, “No. Not for the most part. One guard here doesn’t particularly like me, but the warden said he wouldn’t assign him to me anymore.”

Mr. Weasley contemplated him. “In that case, you are being treated extremely well given how these places are normally run. But as you implied with your biting question, that is not why I am here. I’m here because someone has been sending poetic letters in your name. Molly even received one.”

“Poetic letters?” Harry echoed, sleepy mind slow to comprehend, but it snapped in place. “From the poets here?” Mr. Weasley nodded, and Harry added, “Well, it wasn’t me.”

“I know that, Harry. They are being sent to your biggest allies, to mute their complaint about your situation.” Mr. Weasley began to pace. “So I asked around and discovered that one of the two translators that come here every few days to help censor your post, is my son, Percy.”

Harry felt heat course through his arms and neck. A cell door rattled, but he pulled back on his anger and it stopped.

Mr. Weasley paced back the other way. “I’m trying to understand what is happening here.”

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

“No, you aren’t,” Harry heard himself say. That energy had filled him again, and it gave him clarity and no desire to withhold his thoughts. “You aren’t trying to understand; you are unwilling to suspect him of anything. You always think the best of people until it is too late.” From the back of Harry’s mind came the wry notion that Mr. Weasley gave him exactly the same benefit.

Mr. Weasley did not reply right away. “Do you have anything besides suspicion, Harry?”

“Do you?” Harry returned immediately.

“I’m close,” Mr. Weasley admitted.

“You won’t find any proof if you don’t want to find it,” Harry calmly pointed out, feeling victory in that small cruelty. The shadows hummed in the air, but apparently only he could feel it, based on Mr. Weasley’s lack of reaction. It was as if Harry stood at the center of a circle of power, and could draw on it at will, if only he wished to. If he kept it narrowly focused he remained in control; more than that and it would overtake him.

Mr. Weasley must be sensing something because he was watching him now, with curiosity and wariness. Harry remained silent and saw in Mr. Weasley’s eyes that his thoughts returned to worrying about Percy and how to approach him. Harry said, “It would be foolish to confront him directly, since it would tip your hand.”

Mr. Weasley turned abruptly on his toes and resumed pacing. “I believe I better understand Ginny’s concerns about you,” he said without looking up. “I would move you, Harry, to the dungeon at the Ministry, if I did not fear it would constitute the perfect trap for someone wishing to do you harm. Many, many people have access to the dungeon.”

“You needn’t to worry about me,” Harry said mockingly. He did not mean to but the power hungered to be on top.

Mr. Weasley finally met Harry’s gaze, because he forgot not to. “That’s not true. You remain my responsibility, in more ways than one.”

“I’m tired of being everyone’s responsibility,” Harry snapped. “You, the warden, Severus... I can take care of myself.”

Mr. Weasley frowned and let that go. “If Percy is involved, then we-”

“If Percy is responsible, you mean.”

“Involved. Then we are much closer to getting you out.”

“Because the investigation is at a dead end otherwise,” Harry supplied, mocking again. “I won’t wait in this place forever.”

“It’s not even been two weeks,” Mr. Weasley countered, finding some sharpness.

Harry sighed lightly. “It may feel like it to you. It feels like months to me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“I know, Harry. And I am sorry for that. It was all supposed to be straight by now.”

He did sound sorry, which sucked the thickest darkness out of Harry. But thinking of Snape, trapped in that miserable world made him say, “Another week is all I will stay.”

Mr. Weasley glanced around, assessing the walls. “I’m not certain what you think you are going to do, but your timeline is duly noted.”

“Fine,” Harry said, crossing his arms. “Just so you’re informed.”

Mr. Weasley exhaled and swung his arms once. “On another topic. My daughter is rather cross with me for not bringing her here to see you. You sent her a letter that sent her on a mission of sorts.” When Harry did not reply, he went on. “Can I take her a message from you. Something that might perhaps get me off her Worst Dad in the World list?”

Harry felt for the shadows around him. He could no longer discern where he ended and they began. “Tell her to be careful. Do her readings.”

Mr. Weasley complained, “She’s going to think I made that up.”

Harry smiled faintly and felt like himself again in a rush. “Tell her she needn’t panic but just stay alert.”

“That will have to do, I suppose,” Mr. Weasley tiredly said. “I believe the warden is looking out for you, above and beyond what we expected, but if there is anything you need, do let us know. I wish you would be more patient with us, Harry.”

“You don’t know how hard it has been to stay here even this long,” Harry said. “You don’t understand much of anything.”

Mr. Weasley put his hat back on out of his pocket, covering the uncombed hair flying away off the top of his head. “I don’t think you’ve kept us well informed.”

Harry, fully charged again, stated clearly, as though he were the one in charge, “The things I did tell you, you refused to believe. You would not believe any of the rest.”



Despite it not being her shift, Tonks sat in the Aurors’ office, pretending to work on paperwork, when in reality, she frantically schemed how to arrange things that evening per Snape’s demands.

There was a meeting that afternoon with the Minister and the department heads, and she intended to wheedle her way into it. Odds were that Fudge, who could not leave his nose out of anything, would also have worked out an invitation. It was her only chance.

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

Shacklebolt sat at a nearby desk, plucking lint from his robes as he dictated to his quill. Tonks waited for a break in his transcription to ask, “You’re going to the meeting today, right?”

Shacklebolt rolled his eyes and grumbled. “Yes, I suppose.”

“You sound thrilled.”

“Waste of time,” he muttered.

Tonks shrugged, and hunched over in his direction, hands clasped before her. “I could go to it instead so you could work. I haven’t been feeling terribly useful lately.” It was easy to sound strained. She did feel useless, in more ways than they knew.

“If Arthur will have you along, that’d be just grand with me.” He shook his head. “He just wants someone to help back him up and take notes.”

Tonks sat considering how to approach Mr. Weasley when the man wandered in. Shacklebolt grabbed up his quill off the parchment and said stiffly, “Take Tonks with you. I have too much to do to waste time in a meeting.”

Mr. Weasley said, “Well, if I had any delusions about being in charge, Harry and now you, are doing well at convincing me otherwise.”

Shacklebolt stood and canceled his quill before dropping it on his desk. “Sorry, Arthur. Just a bit stretched thin.”

Mr. Weasley regained his warmth. “I’ll take Tonks along, Kingsley, don’t interrupt what you are doing.”

Tonks followed him out. He walked to the stairs instead of the lift. On the way, he said, “I saw Harry last night.”

Tonks was watching her light blue boots walk along the floor, but this brought her attention up. “You did?”

“Yes. He seemed all right. But... not quite himself.”

“He shouldn’t be there, Arthur. It’s not good for him.”

They had reached the next floor, so the conversation stopped. Tonks and Mr. Weasley slipped by the group gathered around the Minister’s doorway, making good-byes. Inside the Minister’s office, Fudge and Percy, as well as the head of International Magical Cooperation were waiting.

Tonks took the seat beside Mr. Weasley and sat quietly, hoping she could pull this off without raising suspicion. Bones swept into the room and opened the meeting with her usual grand manners, intended to draw everyone present to her way of thinking.

“All right then, reports from the last week, if you will.” Parchments were pushed her way, which she redirected to an assistant. “Summarize if you will.”

Mr. Weasley began by explaining that earlier outreach efforts were paying off in increased tips of suspicious activities. Fudge scoffed through most of his summary. He concluded with: “We’re still waiting on assistance from our colleagues in Portugal.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Bones said, "Even though that is a lead in for a report from IMC, I sense you would like to go next Cornelius."

Fudge leaned forward, elbow out on the table, and said to Mr. Weasley. "You neglected to mention that your crime activity statistics slipped again this week, all but your precious anonymous tips, most of which will amount to nothing."

He went on in this vein, until Tonks, tired of it and seeing her chance, interrupted his red-faced diatribe. "If you think this is so easy, why don't you try patrol for a night or two."

Mr. Weasley put a hand on her arm. "It's all right, Tonks."

This was going to be the best chance of arranging what Snape wanted, and like Shackbolt she had stress as an excuse for losing control. She shook his hand off. "It's not all right. We're supposed to be working together, but all Fudge ever does is blame, not help. If he wants to help he can do a few rounds of patrol." She sat back and crossed her arms.

Mr. Weasley too must have tired of Fudge, because rather than get short tempered with her as Tonks expected, he wryly said, "I'm not sure which of you I could possibly convince to partner with him."

"I'll take him out," Tonks angrily said, "if it will shut him up."

The table fell silent. "Ridiculous," Fudge scoffed. "I have far more important things to be doing." To demonstrate this, he began rearranging the many notes before him.

Bones said, "I think it's a wonderful idea."

"What?" Fudge blurted, turning redder.

"I think we all lack appreciation for the difficult job the Aurors' office does." She waved to her assistant to take a note. "I think several department heads would benefit from tagging along on patrol for an evening."

Tonks glanced at Mr. Weasley's alarmed face. "We don't have to make a project out of this," she said.

"Nonsense," Bones countered. "It's a great idea."

Tonks sat back again and in a mode of apology to her boss muttered. "I didn't mean to have a great idea. Really, I didn't."

But Tonks had arranged what she needed to, and that evening Fudge stood before the log book, getting a tour of it from Rogan.

Tonks took small satisfaction from Fudge asking, "All these calls are just yesterday's?"

Rogan turned out to be a natural at the task he had been given. "Oh, that was a quiet day," he said dismissively.

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

A Magical Disturbance call came in from Wiltshire, and everyone turned to Tonks questioningly. “Want that one?” Rogan asked. “Shouldn’t be a tough one.”

Tonks had to wait for the call from Scunthorpe that she felt confident Snape would arrange. She fingered the slip. “It’s probably just the local coven, disturbing the Muggles by racing modified broomsticks again. I don’t think Mr. Fudge would get much out of that.”

Rogan, trying not to smile, said, “Unless Durumulna decides to weasel in on the established bookmakers, no, probably not.”

Fudge took the slip. “They may decide to do just that.”

“Least of our problems if they do,” Rogan said, taking a seat and putting his hands behind his head. Sounding lazy, he said, “Pass it on to Reversal. Probably their purview anyway.”

Tonks would have pointed out that he wasn’t making a great impression, were he not inadvertently helping her. She sat down to wait again, pulling out an old report and pretending to look diligent. Rogan followed her example and did the same. Fudge prowled the room, finally settling on the task of auditing their temporary filing practices, something Shackbolt had been harping on for a while, so everyone left him to it, on the condition he not complain aloud, but take down notes about his concerns.

Finally, the call arrived. “Aye,” Rogan muttered as he read the slip. “Not again.”

Tonks joined him at the log book, half on instinct, and Fudge naturally followed.

“What is it?” Fudge asked.

Tonks replied, “A warehouse Durumulna had been using.” She glanced at Rogan. He would be easy to convince. “I could take this one,” she said, sounding vaguely reluctant. “At least it has some connection to the organization most of interest to Mr. Fudge.” She passed the slip over and held her breath. This was going well, and she feared mucking it up.

Fudge rocked back on his heels, which made his belly more pronounced. “I’ve found this evening to be nothing but a waste of time, so I will take any call, just for a change of scenery.”

Tonks took up her cloak. “Probably nothing, but it’s a familiar locale, so we can case it quickly if it’s a false alarm.”

The long, low roof of the warehouse stood quietly in the late evening light that brightened the sky in a way so as to render everything else darker by comparison. Tonks crept alongside a rack holding square metal rods and nearly tripped when she tread upon something fleshy that gave a squeak of complaint. She regained her footing and held up a hand to stop Fudge from stepping on it also.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

A Lumos Charm revealed a dog, curled tightly upon itself, mouth closed with a curse.

“That’s telling,” Fudge whispered.

“We’ll free it when we’re through,” Tonks said. “We don’t want it barking either.”

At the door to the warehouse, Tonks knocked off the lock, distracted and assuming somehow that their prey would be an easy catch. She assumed wrong. A spell sizzled just over their heads as the door swung open. Without thinking, Tonks shoved Fudge back out the door and dived for cover between the racks inside. She sent a shower of movement inhibiting spells through the gaps and things fell silent.

Tonks quelled her breathing. She might have him, or she might not. Snape did a good job to leave this much fight in the man, she thought. She was just about to send out a Doppelgänger when Fudge pulled on the door from the outside, which brought on another barrage of spells. It instinctively felt like covering fire. Tonks ducked down and slipped through the rods on the lowest rack, just as a Blasting Curse sparkled from behind her, along the row.

Tonks rolled, and despite painful scuffing on her hands, knees and shoulder, slipped again through the next rack and got to her feet. There were two of them, apparently. A spell shot out low, knocking her legs out from under her. Tonks threw a Grappling Charm upwards, which found purchase on the open framed ceiling, and whispered the reeling trigger. She flew upward, just as the racks smashed together.

Tonks canceled the grapple and surveyed the scene from her perch on a crossbeam. A figure moved below, too thin to be Fudge. She struck it straight down with a heavy Net Charm and jumped onto the closet rack, but the pipes on it had been upset by the collision moments before, and they began to roll en masse off one side. Tonks threw herself to the other side and grabbed hold as they rolled under her. “Look out!” she shouted, having no idea where Fudge was.

The deafening crash died out only after long seconds of echo and reverberation.

“Mr. Fudge?” Tonks called, climbing in a panic down the end of the rack. Being well practiced at upsetting things had probably saved her life.

“Over here.” He sounded strained.

She bent to check the figure under the net and found him out cold. It was not the man she expected to find. With a wave the net became a Mummification Curse that she hovered behind her. Banging sounded on the nearby the door as well as shouting. The door must have been magically barred because it shook against the loose latch without yielding.

Tonks stepped quickly over the piles of pipe to where Fudge stood over another figure. There was no time. The other door was wide open and it would not take long for the Muggles to go around.

GUILTY CONSCIENCE

“We have to go. Ministry. Now,” Tonks said, grabbing hold of her charge.

She arrived in the Atrium, in the only area they could Apparate into. She counted to three, prepared to return, but Fudge appeared just as she began to hover her prisoner over where he could not Apparate away again without help or breaking his bonds. Relief flooded her bruised limbs upon seeing Snape’s “project” hanging from Fudge’s fat-fingered grip.

Curious onlookers gathered. Fudge, hand grasping his prisoner’s cloak instead, said, “You need a better area to Apparate into.”

“We’ve been saying that a long time,” Tonks smartly pointed out, while pushing her way through the small throng. “We’d happily use the large cupboard off the dungeon. But someone accused us of a power grab by virtue of controlling office space, or some such nonsense.”

They were ushered through the gates by the receptionist.

“Ah,” Fudge said.

At the lifts, Tonks couldn’t resist saying, “That was you, wasn’t it?”

Fudge hemmed a bit. “I’d have to check my notes to be certain.”

Tonks bit down on a smile and roughly shoved her prisoner into the corner of the lift cage. She observed Fudge’s prisoner was also having a difficult time with breathing given Fudge’s grip. “Not a bad haul,” Tonks said.

Fudge said, “You seemed rather blasé in how you approached that facility.”

That had been a mistake, from many angles; one undoubtedly brought on by exhaustion. “We’ve been there many times where it’s come to naught,” she explained.

He nodded, accepting that to her relief.

They assigned each of the prisoners to an interrogation room and Tonks went to wash up and get some bruise salve out of her desk.

Mr. Weasley sauntered in. “What is this Fudge is saying about a good catch?”

Tonks looked up from dabbing gel on her elbow. She smarted everywhere. “We found two Durumulna members at the warehouse in Scunthorpe. And on that topic, Reversal should make sure the scene is clear. There is a dog to uncurse if not some memory charms to be distributed.”

“So you failed, then?” Mr. Weasley asked. At her confused gaze, he explained, lightly teasing, “You are giving Cornelius the impression that what we do is easy.”

Tonks sat down to treat her skinned knee with a spell and some gel. “Given the fight they put up, I hope he didn’t get that impression.”

Shacklebolt came in. “Fudge wants to interrogate his prisoner.”

Mr. Weasley straightened from helping Tonks to say, “That’s our responsibility. Put a stop to it.”

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Tonks held in her reaction. Shackbolt crossed his arms and said, "Perhaps that should come from someone of his rank."

Mr. Weasley stalked off. Tonks, hoping to stall him, put her gel down and followed him, limping faintly.

"He's more on our side at the moment," she said, speaking rapidly. "Maybe don't rub him the wrong way?"

"Cornelius has no right way to be rubbed," Mr. Weasley stated and opened the door to the interrogation room.

The prisoner sat in the corner, legs pulled up to his chest as a bulwark against the tirade Fudge was putting out.

"You are despicable, you know that? Living off other people's labors like you deserve it. Threatening people, ruining their livelihoods when they resist you," Fudge said, pointing directly in the man's face. "When I was Minister of Magic, this sort of thing did not happen, I'll tell you."

Mildly, Mr. Weasley said, "Yes, we just had Voldemort to contend with."

In a small voice, the prisoner asked, "You were Minister of Magic?"

Fudge straightened proudly and pushed his girth out before him. "I certainly was. For seven years. Some of the best years Wizarding Britain has ever had."

Tonks held her tongue with effort. Mr. Weasley said, "I would appreciate you leaving the interrogation to us, Cornelius."

"He's my prisoner," Fudge countered. "By all rights I can simply take him down the Department of Mysteries."

Tonks could not hold back. "Why in the world would you want to do that?"

Fudge blustered. "I am just saying." He rubbed his hands together and lorded over the prisoner. "This department seems to capture all kinds but not to get much out of them."

Mr. Weasley said, "That's because they don't know much, or have you not been reading our memos?"

Fudge ignored this. "Get a transcribing quill and we'll see what we can do, eh?"

Mr. Weasley slipped by Tonks, saying, "Keep an eye on him, would you?"

Tonks' heart rate was about double normal. She gratefully sat on the stool Fudge was ignoring and held her wand out at ready. Watching Fudge rant, she wondered with no small amazement at Snape's scheming. He must have known that once the former Minister had their plant in his hands, he would not let him go, walking merrily into the trap they had set.

Mr. Weasley returned with an Autoquill and a roll of parchment. He set the Autoquill going and gave the date and time and those present. He then gestured at Fudge to continue.

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Fudge bowed faintly and turned to the perpetrator. “So, young man, happy with what you have wrought?”

Mr. Weasley rolled his eyes and Tonks put her hand to her forehead in dismay. Fudge cleared his throat and tried again. “Why were you there in that place? That place where we found you?”

“I was hiding,” the man said, as though speaking to an idiot.

“Now we are getting somewhere,” Fudge said, claspng his hands before him. “How long have you been this country?” When the man did not reply, Fudge kicked the bottom of his sole with his toe. “Well, perhaps some Veritaserum will get us somewhere.”

Mr. Weasley said, “It won’t. He doesn’t know the answer to that. He knows very little, Cornelius, believe me.”

Tonks began to fear that Fudge would so bungle this that the confession Snape presumably had him ready to give, would never come out, but she absolutely did not want to raise even a hair of suspicion by seeming to manipulate what was happening. She grasped for another option. “We have a standard procedure we follow,” she began, thinking of the list of normal questions and that one would likely trigger something.

Fudge turned on her, his temper flaring. “Maybe your standard procedures are the problem. It’s time for something creative around here.”

Mr. Weasley calmly said, “They serve us quite well, but go ahead as you were if you wish. But I’ll have to ask you to not to strike the prisoner again.”

“I didn’t strike him,” Fudge said, flabbergasted.

“You did. And if you do it again I will throw you out of here.”

Fudge rose up and said, “You think they’d treat you equally well? I read the report of what they did to that apprentice of yours.”

Mr. Weasley replied, “Precisely why I refuse to stoop to their level. I consider us to be better than them.” He let that sit and said, “This is my department Cornelius. I’ll have you removed if I see fit to, and I will keep the prisoner.”

The Autoquill finished writing all that out during the lull. Tonks said, “Should we restart that?”

Mr. Weasley waved her off. “No. Leave it.” He moved to stand in the corner opposite Tonks, leaning heavily on the wall, head drooped with exhaustion. Tonks stared at him, waiting for him to look her way. When he did, she gave him a proud smile. He barely acknowledged it and looked away, down at the prisoner in the adjacent corner, mind and focus elsewhere.

Fudge leaned close to the man, making a point of not touching him. “So, you were hiding, were you? Hiding from what?”

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The man struggled, in an odd way, Tonks thought. He did not hesitate, exactly, more that he could not put his thoughts together. He wanted to confess, she thought with a chill, but Fudge was not setting it up right.

Finally, the man repeated, "Hiding."

Fudge stood. "Where do they get these blokes? They're not smart enough to lace their boots."

Mr. Weasley, from his corner, said, "If you'd lost as much of your memories as this one has, you would have about as much to say. We imagine they are perpetrating crimes against us, but they also do grievous injury to their own."

Tonks frowned, feeling guilty about what was almost certainly more injury caused to this one... with her assistance.

"What is your role in Durumulna?" Fudge asked the man.

Tonks did not think he would answer, but the man said, "I do what I'm told."

"Ah." Fudge paced, and muttered, "We could use a few of you around here."

Tonks rolled her eyes again, and glanced at Mr. Weasley, expecting commiseration, but found him lost in thought and looking saddened.

"And what were you told to do lately? Anything you remember?"

The man's jaw moved, then stopped. Fudge went on, cajoling. "Come one, we haven't all day. We have things to do. Cleaning up the mess you people have made, for one thing."

Fudge was about to launch into another question, when the man softly said, "I didn't want to kill him."

Everyone froze, Tonks with her heart racing again, and Mr. Weasley rising back to awareness of his immediate surroundings.

The man on the floor swallowed hard. "I didn't mean... I didn't want to." He seemed confused, and shook his head like a dog would after running headlong into something.

"Who?" Fudge prompted, fortunately losing his overbearing mode.

"The Aurore," the man replied, then shuddered faintly as though struck by something invisible. "I was told to," he added, sounding almost eager to speak.

Tonks swallowed too, and sat on her hands to keep them from shaking. She felt nauseated and faintly dizzy.

Fudge needed time to recover, but he finally asked, "You killed which Aurore?"

"The one..." The man had to think about that, and Tonks held her breath, fearing that he did not have an answer supplied by his programming. After much apparent digging through his memories the man replied, "The one with the machine eye."

Mr. Weasley pushed out of the corner, shifting quickly into action. He re-read the transcript and looked up at Tonks. She drew on his innocent excitement, and let

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her limbs relax.

Fudge said, “Alastor Moody?” Turned to glance between Tonks and Mr. Weasley, looking for help.

Mr. Weasley whispered, “Ask him what spell.”

“What spell did you use, you, you worthless ruffian?”

The man raised his wandless hand and ran through a spell. “Stellifera,” he said. “I learned it... just for the job.” He sounded far away, happy almost. It gave Tonks the quivers.

“Heard of it?” Mr. Weasley asked her. When Tonks shook her head, he said, “Go look it up.”

Tonks rushed down to the Aurors’ office and thumbed through the Compleat Encyclopædia of Spells, hand shaking too badly to find the right page.

Shacklebolt came up behind her and took the book away. He kindly asked, “What are you looking for?”

“Stellifera.” She should tell him the prisoner confessed, but could not bring herself to do it.

Looking at her, Shacklebolt closed the book on his thumb at the right page and said, “Stay here. I’ll go down.”

She held her hands out for the book. “No, I’ll go.”

He opened the book for her and gently handed it over. “There in the right column.” Tonks hoped that soon, their extra consideration would not be needed.

She took the book and rushed back, hoping she felt better about all this when she had Harry safely home, but feared she may not.

Mr. Weasley read the spell description. “As the name indicates, leaves a distinctive star-shaped marking of burns.” He levered the heavy book closed and again looked at Tonks, as though needing confirmation.

“Can I go get Harry?” She pleaded, desperate to leave, to escape, to reach the ends before guilt about the means overwhelmed her.

He glanced at the transcript one more time then looked at Fudge, who put up his hands in surrender.

Mr. Weasley said, “Let’s go and get him. I expect they’ll let us straighten out our part of the paperwork later.”

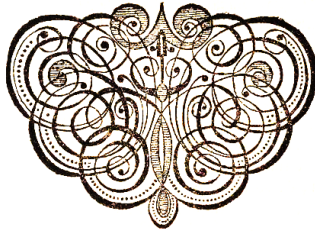
Author’s Notes: I’ve started using double breaks (



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) to denote jumps between universes. Been doing that for a few chapters, but I thought I'd point it out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



FREE BIRD

The clanging footsteps reached a crescendo just before they stopped on the other side of the iron door. The bolts slid back and Harry, thinking he had another late evening visitor, stood up from his stone bench. And indeed, Steeltie Pierre gestured with the riveted, rusty bucket he held for Harry to come out into the corridor. A sparkle of metallic confetti fluttered off the guard's armor as he left Harry there and efficiently swept back through the cell and tossed everything in the bucket, including the things Harry had stashed under the mattress.

Harry started to ask what was going on, but remembered he would not get an answer and, with his face-guard down, Harry could not gather a clue from the guard's expression either. Following gestures eager enough to make Harry worry that Steeltie might become impatient with him, Harry led the way down the uneven, poorly lit corridor.

The warden's office contained a surprise: Tonks, standing before the desk, hair fluttering between brown and spiky pink like an agitated sea creature.

"Tonks," Harry managed breathily. He dearly needed to see a friendly face. Mr. Weasley stood off to the side, looking chagrined.

"Your pape-airs," the warden said, holding out a stack to Tonks, eyeing Harry keenly the whole while. He too had metallic confetti glittering on his robes.

Tonks turned the stack around to glance at them before reaching back for a pen from the well on the desk. "Here, Harry, sign this," she said.

They had decided to move him to the securest area of the prison, Harry thought, heart thudding as though a Bludger had become lodged in his chest. He should have

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exercised more control. Now he was going to be in with the worst, with the Vampires and who knew what else. But maybe he deserved that.

Tonks forced the pen into his hand. While he hesitated, the pen scattered ink on the pages she held up, arms propped up as a desk. “Don’t look so glum, you’re going home.”

The pen slipped off the parchment, dividing the dense text with a wide, shiny line. “What?”

Tonks seemed unable to say more. Her face moved but her lips remained mute. Mr. Weasley stepped up and said, “We caught the real killer.”

Harry’s mind engaged on this news and the room snapped into clarity. “Who?” he demanded.

“Just a hired wand. A foreigner brought in by Durumulna to do the job.”

Harry could not stop his shoulders falling in disappointment. He wanted to hear the name Percy quite badly. He rubbed his hair and scratched the back of his neck, trying to take in this new reality – he did not have to go back to his cell. He did not feel elation, just quivering relief.

Sounding strangely pained, Tonks flipped the page and said, “Sign here too, Harry.”

After a firm handshake from the warden, who still had a knowing glint in his eye, a paper-wrapped package of his possessions was pressed into his hands by the guard. Steeltoe bowed them out of the office, inadvertently shutting his face guard, which he left down while he escorted them back up to the surface.

As they rose in the lift, the air grew fresher. Harry tipped his head back and breathed deeply. The shadows grew distant and he instinctively grabbed for them, pulling them along. The lift stopped, throwing them up onto their toes, and Harry lost his grip on them and his package. He picked it up slowly, stalling to see if he could recapture that fortifying sense of power. Tonks, thinking he needed help, picked it up for him and hooked it under her own arm while taking his. Something was going on behind her eyes, something easy to use. But she turned to lead him off before he could delve into it.

Reluctant, but given no choice, Harry followed them out into the towering entry hall. The sea sloshed angrily in the slots along the walls, spitting foam onto the floor and up onto the walls.

Mr. Weasley pulled out a Portkey from his robes and lifted it to dangle before them on its chain while he fumbled for his wand. Tonks shifted her grip on Harry’s arm to lift his hand to touch the body-warmed gold. Harry turned back to their escort and with a clack! audible over the noise of the sea, Steeltoe saluted, and the prison spun away.

FREE BIRD

They dropped into the Ministry, in the corridor of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement outside Mr. Weasley's office. Tonks, who still had hold of Harry, pulled him down for a hug. Others flowed from around the corner, far more people than would normally be there for a late evening shift.

Aaron patted Harry painfully on the arm. "Happy New Year, Harry," he said. "You're coming to my party, right?"

"I forgot it was New Year's Eve," Harry said while accepting a hug from Blackpool. "I didn't have a calendar."

Tridant teasingly said, "Didn't you make marks on the wall to keep track?"

Harry replied, "If you tried that, one of the bricks'd give you a bloody nose." He finished greeting everyone, feeling raw relief radiating off his colleagues.

When Aaron again urged Harry to come to his flat, Tonks stepped in. "I think Harry should go home." She took Harry's hand. "I'll take him."

Harry did not argue, he longed for his own room and his own bed. The world felt disjointed; one minute he was stuck in a tiny stone cell and the next he was free to do as he pleased. "I have to go home," Harry confirmed with Aaron.

"Well, Ginny's annoyance with me will be on your head, then," Aaron said.

"Don't worry," Mr. Weasley said, "it's already on mine."

"Come by the house, then," Harry invited Aaron.

Vineet spoke up. "Hermione too, wishes to visit."

Tonks said, "News travels fast."

"Party at Harry's house," Kerry Ann cheered faintly.

"Not sure what Severus will think of that," Harry said, mind casting out to worry about the impostor.

Mysteriously, Tonks said, "He'll be fine with it. Come on, Harry."

They Disapparated, but did not re-appear in Shrewsthorpe as Harry expected. They arrived at Tonks' flat.

Tonks pushed Harry to arm's length, face distraught. "I have to tell you something." But she fell silent, head dipped between her bony shoulders.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked, trying to see beyond the unchained lightness of unexpected freedom. At some point her hair had changed back to brown and he had not noticed when. Upon arriving at the Ministry it had been as bright as ever. "Tonks?"

She paced her flat, running protective spells. "You're going to be angry," she said, stopping before the window and keeping her back to him. Sounding angry herself she added, "But we aren't as perfect as you... you know. You have to understand that."

"What are you on about?" Harry blurted. He would have found her statement funny if she were not so distressed. "I'm turning into Voldemort and you think I'm

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

perfect?”

This made her turn. Through her stress, her lips tried to smile. “You don’t seem much like Voldemort right now.”

Out on the street revelers were shouting. Harry said, “Helps to get away from that place.”

“That was exactly the point of it all,” she said sadly.

She turned away from him again and parted the curtain to look out. Lights flashed on the adjacent building. Harry approached and peered down at where a car was parked with its hazard lights on. The driver leaned out the window to speak with someone walking along the pavement.

Tonks’ dark flat felt small and closed up. Harry wanted nothing more than to be home. “The point of what? Come on. We’re going to be missed.”

“Severus arranged for someone to confess to the murder... to get you out.”

Prickles ran over Harry’s arms. “Arranged? What do you mean?”

Tonks spun on him, grabbing up his robes with her hands. “See, the killer is still free; you have to be careful. Durumulna will know they were cheated, not only out of framing you, but out of one of their own, who will take the fall.”

Raising his voice, Harry blurted, “Severus framed someone else?”

Tonks exhaled audibly. “Yes. I didn’t imagine he could do that... get someone to confess like that to something he hadn’t done.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “I don’t like thinking about it, even. He’s rather a dangerous chap when he wants to be.”

“He is,” Harry agreed. Then hoping to downplay it, reassured her, “He mostly behaves himself.”

“I hope so.” She tugged on his robe front and gave him a kiss. “It’s good to have you out no matter the means,” she said, but she sounded like someone trying to convince herself.

She tasted good, but he resisted pulling her closer. “We should go.”

At the house, Hermione and Vineet were sitting on the couch beside Candide. Snape glided over from where he stood talking to Aaron and Ginny. “Welcome home,” he said, in such an oddly convincing tone, that Harry needed a pause to say, “Thanks.”

Candide levered herself up to greet him. Harry rushed over to meet her halfway for a hug. The motherly scent of home on her skin called to Harry’s insides from unsettlingly far in the past. “Good to have you back, Harry. Really too bad this all had to happen.”

Harry helped her sit back down and said, “It’s all right.”

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Harry looked around the room at his friends, and their anxious expressions. He did not want their concerns right now. He had plans well concocted from his copious idle time and he was itching to get them in motion. He spun on Snape. "I want to talk to you, alone."

Snape gestured to the drawing room, but Harry went to the stairs. At the top, he had to fight his instinct to go to the right. Snape passed him and led the way around to the left, to where Harry's new room lay.

Farther down the balcony from the room that still gave off a chill of dark magic, Snape stopped. Harry glanced down into the main hall, where his friends were looking up, watching them.

"Candide has been busy in here," Snape stated, opening the door on the end.

Harry slowed as he entered. Indeed, the formerly neglected room had been transformed with mutely patterned curtains and matching bed drapes, and a new rug covered the middle of the floor, artfully turned diagonal to keep it distant from the embers of the corner fireplace. Even his old wardrobe glowed with fresh polish.

Harry went to the cages by the window, but they were both empty. "Where's Kali?" he asked sharply.

Snape stepped closer and reached into his pocket, out of which he plucked Harry's furry, bat-like pet. Harry lifted the sleeping creature from Snape's hand, eyeing him in surprise, which quickly became tainted with suspicion at being manipulated so. Harry cradled his pet in the crook of his arm and rubbed her fur. She creakily stretched her wings, one at a time, batting Harry's hand.

Snape said, "I realize you do not wish to like me."

Harry glanced up at the man who looked too much like his adoptive father. Pet now in hand, Harry's concerns about Snape handling her as a means of handling him slipped into unimportance. He said, "You helped me get out, even if it was to your benefit to keep me locked away."

"It was to no one's benefit to have you remain there."

"Not even yours?"

Smugly, Snape said, "Especially not mine. I understand to a degree unmatched by no one else exactly what is at stake."

Harry bent back to his pet, who was trying to crawl up his arm. "So you also understand what is at stake if I don't get my adoptive father back."

Voice low, Snape replied, "I resist understanding it, but if pressed..."

Harry felt the siren of the shadow hovering before him and said, "I'm grateful for your help, as dubiously moral as it is, but I'm still upset with your invading my home. I'll give you a day to prepare, but even if you put up a fight, you're going back."

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“Put up a fight...” Snape echoed, sounding sarcastic, “to keep this perfect house? This perfect little family?”

“You sound jealous,” Harry said.

Snape tossed his head and ignored the comment. “I have learned too much the last few weeks, too much about the power of chance and possibility.”

Harry finally let Kali crawl up to his shoulder where she commenced chewing on his hair. He knew a lot about those alternative paths. “Learn too much about yourself?” he prodded.

Snape spun away on his heel. “You are undoubtedly expected downstairs.”

Harry halted him before he reached the door, like tugging on a string. “Severus...” The air between them hummed. Harry could sense the shadow inside the other as an extension of his will. How easy it would be to reach out and make a firmer point about his power over him.

Kali took flight, clawing Harry as she shoved away. Snape’s eyes tracked her progress back to the roof of the cage, where she landed, ungainly extending her wings for balance. Harry stepped over and picked her up again. She chewed lightly on his fingers, but remained in his grip. He turned to Snape and considered him and the connection that allowed him to stay his departure. Harry would miss having a dark servant this close as much as he wanted his family properly reassembled.

Snape’s hand slipped from the door latch. “If you force me to, I will bow to you. But I somehow cannot imagine Lily Potter’s son resorting to that.” His voice grew drier. “Not without his temper riled, that is.”

They stared at each other, Harry limited himself to a hard look, leaving the shadow untouched. Without breaking eye contact, Snape reached to open the door and gestured that Harry should lead the way out.

Downstairs, even more of Harry’s friends had gathered. Many wore sparkling pointed hats and glaringly bright robes, as if coming from other parties. Harry accepted a fizzing glass, the best seat on the couch, and tried to insist that, really, there was nothing of interest to tell about the French wizard prison.

Aaron sat across from him, looking older than Harry remembered him. He leaned toward Harry to ask, “Looking forward to stretching the ol’ wand out in training on Monday?”

Harry did not answer right away. He had been anticipating using his liberty to take care of the imposter and investigate Durumulna himself, and not much beyond that. In fact, he would prefer to have more time for those things.

His silence did not go unnoticed. Tonks, from her perch on the couch arm, speaking with Ginny, quieted and turned to listen.

“I don’t know,” Harry said.

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Aaron bent his head down. "I'd understand if you didn't come back."

Tonks bumped Harry with the back of her hand. "What's this?"

"I have to think about things," Harry announced, sitting back and sipping from his glass. The bubbles fizzing inside it were not spherical, but starburst shaped. They careened off the inside surface of the glass and each other, sometimes combining in little explosions.

The surrounding conversations remained muted a minute before starting up again.

The last of the spontaneous partygoers departed in the wee hours of the morning and a tired Harry glanced around the main hall. He thought he was alone, but Snape stood in shadow near the merrily fluttering hearth, watching him. His wand moved in the familiar arcs describing the usual anti-eavesdropping spells before he stepped into the orange light.

Snape examined his hands before saying, "I submit to you that tomorrow, Saturday, is not the best day to arrange the switch."

"Why's that?" Harry calmly asked, knowing he could gain the upper hand in an instant.

"Candide will be here. I suggest that Monday, when she will be at work all day, would be a better choice." His starkly lit chiseled gaze came up. "I assume you still wish her to remain incognizant of the situation?"

Harry wanted to fetch his guardian as soon as possible, but perhaps this would work out for the better. He could go tomorrow and warn Snape to be ready, and to make sure the notes were complete enough to execute the spell, then go back on Monday to assist with activating the Device. That would give him a chance to attend to some other things first, while he had the leeway to do so, a thought that appealed to him a little too much.

Sounding lightly disdainful, Snape said, "So, that meets with your approval? I have been led to believe that I can pass my teaching duties on to Lupin for stunningly weak pretenses."

Harry nodded. "We can do it Monday, unless there is no choice but to do it sooner." Harry strode away, turning on the stairs to say, "Don't enjoy your last two days too much."

Harry settled into a familiar bed in an unfamiliar room. Hedwig scratched at the window and he stood up to let her in, having lost the habit of using his wand. Hedwig had a bundle of letters for him. The top one was from Elizabeth. Harry put both of his pets in their cages and took the letters to bed to peruse.

As he read Elizabeth's letter, he felt relieved that she was isolated from the troubles in the magical world and would not lose faith in him since she was outside the normal wizarding world gossip. Her letter was written before she knew he had been

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released and her sympathy baldly reminded him of how much his living conditions had changed in mere hours. Harry sniffed the chilling air in the room and rubbed his eye. Despite exhaustion, notions of sleep eluded him.

The door cracked open, and a light rap sounded. Harry set the letters aside and shrugged to a sitting position just as the door creaked open. Snape glanced behind him before slipping inside.

Sounding wry and tired, Snape said, "It was suggested that I check on you."

Harry forced down a smile. "Yeah," he said, putting on an attitude for no really good reason. "So, now you have."

Meeting Harry's attitude with his own, Snape returned, "You're trying, but Slytherin does not fit you, truly. Your heart is not really in it."

"What does my heart have to do with it?" Harry smoothly asked.

Snape did not reply to this right away. He examined the wall and, putting his hand on the door handle, said to the ceiling, "Perhaps it is time to pass this whole thing on to someone better suited to it." In contrast to his words, he sounded disdainful.

"Oh, it is definitely time." Harry made as if he was bedding down to sleep and ignoring his visitor, but inside he worried what his Snape was going to think. If he found out. But he always seemed to find out.

The door clicked closed and Harry reached an arm out to crank down the wick on his bedside lamp.

Harry was woken by Candide peeking in the door and calling in a sing-song. "Harry, there are guests for breakfast, and we have been waiting on you. Winky will undoubtedly serve them another round of pomegranate Knut buns shortly, but they are hoping to see you."

Harry blinked painfully into the grey light from the window and scrubbed his eyes. Really, he must have just shut them and he wondered that his friends weren't all still abed themselves. "Be right there," he said, immediately thinking of all the things he needed to do that day, which got his blood moving nicely.

In the dining room he found his cousin, Pamela, accompanied by Lupin, settled in at the breakfast table. Pamela leaped up to greet him.

"Harry! So terrible what the wizards have put you through!"

"It was a misunderstanding," Harry said, returning her quick hug. "Well, not exactly... someone wanted it that way. But it will be straight soon enough."

"Soon enough?" Lupin echoed in surprise as Harry pulled out the chair across from him. A wondrous breakfast appeared, wondrous for being exactly what Harry normally had before he had been sent off.

As he sat there, Harry's curse sense bothered him in strange little surges. After the plain walls of his cell, the normal world felt confusing and busy, including the magic

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of it. Harry glanced casually around but the feeling came from directly across from him. Harry's eyes fell on Lupin's unnaturally long nails and hairy fingers. Perhaps it was Lupin himself that he sensed with his over-keyed perception.

Candide took a seat beside him and studied her plate and then Harry's. "At least I'm not the one getting overfed this morning. I swear Winky thinks I'm eating for four, not two."

"How are you doing?" Harry thought to ask.

She was concentrating on picking up her fork and knife as she replied, "Ready to be not pregnant anymore."

Across from her Pamela dropped her hands into her lap to adjust her napkin.

Harry was just wondering how to ask what was wrong when Snape slipped silently in, but declined to join them. Flatly, he said to Lupin, "I will be staying here on Monday, if you will see to things at Hogwarts."

"That will be fine," Lupin said, eyes flickering to Harry. "I'm expect you want to spend some time... at home."

Snape hesitated before replying, "Yes. Of course," in a tone that conflicted with his words.

Harry gave attention to his plate. Some weaker part of him wanted to feel sorry for the man, but he refused to allow it.

"Joining us?" Candide asked, sounding concerned.

"I think not," Snape replied. "Just fetching the paper." He slipped around to the sideboard.

"Is that a wizard newspaper?" Pamela asked.

Snape untied the distinctly edged scroll of the Daily Prophet, and glanced at the headline, before turning it over with acute interest. "Yes," he replied, distractedly.

"May I see it?" Pamela brightly asked. "Remus didn't think he should bring me a copy, something about avoiding charmed devices in Muggle houses."

Snape's eyes scanned the page back and forth before he held the paper out to her, expression unchanged. With a faint nod at Candide, he slipped out again, as silently as he had arrived.

Pamela held the newspaper up before her. "Look at that. The people are moving. And what silly hats everyone wears in the cold!"

Harry smiled faintly at her reaction and reached to serve himself more sausages. They were the super greasy kind that became solid and pasty once they cooled even a little. Even a French prison chef would not deign to serve such a thing. As he forked a few more, he glanced at the back of the Prophet, at Skeeter's column.

Exclusive Exposé! it read in bold letters. Distinguished & untarnished old moneyed wizard family's sordid past history...

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A chill passed over Harry. “Can I see that?” he asked his cousin.

“What? Oh yeah.” She quickly glanced through the other pages, even as she handed it over.

“You can have it back,” Harry reassured her as he laid the paper out beside his plate where the edge soaked up oil from the remains of his forgotten breakfast.

In muted letters after the gigantic title, it read: “...to be revealed in a special supplement to the Prophet tomorrow. Unveiled... a tawdry tale told through letters obtained by our intrepid reporter, Rita Skeeter. Infidelity! Deception! Do not miss the Sunday Prophet containing Part One of this five-part special investigation into the philandering past of a wizard many currently, and erroneously, believe to be above reproach.”

Harry handed the newspaper back, wondering whose life Skeeter was planning on ruining now. While he was in prison, she found herself another topic, apparently. He wouldn't mind ruining it for her, if possible.

Breakfast wound down. Harry sat back and patted his full stomach. Winky would most likely get her way and return him to his normal self in short order. Lupin slipped out, saying he needed to ask Snape a few things about the Seventh-Year syllabus, and Harry saw his chance.

“You should come see my new room,” Harry said to his cousin. “Candide did a wonderful job decorating.”

Harry waved that Candide should stay put. She misunderstood that he believed her physically challenged. “I can make it, Harry. I'm pregnant, not lame.”

Harry wanted to give her the Auror gesture for I want to talk to this person alone, but she would not understand it. He sighed and led the way.

In the bedroom, Kali set off a series of chimes as she climbed around in her cage.

“I like the rug,” Pamela said, rocking up and down on her toes. “Squishy and it looks less like a dungeon in here with it.”

Harry finished the quick tour, and asked his cousin, “Something wrong?”

“With me?” she blurted in surprise. “No.”

Candide drifted toward the door sending an apologetic smile back at Harry. Harry decided he would prefer she stay and gestured for her to return. She hung near the door.

Harry shrugged broadly, falling into a disinterested mode. “I only ask because I thought you looked unhappy at breakfast.”

“Oh.” A regretful ripple went through her pose and she looked away. “It's not something you should be worrying about, really.”

Harry waited. It was what his old man persona would have done. Pamela fidgeted more and spoke anyway. “It's just that...” Her voice dropped. “I want to marry

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Remus and he's having none of it. He pushes away, a lot, at the merest suggestion and..." She drifted off, strained. "I don't know."

From the doorway, Candide sighed. "I know how that goes."

Pamela laughed nervously and, after another pause, said to Harry, "I really don't know. I'm ready to give up. You've known Remus longer, but I don't get the sense you've really been close, or anything. So I hadn't bothered asking what you thought, even though I've been dying to ask someone." After another gap she added more harshly. "Maybe no one has."

Harry turned to Candide for help. Candide visibly took a deep breath and came back to them. "I admit that I don't know Remus all that well. And I don't want to seem insulting by guessing, so maybe we should have you over for a long dinner... ah, some night after Severus has returned to school, I wouldn't mind his input, but I've sensed a new animosity with him aimed at Remus..."

"Next Saturday would be good," Harry interjected. "I'll talk to Severus about behaving himself," he promised.

Candide sounded unconvinced. "You really think..."

"Yes."

Pamela snorted lightly. "You really don't have to get involved. It's not really your problem."

"Nonsense," Candide said, sounding chummy. "Things are quiet here and we could use a challenge."

Harry, stunned by her assertion of household peace, watched them depart. Before they could get out of earshot, Harry shook himself and said, "I'm going out."

Candide, arm now around Pamela's shoulder, turned outside the doorway. "Given how things have been going, I feel I should ask where you are going."

Harry bristled inwardly, but calmly said, "Just to say hi to some friends. I won't be long."

Alone in his room, Harry gathered up his nice cloak, which hung comfortably light on his shoulders. He also grabbed up his other cloak, the one from his father. Harry needed to check on his guardian, but before he knocked himself silly with the bone grinding and chilling transition between the Planes, he wanted to check on a few other things first. And since he was in a hurry, he was not going to be polite about it.

Under his invisibility cloak, Harry slipped in and out of the Dark Plane, directly into Belinda's flat. She had lied to the Auror's office about his visit the night of the murder and he wanted to discuss that with her, if not snoop around more.

Belinda was not home, but the flat was occupied. Two wizards sat before the television, sharing a bag of crisps. Their hair and features had the flat generic look

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of Durumulna. With food-flecked mouths, they laughed at the man talking on the screen, even though the scene was not amusing. A pile of plates and empty crisp wrappers littered the area around the base of the television stand. Harry listened to the incomprehensible commentary one offered the other about the program, while he decided how to proceed.

Tip toeing, Harry moved into place, noting where each of the men's wands were. Under the cloak he reached out and grabbed up one wand out of a back pocket. The man twisted and reached back in question, the cue for Harry to knock the other one into chain binding, and take up his wand from the floor where it fell. He used another chain binding charm on the first man and with one broad pull tugged the cloak off to reveal himself.

Confused motion turned to startled stillness as the pair recognized him. One of them expressed what must be a profanity as his eyes tracked Harry moving in closer to search them both. There was not much on them. Some pounds, and little note cards Harry could not read.

"Speak English?" Harry asked the nearest one. When there was no reply, he put his wand point just below his throat, where the bones formed a notch, and asked again.

"Yes," came the eager reply.

"Using this flat as a safehouse, are you?" Harry guessed. When he got a nod in reply, Harry narrowed his gaze. "You better not be bothering Belinda," Harry said, mind leaping to worst case scenarios.

The man rapidly shook his head. "No, no, no. She is not to be touched. We are clear on that."

"Who made you clear on that?" Harry asked. There was no reply, and Harry could see in his gaze only a murky figure bleeding through damaged memories.

Harry swore lightly himself and wondered what he should do with them. He did not want to turn them in, just yet, nor did he want them to tell anyone he had been there, talking to them.

Harry smiled faintly as he thought of a plan. Pressing his wand into the man's solar plexus, which made him shrink away, Harry said, "So, you've been shaking down the shopkeepers on Diagon Alley, eh?"

The man glanced at his cohort before saying, "Mostly Knockturn Alley."

"How much have you collected?" Harry demanded. "I want to know how profitable this venture is."

"Profitable?" came the dull echo.

"I want to know if it's worth my cutting in," Harry impatiently explained.

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The man's tone did not come back into focus. "You want in? Harry Potter wants in?"

"What else you think I'm goin' to do? They sent me to prison, the Ministry did. I didn't like that so much," he added, thinking he should probably try to sound less like a film villain.

"Oh. Yeah." The man agreed.

Harry made the point of his wand clear again. "I want a cut of what you're getting."

"A cut? You want part of our share?" the other man exploded. "You think we get to keep much ourselves?"

"I don't care," Harry snapped. "I'm getting in on this, or I haul you both into the Ministry."

The man shut his mouth which had remained hanging open. Harry spoke more calmly. "Or you can do something more for me. You can introduce me to someone who can get me in where the money is a little better. I expect I'm worth it."

The two men stared at each other. "What'll it be?" Harry asked. "Ministry? Money? Or an introduction to your contact?"

"Yer, yer, going to have to prove yourself, you know," the man said, suddenly exhibiting a stutter. His face had turned red and bloated from lying on the floor in a tight binding, reminding Harry of Neville.

"I don't have any problem with that," Harry said pleasantly. "None at all." He aimed his wand back and forth at each of them while toying with their wands in his other hand. "I'll come back on... Wednesday, noon. I expect an introduction to be set up by then. If not, your trip to the Ministry dungeon will be long and roundabout and you will be very grateful when you finally arrive. Got it?" He stared hard at each of them. Not surprisingly, neither had decided quite what to do. "Got it?" Harry nearly shouted, thinking a little unbalanced craziness would play in his favor, and frankly, he needed the chance to vent.

They both nodded rapidly. Harry stepped back and said, "You owe me now," and released their bindings. He tossed their wands behind him near the bedroom door, pulled the cloak over his head and slipped into the Dark Plane, leaving them to concoct their own explanations about how he had departed.

Feeling good about how that turned out, Harry Apparated and slipped back into the real world on a narrow lane, beneath a decoratively written, crossed sign designating Heatherlick Lane and Battle Bridge Approach. At the end of the canyon-like lane with its crooked gas lamps, Muggle traffic hummed past, unaware.

Still invisible, Harry fell into step behind a witch pushing a pram, hoping she turned in at Number 55, a soot stained brick structure with heavy rusty bars on the

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ground floor windows. In contrast to the rundown building, the doors were thick glass protected by swirl-patterned brass, polished to a glitter. The first pair of doors parted for the woman and Harry followed, mincing to keep from getting pinched by the doors closing behind him.

The squeaky wheels of the pram were quickly drowned out by the noise of the front offices of the Daily Prophet. Clacking and humming filled the air as visitors queued at various windows for placing adverts, ordering bronzed back copies and collecting post from their Which Match Secret Admirer boxes. Beneath the chattering noise of the hall an incessant thrum came up through the floor. The glass walls around the wickets allowed Harry to see everything, but he did not see a way into the rest of the building. He wanted to check his suspicions about Skeeter's article and, given his skills, this should be easy, but while patrol had brought him around the outside of the building many times, he had never been inside.

Beneath his cloak, Harry frowned, frustrated. He would have to try something else. He followed a dallying young couple to the doors. They leaned heavily on each other, even resting their heads together. A glance showed they had wandered over from the Announcements: Births, Deaths, Weddings, Elf Ownership window. They were so dreamy, Harry himself had to give them a light shove to get the second set of doors to trigger open. Rolling his eyes inside his cloaked world, Harry took off to pace around the building, intending to finding a way inside.

As he strolled, passing one painted-over window after another, something flickered from the second floor, like a curtain fluttering out an open window. Smiling to himself, Harry slipped away to his room intending to collect his broomstick, but he forgot which room was his, and he silently inverted into the baby's room. The pale greens and grey-checked matching ruffles on the basinet and curtains brought Harry to a halt, feet rocking on the edge of the thickly corded spiral of the muted green rug.

Harry took a deep breath, starkly reminded that all was not well at home and that he needed to get his Snape back again. Torn between his desire to get even with Skeeter and his desire to check on his guardian, Harry hung there on the rug edge for half a minute. If he waited, his guardian's influence might make him forgo using all his powers to snoop around without warrant. Harry bit his lip. He would give it just one quick try, then he would be off. In any event, arriving with the sun higher would be better for his recovery on the other side, if he could not think of a safe hearth to land at.

Feeling better about that excuse than the other, Harry presently returned to the alley beside the Prophet building. He rode his broom up to the second floor and found the source of the thrumming. Occupying the entire rear half of the building was a massive, complicated, steam-belching, printing press. The familiar newspaper

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parchments were shuttled, flipped, and sent flying around the space before settling down and arranging themselves in a neat column that drifted down into the dark depths of the basement.

A figure in a sweat-stained, white shirt hunched over the controls of a great lever arm shuttling at a blinding pace over a broad roller. His hovering chair drifted dangerously close to the cranking metal. The man wiped his brow with an ink stained rag and tweaked a control.

Not spying any Apparation landing spots inside, Harry maneuvered into position to raise the window far enough to slip through, but it would not budge. From under his cloak he pulled out his wand and rather than risk setting off a spell alarm on the window, sent a heating charm at the man. The man appeared to heave a great groan, inaudible over the din, and sopped his forehead again. He hooked a stretched rubber band over the largest control knob, and pushed his chair to fly over to the window. There was a metallic clack as he unbarred it, then with Harry's invisible help, the window shot up, fully open.

Harry had to grab his broom with a jerking motion and veer away as the man leaned out to catch the cool winter air in fish-like gasps. Inside, the rhythm of the machine changed ominously, a teeth rattling vibration threatened, and the man heaved up and pushed away, leaving the opening clear.

Harry sailed inside, skillfully weaving through the streams of parchment shooting in all directions, to come to rest on a high landing beside a lift. He stopped at each floor, hoping no one noticed the empty lift moving about, sometimes cramming himself back into the cage's corner and sucking in his breath to stay out of the way. He found Skeeter's office on the second-to-the-top floor. The walls everywhere were glass, but the blinds on her office were drawn firmly closed on the inside, and based on the dim light, the office was most likely empty. The massive gaudy gold door lock that must have needed a key only Hagrid could pocket, did not yield to the first spell Harry tried and merely attempting it set off his curse sense, so he minced off to the next office area and waited to be certain he had not set off any alarms. When nothing happened, Harry slid back along the corridor, peeking around the edges of the slats. He could just make out a narrow office with crowded, bowing bookshelves stuffed with leaning stacks of papers and a small desk, equally buried.

When he had a good enough vision of the office, Harry slipped inside using the Dark Plane, and stood perfectly still, nerves keyed up in case of attack from a protective spell. Just below the ceiling, all around, hung a long row of stoic, stone masks that set Harry's teeth on edge. The eyeholes of the faces stood empty, revealing the shadowed wall behind, but they did not feel empty.

Keeping his cloak close around him, Harry carefully circled the desk. Skeeter's

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familiar, narrow, ringed notebooks littered the area, stacked meticulously front to back. Heart beating in time with the thrumming in the floor, Harry tediously searched with just his eyes. On a low shelf beside the desk, he finally spotted a draft proof of the article from that morning's paper. It lay curled on something smaller underneath. Using the cloak, he tugged that aside, letting it drift to the floor. Under it lay a bundle of letters, secured with a great golden clip sporting a jewel-winged dragonfly. Harry again, through the cloak, picked up the bundle and his curse sense went wild, making him duck instinctively, which was limited by his closely held broomstick. A mad buzzing filled the air, the bundle tried to take flight from his hand and Harry slipped through the floor and away, tugging the bundle through with him only by gripping it with all his strength.

In the grey stillness of the underworld, Harry examined the bundle, torn clean in half where the charmed clip had kept hold. It was a collection of love letters, written in a stunningly fine hand, and addressed and signed in pet names. They were dated more than thirty years ago, and postmarked from various places around England, but mostly the village near where Lord Freeland had his estate.

Harry held his broom tight and slipped back home, directly into the main hall. He tossed off his invisibility cloak, set his broom against the couch and paced once, thinking rapidly about what he should do. Skeeter's article was probably running on the presses right that instant. Should he go back and break the works to delay publication? He really did not have time to deal with this; he yearned to see to his guardian.

"I have yet to get used to your method of ingress and egress," a distressingly familiar voice intoned from the door to the library.

Harry stopped pacing and waited while Snape approached, gracing him with intent scrutiny before seeming disinterested, that was, until he saw what Harry held in his hand.

"Where did you get those?" Snape asked, sounding vaguely stunned.

Harry waved the broken packet. "Skeeter's office. I feared I knew whose life she was trying to ruin and I think I was right."

There was an odd pause. "And why would you care?"

"Lord Freeland is my benefactor. He's offered me help in the past."

"Ah." Snape said, clasping his hands before him, which brought his broad sleeves to a deep point. "The letters are fake. I planted them on Ms. Skeeter to damage her standing in the wizard community and with her employer."

Harry stared down at the letters. "But Freeland was having an affair..."

"Well, not with this witch... who never actually existed."

"You think Skeeter'd fall for that?"

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Snape's sounded smug. "I believe she already has."

Harry huffed. "I should have grabbed hold of a copy of tomorrow's paper while I was there. The presses were running and I didn't even think of it."

"That is most likely the evening edition, in any event," Snape said, holding out his hand for the letters.

Harry stared at Snape's elegant, open hand, which conflicted so strongly with the scruffy rest of him. Harry held the ragged bundle in reach and let go of it. "I didn't mean to ruin your plans," he said, feeling torn about the situation.

Snape thumbed through the letter halves. "Oh, you have not. This is a far better outcome that I did not think could be arranged. Her office is considered impenetrable, protected by artifacts she reputedly purchased from an illegal dealer in Tazmanian talismanic objects." He put the letters in his pocket. Sounding almost pleasant, he added, "Now she has no evidence, which makes her position all the more precarious."

Harry said, "I'm all for Skeeter getting her due. But I don't like you messing with the lives of people I care about. You have an annoying habit that way."

"I did not realize. I thought him a safe target. My former colleagues knew the blackmail possibilities on every significantly rich or powerful witch and wizard, and I believed him blameless and able to take the scrutiny. But you tell me he cannot."

"Aaron's his son, in fact."

"Really?" Snape said, sounding amused by this gossip.

Harry said, "I just hope Skeeter isn't onto the real truth."

"He can withstand it if she is," Snape drawled, sounding bored.

"You could have told me what you were doing."

"I was getting even as part of a personal battle, well out of your purview, or so I believed. In any event, including this in a letter would have been problematic... you and I do not share any code I could utilize. "

"We share all kinds of codes, you just don't trust that we do," Harry snipped. "And on that topic, I'm going to check on my adoptive father. Cover for me if you would." Harry started to turn away to fetch a sweet snack, which he hoped would make it easier to recover from the cold on arrival. But he stepped back to ask, "Where's Candide?"

"Napping," Snape replied smoothly.

"Behave yourself," Harry said, tempted to reinforce the point.

"Please," Snape breathed, insulted sounding.

"And get ready to leave, because you're going back soon."

At that, Snape lost his annoyance and a haunted something drifted into his gaze.

"You don't look ready," Harry said, trying not to feel anything.

"There is little hope in that place, you must admit."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

“It’s better than when you left, for what it’s worth. You’re living at Grimmauld Place now.”

Snape crossed his arms and smirked. “With Potter and his Merry Band I suppose.”

“Yes. It’s safer than before, for you. Don’t complain.” Harry pointed rudely in Snape’s face. “Pretend you deserve the assistance, because if you want a place like this one, you have to earn it.”

Snape pushed Harry’s hand away, but gently. Voice low, he said, “If you don’t think I’ve been sacrificing for longer than you’ve been alive, you are badly mistaken.”

Harry stepped back, remembered he could use a wand, and Accioed the treat jar from the kitchen. He took a handful out before leaving the jar on the nearest end table. “Your journey’s not over yet,” Harry said, then feeling a stab of regret, added, “That’s just the way it is. I’m sorry.”

Mouth full of biscuit, Harry Apparated to his room to fetch his notes, which he found in the bottom of his trunk where he had left them, folded into the back of his first Potions text book. With these firmly secured in his breast pocket, he finished the last of his snack and slipped away for greyer surroundings.



Harry checked the age spell on his hands, and brushed his beard out as he stood before the door at Grimmauld Place. Cold to the bone and with his joints as stiff as if they were full of treacle, he leaned on the railing, like an old man would. The transition between the Planes had been the worst yet. Something odd had caught his attention just as the crushing of the In Between reached its peak, and that distraction drew him back, lengthening the agony. Shaking off uncertain impressions of dark human figures, Harry breathed in the welcome reality of the quiet square boxed in by smoggy air. It was more than smoggy, the breeze smelled scorched, like hot concrete and burned plastic. But the square appeared the same, albeit more decrepit in the hazy light. Harry sensed the usual handful of Death Eaters hiding nearby, ever watchful. The door cranked open before Harry could decide if he had the strength for some mischief in the Death Eaters’ direction. Hermione stood in the doorway, brushing the hair out of her face. She smiled at him in welcome, just like normal. “Hey, it’s you. Come on in.”

Harry bowed, and found it difficult to re-straighten his painful back. At least he need not worry about forgetting to act his part. Hermione led the way inside to the dining room, where the scent of bread overwhelmed the mildewed drapes. Hermione bit her lip once, as if in anticipation, but that made little sense.

FREE BIRD

“Mr. Snape, someone to see you.”

Snape stood by the sideboard, explaining something to Neville while drawing on a well-used parchment. He turned and caught Harry’s gaze and his expression fell away into blank relief. Neville moved aside and Snape met Harry halfway along the table. “You made it,” he said, sounding as emotional as Harry had ever heard him. Snape’s eyes took in his bent posture. “Have a seat, you must... have traveled a long way.”

Harry gratefully lowered his sore body into the offered chair. Snape did not release his shoulder as he sat beside him.

“What happened?” Snape sharply asked.

The others in the room gathered closer. Harry managed a small smile for his guardian and decided it was safe to say, “Sorry I’m late. I ended up in L’île de Cachot Méfait.” His voice sounded hoarser than he intended.

“You ended up where?” Snape said, hand gripping harder.

“Where’s that?” Ron asked, and Hermione whispered, “It’s the French magical prison.”

Snape did not wait for a response. “Dare I ask how that came to pass?”

Harry read the double meaning to the question and nodded. “I was framed for murder, but some friends arranged for my removal with some, shall we say, dubious counteractions of their own.”

Snape said, “So, we have some straightening up to do.”

“Just a bit,” Harry said, so pleased to be there speaking with his guardian, he imagined everything would be set to right soon enough.

Hermione approached. “Would you like a bite of something, or tea? We haven’t cleaned up from lunch yet.”

Harry held up his hand. What he really wanted was a scorching hot bath, but asking for that felt awkward. “I’m fine, young lady. Really. They treated me rather well in prison, all things considered. Twelve course dinners with the warden and such.”

Ginny, still leaning against the wall nibbling on the remains of the heels left on the bread tray, made a painful noise and said, “Can we get arrested by the French?”

Harry turned back to Snape. “I just came to check on you. To make sure you were all right.”

Snape finally released him and knitted his fingers together. “I am quite all right. The situation with the Muggle rebellion groups has grown worse of late, but we are still quite safe here. And how are things where you came from? Are they holding up despite your not being there to look after them, having fallen into disreputation the way you did.”

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It had been a while since Harry had been teased. He smiled faintly and voice weaker than he would like, said, "Things are holding up fine. But, I should get back."

"You are leaving again already?" Snape blurted. A few of the others also expressed surprise.

"I have things I have to do, Severus," Harry said.

"Not in your condition you do not."

Harry stretched his neck. "It's true that the journey here was... more difficult than expected. But I didn't intend to be gone long. I didn't leave things set for that. I'll return tomorrow or the next day, I promise."

Snape insisted on remaining in charge. "You should simply remain until then. Rest yourself."

Harry had not considered that. He had been in too much of a rush to check on his guardian and bring the notes. "I have things to attend to. No one is expecting my absence."

"What did you tell others before departing?"

"Er, I said I had things to think over, given recent events."

Sounding unusually fraught, Snape leaned closer and said, "Then you can easily claim you simply took more time to do your thinking. Stay, Ha-Aaron."

The way Snape botched his name, it came out "Heron" like the bird.

Harry put aside the issue of his staying or not. He felt for the spell notes in his pocket and hesitated speaking.

Snape, ever perceptive, said, "Something you would like to discuss in private?"

Harry nodded and assumed the two of them would depart, but everyone else quickly took the hint and left them alone. When the door clicked closed, Harry observed, "You are getting along here, Severus."

"Things have improved," Snape admitted. "Desperation leaves them little choice." Then more quietly added, "And me as well."

Harry pulled out the bundle of notes and smoothed them on the table between them. "I copied everything out of the book that seemed relevant to executing the spell. If it isn't everything, I can try bringing the book itself, but I didn't want to risk losing it."

Snape read the notes, flipping each page behind the others.

Harry remembered being marked on his essays, and hoped this one passed more than any before. He said, "I expect I can help, since I do this all the time."

Snape nodded distractedly and read through the pages again. "There are only two sections that are not clear to me. I assume you transcribed this exactly?" He pointed at a diagram, where a dome of spell energy rose out of the Device. Harry

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had been forced to verbatim copy out ink-faded symbols he did not recognize, some kind of modified zodiac signs.

Harry nodded. Snape found a pen. "Could it have been this instead?" Snape wrote out something in the margin.

"It could. It wasn't clear."

"That's an alchemical symbol. This whole string is. It may be the spell incantation. I cannot think what else it may be." Beneath each one, Snape wrote out phonetics, then held the parchment out to examine it. He shrugged lightly, a surprisingly easy-going response to the situation. He glanced sideways at Harry. "We may be relying on you a bit."

"I'll manage," Harry said, determined.

Snape put the parchments away and set the quill on the edge of a stray plate, even though the table was already stained and burned. "Stay, Aaron. You will need your strength for the spell."

"Afraid I won't come back?" Harry tried to tease, but he was too worn down, so it just came out hopeless.

"I spent the last weeks trying to imagine arranging a life here. I do not wish to do so. I am too soft for this place, too tired of the fight, not to mention too involved elsewhere."

Harry bent over his hands. "And there are new problems too. I'm in trouble with people who don't play nice."

"My duty is to be there helping you. I think I've earned that right." Snape stood and offered Harry a hand up. "I am not going to allow you to depart, so why don't you rest and recover while I research a few things from your notes in the rather interesting book collection Ms. Granger has been slowly pilfering from the London Wizard Library."

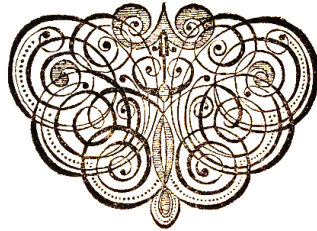
Harry accepted the offered hand and winced as his knees complained, chasing away his last stubborn thoughts of leaving. "All right."

"Thank you for coming back," Snape said, deeply sincere.

Harry snorted lightly. "Like I could stay away."

Author's Notes: Yup, huge break. Life just got to be too much and this had to give. Back on track again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



SUBSTITUTE HEROES

Upstairs in Grimmauld Place, in the room Snape shared with Lupin, Harry sat on the end of the bed, hunched in the enveloping folds of his charm-warmed cloak. The cold spiking his marrow was slow to ease, and it perniciously drained his strength.

“No ill effects from prison?” Snape asked. He moved about the room pulling potion bottles from the shelves and mixing in a cold cauldron. “You truly were treated well?”

Harry shrugged and nodded reassuringly. Voice still rough, he said, “They were perfectly polite – well, one guard was a bit of an arse...” He shrugged again to dismiss this complaint. He had lots of things he wanted to say, but they were undoubtedly being watched if not listened in on. He waited and took his cue from Snape for what to discuss.

Snape used a match to light the burner under a cauldron. Harry blinked at that. “Want to borrow my wand?”

Snape shook his stringy hair. “It’s all right. I’ve learned to live without.”

Harry laughed in a bark. “Ha! Have you now? No more mocking me for my Muggle ways, Severus.”

Snape’s warm gaze slid over to him, nearly obscured by his unkempt hair.

More soberly, Harry said, “You look like a Potions Master again.”

“You make that sound like it’s a bad thing,” Snape drawled.

Harry hunched over and better wrapped his cloak around himself, wondering if he should renew the charm. Perhaps the room itself was cold.

“The hearth’s not lit,” Harry commented.

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Snape drew out the stirring stick several times, testing the viscosity. He said, “We have to ration wood.”

“Why?”

“There is a shortage of just about everything. Partly it is the chaos outside, partly poor organization inside exacerbated by a shifting of roles. Procurement of supplies is gradually improving, but this is a rather large house, with many hearths to feed. The logs there on the grate are for the early morning. Someone usually comes in and warm the walls and floor with a spell after breakfast. That helps.”

“They need to get Kreecher on their side,” Harry observed. He pulled out his wand and warmed the walls himself, thinking it wise to skip the wall covered in potion-laden shelves. He then sat, hunched more, waiting for the brewing to complete on what he hoped was a Bone-Toasting Draught, if there was such a thing.

Snape’s hand endlessly circled, alternately stirring and testing the potion. Harry closed his eyes and, like he had done so many times in prison, reached out in his inward world and... stopped cold, stunned silly.

The forest of Harry’s mind hummed with Death Eaters, hundreds of them, perhaps a thousand or more. In his inner vision he huddled, small, amidst this dark star-scape, fixed in place by his own amazement. The few dozen servants that bolstered him in prison were a club team in comparison. Wanting to better know, to better feel, he stretched out to touch the shadows, and was over-swept by a headlong surge of potential strength. As his mind latched onto a few shadows here, it slipped away from others there, only to slip free again and rush in another direction, wave tossed, unable to find anchor, at the same time taunted and overwhelmed by the aura of obscene power. Harry had no defenses against the rush and retreat of this extra-sensory onslaught. He lost track of his physical self and slumped to the floor, inert.

Harry was dimly aware of Snape lifting him up and resting him on the bed, of hurried motion and quiet, adamant words. A hand brushing his hair back gave him the sensory harbor he needed to let go of that other world.

Snapped back to his senses, Harry opened his eyes. “It’s all right,” he insisted. Snape had taken up Harry’s wand and currently sat with it aimed at Harry’s heart. “I’m all right.”

With a sudden motion, Snape stood and went about the room, picking up seemingly random objects: a crystal ball, a conch shell, a figurine of a girl with dog. With these bundled in the crook of his arm, he opened the door and stopped short because Hermione stood there.

Hermione saw what he held and put her hands out. “I was just coming for...”

Snape rolled the things into her arms. She smiled sheepishly and headed downstairs. Snape closed the door with a satisfying snap and ran a series of anti-snooping

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spells before returning to Harry's side. His manic energy waned and he deliberately placed Harry's wand under his pillow, sticking out an inch for easy reach.

Sounding wry, Snape said, "Given their theories about us, I would hope they would not eavesdrop, but I wished to be certain." He felt Harry's forehead. "It is a good thing you did not try to return immediately; who knows what would have happened to you."

Harry closed his eyes, staying within himself this time, and tried not to laugh aloud. He rested that way, wishing the cold would finish easing, and wondering what it would feel like to connect thoroughly to such a legion of servants. It seemed too much really. How would one keep track of them all?

The bed rocked straight as Snape stood to tend the potion, which bubbled noisily. Harry opened his eyes and peered around the room, vigorously resisting reaching out to test the closest shadows. Snape returned with a cup of watery violet liquid that glowed faintly and gave off a metallic odor. "Try to drink that as hot as you are able," Snape said.

Harry had to switch hands quickly on the hot cup to hold it by the handle. All he could manage was one searing sip at a time, but his limbs warmed nicely.

Snape watched him drink before saying, "I'm going to fetch some books from Ms. Granger."

Minutes later, Hermione followed Snape back into the room, accompanied by a hovered stack of odorous leather-bound, monstrous volumes. Hermione was saying, "I don't think you'll find much on advanced diagramming in those. I can go search the collection for others, if you like." She gave disguised Harry an embarrassed smile when she saw him reclining there on the bed. Harry immediately put his feet down on the floor and sat up.

Snape said, "The library is open?"

"I have a key," Hermione said. "Technically, the library is only open two hours a week now and the time always changes. My library card shows the time for each week Sunday at midnight." She put her hands in her pockets and rocked up on her toes. "If you told me a bit more, I could probably help..."

Snape opened and bent over the top book, hair obscuring his face. Harry said, "I can go along to the library."

"Feeling up to it?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded, and stroked his beard, constantly worried it might have faded away. "You look through those and I'll accompany Her- Ms. Granger." Harry stood creakily, and fetched his wand from under the pillow in a quick motion. This also embarrassed Hermione, who stepped to the door.

"I'll be downstairs when you're ready to go."

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“I’m ready now,” Harry said, reminding himself to make his voice hoarser. Hermione shrugged and departed the room. To his guardian, Harry said, “I’ll be back.”

“Do be careful.”

Harry hesitated, thinking that very good advice, but not at all in the way he suspected Snape intended it.

“I’ll try.”



The London Wizard Library stood like an oversized Victorian shanty in an apparently large open courtyard of a boring glass office block. Hermione stopped in the dimness of the portal leading in and examined the area, wand twitching in her fingertips. The low clouds rendered the scene mute and of indeterminate time of day. Harry’s curse sense buzzed in the back of his rib cage. He focused on that, rather than the shadows dancing around him. He closed his eyes for just an instant, just long enough to swallow a charged flutter of breath-sucking reach and power. None flitted too near to them so he had no good excuse to remain in their tantalizing presence. Really, he could not risk getting overwhelmed again. If his disguise should fade when he could not renew it or use a memory charm on Hermione, things would get quite complicated.

Harry must have made a strange noise when he reached inward because Hermione patted his arm and said, “You going to make it?”

At Harry’s nod, she turned back to waiting for an employee towing a dust bin to finish rumbling it off through the opposite portal, where it echoed louder momentarily before fading.

“Clear?” Harry asked. He wanted to say that he thought it was clear, but deferred to her familiarity with this errand.

Hermione nodded, causing her hair to bob in the usual manner. She marched across the grey courtyard that was dotted with concrete benches and concrete planters. But instead of heading for the carved double doors of the entrance, she paced around to the back, fishing in her pocket as she went. With practiced ease she pulled out the oversized key and let them both in a large battered door with smaller owl doors mounted in the face of it.

Harry was glad her practiced movements continued and the lamps came up quickly, because his curse sense was setting his back painfully straight. They stood in an over filled storage room. Thousands of books teetered in piles growing out of crates. Crates had been tipped sideways to form makeshift shelves beside real metal shelves. Owl cages hung crooked and empty from the wall over the door, cobwebs between them.

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Hermione bent to the crate placed beside the door. "These are the ones I'm supposed to take next," she said.

"Take?" Harry said, feet glued to the spot by his instinctive alarm.

"I'm a member of Friends Of Obscure Libraries. That's why I have a key. With things getting bad, the libraries have been trying to disperse the collections to save them from destruction. So, the next lot to be taken to a safe place are put in this crate." She tapped her hand on the splintery wood.

Harry peered into the crate. "Several of these are cursed," he said, preferring if she did not take those.

Hermione stood on tiptoe to better see inside. "They are?"

Harry glanced around the room, making his feet move in what had to be a dangerous direction. "Lots of these are. This whole shelf is," he added, peering along a line of especially rugged bindings that nonetheless had taken a long-term beating.

Hermione, coming up beside him, gasped and grabbed Harry's sleeve in her fingertips. "What are these doing here?" she whispered. One of the books shuffled on the shelf and fell still. More quietly, she said, "These are supposed to be in the vault. Actually, in the special vault in the vault." Her hair swung as she glanced around. "It's not safe like that."

Harry gave the shelf a good eying, like he would the creatures in the Dark Plane, insisting they behave.

"It's a trap," Hermione murmured, tugging Harry backwards by the small corner of robe she still pinched.

"It's all right, stand over there," Harry commanded. "Keep your wand up." He scavenged around the room until he found an unused metal shelf. This he mounted across the front of the dangerous row of books. While the hot metal from his welding spell pinged and the glow faded, Harry blew across his wand and gave Hermione a satisfied grin, which, since she did not know him, made her dubious rather than amused.

Harry said, "You are correct that it isn't safe here. I would guess the scheme of your Library Friends has been compromised."

"Fools," she said.

"That's a little harsh," Harry said. "Things are tough."

"No, I mean F.O.O.L.s. That's our acronym."

"Ah," Harry said, not having anything to add. He shook himself. "I still want to look for the books we need. If you want to go, that would be fine," Harry added, thinking he could more easily slip out alone than with her.

Rattled, but as brave as expected, she said, "No, I'll help you look." She started in on the crate by the door, gingerly pulling out a book and opening it. "Just warn

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me if anything cursed is going to try to take my face off.”

“It won’t while I’m here,” Harry said, trying to reassure her.

She studied him, too closely, such that a flicker of strange recognition crossed the lines around her eyes. “That’s interesting. Why is that?”

“Just an effect I have on them,” Harry assured her, quickly bending over a book away from her.

Two hours later, Hermione stretched her neck and blew her fringe clear of her eyes. “I don’t have a key into the main library, but we could probably get in. Most of the good books have been dispersed already or are in here waiting to be.” She gave the dangerous shelf a worried glance.

Harry stepped over a makeshift pile that formed a wall in the middle of the room. “We found three; that’s more than I thought we would.” Worried about his disguise holding out, he said, “We should go. Given that your Friends have been found out, we are pushing our luck staying this long.” He faced her, putting his hands on her arms. “Don’t come back here again. This is a trap.” He gestured at the trunks. “Take what you must, now and don’t return.”

Cobwebs clung to the hair she pushed back out of her eyes. “That would be all of them.”

Harry smirked. “Try to be more choosy than that.”

The two of them ferried books to the attic of Grimmauld Place for three quarters of an hour, until upon returning to the office block after one overburdened run, Harry’s sense of shadows advancing made him grab Hermione before she could step out into the courtyard. He pulled her backwards into an alcove of the concrete portal and waved a spell to obscure their hiding place.

“What-?”

“Shh,” Harry said, arm tight around Hermione’s smaller frame. Her back moved against him as she breathed, rapidly. Footsteps approached, the kind made by hard leather soles of business shoes. A Muggle.

Harry did not like the turn this was taking. He waved a darkening charm, which sucked the daylight out of the open entryway to the expansive courtyard. He then transfigured the dead leaves collected in the corners into hand-sized spiders and sent them scurrying out to the pavement.

“Gah!” came the expression of horror followed by running feet.

Harry hoped the man slipped away before what must be a dragnet closed around them. So many shadows approached, Harry worried that a broad Apparition barrier may already be in place.

In a very quiet voice, Hermione asked, “What are we waiting for?”

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“I suspect we cannot Apparate away, and-” He stopped as she made a delicate series of movements in the cramped space. The resulting spell gave off a puff of smoke that swirled in a tetrahedron. She shook her head. Harry held her more firmly, and said to her, “Whatever happens, do not let go of me.”

She nodded and sucked in a breath that may have been a snuffle. Harry bent to her ear. “I am curious what they are doing. I can’t imagine all this trouble just for us.”

“All what trouble?” But before Hermione’s whisper faded, she jerked back against Harry in surprise. Out of thin air, Portkeying into the courtyard, appeared legions of Death Eaters. Harry’s gasp of dizzy mental surprise was fortunately completely excusable.

The hooded figures, long cloaks flowing around them and snapping when they moved, paid no attention to the alcove behind them. Harry quickly added a series of masking spells to their hiding place, easy to add because he could bridge them across the concrete edges boxing them in.

Without any coordination the figures threw spells at the library, causing it to glow at the edges of every board and window pane. The spells hiding it from Muggle eyes failed in a burst that shattered the windows on the library and some on the office block. Glass rained like hail. The spells changed and the glow tightened, narrowed, until, with an ear-splitting creak and crash the building imploded.

The crowd of Death Eaters expressed only one or two notes of victory. A smaller group formed near the rubble and set fire to it. The dry wood caught easily and soon the grey evening sky fell darker in comparison to the rising inferno. The Death Eaters backed away. Some departed. More windows on the office building shattered.

Muggle sirens trickled out of the distance and the Death Eaters began leaving en masse. Harry waited until the fire personnel pushed their way through the crowd gawking from the relative safety of the portal’s overhang, their hosepipes keeping a path clear behind them. He cancelled the spells keeping the two of them boxed in, and they slipped away in the crowded confusion and dazzling firelight.

“You were gone quite a while,” Snape said when they finally returned to the Grimmauld Place dining room, empty handed for that round.

“We pushed our luck too far,” Harry amiably said, trying not to feel anything. He could not afford to care about this place. It would overwhelm him.

Hermione remained quiet upon their return. She went to the tea service and with calm hands made herself a cup and sat down to cradle it, not drinking. Neville tracked her doing this and said, “What happened?”

This drew everyone else’s attention.

Hermione cleared her throat. “They destroyed the library.”

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Lupin turned from helping Lavender put a spell on her mittens. “They did? Guess it was just a matter of time.”

Hermione raised her worn gaze to futilely seek hope in every other face in the room, one at a time. Unconsoled, she returned to studying her teacup.

Harry tipped his head subtly toward the door, indicating he wanted to talk to Snape alone. Snape followed him up to the room, where Harry dropped tiredly onto the bed. “Things really are a mess here,” he said. “I saw more Death Eaters this afternoon in one place than I believed existed before.”

Snape turned to peer out the window, not replying. “What are you thinking?” Harry asked. When he received no reply, he added, “I want to get... can we talk safely?”

Without turning around, Snape replied, “I removed all the spying devices. Go ahead.”

“I want to get you out of here,” Harry said. “It’s going to be difficult waiting until Monday when Candide won’t be around to notice.”

Snape nodded, but did not turn. From below, scents of dinner wafted up, making Harry’s insides churn needfully. He stroked his beard and found it felt thinner. “Can you check my disguise?”

Snape approached, thoughts clearly far away. But he renewed Harry’s wrinkles and his beard. Harry took his wand back and redid his own hands. He said, “You aren’t having second thoughts...?”

Snape shook his head. “I am trying to find hope, any assurance that the odds of success are better than zero... I have not yet managed it. This place well exceeds my inadequate aptitude for finding a bright spot.”

Harry put his hands in his pockets to protect them against the chill and gave Snape a wry smile. “Mine too, I’m afraid.”



Snape peered across the nightly feast filling the dinner table at his “wife”. Her normally conversational demeanor had taken a holiday, making Snape wonder if she was beginning to suspect something was amiss. An newly emerging spoiled part of him wished her to know the truth, but his agreement with Harry kept that idea firmly in check. The young man would not be pleased, and Snape had little desire to cross him so blatantly. He did not fear Harry, exactly – only true cruelty was worth fearing, and Harry was not that. But his quick temper, previously impotent at being expressed in any significant manner, had found a dangerous conduit in this place.

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Snape contemplated an appropriate comment for many minutes before saying. “May I ask what is troubling you?”

“What? Oh. I’m just worried about Harry.”

Snape hoped that was the extent of it. Perhaps it was the majority of it. Reassuringly, he said, “He told me he needed to think things through. I am certain this is merely his quandary over whether to continue on at the Ministry.” He made a point of returning to eating, trying hard not to feel jealous of this moment ahead of time. Such meals would become extremely rare very shortly, and the memories of them painful.

“Why can’t he think here?” Candide asked, piqued.

Snape put the quick emotion down to hormones and replied, “Perhaps he grew accustomed to being alone.” He gestured at the hall behind her. “You saw how many of his friends were here and how many continue to stop by.”

“Including Tonks, who should know where he is,” Candide insisted.

Snape shrugged dramatically, truly wanting her to let it drop so he could better have her attention. “Possibly he is rethinking that too,” he insinuated. “Harry is fine. I am certain. He is more than capable of taking care of himself.”

“True. The way he flits in and out of places, without even bothering to Apparate,” she murmured, arguing with herself it sounded like.

“That and other things,” Snape agreed.

She finally picked up her knife and started in on the main dish. “I wish someone in our office had Curse Nose. Especially around the time Ministry Revenue sends out the crows with the audit notices.”

Candide remained quietly introspective through dinner. Snape wished otherwise, but knew of no means to draw her out. He did wonder why the boy wonder delayed so long in returning.

Candide arranged the pillows just so and settled back on the couch to relax with an empty sigh. Snape thought of and discarded many possible things to say before settling on, “Is there something you would like to do?”

Candide sat up enough to peer at the clock. “Oh, well at eight the Flying Gorgeouso Brothers comes on the wireless.”

Snape wanted to utter the what? but held back on the assumption that he should already know. “Nothing else you might prefer?”

“They are re-enacting the magical version of Hamlet tonight. Not interested?”

“I think not.”

She pulled a small book from her robe pocket. “I feel like listening to a story. You could read to me.” Snape fetched the book from her outstretched hand and returned

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to the opposing couch as she tipped her head back and said, "I like listening to your voice."

The book cover showed a rider hauling hard to turn the head of his black horse. His white sleeves leaked out of his ill-fitting rough brown robes. The horse's head filled the foreground with flared nostrils and defiant protruding eyes, banded neck muscles arcing away, countering the tug of the bit. "The Fiery Friar," Snape read. "You truly intend to read this?"

Without opening her eyes, she said, "I'm halfway through. You can start at the bookmark."

Snape parted the book at the diminutive strip of yellow ribbon and backed up a page to the start of the previous paragraph. "Forks of lightening cracked the seething sky and torrents of rainwater consumed the surface of the already poor road. Behind him, the monastery's stalwart walls stood firm against the onslaught, tiny windows shining beacons against the night. Somewhere ahead on the fast-dissolving road, obscured by the foggy mist sent up by the battering rain, was the Green Rooster Inn, where the Duke undoubtedly harbored from the storm on his trip to the port. It would be harder to guard his daughter in such a place should she finally be driven into mutiny by his stubborn insistence that she be sent off, exiled really, to the colonies."

Snape stopped. "Why?" he asked.

"Why is she being sent off? To be married, because the Duke fears—"

"I meant why any of it? Why are you reading this?"

She laughed, reminding Snape again how easily she let criticism wash around her, unlike Lily. "It's just easy entertainment. I like the books that way. I don't want to think at all when I'm relaxing."

Snape flipped ahead a few pages. "No risk of that. I'll agree."

"Don't you sometimes ever like to imagine a different place, where different rules apply?"

Snape hesitated replying. "I find such thoughts to be unproductive, or... counterproductive even."

"Well, unlike you I don't want to get home from work and curl up with the latest Potions research newsletter." She peered over at him discriminately. "Well, you'd probably break if you tried to curl up, but you get the idea. Couches are for relaxing, Severus, in case you missed the memo on that."

Snape sat straighter in response. He held the delicate book up higher, moved his thumb out of the way of the words, and read, "Scarletta slipped from the horse's quivering haunches and landed lightly on her dainty boots. The rain had eased into a gentle caress with the touch of dawn upon the land. She tossed her blonde tresses out of her eyes and held them back with one milk-white hand. 'But, you cannot go,'

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she insisted, troubled eyes reinforcing her unsteady tone. ‘I don’t even know these people or this place.’ ”

Candide interrupted, “He’s leaving her? What page are you on?”

“Fifty two,” Snape assured her. “Which would be...” he flipped ahead. “Precisely the middle.” He paged back. “I did skip over some,” he said, tempted painfully again to tell her the truth. He shut the book, forgetting the bookmark and having to find the page again to rectify that. “I’m sure he is going to tell her he has larger responsibilities... promises he cannot break,” he said, thinking the author would have an entire run-on flowery sentence about how much effort he put into saying that with no inflection.

With a surge of selfishness, he pushed to his feet and went over to her and changed himself for one of her many pillows, so that she lay across his lap. He felt defiant given how little time he had remaining. Harry’s mysterious absence notwithstanding, he harbored no hope that the unpredictable young man would not hold up his promise to send him home, on schedule. Executing the obscure spell of a long dead insane wizard had been Snape’s last best chance, borne of homeless desperation. But fate had pushed back and now he had been drained of all desire to tempt it again.

While he considered his fate, Candide’s breathing fell slow and steady and he assumed she slept. Her unremarkable face was canted away from him, so he could not be certain. His hand hovered over her shoulder, tempted to touch, but not willing to disturb her if she did sleep.

Snape took a deep breath and remained still, considering his situation. Even if he could not escape fate, escape retribution, it seemed more avenues were open if he would only escape himself and seek them. Candide presumably had a counterpart in his world. And his illicit understanding of her would work greatly to his advantage in approaching her. He may not have a future, but he certainly had a present and he intended to work out how to optimize the quality of it. There was literally nothing to lose, except the dusty past.



Harry had no hope of sleeping that night. Snape’s reassuring presence helped, but the room’s underlying haze of stale potions and the foot-powdery scent of his borrowed pyjamas distracted him from relaxing. That and every time he closed his eyes, the shadows loomed into view, teasing him with hard-to-define promises.

Harry would have tossed and turned, had there been space to do it in. As it was, he bumped Snape with his elbow and expected that if the other were not awake before

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that he would be now. Indeed, Snape shifted and asked, "Difficulty sleeping?"

Harry did not feel this was the best time to explain about his latest penchant for gathering a personal psychic army. "Yeah," he said, intending to leave it at that. But he could not, the wraiths teased at him, and the closest shadows bothered him the most. Harry pulled his wand out from under his pillow and sat up in the grey light.

As he sat there thinking, Snape shifted again. "What is it?"

Harry slipped out of the heavy covers and down to the cold floor. "I have to take care of something." With his toes, he found his shoes and grabbed up his cloak off the hook by the door. He could just make out Snape's outline, sitting up in bed.

"I'll be right back," Harry said, and slipped away.

He reinverted on the far side of the square in the center of Grimmauld Place. Relaxing his mind for just an instant, he detected that there was one Death Eater off to his left, near the corner of the fence, and another three huddled directly across from the house. Without even bothering to tie his shoes, Harry marched along the trampled grass beside the curb, preparing a spell in his head and rolling his wand in his fingers in anticipation.

The Death Eater guard was so inept, he caused a rustle of dead leaves as Harry approached, but Harry had a Silencing Charm applied just before the man let out a bird call. Harry jumped the short metal fence meant to preserve the grass from walkers cutting off the corner and sliced out with one of the few invisible spells at his disposal, a Choking Curse. It took two tries, but his quarry fell through the shrubbery at his feet in a futile effort to escape the spell. Harry disarmed the hooded figure and added a heavy chain binding before releasing the man to breathe again. Harry yanked the hood free to reveal Montague, a Slytherin Harry knew from Hogwarts. The surprised look he got in return made Harry realize that he was operating without a disguise.

Harry hesitated only a second before tugging Montague's hood back down and slipping off across the grass, angling away from his next targets a bit to come in directly from behind.

Harry had two of them bound up before the third even thought to turn. The figure's mask was in place, but his voice sounded like Jugson's when it said, "Potter?" and looked him up and down. Harry assumed he made quite a picture, standing in the night air in his pyjamas and cloak, shivering faintly despite the lovely adrenalin warming his blood in its course.

"I want you to leave me alone," Harry said. "I want you to go away."

"Go away?" Jugson echoed, as dull as ever. The mask made Jugson's breathing louder. He huffed and raised his wand. Harry easily waved out the counter to the Blasting Curse that came his way.

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“What is this?” Harry mocked. “Aren’t you listening? Take your friends and go!”

Another curse. Harry blocked that one too. “What does it take?” He sent a Spinning Hex at Jugson, toying with him. It spun his robes up tight and when it released him he continued spinning until he fell in the cold mud. “Go!” Harry commanded again, reaching inward this time to reinforce his will.

Harry could not see well, but thought that Jugson convulsed once in a great heave before shakily rising. Shoulders rising and falling, he peered at Harry, eyes glittering through the holes in his crooked mask. He raised his wand threateningly, but then lowered it and Disapparated.

Harry stepped over, grabbed each of his companions by whatever he could and took them away as well, to the first place he thought of that was harmlessly out of the way: the Quidditch pitch overlooking the port at Falmouth. He dropped his packages on the center line, also muddy, and went back for the last of the four.

Montague he took to the field outside of London where he had battled with Merton’s associates. He dropped him backwards onto the windbroken straw and stared around them. The night made the fields stretch away to an impossible distance. There were no cars, no lights except the hazy glow that must be London central to the northeast. The closest houses were dark, roofs ragged, uninhabited looking.

“Happy with this?” Harry demanded of his confused captive. Part of him felt terror at this world, at what his own could have become if he had not succeeded. It all felt so fragile and slippery and Harry hated that feeling; he was strong enough that he should never feel that helpless, ever.

Harry brought his breathing under control. He longed to lash out, somehow, take any action against the impossible. A great spring threatened to uncoil inside him and if he did not let it loose, it would shred him from the inside. He tossed a Lumos out of his wand and held it low, glaring at Montague.

“You didn’t have to become this,” Harry said.

Montague cleared his throat, but still croaked as he said, “I did, really. There’s nothing else.”

“There’s death,” Harry said pleasantly. “That’s always an option.”

Montague’s face stretched in dismay at that thought and he uselessly shuffled the thick links of the chain binding before falling still again, wary.

His old classmate lay like a black carpet before him, leaching poison into Harry... sweet poison. Harry licked his lips and in one sudden and violent movement crouched low, jerked Montague’s arm free of the chain and pressed his hand over the Dark Mark. Desperately, fighting his own base instinct to do the opposite, Harry pressed the curse away. He pressed it away from himself, away from Montague’s clammy flesh.

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Montague screamed and Harry had to hold his knobbly wrist with all his strength to keep him from pulling free. Ash gritted under Harry's hand as he let go. With a small smirk he brushed the ash away to reveal a clean arm and said, "Explain that to your master."

Harry stood, unsteady in the dark field that provided little discernable reference for upright. He brushed his forehead, then had to rub it clean of the ash from his hand. Dismissively, he waved the chain binding off and Disapparated away so he could slip into the Dark Plane unseen, and from there return to Snape's room.

The field outside had not seemed bright, but the room was even darker. Harry's eyes finally landed on a figure standing in the window, when it turned.

"There you are," Snape said in relief.

"Yep, I'm here," Harry said, trying to act normal. He kicked off his shoes, shed his cloak to the floor on top of them, and slipped gratefully back into bed.

Snape joined him a minute later. Sitting on the other edge for a time, thinking, apparently. "We will discuss later what you were doing."

Harry's brows raised, unseen. "Right," he said amiably. "I just needed to stretch out a bit so I could sleep."

"Not wise doing that here."

Harry rolled away and curled up against the cold so far that his knees hung off the side of the bed. "Yeah, I know."

Snape gave him and settled in beside him. "Don't do it again."

Harry, enjoying the lonely near-field of his mind, and sucked down by exhaustion, could not reply.

He dreamed he stared into a mirror. He and his reflection considered one another, blinking and twitching. Harry reached up to touch the silvered glass and found that his reflection did not follow this movement, nor was there any glass.

Harry snapped awake, gasping. Again, he was glad to have Snape's nearly painful grasp on his arm as an anchor to bring him out of the forest. The square outside, and thus Harry's inner vision, hummed with scores of Death Eaters.

"Guess that didn't work," Harry mumbled.

"What?"

Harry rubbed his gritty eyes and explained, "I chased away the handful of guards out in the square earlier and now there are about fifty." With a heart surging start of worry for the counterparts of his friends, Harry asked, "They can't get in here, can they?"

Snape released Harry's arm and reached for his cloak. "If an all out assault could be effective, I expect they would have done it long ago."

Harry calmed his heart. "Good point."

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The air in the room bit at Harry's nose and fingers and a gauzy greyness crept around the objects in the room. "Can I light the hearth? What time is it?"

"You may light it if you wish. Heating the walls is almost as effective."

Harry did both and scooted forward on the bed to better enjoy the firelight. Snape still peered out the window, moving slowly side to side, sometimes leaning close. "You really don't think they can get in?" Harry asked again.

Snape shook his head. Harry tapped his wand on his blanket covered knee. "I should renew my spells," he said. "Return to Dumbledore mode."

After a pause, Snape said, "You are nearly as frustrating as Dumbledore, so you do have that going for you."

"Thanks."

It was a good thing Harry had put on his disguise as early as possible. Just as dawn came on in earnest, Hermione knocked faintly on the door.

"Just thought I'd come and warn you to be extra careful coming and going. Looks like we have an invading force down in the square." She minced over to the window and leaned on the brewing shelf to peer out. "Look at them all. They aren't even hiding." She sounded rattled and worried.

Harry felt a bit guilty and then thought he should reserve his energy for keeping inside his own head.

At the door, Hermione stopped and said, "I have some books spread out on the table downstairs, if you want to come down before we have to move things aside for breakfast..."

Snape nodded. Hermione glanced stressfully at the window again before pulling the door closed behind her and leaving them alone.

Harry could not read Snape's expression. He said, "I don't need a lecture."

"I was not intending to give you one." He shook his stringy hair. "I have given up understanding the cause and effect of this place. A sign, I suppose, that I am more than ready to abandon it." He raised a finger in Harry's direction. "Back home, however..." and he left it at that.

Downstairs, a loud discussion could be heard even through the door to the room. Neville's voice and Lavender's came through the clearest. They were debating how best to counter the force outside. Ron made proclamations like he had been pushed by frustration into a daylight counter-assault.

Harry closed his eyes and carefully, most carefully, reached not for the shadows, exactly, but for the heart of where they connected to him. He pushed discordant energy into that, making their Marks burn. Seconds later the sound of mass Disapparation could be heard clearly, like a bundle of marbles thrown at a wall in the distance.

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“Did you do that?” Snape asked.

Harry nodded and stood up. “They’ll think they were summoned.”

“That should be interesting for them to sort out,” Snape said.

“I didn’t want Ron doing anything stupid for my mistake,” Harry explained.

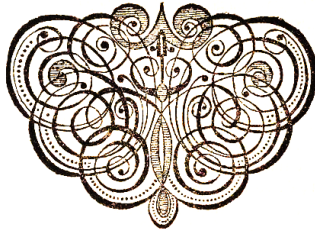
“Come on, let’s go do some reading so we can get out of here.”

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Hermione kept her hand over the book, visibly struggling with what she wanted to say. “This may seem a little mad, but I’m trying to piece something together and I hope you can help. What do you know about Dumbledore’s wand?”

“Just that the Malfoy’s are not above grave robbing, which is no great surprise upon deeper reflection.”

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FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART I

The entire household had crammed into the entry hall of the house, arguing and whispering. “I think they’ve gone,” Ron said, squinting through the wavy glass set high in the door.

Unusually forceful, Neville demanded, “That many... just disappear?”

“I heard them go, I think,” Susan said. “Sounded like a whole load of them.”

“Why would they just go?” Harry asked.

“Who knows?” Hermione said, exasperated, “Why did they come in the first place?”

Ron took the door handle in hand. “Maybe I’ll go check.”

Disguised Harry, standing several steps up on the stairs, cast his voice over the lot of them. “The Death Eaters have departed.”

After a pause, someone asked, “They have?” Ron dropped his hand off the door handle, shoulders falling in relief.

Before they could demand more information, Harry picked Hermione out with his eyes. “You said there were some books?”

Another pause, and then Hermione pushed her way free to lead the way into the dining room. Whispering closed in behind them and a few gathered in the doorway to watch what they did.

Hermione had an array of books open on the large table. “I found a few that might interest you. They’re on that side.” Hermione’s voice modulated as she turned from her friends to her books and back again, gesturing that they should leave them be.

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Harry and Snape followed along the row, stopping at one diagram that struck Harry as eerily familiar. Snape lifted the heavy vellum to read the next few pages of the book from where it had been left open. There was no publication date in the front of the book, but the cloud of fine dust, and deep groan of the leather spoke of great age. Quietly, Snape said, "I did not think our mysterious author could have invented everything he wrote."

"This is a much clearer version."

"Than your notes, certainly," Snape teased as he angled his nose down to better peruse the broad pages.

Hermione closed the door to the dining room after a quick argument with Ron. She stood with her back to it a second before pushing away and joining them. "Anything useful?"

Snape moved on to the next book in a mode of browsing, apparently not wanting to give too much away. "They are interesting enough. We'll take them upstairs if we may."

Harry quickly marked the open pages on each and stacked them together for easy hovering. Hermione stepped over to glance into the quiet kitchen before intercepting Harry on his way out. "My friends insist that I ask if you did something to the DE outside." She bit her lip momentarily. "I mean, if you wanted to say, you would and if not, I didn't think I should bother you by asking, but they insist."

Harry was reminded again of how very intimidating he must seem. No wonder Dumbledore put on such kindly airs at every opportunity. He said, "I tricked them. I don't know how long it will last."

"How did you do that?"

Harry turned back to the stack of lead-backed books, far too heavy to carry without a charm. "I'd rather not say. It's not something even you'd be able to replicate."

"Oh," she said, shoulders falling. She appeared drained by his response.

Harry frowned faintly and glanced at his guardian, who moved to join him in leaving. Hermione stopped them both by saying, "Can I ask you about something, Profes- Mr. Snape?"

When they did not reply, she hurried down to a book on the end and rapidly turned the pages. Snape slid down beside her, but she put her hand down on the text, covering it. "Can I assume you will not tell anyone this?" she asked, eyes jumping between the two of them. She frowned wryly. "Mr. Totten, can I speak to Mr. Snape alone?"

Harry shrugged and went to the door, startling the group crowded around the other side of it. Harry used several anti snooping spells on the outside of the door,

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gave each of those lingering near challenging glances and walked away, nearly running headlong into his counterpart at the base of the stairs. Native Harry stood with his arms crossed, defiant. Disguised Harry explained, “Ms. Granger wished to speak to Severus alone.”

Native Harry stepped aside to let him pass, saying nothing.

Hermione kept her hand over the book, visibly struggling with what she wanted to say. “This may seem a big mad, but I’m trying to piece something together and I hope you can help. What do you know about Professor Dumbledore’s wand?”

“Just that the Malfoys are not above grave robbing, which upon deeper reflection is no great surprise.”

“No, I mean where he got it.” She pursed her lips. “Unless you knew that and you’re being difficult.” She huffed and turned to the book. Scanning back and forth, she found what she wanted. “Read starting from here.”

Snape followed her finger and obliged. “Hm,” was his only reaction. “And?”

Hermione brushed her hair back and leaned over the book. “Gregorovitch is a famous Bulgarian wand maker. Have you heard of him?” At Snape’s nod, she went on, “Earlier in the century, he claimed to possess an undefeatable wand and that he would sell a copy of it to the highest bidder. This is according to an advert in an old magazine I found in the attic here. But according to this wand historian, Gregorovitch never produced the wand for the auction and later claimed the original was stolen before he could work out how to copy it. This author assumes Gregorovitch was lying about having such a wand in the first place.” She slid down to the next book and flipped it open, raising a cloud of dust. “But this author, Antecedent Tummifus, claims that stories of such a wand – she calls it the Wand of Destiny – are too consistent to be entirely myth. And she says she’s collected the tales together and in fact there is a plausible lineage for the wand’s legacy, one wizard winning it off the previous one..”

Snape stared at her. “How does one win away an undefeatable wand?”

Hermione shrugged. “Through carelessness, as far as I can suss out.” She put one book away and pawed quickly through another, stopping only to glance at the clock. “This is the thing... it’s possible that Gregorovitch really had the Wand of Destiny and that it was stolen by someone who put it to rather infamous use.” She had pulled a book closer, but did not open it, just rubbed the pattern hammered into the leather and fingered the cracked half gem decorating the corner. “So, my question for you... Professor... is quite simple. Do you know if Albus Dumbledore was using Gellert Grindelwald’s wand?”

Snape considered the question, both in this world and his own, pawing back through his memories for clues. She looked away and he caught a glimpse that she

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART I

did not entirely trust him, and disliked being trapped into asking the very man who had ended Dumbledore's life. Annoyed with his position, Snape said, "It's a bit insulting of the old wizard's memory, isn't it, to imply he needed that much help?"

"I didn't intend that implication," Hermione snapped lightly. "You know I didn't." She fingered the book before her. "Maybe I'm trying too hard," she said, sounding strung out once the excitement of solving a puzzle left her voice. "If it is the wand. Then you got it from Draco, and Harry took it from you, so he now has it and should be its master. He hasn't been using it... I think it bothers him a little to think of Dumbledore that much. I mean, sometimes I think Harry feels a little abandoned..." She moved quickly to put the books away, triggered by some internal clock. "I just thought if you knew for certain, then I could convince Harry to try using it more. We could use any help. Although I sort of don't want Harry to know; he acts recklessly enough as it is."

Snape stacked two of the books before putting his hands in his pockets and letting her shelve with her wand. "Are you suggesting that I had this Wand of Destiny in my possession and did not know it?"

"I, uh, yeah, I suppose I'm saying that." She stopped what she was doing and turned to face him. "Sorry," she said with a shrug. "I know how you feel. I'd hate to know I had that much power and lost it given how things are." She finished up and moved to open the door, saying, "I'm holding up breakfast."

Snape caught her arm as she went by, still lost in memories. He said, "Dumbledore's original wand had a Phoenix Feather in it. If that wand does not, then it may very well be Grindelwald's old one."

Hermione's bright gaze bored into his. "How did Dumbledore defeat him? No one has ever said."

Snape released her arm. "He never explained that to me. He never explained much of anything."

She ducked her head. "And now we get to sort it all out without him."

Hermione moved to exit and bumped her nose on the door when she tried, but she smoothly backed up and cancelled all the spells and charged through it. Snape followed her out, and the breakfast cooking crew glared at them before hurrying inside. Snape continued following Hermione, drawn to this mystery by clinging tendrils of the unresolved past. Hermione went up to the door of Harry and Ginny's room. It stood ajar and Harry glared at Snape behind Hermione as she said, "Harry, can I see that wand we got from Draco?"

Harry kept his wary gaze on Snape as he fetched the wand out of a hollowed out book and handed it over. "You're not getting it back," Harry said.

"Oh, I realize that," Snape stated dryly.

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Hermione examined the wand for a long time before turning the handle to slip out the delicate mount for the core. "What is that?"

She turned to Snape, who leaned over it for a closer look. All four of them did, bumping heads. "Notice the scales at the root. Thestral hair," Snape proclaimed.

"Odd core," Ginny said. "Ollivander never sold any with that core, did he?"

Hermione gingerly turned the handle in and handed it back to Harry for a test. The curtains obediently opened fully. When he tried to put it away again, Hermione said, "I think you should use that one instead of your other."

Harry stood with the book open, ready to drop the wand in. "Why?"

"Well..." Hermione struggled.

Snape said, "Your usual wand locks spells with Voldemort's, does it not? If you wish to defeat him you will need one with a non-matching core. That one appears to work at least as well for you..."

Ginny dismissively said, "Just carry both. That way if you lose one, you have the other. No one expects that anymore because wands are getting so rare."

Harry shrugged and put the new wand away in his back pocket with his other.

Disguised Harry came up behind Snape with a look of question. Snape gestured with his head that they should return to their room. Once there, Snape said, "We are discovering some things Dumbledore did not explain."

"Such as?"

"His wand appears to have a rather storied history, including formerly belonging to Grindelwald."

"Huh," Harry said, finding that a bit disturbing but not important. "And?"

"Potter now has it. Malfoy took it from Albus' grave, it seems, and it made its way to Potter, of course," he added, sounding annoyed. "The implications of this are not yet clear. And on top of it, Granger does not want Potter to understand the power he may now possess."

Harry replayed in his mind Snape's comments to Hermione about understanding too well. He pursed his lips and said, "And do you think he can handle knowing?"

Snape raised his chin and replied, "Yes. If he remains careful... ongoing."



Tonks coughed and brushed the soot from her clothes. "You tightened the Apparition block," she said to Snape, who sat at the table, a cup of tea under his nose.

Candide said, "Arthur suggested it."

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART I

“Ah,” Tonks said. “I’ve been looking for Harry rather than reading my memos.” She dropped into a chair. “You really don’t know where he’s gone?” She gave each of them a pleading look. “I’m starting to think he’s headed off to one of those other parallel places.”

Snape started faintly. “He told you about that?”

Tonks nodded. “I figure that’s really the only way for him to get away from everything to think.”

Snape tapped his teacup with his long index finger. “Perhaps.”

A knock came on the door and moments later Winky led Aaron and Ginny in. “Any news? Well, besides this news...” Aaron said, indicating the newspaper out flat on the table beside the tea service.

Ginny gave Snape a meaningful glance, which he ignored, so she took on a more casual attitude. Candide reached for the paper and said, “You mean Skeeter’s article, I assume.”

Aaron accepted the chair Candide gestured at and settled in, hands clasped in his lap. “Where’d she get this stuff? Lord Freeland says it’s entirely made up. He’s had his solicitor subpoena for her notes and evidence... these letters she refers to.”

Ginny sat straighter, swallowed hard and tried for a proper tone. “And he sent them an... injunction... right?”

“That too, of course,” Aaron said. He tossed the paper into the fire. “Better to be a pauper with a life kept private.”

Placatingly, Ginny said, “You aren’t even mentioned.”

“I expect I will be. Even though her dates are all wrong. How could she be so right and so wrong at the same time?” he demanded of the room.

Snape and Ginny shared a passing glance.

“Your father should just buy the paper and fire her,” Ginny suggested.

“Excellent idea,” Candide agreed, toasting Ginny with her teacup.

Aaron shook himself. “But this is all silly stuff. What is going on with Harry?” He turned from his former Head of House to stare at Tonks, who helplessly shook her head.

Candide asked Snape as if just thinking of it, “Did you owl Finland? That shaman he stayed with?”

Snape shook his head. “Would it help? If he is there he will return in his own time.”

Aaron leaned toward his former teacher and asked, “Do you think he’s coming back to the program? I don’t know what we’ll do without him.” He sounded unexpectedly sad.

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Snape, biting with his words, said, "Perhaps they should have been nicer to him if they wanted him to stay."



Speaking quietly, despite believing they were no longer overheard here in their borrowed room, Snape said, "You will have to bridge some hazy sections of the spell instructions with your implicit knowledge." He rolled their edited diagrams up and pocketed them.

"The Device is still there, Severus. I don't think we'll have a problem."

"The physical diagram is. A Device exists in magical dimensions as well. The chalk lines are a reference to focus the magic. And this particular Device bridges dimensions of possibility as well." He did not sound terribly optimistic of their success. "We will have most of the day tomorrow to work out the execution."

"Poor choice of words," Harry said. He tapped his fingers on the book open on the brewing counter, impatient with sitting still. "I could have gone home and returned before morning," Harry complained for the second time.

"I expect this task will require you to be better rested than that. And on that note, you would do best to remain in tonight."

Harry pushed back the stool and stood to pace. "Grounding me?" he taunted lightly. A quick check of his inner mind indicated there was only one Death Eater outside on the square. Harry leaned toward the frosted window and used his fingertips to melt away a spot to look through. A surprising number of figures sat on the four benches on the square. Non Death Eaters, perhaps. Harry expected he could ignore the lone true servant assigned if that's all there would be through the night. He wondered idly and with amusement what Voldemort thought of his army being summoned by someone other than himself.

Harry pondered the thousand servants Voldemort had and said, "How is this place going to fare?" His question fogged over the round clear spot, quickly turning back to crystal ice.

"It isn't our problem," Snape said.

Harry watched him put the inkwells away and wipe the pen nibs clean with a heavily stained rag. "You really feel that way?" Harry asked.

"I'm trying to," came the reply. Snape gently lined up the quills in a writing box and latching it. It had the Black family crest on the lid.

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“I could just kill him like last time,” Harry said, tracing five-pointed diagrams in the window frost. One particular one felt active, so he huffed on it quickly to wipe it out.

“Be careful there. You’ve created Devices in glass before when you were out of sorts.”

Harry sat straight, tucking his hands safely away. “I forgot about that.”

“If any of the Horcruxes are intact Voldemort’s departure will only be temporary.”

“But they can keep looking for them with him gone. Wouldn’t that be easier?”

Snape nodded. “If they don’t lose interest in the task.”

Harry said, “You think they could lose interest... after all that’s happened here?”

Snape shrugged and went to the potions shelves. “I do not know what will happen. Destiny is a difficult thing to interfere with.”

Harry spun on the stool to track him. “You don’t want me to kill him.”

Snape straightened a few bottles before replying, “I think you will pay a price for your actions and I intend to protect you from that if I can. You are my responsibility.”

“What about the Harry downstairs?”

“You are my responsibility. My counterpart can fulfill his own promises.”

Harry half wished he could feel as straightforward as that. This house was full of the same friends he had at home. They would hurt just as badly when things went wrong.

“Maybe you should leave him a note,” Harry said, half joking.

Snape’s brow rose and after a pause he retrieved the writing box and systematically removed things from it. He took up the Potion notebook and flipped it upside down and over, before starting in with the quill on this reverse page one. He scratched out words, pausing frequently with his long fingered hand poised over the next blank spot. Harry leaned over Snape’s shoulder to read and said, “Those are brewing instructions.”

“I am writing a code of sorts. I used this method to take all kinds of notes through the years. So far it has not been broken, although it has earned me mockery for the mud it will brew if followed.”

With the sound of the scratching quill to lull him, Harry lay down for a nap. He was woken some time later by a soft knock on the door. Snape opened it to reveal Hermione, who glanced behind her once before slipping inside.

“Can I show you something?”

Snape used the excuse of clearing a space for the book she carried to close up the notes he had been working on. She glanced with concern at Harry sitting there in his old wizard disguise. Snape said, “It is safe to speak in his presence.”

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Hermione opened the book to her mark. The page margins were crowded with drawings and the parchment exceptionally brown and crinkly.

"The Wand of Destiny had some companions," she said, then pointed where Snape should start reading.

Harry remained where he was, assuming Snape would fill him in later. He used the opportunity to study Hermione in detail and imagine letting go of the people in this place. It did not work out well, but the exercise did push the shadows into the distance.

Snape raised his head. "You will have to find the ring."

Hermione's voice was pitched higher as she whispered, "So you think the cloak...?"

Snape nodded. "There are more than few odd things about that particular cloak that could be explained by this. You need to find the ring and you will know for certain."

Hermione closed the book and clutched it to her chest. Soberly, swallowing hard, she said, "You think we should?"

"I don't think you have a choice."

"But... you don't worry that... you know... Harry? You don't think he might—"

"That is always a concern," Snape said, cutting her off.

Hermione's gaze was bright. "You know what I mean, right?"

Voice low, Snape replied, "Better than you can know."

"I wish we could ask someone who would know for certain about the ring."

Snape's gaze had the glint of Legilimency, even though he probably did not need it. "You refer to the former headmaster, I assume."

Hermione nodded, clutching the book to her front. Snape fell silent and held up his hand when Hermione turned to go. "What became of Dumbledore's painting, do you know?"

Harry sat straighter. Hermione searched Snape's face and said, "Lucius Malfoy is reported to have tried to be rid of it."

"He cannot have removed it from the school. Not with any ease," Snape said.

Hermione nodded again. "Right. We heard he had another painting done, and tried to trick Dumbledore's image into getting trapped in it so it could be removed instead. But it didn't work." Hermione ducked her head. "We tried to steal it once, but we lost both we sent and several students who helped us were punished severely as an example before they too disappeared."

Snape turned to Harry. There was an edge to his gaze that Harry read as determination, and Harry was glad to see it. Despite his insistence otherwise, Snape could not leave here without trying to help as much as possible. "Care to fetch it for them?"

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Hermione stepped in Harry's direction just as he pushed off the bed, too energetically for his persona. "I don't want anyone to get hurt-"

Snape held up his hand. "Not to worry." Then to Harry, "Do not be long."

Harry Disapparated, glad to have something to do to make the day go by faster. Since he could slip away from anywhere else, untraced, he simply Apparated into a London alleyway and away again.

It was the Sunday before school resumed, and the sweeping castle grounds sat with a fresh blush of untrampled snow. Harry had slipped in under the Whomping Willow and stood staring up at the sheer stone wall. He felt better, more himself. The fresh air and concern for his friends' counterparts pushed the shadows away, and he wanted to stay that way for a while so he did not reach inward, but remained acutely aware of his physical senses, and they hummed with the brisk fresh air. His breath fogged the air in front of him and his fingers grew cold so he buried them in his pockets. The tower windows above him showed dark, so he decided that he might as well start his search in the headmaster's office.

As Harry silently arrived on the thick overlapping rugs, a painting snorted. Most of the headmasters hung in their expected places, but some had been rearranged. A clock ticked and chimed the quarter hour. The room smelled of rare wood and the overly sweet aftershave of the current occupant. Dumbledore was not among those on the wall, even the covered ones near the floor, which Harry had to peek under one at a time, not wanting to waken them. Harry moved about, looking over the documents on the desk. A few eyes watched him do this, curious. Harry moved to open a drawer, but pulled back out of a sense of curse – a reminder that he had to remember what he came for and not dally.

To the paintings, he said, "Anyone know where Dumbledore was taken?"

The awake paintings shook their heads or scratched something, a chin or their scalp. A voice from the second level of the office said, "Who in Merlin's cursed realm wishes to know?"

Harry turned to face Lucius Malfoy, who had his wand aimed down at him.

Casting his voice rougher, Harry said, "No one you would know."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed and he held out his other hand for the railing to slowly approach down the metal stairs. Harry watched him do this, wand at his side.

"How did you get in here?"

Harry took on an attitude of amusement, propped his hand on the desk and leaned on it. "You believe you know every secret of this place? You always were obnoxiously conceited."

Malfoy's wand twitched and his lips moved but he held back on the curse. His eyes took in the room and the paintings. "Why do you want Dumbledore's painting?"

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“Who wouldn’t want it?” Harry tossed out with a silly flair. “I haven’t had a good conversation with anyone since the old buzzard kicked off.”

As expected this knocked Malfoy back a bit. Finally recovering, he asked, “Who are you?” trying to overcome confusion with menace.

Harry remembered being alarmed by this man. Now Harry felt deliciously ecstatic at how foolish Malfoy was. “Harry Potter... who do I look like?”

The wand homed in on Harry’s nose, too far away to grab, but close enough that a normal counter would be difficult to cast, even if Harry had his wand up. “I can make you tell me,” Malfoy threatened, sounding utterly confident.

Harry crossed his arms, and grinned. “Oh, I’d be amused to see you try.”

The curse came, a Crucio. Malfoy fell. His wand tumbled to the base of the desk. Gasping, he thrashed his cloak-tangled legs and finally managed to claw himself up on one elbow to stare at Harry in surprise.

“You lack all subtlety,” Harry said. “You couldn’t work your way up from, say, a Spasm Hex?”

Panic seeped into Malfoy’s gaze. Harry stepped over and picked up his wand and pocketed it. Malfoy pulled another out of his pocket and aimed it up at Harry, but not steadily.

“How many graves did you rob?” Harry blurted, indicating the second wand.

“Too many!” came a particularly exasperated and elderly former headmaster.

Harry finally took out his own wand and before he could aim it, Malfoy tried again. This time the blowback from the blocked Blasting Curse tossed Malfoy flat on his back and his wand sailed away to clatter off the bookshelves. Harry Accioed it to himself and took the three others from Malfoy’s pocket. He used a Mummy Hex on him and stood over him, thinking.

“Getting in my way was a mistake,” Harry tiredly said, which ratcheted up the alarm in Malfoy’s eyes. “I want to know where Dumbledore’s painting went.”

Malfoy sneered but Harry got the strangest image of the Mirror of Erised from his icy eyes, so he smiled faintly back and said, “There are far too many of you – so many that eliminating even half of you would do little good. I think we’d be better off letting you drag things down for a while. Yes,” Harry said, thinking upon it more. “I think your pride will keep you from revealing what’s happened to you.”

Harry struck out with the well-practiced Memory Charm they used on duty, then once that settled in and Malfoy’s face relaxed, he used a Charm he had only read of before, in one of the books Snape disposed of to clear out the upstairs rooms. The book had labeled it a Serpent Memory Charm and promised that it would do random selective damage to what someone knew, leaving them functional but inept.

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The air seethed and coiled around Harry's wand as he worked the motion. The spell lacked an incantation, which was what attracted Harry to studying the diagrams. As the air flowed around his hand and arm, tendrils reached up from the Dark Plane, seeking his wand. The spell was nearly finished, the coils solidifying and falling off the point of this wand to sniff out their victim. But the Dark Plane refused to close beneath him, despite Harry's best efforts. It was like trying to close a door while standing in the way of it. It grew apparent that as the spell reached completion, the tendrils would reach him, connecting like an electric circuit, to who knew what result.

With a shout of dismay, Harry tossed his hand to the side, cutting the spell off. The tendrils sank away. Harry growled to himself. He should be able to do this spell. It was the perfect spell for what he wanted to accomplish. Perhaps the trouble was less the idea than the execution. The spell clearly unleashed something to do the damage and that was what made it dark. Harry knew how to adjust a standard Memory Charm for depth rather than breadth of interference. He would simply have to use twenty or so narrow, deep spells to get the same result.

After a dozen spells at the helpless, dazed man lying before him, Harry stopped and breathed in and out, feeling badly, but then he remembered everything that had happened here and he added on another ten, even narrower ones. He wanted Malfoy to make mistakes, major ones. Killing him would simply lead to him being replaced. This was better, even as mechanically cold as he felt hitting him with one spell after another, making his head rock from side to side with the impact.

Satisfied that he had struck the right balance between mercy and crippling, Harry released the Mummy Hex, gave the paintings a shushing gesture, in response to which several winked, and slipped away to the school attic.

Harry wandered the entire L-shaped length of one attic and had moved to the other when he stopped, hearing something. The noise faded, and Harry stood, breath held, listening, while he raised his wand and tried a Sentient Locator Spell. The spell fizzled, something Harry had never before had happen.

"Who's there?" Harry asked, certain someone was, but if they were hiding, perhaps they were not foes, so he did not want to try anything more violent than that.

A long ear peaked out, and then a large-eyed head. "Dobby?" Harry whispered.

The elf fully emerged. "Please, Master, Dobby is not harming anything. Dobby is being careful is all Dobby is being. Not knowing your wizardness, Dobby isn't."

More elves peeked out before ducking into hiding again behind Dobby.

"What are you doing up here?" Harry asked.

Dobby rolled his hands over one another. "Dobby is helping his friends. Dobby is not bound to Hogwarts but his friends are. Dobby can just manage to convince them to stay up here, rather than be hurt by their cruel masters, Master."

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“Ah,” Harry said. “Do you want help freeing them? Do you want me to bring them clothes?” When the other elves squeaked and backed into the furniture-walled hiding place, Harry gave up on that idea. “Do you know where Dumbledore’s portrait is?”

Dobby took a little leap forward, making his ears swing. “Dobby can be helping with this, Master.” He led Harry by the hand a few paces and pointed at a small window at the end.

Harry gestured him away and thanked him, which made Dobby tug on his ears, embarrassed. At the end of the gabled space, bathed in the dust-riding light leaching in the window, sat the Mirror of Erised and facing it, on a chair missing a leg, sat the painting Harry sought, its figure snoring lightly.

“Professor?” Harry prodded to wake it.

The painting started, and blinked tired eyes. “What? Oh?” The painting’s gaze was taken in by the mirror and grew misty-eyed.

Harry stepped around behind the chair and looked in the mirror, half expecting to see what Dumbledore saw. Instead he saw himself, bright-eyed and smiling. “What do you see?” Harry asked.

“Ah... nothing I wish to share, I’m afraid.”

“But it works for you?” Harry went on.

“Apparently,” Dumbledore said with a sigh. “I can no longer visit the other paintings in the school. I had the elves move me here, so that I might have someone to look at.” Only because you asked it of me, will I do the same. “What do you see?”

Harry considered his reflection. “I see someone freed of someone else’s instinct for evil deeds. Someone able, finally, to move on without being dragged back into the past.”

Dumbledore pondered that and said, “I changed my mind. That is my answer as well, and there is no reason not to tell you that since it was yours.”

“We have to go,” Harry said, aware of fleeting time.

“I cannot leave,” Dumbledore said. “The school holds me in. But I am quite astoundingly bored and very much desire to know where it is you would like to go, just so I can imagine it.”

“To where you can do some good.”

The spells for the castle’s paintings were in Ravenclaw’s book, near the front, so Harry had read them too many times over. He cast the spell to link Dumbledore’s painting to the rest in the school, thinking that would be useful later. Dumbledore skipped back from the frame as the curling sparkles from the magic sank into the gilded wood. “Ah, thank you. It took Mr. Malfoy months to remove that spell. He thought to lure me into a single other picture where the paint had been tainted

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with Widow's Ink and then destroy the original. A transparent ploy. Really, he believes himself to be far more clever than he actually is," Dumbledore added, right eye glittering even in the low light.

"Well, it's good he didn't succeed," Harry said picking up the painting to examine the frame with its cloth portrait nailed up against the back of it. In Ravenclaw's book the portrait canvas and frame were a enchanted as a unit so he did not want to simply pull out the painting and leave the frame. Despite wanting to hurry, Harry took his time to think a bit. Ravenclaw had included how to bind a headmaster's portraits to the castle, with a kind of widespread Boomerang Charm that returned the painting to the headmaster's tower by whatever means necessary as soon as it exited a door, window, or tunnel. The book did not contain a cancellation for the spell, so Harry hoped that his means of egress would not engage the spell. If that failed, he would think of something else.

Harry took up a drop cloth from a nearby chair and wrapped the painting in it. "We're going to give it a try. But I don't want you to see how we travel," he explained. Holding tight, Harry inverted himself into the netherworld. The painting gave a shudder and resisted, yanking his arms hard at his shoulder sockets, but as his feet settled to the grey earth, the frame fell still in his hands. Fearing he might have left the painting's subject behind, Harry peaked under the cloth and found Dumbledore smoothing his comically frazzled beard. "That was rather strange. Where are we?"

"You don't want to know." Harry said, unceremoniously tightening the wrap again before slipping back into the normal world, right to the doorstep of Grimmauld Place so as to leave no Apparition trace. He again almost lost his grip on the painting, making him think the resistance was merely the drag of any large object being pulled through the interstice, rather than a vestige of the binding spell.

Upstairs, he found Hermione, Ginny and this world's Harry waiting with Snape. Snape said, "I did not think that would require so much time."

Harry checked his beard with one hand and propped the painting up on the brewing shelf, still wrapped tight. "It had been removed to storage. I had to find it."

Snape stepped in a half circle around the shrouded painting. "They must have broken some of the spells on it, in that case." He turned to this world's Harry. "If I may have a word with the portrait alone?"

"No," this place's Harry said. "I don't trust you." He stepped up and with determined movements, quickly unwrapped the painting, slowing to reverent as Dumbledore's visage appeared to blink in the light. "Professor Dumbledore," he said, carefully propping the painting back up. With visible effort, he stepped back and invited Snape to step forward with a gesture. "Whatever you want to say, say it." Harry, believing himself a fair judge of his counterpart imagined the other was stalling to

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gather his emotions. Snape sighed faintly and stepped before the painting.

“Ah, Severus,” the painting said, showing real joy. “I had overheard that you were found out and worried what had become of you.”

Snape waved this topic off and turned the painting a bit when it started to say hello to everyone else. “You must listen to me, Albus. Things are rather dire and you cannot hold anything back any longer.” Dumbledore gave Snape a dissuading expression. “No,” Snape said. “There is no longer anything to lose.”

“I am aware of what is happening, Severus,” the painting stated, sounding unusually patient.

Snape turned the painting back to the room and Dumbledore addressed the native Harry. “You’ve grown a bit, young man.”

“Professor,” Harry said, half looking at the floor.

“I suppose I deserve such a greeting.”

Harry shrugged. “We need help.”

Dumbledore nodded, stroking his beard. “And Ms. Granger, good to see you. Ah, and my rescuer. I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure.”

Hermione’s head snapped over, her whole body going on alert. “You... said you were an old friend of Professor Dumbledore,” she said to Harry.

Beside him, Snape half uncrossed his arms and held them hovered around each other, ready to move. Harry said, “A headmaster’s portrait does not include every memory, or even a fraction of them. Just what he leaves behind in the pensieve.” This world’s Harry had pulled his wand, but held it hidden in his sleeve and watched him with acute suspicion.

Harry let the rough mask on his voice fade. “I’ve known Albus from when I was very young. I think he just doesn’t remember.”

Hermione stuttered and asked the painting, “You... you don’t know Aaron Totten?”

Harry directly faced the painting, moving with more confidence than he felt. He adjusted his hat just briefly when the eyes in the room turned to wait for Dumbledore’s reaction to this question, revealing his scar.

Dumbledore’s reaction was swift and sharp. He actually leaned forward in the frame as if to escape it. “Wait a moment. I... do remember you. But, I... am quite surprised to see you... here. I never would have expected you... to take such an enormous risk. What has brought you... back?”

Harry realized Dumbledore misunderstood, believing him to be his future self. “I take less of a risk than you realize,” Harry said. “Much less. But even so, the situation here calls for drastic action. As Severus insists, you cannot afford to hold anything back.”

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Dumbledore's eyes remained wide with shock as he stared at Harry. "I need to speak with... Aaron alone, if you all would leave us."

"And Severus," Harry added. "We're here together... at the moment."

Dumbledore's face went wanky at this revelation. "You are? I don't believe I understand."

"I know you don't," Harry replied.

The room's legitimate Harry stepped into their circle. "I'm tired of secrets. Hermione has questions for you, Professor. Anything else can wait."

Hermione shuffled over and said, "We need to know where the ring is."

"Do you?" Dumbledore returned, clearly a challenge.

"Yes, sir," Hermione humbly replied, dropping her gaze.

"You do know what you are asking for?" Dumbledore queried, like an examination question.

Hermione nodded, shaking her hair which had fallen before her face. "We have the other two things."

Dumbledore straightened at this news. "Interesting." He looked her over before turning to disguised Harry. "And you agree with this?" When Harry replied in the affirmative, Dumbledore asked the same of Snape, who nodded.

"I see that I have failed utterly." Dumbledore took off his hat to brush his hair back, before replacing it again. "Harry," he said, "step a little closer so I can see you properly. You know what Ms. Granger is referring to, correct?"

Harry shook his head. "She keeps me as much in the dark as you used to."

Dumbledore's head pulled back from the frame and he had to straighten his hat. "Well, good to know someone is looking out for you."

"I don't particularly see it that way," Harry mumbled.

Dumbledore sighed loudly. "If even half of what I've overheard is true, things are quite dire indeed." After pausing for a snuffle, he contemplated Harry, eyes oozing affection to the point where the paint composing him appeared fresh again. "I'm sorry for this, Harry. Everything I've ever done, I did to protect you because I loved you. But this one will not be that way. If I tell Ms. Granger what she wants to know, and yes, I know where the ring is..." Hermione stood straight, eager to hear.

Dumbledore sniffled again. "If I tell her, I fear I will be sacrificing you to this cause more thoroughly than I ever thought possible."

Harry's scarred brow wrinkled. "Haven't I already been?" he asked.

"Not like this," Dumbledore said quietly. "Not at all like this." He sighed the loudest yet, making the picture frame vibrate on the shelf. He tapped his finger on his crossed arms and said, "In a way I would rather see you... well, I suppose that is not fair to the rest of the wizarding world."

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“Rather see me what?” Harry asked.

“Dead,” Snape bluntly provided from his perch on the shelf a few feet beyond the painting.

Harry glanced between Snape and the painting. “You can’t really mean that,” he snapped.

Dumbledore said, “I do indeed. Harry, you have to promise me something. When this war is over. When you have won-”

“What makes you think that’s going to happen?” Harry came back.

“Oh, you will. Your friends are asking me to help you become invincible.”

Harry gave Hermione a doubtful glance.

Dumbledore went on, “Remember Binn’s lessons of how Grindelwald roared across Europe, unstoppable? He only had one of the Hallows and you will have all three. Ah!” he said, cutting off Harry’s leap into a question. “Before I say another word, I must have your promise that you will heed me when this war has ended.”

Harry stared at the painting. “Invincible?”

“Yes.” The painting’s voice reverberated now, growing in strength. “Restrained only by your conscience, your love for your friends, and absolutely nothing else. Imagine it well, and then promise me you will do whatever I say, no matter how much you wish to do otherwise.”

“You’re saying I can just destroy Voldemort and his followers and free us all from the war?”

“Not necessarily in that order. And it will require care, Harry. And some patience to avoid extending the carnage. I would like to guide you in that as well, but that is less a requirement than your final loyalty.”

Hermione stepped in, grasping Harry by the arm. “Harry, I don’t like the sound of this. He wishes you dead rather than this; you don’t know what he’s going to ask of you.”

Snape too, had stood away from the shelf as if to approach and offer a warning.

Harry pushed her hand away. “It’s all right. We don’t have any choice. I promise I’ll do whatever you say,” he pledged to Dumbledore.

“I am going to have you make that promise to your mother as well, if you don’t mind.”

Harry blinked at him. “How’s that?”

Disguised Harry shared an alarmed and curious glance with Snape.

Dumbledore’s painting settled back in its seat. “You will see.”

The Order spent the day holed up in the dining room, plotting, leaving displaced Harry and Snape in their room to complete their own planning. Harry kept his thoughts away from Death Eaters, even the two assigned out on the square that

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flickered constantly at the edge of his senses. He would be leaving here soon, and they did not matter.

A knock finally interrupted their scheming. Hermione informed them that lunch was almost ready and that Dumbledore's painting demanded to speak with Aaron, alone. "He's up in the attic," Hermione informed him. "He said he preferred it there."

Harry climbed up to the attic, brushing cobwebs out of his hair and sneezing.

"Bless you," the painting said.

Harry closed the door and cast as many spells as he could to assure they were alone before sitting on a trunk facing the painting, which had been propped in the opened drawer of a battered dresser. "You wanted to see me," Harry said.

"I want to make certain you are leaving immediately, before you destroy everything."

"I am. As soon as I can arrange it."

"And you stated that Severus was with you...? He is badly needed here."

"He is. I'm taking him with me, but he'll be here," Harry said, delighting in confusing even the portrait of his old mentor.

The painting hesitated. "I am not certain I understand."

"Just as well," Harry said. "About time I got the chance to leave you with only opaque hints to work with." Harry stood. "I am not risking anything in this place. Not really." He started to leave and said, "Severus will need help, since he will not know what has happened here for the last few weeks. Do give him your assistance if you will..."

The painting pondered this, finally settling on: "I will assist Severus with whatever he needs."

"We left him notes in the back of the Potions notebook. Tell him that, in case he doesn't find them."

The painting spent even more time considering this. "Certainly." Then: "You are leaving when?"

"Tomorrow. But tell this to no one."

Dumbledore's visage nodded. "Interesting making your acquaintance; it lets me know far too much about what you may survive, I'll confess."

Harry leaned close all of a sudden. "It tells you nothing of the sort. I'm nineteen." Harry stood, ignoring the painting's confounded expression. "Good day, Professor."



That night, Harry lay fitfully, afraid to sink completely into sleep. The two shadows hovering close on the square needled him. He could not remain neutral about

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them and their more distant, but plentiful peers – both servants and enemies – could not be denied. Each time he closed his eyes to relax, they vacillated between these two roles, taunting him to defeat them or take control.

Despite this inner battle Harry tried hard to seem outwardly at peace. He lay half curled as much as possible in the small space on the shared bed, head buried against his bent arm, as if he could block out the psychic impressions.

Harry remained cautiously still, despite the turmoil within. Perhaps he lay too still because Snape raised his head and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. His resonating voice came out of the grey murk, saying, "You are rather agitated. And I am uncertain why." When Harry did not respond after many seconds he went on, "Do stay, Harry. There is nothing for you to do here."

"I'm not going anywhere," Harry said through his robe sleeve. But it was almost a lie. His entire being hummed, keyed up to take some kind of action, be it offensive or defensive. He longed to be alone, home away from the shadows, as badly as he feared losing them.

Snape's hand brushed the hair over Harry's ear before re-gripping his shoulder. "If you were any more tense, you could serve as a tuning fork. What is wrong?"

Harry shook his head.

Snape sighed faintly and dropped back on his own pillow. "When we get home, we will discuss it."

Some purer core of Harry flinched at what it feared would be a long and tedious lecture. "If we must," Harry said, feeling suddenly better despite his grim response. He held onto that old, familiar loathing of detention. It felt nostalgic and wholly alien to the corrupting power teasing just within reach. With it he found a balance, and shallow rest.

The early grey-blue light had barely given form to the objects in the room when Snape shook Harry awake. Stiffly, Harry roused with a yawn and lit the hearth, intending to warm himself before sliding out into the cold air.

"We should go," Snape said, prompting Harry to groan and brave the chill.

As he tugged himself into his robes, Harry quietly said, "Do you feel all right about going?"

Snape halted in pouring out the dregs from a cold teapot left from the night before. He set the pot down, stared into the cup and said, "Dumbledore has things well in hand. And he seemed most eager for you to depart."

"That's because he doesn't understand..." Harry dropped his voice lower still. "...that I'm not from the future."

"He's a painting. There are limits to what it can grasp."

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Harry dropped his arms and made ready to Disapparate. They had used the house travel map the night before and had already plotted out a misdirection route. “That’s just it. How much help can he be?”

“All he has to do is help them complete this triumvirate of objects and I believe the odds will be about even.”

“Lots for them to do, even if they win,” Harry said, feeling reluctant to leave, and worried about the source.

“That is always true. It is true for us as well.”

“Not like this.”

“Nevertheless.”

Shrewsthorpe stood with the same willful stillness as Grimmauld Place. The fat, sagging candles and chalk lines of the Device had collected a light coating of dust but otherwise remained as before. Harry rubbed his neck and stood before it, sensing its dormant connections to the netherworld and beyond, chilled and heartened by it at the same time. Snape came beside him and unrolled the notes where they could both see them.

Harry had been optimistic about the spell, but faced with so many complicated execution diagrams, one after another, he felt daunted by what they needed to do. “Good thing we’re getting started early.”

Snape’s eyes slid over to him before he shook his head and paced around the pentagram’s broad borders. “I am hopeful that because it was used before it will reopen more easily than an original construction.”

“We have to make certain it’s closed utterly this time,” Harry said. “If what you say is true, it will reopen even easier after this.” Harry sighed and rubbed his itching scar. Snape observed his, but continued without comment. Harry, realizing he was being watched too closely, said, “What’s the first step?”

“Clean up the lines, straighten the candles – the Black family was gracious enough to loan us a few-”

“They aren’t in a position to notice,” Harry pointed out.

“Or more accurately: too dead to notice. Then we create the power arcs between the nodes-”

“You’re getting punchy,” Harry criticized.

Snape stood with his arms hanging loose. “I admit, I am less than hopeful. Perhaps I have been in this place too long.”

“I’m going to get you home, Severus. Let’s get to work.” Harry bent and used the corner of his robe to clean up the smudges around the nearest vertex.

When it came time to work the first spell, the pair stared at each other until Harry said, “You should do this part.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Snape held the notes out to Harry. “I was wondering if you should. Then the magic all through would be yours when it comes time to work through the gaps in what we have.”

Harry pushed the notes back. “But the spell is already yours. Or essentially,” he added quietly.

Snape pulled the notes back and held them out, angled to the sparse light. “True, I’ll admit. And the has the hallmarks of dark magic. At this point, perhaps I have more leeway...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry asked.

Snape shook his head, lowered the paper and began to point at each vertex while reciting the complicated spell from memory, then repeating, like a mantra, until Harry had it memorized too.

Harry’s bored and over-keyed mind was certain an hour had passed. The sky impinged earnestly now through the cracks in the boards over the windows. Finally, glowing arcs connected each of the vertices to each of the others. At the end of one round, Snape simply stopped and rubbed his arm. The arcs continued to hum, flowing and oscillating as if attracted and repelled by each other.

“Now it must be inverted into the netherworld,” Snape said. Squinting at the notes, he tried a spell several times, but the arcs merely deformed before bouncing back.

Harry said, “I can open the gateway wider.”

Snape stepped back. “Be careful not to impose your will upon the Device. My counterpart formed a gate without your skills and I am loath to venture too far from his methodology.” He sighed. “That stated... go ahead. I’ll give you a count.”

Snape counted to five and Harry cracked open the Plane. The arcs contorted and sizzled against the floor before disappearing. Harry released the opening and reasserted the barrier. “I think I may have been holding it closed on you. It’s just a habit.”

“A good one to possess.” Without further comment he began the same spell again, recreating the arcs on their side.

It required just as long again. Harry paced, feeling uneasy and keeping his wand in hand. He felt watched despite their alarm spells remaining silent. He roamed farther this time, around the room’s edge, to find Tidgy’s ghost hovering in the dining room doorway. The elf’s oversized eyes watched him pass, blinking without disturbing the air.

The second set of arcs finished, Snape paged ahead, studying his amended notes before moving on to building a dome on the arcs. Harry came aside and read along, needing to do something.

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART I

Snape, lecturing, said, “During this step, the arcs are stretched upward until they connect back to themselves, linking the Planes.” He pointed at the instruction list, which ended in an infinity symbol. “Done correctly, the arcs will straighten perfectly upward and thin infinitely.”

“What? You mean they will stretch the entire length of the universe? Seems doubtful.”

Snape raised his wand. “As long as they stretch far enough for the spell, I’ll put aside the astronomical implications.”

It took several attempts. Fortunately the arcs proved resilient upon failure and always jumped back, bright as ever. But Snape finally mastered the motion to wave them ever upward, until they stretched so thin they disappeared and the device fell dark again, but to Harry, it hummed strangely, making the hair on his arms tingle.

“What now?” Harry asked.

“That was going to be my question,” an unexpected voice said.

Harry spun on his heel, bringing his wand up to aim at Draco Malfoy, standing just inside the back door.

Malfoy shifted his shoulders and keeping his wand trained back on disguised Harry, circled closer to study the device. “Took me a while to get through all the alarms on this place.” He stopped near the front corner of the hall. “What are you doing? What is this spell?”

Harry cast his voice into old and wavering and said. “Nothing of interest to you. You would best be served by getting out of the way.” Harry felt for the young man’s Mark, intending to bring him down with that rather than cast a spell that may disturb the Device.

“I want my wand back.”

“I don’t have your wand.”

Pointing with his chin at Snape, Draco snarled as if to an idiot, “HE took it.”

Snape said, “It wasn’t yours to begin with. Are wands so difficult to obtain that you resorted to taking Dumbledore’s from his dead hands?”

Draco cringed, as if at a memory. “My father took it.”

“Why?” Snape demanded, full force Head of House.

Draco withered under the assault. “Because the Dark Lord wanted it. My father took it and forced Ollivander to make a duplicate of it to trick him with.”

“But why give it to you?” Snape demanded again.

Draco raised his chin. “Father wanted to keep me safe, that’s why. He figured if the Dark Lord wanted the wand so badly that it must be special.”

“How did you find us?” Harry asked.

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“I followed Potter,” Draco said. “I have access to Transportation’s records if I need them. He was easy to follow, he jumped around so much in a short span of time.”

“Too bad for you,” came another new voice from the other corner of the hall. An invisibility cloak slipped aside and this world’s Harry stepped into the fray, wand out.

“That’s my wand,” Draco snapped. “I want it back.”

“It’s mine now,” Harry proclaimed and spells rang out, tangled, and Draco turned a limb-splayed somersault before landing in a heap.

“I like this wand,” Harry quipped happily, stepping over to lightly kick Draco’s inert form with his toe. Draco’s hand shot out and tried to trip him. Harry jumped lightly back and used a Jelly Limbs Curse to get his ankle freed up.

Disguised Harry stepped closer to the Device, trying to sense if it had been damaged. It felt untouched, and he slouched in relief, more than even his persona required.

Draco pushed himself up with his hands, only to fall on his face again. “I want my wand!” he whined plaintively.

“You’ll be lucky if I don’t take this one too,” Harry said, picking Draco’s wand up off the floor where his limp hand had dropped it. “Disgusting of you taking Dumbledore’s wand. Now, what to do with you.” He aimed his wand between Draco’s eyes and cast a Memory Charm, and a sense of Cursedness made disguised Harry shout a warning, but too late.

A golden pendant dangling around Draco’s neck flashed yellow-hot and bounced the Charm back. A counter flashed out of Harry’s wand at the same instant, swallowing the curse. He stepped back, staring at the wand in surprise.

Draco pushed to his feet and Disapparated while Harry mused, distracted. Harry pocketed Draco’s other wand and said, “Good riddance to that,” and turned to the others.

“You should not be here either,” Snape stated.

“I wanted to know what you were concocting. You left traces on the route planning map, which records every touch, compliments of Hermione,” Harry said, glancing at the now quiet Device while his counterpart considered their options. “What are you working on?”



Draco landed outside Malfoy Manor in the cold gravel, tossed there by the spells protecting the porch, which already that morning must have been reinforced for the day. Hands stinging, he crunched to his feet and strode inside. The Carrows stood in the hall with heads bent toward each other, whispering, as Draco plowed by, intent

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upon his destination. His father had gradually pulled away from wholeheartedly supporting their master, satisfied with running his fiefdom at Hogwarts, putting Draco in an increasingly untenable position. Draco did not know what he would be satisfied with in the long run, but in the short run, a little revenge and bolstering of his own position would be fulfilling enough.

With Bellatrix in hospital, MacNair and Mulciber were given the task of keeping guard over Voldemort's appropriated suite. Draco attempted to simply walk between them, to knock on the door, but he was bodily lifted and set aside rather than allowed to reach his goal.

Draco, bit his lip and brushed himself off. The nasty look that would have withered his classmates, drew smirks here.

"I have to speak with the Dark Lord," Draco pronounced. "I have news."

"Yeah? What for? You have somethin' to tell 'im... we'll pass it on for you," Mulciber drawled. His mask had been slid up onto his head, under his hood, which made him appear to be wearing a funny cap. It did not make him look any more friendly.

Draco had no intention of losing the influence his news would lend him. "As if I would tell you something only our Lord should hear," Draco snarled as derisive as possible.

The pair shifted from their spots beside the door and approached. Draco backed up. He had lost his wand, both his wands, and could not physically best them. A full retreat to rethink seemed the best option until the door sucked open with a smoky whoosh and revealed Voldemort standing in the center of the room.

"Let the boy in. I wish to speak with him as well."

The guards stood aside and bowed him forward. Draco swallowed hard, now faced with what he had wanted: access to the murky room that formerly served as his mother's brightly lit dressing room. Draco found the ego to stride inside, but he jumped faintly when the door rushed closed behind him.

Voldemort paced to the fire, the light from which failed to make it into the room except to further confuse the eye about what was real and what was shadow. The Dark Lord held something in his bony fingers, the wand, the fake wand, so carefully aged by a terrified Ollivander that it and the original could barely be distinguished. Draco took the opportunity to collect his rampant thoughts, to have a chance of hiding them.

Voldemort's terrible voice sounded even worse when it took on an air of casual calm. But he did not look up as he asked, "Tell me again what happened on the tower, young Malfoy."

In that instant, Draco was painfully grateful he no longer had the wand. To be

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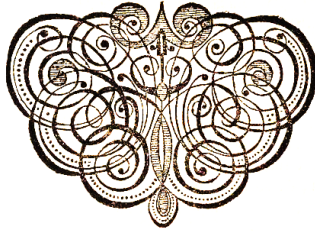
revealed to have it here and now would mean an incomprehensibly miserable end. He stuttered through the beginnings of his carefully modified tale, and Voldemort raised his hand, which shoved him back into an armchair that slid over to meet his back. “I have no patience for your nerves, Malfoy. What did Severus Snape do, exactly?” Now his eyes bored into Draco’s and the scene in the tower, of Dumbledore begging and Snape finally giving him release, played out.

Draco closed his eyes, cutting it all off. He covered his loss of control by saying petulantly, “He used a killing curse which threw the headmaster off the tower. What else is there to tell?” Ollivander had pulled Draco aside and strongly suggested, with the disingenuous air of a truly caring uncle, that Draco not tell anyone he had disarmed Dumbledore. Draco never understood why not, but sitting there now, pinned to a chair by magic far beyond him even with a wand, he pledged to bring the old wizard a feast and a stack of blankets to improve his poor prison in gratitude.

Draco risked opening his eyes. Voldemort stared down at the wand in his fingers, studying its intricate carving in the firelight. He did this for over a minute before saying, “You insisted to my guards that you must see me. What for?” in a voice that could not be denied, perhaps even in death.

Author’s Notes: Happy New Year to everyone (those using the Gregorian Calendar, that is ;-)

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART II

“How long have you been here watching?” Snape asked the figure exploring the edges of the room.

This world’s Harry crossed his arms, wand dangling at his side with confident ease. “Long enough to wonder what you’re doing.” When they did not reply to this, he added, “I doubt I could repeat the spell, if that’s your concern. Without knowing what it does, I probably wouldn’t try.”

Harry thought his counterpart to be lying, but there was nothing for it. To Snape he said, “What’s next?”

Snape gestured for him to come closer, then whispered, “We are almost finished. The candles must be lit, simultaneously, and the Device anchored. That is it.” He reached as if to pull out the notes, but did not open them again. “The procedure is unclear from here. The anchoring instructions are repeated, and I am not certain why. But I expect either the Device will activate, or not. If it does not, we shall repeat as necessary.” Snape turned his body and leaned closer to better hide his voice. “What do you propose we do with your counterpart?”

Harry shrugged. “What can we do? Who am I to insist someone not visit other worlds? If we remove the anchor from our own, he will most likely not make it to ours.”

“Odds are, he won’t, but I am still uneasy.”

“I’d hate to damage his memory with a spell. He’s got enough to worry about.”

Snape sighed. “I agree with that. That said, the anchoring in the instructions is vague on another point. How do you choose where you wish to go?”

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“I just think about the key features of the place and people and I get taken there.”

“And you can return to that place again, with some reliability,” Snape added, half a question.

“Well, yes. I think.”

“Then we shall leave that step to you.” Shielded by his body, he held out the notes.

Harry said, “If we are leaving it to me, I don’t need the notes.”

Without turning to look, he gave a snapping wave of his wand arm that lit the candles, adding, “It is yours then. Perhaps you can keep the incantations quiet enough to not be heard.” Snape backed off, sober face limned by warm candlelight.

Harry glanced at the notes and, while imagining himself poised to travel home, began the last stage of the spell. The Device crackled, the candles popped. Harry glanced back at his guardian and began again, only to have the same result, worse yet, he had a sense of the interstice warping in some stomach lurching way he had never felt before.

Snape joined him again, whispering, “You are enforcing your will upon the Device, I believe. What are you visualizing?”

“I’m imaging Candide at home, waiting.”

“But she is not.”

“But she will be if we don’t make it.”

“Perhaps Candide does not make a good anchor, since we do not actually know for certain what she imagines about what is happening.” Snape held his hands out for the notes. “Perhaps I should continue the spell.”

“What are you going to visualize?”

“I will think of something,” Snape said, turning to face the Device. “Perhaps you should attempt to convince our visitant to depart or, failing that, at least distract him, ”

Harry slowly moved away while Snape intoned the spell just under his breath. His eyes closed, face intent as the dead language flowed out. The candle flames rose and fell rather than sputtering, breathing with a life of their own. The flames stretched longer, reaching for some distant satellite, tracked its course over the house, then returned to straining straight up. Harry wished he knew whether to view this as a positive sign or not.

With a quick check of his beard, Harry retreated from the candles’ warmth and sidled over to his counterpart, whose mesmerized gaze remained fixed on Snape and the Device.

Harry said, “You really should go.”

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The other bit his lip momentarily before turning to Harry. “Tell me what you are doing, first if you want me to go.”

“It is a spell that allows me to go home.”

“You’re leaving?” the young man asked, sharply. “You’re letting some old portrait tell you what to do?”

“Aren’t you?” Harry prodded with a gentleness that made him cringe with his own memories of where else he had heard it.

His counterpart smirked as he returned to observing the incantation. “I guess you did know Dumbledore.”

“He is correct that it is my time to go. He is mistaken about the reason, but he is only a portrait, and cannot understand.”

They both observed the spell execution. Harry sensed movement under his feet, like sand sifting out with a receding wave. He dearly wanted this over with. He considered what argument might convince himself to leave under such circumstances, finally settling on: “Harry, this does not involve you. It involves something I must do to make right the unexpected consequences of my own lack of magical control. Your being here puts that at risk. I will send Severus back to you just as soon as we are finished here.”

Reaching for snide and setting his shoulders more confidently, the other Harry said, “You don’t want to keep him?”

“Severus is my family. And the answer is too complicated to explain right now. I’ll say that I do expect you to protect him.”

The other Harry turned to lock gazes again. Reflected glowing pentagrams shimmered in his eyes. “Do I answer to you if I fail at that?”

“Fair enough question,” Harry said, thinking hard, knowing his answer mattered greatly to the impostor, for whom it would actually apply. “I realize your task is overwhelmingly important, but you will need Severus to guide you after it is all over. That I know. Your friends are not strong enough for this task. For your own good, you need to protect him. But I realize that may prove impossible, so I will certainly not exact revenge if you fail to do so.” Harry’s voice wavered, struck weak by bad possibility.

His counterpart appeared to notice, because he quickly looked away again.

Harry went on. “You will need Severus close by to avoid becoming a hazard to your friends and wizarddom. I know that seems impossible now, but it isn’t.”

The other Harry dropped his gaze, which had the effect of making his eyes dim, no longer reflecting the Device. In the darkness their piercing green failed to make up the difference.

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After a space, jaw tight, the young man said, "It won't matter for long. I think Dumbledore is going to insist I kill myself at the end of this." When he received no response, he went on, jaw tight, "Don't you think so?"

Harry had difficulty contemplating that, had difficulty pulling in a full breath. "I don't know what he will ask of you. I certainly hope it isn't that." Harry meant it, and it came through clearly in his voice. He raised a hand and brushed his counterpart's arm, and the other young man moved casually to get out of reach.

Harry withdrew his hand, but immediately raised it to his forehead, which felt needed. His counterpart gasped at the same time and ducked, pressing his fist against his scar.

"Severus, hide!" Harry shouted across the hall, and dragged his counterpart toward the closest doorway, that to the library.

His counterpart, with a tight-lipped moan, tossed his invisibility cloak over both of them, just as the candles fluttered and a dark, swirling form landed in the center of the hall. Harry gripped the sleeves of his counterpart to hold him up, and held stock still, leaning around the door frame to observe from under the cloak's protection.

Voldemort prowled the room, his muted face turning this way and that as he stalked around the Device. Harry held his wand at ready, prepared to distract him should he make a move toward the drawing room where Snape must have hidden. But Voldemort strode to the center of the hall and called out, "I know you are here, Potter. Save us both a lot of pain and come out and face your short future."

With a swish, the white skinned face turned one way, then the other, as if sniffing out two possible enemies. Harry pushed fully into the library and whispered, "I'll keep him distracted while you get away."

This world's Harry stared at him, flinching again with the pain in his scar. Harry said, "I can distract him long enough for you to get at Nagini. Go on. Take the cloak and go." Harry tossed the cloak off and untangled himself from the hem of it.

The other gathered the cloak around his shoulders, head floating disembodied. He grabbed Harry's robes and whispered, "You can't stay."

Out in the hall, a stalking Voldemort, called out, "I don't know what kind of childish magic you are attempting here, but it will not work. You cannot leave this place except through me."

Harry, fearing for the Device, quickly canceled his disguise, and with a wave of Ravenclaw's spells, opened a broken arched doorway in the outer stone wall. "GO!" he commanded in as harsh a whisper as he dared.

His counterpart gaped at him, eyes roving his face. "He... he won't be fooled by that."

"GO," Harry tried again and gave a forceful shove on his counterpart's arm.

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART II

The other stumbled and tossed his cloak over his head, but raised it up like an anti-cave to warn: “He’ll know you’re not me!”

Harry turned and marched out the library door to find Voldemort standing before the Device. Harry said, “You’re looking for me?”

The figure turned, wand extended toward Harry, pinched with queer delicacy between alabaster fingers. “Ah, Potter. So, you are here. My servants often fail me, but not this time, it seems.”

“You didn’t bring any of those friends?” Harry asked, stalling, hoping his counterpart had departed, but fearing he had not.

Smug now, in the terrifying way only he could be, Voldemort said, “I can bring them at any time.”

Harry dropped his shoulders and shifted his feet, pretending boredom in the face of what felt like a churning dark hole in the fabric of his inner mind.

Voldemort said, “It is past time for you to die, but only after I learn what game you are playing at here.”

Harry shrugged, dragging things out as long as possible. He had to assume his counterpart was taking advantage as he advised. Voldemort swept his arms wide and stepped to the side to glance back at the Device. Harry wondered if he felt it instinctively the same way he did.

“A First-Year’s silly project, it looks like,” Voldemort sneered, and Harry hoped he honestly believed that. Perhaps he was unaware of grey worlds overlaying this one, even as he caused such a violent wrinkle in them. Harry pushed those musings away, lest they be snagged from him in a moment of weakness.

Voldemort aimed his wand directly at Harry’s head. His cloak fluttered oddly around him, at once weightless and infinitely heavy. “What is this, Potter?”

“What does it look like?” Harry mocked back.

“Dark Magic. Which your former mentor would be most saddened to hear you are attempting.” His wand lowered, aiming at Harry’s knees now. “Perhaps you can be turned. Does the power of this thing call to you?”

Reluctant to reply, but eager to stall, Harry nodded.

Voldemort laughed with a chuffing sound. “Yes, I can see it making your eyes glow, even from here.” Voldemort considered him as the candles fluttered in a draft before stilling again. “Why don’t you join me, Potter? It would be so much easier. I’ll make certain your little friends are safe. Isn’t that what you want?”

Voldemort tried for reassuring, but the treacly flow of his voice made Harry’s skin creep up his arms. Harry rubbed his scar, half without thinking. Voldemort’s voice dropped, “If you accept me, that will hurt less.” He gestured at the Device behind

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

him. “Forget these infantile attempts at schoolbook Dark Magic. I can show you things you never imagined.”

Yeah, right, Harry thought. “Like what?” he asked, unable to not sound derisive.

“You doubt me?” Voldemort asked. His chest and shoulders inflated, making him appear to swell and float above the floor. His wand arm struck out, but Harry was right with him, throwing up a counter to the Snake Conjunction Curse. The spells exploded between them, sending pink and yellow streamers swimming through the hall, hissing.

Voldemort hesitated, surprised. Harry took one breath and came back with the most forceful Chain Binding he could. His most practiced spell worked for half a second before the links melted. A Blasting Curse came back. Harry threw a Rubber Shield over it, but it still shifted the stones in the walls around them as it dissipated.

Intense instinct pumped through Harry’s limbs. He half spun, light footed and ecstatically alive, to literally throw a Cutting Curse across the hall. Voldemort managed a block, but he needed two steps to keep his feet. Harry did not let him recover, he followed up with a Whip Charm, aimed at Voldemort’s ankles. But Voldemort had a better Counter than Harry knew existed, and Harry’s wand tried to jerk out of his hand, and he hung on, getting tugged halfway across the room and dropped hard on the floor.

Harry struggled to draw a breath into flattened lungs. Voldemort strode closer. Harry sucked in a small fractional breath and worried that Snape may intervene. Between gasps, Harry squelched, mostly, the oncoming Crucio. Voldemort cried out faintly and staggered. Harry pushed himself to sit up, limbs singing with pain, gripping his wet and gritty wand. Voldemort’s wand flashed with another Blasting Curse and Harry squelched this one right on time. Voldemort went airborne, met the wall beside the library door, and slid down it, stunned.

Harry stood up and brushed himself off. “I see you have a new wand,” he said, indicating the elder wood wand Voldemort held.

Voldemort blinked, still returning to his senses. He held his wand up to examine it dazedly. Harry used a Expelliarmus to knock the wand away and it clattered along the wall where came to rest, glowing out of the shadows. As much as his distorted face would allow, Voldemort’s expression grew sly and Harry felt a shifting in his inner vision, a flutter like birds changing direction in flight. In that instant, Harry sensed them, all the servant shadows, all at once. Breathless again, he teetered on his feet. He knew how to send a disturbance into that connection to irritate their Marks, but he had not known how to Summon. Summoning was not dissonance, it was more like song, tuned strings vibrating in the presence of a matching tone of music, rising and falling, calling all of them.

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART II

Harry cut it off. He threw his mental weight against the siren vibrato coursing through his inner mind, deadening it utterly. The room remained still.

Voldemort, growing wary, began to stand by clawing his way backwards up the wall. He tugged another more familiar wand out of his robes and aimed it at Harry.

“Sure you want to use that one?” Harry asked. “The one Dumbledore wanted you to have?” Harry bit his lip and gestured at himself with his fingers. “Come on. Want to show me what you can do with that one?”

Voldemort glanced at Harry’s wand. Harry with vicious helpfulness said, “I can change to that one, if you’d like,” indicating the fallen one across the room.

Voldemort’s eyes flickered to the other wand and blinked, giving away that realization struck, and it was not a pleasant realization. His eyes were caught then by something else across the room that made his lip curl. Harry assumed he had spotted Snape, but did not risk turning to check.

Harry set his shoulders and drew his attention back at himself. “I’m tired of this. I’m tired of you killing my friends of you tormenting Muggles and wizards you don’t approve of. I’m tired of this war.”

Voldemort spelled a Curse, something that threatened to balloon to fill the entire hall. Harry did not even take the time to resist what it was beyond that, squashed down, the backlash was sufficient to knock Voldemort down again and force him to scabble for his second wand. His hand shook before he got it aimed again, shoulder wedged against the wall to hold himself upright with his feet trying to find purchase.

Harry aimed his wand between Voldemort’s scarlet eyes, yearning to finish this. His breath came in heaves as he fought the instinct not to just crush the darkness slithering before him, but to slip into its place and Summon his followers, to breath in not air, but unfathomable power and reach. Harry bit his lip hard, hunched over with the effort of resisting. So easy to just climb into the center of the web shimmering smokily right before him.

Weak with tormented effort and suddenly damp and cold in his clothes, Harry managed to hoarsely mock, “I’ve decided to take your advice and I’m not playing around any more, Tom. This is the beginning of the end for everything you’ve wanted.”

This was not his place, Harry adamantly reminded himself. Snape waited. Candide waited. His friends would suffer. He could not risk killing this Voldemort. This world’s Harry would have to fulfill his role. He himself could only escape this place, at best.

Voldemort lowered his wand, and Harry’s jerked, triggered by the movement to ready a Counter. A ruffle shook Harry’s robes and, with a burst of inky smoke, the other wizard vanished.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Harry turned to check the room and found Snape in the doorway to the drawing room, wand drawn. For a second he seemed to consider keeping it up against Harry, but he lowered it.

Harry was still catching his breath when Snape joined him, simple air no longer felt sufficient.

Snape considered their project for several breaths, mind elsewhere based on his expression. He finally said, "I was going to have you check the anchoring on the Device, but I think it is sufficient, given your state."

Harry stumbled up beside him. "No, I'll see if I can check."

Ignoring Snape's hand of assistance, Harry stood unsteadily before the Device, calmed by the glow of its ever breathing tapers. Snape took Harry's shoulders and tugged him aside. "Why don't you rest a moment?"

"I don't know how much time we have," Harry argued, desperate to go, to escape his rampant instincts to reach out and grab what should not be his. With a great swallow and forced calm, Harry asked, "How long do you think he'll be gone?"

Snape shook his head, hands still clasped on Harry's arms as if fearing he may slip free. "I have never seen him run like that, so I do not know." He patted Harry's sleeve and turned him more away from the Device. "Better yet, why don't you talk to me a bit."

Harry could not possibly describe what he felt. A dreamy sense of skirting above everything, untouchable warred with feeling bound into intimate contact with an entire army, if he just would let it be true. "We should go, Severus."

Snape gazed at him narrowly before saying, "Whatever you are going through... will it end when we leave this place?"

Through a haze of willful deceit, Harry managed to faintly shake his head.

Snape's fingers now hurt where they gripped. "Will it improve, at least?"

"Yes." Harry repeated. "Yes."

Snape turned him to the Device and held him there by the arms as they both gazed into it. Harry moved his toe to avoid bumping the closest candle, Snape forcefully stepped him back, like a puppet. Harry did not think he needed so much help. "I'm fine," he said, raising his arms to shake free of help.

"If you are certain," Snape said, remaining close, but letting go.

"I didn't kill him," Harry argued his case. "I wanted to."

"I noted that," Snape said. "But you do not seem quite yourself."

Harry brushed his hair back. "I'm the same self I always am," he muttered sadly, and felt better for admitting that. They stood side by side in silence, woven into their own thoughts until Harry said, "Let's get you home."

Snape took his arm again, grip hard as ever. "You will follow?"

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART II

Harry, who had not contemplated otherwise, blinked back at him in surprise. “Of course.”

This calmed Snape considerably. “All right.” Harry restrained him from entering the device, saying “Let me check it first.”

Snape allowed himself to be pushed back out of the candles’ immediate light. Harry drew in a deep well of air and relaxed his mind, pushing aside the cloying web of power that tried to smother him as he did so. The Device sat like an immovable island in a universe of chaos, and within it, Harry read peace, or at least relative peace: a place unstalked by Voldemort, where a few struggled to straighten out the Ministry of Magic after many battles, both for power and otherwise. Harry sensed himself, struggling with things beyond his maturity and innate coping skills, wishing for guidance from someone too far away to provide it. The candle flames veered and righted as he returned to the here and now. Smiling wryly, Harry stepped back and gestured like an invitation to Snape. “Feels okay. Better than here, for certain.”

Snape uncrossed his arms and after handing Harry the instructions, held up his robes to step safely into the star-shaped void. “You are right that we must hurry. But that said, do be mindful of what you are doing.”

With care to avoid igniting his robes or his hair, Snape crouched and uncurled himself, reaching out to align each limb along an arm of the pentagram before resting his head back on the unyielding floor. Harry dropped his eyes away from the sacrificial vision before him to squint at the phonetic notations beneath the original obscure alchemical codes. On the next sheet, the anchoring process was indeed repeated. Harry puzzled over this, wondering if he should try to execute that part. Haste weighed on him, and he began reading, figuring he could do that section if the spell failed without it.

Harry’s voice sounded stilted and meaningless as he read, but the Device hummed to life, gathering a halo more substantial than the candles could account for. The last words of the incantation fell from his lips and he lifted his wand to copy the complex tracing in the air, trying very hard not to shape what was happening with his innate skill, but it was near impossible to hold back. He could feel the gateway contorting as it yawned wide, could sense possibilities stacking to infinity, making his knees weak. He wanted that peaceful place where the only enemy was his own weakness and his largest need for help from the one who, through atonement, had allowed him to find himself. In such a place he could imagine successfully overcoming what remained of Voldemort’s legacy, and he ached with hope to get there.

The Device latched firmly and dilated open, making Harry hold his breath, steering without trying, but fearing to hold back. A rush of wind threatened the candle flames, sending them seeking outward from the Device in all directions. Visions shot along

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

the flat edges of the pentagram then the wind rushed inward. Then silence.

Harry blinked at the still candles. Snape was gone. For an instant Harry stood there on his toes, startled by the sudden cessation of shifting Planes, but then alarm took over: Snape's counterpart had not arrived in his stead.



Having been mangled and shunted through an impossibly narrow and acid-cold gap in reality, Severus Snape found breathable air and a hard floor to be an almost insultingly mundane conclusion to his experience. The inconceivable faded and the paralyzing cold took over. His limbs barely obeyed his will, shaking violently when he tried to pull out his wand. His fingers refused to work properly, and he had to wedge the wand against a knot in the floorboards to hold it steady while spelling a Heating Charm into the wood beside him. Gradually, the blessed heat spread under him and eventually, the tremors eased enough that he could breathe normally and sit up.

Snape was in his house, but not. Dust carpeted the floor, disturbed by his struggles. Joints protesting, he stood and out of paranoid habit wiped clean the evidence of his arrival by returning the dust to a smooth sheen. He added another spell to his feet to continue masking his presence.

The house stood empty, but unlike the one he just exited, it remained undamaged, and smelled of nothing but old wood and mold, long unoccupied. Where was he? he wondered, flinching at a random pain when he turned to study the un-boarded upper windows. Someone had seen fit to only protect the house from casual marauders.

Snape sat down cross-legged beside the invisible Device to wait for Harry. His charge would be hurrying to straighten things out, in that Snape had faith. How long it would take him to work things out remained a looming question, but Snape would not make things more difficult by straying away.

A cloud moved across the sun, muting twin four-squares of light beaming down from the upper windows. Despite being intact, the house was not warm. At risk of chills, Snape stood to warm himself by moving about. He circled the hall, glancing into each room, finding fleeting familiarity with how the house had been when he had bought it. Perhaps it was not actually his, just an unsold property. At least he could be assured by its state that no one would be arriving home from work. If their steering of the spell was of any reliability, Voldemort should not be a threat either. Only Harry was of any concern, back in that other dark world, working frantically to rectify things.

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART II

Snape circled around to the library and found his best books stacked with apparent haste on the lower shelves and floor. The dust around them had been disturbed recently. Snape backed out of the room and crossed to the hearth, where he could evaluate the hall floor with the advantage of the backlight of the upper windows. Old footprints wandered everywhere, dust filled, so of no immediate concern, but still mysterious.

Snape puzzled this before giving up and returning to occupying himself in a book entitled *Transient Concoctions*, a primer on brewing short-lived potions. The house had no chairs, so Snape sat on a stack of the largest books, precariously resting the one he was reading on a narrower tower. He was passing into the second chapter when the sound of Apparition brought his wand to hand without thought.

Snape peered around the doorframe into the hall and stopped in surprise. A figure resembling Harry stood with his back to the library, hand on the decorative metalwork supporting the stairway banister. Snape stepped fully into the doorway, subconsciously thinking to call out, but his better instincts prevailed and he remained there, motionless.

The figure dropped his arm and moved to the mirror under the stairs. He trailed a finger over the Celtic knots weaving around the frame of it, looked up, and stood unmoving, fixed on Snape's reflection in the doorway opposite. In slow motion, his hand came off the mirror and he took a half step back, but did not turn. He hung there, his pure green eyes apparent even at a distance. His hand reached for the frame again, running his hand along the side of it, as if expecting it to trigger something.

Snape crossed his arms, and this caused the other to spin, his expression revealing that he believed the reflection to have no real counterpart. Seeing no way to back out gracefully now that he had missed that chance, Snape stepped forward.

"Pr... Professor?" Harry stammered, growing more stunned, not less. He swallowed hard and teetered between stepping closer and falling back against the mirror.

Snape dryly stated the obvious as the best opening. "I take it you weren't expecting me."

Harry's mouth tried to smile but uncertainty overcame it. "I'd say," he said, and swallowed hard. Ever finding some inner well under pressure, he said more solidly, "I realize it's your house, but still."

From behind Harry's eyes, Snape gained a fuzzy impression of fatal violence involving himself, but it was pushed aside too quickly to perceive in detail.

"To what do I owe the visit?" Snape asked.

"What? Oh." Harry reached back to touch the banister again, explaining, "I come here to think. The spells on this place are really good, and no one, not even an owl, can find me. It's nearly impossible, otherwise, to get a break from things,"

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he explained, sounding tired. He began to pace, falling into his complaint, but alarm reasserted itself and he spun to face Snape again. "You don't look like a ghost." He indicated the floor. "You aren't leaving any footprints, but..." He came closer, raising a hand, but withdrawing it before it got halfway to Snape's sleeve.

"What are you?" Harry asked.

"Not a ghost, fortunately."

"That's good," Harry said, clearly relieved.

"More an echo," Snape explained.

"An echo?" Harry pondered.

Snape shrugged and paced away, towards the Device, worrying now that his Harry might choose that moment to come through.

Laughing nervously, which made him look much younger, Harry said, "It's true I didn't expect to find you here."

"I imagine not," Snape nebulously replied.

Harry paced him at a distance, like an eager student, saying, "I didn't expect it, but I've wanted to talk to you."

The obvious underlying pain in that statement made Snape stop and return his full attention to the immediate. "Have you? I can't imagine," he said, falling easily into his old self, the one he estimated was expected.

"I did what you said," Harry obliquely stated.

Snape tried to catch the young man's thoughts but they were running roughshod over each other, and it was impossible beyond the bizarre sense of welcoming the enveloping green of a Killing Curse.

Harry went on, "I'm sorry I didn't understand."

Snape now wished he did. There may be something to learn here for his Harry.

"I saw all the memories you left and I did what you said," Harry repeated earnestly, clearly needing to unburden himself of these words. Again, his thoughts were chaotic: Lily as a child, Dumbledore, the green light again. While Snape pondered the inexplicableness, Harry plowed on, gathering strength from confessing. "And I feel bad that we didn't try harder save you," he helplessly admitted, arms falling loose at his sides.

Snape got a crystal clear picture that time, of Nagini's evil coils, of his own death.

Harry swallowed hard, clearly saddened, but then his eyes narrowed, ever slow on the uptake but guaranteed to get there. "Your neck..." He leaned in and down to better see before straightening. Suspicion bled into his movements.

Snape tipped his head back and forward, bluffing. "Your point? I'm not a ghost, as we have already established."

"You're an echo," Harry stated. "Whatever that is."

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART II

Snape shrugged. "I am dead, but I am here. Call it what you will."

Harry crossed his arms, and tapped one foot. "Tell me something only you would know."

Snape longed to steer Harry back to the previous conversation. He made a tiresome, in character noise. "Such as?"

Harry bit his lip and gathering determination said, "Tell me what memory of yours I saw that made you quit giving me Occlumency lessons."

Snape topped Harry's standoffish pose with a raised chin. "Oh, the indignity of death and now the indignity of your father's miserable treatment of me. Thank you."

Harry deflated. "Sorry."

Snape gave him now time. "Apologizing for your father now?"

Harry gave a useless arm movement. "I suppose. Yes. Now that I understand better. It's the best I can do. I didn't expect to get the chance, really." He turned to pace alone now. "All I can ever manage is to do my best. It's not always enough, I realize. But I am sorry... for everything."

Again, there was too much pain. Snape came back like a whip. "Potter, stop apologizing."

Harry froze and stared at him, derailed from his circling thoughts. Snape did not give him a chance to recover. "You defeated Voldemort, correct?"

"Yes," Harry confirmed with that cloying earnestness Snape had gratefully forgotten about. "I did as you said. It wasn't easy, but I did."

Since Harry's thoughts were singular this time, they came through clearer. Snape demanded, "You stood still for a Killing Curse and believe you have anything to apologize for?"

Harry's mouth moved but he gave up and fell silent.

Snape stepped closer. "May I give you some advice? Give up on the self pity, it gets you nowhere." He waved to indicate the house surrounding them, growing more forceful. "Give up on the past, you owe it nothing."

Harry gaped at him now. "But..."

"No buts, Potter," Snape chastised him.

In mild wonderment, Harry said, "No one talks to me like this."

Snape put up a finger to accent his point. "That may be your problem."

"Maybe. Well... they all smile and nod, but getting them to actually change things at the Ministry is bloody well impossible."

Snape sighed. "You're nineteen, Potter. Leadership takes time to learn, and to earn."

"So, I'm realizing."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

“You cannot singlehandedly fix things,” Snape pointed out, guessing at the trouble. “And leading your little friends about is sorry preparation for long entrenched political powers.”

“I know that,” Harry replied, defensive now. “But what else can I do? Things still aren’t back to how they were before, even as sloppy as that used to be. Wizarddom can still self-destruct if the Ministry doesn’t get back to normal soon.”

Snape suggested, “Perhaps a Muggle course in management?”

Harry laughed. “Are you being facetious?”

“Do I sound facetious?”

Harry fell sober. “I can’t tell. I don’t understand you, really. Didn’t,” he corrected, falling sad and introspective.

“Potter, move on,” Snape insisted. “It is all well and good to take responsibility for things, but clearly you are letting the past hold you back.”

Harry stared at him, eyes unveiled, drinking that in.

“And learn some Occlumency,” Snape added. “You are a political liability as open as your thoughts are.”

Harry turned away, chagrined. “It’s been suggested, but I didn’t want to. I remembered how badly it went—”

“Potter!”

“Yes, yes, let go of the past,” Harry chanted, pacing a short way. He slowed to examine the room with what may be new eyes. His face went through some expressive transitions before he said, “I found this place in the records at the Ministry. I got curious about you. I wanted to understand.” He touched the railing again as he passed. “The other place seemed to be where you were living, rather than here. It was like you were saving this place for a better time.” He turned his gaze to the ceiling. “Like you had hopes, plans, for the future.”

Snape swallowed, having nothing to add to that.

Earnest again, and almost shy, Harry asked, “Have you seen them, her, my mum, beyond the veil?”

Snape shrugged. Oddly enough, he had. “Yes, of course.”

“Oh, well, that’s good.” Whatever he had been leading up to, Harry let it drop, and stuck his hands in his back pockets and hunched over like a teenager.

Snape jerked his nose at a familiar scent, a whiff of the dry rotted earth that accompanied Harry’s gateways to the underworld. Nonchalant, Snape turned to where the Device had dropped him off. The dust was disturbed again, in the pattern of a pentagram. And now Snape felt a tug, akin to a Portkey, drawing him that way.

His Harry was not going to come through himself. He was reversing the spell. Snape wandered that way, retaining his posture despite a rush of absolute relief.

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART II

His silence let Harry build up to another confession. "I AM sorry for what happened."

Dredging up some semblance of his stricter self, Snape snapped, "Stop apologizing."

Harry glared at him. "NO."

Snape tried to estimate where he stood without glancing down and drawing attention to the floor. He tipped his head from side to side. "That's better."

His praise derailed Harry again. Harry regrouped and said softly, cathartically, "I needed to tell you. I didn't imagine I'd get to."

Snape feared he would be unceremoniously sucked away at any moment. He ignored his bones wincing at the thought and urging him to jump clear. He said, "Well, you have. And I have to go, now."

Harry pulled his head back. "What? Go where?"

Snape let out a pent up breath and glanced up to where, in his world, Candide had hung a small abstract weaving. "To a place like this, but full of light, and color, and a family."

"Is there such a place?"

"I hope so," Snape replied. A rush of something circled his feet, tracing the lines of the Device without leaving a mark. When Harry took a step forward, Snape raised his hand and commanded, "Stay back."

Harry circled sideways and away, giving the spell more space. "I am sorry," Harry insisted over the faint sizzle of the spell, sounding more stubborn and less pained.

Snape crossed his arms. "I heard you the first time." And then the world collapsed around him.



Snape came to in the glare of candlelight, with Harry shaking him lightly, saying, "Sorry."

"Ach," Snape uttered in exasperation.

Harry jerked aside, patting down his smoldering trouser leg and the scent of burned cloth drifted in the air. He crouched more carefully and adjusted the warmed cloak over Snape, explaining, "I figured out what the second anchoring is for; it's to lock the spell to a person, rather than just a place."

Snape could barely think let alone move. "Ah," he managed.

"I can execute it again, but I think you need time to recover."

Snape nodded weakly. "As much as I'd like to hurry... perhaps..."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Harry lifted the cloak off, reheated it and settled it over Snape again, then rested his hand on Snape's chest. "Let me know when you're ready."

"In a minute. Or ten."

Harry smiled painfully. "Where did you go?"

Snape shook his head rather than reply.

"You're all right, though?"

"Yes."

Harry's sigh of relief joined the collective hiss of the candles. He patted Snape and stood, wand out, on guard.



Snape signaled that he was ready, and Harry, worried, asked him twice if he was certain.

Snape lifted his head with obvious effort. "We don't have much time here, nor at home."

"Right," Harry agreed and raised the wand to repeat the spell properly.

This time, the candles drew inward, almost to the center of the Device and their flames appeared to fish up a nearly identical form before fluttering back to normal. Harry let the fitful energy ease out of his shoulders and stepped forward with a warmed cloak.

The other Snape, an impostor no longer, lay senseless, and Harry was loath to leave him alone and unprotected. He tucked the cloak up around Snape's neck to better warm his blood and began to count to sixty. His own Snape lay unaided at home and he could not wait beyond that.

Before the count ran out, Snape stirred and raised an arm. "Don't ignite your sleeve," Harry warned, tugging his hand to safety and helping him sit up.

"Wonderful. Home," he drawled.

"Go to Grimmauld Place. They'll take care of you there."

"Bloody likely," Snape slurred with a shiver.

"I wouldn't lie to you. My adoptive father has been laying the groundwork for you to help the Order, and you are badly needed. Dumbledore's portrait somewhat understands the situation and will help you."

Snape stared at him. "Dumbledore," he uttered. "I am safe from no one."

Harry stepped back. "I have to go. Get yourself to safety," he said, nearly pleading. "Voldemort was just here."

Hand buried in his hair, Snape took that in. "Where is he now?"

"I scared him off."

FATEFUL ESCAPE, PART II

Snape let his arm fall, breathing, "Of course you did."

"Good luck," Harry said. Snape gave a half wave full of derision, and Harry slipped away through the floor.

Harry wasted no time imagining home and falling away into it. Again a clinging shadow seemed to follow him, but this time he expected it, and willfully ignored it.

On the shiny clean floor of their own main hall, Harry struggled to his half-numb feet, which refused to move exactly how he commanded them to. He staggered across to where Snape lay, spread out as he had been in the corresponding hall in the other Plane. Harry dropped to his knees beside him, willing his own body to function despite every fiber of him resisting.

Harry breathed deeply several times as though preparing to dive into deep water. This at least cleared his head, even if it did not give him any strength. With clumsy hands, he grabbed hold under Snape's arms and hauled him up.

"Candide will be home soon," Harry said, as a kind of apology for the manhandling.

Snape's head lolled, and Harry believed him unconscious until Harry muttered, "I should just hover you..." And received a firm, "NO."

Harry laughed, and they staggered together to the stairs. "Come on then. We have to get you to bed; pretend you have the flu or something."

Halfway up, with Harry needing one hand to keep them from falling forward onto the stairs, Snape said, "I have raised you with a properly devious mind. That makes it all worthwhile."

Harry shook his head and led him to his bedroom. Movement seemed to be helping more than warm blankets. Snape almost stood on his own when they arrived.

Harry applied heating charms to the bed and the extra duvet from the trunk in the corner. Snape tugged off his shoes with difficulty while Harry worked at warming everything nearby.

"I can get those for you," Harry said, but Snape shook his head. His second shoe thudded to the floor and he fell back.

Moving quickly, Harry covered him firmly. "You'll be all right in a few minutes," he assured him. "I usually am."

"You are much younger than I," Snape pointed out peevishly.

"And I don't usually do three in a row. Sorry about that."

Snape raised a long index finger into the air. "Please don't..." he began, but the Floo roared downstairs.

Harry stood, glancing quickly about the room to make sure everything was as it should be. Downstairs he slowed to what he hoped was a normal pace. Candide stood

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

at the table, sorting her post. She jumped upon seeing him there, as if, in Harry's overtired imagination, he did not belong.

"Harry, you're home," she said with great emotion and a hug. "Were you able to figure things out for yourself?"

Harry shrugged. He had not had time to figure anything out, at all, and felt daunted by the creeping concerns of his own reality.

Harry took a silent, much needed breath and easily let slip, "Severus has a touch of the flu, I think."

"He does?" Candide asked, alarm clear. "Where is he?"

"In bed."

Candide slid by him to the door. "Did a Healer look in on him?"

Harry shook his head, safe with the lie: "He doesn't want one." She grumbled and started up the stairs with purpose. On her heels, Harry quietly said, "I told him that if he wasn't feeling better by midnight, we'd contact one, no matter what he wanted."

"Good," she said, businesslike.

Harry hung in the doorway while she entered and directly went to sit on the bed. She brushed Snape's hair back even though it was not in his face. Harry thought he probably needed that more than the warmed duvet.

"Sure you don't want a Healer?" she asked.

Snape replied, "Don't be preposterous. Of course I don't."

Continuing to brush his hair back, despite how difficult the impostor had been recently, she said, "You'd insist on calling one for Harry in an eye-blink."

"That's different."

"My mum insists on taking me shopping this evening and I'm sure she will insist on a visit home, but I can stay."

"Do not do so. It is unnecessary."

Harry could see her frown even from where he was. "You do feel slightly feverish," she said, which reduced Harry's concern that Snape might not be warming up. "If I leave right after dinner, I expect I'll be back by eleven."

Snape grabbed hold of her hand as she moved to stand. "If you do not return by midnight, I will send Harry to apprehend you."

She laughed lightly. "My mum couldn't argue with him; that's for certain." She sent Harry a glowing grin. This time Snape let her stand. She said, "We'll let you rest."

The two of them had a quiet dinner. Candide finished quickly and departed in the Floo after checking in on Snape. Harry pretended to be arranging his books and

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notes before him on the table, but as soon as her feet spun out of view, he went upstairs.

Snape appeared to be sleeping when Harry approached the bed. With the bedside lamp tweaked up, Snape's face appeared deeply lined by stress. Harry sat on the bed, wanting to speak to Snape, but not willing to wake him.

Winky appeared with a bowl surrounded by the overpowering aroma of chicken broth. Harry set the tray on the side table for later, but Snape roused from the steamy scent. He gingerly rubbed his eyes and forehead and sat up partway. Harry quickly shifted his pillows for him, which startled Snape slightly.

"Winky brought soup," Harry said solicitously.

"Yes, I noticed." He leaned his prominent nose in the direction of the tray and Harry carefully handed it over.

Snape ate ravenously once he started, making Harry ache. "Do you want something more substantial?"

Snape shook his head between bites. "Winky is spot on, as usual."

Finished, he handed the service back to Harry, who set it on the floor. He looked Snape over, wanting to do something more. He said, "I'm glad you're home."

"Not as glad as I am."

"No, I think so," Harry countered, pained.

Snape shifted forward to lie flat again. He stared beyond the ceiling in silence before saying, "You said something to me once, quite wisely, regarding my faith being your home. I did not realize how true the reverse of that was at the time."

Harry patted his arm through the duvet. "You must really be exhausted, talking like that."

Snape shook his head in amusement and doggedly went on, "I have learned a great deal from you, Harry. Having to force myself to behave as I used to I now fully appreciate just how much. " He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose before continuing. "One must give oneself up to truly discover oneself. You have to give yourself away, totally. It requires enormous faith in those around you to manage it. I know now it was fear that prevented my doing it before; fear borne on lack of trust. You have been wise enough all this time to know what it has taken me this long to learn."

Harry dropped his gaze. "You really will regret this later," he insisted, in a light sing-song.

Snape punched him lightly on the arm and slowly went on, "I didn't know who I was before. And I was so terribly certain of it at the time. How very delusional of me." He paused again before saying, "I owe you quite a lot."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Harry smiled teasingly. “You still haven’t learned, really,” he criticized. “If you think there is accounting in this.”

Snape’s hand clumsily found Harry’s sleeve. “We have some things to discuss, I think. But later.”

“After you’ve seen a Healer, you mean?” Harry prodded.

“I’ll be fine in the morning,” Snape insisted, eyes falling closed. “We can talk after your training tomorrow.”

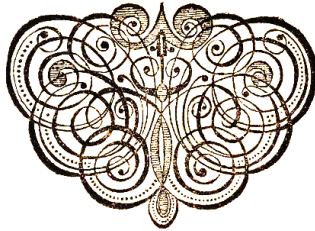
“I’m not going,” Harry said, finding that statement very easy.

Snape cracked an eye open. “We will definitely be talking in the morning, then.” He studied Harry with slitted eyes before saying, “Feeling better?”

“Yes,” he said. He had not tried reach out to the shadows here, and did not know how tempting it would be to grab hold if he tried. He wanted Snape to rest and not worry. “Much better.”

Snape, as usual, seemed unconvinced. “Tomorrow,” he insisted, patting Harry on the arm.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



PRECIPITOUS PLOTS

Harry sat at the dining room table, penning a letter to Tonks, one pet on his shoulder and the other watching and winking from the chair-back opposite. Harry held the letter out for Hedwig and took down the canister of Floo powder. She nipped at him, but accepted the journey, leaving behind a tail feather that quickly burned up in the fire when it returned to yellow.

Tonks appeared minutes later, and stood awkwardly beside the table.

“Did you bring Hedwig back?” Harry asked, wanting to send more letters.

“She wanted out of my window, so I let her. Probably off collecting your post.”

Harry gestured that she should sit. He wished that nothing hovered between them, but could not shove the issues completely aside. He took her hand and sat down, holding it. “Want to stay?” he asked, missing her acutely from his time in prison.

“You aren’t angry with me?” she asked. “About everything.”

Harry thought she seemed angry with herself. A breath escaped him and he shook his head. Kali crawled once around his collar before settling in again.

“Coming into the Ministry tomorrow?” she asked.

Harry shook his head again. Partly, he was thinking he could better find Moody’s killer if he had more time to do it. Partly, he wanted to punish the Ministry.

She pulled free of his hand and sat back, elbows out. Winky sparkled in and poured her a cup of hot mead, which she concentrated on while sipping it. She did not meet his eyes as she whispered, “We need to find who really killed Moody.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Harry said. “And I have an idea how to go about it.”

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Her tired eyes grew interested. "How's that?"

Harry was not ready yet to explain his plan to infiltrate Durumulna. "Let me try this week to see if it will work, then I'll let you in on it."

"Just be careful, Harry. Promise?"

A little recklessness would be required, but these people were nowhere near Voldemort's level, which Harry had just faced down yet again. He shrugged vaguely.

She pulled out her little chalkboard and scratched something out on it. Harry said, "Are you on duty?"

She avoided his eyes. "I've been taking extra shifts... just for something to do. I'm taking myself off for a few hours." She held the board up. "Kingsley says no problem." As she slipped the board back into her pocket, she said, "Arthur will want to talk to you."

"Fine," Harry said flatly.

It was not terribly late, but Harry had not rested well in days. He stood to lead the way to his room. In the main hall, Tonks said, "You never opened your Christmas presents."

Harry glanced over at the pile that Winky must be keeping neat and dusted. "Want me to open them now?"

Tonks headed that way, and sorted through the pile. "You have a lot of friends, Harry," she observed.

Harry took up the present from Candide and tore off the paper. Inside was a new quill set, gold tipped in six colors of feather. "I could have used that in prison," he said, remembering having to beg a quill from the warden.

"Posh," Tonks said. "Can I have the bright pink one?"

"Yeah, help yourself to it," Harry adamantly said, reaching for the next gift.

Tonks happily pocketed the quill and said quietly, "I caught Arthur in the file room the other day..." She stopped until Harry put down a small box that held what appeared to be a snow globe with the Hogwarts castle inside. But shaking it did not make any snow appear. "He was adding pages to Percy's file."

Harry fixed his gaze on the castle. "What was on them?"

"You assume I sneaked back to read them?" she said with false insult, raising herself up on her toes.

Harry waited, prodding the boxed globe to no avail. Voice low, she said, "He's opened an internal investigation. Just our department. He isn't telling anyone about it, even the Minister. Kingsley's assigned to it. I told him what I'd learned following Percy around at your request." She sighed. "The department would probably not be pleased to know I'm telling you this."

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Harry nodded and held back a smile. It was a better present than any on the table.

Tonks helped dispose of wrappings while Harry stacked opened gifts. Halfway through the pile, she asked, "Where did you go?"

Harry turned the box he held one way, then another, trying to read all the small print. Set a Spell it read. Better than a Rememspeller! Harry opened the box, to find a small black pyramid inside. "It's hard to explain," he said.

Tonks took up the pyramid. "My dad has one of these. You can have someone record a spell you can't do yourself on each corner, and then replay it when you need it."

"Does it work?" Harry said, thinking that a bit dangerous if used the right way.

Tonks shrugged. "Only for weak spells and some charms. His refuses to record hexes or curses." She dropped it back in Harry's hand. "His mending spells are bollox, so he uses it for that to avoid asking Mum." After a beat, she said, "What's hard to explain?"

Harry thought of that other place and how tangled things had become with his guardian misplaced. He huffed and laughed lightly. "Everything."

Sadly, she said, "You won't say. I thought maybe you'd gone off to one of those other places."

"I needed to work some things out," Harry insisted vaguely, not wanting to lie outright. He dropped the next wrapped box he had held and took her by the arm. "Come on, let's finish this later."

The next morning, Harry woke late, and alone – Tonks had slipped out while he slept, to return to duty. Harry found Snape in the drawing room, still in his dressing gown, well enough rested that his eyes were clear and keen.

"Feeling better?" Harry asked.

"Well enough. Candide wished to remain home from work for my sake, but I convinced her to go. I feel recovered but I do wonder if it is possible to ever feel truly warm again." He sipped his steaming tea with unusual reverence.

The door knocker sounded, and Harry went to open it, finding Ginny and Fred on the stoop. Ginny said, "Aaron owled this morning to say you were back, but not at training."

Harry nodded and invited them inside. Fred gave him a hard slap, "Welcome back to the Red Haired Anti-Ministry League, my man. Good to have you back on the safe side."

Harry said, "You only say that because I've seen too much of what you're doing. And my hair's not red."

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Fred made himself comfortable on the couch. "That can be fixed. Permanently, even."

Ginny scuffed to a stop upon spying Snape in the drawing room. "Oh, you're still home, sir. Sorry, Harry, I need to talk to Professor Snape, alone, if you don't mind." She slipped into the drawing room with too much familiarity, and closed the door.

"What's with that?" Harry asked the room, which only contained Fred, who replied with a shrug.

Harry worried acutely about Snape also not knowing. "Maybe I'll crash this meeting. I'll be right back." He waved Fred to sit back down and after a quick rap, slipped inside.

Snape was standing behind his desk, wearing that thoughtful look on his face that implied he was trying to catch a hint beyond someone's eyes. Ginny stopped speaking upon Harry's entry, trailing off from, "...I don't feel comfortable..."

"It's all right, go on," Harry urged.

Ginny frowned, and with a half glance at Snape informed him, "I'm not supposed to tell anyone."

Snape gave a small sideways nod that Harry interpreted to mean he was grateful for the help. Harry wished he had some idea what this was about in order to help.

Snape cued Ginny for Harry's sake, "You were saying something about Lord Free-lander, if I'm not mistaken."

Ginny glowered. "Oh, so now I can say something."

Snape's expression did not obviously change, but clearly he disliked this immensely.

Harry took a guess and asked, "You're not happy about the letters?"

"You know about that?" Ginny asked, sounding relieved.

"Yes," Harry assured her.

Ginny's shoulders fell. "I feel terribly about the trouble." She paused to give Snape a deserved glare before turning back to Harry. "I don't like having this kind of secret from Aaron, and I worry I should tell him before the letters come to light and can be traced to my handling them. I've seen my brothers at work; I know that can be done."

"Severus has the letters again," Harry said, finding amusement in Snape's attempts to appear that he followed this conversation. Harry turned to Snape. "I'm sure he's hidden them safely away."

Snape gave a mechanical nod. Fortunately, his usual annoyed detachment worked as cover.

Harry tried to console her. "Look, when this all blows over for the better, Aaron will be happy Skeeter got what she deserved."

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Ginny argued, "If we got at her any other way, I'd believe that. But this is too close to the truth. I would never hang Aaron's personal life out there like this. Not if I'd known." She gave Snape another glance and stood up. "Never mind. I promised I wouldn't shirk." Her voice fell softer and she addressed Snape with, "I just feel like I sacrificed myself, even though you said that wasn't part of the plan."

Ginny departed, closing the door behind her. After a moment, Snape said, "Clearly, I returned home just in time. Hopefully." He pulled out the center drawer on his desk. "I suppose I should locate these letters, as good at hiding things from myself as I seem to be..." He closed that drawer and opened another. "What do they look like?"

"They are torn in half." Harry said helpfully. "Should be easy to spot."

Snape sat down to rummage in a lower drawer. "And that happened, how?"

"They had some kind of magical alarm clip on them, and when I slipped into the Dark Plane it refused to go along."

Snape shook his head. "I don't see them."

"Did you run all the eavesdropping spells?" Harry asked, pulling his wand to check now that he remembered.

"Of course," Snape said, still looking around. He found some other papers that were of momentary interest. "And these letters were to what purpose?"

"Revenge on Rita Skeeter."

"Did it work?"

"Yes."

Snape dropped the papers back into the drawer and closed it. "Long overdue."

Harry explained, "Well, she was tricked by it. What will come of it, is yet to be seen."

Snape stood and surveyed the room. "Is it possible I would have simply burned them?" he asked.

"That would have been the best thing."

They both stared into the hearth, where lean, blackened logs fluttered with orange tongues. "I'll look some more here and at Hogwarts, but if they do not turn up, I may assume I simply did that. But I do wonder if more action is required on my part."

Harry laughed. "You want to finish what your counterpart started?"

Snape gazed thoughtfully back at him. "You always do." He resumed his chair and gestured at the door. "Why don't you see your friends out and come back for our talk."

Harry felt a flutter of reluctance at getting a lecture, but did as requested. Ginny sent her brother on ahead and took Harry's sleeves. "Will you help me with Aaron if

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I tell him?"

"Yes, of course. You didn't mean any harm to him, right?"

"I didn't even know he would get involved. I didn't ask any questions; I just followed instructions. After your letter, I told Professor Snape I wanted to help you, and delivering those love letters was what he told me to do."

"You were a mule," Harry said, then explained. "What the criminal gangs call someone who does the legwork but knows nothing about what they are carrying."

"Wonderful. I've joined the Gang of Slytherin."

Trying to cheer her up, he quipped, "You'll enjoy it. They get away with everything you never dared try."

"Didn't stop my brothers."

"Your brothers always got caught, as I recall."

"Not as often as you think," she said. Then feel more serious. "I haven't asked you again about that crazy letter you sent me. Did you mean it?"

"I meant it, but I don't know if it matters," Harry said. "That's a bad answer to be going on with, I know. Keep up with your studies and don't trust me. I could be an evil wizard in disguise, you know."

She gave him a shove on the arm, "Harry, not trusting you would include not trusting the letter you sent."

A more wily instinct inside of him said, "And maybe you shouldn't."

"Uhhhn," she groaned in playful annoyance. "I don't want a prophecy. But I'll admit just the threat of one makes it easier to pick up my books when I'd rather do something else."

Harry considered delaying her longer, to delay getting the talk, but she said, "I have to get back to the shop. Aaron is coming to take me out to lunch." She gave him a peck on the cheek and said, "Glad you're home, Harry."

"So am I," He said, happy to gain some distance from the shadows calling to him. It gave him room to think about broader things.

"If you think of sending a letter again, come and find me instead!" Ginny said, before borrowing a handful of Floo powder.

Harry waited for the last of the loosened ash to settle on the grate in her wake before returning to the drawing room. Snape sat with his fingers on his forehead, reading his pre-opened post.

"Anything else I've been doing that I should be made aware of?" he asked, flipping each letter over to scan the next.

Harry took the seat before the desk and tossed his hands. "I wasn't here either, remember?"

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Snape's focus drifted off. "The next few weeks should be excessively interesting, in that case."

"We're doing better than they are. Back there," Harry said, silently wishing them well.

"I've been thinking over those events. You appeared to win the Wand of Destiny off Voldemort, tipping your counterpart's hand, so to speak. Except that you already signaled your superiority before that. That may work in that Order's favor, by driving Voldemort into a defensive posture."

"That would be better?"

"It will give the Order some time to get better organized... Potter to get a sufficient grasp of his powers..."

Silence ruled, until Harry said, "Do you think they'll manage?"

"I still gauge the odds at fifty-fifty." He put his letters aside and put his eyes squarely on Harry. "Thinking of going back to assist?"

Harry faintly shook his head. "I shouldn't go back there."

Snape's mannerisms lightened, indicating this was his preferred answer. "One of several things we need to discuss."

Harry frowned and took a deep breath. Snape closed his dressing gown tighter around his chest and settled back in his chair, hands in his pockets.

"Still cold?" Harry asked.

"No matter. Let's back up to the critical issues I missed. You were arrested for what?" he asked, in the mode of one making a list.

"Killing Alastor Moody."

Snape breathed in slowly. "I did not realize that."

"I didn't want to risk telling you in front of everyone."

"Valid concern. Who did kill him?"

"I don't know," Harry said. "Had to be someone who knew he was alive. Oh, that's another thing..." Harry, hemmed, "Tonks told me you arranged for someone to confess to my crime, to get me out of prison."

"I did that," Snape stated, half questioning.

"Yup."

"Remind me in the future not to be replaced by an impostor."

"What?" Harry countered, half teasing. "You'd have left me there in the lock up?"

"I would have thought of something."

Harry let that go, otherwise he may need to explain what precisely had motivated the other Snape to take such drastic action. Harry appreciated, with a tremor in his raw nerves at imagining otherwise, having a guardian who was not also a shadow and

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therefore a tempting tool. He felt badly now remembering how he had treated the other. He had not been able to help himself, and that bothered him the most.

Snape resumed a businesslike attitude. "So, you were framed for Moody's murder, how?"

Harry pulled out his wand and held it out before him. "Well, I went to talk to Belinda, that evening, and she gave me the brush off about needing help, which she previously told me she needed, but later said I was not there at her place that night. I made the mistake of using the Dark Plane to get there – I know, I know, I should not be using it at all – and so there were no records in the Department of Transportation to back me up." He held the wand up higher. "That and Moody's murder was on my wand," he added, feeling faintly nauseated at that thought.

Snape sat forward, thoughtful for many seconds. "They reversed the spells in front of you?"

Harry nodded, holding the wand out so Snape could take it. "deBenedictus was there and he told me not to let them do it. But I didn't see the risk."

Snape looked the wand over and handed it back. "And it is your wand."

"Yes." Harry sighed, turning it between his fingers, finding nothing odd about it.

"Give me the timeline in detail. When did they reverse the spells?"

Harry held the wand in hands clasped between his knees. "Two days after the murder, when I first came into the Ministry for training."

"And you recognized the spells preceding... actually sequentially after... the curse in question?"

Harry shrugged. "Other than drills, they weren't anything special."

"And the spells right before the curse?"

Harry paused. "They didn't go back any farther than that."

"They should have. Who performed the reversal?"

Harry's mind was speeding up, remembering. "Rodgers ran the reversal. But Mr. Weasley was in charge."

"I'm disappointed in them, then. I would expect them to be more thorough."

Harry shook his head. "They may not have wanted to prove me innocent. Tonks told me later they wanted temporarily to do what Durumulna intended, to keep me safe."

"And your wand was in your possession the entire time when the murder is reputed to have been committed?"

Harry wondered fleetingly how dinner with both his guardian and his solicitor would go. Tediously, most likely. "Yes."

"You are certain?" Snape stated with clear enunciation.

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“Well, the day before my arrest, Percy knocked it out of my hand and fetched it up. Dangled it before me.”

“Did he now?”

“Well, but he just knocked it under the bench in the changing room.”

“But you lost sight of it in that moment?”

“Yes. But, what could he have done with it in that second and a half?” Harry asked, letting his frustration get out.

“He does not have to do anything but switch it,” Snape pointed out, also rising in agitation.

“Severus,” Harry insisted, not liking the implied chastisement. “I had my wand before that. I would know if I had lost my wand. It’s kind of a rare one, you know.”

“Harry,” Snape said, backing off on his Head of House voice and moderating into something more gentle, “it isn’t so very rare. You had another, before.”

A tingle, like ice crystals forming, migrated up Harry’s back. He thought frantically backward in time. “I... I was having trouble getting my wand out of my pocket. Like it would fall in too far.” He slid this one into his front wand pocket and out again, feeling colder still. “Someone switched my wand for my old one. Severus, I had Winky extend all my wand pockets, and several times, I couldn’t get at my wand.” Harry thought back, trying to remember when that had started, exactly. “I don’t remember the first time that happened...”

“Think back instead to another time your wand was out of your sight.”

Harry did so, unable to remember, so he gestured helplessly.

Snape, unrelenting, said, “It could have been while you slept... it could have been while you ate lunch, it could have been a pickpocket.”

Harry thought back, but shook his head again.

“Think, Potter. Did you ever loan it out?” When Harry indicated not, Snape went on, “Were you out on a busy street in the days preceding?”

“In the days preceding, I came to see if you were all right, in that other place. Surely no one there switched the wands.”

“I would think not. Other than that?”

“I went down to Diagon Alley, to buy a small animal to try taking In Between.” Harry felt another chill, remembering the desiccated creature.

“And did anyone bump into you, physically?”

“Belinda,” Harry replied.

“Could she have switched your wand?”

Harry remembered that day. He remembered Belinda taking his lapels and waltzing him around the animal cages. He had not been watching her, but instead the suspected Durumulna walking by. “Yes.” He scratched his chin with his knuckles.

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“She had been so eager to talk, to go out for tea or something, and after that, she gave me the brush off. Told me she’d taken care of things.”

“She probably had,” Snape stated knowingly.

“They told her to take my wand,” Harry said.

Snape accepted the fresh tea Winky brought in and poured out two cups. “She was probably not the only one assigned that task, if they were at all competent about it.” He gestured for Harry to come fetch the other cup from the tray, and blowing over his own, said, “They left the plan tight for Percy to change the wands back. They had to know he could reasonably get that close to you.”

“It was a surprise inspection.” Harry warmed his hands on his cup. “You think that’s what happened?” he sadly asked, regretting the discovery that Belinda had grown so involved. “You think that’s how the spell got on my wand?”

“Not for certain. But lacking more evidence, we will operate on the assumption that it is correct. It is critical to recognize your enemies, especially the ones closest to you. In this case, we already know she lied, so the rest is safer to assume.”

Harry turned his cup and drank off the end of it. “So, Percy probably knows who really killed Moody.”

“Or did it himself,” Snape stated, raising Harry’s eyes in surprise. “You do not think him capable? Possibly. In such plots, the fewer involved the more likely the success, and since they succeeded, until foiled at a later time, I would assume there is only one other involved, at most.”

“You could lecture our apprentices on criminal plotting, Severus.”

“Our apprentices?” Snape prodded.

Harry dropped his gaze to his cup, which was empty. “I might go back. I haven’t decided.”

“I would prefer it.” At Harry’s curious glance, Snape went on, “You are still at an age where structure is important. And you have a great deal to learn.”

“Yeah, plus you’d prefer I at least pretend I’m on the good side.” He eyed Snape knowingly at the tail of this.

“Pretending to be on the bad side does gain one some personal leeway, but I don’t recommend it, in general. In any event, you will most likely receive some concession for returning. Perhaps that will assuage your ego regarding it.” His voice fell off and he regarded Harry in silence

Harry hoped that Snape would be finished with their talk for now, that he would leave some things for later, but this was not to be.

“On another topic. You were having peculiar difficulties in that other place. What exactly was the problem?”

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Harry met Snape's eyes, and only upon finding them shuttered realized he had tried to get a hint of what Snape suspected. "I didn't like having so many shadows around. That's all. They bothered me."

Snape sat with his chin resting on his closed fist. "Bothered you, how?"

Harry shrugged, reluctant to give away everything. Those other instincts to plot had grown less alien and now felt like a reasonable advisor.

Snape asked, "Why did Voldemort fail to Summon his followers?"

Harry shrugged again; it was by far the easiest answer.

Snape did not speak for several breaths. "I consider it crucial to remain in your good graces, Harry. So, I do not wish to appear to betray you by entrapping you with my questions. Are you certain that's your answer?" Snape asked. Too level.

Harry swallowed. In a rush, he said, "I don't like what is happening to me. But I can't stop it."

Snape knitted his fingers before him and said, "Now we are getting somewhere. My counterpart left me a most interesting letter, one I find hard to believe."

"You were tricking me," Harry complained.

"I was simply asking you for information. Then when you resisted, I was merely assessing you. Both differ from trickery. I am now treating you as an equal by informing you of what he wrote, so you are aware of what I know. Or would you prefer I not?"

Harry dropped his eyes, fluttery inside again, he said, "He set me off. I couldn't stop myself. I was angry with him invading this house."

"Understandable. But despite that, I think you crossed a line. One that I am personally familiar with, so please do not think it a mere lecture when I warn you that it is difficult to remain behind this line after breaching it."

"I do feel better," Harry insisted without thinking. "Here. At home."

"I fear, merely a reprieve," Snape said. Adding upon Harry's change of expression, "I am never delusional, no matter how much I wish a situation to be otherwise. I would think you knew that by now."

The door knocker sounded. Moments later, Winky interrupted with immense shyness to announce Mr. Weasley. Mr. Weasley pushed the door open a tad more than Winky had to stick her nose inside. "I hope I'm not interrupting?"

Snape stood. "No, do come in. I assume you wish to speak with Harry."

Mr. Weasley slipped his hat off and folded it into his pocket. Scratching his head, he said, "If I could have a moment alone with you first, Severus, I'd prefer that."

Harry stood and, glad for the interruption, went out to the main hall where, with distracted attention, he opened the rest of his Christmas gifts. He stacked a pair of sparkling socks from Dobby on top of a box of Telescope Vision Sweets from the

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twins. For the first time he understood how his cousin could care so little for each gift. They felt terribly meaningless to Harry at that moment.

In the drawing room, Mr. Weasley tugged the chair so it better centered on the desk. He still had his cloak on and he stood halfway to flip this back over his shoulders before sitting again. "I just wanted to know where you stand before I approach Harry. We do want him back and I want to go about convincing him to do so the best way possible."

Snape sat back and stared at Mr. Weasley over the tips of his steeped fingers.

Mr. Weasley looked away and went on, "Ehem, I wanted to know where you stood on his continuing his apprenticeship before I—"

"I am for it," Snape interrupted.

"Ah. Good. Fine then." Mr. Weasley sat forward in his chair. "How best do you think that can be accomplished?"

"Give him time. Let him make up for his incarceration by enjoying some extra freedom. I honestly think, given enough time, he will grow bored."

Mr. Weasley straightened his hair and better tucked his hat away. "Can I count on you to convince him?"

"I will do no such thing." At Mr. Weasley's surprise, Snape added, "This is his decision, alone. I have expressed my preference to him, but I will not attempt to coerce or even nag him. He is perfectly capable of deciding for himself."

Mr. Weasley's shoulders fell forward. "I was hoping for more help than that. Minister Bones insisted in no uncertain terms that Harry must return. Perhaps she can convince him."

"May I say," Snape said, "that I understand Harry's low estimation of loyalty from your organization."

"The threat to him was not to be underestimated, Severus."

"There has always been a threat to him," Snape pointed out.

"We have leaks—" Mr. Weasley stopped when Snape abruptly held up his hand, took up his wand and reran the spells to block eavesdropping and to force Animagi to unmorph, then he set it back on the desk.

"Do go on."

Mr. Weasley huffed. "Same problem we have. We have a traitor, or perhaps two or three, in our midst at the Ministry. We feared — we being myself, Reggie and Kingsley, that the goal behind framing Harry was not to have him prosecuted for the crime, but merely to have him held in the Ministry dungeon awaiting a hearing, where he would be an easy mark indeed." His face fell. "We cannot fail to detain someone once we have that much evidence. Doesn't matter if it's the Minister herself." He threw up his hands, which then landed on his thighs. "We brought in the very best

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to advise him, but dear Harry, with his overflowing faith in his own innocence, did not abide by his advice. Placing him with the French was our only workable fall back plan. Fortunately the new Azkaban will not be finished for another half a year; otherwise, we'd have had to come up with a rather singular excuse to not send him there."

The two sat in silence, until Mr. Weasley said, "Really, Severus, we are merely doing our best to protect him. He doesn't make that terribly easy, you know. But he's more than worth the trouble he attracts. I hope he knows that."

"He will if you tell him." Snape fluidly rose to his feet. "I'll fetch him, unless there is something else...?"

Frowning, Mr. Weasley shook his head.

Harry looked up when Snape opened the drawing room door. He was playing with the Set a Spell, trying to trick it into recording a simple Hedgehog Hex. As Harry passed Snape in the doorway, and Snape turned to leave, Mr. Weasley said, "Do you want to sit in?"

Snape shook his head and closed the door. Harry's opened presents sat in a disarrayed pile on the table, the top packages off kilter and threatening to tumble. He took a seat on the couch, hands clasped, appearing more pained as he became more thoughtful.

Mr. Weasley pulled another chair away from the far wall – one in need of upholstery repair. He set it facing Harry and leaned forward anxiously.

"Harry. I'm glad you didn't spend too much time away. We were quite worried, given that not even your family knew where you had gone off to."

Harry rubbed his nose and waited for something easier to address.

Mr. Weasley spread his hand placatingly. "You are well aware of what the limits are of our office. The rules we have to work within. They are part of what keep us from falling into treachery, from the Ministry becoming part of the problem." He sat back and muttered to himself, "Perhaps that's the wrong way to go about this."

Given the terrible situation he had just escaped, Harry had more understanding than Mr. Weasley probably suspected. "I understand, Mr. Weasley, but I'm not ready to come back."

"Ah, but you do intend to."

"I don't know," Harry said with a shrug. "I don't know what I want."

Mr. Weasley gave him a pained frown that might be sympathetic. "Don't take too long to decide or you may fall too far behind. Not that we wouldn't make some accommodation," he added quickly. "We didn't believe you did it, Harry. But we have to do things a certain way, you understand."

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An owl scratched at the window. One of the small grey and silver fast ones the twins owned. Harry went and let it in, taking the letter that had his name scrawled on it in a small and furtive, but familiar, hand. Harry opened the letter as he returned to his seat. It was short and from Ginny. She said that Skeeter was snooping around the shop in disguise and wondered if Harry had any ideas what they best do.

Harry tossed the letter on the fire on the way back to his chair.

"That looked like my one of my sons' owls," Mr. Weasley said, in a manner that expected further information.

Harry shrugged. "You were saying?"

"Ehem, yes, I was saying that you are always welcome back. Amel- Minister Bones told me that she is willing to go to rather great lengths to make things up to you."

Harry's brow furrowed. "By doing what?"

Mr. Weasley grew remote. "Er, I think it was something like declaring a Harry Potter Winter Fun Day or some such, but... that's not the point, Harry. The point is she's willing to smooth things over, whatever it takes."

Part of Harry thrilled faintly at the notion of being owed a favor he could save for later, but most of him did not want anything. "I'll think about it."

Mr. Weasley leaned closer. "She's willing to place you elsewhere in the Ministry, if that's what you'd prefer. I'd rather not tell you that, because we'd rather you stay with us. And I told Minister Bones that I doubted you would want to be anywhere else..." He faded out, eyes searching out Harry's.

Harry stood. "I'll think about it," he said again.

Mr. Weasley patted Harry on the arm, looked as if he wished to say more, but made it to the door before saying, "If you need anything, Harry. Let me know."

"A bit of leeway," Harry said.

Mr. Weasley asked, "With what?"

Harry shrugged again and saw him out. Snape stood in the hall when Harry returned, face unreadable.

Harry slipped his warmest cloak over his shoulders.

"You are going where?" Snape asked evenly.

Harry paused to look at him. He could make a battle out of that. He ignored that instinct and replied, "Diagon Alley. Skeeter is snooping around Ginny."

"Do you want help?"

Harry shook his cloak to drape it forward over his shoulders and memories of what they had just gone through cleared his head. He laughed lightly. "We are unfortunately both equally ignorant about things. I don't even know how Ginny got involved in this. I'm hoping to get her to explain. At least I'm supposed to not know."

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“Her cryptic remark about being sacrificed also begs for illumination.”

Harry paused in fishing out his gloves. “Right.”

“You will be back to guard Candide when she returns home from work?” Snape asked. “If not I will remain.”

Harry felt a warmth rush through him at that expression of trust. “I’ll be back. You need to get back to Hogwarts, don’t you?”

Snape nodded, studied Harry’s eyes a moment longer than necessary, then turned to retreat to the drawing room.



The bells on the shop door cheerfully chimed out a dirge as Harry slipped inside Weasley Wizard Wheezes. His stroll along the alley had attracted a level of attention unmatched in a long time. A few congratulated him on proving his innocence, but most just stopped and stared in confusion.

Harry walked slowly and peered around the shop, thinking Skeeter may be hiding among the piles of colorful boxes. She would have come in disguise in order to ask questions, which she could not do as a bug. Undoubtedly, she hoped to get the letters back, and would not give up until she had.

“Harry,” Ginny said in surprise, causing the pair of customers in the corner to look over. Fred, who was assisting them astutely led them to the farthest corner of the shop. As Harry approached the counter, Ginny said quietly, “You still haven’t gone into the Ministry today...”

Out of the corner of his eyes Harry saw movement on the top edge of a framed Wizarding Yen note on the wall above the counter. Something insect-like with long antenna was crawling along the top of the glittering, gem-inlaid frame. Fixing his eyes on Ginny so as not to give away that he had spotted Skeeter, Harry stated clearly, “No, I’m not planning on going back at all.”

Ginny’s lips pursed. “Oh.”

“I don’t want you to give up trying,” Harry added quickly. “Just because I have. You wanting to be an Auror shouldn’t have anything to do with me.”

She came around the counter and leaned on the front of it, peering up at him. This was better for Harry, as his eyes kept wanting to dance up to stare at Skeeter. Ginny said, “Dad’s treated you really badly.”

Harry gave the faintest shrug. He wanted certain things to make it into the evening edition, but others could be left unprinted. He thought about how he would like an article to read. “The department had to do what they had to do. But so do I. I’m doing what I want now.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“If you say so, Harry,” she said, sounding dubious, but not so much as to tip off Skeeter. She sighed, and said in real sadness, “It just would have been nice to train with you... if I do get in. It’d be like old times.” She glanced along the front windows before leaning closer. “As to the other thing. Are you certain that...”

Harry could see in her gaze what she was about to say. With Skeeter hanging over his shoulder, his options were quite limited. He bent down and kissed her to shut her up. It was a quick kiss, but she stood rail straight and stunned when he released her. Before she could speak, Harry grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the door. “I want to show you something.”

Fred appeared beside him, seemingly out of nowhere, a perturbed expression on his face. “What’s this then?”

Harry gave him a glance that he hoped conveyed he had bigger things to worry about. But the twin followed behind, head cocked amusingly. Ginny’s feet caught up, and she said, “Fred, I’ll be back in a bit.”

Fred slowed down, giving Harry time to pull out his wand and whisper an Imperdurable Charm at the door while pushing it closed with his wand hand. Fred ran into the door and shook the handle. He gave Harry a raised eyebrow and a shaken finger and disappeared back inside the shop.

Harry tugged Ginny down to Eyelops, which had a construction fence around it, made up of half burned boards from the old shop. Based on the sound, work was going apace. Harry shook off Ginny’s hand, ignored her sharp gaze, and waved an Animagus revealing spell around them. Nothing happened.

“I wasn’t certain we’d beat her to the door. Let’s go somewhere we can talk.”

Ginny relaxed and let him take her arm. Harry Disapparated them to Weaver’s End. Ginny crossed her arms against the cold wind whipping along the road and said, “Where are we?”

“Someplace easy to protect from eavesdropping. Come on.” Harry led the way into Snape’s old house after layering on a few spells to the outside of the ramshackle structure.

Harry warmed the walls and floor and Ginny waved a repair spell on the couch that caused the sparse remaining stuffing to collect on the seats, almost comfortable.

“This is a nasty place Harry.” She glanced around at the bookshelves and the ajar shelf that led to the passage up. “Old Order safehouse?”

“Something like that.” Harry adjusted his posture to half face her. “Sorry about what happened at the shop. I didn’t want you to say anything with Skeeter there.”

Rising quickly in frustration, Ginny countered, “I assumed Skeeter wasn’t there because you were talking so freely.” She rolled her eyes and sat back, faintly licking her lips, but remaining stubborn in expression. “What’s she going to print about

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that?”

“She didn’t have her photographer. And I’m okay right now with a reputation as someone willing to be reckless.”

“You are?” She shook herself and brushed her hair back. “What’s Aaron going to say?”

“Talk to him. I’ll talk to him, too, if needed. Don’t worry about it.”

She gaped at him the way people in those other worlds often did, so Harry moved on. “I need you to tell me how you got involved with the letters.”

“Reheat things, if you will,” she said, rubbing her arms and shivering. “Unless you want the highly abridged version.” While Harry complied, she said, “I told Professor Snape that I wanted to help you and that’s what he gave me to do. He gave me those letters and had me bring them back to him, telling him I needed someone to hide them for a friend. They were love letters he’d forged, it turns out. Fakes to trap Skeeter, who he must have known was spying on him.” She grabbed up Harry’s sleeve. “I didn’t know Aaron’s family would end up involved. I really didn’t.” Heaving a helpless sigh, she sat back and stared at the ceiling.

“What was that comment about being sacrificed?” Harry asked.

A ripple went through her as she composed a reply. “Professor Snape is a scary bloke, Harry. Maybe you know that already well enough. I mean, we all used to think that, but somewhere along the line, we forgot. After I volunteered to help he grew, I don’t know how to say it, aggressive. No, that’s not quite right. Over-determined, maybe. Said I couldn’t shirk...” She closed her eyes. “Don’t tell him I told you this, okay?”

“I won’t,” Harry assured her. “Now that I’m back, it’s all right again.”

“I had the sense he had some plot idea he wanted to use me for. Something right awful. He warned me he would sacrifice anyone to get you out, and I said, even me? And he said ‘bright girl’.” She shook herself and behaved cold again. “I have to tell you, Harry. He scares me again.”

Harry reran the warming spells and then the eavesdropping ones. “I stole the letters back from Skeeter. Partly because I didn’t know what was going on. I would not have let Severus involve Freelanders if I had been around to stop it.”

Ginny laughed. “It’s like Professor Snape knew we’d been trying to convince Lord Freelanders to buy the Prophet and fire Skeeter.”

“What?” Harry blurted. “You were?”

Ginny laughed harder, partly as a release from stress, and punched Harry on the arm. “That’s what’s happening now. He’s trying to convince his wife to run it. Says he’s tired of her running off far away to work on her charity stuff and this would keep her at home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“Does Skeeter know the paper’s being bought out?” Harry asked.

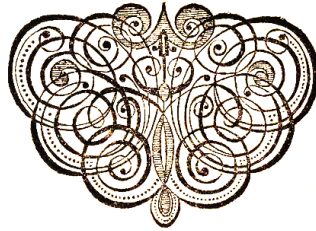
Ginny shook her head. “I doubt it. Freelander hasn’t made an official offer yet.” Ginny clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh Merlin, I almost said something to you in the shop! Thank goodness you stopped me.” She blushed faintly before grabbing her hair and pulling it back from her face and holding it there. “Oh, what is Aaron going to say. Do you think she’ll print that?”

Harry thought he would not mind a good fight, was in the mood for one. He found himself anticipating Aaron’s anger with a kind of happy warmth. “Probably.”

“Maybe I can head him off. Catch him as he leaves the Ministry. Tell him it was part of some plot you have going.” She turned to him. “It is, isn’t it?”

“It is now.”

CHAPTER FORTY



BAD PRESS

Harry's evening started out quiet, a welcome relief, just Candide and himself resting after dinner. The quiet was broken by Hermione arriving for an unannounced visit. She eyed the pile of opened presents on the table while loosening her gloves then smiled and gave Harry a hug.

"How are you, Harry?" she asked, not a meaningless greeting, but a serious question.

"I don't know," Harry replied, unable to be less than honest with his old friend.

This reply brought Candide's attention up from the letter she was writing. Harry stared at Hermione's feet, considering suggesting they move out of earshot.

Hermione patted him on the arms and moved to take a seat. "Professor Snape suggested I make a visit." She shrugged apologetically. "He even assigned one of his Seventh-Year Slytherins to do the marking I was working on when I hesitated." Grinning a bit, she added, "He assured me she would mark the essays even more brutally than I do." She looked Harry over. "So, you are not going back to the Ministry?"

Harry ran his best Animagus-detection spell before approaching to sit across from his friend. Hermione reached into her pocketbook for a copy of the Prophet. At Harry's noise of curiosity, she asked, "You didn't see this?"

Candide leaned over to look as Harry opened it, explaining to Hermione, "I added a Hate-Owl blocking Charm on the windows. It sometimes means we don't get a paper."

Harry could not be more pleased with the article that made the evening edition.

CHAPTER FOURTY

Potter and Ministry in Splitsville the tall headline read. He hoped whomever he met with in Durumulna tomorrow had a subscription to the paper as well. He suspected he or she would have. Rodgers always asserted that half of what a gang did was aimed at getting to read about it later.

Skeeter had written exactly what Harry had said at the shop, then chased down various Ministry officials for comment. The inset photograph was of Bones waving the camera away like an insect. The caption stated she would not comment until she had met with Harry herself. There was nothing in the article about the kiss.

Harry, hiding a grin, held the paper out for Candide when she reached for it. Hermione gazed wistfully at Harry. "I thought being an Auror was what you wanted." The comment made Harry wonder if they now knew each other about as poorly as he and the alternative Hermione did.

When Harry did not respond, Candide, nose buried in the paper, asked, "What are you hoping to get from them?"

Hermione replied for him. "Harry doesn't want anything. Do you Harry?"

Candide stated philosophically, "Everyone has a price."

"You only say that because you're an accountant," Harry pointed out, surprised to hear her being so cynical.

"It doesn't have to be money." Candide raised her head, handing the paper back. "Rita Skeeter is looking for validation. That's her currency of trade: notoriety for knowing things others don't. She can be bought off with that currency... for a while at least."

"You still think I should grant her an interview," Harry lightly accused.

"It's her price for being nice."

"For a little while," Hermione muttered. "Also works to simply get the better of her."

"Right. For a little while," Harry echoed, and the two of them shared a knowing look about the past.

Winky arrived with mulled wine. Hermione took a glass and sat back with a sigh. "This is nice... having an evening off."

"Sounds like you work too hard," Candide said, reading the back page.

"Look who's talking," Harry said.

Candide rubbed her mounded belly before resting her hand atop it. "That will end soon. Boss was reluctant to let me go to half time, but I think I will, starting next week. Already can barely tolerate the Floo." She held the paper out and changed the topic. "So, who's the new flame, Harry?"

"What?"

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Candide tapped the back page of the paper in Harry's hands, open before him, but unread. "That."

Harry read Skeeter's gossip column and found that his arresting Ginny's speech had not gone unprinted.

Potter has not only moved on from duties at the Ministry, he has also (just in time!) moved on from dating one of the Ministry Aurors. Rumors too hot to ignore reached the ears of your intrepid reporter and I am merely dutifully passing them on to you, my loyal reader.

Candide read the blurb aloud and added, "Did you break up with Tonks without my noticing?" she asked, stunned.

"No. Skeeter's mistaken."

Hermione said, "Harry, you better find Tonks then and explain."

Harry sat back, thinking that seeking Tonks out would put him at a disadvantage, somehow. "She'll come to me."

"Harry! What is wrong with you. Go find her."

Just the tone of her voice made Harry sit up. He could not deny her argument, really. "Right." Brushing his hair back, he said, "You'll stay here?"

"I don't need a guard," Candide argued. "If that's what you're thinking."

"Yes, you do," both Harry and Hermione said in unison.

Harry tried Tonks' flat, but found it quiet and empty. Her copy of the newspaper lay on the ledge outside, rotting with a few older editions. Perhaps she had not even seen it. But anyone else who had would not neglect to mention it.

Worried he may no longer be authorized to enter the Ministry after hours and not willing to submit to the night guard's scrutiny, Harry used the Dark Plane to slip inside the Ministry, into the stairwell just outside the door to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Rogan and Rodgers were on evening duty and they both stared when Harry put his head inside the office.

"Potter," Rodgers said. "To what do we owe the visit?"

"I was looking for Tonks."

Rogan, wide-eyed, averted his gaze back to his reports. Rodgers appeared amused. "She's not here. Said she was going out for a nip, isn't that what she said, Tristan?"

Rogan appeared uncomfortable with having to answer. He muttered, "Something."

"Did she see the paper?" Harry asked.

Rodgers leaned on his desk and nodded, evaluating Harry more than conversing.

"Why didn't she just come see me? How long ago did she leave?"

"Few hours," Rodgers said, seeming to enjoy stringing Harry along, which shifted Harry into a different mood.

CHAPTER FOURTY

Rogan, burrowing farther into his report work, muttered, "She needed a night off anyway... needed to unwind a bit."

When Harry started to duck out of the doorway, Rodgers asked, "How are you doing, Potter?" His posture remained aloof and his voice calculating.

"Good to be home, sir," Harry said, clearly sounding artificially pleasant.

Harry Apparated away to search the wizard pubs. He found Tonks in Grimsby at a pub wedged into an alley between two small shops. It was so old the magic to make it larger on the inside than the out no longer could be made to work. Harry squeezed his way through the smoky brown murk to where Tonks sat, arguing with someone whose bright golden curls made prickles crawl on Harry's arms.

Harry stopped just within earshot and listened in. In the gloom, with her attention elsewhere, Tonks did not notice Harry's approach.

"Look, why don't you go bother someone else?" Tonks was saying. Her face showed red strain, even in the poor light. Harry thought it unfortunate that she did not just haul out her wand and use one of a hundred repelling spells Harry knew she could perform without thought.

Ingratiatingly, Skeeter said, "My dear, don't you want to get it all off your chest? You will feel sooo much better for it..." She leaned closer, making her bejeweled handbag sway off her shoulder. She smoothly hitched it up again. "It always goes without saying for the famous... they think they are above the usual polite rules."

"Like someone else we could mention," Harry offered loudly.

Skeeter spun on Harry. "Well, Mr. Potter. This is delicious." She gestured at someone farther along the long, narrow pub. Harry subtly waved a Freezing Curse at the photographer who tried to stand up from his table.

Skeeter's eyes flashed with anger. "What's the meaning of that. Ministry rules prohibit employees to interfer-"

"I'm not with the Ministry," Harry smartly pointed out. "Why don't you move along? Make something up, like you usually do."

"Oh ho, I didn't make this one up, and you know it. I saw you locking sweet red ones with the youngest Weasley." She pounded her fist into her other hand, adding to herself, "If only I'd had my photographer with me."

"You were sneaking around in Animagus form, a strict violation of Ministry regulations."

"Ah ha," Skeeter said, shining red lips stretched wide. "So, you admit it's true?"

Tonks' gaze took on a new distance and she pulled her mug close.

Voice low, Harry said to Skeeter, "Go away."

Skeeter glanced at her photographer, still frozen, half standing from his table below a crooked hanging of a dragon circling over a tower. "Are you threatening me,

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Mr. Potter?”

Her supercilious mockery made Harry reach for the shadows, but he was like a man grabbing a robe hanging just out of reach. He teetered and closed his eyes to recover. When he opened them again he found the room much dimmer.

Tonks drunkenly pushed her chair back. “Harry...” her concerned voice came from the right side of Harry’s tunnel vision.

Skeeter had moved to her photographer and was repeatedly waving an Unencumber Charm at him. Harry took Tonks’ hand, clammy from her mug, and Apparated them away.

In the hall in Shrewsthorpe, Tonks shook off his hand and stared at her feet, hiding her face from the room. She gave a faint wave to Hermione when the other greeted her warmly.

Harry took Tonks’ shoulders and said, “Let me explain, please. We’ve been setting Skeeter up for a fall. Ginny didn’t know Skeeter was spying on us at the shop and was about to let slip that Freeland is about to buy the Prophet.”

Tonks shook her shaggy brown mane, having trouble catching up with that after so much alcohol. “What’s this?”

Candide interjected, “Freeland is making a secret offer to buy the paper expressly to fire Skeeter.”

Tonks’ red-rimmed eyes brightened. “Oh.”

Harry said, “If Skeeter finds out, she will make a stink and the deal will be much harder.” He released Tonks to shrug helplessly. “I didn’t know how else to quiet Ginny without letting Skeeter know I knew she was there.”

Tonks sniffed and wavered on her feet.

“Tonks, why can’t you trust me?” he began, shaking her lightly, but she was limp. “Never mind. Let me mix you up some of the house remedy. Have a seat.”

Harry placed Tonks beside Hermione and went off. When he returned with the potion, the room fell awkwardly silent. Harry tried very hard to avoid taking offense or growing suspicious, either of which would make him lose control.

Tonks accepted the glass, complaining, “But I was trying to get flat-on-my-face pissed.”

“Would you like a shot of something instead?” Candide offered innocently.

Tonks gingerly rubbed her eyes. “No,” she said, and drank down the glass.

Hermione sat forward. “I should get back.”

“Why?” Harry asked. “You said everything was being taken care of. Why don’t you stay?” Behind her, Harry spied the piles of opened presents. “I got a few games for Christmas, let’s play one. We could all use an evening off. Especially Tonks, who has lost her senses.”

CHAPTER FOURTY

Tonks stared sadly into her glass and did not argue.

They settled around a deep box and proceeded to unpack a complicated game board that unfolded with a charm into various combinations of terrain with a long, winding dirt path on it. Hermione read the instructions, "Gambling Castles is a game of resource strategy. You build houses and villages with the eventual goal of installing castles or casinos, depending upon whether you adopt a strategy of defending the gold you have or attracting more of it." She reached into the box. "I want to be the unicorn."

Tonks reached in and took out a pig. Peering closely at it, she said, "Funny, he's wearing a waistcoat with a little pocket watch on a chain."

Candide took it from her. "I'll be that one. That's about how I feel."

"I'll be the juggler then, and Harry can be the last." She took out a little figure of a bent over wizard leaning on a tall knobbly staff. She withdrew it momentarily to glance at the bottom before plonking it down before Harry. "The Wandering Sage."

"I don't feel much like a wandering sage," Harry said, adjusting his piece to his starting arrow. The figure saluted him with his staff and shuffled his feet.

Hermione rubbed her hands together gleefully. "This is great. I haven't had a chance to beat everyone at a game in months."

Candide, leaning sideways to reach all the way across the board said, "You think you're going to win that easily? First you have to know who else is playing."



Harry arrived in Belinda's flat promptly at noon. He slipped silently in under his cloak and tossed it off.

"See?" one of the underlings Harry had dealt with before said to the bulky masked figure standing between them. The two Harry knew stood round-shouldered, letting the larger man dominate even more than he would have otherwise.

"You really are Potter," came a raspy voice from the masked figure. The accent sounded West Country, making Harry believe he was not foreign. He fiddled with something in his wand hand, something glittery. Harry suspected it was a Portkey for a quick escape.

"It is. The same." Harry stated, sounding as bored as possible.

The figure nodded to the side. "They said you wanted to cut in, or something mad like that."

Harry tried for disdain. "I do, but not at their level."

Fingers flipped the shiny thing faster. "I don't buy it. Prove it."

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Harry trusted that Snape was correct about Moody's killer acting with few accomplices. "I really killed Moody. I had a mate frame your man to get out again."

The flipping coin froze. Harry continued, "Come on. Word going around your organization must be that he didn't do it."

The figure's jaw moved behind the mask, folds of skin filled and shrank beneath it. The coin resumed turning, slowly. "All right then. I have something for you to do. Prove yourself and I'll take you to someone else."

"I want to meet your contact, now," Harry said. "No games."

"Not until you do something for me."

The two of them stared at each other. The underlings barely moved, waiting. Harry contemplated putting the man on the floor and threatening him. It would feel good to do that – lack of drills left him itching for some serious casting. He resisted the instinct. He may need an ally or two later, and he was not certain how many layers there were.

"I want to hear what it is first," Harry said. "If it's not worth my time, I don't want to bother."

A snort came from behind the mask. "Yeah, you would be the snooty type."

"Look at it this way: you need something done you don't have anyone to do, and I can skip a level or two when I succeed. I'm an impatient man."

"Yeah, all right. Wait here, then." He Disapparated and Harry was left to bide the time with the two others.

One of them studied his fingernails then said, "Must be nice."

The other said, "How do you do that trick? Apparating without a sound?"

Harry lied, not wanting them to suspect the depth of his skills, "It's easy. I send a Silencing Charm ahead of me."

The two thought that over. "Huh. Must be one hell of a charm."

Eventually the masked man returned with a loud pop. "I have a job for you. There're some things we want from a house in Harrogate."

Harry exhaled, glad it was not something he could not undo later, if needed. "What?"

"A tea set and a pillow."

Harry scratched his bristly upper lip. He wondered if he was being toyed with or insulted and how best to respond. Asking "why" was not going to be acceptable. Soldiers in gangs did not have the luxury of getting answers or understanding the larger picture.

Harry said, "There must be a catch. Otherwise someone else would already have done it."

CHAPTER FOURTY

“The catch is that the place has Aurors stopping by on patrol twenty four-seven. Here’s the address and a description of the items. Bring them Sunday, same time.” He waited while Harry perused the little slip of torn newspaper edge used for the note. The scrawled lines vanished as he read them. The man went on, now insulting for certain, “Unless His Highness needs more time.”

“No. I’ll bring them then.”

Harry found his curiosity nearly too much to bear. He had been out of the office too long to know what was happening in Harrogate. He needed to go home and look at the atlas before casing the house. Mind leaping ahead with plans to avoid asking questions, he said, “Then I expect to meet with someone with some real power.”

The man shrugged. “I can bring you to my contact. That’s what I can do – I don’t know anyone else.”

“So you must be new to be so low in the organization. Is it worthwhile?”

The man shifted his shoulders back. “Good people always move up. And I get respect now when I’m out on the street.”

“Not in that mask, you wouldn’t.”

The man snorted again. “I don’t need the mask all the time. Power shows even without it.”

“Right,” Harry said.

“You have loads of power already. Why do you want in?”

Harry crumpled up the bit of blank paper and tossed it on the floor. “I want a different kind. The unlimited kind.” As he said this, what was to be meaningless words to someone he needed to fool, a rush resonated up through his core. Distracted by this, he moved to toss his cloak over his head, but at the last moment saw the man’s wand moving and stopped. He bundled up the cloak under his arm and exited through the door instead, shutting it quietly.

Greeted by the empty house in Shrewsthorpe, Harry found himself grateful for any task to occupy himself. In the library he pulled out the atlas and eventually located Harrogate – after shooing the drawing of a snoring dragon off it. He would have to take a broom from Kirkby Overblow, the closest place he knew from field work.

Thinking about field work gave him a pang of loss. He had psyched himself through his time in prison by dreaming of returning to previous activities, and it sent him more adrift to lack them. As tedious as patrol often was, he did miss it.

Well, Harry thought, he would have to reconsider things when Durumulna was straightened out. He closed the large atlas with a thud and Accioed his broom down from his room.

The weather alternated between bitter and pleasant depending upon the clouds. From high above the hills, the patches of sun glowed golden as they crept across the

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rippled earth. His strange task still felt insulting, but that made it simply a test he must pass, rather than anything to think about.

Harry located the town that matched the map and tilted the broom handle to plummet. He landed upon the unbroken roofline of the houses two streets away and scanned the area, keeping the broom hovering beside him. With the Obsfucation spell renewed because his invisibility cloak blew off his legs in the wind, Harry took his time observing. He fished a Telescoping Vision sweet out of his pocket and chewed it thoughtfully.

It was a good thing he kept a tight hold on his broomstick. As soon as the sweet took hold, filling his vision with the surging view of the brickwork of a distant house, he lost his balance and would have toppled backward off the roof otherwise. Grasping the broomstick in both hands, Harry carefully found his footing on the tiled roof peak and let his eyes wander wildly over the distant surfaces that threatened to bump his nose. He should have only eaten half a sweet, a nibble, or even just a lick.

Growing dizzy, he closed his eyes, but dared not leave them that way in such a vulnerable locaiton. He carefully traced the roofline opposite, down to the spotty soot stains left there by the rain. He squinted into the windows beyond, checking each in turn. The only one with open curtains revealed a stairway with a white banister and a pale blue runner. He estimated by the window count that it should be the correct house. His vision began to recover. Blinking rapidly, he spied a wavering like an invisibility cloak in the air above the next roof over, then lost it as his eyes returned to entirely to normal.

The world seemed ridiculously small now and he could not locate the disturbance. It was most likely someone watching the house. But from whose side, he did not know.

Harry slipped away to stash his broom back in his bedroom. Now that he knew the area, he could return without it. Cloaked, he slipped directly onto the stairs of the house in Harrogate and stood, listening. Voices droned somewhere, rooms away. Harry sneaked slowly up the thick runner, uneasy about even a muted squeak. In the master suite he found a distinctively lacy pillow propped neatly in a place of honor before an army of other pillows. It matched the description well enough, so wrestling a bit, he rolled it up and stuffed it in his sack. Then he had to spend time tugging the bedspread back to pristine.

Downstairs, in the back of the house, he found the kitchens. That put him closer to the voices, and he could hear Kerry Ann talking, intermittent with an older, complaining voice.

“Look, Ms. Auror, or Aurorette or whatever you call yourself... honestly, I can’t believe they’d allow someone so young anything like the kind of responsibility you’ve

CHAPTER FOURTY

clearly been handed...”

Harry sighed and began searching the bastion of stainless steel for a blue and white teapot. The idea that he might actually find the things he had been sent for brought his curiosity back full force. He slowed his search to listen more.

“...but I don’t have even a lamb’s lick of faith in the Ministry let alone a little girl, even one as tall as you. What happened to that quiet black man who was here last time?”

“He’s out searching for your husband, madam-”

“And that other man, the red-headed one who’s balding... they have potions for that you know. Merlin knows why any sensible wizard would not avail themselves of the magic available...”

Harry resumed searching more expediently, carefully opening the top part of a tall cupboard and standing on tip toe to look inside. Something bumped his leg and he jerked back, wand extended, heart thumping. But it was only a small grey cat. Undisturbed, it bumped its bony spine against his half-cloaked leg again, purring fiercely.

“I’ve a mind to write Minister Bones again. What do we have leadership for except to lead?”

The voice was starting to make Harry’s nerves itch. He ducked low to search under the long metal counter, but that was full of mixing bowls.

“Drat it all! Where is that calendar of mine? Godfried has been missing for almost three weeks, Ms. Auror.”

“You can call me Kerry Ann, really.”

The cat batted at the cloak, catching it in arced claws.

“Hey!” Harry whispered. Not wanting to tug and risk damaging the precious thing, he had to unpluck the cat’s paw one transparent, hooked claw at a time. “Shoo!”

Standing from freeing himself, Harry spotted a blue and white flowered tea set on a silver cart by the door.

“It wasn’t like this in my day, I’ll have you know...”

It was a tall teapot, chipped along the spout. Harry lifted the cloak to grab up a neat stack of delicate little cups and slip them into his deepest robe pocket. The creamer was fortunately empty, and this filled his other pocket by itself. The cat jumped up on a nearby counter and curiously cocked its head at him before washing a paw. Harry hefted the heavy teapot and, grabbing his cloak with his free hand, slipped away into the Dark Plane.

As he feet ground into the grey dirt, Harry put his hand on top of the pot and found the lid missing. He imagined it left behind, hovering just an instant, before

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falling to shatter on the floor. He stood there for just a breath before setting the pot down and slipping back into kitchen. The lid lay scattered in a thousand pieces, except for the rooster-figure handle. That survived whole. The grating voice had ceased and footsteps approached. Harry waved a *Reparo* and with a telltale rattle of his pockets, scooped up the lid, and slipped away again.

Harry tossed off the cloak and huffed at the crazing in the glaze from his sub-par repair. He pocketed the lid, shook out the half lobster-, half salamander-like creatures that had crawled into the teapot to investigate, and slipped away for home.

He placed the pillow and tea set on the floor just beside the door to his room. Unlike, say, a diamond necklace or something meaningful for a real thief, Harry felt no need to hide his haul. He studied the cracked lid again before returning it to his pocket.

The quiet house nearly did Harry in over the course of the afternoon. Given the copious opportunity his mind had to wander, he repeatedly reverted to imagining fighting Voldemort in that other place, and had to remind himself that was not the case here. Well, not exactly the case.

When an owl scratched at the window, Harry jumped up, eager to fetch any letter. This one, written on a torn paper bag corner, was from Ginny.

Monday the deal is done. We're celebrating at the Three Broomsticks tonight.

Harry smiled, savoring the thought that Skeeter would shortly be out of a job.

Humming to himself, he returned to shelving his Auror books in the library, alphabetically in a manner that implied he did not intend to touch them for a while. On the top shelf above that sat an interesting row dark magic books, antique ones in excellent condition that Snape had not been able to part with when he cleaned out upstairs. Harry hesitated, fingers gripping the spine of one titled *Odyous Okkult*. It stood out from the others by the black suede cover, tooled in silver.

Harry hesitated, remembering how he had been forced to cancel the *Serpent Memory Charm* against Malfoy. He worried that learning more spells he not dare use would only lead to more frustration. Curiosity won out and he pulled the book down. As usual for the era, the bookbinder was more skilled at binding than spelling or typesetting. As he entered the main hall to make himself comfortable while he read, Franklin dropped a letter on the side table with his name on it before taking off again. For a second, Harry imagined his taking the book down had triggered a letter from Snape. Shaking this notion off, Harry set the book aside and opened the letter.

Stop by my office for a visit this evening, if you would was all it said. Harry pocketed it and contemplated the book, not opening it, but running his finger in the curly, silver grooves. It was not clear what he wanted. He wanted to get even with a few people, that much he knew. But beyond that his plans were vague. For the first

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time his life lacked all structure and he did not know what to replace it with.

Harry opened the book to a random page in the middle and began paging forward.

Candide arrived home and Harry informed her of the visit to Hogwarts just as she settled on the couch with a heavy groan.

“You’re implying I’m supposed to go along?”

“I can’t leave you alone here.” Harry said.

She raised an eyebrow. “What about that little knitting woman who wrestles dragons?”

“She was assigned by the Ministry because I was busy doing stuff for them.”

Candide rubbed her rounded robe front. “I’m not taking the Floo again today. Maybe not again until after the birth.”

Harry imagined that to be reasonable.

“I can stay here,” she offered.

Harry shook his head. “You have your orders and I have mine.”

“How do you know I have orders.”

“Severus always gives you some,” Harry said.

She sighed again. Harry said, “I can take you so you don’t need the Floo. My friends are going to be in Hogsmeade tonight. Wouldn’t you like to get out?”

She waved an ottoman over and propped her feet on it. Hands emerged out of it and untied her shoes and began a massage. She moved her feet around, making faces. “Going out wasn’t high on my list, I’ll confess. Watching people drink...” She stared into space a moment. “I could just about kill for a beer.”

Harry broke out into a laugh and put his book away on the side table.

She sobered quickly, saying, “I wouldn’t mind talking to Severus too. He’s been out of sorts. I assume it’s the impending third party, but I don’t really know. He seemed to be overcompensating yesterday morning.”

“Severus isn’t always easy to figure out.”

“At least he is always intriguing in his own strange way.” She sat up and the cloth hands sank away. “Well, shall we go for dinner?”

“Brilliant plan.” Harry felt the lid in his pocket. “Oh, before I forget, can you repair this better than I did?”

She puzzled over the lid, but shrugged and waved a repair spell at it. The pieces flew apart, hovered a moment above her hand, then with a tiny clatter, reformed without any sign of cracks.

“Thanks,” Harry said, moving to take it back upstairs. “Put on something warm,” he called over his shoulder.

“We’re not going by broomstick, I hope,” she called up as he went along the balcony.

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“No, of course not,” Harry replied, amused by her subsequent expression of relief. When he came back down, he said, “We’ll take my bike.”

Harry’s friends had not arrived at the pub yet, but Hagrid occupied the largest table in the corner, sitting with Hornisham.

“Ello, ’Arry!” Hagrid roared. “Was that Sirius’ bike I saw go by out there? Ah, he’d be pleased to know yer on ’er.” He immediately grew soft as his eyes fell on Candide.

“And how is the little fella?” he asked, giving Candide a kind of pat, perhaps more an envelopment, on the belly.

“After that ride, ready to order his own drinks,” Candide said, accepting the offered chair. “He’ll have to settle for a hot cocoa, or three.”

Harry shook hands with Hornisham, who had to bundle her knitting against her to free a hand. The silvery limbs of her project spilled onto the floor at her feet.

Hagrid returned to roar level. “We were jus’ discussing the finer points of tusk care. ’ave a seat, Harry.”

After dinner, Harry left his friends to head to the castle. He walked carefully over the treacherous frozen ruts that made up the road, but stopped suddenly before Honeydukes to stare at the boarded over windows. Around the boards, large splinters stood out of the frames in all directions, prickly looking. The scent of burnt chocolate drifted on the crisp air.

Harry stopped the next person walking along the other way. “What happened to Honeydukes?”

The witch pulled her stringy hair back and stopped to consider the shop in question. “Someone attacked it. Broad daylight. Cheeky bastards, they were.” She sniffed loudly. “Eh.” With that succinct assessment, she moved on.

Harry did not like this. His purpose in infiltrating Durumulna was to get proof that Percy was involved with them as well as a party to Moody’s death. He also hoped to relieve Belinda of their machinations, believing her a victim. But the damaged shop solidified for him that more was at stake. The crooked shop sign reminded him of bright-eyed, school-day trips for sweets, and for once those other, darker, instincts had no opinion. Harry sensed them biding their time, though, and walked on.

The students milling in the Entrance Hall after dinner greeted Harry warmly and welcomed him home – he assumed out of prison, not so much back to Hogwarts, but either was fine.

A dash of flowing white and green joined him on the stairs. “Harry!” Suze Zepher said breathlessly. Harry slowed so she could catch her breath.

“Good thing they caught the real killer. I thought you might be stuck there for good and we’d have to break you out.”

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“Really, I’d have broken myself out before it came to that,” he said, drawing a laugh from many listening in as they passed.

She followed him to the door to Snape’s office. “What are you going to do now? You aren’t an Auror.”

“I’ll find something.”

“Coming to the next match then? We’re playing Ravenclaw. They have a new Seeker this year – a visiting student from Morocco who is quite good.”

“I do have lots more time now,” Harry admitted.

She smiled awkwardly and clasped her hands behind her. “Well, if you can. I could use the support. He’s going to be tough. He has this non-reg Algerian broom that the headmistress is letting him use anyway.” She nodded at the door. “And despite that Professor Snape, you know, always expects a win.”

“A challenge is good for you,” Harry pronounced.

Her face wrinkled up. “You sound like an adult.”

“Well,” Harry waved his arm in apology. “I’m getting there, they tell me.”

“Sad,” she said, shifting her impossibly long white hair as she shook her head. She brightened nervously again. “Don’t forget: Ravenclaw match.”

“I won’t.”

Harry watched her walk away. That inconvenient instinct was assessing her potential loyalties with cold calculation. Harry knocked on the door to have something else to think about.

Snape sat with a student, whom he told to finish serving detention with Lupin. The student left with no little expression of relief. When the door clicked closed, Snape said, “I arranged rather a large number of detentions, it seems. Sit down, Harry.”

Harry took the vacated desk. The seat was still warm.

Snape paced to the window, then back to his desk. “Still feeling better?” he asked.

“Me? I suppose,” Harry said.

Snape’s gaze came around before his head. “Not much of an answer.”

Harry gestured at his seating. “I’m back in a desk. You’re a teacher. What can I say?”

This drew a faint smile and the strategic instinct inside Harry smiled too. Snape said, “It’s been interesting adjusting back. I had forgotten how much we’ve gained.”

“On that note, you’re being too nice at home,” Harry said, further diverging from the topic.

“Truly a first.”

“Really. You need to ease back into you again. Try for old you for a little while.”

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Snape sighed and stared at the ceiling briefly. “Candide doesn’t suspect, does she?”

Harry shook his head. “You’ve been excused for it due to the kid’s near arrival.”

“A fine excuse,” Snape stated. He leaned back against the desk. “And yours?”

“Do I need one?”

Snape stared him down. “Are you going to remain behind the line you crossed?”

“I’m trying.” Harry considered that Snape would most definitely like to hear about his meeting with Durumulna. But he found no desire to mention it.

Snape continued studying him, saying, “I suppose until an opportunity to cross it presents itself, it will be difficult to determine, for certain, how successful you will be.” He reached behind himself and handed over a folded parchment. Harry breathed in deeply and unfolded it halfway, stalling. Snape said, “I find it interesting the contrast between your treatment of him and your treatment of me.”

“You aren’t one of them,” Harry said, holding his gaze on the letter, noticing it had no salutation, just a date. Harry reckoned that addressing it to Other Self might have felt too awkward.

“Is that the only difference?” Snape softly asked.

Harry did not look up, but he also did not read the letter. The closest lamp was on the desk, so all Harry had to do was tip the letter slightly to make it too dim to read. “There are lots of differences.”

“Of the ones that matter.”

“Lots of them matter,” Harry said, not understanding this line of questioning and wanting to be difficult.

“I’m curious what they are.” When Harry shrugged, Snape went on. “It matters greatly if it means the difference between your treating me as a guardian or an underling.” After a pause: “It is not like you to cause others pain. Even those you do not like.”

Harry remembered making the other Snape’s Mark burn. At the time, he had not cared about the pain beyond its use as a tool. That other part of him had ruled over their interactions so he could not recall any real reasoning he may have had.

Snape asked, “If I had a Mark again, would our relationship revert to the one in that letter? That is the essence of my question.”

Harry did not have an answer, so Snape went on. “I seem to recall that during the incident with the cane, when you convinced me against all better judgment to return to twenty years of age, that I did set you off, not dissimilar to the events described there.”

Harry folded the letter up without reading it and held it in his hands. “It did,” he agreed, remembering that with a similar distorted mix of regret and satisfaction.

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“What is happening to you, Harry?” Snape asked. Level, calm – a tone that made it far easier to answer.

Harry closed his eyes and held them that way, seeing the shadows in the distance, a mirage, almost. “He left a vacancy behind.”

“Voldemort did?”

“Yes.” In a surge, Harry found the explanation bottled up again. By talking, he was giving away power, and doing that felt wildly unwise. But one glance at Snape looking down at him with level interest and perhaps affection let him keep talking. “I can feel his followers like I used to, but now I can also manipulate them. Easily. So easily, it’s hard to avoid it.”

“You, yourself, pushed Voldemort out of place,” Snape stated. “You created this vacancy.”

“I did,” Harry agreed, feeling unseemly pleasure in remembering that moment when he carved Lockhart magically into pieces, removing the threat of him, the rivalry of him, it now felt like. Harry licked his lips.

Snape had to call his name twice to draw his attention to the present. “Would you rather be free of this influence?”

Harry glanced down at his hands. “I know I should want to.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

Harry felt woozy. “I don’t know.” Then he felt fearful, worried that he had created an enemy out of Snape by revealing too much. The cords on the backs of his hands popped out. The letter crinkled.

“Harry,” Snape said after a pause. “I do know what you are going through. Truly I do.” When Harry’s face expressed doubt, Snape went on, “Shall I prove it? You are thinking now that I may be untrustworthy because I know too much. That is correct, is it not?”

Harry looked up, beating down the wings of alarm trying to take flight in his chest.

“This is important, Harry. I want you to always remember that I am on your side, no matter what. I do not want you to ever doubt that. Do you understand me?”

Harry chewed on his lips, trying to reach equilibrium between his riled instincts.

“Harry?” Snape prompted.

“You’ve said that before,” Harry said. “But you must have some limit.”

“No,” Snape said. “I never have if need be.” He shifted to sit back on the desk after setting one of the lamps aside. “All I ask in return is that you trust me. Which should not be much to ask, really.”

Before he could change his mind or find new resistance, Harry said, “I’ve decided to infiltrate Durumulna.”

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Snape considered that before replying, "You are uniquely well positioned to do so right now."

"That's what I thought," Harry said, feeling relieved to have confessed.

"Dangerous occupation, however."

"More so than before?" Harry asked with light sarcasm.

"The danger will perhaps not increase for you, true. But for others close to you, it will."

Harry dropped his gaze, considering that. He had acted on the opportunity, listening to that voice that assured him it would be so easy. "I'll know what they're up to. That will help."

Snape lightly shook his head. "People like this will not hesitate to use family as leverage, or as a target for retribution."

Harry bit his lip, feeling vaguely unwell. "I didn't intend to put anyone else at risk. I didn't think about it that way."

"Your power makes you too confident, I believe." Snape did not sound angry, surprisingly, just thoughtful. "If I strongly suggest that you do otherwise, what would be your response?"

"It's too late?"

Snape blinked and reached his long neck out forward. "You managed to get in over your head in a day?"

Flinching faintly, Harry said, "I'm good at that?"

Snape shook his stringy hair. "We will have to take even more precautions than we already are. Perhaps invite Minerva to help respell the house."

"You aren't angry?" Harry asked.

"I don't believe you are thinking quite clearly, Harry. Through no real fault of your own."

"You're going easy on me all of a sudden," Harry criticized, to take the sting out of being treated as if he were helpless.

Snape stepped forward and leaned on Harry's desk, bringing their noses to within inches. "Much larger things are at stake," he stated clearly.

Harry blinked at him, for a wild second imagining he had the wrong guardian yet again. This close, Harry could see the distinction between Snape's black irises and his pupils, the texture of his skin, as well as the sprinkling of grey in his brows.

Snape went on, continuing to speak slowly like one insisting upon being understood, "I am quite familiar with what you are becoming. And I am doing what is necessary to retain your trust in me. I am even telling you all this so as to encourage you to trust me additionally."

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Harry had pressed back in his seat, and relaxed only when Snape pushed straight again, rocking the desk. He turned away and went to the window, where the grey sky no longer competed successfully with the lamp flames reflecting off the glass.

Undone, Harry asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to not lose yourself. This thing you harbor previously clashed with your mindset, causing you pain. An adult mind and greater power has allowed it to make a better home."

"Being trapped there in prison with all his followers didn't help," Harry said, remembering how good it felt to reach out for even that small cadre. Just as well he could not reach them now in quite that intimate a way.

"Your battle with Voldemort in that other place involved fighting for his followers, I now suspect. That is why they did not come to his aid, and he instead fled." It wasn't quite a question.

Snape did not turn as he spoke, so Harry had to do more than nod and that drew out another confession. "Yes. You wouldn't believe what that kind of powerful reach feels like."

Snape fell silent a while, his reflection in the window backlit by the lamps. "Back in that other place my counterpart is coping with a Harry just now arming with unimaginable power."

"So you have the same problem as him," Harry tried to quip, but it fell flat.

"No." Snape finally turned. "He has it worse. You are quite manageable as long as I have your trust."

Harry huffed. "We're talking about me as if I'm not here."

"That's because we are talking about the part of you that does not belong."

"I've had this other part a long time. It sorta is a part of me."

"I am hoping that is true only if you yield to it."

Harry swallowed and rubbed his hands along the well-worn edges of the desk. "And if not? Then what? We ask Dumbledore's painting what it suggests?" Despite his level voice, Harry's heart rate leap up as he asked this.

"Never that." With only the lamplight now, Snape's face fell in shadow. "We will think of something else," he stated with certainty. With a sigh, his tone shifted to the practical. "Tell Candide what you are doing with Durumulna. I do not want her in the dark about the dangers. And make sure she is always guarded as you are already doing. Take her to the Burrow if there is any question, it is nearly as safe as Hogwarts as long as Percy is not there."

Harry stared at his hands, feeling sorrowful. "I didn't mean to make trouble for your family, Severus."

"You are my family, Harry. Do not forget that."

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“Still,” Harry said, sliding out of the desk at what sounded like a parting tone from Snape. “I’m still sorry.”

Snape returned to casually leaning back against his desk, exuding confidence of all things. “You may hold that thought. It is most likely a safe one for you.”

Harry half grinned, half frowned. Snape did understand. “Still,” he said again.

“Harry,” Snape began, losing his level tone in exchange for a reassuring one. “I have always assumed that my past would come back to haunt any kind of life I attempted to establish.”

“This isn’t your past, it’s mine.”

“How so?” Snape returned sharply. “As I recall, the events leading up to your obtaining this rather inconvenient piece of Voldemort were not without my participation.”

“True,” Harry said, scrubbing his head. He felt even more confused and undone at remembering that.

“Do keep me informed, as well as Candide as necessary for her to be on alert for trouble. Not too much detail, however, as that puts her at yet more risk.”

Harry cut him off. “You sound so casual about it.”

Snape crossed his arms and rose up a bit. “I have seen you in action and am confident that you can protect her as long as you are aware what is happening. I will be home soon enough on leave as well.”

“That will be nice,” Harry said, imagining them all home together, which made him feel utterly himself.

“Be careful, Harry. That is paramount.” Snape said, as Harry went to the door.

“I thought not losing myself was paramount,” Harry said, teasing a bit.

“Same thing.”



Back at the Leaky Cauldron, Harry was pulled out of his circling thoughts by Aaron, greeting him roughly just as he stepped inside. He pushed Harry back through the door out into the road.

“I want a word a second,” Aaron insisted.

Harry was still gathering his bearings and nearly tripped on the uneven hard mud.

Ginny came out behind Aaron. “What are you doing?”

With false pleasantness, Aaron said, “Just having a chat with Harry. We’ll be right there.”

Harry glanced around the road, which was filling with interested bystanders. He found his balance and stepped closer so his friends would perhaps not talk so loudly.

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Ginny was demanding of Aaron, "I told you there was nothing to it. What are you doing?"

"This is between me and him," Aaron insisted.

Harry put up a hand to encourage Ginny to calm down. "It's all right. I'll talk to him."

Ginny said, "It's not just between the two of you. How does that work again?"

Harry saw Skeeter's photographer approaching, stealthily low but still on tip toe, so he walked rather oddly which made him immediately obvious. Harry closed his eyes to work up the right attitude. He grabbed up the front of Aaron's robes and tugged him off balance. Despite Aaron starting the physical battle, this caught him off guard and he swung an arm in a futile attempt to break Harry's grip.

"What do you think you're doing?" Harry demanded loudly. Close to Aaron's face he muttered quietly but affectionately. "There is nothing going on and now we both look like fools."

The photographer's flash went off and Harry let go. He smoothed Aaron's robes for him, even though Aaron batted his hand away, confusion in his movements.

Ginny covered her face in dismay, but recovered to pull her wand on the photographer, who squeaked and slipped back into the crowd. Trying not to grin, Harry patted Aaron's shoulder. "Let's settle this like civilized men: with a drinking contest."

Aaron straightened his collar with a rough tug. "You're on."

"Ugh," Ginny sighed, following them inside.

The crowd chuckled and muttered as it dispersed. Harry, happily envisioning yet more effective press for the next day, ordered a round for the table.



Snape returned home earlier than usual on Friday evening. He wished to assess Harry yet again, an instinctive need that would most likely not diminish any time soon. The house creaked faintly in the wind as he sorted his post.

"You're home," Harry's voice came from the doorway.

Snape turned, glad he had let his correspondence distract him from immediately seeking out his charge. It allowed events to fall into a normal, healthy pattern.

"Yes," Snape said, returning to the envelopes long enough to pull out the ones requiring attention that day. "Hogwarts, specifically Slytherin House, is quiet for a change."

"Maybe all those detentions..." Harry suggested.

"Something I'll have to remember," Snape distractedly returned. He tucked the letters at his side and gave Harry his full attention. "I couldn't help but notice you

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were in the papers today, tussling with an Auror Apprentice of all things. Anything I need worry about?"

Harry shook his head.

"You are certain?"

"Just more posing for my undercover operation."

This stopped Snape, who had not expected that answer. "You are doing well in that case. You have been converted from pristine hero to bad boy in record time."

Harry slipped his hands into his back pockets and shifted to a jaunty stance. "I'm sorta liking it. It's much less effort to maintain." He resembled his father standing that way.

Snape said, "And your next contact with them is?"

"Sunday."

"Do be careful. Perhaps I should remain here until you return."

Cheekily, Harry said, "Candide would like that, so certainly."

"Hm," Snape said, passing Harry on the way to the drawing room. "I knew you two would gang up on me eventually."

Harry followed. "Remember, not too nice."

Snape waved him off, still having difficulty hearing such an unlikely thing.

Harry waited in the doorway of the drawing room while Snape set out his writing set. Harry said, "Since you're home early, I'm going to meet up with Tonks early. I have some make up time to spend with her."

Snape began opening his mail. "Don't be late," he said automatically.

Disbelievingly, Harry retorted, "And that would be what time?"

Snape shook himself. "I'll expect you at breakfast."

"That I can work with."

Snape worked on correspondence until Candide returned from work. She leaned on the doorframe Harry had vacated earlier and said breathlessly, "That's definitely my last trip in the Floo..."

Snape forgot his letter and put the pen down on the blotter. "Do you need anything? A Healer, the Witchwife?"

She waved him off and set her well-worn bag of files down inside the door. "No, no. But I will if I try one more time."

Snape stood and took her things from her. "Ask Harry to take you. He has no trouble Apparating that distance if you do not mind Siding Along."

She rubbed her back while making a face. "I'll do that."

"Or I can simply insist he do so. Whichever."

She shook him off and headed for the seating area.

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“Where is Harry this evening?” Candide asked as she draped herself across the couch in a position that was presumably more comfortable than it looked.

“Out,” Snape replied. He pondered her there, considered making room beside her, but remembered Harry’s words about behaving more coldly, and sat on the opposite couch. He took up the latest issue of *Potion Portions Quarterly*, even though he had no interest in anything except in getting reacquainted with his much missed home life. It pained him, but he managed a disinterested air for nearly ten minutes.

“When you are done with that, why don’t you finish reading to me where you left off?”

Snape lowered the journal. He had no idea what she was referring to and clearly he should. “If you wish,” he said to cover. As he pretended to finish that article, he glanced around at possible reading material. Certainly she did not mean one of the *Witch Weekly* or *Enchanted Life* magazines stacked under the side table.

Eventually, he had no choice but to try a bluff. He set the journal down and made a point of glancing around.

“It’s just there, by the vase.”

Snape had disregarded the little book sitting there right before him. He picked it up, grateful it had a bookmark, at least. He tried to stare properly at the action-packed cover but he should presumably be familiar with it already. Continuing the bluff, he said, “Ah the *Fiery Friar*,” in a pleasant tone that betrayed none of the horror he felt at the prospect of reading such a questionable volume, even silently.

Snape stared at the words and felt a cold chill. This was a test. It had to be. She suspected the switch and was using this ruse of his counterpart reading aloud from this... this... novel... to snare him.

“We left off where the man is arranging to send a carriage to pick up the woman and her niece who is disguised as a maid,” Candide prompted helpfully. She was clearly a better actor than he gave her credit for.

“Must we read this... particular... *enchiridion*?” he asked, using the only middle ground that did not give him away.

“You seemed to be enjoying it last time.”

Snape stared at her. “You must have been mistaken.”

She chuckled. “I’m pretty certain you read it. I’m willing to believe I mistook your lack of annoyance for enjoyment.”

Snape turned to the book again. Perhaps this wasn’t a trap, after all. Or, if it were, it was of a far more complicated variety. That his coarser counterpart fell for it too was small consolation.

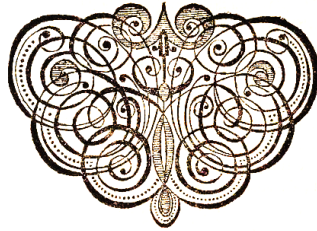
Pulling the small book closer so he would not have to squint, Snape began, “The mule’s breath clouded the still air around him as he pulled tight the last loop of the

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harness. The animal stood, stalwart, throughout, only flicking an ear occasionally to follow the sound of the rooks gathering in the hedgerows, lost in the dawn mist, all sound and no fury...”

Author's Notes: I had three huge work deadlines in the last two months and as an independent contractor that basically means I've been living, sleeping, eating and breathing work. The last of those project deadlines was yesterday, so I finally got a chance to give the chapter some much needed attention. The betas were champs this round, given what a wreck the chapter was when I sent it to them. Special thanks to them!

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



AN OFFER YOU CAN'T REFUSE

“What would you like to do?” Harry asked brightly when Tonks came out of her bedroom. He was relishing his freedom this evening and wanted Tonks to join in.

“You seem very chipper,” she complained. When Harry shrugged, she added, “I expected you to still be angry about getting stuck in prison.”

Harry had lost track of that anger while working to recover his guardian from a much worse place. The touch of absolute power he had experienced through Voldemort’s army of followers there had dwarfed what he had felt in prison, rendering that experience smaller yet.

Just for something to say, Harry half-jokingly said, “They’ve learned not to take me for granted since I quit.”

She came around to where he sat and placed her hands on his shoulders. “The recriminations keep flying about that.”

The tips of her fingers hurt him where they pressed against unyielding muscle. He tried to relax into her ministrations. but failed and shook loose by standing up.

“Come on, let’s go out. I don’t care where.” Indeed, in this world, everywhere was safe, the whole place a playground.

Glumly, she insisted, “Somewhere Skeeter won’t be.”

Harry put an arm around her narrow waist, gathering her thick winter robes under his hand. Whatever scent she had put on was overwhelming so close. “Nah, let’s go find her.”

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“Are you mad?”

Harry grinned. “One last setup... come on.”

She shook her head. “You’re really certain about her getting made red-” Tonks glanced around.

Harry replied, “I am.”

Tonks took up her small silver-blue handbag on a silver chain. “How about, we don’t go looking for her, but if she shows up, I get to tell her to bugger off?”

“All right,” he agreed.

Tonks hesitated departing. Finally she asked, “You couldn’t shut Ginny up any other way?” She sounded doubtful, but fortunately not like she did when questioning a suspect. “It really didn’t mean anything?”

“I couldn’t think of anything else on the spot. And it didn’t mean anything more than that I didn’t expect she’d resist.”

Tonks glared at him full on. “Did she?”

Harry shrugged yet again. “No. Not really.”

“Wonderful.”

Harry had considered finding his friends that evening, and instead said, “Where do your friends usually go?”

Tonks took them to a place where a vast space danced with colored lights but everyone sat on high stools around the shadowed fringe. Harry followed along the perimeter, flinching at the noise pummeling his head and making his heart vibrate but glad for the anonymity of the lighting.

Tonks leaned attractively over the bar to shout their order to the barman. Harry scanned the crowd and checked that his wand remained easy to reach. Tonks handed him a glowing red drink and clinked their plastic glasses together.

The drink tasted sickeningly of artificial cherries, and Harry pretended to sip it, not in the mood to mute his concentration, at least not by drinking this particular substance. Tonks insisted on dancing, but while they did so, Harry remained steadfastly off the floor where they would be the center of attention. The lights and the brain-penetrating noise blissfully let him forget where he was and what he needed to do. He must have relaxed his grip on Tonks as they danced because she suddenly slipped closer and they fitted together much better, turning there in the waves of sound and color.

Tonks ordered a second drink after finishing Harry’s. When he suggested she slow down, she couldn’t hear him even with him shouting directly in her ear. Once she had her drink, Harry tugged her away from the blasting curtain of sound and back into the recesses of the nightclub.

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“What?” Tonks asked when they entered an area of cheaply black-painted walls and random thin curtains.

Harry tugged her drink away to take a sip of it – at least this one was clear – and said, “I was trying to suggest you slow down.”

“It’s my night off,” she pointed out, not understanding.

The speed with which she had put down two and headed into a third implied she had taken on a regular habit of more.

Harry took another symbolic sip of her drink and kept it at his side, held by the lip. “I’ll help you with this one.”

She screwed her face up to complain, but it did not hold. She leaned against him, slipping a shoulder under his arm. Harry led the way further from the thrumming of the dance floor and around a corridor lined with curtained alcoves. Elegant feet with high heels stuck out from under one, shifting slowly. Tonks halted and backed up to pretend to trip over them.

The person let out a yelp and sat up, fighting with the curtain to do so. Other feet appeared, clad in dark men’s shoes and pinstripe flared trousers.

Giggling, Tonks yanked Harry away. Her outfit and hair turned jet black, the better to blend in with the surroundings. She shoved Harry through an unlocked door and they stumbled into the stairwell, which held far more lounging bodies than expected.

No one moved. Harry at first assumed this was from surprise, but it was not. The figures sat or reclined on the stairs as if overcome by some kind of lethargy. A robed figure sitting halfway up the flight raised his head and peered at Harry, eyes blinking in wonderment. As though living in a thick soup, Justin Finch-Fletchly’s lips moved, forming the word “Harry”. Then he raised his arm, ever so slowly, and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“Laudinasia, looks like,” Tonks said, snapping Harry back from an acute sense of unreality.

“What?” Harry asked.

Tonks nudged the closest body with her foot, moving far flung robes off the stained floor. She walked around doing this, finally bending down to pick up a plastic baggy. This she held to the light filtering down from the floor above. “Red crystals,” she said. She moved about, lifting heads this time.

“Recognize a few?” she asked Harry.

Harry nodded, noting several former students from Hogwarts.

She came back to Harry, and slipped the bag into her pocket.

“This party’s a drag; let’s go somewhere else,” Tonks announced and led the way out of the stairwell. Harry followed, hurrying to keep up.

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“Aren't you going to do anything... take them to St. Mungo's or something?”

Tonks did not slow down. “I don't want them getting any cures. I want their headaches splitting their heads open when I go around and interview them tomorrow.”

They were off by Apparition to a quieter spot before Harry could ask more. “But what is that stuff?”

“Laudinasia is a crystallized potion making the rounds of the party set. The stuff with red crystals comes in from St. Petersburg, and that's usually made pretty well. The local stuff isn't brewed as well, and can have all sorts of awful side effects.” She pulled out the packet and rolled it more carefully. “Looks like first timers since they were only splitting a single satchel of it. We'd like to get a line on the local brewers, since they are causing the most casualties, but the demand is created by the good imported stuff, so it's a problem too.”

Harry, worried about his old schoolmates, asked, “Addictive?”

“Psychologically mostly.” She clapped Harry on the shoulder. “You've been missing out being gone, Harry.”

“Apparently.”

“Come on, I'm famished. Let's get some dinner. Somewhere nice.”

Tonks provided grooming charms for both of them before she let Harry open the door to the Middle Inn. The waiter led them to a central table and remained just long enough to snap Tonks' napkin into her lap.

“So, things are getting tougher at the Ministry,” Harry said, feeling left out, as well as digging for information.

“We're always understaffed. Are you coming back?”

Concerned who might be overhearing, Harry had no trouble saying, “I don't know.”

She frowned, deepening the already noticeable lines of her face. Around them, dining room chatter ebbed and flowed, relaxing the mood. “Rodgers says he's now glad we're together because he thinks he can recruit you back through me.”

“I need some time,” Harry said, sipping his expensive fizzing water. A vision of Finch-Fletchly mouthing his name dogged at him. “I was surprised to see Justin among those in the stairway at the club.”

Tonks shrugged. “Sometimes straights get pulled in. Especially when friends insist you can't get hurt and you don't want to get left out. Bones is about to launch an informational campaign about it.” She scratched her ear, thoughtful. “Were any in the stairwell Muggles that you could tell?”

Harry thought back before shaking his head. There had been Muggles in the club, but not there on the stairs.

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“Good. We’ve had reports the stuff is getting sold on the Muggle market too. That we really want to stop. It has magical properties and the Muggle authorities will be asking some serious questions once they get a hold of some.”

“Serious questions of the Ministry of Magic?” Harry asked.

“Serious questions about how the stuff works. Bloody inconvenient having to Oblivate entire departments in secure Muggle government bureaus. They tend to ask questions about that too, unlike most Muggles who just shrug and write off everyone forgetting a whole day. Like they’ll assume the calendars were all wrong or something. Muggle bureaucrats don’t do that. They get more tenacious.”

As the meal progressed and conversation fell off, Harry’s mind began to fixate on his meeting Sunday. He had no idea how it would go, and expected he would have to give way to that other mode of thinking to best maximize the encounter, or perhaps even to survive it. He was lost in these musings while picking at his ice cream with a fork when a familiar voice jarred his attention away.

“The riffraff even in the nicest places is just unbelievable,” Draco Malfoy sniffed.

Harry looked up. This Draco actually looked older than the alternative world Draco, which did not match most of the other schoolmates Harry had seen there.

Harry, taking Draco’s put on attitude as just that, put his toe down on Tonks’ foot before she could say anything. Before he could come up with a unperturbed rejoinder, his eye was caught by the vision in heavy black robes standing just behind and to the side of Draco. Pansy’s belly bulged as much as Candide’s did. Unlike Candide, who seemed to glow a bit, even through the discomfort, Pansy appeared hopelessly weighed down. She stood bent forward, hanging on Draco’s hand. Make-up failed to mask her puffy eyes, which fixed on Harry with a curious but wary look.

Aware of the diners around them halting and turning, Harry stood up and gave a nod in Pansy’s direction. Wanting to do the unexpected, Harry graciously said, “Mr. Malfoy, I think your wife looks quite ready to be home, with her feet up.”

Oddly, Draco appeared to make a decision and relaxed into a grim, quieter attitude. “Come, Pansy,” he said, leading her away by the hand.

Pansy put her head down and followed. Harry watched them depart, as did most of the restaurant.

Tonks picked up her drink and said between swigs, “Not exactly the happy couple.”



Bleary-eyed, Harry returned home for second breakfast, glad when Snape gave him only a cursory looking over that could easily have been attracted by Harry’s ruffled personal state.

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Harry sniffled, wishing his head did not pound lightly and his ears did not buzz.

“Did you make things up to Tonks?” Candide asked.

Harry grunted noncommittally, taking great care to evenly coat his toast with marmalade. As nice a time as he and Tonks had had, things still felt unresolved. Maybe things just always felt that way.

Candide, working her breakfast with both hands, paused to add, “She’s easily upset, it seems. Not self-confident.”

“She is with magic,” Harry said, not certain if he was defending her or just clarifying.

“I meant with relationships.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “I don’t know how to reassure her. What should I do?”

“It’s not you, I don’t think, Harry. But I’m not impartial.”

Snape lowered the paper he was reading to glance between the two of them.

“You were saying?” Candide prompted him.

“I was just thinking that this was the same topic that I must submit to overhearing from my students.”

“And you’ll get more of it this evening, with Lupin and Harry’s cousin coming for dinner.”

Snape gave Harry a gaze of dismay that said, yet another thing I must bear, and lifted the paper to ignore them through the rest of breakfast.

Harry, bored just minutes after breakfast concluded, decided to take a run. He had not done so in months and once the idea took hold his limbs refused to remain sedentary.

The brisk air burned Harry’s lungs, making him cough, but after stopping to clear them, he powered on. He ran in a single direction, limbs cycling, mind blissfully blank until he passed the gate where he had encountered Moody spying on him one night last autumn. Harry slowed, crunching gravel underfoot as he leaned on a gate post to stretch his legs. He did wish to avenge Moody, even as annoying as the old Auror’s paranoia had grown in the end. Moody had been following someone else besides Harry, at the end. He had been watching out for Belinda too, and now there was no one to do that except Harry, who did not understand as much as Moody presumably did at the time. Maybe if the old Auror had trusted anyone, he would have told someone what he knew. Perhaps he had only ever really trusted Dumbledore.

Properly stretched, Harry ran on.

Lagging sooner than he had hoped, Harry pushed himself several times to go on, but he had lost too much capacity for athletic activity between prison and winter’s dissuasion from venturing out. Coughing again, Harry stumbled away from the road along a muddy field path bordered on two sides by overgrown stone walls. When the

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car noise faded and the wind took over, he transformed and took flight for home, flapping slowly and relishing the air on all sides of him, hoping to be mistaken for a kite if his luck did not hold.

Back at home, Harry had at least shed his anxious energy, if not his mental boredom. He wandered to the library, thinking perhaps of pulling down one of his Auror books. Once there, he felt doing so would imply giving in. He instead perused the top shelf of far more interesting bindings, turning his head to read each title in turn, looking for any gems he might have missed the last time. He pulled each down and paged through them, pausing to study the etchings and woodcuts, which frequently contained something in the background, a little mouse in the corner or a little walled city on a hill.

Harry's attention was so caught by the muddled, arrow-filled diagrams in a book on hex deconstruction, that he did not notice Snape standing in the doorway until the other cleared his throat.

Harry said, "All the good books are gone."

Snape replied, "'Good' being a relative term in this instance."

Harry put that book back and took down the next. Like most of them, it had no index or table of contents, so it had to be perused to understand its scope.

"Looking for something in particular?" Snape asked.

Harry shrugged. "I'm just reading."

Snape dropped his voice. "Increasing temptation as well, I expect."

"Maybe."

Harry read in peace for a page. Snape said, "Do you feel lacking, magically?"

"Do you mean, do I feel like someone who's been living on porridge and dry toast and just discovered a book on desserts?"

"Something of that nature."

"A little," Harry admitted. He shrugged helplessly. "I feel incomplete. I want something, but I don't know what it is."

"I think everyone experiences that at your age, Harry."

Harry looked up from the book, finger on an incantation for cursing someone with a parroting affliction. "Did you?"

"Yes."

"What did you do about it?" Harry asked, hopeful for a decent suggestion.

Snape's gaze drifted off. "I made rather a large number of serious mistakes."

"Oh," Harry said, returning to his book.

Voice harder, Snape said, "That makes me more useful to you, not less; I'll have you know."

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Harry grinned. "Figures you'd say that." When Snape continued to ponder him, Harry said, "What?"

"Nothing. Let me know if you require anything of me."

The arrival of their guests broke the monotony of the house. Harry greeted his cousin and led her inside, Lupin trailing, brushing his hair back nervously. "I have to keep it an early evening," he said, sounding strangely false while apologizing.

Harry's curse sense was making his skin itch again, confirming that Lupin himself set him off. He resisted the urge to step backward rather than shake hands.

Candide, with a teasing glance at Snape, said, "Shall we send Severus in your place so you can stay later?"

Speaking softly, Lupin grinned weakly while saying, "No, that's all right."

Lupin said, "Minerva asks after you, Harry, and wanted me to insist that you stop by for a visit now and then." He smiled more as he added, "She doesn't trust Severus to pass on social invitations, I don't think."

"I'll do that, thanks," Harry said, instinctively pondering what useful information she may have that he could appear to innocently weasel out of her. She did sit on the Wizengamot. Harry shook off these thoughts and helped Winky hand out fruit juices all around. Pamela gazed curiously at the glass she had been handed, and suddenly said, "Where's your pet, Harry?"

"Up in her cage." Harry waved an Unlatch Spell in that direction and moments later his Chimrian came flapping over the rail before settling on the edge of an unlit lamp, claws ringing painfully as they scraped on the glass.

Harry plucked her off and put her on his shoulder and took a seat beside his cousin.

"Can I hold her?" Pamela asked.

"She eats strangers, you know," Candide warned her.

Kali gave a warning hiss just then in the direction of Pamela's outstretched hand. She intelligently pulled it back slowly, rather risk a quick movement.

Harry patted his pet on the head and she began cleaning her wing membranes by running the edge along her foot in between nibbling frenetically on them.

"Look at those teeth. She doesn't hurt herself doing that?" Pamela asked, leaning in closer than she really should. "Is that how she got those wounds?"

Harry took his pet off his shoulder and tugged on one wing to pull the black membrane taut. He no longer noticed the ragged scars even as much as they distorted the sheen of his pet's wings. She had been injured defending Snape from the demons Harry had let loose.

"No, that was something else," Harry replied. "She got in a fight with something nasty," he hedged, not wanting to explain, really, but knowing he had to say

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something. He found Snape's gauging gaze on him when he looked up.

"Did she win?"

"It was a draw," Harry said, clipping his speech in the hopes that she would drop the questions.

Pamela sat back with her arms crossed. "More mysterious magical stuff that isn't fit for Muggle ears I suppose."

"It isn't that you're a Muggle," Harry said, remembering those painful helpless hours while Snape slipped away from him. "I just don't feel like talking about it." In the end he had taken care of things himself, like he always needed to do. And probably always would, a notion that bolstered him for tomorrow.

Snape stood and fetched Harry's pet from him and held her on one bent arm. He stood beside Candide's chair, holding Kali down by stroking her back. Harry sensed he was watching him through his hair.

"Likes you well enough," Pamela lightly complained.

"You will have to let her drink your blood if you wish to make peace with her." Snape coolly stated.

"Oh," Pamela said, mouth holding an 'O' shape.

"There is no shortage of monsters in the wizarding world," Lupin said between sips of his drink, frowning a bit.

Harry observed Candide glance at each face around her in turn. "Shall we go to the table?" As she scooted forward to more easily lever out of her chair, she said, "If I were being honest, I would say, I don't care about anyone else, I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

Pamela laughed loudest at this and gave her a hand, since Snape's hands were full of Harry's pet, who had decided she did not want to fly off when urged to.

As toast with olive spread appeared on the table, Candide said to their guests, "You two are still very cute together. Any additional plans on that front?"

Harry thought this diving in a tad blunt, so he picked a side, saying, "I'm glad you don't start in on Tonks and me like that."

Snape's stern voice emerged from the shadowy head of the table where the hearth burned high behind him. "She had best not."

After a gap where she studied the slightly rusty wooden-handled knife by her plate, Pamela said, "No. No plans."

Candide shrugged, fully appearing to make this a casual conversation. "You seem well matched is all."

Lupin's grey gaze flicked to her, then to the truly disinterested Snape, before returning to the black smeared bread abandoned on his plate.

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Into the silence that followed, Pamela said with pretend brightness, "Remus insists he's not the marrying type."

Harry watched Lupin's hairy, pointy-nailed fingers rotate the toast on his plate, and sensed the man bristling. To fill the gap, Harry said, "Severus insisted that too, but look where he is."

Candide turned that way, bit her lip and said, "He hasn't been entirely happy lately."

Harry rose immediately to defense. "He's adjusting all right." He and Snape shared a glance and Harry frowned lightly. He hoped Candide was being overly forthcoming solely to distract Lupin from what could be construed as a grilling.

"Where's your ladyfriend, Harry?" Pamela asked.

"You mean, why am I spared?" He paused while they chuckled. "Tonks is on duty. As usual." He took another square of toast. "As far as I can tell, married people want to make certain everyone is equally miserable and so try to sell it to everyone else."

"Kindly leave me out of this," Snape intoned, accepting a drink from the tray Winky sparkled in with. He swirled the liquid around in the bulbous glass a few circles and Harry knew he was going to say more from the way the muscles of his face tightened. "I honestly don't care what anyone else does. I don't care if your cousin feels out of sorts for lacking a ring..." He gave a small gesture in her direction. "Nor that Remus feels unworthy, for reasons entirely outside his control, of giving one over."

Harry, for a second, was certain Lupin was going to stand up and storm out. But instead the air went out of him, and his fingers fidgeted more. In his best self-depreciating manner, he defensively said, "Easy for you to say."

"You think?" Snape said. "Really?"

Harry did not believe this the best tack, but part of him was relieved they would not play the earlier game all through dinner, but would instead get it settled quickly. Leave it to Snape to dispense with niceties.

Lupin stared at Snape before sitting back and tossing his napkin onto the table beside his plate. "I don't know," he breathed.

"If you are looking for pity, you are looking in the wrong place," Snape stated.

"I'm not looking for pity. I'm not looking for anything," Lupin said.

"Why not?" Candide asked.

"What?" Lupin uttered.

"Why not?" Candide began gesturing with her knife, but set it down. "Why aren't you looking for something. Isn't that the state everyone is supposed to be in?"

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"I... I never thought of it quite like that." Lupin glanced around at them all and returned to hunching over his plate, which had the unfortunate effect of making it clear his spine bent a bit unusually. Pleading a bit, he came back with, "I'm not right for a husband, for anyone. Or fatherhood, or anything of the sort. It surprises me that anyone could think I was." He relaxed then and finally ate his toast.

Pamela leaned forward to partly face him, "If no one else cares, why do you?"

Lupin finally turned to her. "If they don't care, then they don't understand," he stated with finality.

"Well," Pamela said, voice unsteady. "As long as we've established that all of us are hopelessly daft, that's fine."

Lupin rolled his eyes and shook his head. He held his hands up. "Can you imagine these hands holding a child, taking care of a child. What if the child turns out like this?"

"Curses, in general, rarely pass along father to child," Snape stated.

"And how would you know?" Lupin returned.

"Copious reading. Minerva would be a better source of informed opinion on the matter. But again, no real concern of mine, so do as you wish."

The table fell silent aside from small fidgeting movements. Dinner sparkled in, a great crispy roast duck.

"Are house elves hard to get?" Pamela asked.

"It's complicated," Candide replied.

"Involves a creepy spell," Harry added, partly glad to change the topic.

Pamela paused holding a spoonful of potatoes staring across the table at Harry. "Creepy how?"

Harry tried to explain, "It involves... uh... magical bondage, er, something."

"Yuck," Pamela offered.

In a voice of dismay, Candide said, "Some wizard weddings do the same."

Pamela swallowed hard. "Really? Yours didn't, did it?"

"No," Snape and Candide replied together.

Kali choose that moment to stick her nose out of Snape's pocket and creep over the landscape of his robes toward his plate. Snape plucked her up by her fur and dangled her out to the side. "Your pet, Potter."

"Yeah," Harry said, pushing his chair out. "I'll take her upstairs." He stopped back at his plate for a slice of duck and nearly lost two fingers giving it over to his pet. Her teeth flashed in the firelight, seeming to lengthen before they were embedded in duck breast.

"Quite a pet," Pamela said with a hint of sarcasm.

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Lupin said, "That's why wanting to marry something a hundred times as big and ten times as nasty makes no sense." He sounded victorious pulling out that argument.

"You're really that bad?"

Lupin dropped his assertiveness as fast as he had put it on. He returned to hulking over his plate and eating.

"Why don't you let me see for once and judge for myself?" Pamela demanded.

This deflated Lupin more. Harry hesitated in the doorway. He gave his pet a toss toward his room instead of escorting her. She flapped madly to cope with the weight of her meal, but gained altitude in time to make it up to the railing.

"I'd rather not," Lupin said, rather calmly.

Harry only saw it because he had not yet returned to his seat, but Candide tapped Snape on the shin with her toe. Harry settled back in at his place, hoping his pet did not decide to use his pillow as a dinner napkin. Snape put his utensils down and propped his clasped hands over his plate. "It could be safely arranged," he said in a bored tone.

Harry pretended interest in smearing an unwanted third piece of toast when Lupin's accusatory gaze made it around to him.

"Fine," Lupin mumbled, as if that won the argument.

Harry looked up and asked, "Fine what?"

"Just fine," he said, sounding fatigued.

Pamela contemplated the beaten old wooden handled fork they were using that evening. Despite a brutal shining by Winky, rust spots still showed on the tines. "Should I be serving food with something more like these, or plastic even?"

"There isn't much silver in your silverware," Lupin mumbled.

"But there's probably some. Why didn't you point that out? I tossed out all my silver jewelry, but I didn't think of this."

"It's not important," Lupin insisted. "I've learned to tolerate it. It happens frequently enough."

Pamela scrutinized Lupin beside her, giving a small huff of exasperation, but remaining silent.

Snape said, "It has been my observation that Remus cannot bear anyone making accommodation for him. Even when it is in everyone's best interest."

Softly, but with finality, Lupin said, "I said fine."

"Two weeks, Friday, then. I believe we have a date," Snape stated, in the manner of closing out a meeting. Candide suppressed a small smile.



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With the distinctive chiming rustle of fine china, Harry scooped up his stolen goods and Disapparated for Belinda's flat. He had decided that showing off his silent transportation skills too much was an unnecessary risk. Belinda blinked at him from the couch where she sat curled up with a magazine. When she did start to move, she moved rapidly, dropping her reading on the floor and jumping to her feet.

"Harry?"

Harry placed the china on the table and the pillow on a chair. "Good evening," he casually greeted her.

She put her hands on her hips, challenging him. Behind her, in the window, her owl fluffed itself and pecked at the side of his wing. "What are you doing here?"

"I have a meeting," he informed her.

"A meeting?" she echoed dully.

At that moment, Harry's Durumulna contact arrived, flanked by his two lackeys. He adjusted his mask and peered at Harry, ignoring Belinda. "You have the stuff." It was not a question.

Harry waved an inviting hand at his cache and reached to pick up the teapot.

"Leave it on the table." With a toss of his round shoulder, the man sent a lackey over to run a hex detection spell on each item.

The underling stood aside so his boss could study the pile. "This the stuff they asked for?"

The man nodded. "Pick it up, and let's go."

The lackey had to do as Harry had, and load his pockets with rattling teacups in order to comply. Another gesture from the masked wizard and the other lackey came forward, pulling a black sack from his pocket. He was not intending to help carry, but instead moved to put it over Harry's head.

"Your wand too."

Harry hesitated at that one, but assumed that he could escape from any situation, and so complied. He gave Belinda one last glance before letting himself be blinded. She stood stunned, even when he winked at her.

The hood pulled free of Harry's face and he glanced around a wood paneled room with no doors or windows. They had Apparated twice, then walked for many minutes, and somewhere along the line had lost the two lackeys. Harry studied the room, memorizing it for later, uncertain how they could have walked into it from elsewhere. His escort had already moved to a steep ladder leading to a hatch in the ceiling, the only visible exit. "Boss is this way," he said, sounding threatening.

Harry followed, feeling stiffness in his legs from his run as he climbed. They emerged near the ceiling of a modern industrial building and followed along a catwalk stretching the length of the building. Sunlight came through the skylights, but black

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cloth had been hung around the catwalk, obscuring the view. Harry could hear voices echoing, and a shout, a pounding like a hand on a table, and then a sharp hearty laugh.

As they walked, they approached closer to the noise. Harry's ears strained to follow what sounded like a card game. A whiff of pungent cigar odor drifted by.

The catwalk came to an end hanging out into space. The man stopped and waited, tossing a small ivory box in his hand. The goods Harry had collected were not visible, and Harry thought it best to hold off on his questions.

Time passed. Back along their path, from somewhere down on the floor of the building the distinctive sound of shuffling against solid wood drifted up. Suddenly, Harry noticed the catwalk now continued on in three directions. Still the man waited. The catwalk creaked and an elf with wiry hair-covered ears crept up and beckoned from the branch to the right. Harry's escort batted him on the shoulder and gestured for him to lead.

They reached an ordinary, heavy door, which the elf stood on tiptoe to open. With more long fingered beckoning, he led the way into a heavily decorated office lined with plush furniture. The scent of cigar smoke grew pervasive.

A minute passed before the wall at the far end jumped away, doubling the size of the room. Someone sat at a wide desk, feet up on the blotter. A female elf, dressed in a lacy red placemat, lounged on the corner of the desk. Her ears drooped with rows of gold hoops.

"Special delivery?" a voice asked in a light accent Harry could not identify.

"Insisted on an introduction in exchange for the goods," Harry's escort explained.

The feet slipped away and a short man wearing an oversized hat emerged from around the desk. His long pointed chin moved side to side as he talked.

"Well, the infamous Harry Potter pays us a visit." He put his cigar to his mouth and his jaw worked all the more.

Harry gave a deep nod. He did not trust himself to not ask questions if he spoke. The man snapped his fingers and Harry's escort scrambled to take a chair. Before Harry could turn back, the boss shouted in a slightly insane manner, "I said, take a seat!"

Harry did so, startled more than anything. The elf's red painted toes bounced at the end of her crossed legs. She grinned back at him mockingly. Harry looked away from the queer sight of her and studied his surroundings. The room contained a few mildly cursed things, but there were too many objects in the room to identify the cursed ones from where he sat.

The boss paced his perfectly creased trousers to his desk and picked up an issue of the Prophet. "My people tell me you want in. Give me the stuff, Ursie."

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Harry blinked in confusion. But his escort tossed the boss the little ivory box, from which the pillow and each part of the tea set emerged, one at a time. “Take these down to our guest. Mr. Potter and I will have a little chat alone.”

Harry’s heavysset contact moved like a sprite to comply, gathering up the things on a tea tray and shuffling out, a vision of unlikely maid service.

After the door closed, the boss flipped his cigar around his mouth a full circuit and said, “Give me just one measly excuse not to kill you here on the spot, Potter.”

Harry sat straighter and despite resisting, glanced around himself in quickening alarm. The deep maroon curtains and knickknack-filled shelves could harbor all sorts of things.

The boss waved his cigar, leaving smoke like spell trails from his fingers. “There are about a hundred ways to do it where you are there. No sense wondering what they all might be since you can’t count them.”

Harry sat back and forced himself to relax, just for show. “One reason only? Okay, how about you can’t really afford to waste the opportunity?”

The boss snorted. “The opportunity to be hulled, you mean? By an inside job?”

Harry could honestly peer back in confusion about this. He had lost control already and needed to cease playing this as himself. He closed his eyes a second and felt for the shadows, dredged up the hunger that still lingered from losing so very many followers. Immediately, a sense of outrage and derision flowed into him. The room transformed before his eyes from a showpiece into an insultingly superficial trap.

“Look,” Harry said, keeping a tight binding on the scornful tone wanting to get out. “I’m here to make an offer of my services. You can accept them or not. I’m still exploring potential opportunities. I have loyalty to no one right now and I may decide to just keep it that way. Your organization is certainly giving the Ministry a good run, so I thought I’d shop my services to you, see what my options may be.”

The cigar bounced around again, shaking the ash from the end, which fell and disappeared as it struck the shag rug on the floor, revealing the room to be an illusion. Harry may not even know enough about this place to slip in via the Dark Plane, unless he departed via it, and marked the location.

The boss leaned back against his desk, which barely came up to his armpits. He turned the folded newspaper to better glance over it. “What do you think of one Rita Skeeter?”

Harry saw enormous hazard in this question. He worried that if he informed the man of his bitter feelings, he may be assigned to assassinate her. He instead saw a chance to bolster his dark credentials and replied, “She has an annoying habit of following me around.”

“Potter’s out of control, says adoptive father.” The boss read off, clearly from

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an old edition. He pulled another over and flipped it around. "This same adoptive father... interesting vitae, himself. I wouldn't mind recruiting him..." He stared Harry down with intense eyes that gave Harry the sense that the only real thing in his surroundings was that pair of dark blue eyes. "How did he escape getting sent off prison? Every one of his colleagues got the shaft."

Harry felt on better ground arguing for his own corruption based on Snape's. "This time, or the previous time?"

The boss's lips curled momentarily. "Both, if you are so eager to tell me the story." His strange accent, mostly hidden, flared as he spoke this.

"Dumbledore staked his own reputation on Severus Snape's loyalty the first time. He was influential enough to keep him out of prison. The second time around, I've been defending him."

"Staking your reputation..." the boss taunted.

"I wasn't putting it to other use," Harry casually tossed out. "It was going to waste."

"So, how did you like prison?" came the next flatly conversational question.

"It was... informative," Harry said, making himself forget his distress and depression in projecting a thoroughly different outward memory of events. For a minute he could almost believe the experience had made him stronger. "Too much time to think, though," he complained.

The boss took a long, cloudy puff on his cigar and smashed it violently out on the pristine surface of the mahogany desk, adding the scent of burnt wood to the tobacco odor. The elf leaned over and waved the smoke away, removing the mar from the desk, which must be real, even if the floor was not.

A knock came on the door and Harry's escort entered and groveled his way to the middle of the rug. "I did as you instructed."

"Is our guest pleased?" the boss asked, sounding something far less than pleased himself.

"Yes, sir."

He gave a toss of his hand, and the man jumped over to gesture rapidly that Harry should get up and follow him. The boss turned away, then back. "Take Potter down to our guest, why don't you. He'll be tickled to meet him."

Harry followed out of the room and walked backward down the catwalk a few steps. The door disappeared just after it closed, leaving the gangway swinging out over empty space. They took a different path back and halted at a ladder down that vanished into a black fog before it reached bottom.

Harry's escort insisted Harry lead. Harry turned around and, with some trepidation because he had to bend down and step blindly over the edge, finally got both

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hands and feet on the ladder.

They reached the floor and more branching black-cloth corridors, lit by hovering fairylights. Harry could hear the card game clearly now, and a more acrid cigar smoke stung his eyes. They emerged from the tunnel of cloth into a room with no apparent ceiling, but with lots of woodwork and a mirrored bar along one wall where another exotic elf patiently shined glasses. The tea set sat on the bar, clashing brightly with the wood and glass.

A feeble-looking, grey haired man tossed a card down with surprising authority, his partly closed hand pounding the table as he did so. "Ha!" he said. The other three much younger players had the usual generic Durumulna look to them as they scrutinized their full hands of cards.

Harry's escort chose a moment to step forward and interrupt. "Mr. McCurdy, the boss thought you'd like to meet..." He did not get a chance to finish.

Mr. McCurdy caught sight of Harry and stumbled out of his chair, still safely holding his fan of cards. "You better not be here to take me back!" the man growled at Harry, one eye popping out, long fingered wagging accusingly at Harry.

"No," Harry denied. "I had no such idea."

Mr. McCurdy went limp with relief. "Ach," he uttered, and showed his age as he slipped creakily back into his seat. "Yangzy get me a refill," he cried out in the direction of the bar. Then as he patted his chest, added, "I need something to recover from that shock."

He dedicated his attention to his cards long moments before turning back to Harry. "Nice to meet you, my boy. Just paying a social call, then? Do me a favor, tell my wife I'm being tortured horribly... argh!" he shouted as one of the others collected that trick.

The elf delivered his drink on a tiny silver platter. "Any of those little snacks left? Maybe Mr. Potter would like something?" He said all this without taking his eyes off his cards. When the play came around to him, he tossed off something small. "Pull up a chair, Mr. Potter. We'll deal you in."

Harry's escort shook his head. Harry said, "I don't know this game."

"That's because I invented it. I call it five-deck shooter."

"Four-deck," one of his tablemates corrected.

"It'll be five if we get him to play too," McCurdy pointed out knowingly, then laughed. "Ah, I haven't had such a fine time since... nineteen fifty two when my father dragged me out of the club by my ear and forced me down the aisle. "Your lay, Pitface. You're leading toward me, so you might as well just hand them all over now." He laughed heartily again, not a noise one would expect from such a sunken chested man.

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Harry's escort rapped him painfully on the arm and nodded back the way they had come in. Harry said, "Nice meeting you all," before retreating with his escort into the smoke-hazy tunnel.

Harry withstood the black hood again, and expected to be back in Belinda's flat when it was tugged free, but instead, they stood in an overgrown lot strewn with abandoned cars sporting tail fins.

"Don't call us," his escort growled, tossing Harry's wand so that it clattered at the base of a flat tire with hazy white walls, the rusty wheel rim protruding viciously from the warped mass. He Disapparated away before Harry could fetch it up.

Harry checked his wand for damage and sighed. The sun wanly crept out from behind the clouds and slipped away again. Harry had no idea where he was, but at least it was warm with the wind so low. He walked a bit along the gravel, thinking. Having no real information, he came to no real conclusions and decided he should get home so Snape could get to Hogwarts.

Based on how much aim he needed at the end of his Apparition, Harry decided that he must have been a very long way from home, farther than London, for certain. He found Snape in the drawing room and closed the door when instructed to do so with a gesture.

"How did it go?"

"They don't trust me."

"Not a surprise," Snape smugly said, opening a small trunk to wave the contents of his desk into.

"They wouldn't mind recruiting you."

This made Snape pause. He lightly shook his head and snapped the trunk closed.

Harry pleasantly added, "If they end up trusting me, it will be because of you."

"Hm," Snape uttered. "I expect that won't be the only reason." He picked up his trunk and walked by Harry, pausing to say, "I assume you are on hold?"

"Yep. How'd you know?"

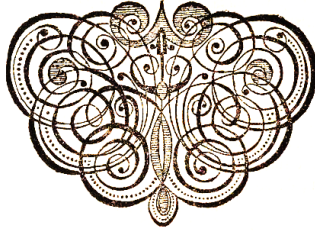
"Really, Potter. I've seen more people initiated into a far more demanding organization than this one probably has in total. Keep in mind most newcomers fail." He turned at the door to add, "Spectacularly, I might add. Although, a few would just slink away and disappear. The lucky ones I suppose."

Harry followed him to the dining room. "You've made your point."

Snape set his trunk on the table and took down the Floo Powder canister. "No, I don't think I have, but it will have to do." With a handful of grit clutched in one hand, he touched Harry fleetingly on the shoulder with his other before hefting the trunk. "Do be careful, and do keep me informed."

"Right," Harry said.

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“Thanks Harry,” Candide said as she released his arm from Siding Along. The shuffling and tapping sounds of an awakening office drifted into the cold stairwell when she opened the door to the accountancy.

“No trouble, really,” Harry assured her. “You’re off at noon?”

Candide nodded and put her hand protectively around her coat-covered abdomen to maneuver through the door.

Back down on the Alley, only a handful of shoppers plied the storefronts. Half the shops sat dormant, but activity could be seen through the window of Weasley Wizard Wheezes. Harry rapped on the window since the door was locked and the carved sign resting against the display case window read *Shuttered please try us again at a more holy hour*.

Ginny pressed her nose to the glass of the door before working the locks, both mechanical and magical, to open it. “Are you coming along?” she said, right out.

“Er...”

Ginny waved behind her and scooped her cloak over her shoulders, pausing only to free her hair from her collar. “Frelander is buying the Daily Prophet this morning.”

“I’d love to,” Harry said, happy to have something to occupy his time.

Ginny was off before he could say more, muttering, “Frankly, we may need more security.”

When Harry and Ginny rounded the corner of the Prophet’s blocky building, they came upon Frelander and his wife standing outside the gold and glass doors surrounded by a small phalanx of solicitors wearing serious faces along with their

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tweed.

“Mr. Potter,” Freelanders greeted Harry warmly, accompanied by a hearty handshake that made Harry have to hide a surprised wince. As soon as he released Harry, Freelanders’s attention shifted immediately back to the trophy-like doors before them.

“Shall we gentlemen? And ladies... of course.”

Inside the bright room, they stopped in the center of the well-worn wooden floor and took in the activity at the surrounding array of wickets and counters. Gradually, the office rattle, hooting owls, and voices shouting to those hard of hearing died out and attention turned to the waiting group.

A section of the ceiling cracked open and a lift floated down beyond the glass wall before them. A round man on rapidly moving legs approached as soon as the lift touched down. He shooed the desk clerks aside and opened a door, wicket and all, in the wall.

“Lord Freelanders, it is a pleasure...” the man gushed in a voice pitched too high for a grown man, making him sound like a performer or a ventriloquist. Freelanders introduced him as Pierrepont Walpole, the newspaper’s owner. This introduction was followed by that of the Editor in Chief, Barnabas Cuffe, whose long countenance did not imply he was pleased with events. Three harried assistants crowded him, arms full.

“And you brought... quite a crew here...” Walpole said to Freelanders, falling uncertain as his eyes counted the lawyers and then landed on Harry. “Mr. Potter,” the man said, reaching into the group to single Harry out for a handshake. His hands were small and clammy and heavily stained with ink.

Walpole adjusted his glasses and waved a writing desk out of the parquet floor. “Shall we dispense with the formalities, then, and retire to my office for tea?” Scrambling suddenly, he pulled out a pocket watch, then checked one of the many wall clocks. “Ah, still time to make a Lazyeye Monday Edition. It will have to do.”

One of the less dour solicitors sensed that he should bring forth papers. A stack of exceedingly long parchments were draped over the desk to unroll to the floor and half way to the entrance. Around them, the clerks and staff were gathering at the windows or kneeling on their desks to hear over the glass wall.

With a serial flourish of long quills the contracts were completed. In the meantime, the lift had made two more trips from the ceiling and this time Harry spotted Skeeter’s tight golden curls in the crowd. He waited with rising anticipation as her head bobbed closer, moving back and forth impatiently when the bodies thickened and slowed.

“Well!” Skeeter said, voice as sharp as the snap of her high heels on the floor. “What have we here?”

Skeeter had been barreling straight for Harry, but Freelanders turned his bulky self

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and intercepted her. He tugged a folded paper from his breast pocket and presented it to her with a slight bow, just as Skeeter came to a stop. He did not let go of it, however, as she took hold and tugged.

“We have had a change in management, as you are perhaps aware... or perhaps not?” Frelander drawled. Then he raised his voice over the drone of gossip flowing around the hall. “And I’m sure you are all eager to learn what other changes we will be making. As far as redundancies are concerned, please all rest assured that nearly everything and everyone will be remaining the same. We have just one.” And with that he released the paper, which moments before Skeeter had been battling for, but now made a distasteful face as she gained full control of it.

Skeeter snapped open the letter and with a glance over it, crushed it down. “On what grounds?”

“Oh, Ms. Skeeter, let’s not make this more tedious than is already required. You concocted stories about me, whole cloth, and, most astoundedly of all, expected to be immune to any negative outcome as a result.”

Skeeter adjusted her jeweled glasses and leaned closer to Frelander. “I did not make up a single thing I wrote. I had the very letters you sent. I had them verified, in fact.”

“And these letters would be, where?” he asked politely. “You refused to produce them for my legal team, as requested.” Frelander began putting his things away, clearly dismissing Skeeter. “Until you do so, there is nothing to discuss, I’m afraid.” He sounded bored now, which only made Skeeter’s face redden.

“I DID have them,” she insisted weakly. Harry was glad she did not glance at him, which meant she did not suspect him.

Walpole gestured at someone in the distance, then said to Skeeter, “You’ll have to clear out your office.”

Skeeter appeared far more prepared to do battle than pack boxes. She glared down domineeringly at the former owner, but he simply shrugged in return. A large figure rose up in the far corner beyond the windows. It brushed off what appeared to be straw and lumbered toward them. Harry had not imagined a half troll might exist but this character did a good impression of one. He wasn’t as large as Hagrid, but he was ten times as ugly and he lightly hefted a massive granite club. Everyone turned to watch him approach.

“Thug, take Ms. Skeeter to her office. She’s to pack it up,” Walpole said.

The half-Troll gave no indication he understood, but he moved aside to let Skeeter pass. Frelander gestured surreptitiously with his chin in the same direction and Harry stepped forward. “I’ll come along.”

Skeeter’s sideways glances evaluated Harry as they walked in the vibrating wake

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of the half-troll's footsteps. The crowd parted for them as they approached the lift, scooting backward, gazes wide and curious.

The troll took up most of the lift platform. He stood in the very center, club resting on the marble floor.

Skeeter leaned around the troll's rag-wrapped belly and said, "I can't figure out how you're involved in this, but there must be a connection."

They were almost to the ceiling now. The floor looked much farther down than the ceiling appeared from below. Ginny waved up at Harry, even though Freeland's wife was trying to get her attention.

Harry waited until the channel of the lift surrounded them to ask, "Why would I have anything to do with this?"

"You've got your fingers in everywhere from what I hear," she said, then leaned farther over. "Care to comment?"

Harry laughed. "And you'll print my comment where?"

Skeeter huffed. The troll shifted from foot to foot, making the lift rattle unnervingly in the shaft. Finally the door opened and Skeeter stalked out, rushing, Harry thought, to get inside her office and lock them out. But she left the door open behind her. Harry remained in the corridor, looking in. He did not like the masks any better in full light.

"What are those?" Harry asked.

"The masks? If I had my way, my former colleagues," she quipped without stopping what she was doing.

The troll lumbered off to a cupboard down the corridor and rummaged inside it with giant, deliberate movements.

Harry laughed. "What do you do to your enemies if you treat your fellow journalists like that?"

Skeeter stood straight from stacking things. "My enemies are my most prized and lucrative possessions. My colleagues just get in my way."

"I actually can understand that," Harry said. He leaned on the doorframe and watched her work.

"You're not going to help?" she criticized.

"You don't want me to."

Upon further reflection, she said, "Yeah, you're right about that."

When all the boxes had been heaved out, ten at a time by the troll, and nothing remained but scraps and broken things, Harry stepped inside. The office still felt cursed, despite the masks having been carted off in an iron trunk that had been chained closed for good measure. He wandered slowly around the bare shelves, trying to determine what bothered him so. He stopped and backed up below the clock,

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which had 27 hands on it, all in different colors. “Leaving that for your colleague?” Harry suggestively asked.

Skeeter used a hand to primp her hair. ”Sure. Why?

“It’s cursed,” Harry said.

“Of course it’s cursed. It’s a World Time Deadline Clock. I challenge you to find me one that’s not cursed.” She propped her hands on her narrow hips, thumbs forward. “What’s your game, Potter.”

“I wanted to make sure you removed everything dangerous.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She sounded hard now, like a teacher.

“Whatever it is, I’d hardly tell you, of all people.”

She exhaled, looking him up and down, enticing now. “I’d pay well.”

Harry’s darker instincts screamed at him to string her along, to leave open the possibility of using her later. “I’ll think about it.”

Strangely, he sensed that she saw through his answer. She strode to the door and waved an extinguishing hex at the one remaining lamp. She primped her hair and touched up her lipstick in the reflection of the glass in the office door. “Time for me to make my final hysterical scene before departing.”

“You are one to talk about games,” Harry commented as they re-entered the lift. The troll must have grown weary because he dragged his club now, and it rumbled deafeningly on the floor, forcing them to shout.

They rode down in silence until just before they touched down when Skeeter said, “As long as you can remain an enemy, dear Harry Potter, we can continue to be friends.” With that, she screwed up her shoulders and veritably marched across the floor, taller all of a sudden and well visible to all the flash lamps going off, homing in on her as she closed in on the old and new management still chatting in the middle of the floor.

Someone touched Harry on the arm, making him jump. Ginny said, “Guess what?” Her face glowed with raw intensity as she went on. “Beatrice wants me to be her assistant here at the Prophet!”

“That’s great, Ginny!” Harry said, suddenly removed from his well of troubles. “What are your brothers going to say?”

“Hopefully a lot. I’ve been working for Knuts over there, and do you think they ever say, ”good job, Ginny“ or ”good to have you here, Ginny“, no...” Her face took on annoyance, but it slid back into a grin as she watched the people milling in the Prophet’s service hall. “This is going to be fun. A ton of work, but fun,” she said, rubbing her hands together. Skeeter had just giving up her loud arguing and was marching out. “I’d better go,” Ginny said, and with a flutter of her short cloak, wove back into the crowd.

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Harry watched Freeland and Beatrice introducing themselves to a few of the staff. Beatrice took Ginny aside for a chat involving lots of arm motion. A little man floating a cart full of boxes stopped upon seeing Harry there and stared at him sideways along his crooked nose.

“Hm,” he grunted and resumed directing the cart, mumbling as he passed, “Everything’s changing, everything’s changing.”

“It is,” Harry echoed to no one in particular.

The staff had thinned out and returned to work, quieter and more diligent than when they had been interrupted that morning. Harry made his goodbyes to Lord Freeland and the others and strode out with purpose, but standing on the pavement outside he realized he had no where in particular he needed to be. Harry could go home and read. Or he could take himself for a run and a long flight. Neither of these sounded terribly appealing. Few of his friends would be home during the day, just Elizabeth, who should still be home between terms.

Elizabeth answered the door in a yellow dressing gown and fuzzy white slippers. “Harry!” she greeted him. She clasped her dressing gown closed over her pyjamas and said, “I didn’t expect you to call. Hang on, let me get something on. Have a seat.”

She was off into her bedroom, leaving Harry to ponder calculatingly how very much he was trusted. He was still in that spot when she returned. “Really, sit down,” she admonished, pointing at one overstuffed chair while taking the other. “How are you doing? You getting over being locked up? Have you given the Ministry of Magic hell for what happened?”

Harry had opened his mouth at each of these, but only got a chance to speak at the end. “Doing all right,” he said, finding himself with little to say. He was happier to see her than he expected to be. Her hair was mussed and down and falling around her oversized pullover.

“The Ministry of Magic strikes me as a frighteningly arcane bureaucracy,” she pronounced, sitting back and crossing her arms. Her overly exacting attitude came across differently when it was in Harry’s own defense. “I’m glad you’re out, now. Any prison sounds awful. I can’t imagine a magical one.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Harry said.

She leaned over the side of her chair to pick up a *Witch Weekly*.

Harry commented, “I didn’t know you read that.”

She leaned over to flip through the magazine, treating the pages with more care than most would. “I’ve been trying to be more like a real witch.” She had flipped all the way through and started again from the beginning, letting the pages flap out from under her thumb more slowly this time.

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“Is it working?” Harry asked.

She shook her tresses, making them hide her bent face. “Mostly I just laugh at this stuff. Which is funny because as a girl I would have killed to do more of it. Imagine! A Charm to do your hair any way you like and change the color of your dress.” She stood and set the magazine in Harry’s lap. “They did an article about the prison you were in.” Then she loped off to the kitchenette, saying, “I skipped breakie and need some nosh. And I’ll make tea,” she added, holding up her wand in a pose of casual victory.

Harry skimmed the article, not really reading it, but taking in the animated diagrams showing the layout of the cell blocks. The Extremely Dangerous Criminal Block was not far from the warden’s office. Harry wished a chance had come up to visit Lockhart/Voldemort while he was there, and he wondered if the warden might still be open to that earlier tour offer. Harry also would not mind a chance to stick his tongue out at Lucius Malfoy one more time. He was grinning at this thought when Elizabeth emerged with a tray.

“I’m still bollocks at Heating Charms,” she said. “Sorry it took so long. I keep meaning to find a tutor for wand waving, but term is starting in another week so it won’t be until after that’s over.”

“Want me to show you?” Harry asked.

“I think I’d be such a terrible student I would bore you to tears.” But she sat forward on her chair, belying her answer.

Harry did not think spending more time with her would bore him at all. And he had nothing else to do.

“Here, get out your wand. If you are going to be a witch there are a few spells you just have to know.”



Harry’s week dragged by. Evenings he spent hoping Tonks would find time for him, but she managed to slip in only once for a few hours and she was too tired to do anything but nap. Mornings, after Harry dropped Candide at work, he spent tutoring Elizabeth. Somewhere between getting away from her parents and going to school she had lost the harder edge to her critical personality and he rather enjoyed her company. He steadfastly refused to consider returning to training, despite the painful boredom of his afternoons and an ongoing desire to return to normalcy. He heard nothing from Durumulna and considered visiting Belinda’s flat a number of times, but he had been specifically instructed to wait for them and he did want to

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seem the diligent type about following orders, so he held off. He sent Belinda an owl at her office, which generated a terse, plain reply that told him nothing.

Harry began to feel envious of his friends who had regular things to occupy their days. Elizabeth was soon returning to classes. Ginny worked all day and evenings even at her new job, growing quickly ragged from the long hours but no less enthusiastic. Ron was free evenings, but he mostly talked about his job, which did not improve Harry's outlook. Friday when an owl arrived from Hermione inviting him for a visit, he dropped it on the floor and left it there in his rush to leave.

Harry arrived in a cupboard on Hermione's corridor and listened at the door with cupped hands before opening it a crack to check that the way was clear. She called out immediately in response to the knock on her door.

"You're here already!" Hermione exclaimed, flipping back the hair that had fallen loose from the clip on the back of her head. She pushed back from her desk and came around to greet him. "That's right, you don't have to bother with the Floo..." she said, remembering.

Harry touched his finger to his lips, but Hermione rolled her eyes and hugged him.

The sun poured generously into the room at this hour of the day, making it feel less like Hogwarts than Harry remembered. Hermione asked, "How are you adjusting to life outside prison? Everything all right?"

He gestured at her uncharacteristically disarrayed office. "About the same as you're adjusting to life in this prison," he teased.

"Yeah," she huffed, surveying the scene. "Come on, I'll skip lunch and let's go for a walk. I need a change of scenery before I tackle another essay that asserts that hexes are a special class of charms."

"They are if you do them right," Harry jested, garnering another friendly chastisement.

The corridors were crowded with clumps of chattering students, who quieted and turned to greet them or just stared in surprise. Harry had once hoped that by this time in his life, he would be treated more or less normally, but that was not to be.

One of the Creavy brothers broke from a group huddled in a window alcove and kept in pace with them. "Wotcher, Harry!"

"Hello Dennis, studying hard?" When Dennis stretched his face disturbingly. Harry explained secretively, "I have to keep up appearances for Professor Granger here."

"Oh, good. Thought you meant that. Swotting would cut into my training too much. I'm determined to make Seeker next year."

"Speaking of which, what do you think of the Ravenclaw Seeker?" Harry asked, mostly to make conversation as they followed along with the flow down the staircases.

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“Tanzir, you mean?” Dennis said. “He looked pretty good in their first game.” He shrugged. “But everyone looks good playing Hufflepuff.”

Hermione leaned closer as they rounded the landing to say, “If they’d pay as much attention to lectures as they do at the matches...”

Dennis stopped suddenly and Harry nearly ran him over. Dennis was used to this and stepped quickly aside, pointing. “He’s over there.”

Harry turned and found the aforementioned boy hanging onto the banister, rocking back and forth while chatting with another Ravenclaw. He was a wisp of a boy with bowl-cropped black hair. Perhaps sensing the attention, he turned, displaying chiseled features. He pushed himself straight as recognition softened his face.

Harry stepped over and introduced himself. The boy closed his hanging-open mouth, and responded, “My name is Aylal, How are you? Pleased to meet you,” like practiced phrases.

Hermione leaned in and said, “His French is better.”

Upon which, Harry received a string of French that he halted by holding up his hands. “My only time in France was in prison, and I didn’t pick up much there.”

The boy’s face fell and he laughed nervously. “But you are out, now.”

Looking for a better topic, Harry said, “I’m going to come watch your match against Slytherin.”

“But no pressure,” Hermione quipped.

“I am honored,” the boy proclaimed, beaming.

Other students making their way to lunch stopped to listen in. Harry made his goodbyes because they were blocking the staircase.

Dennis slithered in between them when they continued on. “Who’re your Galleons on, Harry?” he whispered.

Harry stopped, trying to figure out a reply, but Hermione sent her student off with a sharp wave of her hand. “No gambling on school grounds.”

Dennis laughed as he slipped off. “Shouldn’t have Quidditch then.”

“He has a point,” Harry conceded.

Hermione tugged Harry off the landing before he could take the next set of stairs down. “I remember that I wanted you to show me something.” She started back upward.

“I thought you wanted a change of scenery.”

“The library at lunchtime is a change of scenery... no students.”

Madame Pince must have already gone to the Great Hall because the library was completely unoccupied. Hermione headed straight for the gate to the restricted section. “Speaking of Ravenclaw, I want you to show me her book.”

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Harry followed Hermione in, turning to make certain the gate latched properly behind them. The stacks sat in a waiting silence, reminding Harry of another library and another Hermione. He lowered his voice. "I don't know if it will let me open it with you here, you know."

"Give it a try." She stopped beside the podium against the rear wall, hanging on the edge of it with her fingertips.

Harry opened the grate in the wall, and the book lay inside as it always did, sporting a light coating of dust. Hermione narrated while Harry carefully removed it. "Amazing to think all these centuries, that's been sitting there. The actual notes of the Founders..."

The book's stone covers rattled and ground together and Hermione fell silent. "If that's all it takes to quiet Professor Granger..." Harry teased.

"Hey!" she whispered harshly, "You know how hard it is to fill a double class period sometimes?"

"I remember how hard it was to sit through a double class period..."

Harry tried to open the book, but the covers would not budge, the entire thing a single block of stone. "It doesn't like you," Harry said.

Hermione moved in beside Harry, facing the book. "Why not?"

Harry shrugged and gestured for her to move away instead. He took on an attitude of superior calm. The restricted section fell quieter yet; every last rustle and creak ceased. He imagined facing down the nastiest of creatures from the Dark Plane, making it back down and retreat, head bowed.

Harry touched the cover and lifted with his thumb. It released and let him heft it open to reveal the warning letter. Hermione, crouching, slipped closer to peak around at it from behind Harry. The book vibrated, and Harry again forced it to submit and still.

"Wow." Hermione whispered as she read, "Knowledge should never be mistaken for learning, information, or insight. Oh," she said with passion. "This is amazing... take only pure knowledge away. Yes, yes, I will." she said, sounding childishly excited. "Can you turn the page?"

Harry tried to, but the book rumbled. "Back up," he said, determined, but not wanting Hermione in harm's way. Slowly, he reached up and rested his left hand on the edge of the front cover, not so much to hold it open, which he could not physically do, but to keep track of it. With his other hand, he delicately lifted the corner of the next page. The book shook on the lectern, which resonated and amplified the sound. But Harry, though sheer force of will, compelled the book to remain open. Hermione's hand wrapped around his arm, gripping tighter as the book sang louder in a rumble through the wood of the lectern.

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“Harry, maybe you shouldn’t,” Hermione shouted over the noise.

Harry did not want to lose this battle. He did not want to retreat. He pressed his will harder, and reached for the next page, just to see if he could turn it. The vibration eased but now smoke swept out from between the page edges.

“Harry!” She shook his arm back and forth now. “Don’t make it destroy itself. Let it go!”

Harry calmly pulled his hands clear and reluctantly gave in. The book slammed closed, covers flying vertical before tilting neatly and thundering down onto the lectern and falling still as stone once again.

Hermione’s pent up breath came out in a wheeze, and she still held Harry’s sleeve for support. “You were right. It doesn’t want me to see it, I guess.”

“It might not be so happy with me any longer, either” Harry said.

“Well, that’d be a shame, Harry. I’m sorry for asking.”

Harry shrugged. “I’ve learned loads of spells from it already.” He tossed a shoulder, which pulled against her grip on his robes. “Go out beyond the gate and I’ll put it away.”

“You’re sure you’ll be okay left alone with it? McGonagall mentioned what it has done in the past.”

“Yeah,” he replied, sounding amused, but it was to mask his uncertainty. Her footsteps retreated, the gate squeaked up the scale then down, and finally the latch fell into place again.

Harry stared down at the chiseled cover of the book, at each of the house seals in turn. Part of him suspected that it wasn’t Hermione that was entirely the trouble. But like the letter from the other Snape, he did not want to find out for certain what was inside, so he left it a mystery. Calmly, gathering a certainty of power to compel his actions, he lifted the book and put it away.

Both of them wandering in their own thoughts, he and Hermione walked together down to the Entrance Hall. The dull crowd-roar of lunchtime in the Great Hall washed like a balm around their mood, and Harry opened the castle’s front door with extra grace and bowed Hermione out ahead of him.

The lawn lay in a mat of mostly dead tangle. Coarse snow hugged the low spots and covered under the benches. Harry led the way around to the rose garden and warmed a bench for them to sit on. Hermione breathed into her mittens and surveyed the winter ruin of the plants.

Harry took his mind away from what happened in the library and said, “Has there been any trouble with crystal potions here at all?”

Hermione sat back on her mittened hands. “You mean that mood altering stuff? Haven’t seen it yet.”

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“Keep an eye out.”

She crossed her legs and bounced her foot, looking more the student than the professor. “What am I looking for?”

“Students going out of their head.”

“Like that doesn’t happen normally.”

Harry smiled. “This is farther out than normal.”

“You’ve seen it?” When Harry nodded, she asked, “Tried it?”

“No,” Harry replied, laughing lightly. “I have a hard enough time with the realities I already have access to.”

They sat quietly for long minutes. A mistle thrush worked its way from one bare branch to another, browsing for dried berries.

Hermione patted Harry’s leg with her broad mittened hand. “How are you doing, Harry?”

“I’ve been better,” Harry said, and immediately felt a pit open beneath him. His keener senses went on alert against further confessions.

“At least I got an honest answer. Still mad at the Ministry?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t care about the Ministry.”

“Oh,” she replied. “That’s not like you.”

Harry sighed. He remembered that other place and wondered what they were all doing there, whether they had succeeded in collecting any more Horcruxes and whether that Harry had obtained the power his friends were going to arrange for him. He wondered how long it would take for him to reach full power, and whether he should risk going back to test himself against himself, just for fun.

“Harry?” Hermione prompted. She was sitting forward to better look at his face.

“Yeah?”

“You’re not having nightmares or anything from prison, or anything like that are you?”

“No,” he answered in a tone meant to calm her concerns.

After another gap, she asked, “Are you going back to the Auror program?”

“When I feel like it,” he said, and liked the sound of that.

She tugged her mittens up one at a time and tucked them into her sleeves. “Aren’t you bored?”

“Terribly. But I’m getting ideas.”

“Oh, that’s not good,” she said, snorting faintly.

Inside, he parted ways with himself, half was insulted and angry and half leapt back to the past, to being much better understood. He tilted his head back and stared at the flat grey sky. “I don’t know if it is or not.”

“Harry, you’re really worrying me.”

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He turned to look at her and watched her studying his eyes, like many of his old friends did, unfamiliar with their pale color, expecting them to always be the way they used to.

Part of him wanted to tell her he wasn't the same and that he was a bit worried about that, but he did not have access to his faculties of speech to say it, so he simply stared at her. He broke their locked gazes by standing up. "You have class, don't you?"

She stood too and took his arms. "Harry?" She sounded far younger, fearful for him.

He needed to take care of that. He took her shoulders in turn. "It's fine. I'm just working through some things." All true.

"I don't know." She glanced up at the school. A bell rang inside just as she did. "Are you going to be home this weekend?" At his nod, she said, "I'll come for a visit, all right? I'm not sure when, but I will. Take care until then, all right?"

She started to go, but waited with a hand on his arm for him to nod before actually doing so. When she turned back before reaching the doors, the rose garden stood empty, the only movement a dead rose branch, set rocking by the thrush landing upon it.



That evening after dinner, Hermione knocked on the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts Office. Footsteps approached before Professor Snape jerked open the door.

"Ms. Granger," he said, in his usual dismissive tone before contrastingly gesturing for her to enter.

Hermione frowned at finding a student sitting by the window, writing diligently by the light from a lamp perched on the sill. She recognized Mthunzi, shaking his hand out between lines, face obscured by hair so tangled it may have been intended as one of those Caribbean hair styles.

"I wanted to talk to you about a student, in private," Hermione said to Snape when she noticed his questioning glance.

Snape diverted over to the window and, without ceremony, slid the parchment out from under his detainee's hands, examined it, and stuffed it back in place, crinkling it. "Two more formulas and you are finished for now."

The boy positively glowed at this news, white teeth well displayed, prompting a dark look from Snape who said, "But if I catch you dueling one more time..."

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“But, I made sure this time it was someone two years head of me,” the rhythmic yet mousey voice came back.

“I don’t care if I catch you dueling one of the Seventh-Year Prefects, I will send you home.”

Mthunzi frowned expressively and bent back to his task. Snape shook his head. And as the boy handed him his parchment, Snape gave him a searingly stern glare that sent him scurrying out of the office.

After the door closed, Snape spent a moment checking the parchment. “He’ll be school champion by the end of the year,” Snape muttered, dropping the lines into the bin beside the desk.

Hermione grinned faintly. “And that’s a problem?”

Snape took a seat and said, “Since he isn’t in Slytherin, that is most a definitely a problem.” He pushed the things directly in front of him aside to make room to steeple his hands. “You were saying something about a student...?”

Hermione began pulling the desk over, only to run into the straight backed chair Snape hovered over from the other wall. She dropped the desk with a clunk, and took the chair, unable to find a place for her hands. “It’s about Harry, actually.” And with that her stomach flipped strangely.

She waited, but Snape gave no reaction to her statement. “Is he all right?” she asked.

Snape ran a rather complex privacy spell Hermione had never managed to get right, and returned his wand to his pocket. She hoped that meant he was going to say something, but he remained quiet, studying his fingers.

Finally, Snape said, “Harry is not well.”

Hermione dropped her head. Even though it felt twice as heavy as usual, she lifted it again. “He didn’t seem quite himself. Prison seems to have... I don’t know...”

Snape explained, “It wasn’t prison exactly. It was close exposure to Voldemort’s servants. Harry’s connection to them continues to deepen.” His eyes moved as if he read something out of the air. “And I fear...” He stopped, breathed deeply. Starting again, he said, “Harry disposed of Voldemort’s power in the Dark Plane. And he keeps... crossing... through that place.”

Hermione’s chest froze from the inside out. “You think he’s picking up more of Voldemort?” The thought made the rest of her mind seize up, helpless.

Snape’s gaze was dangerously level. “I’m only informing you of my suspicions because I knew once you suspected something you would not let it drop. That, and, once properly informed, I trust you will tell no one else,” he said, sustaining the “S”. He added, “I also expect that you can assist with him.”

“Doing what?” she blurted, too discombobulated to imagine anything at all useful.

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“My research into possible solutions has turned up nothing that does not entail additional extreme risk, to all involved. I would appreciate assistance with said research. I can give you a list of sources I have not yet checked or that deserve a second reading.” Snape rubbed his hair back, appearing exhausted. His voice lowered to almost inaudible. “My main new concern right now is that Harry does not appear to be fighting this other self any longer.”

“The Muggles have treatments for that.”

“It’s not like that.” Snape waved his hand dismissively. “Perhaps just as well he is psychologically sound as far as I can discern.” Once he had started talking, Snape seemed in need in of fully unburdening himself. He gazed pointedly at Hermione and said, “Just so you understand the situation... I am going to inform Harry that we spoke of this. My primary goal right now is to remain steadfastly on his side, at all costs. I hope you will do the same. I will be easier for you, since you always have been.”

Hermione gathered her scattered thoughts long enough to say, “But... you leave him home alone with Candide?”

Snape pushed to his feet. “Harry isn’t dangerous. He just isn’t himself. And the self that isn’t him isn’t one I particularly want to see more of.”

“I would say not,” Hermione blurted. She glanced around the room, finding it alien. Nothing was in the right place: the papers on the desk, the lamp on the window ledge, the desk abandoned a few feet away.

Snape was speaking. “Whenever you see Harry, try to remind him what he used to be. How he used to think. What he valued. Previously, he was incorruptible. That core of him seems to be smothered of late. It takes a lot with it when it goes.”

Hermione sat rigid, watching him speak, observing everything from outside herself. She remembered the rose garden, how distant Harry became without warning and even how differently he moved. “I’ll do that.” She swallowed hard. “I told him I’d come for a visit. I was going to bring Vishnu along.”

Snape nodded. “Good. Do try not to look as panicked as you do now. That won’t do,” he criticized. “Harry is still Harry.” He crossed his arms and huffed. “But we are losing him, I fear. Something will need to be done. I just have no idea right now what in Merlin’s Realm it may be.”

Hermione’s thoughts found a landing spot. “Do you know what spell he used to cut Voldemort’s magic out of Gilderoy Lockhart? Did you see it?”

Snape nodded. “Harry begged me, in fact, to let him use that spell on himself when he realized what he was, realized that he was the last vessel for the Dark Lord. I would not allow him to attempt it.”

Hermione swallowed hard again, wondering if that was the right decision now.

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Snape answered her unvoiced question, saying, “In the first place, I could not imagine it would succeed, given that he would have to execute it on himself, using magic to remove his own magic, while simultaneously needing that magic to complete the spell. In the second place, failure would have been catastrophic, like the spells Riddle used to cut himself up to achieve immortality. The ones that made him as truly evil as he was. The risk was too great, given the powers Harry already had then, let alone the ones he has now.”

Snape leaned back against his desk, deflated. “I was not intending to tell you so much all at once. I did not expect you to notice for a while yet. That concerns me too.”

Hermione wanted to reassure him. “I could have excused it on a lot of things. But he admitted he wasn’t doing well when I asked.”

Snape rose up at this. “That’s reassuring. Do let me know when he begins to deny to you that anything at all is wrong.”

“I will. I definitely will.” She stood and glanced sadly around the office again, wishing she did not know what she did and knowing it would be tied to this place from now on. “Do you think Harry would be better off back in his apprenticeship, or not?” she asked.

“I think he would be better off,” Snape replied, sorting through the paperwork stacked on his desk. “For one thing it would occupy him. He has been using his copious spare time to get into trouble, doing things outside his purview best left to someone else.”

“That sounds like Harry,” Hermione said.



Ginny held fast to her broomstick when a gust came up, billowing her cloak like a sail and trying to spin her around upside down. Beneath her, a low fog smeared the lights of a town. Chains of twin eyes of white and red snaked along a major roadway. Away from the city lights, the land sank away into distant blackness, scattered with houselights like outposts.

Every night that week had been a late one. Tonight Ginny had been sent off to chase down a missing shipment of wizard ink. She could easily have Apparated to the Burrow, but needed the time alone with nothing to think about after a week of too much to think about. Even now as she steered down toward the field behind her parents’ house, she wished the flight had been longer.

Broom propped on her shoulder, Ginny trudged over the winter-beaten meadow toward the warm lights of the kitchen. She was just passing by the long shadow of the

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shed when she heard voices near the tree-line, heated but lowered to a stage whisper.

Ginny approached the voices, using the shed as a shield from view. She peeked around and recognized her father by the wispy hair standing up from his head. He spoke forcefully with someone who, at the moment, was looking away and down.

Mr. Weasley was saying, "You will not come here unannounced, henceforth."

"And you think Mum won't notice if I'm missing for Sunday dinner?" the other figure said, giving away that it was Percy. He turned to face Mr. Weasley, which made the spare light catch in his hair, igniting it.

Mr. Weasley poked Percy in the chest. "You may come for Sunday dinners, but that is it. If I catch you here any other time, or hear of you visiting, you will answer for it."

"Right," Percy said, sounding bored. "All proper and everything all of a sudden. When I wanted rules around here, there was no chance of it."

"We aren't discussing the past... we are discussing the present," Mr. Weasley said. "Molly wouldn't hear of my banning you from this house outright, but I've a mind to."

In the muddy light, Ginny could not discern Percy's hands clearly. She slipped her wand out of her pocket and held it at ready. Percy's posture spoke of grave anger as he faced off with his father, and it seemed reasonable that he may snap and try something. Ginny half-wished he would.

"This family isn't much to brag about, really," Percy said. "Something about everyone's simpering attitude... really drags one back from true success."

"Then restricting your visits should be easy, in that case," Arthur stated crisply. Ginny smirked from her hiding place. She considered tossing something invisible, and well-deserved, at her brother, but decided that playing impromptu guard was far more important. She next wondered that Percy had come alone, then felt a chill despite her heavy robes that maybe he had not. She checked over her shoulder frequently while the argument went on.

"Do you intend to toss me out of the house if I happen to forget and drop in for tea? It'd be amusing to watch the attempt," Percy scoffed.

"Don't try me, Percy."

"Or you'll toss me out on my ear? Oh, but we can't have any scandal can we? Of course not. This is a proper sort of family, not one to make trouble, or perhaps, horror of horrors, make a bit of money."

Ginny imagined that her father now held a wand in his hand, but it was difficult to tell for certain. She gripped hers tighter.

"You may leave now on your own, or I will send you off. Your choice." Her father sounded more serious than Ginny had ever heard him, but he also sounded regretful,

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which really took the power out of it.

“Fine,” Percy said sounding like his lips were too tight to really speak, and Disapparated.

Ginny’s shoulders fell, but then she came to herself and ran the barrier status spells on the lawn, just in case Percy had brought someone with him inside the barriers. The trees sparkling drew Mr. Weasley’s aim that way and he glanced around, pose tense.

“It’s just me, Dad,” Ginny called out as she came out from the shadows.

“Oh, Pumpkin, you startled me.”

“Pumpkin?” Ginny sputtered. “You haven’t called me that since I was four. Percy didn’t hit you with something when I wasn’t looking did he?”

Closer in, Mr. Weasley appeared strained. His voice fell low. “Don’t tell your mother what you heard, if you would.”

“Why not? Doesn’t she need to know Percy is a first order git?”

Mr. Weasley put an arm around her shoulders and started toward the house. “She won’t ever accept that, so, no. Speaking of accepting things, to what do we owe this visit?”

“I want some more of my things from my room,” Ginny said. “If you think I’ve forgiven you for Harry, you’re wrong.”

He patted her shoulder and released her. “Won’t be the first time.”

Ginny kept her voice down as they reached the side door. “You shouldn’t confront him alone, you know.”

“I didn’t expect to confront him at all.”

Mrs. Weasley threw open the door from the inside, putting an end to the conversation. Ginny put up with a hug and insisted she just needed to ferry a trunk-full of things away. “And, um, can I borrow a trunk?”

“You may, Dear. I’m sure there’s a spare in the attic.” Mrs. Weasley lifted her robes to troop up the stairs. “But why don’t you stay the night? It’s awfully late to be towing anything by broomstick.” She started up the next set, her voice echoing down the narrow opening, “The Wireless Foreteller said it may rain tonight.”

“Doesn’t he say that every night?” Ginny called up behind her, but there was no reply.

Ginny played with the flimsy bannister and waited. Mr. Weasley said, “She misses having you children around.”

“We were all going to leave sometime. Don’t try to make me feel guilty.”

Mr. Weasley put up his hands. “I wasn’t.”

After a gap, Ginny said, “Really, Dad, if you need help with Percy, just send an owl or a silver bird. I’ll happily help.”

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Mr. Weasley crossed his arms and considered her, the strained lines in his face shifting to amused. “I have an entire department of Aurors at my disposal, Pumpkin.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Your new living arrangements are working, it seems?” Mr. Weasley asked after another space, vaguely uncomfortable.

“I’ve only been there to sleep this week, and barely that,” Ginny complained.

“I’m proud of you getting a better job than looking after your twin brothers’ shop.”

“So am I,” Ginny agreed. “But don’t think that doesn’t mean I haven’t already filled out another Auror Apprenticeship application for this year, Dad.”

“I wouldn’t dream of assuming that,” he said airily.

Disarmed from this line of aggression, Ginny said, “Well, good,” rather more lamely than she preferred. She sighed, “Where IS Mum?” and began to stomp up the stairs.

They found Mrs. Weasley beside a half emptied trunk, sitting upon a broken basket full of old Witch Weekly issues, her head bent over a photo album.

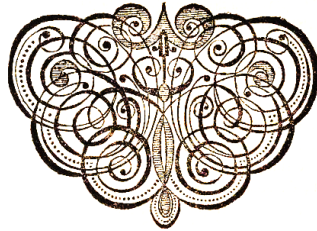
“Oh!” she said, upon seeing them there. She started to close the album, then turned back a few crackling pages. “I was just remembering when we still had all of you home.” She flipped back another page, then closed the album and resumed emptying the trunk into a neat stack on the floor with a shuffling movement of her wand. “I do hope everyone can make it on Sunday.”

Ginny and her father shared a frown.

Author’s Notes: My dream that I was going to get around to the making the edits to this chapter while visiting family for Easter was only that. Don’t know what I was thinking, there.

Second, “wicket,” you may not know that word in this context, but despite beta advice to the contrary I left it in. It is the perfect word, officially defined to describe exactly what I envision here, and I’ve seen it in use in England in this situation, albeit, mid-1990s.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



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Late Thursday evening Harry received an owl with detailed instructions. It told him where to go at certain times and what he should do when he arrived there. He read it through twice, wondering at the wisdom of the plan. He carried the letter downstairs where Candide sat flipping through the accumulated journals beside the couch, including the ones about Potions. The wireless eeked out nearly inaudible music, more haunting than entertaining.

“I need to take you to Hogwarts early in the morning,” Harry said. “Or somewhere else if you prefer.”

She stared at him and said, “Oh that’s right, I forgot about tonight. I don’t get to join in?”

Harry held up the letter. “Severus specifically says no. But if I take you to Hogwarts you can argue with him yourself.”

She rocked to her feet. “Well, I’m partly to blame, so perhaps I’ll get an early start to bed and be chipper in the morning. What time?”

“Four. It’s a lunar eclipse tonight. Severus thinks that’ll be a good opportunity, since Remus won’t be completely transformed, or if he is, he won’t be completely senseless, especially since he’s been taking wolfsbane.” He glanced at the letter. “I’m to fetch Pamela to the village of Ashthorn on the Muggle edge of the Forbidden Forest. I need to get her there in time for the full moon.”

She stared at him, thoughts off elsewhere. “I guess I don’t really need to see this. Remus seems like a very nice man to have to go through this.”

“I thought you agreed it was a good idea?”

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“Oh, I do think it needs to happen; he won’t relent otherwise. But a smaller audience is probably better for his pride.”

Harry read the letter’s postscript one more time before tossing it on the fire.

I have discussed your situation with your friend, Ms. Granger. Given her probing nature, this was inevitable. I am surprised that you have not spoken with her yourself.



The village of Godric’s Hollow rested in muffled sleep, not even a nightbird’s call broke the stillness. Harry made his way toward Pamela’s porch light, which hung in space ringed by illuminated mist.

She answered his light rap while he was still knocking and backed up to let him in. She wore an oversized jumper and her hair was casually bundled at her neck.

“Ready?” Harry whispered, finding it hard to talk normally in the hush of night.

“Let me get my scarf and something for my hands. Then I’ll be ready... at least for the cold.” She snorted wryly.

She tugged on a pair of thick mittens and nodded. Harry took her arm and took her away. They arrived on the roadside beside a pub that was shuttered for the night. The mist hung more thickly here, enhancing both distance and claustrophobia at the same time.

“Stay here,” Harry said and fetched his bike from the car park behind the pub. Even though there were no houses nearby, he turned the roar! knob all the way down before kicking it to life.

He stopped beside her and handed her a helmet out of the compartment under the seat.

Speaking quietly, she said, “This is more like my usual kind of date.” She set the helmet over her head and as she fished out the strap from beside her ear, said, “You know, as dangerous as Remus is supposed to be, being a werewolf and all... on top of being a wizard, he is far sweeter than anyone else I know.”

“Just hold that thought,” Harry said, rocking the bike back to straight up. She swung over behind him with ease and wrapped her arms around his middle. Gravel punched out from under the tires as he gently powered back onto the tarmac.

A few miles along, Harry slowed, watching the play of the headlamp on the brush reaching toward the roadway. Even with the branches bare for winter, it was hard to find what he was looking for. They rolled along another mile and, he was considering turning around, when he spied an overgrown, stone gate post. Beyond that, the second gate hunched in the tangle. The space between them had been filled in with

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piled brush and discarded tree stumps that resembled angry spiders in the harsh light of the bike's headlamp.

Harry gunned them into the air and over the blockade, eliciting a cry of surprise from Pamela. With a squeak of the springs they came to rest on the other side, on a narrow gravel lane, still level despite long abandonment. Harry, worried about being late, rotated the hand grip and they shot through the trees, headlight bouncing wildly over the spidery branches.

They came out into a clearing where a low farmhouse stood. The looming straw roof overshadowed the modest structure, all green with moss and smelling of nature rather than habitation.

Harry set the bike on the stand and put the helmets away mostly by feel. He tweaked off the headlamp and they both stood listening, bathed in the glow of an unnatural crescent moon. Pamela had held her hand on Harry since they arrived, but she took a firmer grip just above his elbow.

Something large fluttered overhead, black against the midnight sapphire and diamond sky. A figure landed and waved a Lumos out of his wand, lighting his distinct profile.

"Severus," Harry said.

Snape glanced around as he strode over to them, using his broom as a walking stick. He went past to the center of the clearing where he waved deadwood out of the forest into a haphazard pile and ignited it. The warm glow chased away the empty night.

When the fire settled down, Harry walked Pamela over beside Snape, who continued to scan the treeline.

Snape said to Pamela, "You will remain between the two of us at all times. Do you understand?"

She nodded, then answered, "Yes," when Snape did not respond.

She still had hold of Harry's right arm. He switched her around to his left, to better handle his wand.

"What time is it?" Harry asked.

"Potter, if you cannot tell by the eclipse what time it is, you are beyond help."

Harry glanced up at the moon. "Testy, aren't we?"

Snape huffed. "I will be glad to have this over with."

The hold on Harry's arm tightened.

They waited. The burning logs settled lower. Snape pointed with his wand and said, "There."

Harry needed a moment to discern the dog-like grey figure sitting just this side of the far trees. The dancing light made the figure appear to shift and move, but it

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remained in place for many minutes. Pamela began pulling down hard on Harry's arm.

Voice wavering in Harry's ear, Pamela asked, "So, he's still a werewolf right now?"

"Looks it. When the moon is fully eclipsed, he may change back... temporarily."

Snape said, "His state is less predictable now with the second bite."

"Poor Remus," Pamela said.

The wiry figure shifted for real, disappearing and reappearing against the brush in the hazy blue glow. The werewolf padded on light feet around the fire and stopped, keeping the blaze partly between him and them. He stood, paw raised, still as a statue aside from the firelight reflecting in his eyes.

Snape lowered his wand. "Can you understand me, Lupin?"

The blue light of the moon continued to sink away, leaving the fire to dominate. The werewolf cocked his head, took a step, then became statue-like again.

Harry glanced over at the moon, the last feathery sliver slipped away and the whole moon surged into view, bathed in red light.

Lupin put one paw down, took another step, then seemed to break down, sinking to the ground. Pamela pushed away from Harry toward him, but was grabbed up by both of them.

Snape snarled low, "You will remain here."

Harry felt Pamela tense then slacken. Lupin contorted on the ground in a strange slow motion grind.

"Is he all right?" Pamela demanded.

Snape pushed her toward Harry and took a step in Lupin's direction, skirting the fire. "He is un-transforming." Well clear of the fire and Lupin, Snape crouched and said, "Remus?"

Harry took two careful steps closer, still holding Pamela. Lupin's hairy arm raised up and brushed at his ragged head, more human than werewolf, but just barely.

"Would you like more potion?" Snape asked.

They were close enough that Harry could see Lupin nod. His patchy-haired body lay folded on the ground, back bent away from the fire, so his face fell in shadow. Snape reached into his pocket and took out a bottle. He glanced at Harry. "Cover me?"

Harry nodded and aimed his wand.

"Harry!" Pamela chastised him. Harry had to raise his left arm to shield his wand hand from her grasp.

"It's all right," Harry insisted, prepping something gentle in his mind, like a Mutushorum. But ready also with a Blasting Curse, should Lupin lunge.

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Pamela gave a gasp as Snape disappeared. But he had not, fully. A sinewy glisten of silky scales oscillated through the grass. The snake approached Lupin with the bottle clutched in its fangs. A half-paw reached out to take it and as he worked at the stopper with clawed hands, the snake slithered away. Lupin clumsily tipped the contents into his mouth. Glittering drips rained down, hinting at a poorly formed mouth.

Snape reappeared and stood straight, wand out. "What do you think?" he asked no one in particular.

Pamela required a few tries to answer. "I think you are all very cruel."

Snape's voice remained level. "How so?"

"Something more should be done. He shouldn't be left to cope like this."

Lupin tossed the bottle onto the fire and rubbed his hands over his hair.

"It's not his fault," she added.

"We know that," Harry said.

"Quite a bit is done," Snape said, then glanced at the red moon. "But now is not the time to debate that. He will be changing back presently."

"Are you all right, Remus?" Pamela called out.

Lupin moved as if to duck. Harry quietly said, "His hearing's very good right now, I expect."

"Oh."

Harry heard her breathing in and out, sounding distressed. He kept an eye on the moon, waiting for the sliver of white light to appear on the opposing edge from earlier.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" she asked.

Harry replied, "Give him help. Make sure he doesn't infect anyone else. He'd feel terrible if that happened."

"Yes," Snape agreed. "Guilt is popular around here as a self-wounding weapon."

Harry let that go. Dealing with Lupin always made Snape crueler.

In his ear, Pamela asked, "Is Severus capable of any pity?"

"There's a lot of history here you don't know," Harry explained.

The scene began to brighten and Harry stepped back, pushing Pamela along. The humanish black figure against the fire light distorted, growing ears and a snout crowned in the light by spiny hair standing up from his back.

The werewolf climbed to his feet and prowled in a circle, before raising up on two legs and sniffing in their direction. Pamela sighed in distress, but had stopped pushing so hard against Harry's arm.

Lupin lowered himself back to four paws on the ground and cocked his head at them. Then bent low and backed up away from the fire before turning and loping

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away.

“He’s gone,” Pamela said wistfully.

“Stand back and I will douse the fire,” Snape said.

Harry led Pamela to the bike while billows of hissing steam filled the clearing. She argued with no one in particular, “Just because he has this thing inside him, doesn’t change who he is.”

“Only if he lets it,” Harry said.

They waited for Snape to join them. Harry said, “I’ll take Pamela home and come back for the bike.”

Snape nodded without ceasing to scan the edge of the clearing. Harry took Pamela’s arm and with a burst of trapped air, her sitting room appeared around them.

She stepped away from him and her sigh sounded loud in the confined space. “I wish I didn’t know any of these things.”

“Including me?” Harry asked.

“What? No, I didn’t mean that. Really. I’m exhausted. ’Course I’m glad to know you, Harry.”

“This all comes along with it, I’m afraid.”

She paced over to the couch but stood studying it rather than sitting. “I’m very glad to know Remus too, I just wish things could be different. I wish he could be more open about it all. He uses it as a shield, a wall, an excuse. I see that now. That’s the real trouble. I also wish that I had not seen Severus turn into a snake.”

Harry found himself grinning.

She turned to him. “I mean, I’ve known men I readily would call snakes in the grass, but that was a bit much.”

Snape was still there when Harry returned to the bike, waiting with broom in hand.

“Go all right?” Snape asked.

“I think so. She understands that the problem isn’t that Remus is a werewolf, but that he uses it to keep his distance.”

“I’m not certain that is going to change just because she has seen the monster he becomes, but perhaps it will help,” Snape said.



Because he did not need to ferry Candide into the office, Harry slept in late Saturday morning. He scrubbed his face to wake up and stumbled through getting

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dressed before he tried to fetch his pet out for the day. But Kali would not leave her cage and instead burrowed under her rags. Harry rubbed his eyes and left her there.

Downstairs he found Hermione cradling a cup of tea across from Candide. His friend jumped up to greet him, her usual chipper morning self. Solicitously, she poured Harry a cup and placed it in front of the chair at the head of the table.

“Is Vishnu coming?” Harry asked through a nose full of steam.

“He’s coming for brunch if that’s all right.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, feeling a little awkward and wondering what Hermione had told his fellow apprentice, whose moral standards were too high to meet at the best of times.

Harry let the women talk while he read the morning’s Daily Prophet. The paper had changed less than expected, aside from the expansion of the gardening section, and the new Missives to the Editor which now filled the back page. At least now Harry could read the whole thing without much concern. For the third day in a row there was absolutely no mention of him.

Vineet arrived in the Floo and brushed soot from his hands before greeting everyone. He bent to Hermione with restrained affection, accepted a seat, and proceeded to arrange the things before him, just so.

“You are very much missed in the department,” Vineet said to Harry.

“Do you miss being there?” Hermione added while Harry pondered what to say.

Harry shrugged and found this response keenly observed from all quarters.

Their meals twinkled in. Everyone else had eggs, rashers of bacon and toast, but Vineet’s plate had arrived holding UFO-shaped cakes and a red sauce.

Vineet said, “The Minister of Magic has called each one into her office to ask for our thoughts on how to bring you back in.”

“You always wanted to be an Auror,” Hermione said, but she bit her lip before and after saying it. Harry probed at her eyes just enough to see Snape’s hand in her comment.

“I did,” Harry acknowledged flatly. “I don’t know now.” For some reason, he felt like toying with her. “Boring, really.”

“Being a dark wizard hunter is boring?” Candide broke in to ask.

Harry pretended his plate was interesting. “Much of it is.”

“Hm,” Candide breathed. Harry had told her about Durumulna, explaining that he wanted to find Moody’s killer. She probably would have said more if they had been alone. She was good at keeping secrets, and Harry increasingly liked that about her.

When Candide excused herself for the second time, Vineet leaned in and said, “I am assuming you are recalling, still, my pledge of my loyalty to you?”

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Harry shook his head and refilled his tea cup. Partly to see the reaction, partly because he thought he owed his friend, he said, "I do, but you shouldn't be pledged to me. You won't like yourself for long."

This made Vineet sit straight again. Harry expected him to glance at Hermione for help, but he did not; he held Harry's gaze. Keeping his voice down, Vineet added, "Perhaps you misunderstand me. I understand you." He paused, searching for words, which did involve glancing at Hermione, whose eyes were still wide. "I choose how to execute my loyalty. I reserve this right and I repeat that it is to you."

"All right, then," Harry said.

"Harry..." Hermione began, sounding heartfelt, but she ducked back to her plate when Candide reappeared.

"Sorry," Candide said. "It's only supposed to get worse as it goes along, too."

"No worries." Harry glanced around the table at his friends and their barely concealed concern, and felt strange, almost euphoric. He itched to test things. Something. Anything. There were limits all around him, but he did not know where they were. He wanted to test some direction so he could find the limit along the way and remove it.

Harry's friends dawdled with small talk but they eventually departed. Harry combed the shelves in the library, and finding nothing more of interest, told Candide he would return shortly. He slipped away to the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts Library, and not wanting to search long, found the first book that shrank from his touch and took it home without even reading the title.



By mid-week, Harry was bored to a kind of fitful distraction. He brought Candide into work earlier than usual and Apparated to Tonks' flat to catch her before she could leave for first shift.

"Harry. Sorry I couldn't stop by last night," she said. "Had to break up two separate fights last night and needed a quick fix up at St. Mungo's."

"You should have owled or messaged or something," Harry said, broken cleanly out of his inner thoughts by a surge of worry.

"You have to keep an eye on Candide. It wasn't anything terribly bad."

"Still," Harry said, glancing over her. She looked the same as always. "I'd like to know."

"Yeah," she said, "I know."

"Can you visit tonight?"

This prompted her to gaze up at the clock. "I'll try, Harry."

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Harry let a sigh escape him. “Okay. I assume you need to go now, too, or you’ll be late.”

“You could come with me,” she suggested.

Harry considered that, uncertain whether his pride was in the way or something else. “Maybe another time,” he said, and slipped away into the Dark Plane.

Silence hung in the musty air. Harry looked around himself, at the hillocks with their nests of crazed wire, at where the strange land met at the horizon at a stubborn grey sky. He started walking, thinking. Animals scurried on ahead of him and fell still, only to scurry again. An air of leaden expectation overlaid the place, like something waited, just out of sight. He should probably not remain here too long, but he could not think of anywhere he wanted to go.

It was early yet. Elizabeth was off to Oxford and Harry felt annoyed about that, wanting someone to blame for it, but came up with no good targets for his emotion. He was bored. He wanted to stretch his magic a bit and his choices were limited about how to do that. Anything he did, especially if he tried an assault on the one Durumulna hideout he knew, he would have to explain later, and that struck him as tedious, if not self-defeating. Before he could think better of it, Harry applied a disguise he hoped would stick, and fell away, far away, into the back room of the Hog’s Head.

Harry shivered violently upon the rusty rings of grit left behind by rotting barrels. A rat scurried away from him, frantic. Barely in control of his limbs, he stumbled out of the room and along the passage to the front of the pub, where in his mind’s eye a roaring fire would be keeping the place habitable for customers.

The fire wasn’t roaring but the hearth held fragments of pulsing hot coals. Harry collapsed before it, facing it, ignoring the patrons, who shifted their chairs so the legs squeaked in surprise.

Harry clenched his wand in his hand and held it close to his chest. Someone’s foot prodded him in the back. “Oy, lookie, someone’s ’ad too much before even arrivin’.”

The radiation off the coals burned Harry’s cheeks where his disguise did not protect them. Fortunately he was warming up quickly. He relaxed into the waves of warmth and felt the shadows hovering nicely, distributed evenly all around, nearby and distant. One hovered quite close. Harry savored the feel of it, the dry metallic taste of its shifting form.

The barkeep stomped over. “Hey, old man, you want to sleep, you pay for a room.” He grabbed at Harry’s arm, set off those strange sparkles from passing between possibilities, and jerked his hand clear.

Harry sat up and glared at him, back broadside to the fire, which felt like salvation the way it seeped into his core. Voice roughened he said, “Get me a hot mead or

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something.”

“Let’s see your coin.”

Harry tugged a Sickle out of his pocket and tossed it at him. The bartender’s reflexes were better than expected and he caught it out of the air and stomped off.

Warmed, but still weak, Harry pushed to his feet and faced down the curious gazes arrayed in his direction, including the interested glint from a hooded figure slouched in the corner. Harry closed his eyes – not the Death Eater. Too bad, an audience might be fun.

A crooked chair rested against the wall. Harry waved it before the fire and accepted his drink. The rest of the place turned back to their elevenses and accomplices, sending overly casual, but attentive glances his way. Harry gave them nothing more of interest, just sat sipping his mead and examining the world in his head, thinking that he had been a starved man and now, finally, faced a buffet.

Rubbing his beard flat as an excuse to check it, Harry made his way out to the road, drawn toward the nearest shadow he sensed. He slowed before each ramshackle building, nearly passed one, but then decided it must be correct. He backed up and entered Honeydukes accompanied by a poppy Weird Sisters tune from the door chime.

He picked up a chocolate bar and took it to the unattended counter where he pretended to consider buying a package of chocolate frog cards while waiting for the shopkeeper. Off to his right, at a large marble slab, a worker directed a wide charmed paddle to flip and fold a great black mass of chocolate. That man, Harry realized. Mousy, with a long pointed nose accentuated by the kerchief tied around his hair. At Harry’s scrutiny, he looked up, twice, before staring back, face shifting gradually from drowsy and bored to alarmed.

The other staff must have been busy in the back. It was still early. Harry continued to stare, considering what he would like to do. The paddle, unattended, began to miss the bulk of the chocolate blob, stretching limbs out of it, which flopped to the side, trying to escape the pristine marble.

Fussing with his uniform, the clerk came out and Harry bought his chocolate without taking his eyes from the Death Eater. The clerk shuffled off again.

“I know what you are,” Harry said, sneering faintly.

The man’s mouth moved like it had gone dry. He grabbed the paddle out of the air and held it the way one would to brandish it. Beyond his eyes, his subservient past came tumbling forward, accompanied by cold panic.

Harry smirked and walked out, peeling his sweet to take a large bite. It tasted even better than the Honeydukes he knew.

Licking his fingers and, after contemplating the position of the sun, Harry slipped away to the Burrow, arriving in the brush bordering the old orchard. The sizzle of

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a spell made him tug out his wand. He came around the brushline and found Ginny and Mrs. Weasley, still in her apron, facing each other on the drive.

“Harder than that, Mum,” Ginny complained.

“Repetition of proper form is more important than trying for power every time, dear. I remember that from school, and I think it’s good advice.”

“I know that, Mum, but if I don’t get this block strong enough, Professor Snape can send what’s left of me home in a small brewing cauldron when I have my lesson tomorrow.” She caught sight of Harry. “Oh!”

With Ginny off her guard, Mrs. Weasley sent the spell she had prepared straight up into the sky, where it flared pink. “You children are too easily distracted.”

Ginny met Harry as he strolled out onto the lawn. She shook her cold-reddened wand hand and slipped on her other mitten. “Hello,” she said. “Didn’t expect to see you again.”

Mrs. Weasley greeted him stiffly and adjusted her muffs back over her ears. “I’ll fix something hot. Bring our guest inside, dear. Must get Arthur to fix that dratted Weather Vain as soon as he gets home today.”

Sticking for the moment with his genteel persona while Mrs. Weasley was in hearing, Harry said, “I wanted to see how you were faring.”

Ginny’s shoulders fell. “I’m working hard. I don’t feel like I’m getting anywhere fast.”

They strolled slowly toward the house. “Only a few people who know really believe anything bad is going to happen,” Ginny confessed. “That’s the hardest of all.”

“We can do some drills if you wish. But I don’t have much time.”

They diverted back to the drive and faced each other. Harry called for a block and sent a mild Blasting Curse at her. She handled it, somewhat. He repeated it and the block wobbled the other way.

“Are you practicing enough?” Harry asked.

Ginny lowered her wand. “You have to be kidding. I practice all day.”

Mrs. Weasley came out, directing a tray. She hovered this to the battered picnic table and sent a few spells up at the Weather Vain, but it just spun and sputtered. “The hot drinks will have to do, I’m afraid.”

As they sipped from their cloudy mugs, Ginny studied Harry closely. She was peering past his disguise, Harry discerned. He also caught that her feelings heightened as she imagined what he really looked like.

“Still have crush on Potter?” Harry asked knowingly.

Ginny’s eyes sauced. Mrs. Weasley chuckled. “No, she’s long grown out of that. Haven’t you dear?”

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Harry smirked at Ginny, but then had to find something with which to dab foamy cocoa out of his mustache.

Mrs. Weasley said, "If you are going to be Ginny's spelling partner, I'm going to work on the chores a bit."

More eager now that they were alone, Ginny put down her mug. "Let's get back to it. I have a new block, a Serpolo, that I have to get right. You know that one?"

"Of course," Harry drawled.

"Yes, of course. Silly of me."

They took up their positions again, using the drive as the dueling platform. Harry fell easily into the cycling habit of the limited drill sequence. He would have previously insisted that this was boring, but he did miss it. The reassuring repetition and the feel of magic flowing freely through him kept the siren call of the shadows at bay. He liked having the power to resist them almost as much as he liked having them there, keeping him company.

As soon as Ginny began to put up solid blocks, Harry began modifying his attack spells so her blocks would go wonky again. After each one, she would shake her head and mutter something.

"I thought I was doing better."

"You are," Harry called back.

She lowered her wand, but Harry did not break sequence, so she had to duck under a smaller block to avoid his Freezing Hex. He did not let up, moving right on to the Confusion Charm.

"Stop, stop," Ginny said, protecting her head with her arm, wand held out blindly.

Harry sent her one more before complying. She managed to block it, but just barely. She stood slowly and combed her hair back with her fingers, and said, "Yes, I know, my enemy would not listen. I get that from Snape, believe me. I need another sip or two of Butterbeer."

Snape, Harry thought, briefly closing his eyes. He was one of those alluring shadows out there. Shaking himself, he joined her back at the table where she stalled returning to drills. Harry did not mind; he was examining the world around him, the way the light leaching through the clouds shifted on the great lawn in front of the Burrow, the way that Ginny's curls caught the light like polished metal, and the way the shadows begged to be hunted or exploited, whichever he choose. He watched Ginny reheat her mug and sip at it, wanting to leave and use his short remaining time here to investigate the shadows instead.

Her light brown eyes came up to his. She laughed oddly and talking quietly said, "So funny to know who you really are. No one would believe it." She laughed lightly

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again, school-girlish. Without the trials his friends had endured she was still youthful. She was pondering him with far too much interest.

“You do still like him,” Harry said.

She blushed, bringing her face more in line with her hair.

Harry laughed. From inside the house, he heard a clock chime. He did not wait to hear the count. “I have to go,” he said.

Harry was late picking Candide up from the office, but she still had her head bent over one of those tall scrolls and did not even mention it. When they arrived home, Harry found an unsigned letter in the post. Belinda’s flat 3 p.m. it read before it burst into flames and Harry tossed it toward the hearth.

“Howlette?” Candide asked without looking up from a thick letter. “Quiet one if it was.”

“Can you visit your parents this afternoon? Or the Weasleys?” Harry asked.

Candide lowered the letter and considered him. “Yup.” She did not ask more, making Harry appreciate her all the more.



At Belinda’s flat, Harry found the masked beefy man from his previous rendezvous and his two underlings. The man shoved one of the underlings in Harry’s direction.

“They’re yours for the afternoon. You have some business to take care of.” When the man looked to be departing, Harry started to ask more. “These two know where you’re going,” the man gruffly said. “You’re just there to make sure no one interferes.” Then he was gone.

Harry studied his newly assigned assistants. “I need some names,” Harry said. “You know mine.”

The gangly one, with a habit of gesturing with hands that were narrower and longer than seemed natural, said, “I’m called Hummer and he’s usually called Slowdraw.”

“Wonderful,” Harry said, trying not to sound too sarcastic.

Hummer stared at Harry expectantly. “And what are we supposed to call you?”

“‘Harry’ is not appropriate, I suppose?”

Slowdraw said, “He could go as ‘Harry Potter’. It certainly sounds like an alias.”

“Not if it’s his real name, ya pillock.”

Harry put out a hand in case their slapping turned into a real fight. “How did you get the name Slowdraw,” he asked, half as a distraction.

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Hummer laughed, pointing at his partner. “He wanted to be Zipdraw, but somehow no one kept a straight face while calling him that since it never was true. I tried getting everyone to call him Zimmerdraw, but it’s a bit long.”

Slowdraw’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Never mind,” Harry said, “just call me the Old Man.”

“Hey...” Hummer said, “that’s a good one.”

Impatient to finish and get away from these two, Harry said, “We’re supposed to go do something?”

Their attitudes grew sober. In a low, serious tone, Slowdraw said, “Yeah, we got a shipment coming in.”

Harry did not like having to do it, but he let Hummer Apparate him where they needed to go. They arrived on a lonely, dirt coast road pinned between the hills and wave-spattered boulders. The wind roared along the shore, tossing the faded grass and kicking off the tops of the spray from the crashing waves.

Hummer walked along the road while Harry and Slowdraw waited. He dived into the brush beside the road and after some tossing about of the branches came back with three broomsticks. They mounted these and were off along the coast, full speed. The brooms, despite the mud and leaves caught in the bristles, were top of the range. Harry had to duck his head to get a full breath they were flying so fast into the wind. The underlings flew with their heads permanently ducked down and to the side, glancing forward only occasionally.

Suddenly the two of them veered off, out over the water. Harry followed, muscles thrilling, heart leaping at the instant maneuverability of the broomstick. Back on shore, a car approached, bouncing over the bad surface of the one-lane road.

They remained out over the water, flying straight, the glinting wave tops blurred beneath them. Harry could do this all afternoon, he decided, hoping their destination was far ahead of them.

They flew a long time, long enough that they passed through two rain showers and Harry wished he had used a Repelling Charm on his glasses.

They landed at a half-ruined abbey on a narrow promontory. The weather had cleared but the waves continued to thunder just below them.

They landed in a small clearing in the abbey’s rubble in what previously had been the largest room. One arched window remained bolstered by a few blocks, so fragile it was a wonder the wind did not blow it over.

“Not here yet,” Hummer said. “Someone needs to patrol.”

The underlings stared at each other. Slowdraw said, “He’s in charge of security.”

Harry said, “I’ll do it. What am I looking for?”

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“Anything,” Slowdraw said, sounding like Harry had gone dim. On top of Slowdraw’s already slow demeanor this was sinking pretty low.

“I don’t want to spell whomever we’re meeting,” Harry pointed out tartly.

“Ah, well, you won’t do that on accident,” Slowdraw assured him.

Harry rolled his eyes and left them there, happy to go back up on the broomstick. Before he hovered it, he looked for a brand name, but there wasn’t one. The broom was completely plain, like someone had rubbed every last ounce of polish off it, including the name which would have been engraved in several places. Shrugging, he took flight and circled outward around the jagged tooth of land standing firm against the onslaught of the cold, foaming sea.

There was no one around. The only Muggle road was a mile away and the only farms had derelict little buildings with gaping black squares for doors and windows. Harry veered, avoiding taking a predictable path in his patrol. He was just going to sweep out a bit wider when he saw something out over the water, something far too large to be hovering up in the air like that.

Harry continued his patrol, glancing frequently back at the thing growing in size. On his next pass, Slowdraw waved Harry down from the top of a high broken wall. When Harry signaled back, Slowdraw jumped on his broom and flew directly out to sea. Harry noticed that the rubble had all disappeared from the large room. Hummer waited with Harry by the wide doorway, observing the craft approaching.

“Don’t you want a mask?” Hummer said, sounding honestly surprised. “You haven’t potioned your face off.”

Harry raised his wand to give himself a spell-based one, but Hummer waved him off and found one behind a neat stack of fallen blocks.

“Real ones don’t fail when you’re in a fight,” he said.

Harry cleaned the dusty mask with a spell and slipped it on just as their delivery slid onshore with a great rasp and rocked to a rest.

It was a flying barge, suspended from sixteen giant flying carpets tethered like kites. Figures in hoods that made their faces too dark to see even in good daylight, began unloading crates from the barge and hovering them inside. The underlings jumped up to help and soon the ruin’s largest room was stacked floor to sky with all manner of boxes, crates and trunks. Harry remained far enough removed to keep everyone in sight at all times, wand at the ready.

The muscle from the craft retired to the deck of it and broke out bottles of something clear and smelling sharp enough, Harry’s eyes watered from twenty feet away. Within the ruins a debate started over the manifest and the crates.

With one last careful check of the barge’s occupants, Harry slid inside the door, keeping his back to the wall, to listen in.

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Hummer was standing over an open trunk filled with sacks, saying, "These are not of the quality we were expecting."

The accent on the visitor flowed thickly. "Dese is the quality available right now. You want better, you have to help me with my supplier. He is getting trouble with his Ministry, you know."

Hummer went down the line to a rough crate and opened it, pulling out a twig with great care, examining it in the light, before placing it back inside and opening another.

"Those are Estonian. The best. I swear on my great uncle's bunions, dose are the best. And half the price so you can take out the local market and still turn a coin."

Hummer nodded and made a note. They continued down the line, opening next a trunk full of books, some of which Harry recognized from Hogwarts. Hummer opened one before tossing it back inside. "Kids don't know the difference."

The visitor added, "And the bindings do not last, reducing the resale value considerably." He rubbed his hands together. "More sales the next year."

As they completed the entire warehouse and Hummer charmed it all to resemble piles of rubble stacked against the walls, the visitor pulled out an awkwardly tall bottle and glasses from his pocket.

"You got new muscle," he said, tossing his hooded head in Harry's direction. "You want some?" he shouted to Harry, even though Harry stood not so far away.

Harry shook his head.

Slowdraw motioned that he only wanted a little between glances at Harry. He leaned close to the visitor. "It is good there was no trouble today," he said.

"Why, he still green?" The visitor laughed. "To business," he then said, raising his glass.

Harry's new colleagues wanted him to fly back with them to their Apparition spot, but Harry wanted to catch Tonks when she got off shift. He said, "I won't Apparate, so no one can track me," he said. "But I'm going on my own."

"Give over the broom then," Slowdraw said.

Hummer, in a tone of giving advice said, "Difficult people don't make it long with the boss. They don't make it at all, in fact."

Harry held out the broom and Slowdraw bundled it with his own using peevish movements. "Now what're you going to do? Portkey's out too, boss says. Not that we'd ever have one."

Harry transformed into his Animagus form, forcing the two of them back by shock as well as the wind off his wings. He leapt into the air off all four legs and leaned into a turn, caught the wind off the sea and lifted away from the ruins. Below him the

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underlings were gaping up at him before a crumbling bell-tower wall blocked them from view.

Harry flew high since he had not asked for an Obsfucation Spell. When he spied a remote stretch of woodlands he plummeted to soar low to find a landing spot amongst the bare trees. From there he Apparated to Tonk's flat.

She still had her cloak on from just arriving home.

"Harry," she said, surprised.

He was glad to see her. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't you?"

Tonks dropped into a chair, making the metal feet chirp against the floor. She flattened her hair down before fluffing it back up with her inherent magic.

"You are getting me a beer?"

"Yeah," Harry said, closing the fridge door and waving the caps off.

She sighed and propped her head on her hand, bedraggled despite having neatened her appearance. Harry thought she seemed to be aging faster.

"You've been working too much," Harry complained lightly.

Tonks shook her head, not in denial, but in dismay. "We have no leads on this kidnapping. It's been a month and we have nothing." She sighed again and swigged her beer. "I shouldn't be talking about it, but what the heck does it matter after this much time... and money the family has forked over, I don't know how much. I think the McCurdys have been lying to us about how much." Once she got rolling, she grew more animated. "And no one wants to go over there to guard the wife anymore, she's intolerable. The apprentices think we are punishing them when we send them instead."

Harry held back on his reaction. "Maybe he's happy to be away," he forced out so it sounded the jest.

"Right," Tonks said, but then laughed thoughtfully. "Maybe."

She drank her beer, sitting glumly. Harry made himself take a deep breath. "No idea where he is, though?"

She snorted and dropped her voice. "The last source we had inside that particular branch of Durumulna... we found him dead last week. Hung up by his collar over the fence at the Belgravia police station, charmed invisible so the Muggles couldn't see him, only smell him."

"Ah," Harry said, and busied himself with re-chilling his sweating beer. "Anything more on Percy?" Ginny had told Harry about her father's banning him from the Burrow, so he assumed Mr. Weasley's investigation was still active.

"Nothing I should tell you," Tonks said.

"But he's in Durumulna, right?"

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Tonks shrugged, but it seemed like a 'yes'.

"What is he doing for them?" Harry asked, mostly thinking aloud. Harry had seen no sign of him, but then again, he had only seen a handful of gang members without masks. "I mean what would they want the git for?"

Tonks sounded disappointed in him as she rhetorically asked, "You mean, besides insider information?"

"True. What's HE get out of it? Other than a girlfriend," he added, thinking of the creepy date Percy kept with him.

"Hate to imagine he's sold out over a woman, no matter how good she looks in tight black clothes." Tonks raised her beer to the side and assumed a reasonable approximation of Vespera's usual outfit.

Harry grinned and thought she looked quite good that way. "So, you've met, I see."

"I've seen her meeting Percy in the Atrium a few times. The guard usually won't let her in. I used to think he was just an annoying git, but now I have a soft spot for him."

Harry traced lines with his thumb in the droplets on his beer bottle, trying to think rather than be distracted by her appearance. "So, Percy may only have limited contact with Durumulna."

"Possibly. Having followed him, I'm willing to believe that. Unless he is stellar at Doppelgängers." Her clothes faded back and her gaze narrowed in on Harry. "Why all the questions?"

"I'm just thinking. I'd like to catch him in the act of something is all."

"You AND me. But you aren't even as official as you were before, remember?"

Harry bristled at what sounded like her talking down to him. "I know that," he said stiffly, feeling angry and behind that pressed a flood of something dark and sticky that he did not want loosed. He glanced at his watch. "Candide will be coming back soon from her parents', I need to get home."



As he donned his warmest cloak, Harry relished notions of the Hogwarts Quidditch match, the most that he'd had since leaving school. Perhaps it was the tedium his life had been reduced to recently that made it so appealing.

Winter did not slacken for the event. A burst of frigid air tried to take off the door to the Three Broomsticks when Harry opened it to depart. His friends followed him out, ducking into the wind one at a time. Hermione came aside Harry, strolling fast to keep up between the longer legs of him and Vineet. Harry slowed and turned

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to watch Aaron pinning the door against his foot for Ginny and Fred to exit. Ron slunk out behind them, failing to acknowledge Aaron holding the door for him.

Harry slowed when he spotted figures standing in the lee of the pub, in the alley. They stood with their heads low, gathered around a central figure. Coins dropped into waiting gloves, one at a time to be counted.

Behind Harry, Fred asked Ron, "So, how much did you wager on the match?"

"I didn't, this time," Ron replied. "I couldn't bear to put money on Slytherin and the spread the booky at Gringotts wanted was rubbish."

"Well," Fred said, "in that case you should have some spare coin for a little bet with your brother..."

Despite arriving just as the ball crates were being hefted to the center of the pitch, the stands were sparsely occupied.

Hermione slid along the bench to make room, hunched in her heavy cloak. "Sad to see that half of the wizarding world is more intelligent than us."

"You are not appreciating Quidditch?" Vineet asked, when there was a break in the wind. He sat unbothered by the chill.

"It's the weather," she replied.

Vineet reached for his pocket. "Would you like a Warming Charm?"

"I have one already. Thank you," she replied.

Harry leaned closer to the two of them. "What? Something about becoming a teacher, your spells stop working?"

"Harry, you are on really thin ice here."

Harry grinned, leaving off his teasing. "Well, that explains why my bum is so cold."

Hermione stated succinctly, "I repeated the charm too many times on the walk to Hogsmeade, already, that's all."

Vineet leaned in closer. "It is fortunate you are not marked on this assignment."

Hermione's reply was lost in the crowd rising to their feet to cheer the Quaffle toss. Harry eyed each of the players in turn. Some, specifically the Slytherin Beaters, were too large to still be in school at all. The Ravenclaw Chasers looked too frail to be facing them. The little bulk they had came from their wrist guards and padding. Harry recognized Wereporridge, who played with an unwavering crease of concentration on his brow.

Harry leaned over across Ginny and tapped Aaron on the leg. "Who's the other Slytherin Beater besides Wereporridge?"

"Cadre, his name is," Aaron replied as the aforementioned player whacked a Bludger with a sound like a thunderclap. It flew in a clean arc towards a Ravenclaw Chaser dropping toward the center goal in a collapsing pyramid maneuver. Instead,

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she was knocked off her broom, and only held on by a gloved hand. By the time she swung a leg back over, the play had collapsed and Slytherin was carrying the Quaffle the other way. She flew hunched over, clutching a shoulder.

“Hogwarts needs a size limit on players,” Harry said.

“He is big enough for League play,” Aaron agreed. “But where would the fun be for Slytherin then? Keeping students back is our main advantage.”

“Well, it’s not brains,” Ginny opined. “They didn’t even set up a play on the return run, just blasted straight through.”

“It worked though,” Aaron pointed out, crossing his arm. “Ten to zero, you will note.”

“It lacks a certain beauty and grace when they have the Quaffle.”

The beefier Slytherin Chaser tried to force the Ravenclaw Chaser out of the pitch area. The Chaser executed a roll, throwing off his opponent. He underhanded the Quaffle to his still limping team mate, who made an instant recovery, pivoted, and scored on the left hand goal post.

“Faker!” Aaron cupped his hands to shout. When Ginny batted him on the arm, he turned and said, “What?”

The Seekers flew high, fluttering specks against the seething clouds. Tanzer and Suze were equally matched, weaving in and out of each other’s flight path. One of them would swerve and the other pulled up to match pace and, if in position, block the other’s path. This went on and on. Glimpses of Suze’s hair were the only clues as to who was who.

Ravenclaw arranged their team for a run at the goal, flying like a diagram on a blackboard. The shot on goal flew wide, shot early so the Chaser could put both hands on his broomstick and execute a spin to dodge a Bludger.

Slytherin again came straight down the pitch, heedless of Beaters and Chasers dodging to cut them off. The goal keeper made a panic save with his broom tail, and the score remained tied.

The Seekers flew lower now, flying just outside the flag poles in a great oval race. Fans stood up to watch them come around behind, flying so fast they passed with a whoosh-whoosh. They circled again, faster, uniforms flapping madly. Suze pulled up and dropped into orbit in the other direction. The whole crowd had stood to watch the Seekers. They looped around, straight at each other, diverting just at the flag pole over the Teachers’ Box so that they missed colliding. A few of the teachers ducked unnecessarily.

Tanzer pulled straight up, dodging randomly once, twice, suggesting that he has spotted the Snitch. Back on the pitch the Ravenclaws were running a Spider Web, a keep-away arrangement meant to tire the opposing Beaters.

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Suze careened across the pitch toward her opponent, broom kicked so hard into full speed that it flew canted. Tanzer dropped his body, arm extended. Harry caught sight of the Snitch then, glittering off the boy's fingertips. But his broomstick floated upward, leaving the prize buzzing just out of reach. He hung that way, straining while time stretched thin, until Suze blasted through, spinning her opponent around and grasping the Snitch out of the air.

Aaron threw his hands over his head and pumped his fist. "All right!"

Everyone else sat down, and Harry elbowed Ginny, who tossed up her hands. "I can't help that he's a Slytherin."

Harry stood up, watching the players land and the Slytherins piling on top of one another, largest on the bottom. Snape appeared at the base of the staircase to the Teachers' box. He stood watching his players, face neutral.

"I'll meet you at the pub. I want to go talk to someone," Harry said to his friends, then pushed his way to the exit.

Down on the grass, the players were greeting friends and family. Harry parted the convivial noises, drawing surprised gazes his way, mixed expressions that made his own thoughts mix around dangerously.

Harry arrived just as Suze reverently held out the Snitch to Snape.

"Professor," she said shyly. She glanced over at Harry and her face slipped from shy into a grin.

"Can I talk to Suze for a minute?" Harry asked.

Snape gestured that he could, and Harry led Suze aside over onto the warning track.

"Nice match. You looked to be having fun up there." Harry tried not to feel jealous.

She stroked her broomstick. "It did all right in a straight match up. I didn't think it would. I read all about the builder of his bespoke one and thought I was outmatched. But I beat him to it in the end."

Harry let her bask in memory for a moment before leaning down to quietly ask, "Do you think he threw the match?"

She stared at Harry with her strange eyes. "Why would he do that?"

"That's a separate question," Harry said. "I couldn't see as well from the ground as you could from up there. That's why I'm asking."

Suze's eyes narrowed thoughtfully, but she did not reply. Wereporridge shouted for her to join them in returning to the warmth of the castle. She waved back to him and said quietly to Harry, "It was a little strange, him not pulling down on his broom. He could have. He was hanging upside down and sometimes that confuses people. But if he can't control a broom upside-down, he shouldn't be a Seeker."

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Harry patted her on the shoulder. "I don't mean to diminish your win. You looked good up there. Don't say anything, okay?"

She grinned broadly. "Why would I? Come. On."

Harry walked with her. "One can always count on a Slytherin to act in their own self-interest."

Snape, standing waiting in his best cross-armed pose, caught the tail end of this and raised his brows. "Can one?"

Harry let Suze walk on alone. The two of them stood there until the pitch cleared around them. Out of the wind it was far more pleasant.

Snape said, "How was your week?"

Harry glanced around them. The stray breeze catching at the grass was the only thing within hearing. He waved a spell for Animagia just in case. "Interesting and boring at the same time."

"The boring only concerns me in so much as what it might drive you to in the interest of alleviating it. What was interesting?"

"I did a small job for someone. Just guard duty."

Snape centered his cloak and adjusted the snake clasp. "Learn anything?"

"Minor things. I'm starting to wonder if the person I'm looking for is there often enough for me to catch him there."

Snape nodded. "Anything else?"

Harry did not answer right away. He did not want to tell Snape he had again left this Plane.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," Snape said. He bent his head while he talked, which masked his voice. "I am hoping you will assure me you did not go back to that place you just rescued me from."

"I didn't go back there," Harry said.

Snape raised his head and stared straight into Harry's eyes. "If I request that you never go back to that place again, what would your response be?"

Harry tossed his hands. "Fine. I don't need to go back there."

Snape held his gaze, making Harry want to look away. "If you did find yourself wanting to go back there, what would be the reason?"

Harry trial-ran the honest answer against his new instincts and found them silent. "To try my power against his." He liked the sound of the words. He liked the way it made his insides go molten.

"You may be surprised what you find. I can send you some reading about that wand of his, if you wish."

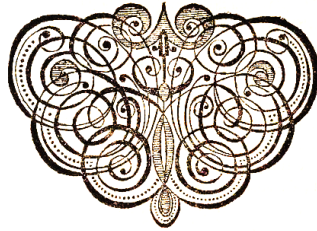
Harry cocked a grin. "Then you are suggesting I wait until I feel ready?"

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Snape raised his chin and took Harry's elbow to steer him off the pitch. "You are jesting."

"Half jesting," Harry insisted.

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Harry arrived at the front door of the Breakstone residence, a low sprawling brick house that tried at Muggle, but failed in little ways. The brick wasn't smooth and straight, and the wrought iron decorations on the corners of the eaves strongly resembled bats.

"Come on in, Harry. I'm not quite ready to go, yet," Candide greeted him at the door, a niece and a nephew pressed against her legs, peering up at him with wide eyes. "Come on, you, give way," she said, herding them clear.

The whole family and some extended relatives had gathered for Sunday dinner and surrounded an awkwardly long table. Candide had requested Harry Apparate her home, but dinner was apparently running late.

"Harry." Candide's father stood up to greet him with a firm handshake. Children raced around their legs as they did so.

Her mother said, "We're just having dessert; why don't you have a seat." She scooted her chair over to make room for him. A sizable glob of lemon curd over shortbread was handed down to him. This cued the youngsters to fight over the best adult laps at the table.

"So, Harry," Candide's father said, "You are still punishing the Ministry, it seems." He sounded amused.

"Not that they don't deserve it," Candide's brother, Fenton, said. He had close-cropped hair, and low, square sideburns framing his chiseled face. Like much of Candide's family, Harry had not seen him since the wedding.

Harry dug into his dessert and relaxed into the conversation, especially when it

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turned to expressions of pleasure at the changes in the Daily Prophet.

A second serving of madeira left Harry groggy in the humid room. He was just backing his chair out to get some air when someone placed a toddler in his arms – a wiggly toddler who arched her back to head back to mom, or the floor. Candide’s mother, beside Harry, told the girl to sit still, a command she honored for around three seconds.

“Candy tells us you can tell if the little ones are magical before it really shows,” Ruthie asked. “Is that true?”

Harry lifted the struggling child to stand on his legs. She reached out and snagged his glasses off without warning.

“I think she’s got a future as a Seeker,” Harry said, rubbing his forehead. Someone handed him his glasses back.

Candide’s sister-in-law, Trillium, said, “Allie must be magical. Remember the incident with the open stove door last month?”

“Might have just got lucky dear,” Candide’s mother said. “You never know.”

There were a lot of magical people in the room, confusing his senses. Harry stood up and carried the girl away from the table. Movement calmed her struggles and she swung her head around, interested in where they may be going. Harry set her down on her feet and held her hands to help her balance. Magic definitely vibrated off her.

“She is,” Harry said, releasing one hand that immediately stretched toward mum.

Trillium scooped her up and swung her feet out before hitching her on a hip. “Told you. We are three for three.”

“How do you do that?” Candide’s brother asked when Harry resumed his seat.

Harry lifted his hands. “Wizards and witches just feel magical.”

“And Muggles?”

“They don’t,” Harry said. “Something’s missing.”

Candide’s mother leaned forward to say, “When I was a girl there was an ancient old hedge witch who was known to be able to detect magical folk. She used to come to the market in Kent selling Charms and herb concoctions.”

“She could suss werewolves, right, even outside a full moon?” Ruthie said.

“What was her name?” Harry asked.

“We called her Good Witch Glistler, but her name was, uh, Gliwice, or something.

Pouring herself more madeira, Ruthie said with a grin, “You told us stories when we were little how you were going to sell us to her if we didn’t behave.”

“Do you remember her name, dear?” Candide’s mother asked her husband.

“I just remember she was exceedingly old. She put curses on all boys, or so we were told, so we never went near her.”

She patted his arm. “Only on troublesome boys, dear.”

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“Well...”

The evening drew on and fell subdued. Harry found Candide’s gaze trying to capture his. She raised her brow questioningly, her face showing wear from the long evening.

Harry stood. “We should get home.”

Candide’s mother stood up. “We have one more we’d like you to read the magic on.”

“We don’t want to wake Elred, Aunt Addie. He didn’t get a naptime this afternoon.”

“I’m sure it will be all right, dear. It would be nice to know.”

Candide’s cousin’s wife slipped away and returned with a sleepy baby in a long midnight blue nightie, who greeted the room with a shaky yawn and vague fussing.

Harry accepted the bundle, finding the boy far heavier than expected. “Yeah, he’s a load,” the cousin said with a laugh. “Eighteen months of determined eating.”

Harry knew the instant the weight rested fully in his arms, but he walked to the open space by the darkened bay window to be certain. There was an absence about the child. He clearly existed, fussing half heartedly, fist rolling against his cheek as though considering cranking up the volume, but not sure it was worth the effort. But his existence ended at the physical, like he existed, but didn’t, at the same time.

In the dimmer light away from the table, Elred could open his eyes wider, and he peered at Harry with suspicion between long blinks. Candide stepped up before him, in front of her cousin and his wife.

Harry shook his head.

“No?” Candide said, head tilting back with a jerk.

“No,” Harry said.

“Maybe you can’t tell with a baby. He’s half Allie’s age.”

“Maybe,” Harry said, swinging his arms a little, making the boy fall still. “But I don’t think so.” Feeling sudden heat on his cheeks and up his middle, he said, “But it doesn’t matter.”

“No, of course not,” various voices agreed, but they sounded like they spoke past disappointment.

Harry handed the child over to his father, who walked away bouncing him lightly while looking him over thoughtfully.

To Candide, Harry said, “Ready to go?”

She nodded, gaze far away.

After making their goodbyes, Harry Apparated her straight home to the main hall.

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“Harry,” Candide’s voice drew him back from heading up to bed. She had not moved from where they had arrived. Gesturing vaguely at her midsection, she asked, “Can you tell if this one is?”

Harry stepped back over to her and shook his head. “It’s too muddled up.” Then he repeated: “It doesn’t matter,” and this time felt pain saying it, like some core of him was making a last desperate stand. He spun away to hide the damp that suddenly clung to his eyes.

Candide remained silent, watching, as he walked away and up the stairs.

Harry lay down in bed, but his body refused to relax. Hedwig plucked at her cage door, sending a series of twangs into the darkness of the room. Harry rose to let her out for the night, then opened his other pet’s cage door as well. Kali climbed out onto the top of it and luxuriously stretched each wing. Harry wondered if he should get her a cage big enough to let her do that whenever she wanted. She sniffed the air in his direction with her little fox head, then bent to groom her fur with her rows of fine teeth.

Harry sat on his bed, letting the cold air of the room chill his sweat-damp pyjamas. Something about refusing to escape the uncomfortable cold seeping into his bones made him feel more aware of everything. With a deep breath he reached under the bed for one of the books he had borrowed from the Hogwarts library restricted section. The leather surface of the book squirmed under his fingers like tiny muscles flexed beneath the surface. The stamped cover bore no title, just amorphous shapes that could have been leaves and vines or creatures and limbs.

Harry cast a Silencing Charm on the room in case the book screeched when he opened it. It did not exactly screech, but the binding made a grating rumble like opening a subterranean chamber.

Harry studied the page he had opened to, but he could not understand any of it. It was like the ramblings of a madman interspersed with arcane spell snippets. He flipped ahead, reading each sheet of meticulously scribed text while the wide border decorations writhed and shifted around the words. But it was just more of the same. Harry wondered why Hogwarts kept the book. That curiosity alone made him keep reading for many more pages. Each page only held about thirty words the way it was written out so large. Each section had a little oil painting around the lead letter, with grotesque themes of death and plague, like a tarot deck viewed through a mind altering potion.

Harry shut the book around a Chocolate Frog card of Dumbledore. The figure of the old headmaster walked into the frame and winked, unaware of his odd surroundings. Harry thought he should have some opinion about all of this, but apparently not.

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Swinging his head under the bed, Harry set the book back on the closest stack, but it teetered. When he leaned under farther to arrange all the books he had stashed there, he noticed that the light under his door shifted as though someone was standing outside it. Harry, caught up in a strange state of ill ease from the book and a fit of anger at some kind of ill-defined persecution, snapped open the door.

Candide stood there, hand out like she had been knocking.

“Oh,” she said, startled about something she found in his face.

“I had a Silencing Charm on the room, since I was making noise,” Harry explained.

“Oh.” She was rubbing her abdomen in broad circular strokes. “I was feeling a bit off. I’m wondering if I should see the Midwitch.”

Harry realized then that she wasn’t startled by him, she was just startled in general, eyes wide and worried. She went on, masking fear with pragmatic planning, to Harry’s ear. “Do you know how to get to the Midlands Midwitch Mediwizard Hospital? I’d hate to take myself since the Midwitch is the one who insisted I side-along for the last month of pregnancy. Scared me into it with all kinds of horror stories.”

“We learned three ways to get to every hospital in Britain as part of our training, so I can take you.” Her worry was infectious. Harry felt himself slip clear of the cloying shroud stultifying his emotions. He stepped out onto the balcony and took her arm. “Maybe you should message your mum. Or I could fetch her?”

“It’s three in the morning and it’s probably just the three servings of lemon curd with marmalade. Really.”

“You’re certain you don’t want me to get your mum. I’m sure she wouldn’t care about the time.”

“Really, I’m sure.”

“Severus?” Harry prompted, thinking ahead to trying to explain this later and foreseeing trouble.

“Harry,” she said with structured patience, “in the last month all kind of false alarms are going to happen. I don’t want to bother him already with this one.”

Harry rushed back into his room, tossed yesterday’s robes over his pyjamas and slipped on his shoes without any socks. He came back and took her arm again, and with a bang! they arrived in the arcade that formed the central corridor of the hospital.

A half moon desk arced out of the wall halfway along, basking in the blue glow of a swarm of fairylights. Harry steered Candide that way and waited while she explained her situation. He felt strangely disassociated, abandoned, like his thoughts had too much room to rattle around in.

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"I'll be back, Harry," Candide said, sounding like he needed reassurance now more than she did, perhaps because of the grip he had on her arm.

Harry did not want to let her go on alone, but the Midwitch took over his hold. Releasing her arm felt like letting go of a life preserver on a choppy sea. Harry turned to look for a place to wait, feeling far away from the arched metal poles holding up the glass roof just feet away on both sides.

"Aren't you Harry Potter?" the desk clerk asked.

Harry turned. The clerk was a delicate woman with a careworn face and receded jaw. The magic radiating off her was weak, almost overwhelmed by the taint of stale blood radiance leeching off the walls around them. She barely qualified as a witch at all.

"Yeah," Harry said, feeling whole again, or at least blessed with a head crowded with diverse notions.

A row of metal benches bisected the atrium. Harry took a seat and waited. Worried about letting his mind wander, he puzzled over the strange book he had been reading instead. What was the purpose of it? Why would someone write something that made so little sense? Someone had gone to great trouble to illuminate it and bind it. That was probably the only reason the Hogwarts library had kept it so long.

Candide returned, accompanied by the Midwitch, a black woman with a glowing face who exuded matronly reassurance.

"If you feels any pains tomorrow, come back."

Candide nodded, lips pulled back in a sheepish frown.

"Sorry, Harry," she said. "I shouldn't have woken you. Turns out it probably was nothing."

"No matter," Harry said, meaning it. "Ready for home?"

They were greeted by Winky, who bowed Candide in the direction of the dining room. "Winky is serving for Mistress chutney and banana on biscuits."

"Thank you Winky; I'm famished."

Harry's stomach grumbled as well, despite the menu. "Is there something else to eat?"

They split a pot of tea that sparked in when they finished their respective snacks.

"Are you going to tell Severus?" Harry asked.

"About what?" Then she chuckled. "I was overly careful, is all."

Harry found a deep reservoir of dutiful will on this topic. It tapped a source closer to his core than those new instincts could reach. "You can't be overly careful."

"The Midwitch was nice enough about it. Only mentioned first time mothers three times during the consultation." Wry smile fixed she poured them both more tea. "How goes your new job?"

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Harry accepted this as code. “Not learning much so far.”

“In general, you don’t learn much until someone takes you under their wing.”

“I haven’t found anyone to do that yet.”

“Maybe just as well.”

When the amber glow of dawn lit the ivy veining the garden wall beyond the window, Candide yawned. “Maybe I’ll sleep and go into work for the afternoon.”

Harry swallowed a yawn too. He had things he wanted to do, but they could wait until she was safely at the office.



Harry dropped Candide at her office and, hiding under his invisibility cloak, immediately slipped into the far corner of the Magical Law Enforcement File Room. He crept along the short wall and leaned far over to be certain no one crouched on the other side of the long row of cabinets before moving down to the drawer marked Gjinni-Glock. Inside he found a thin file of disintegrating brown notes. Under his cloak his breath blew them around, so he held his breath while he carefully lifted each sheet, looking for an address. Holehollow was indicated beside her name, along with the date of 1 November, 1938. The remains of the report hinted at some complaint from her neighbors regarding finding iguanas in place of their children in bed that morning. Smirking, Harry flipped each fragment, chipping the edges of them despite handling them as carefully as possible.

The same location repeated on other sheets, but all very old. Harry should have asked at the party, but he had been loath to reveal his interest in front of so many witnesses.

On the atlas at home he found Holehollow and took himself there through a combination of Dark Plane Apparition and flying, laughing to himself at his ability to be untraceable with such ease.

Holehollow turned out to be difficult to find. In his Animagus form, Harry circled a pair of tracks that crossed in an area where the semicircular arrangement of gnarled old trees hinted at intentional planting. But everything else had grown wild, for quite a while, it appeared. Harry landed and found a broken down wooden sign beneath a canopy of dead ivy that confirmed he had found the place.

The sun beat down and without a breeze it almost felt balmy. Harry walked through the stillness, stopping to study the domed hillocks covered in washed out weeds and brush. He walked up to one and poked around until he found a smashed out window, low to the ground. Cupping his hands around his eyes he peered inside and found the remains of a house.

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He broke trail to the next one and found the same thing, only this time there were signs of fire inside. Perhaps Muggle campers had used it. Back on the dirt track, Harry surveyed the area enclosed by the broken arcs of giant trees. It slept with a cold ease that spoke of wounds erased by time and the death of memory.

Harry turned sharply, sensing someone watching him. He crossed the road and tried the last hillock house on the other side. The weeds and brush were undisturbed around it but it felt more alive than the others. He circled around, looking for a door or window, and found a half-sized door on the side away from the road.

Harry knocked and waited, but no sound issued forth from beyond the bare wood. He waited more, feeling he was being tested. He knocked again and stepped back to where he could see around the sides of the house to watch for movement.

The door cracked open, swung back, creaked open farther, repeating this like it were being tugged on by a string. The door fell still, revealing a dark hole in the side of the hill. Harry stepped forward, just to the top a set of steps leading down and called inside.

In response the door tugged open just a little more. Harry stepped sideways down the stairs because they were so narrow and waited for his eyes to adjust. Light filtered in through brush covered windows in the roof. The air smelled of sweet smoke, cabbage, and wet fur. A brown rat scuttled up to Harry's foot and sniffed at his trouser leg. Harry stepped back from it.

"Herman has to approve of all the guests," a raspy and accented voice came out of the corner.

Harry located the voice in the corner, propped near a window on a rocking wooden contraption that resembled a magical concoction of a bed and a set of dining room chairs.

"Are you Gliwice?"

"I used to be. Not much of anything now." The window lit her pure white hair, which flowed in all directions from her head and accented her deeply sunken face. "Don't have a chair to offer you."

"That's all right," Harry assured her. "I won't be long. I was just curious about something-"

"That's the only reason any comes. They used to only come because they wanted to know, again, what happened here."

"What did happen here?" Harry asked.

She snorted breathily. "The war happened here. None ever wanted to move back." She turned to look out the window, her features as softened and sunken as a dried apple.

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"I saw one of the houses was burned out," Harry said for conversation. "This is a strange little village."

"Used to be all magical folk here, and herbs grew everywhere around. Even on top of the houses. That's why my parents emigrated here, herbs was their speciality." Her face drew in farther. "Wars is terrible things. Grindelwald was hardest on the ones he thought should be his allies, but refused. That's what happened here."

"Wars are when things change," Harry said, not sure why he said it, or even what it meant. Gliwice remained staring out the window at the dead brush glaring in the sunlight.

Herman's tiny paws walked over Harry's feet, sniffing his laces. Shaking the rat off his foot, Harry said, "I heard you could tell when people are magical."

"You need me to tell you if you are?" she asked.

"No. I can do the same, is all, and I've never known anyone else who could."

She turned from the window, putting her deeply sunken features into shadow. "And you hears the demons too... the ones no one else will believe are real?"

"Oh, they're real," Harry said.

"You're awfully young for such visions. I thought that was only a plague on me old brains. Magic got bored or something."

"But sensing magical people, that's not the same thing as the demons, is it?"

"Yes and no." She did not continue right away, but studied Harry standing there. Herman tugged on Harry's shoe lace, and when it came loose, tried to run off with the end of it. Harry shook his foot free again, and stood on the lace ends.

Gliwice spoke more slowly, making her accent more apparent. "Everyone can channel evil. That's what you sense when you can feel someone is magical: that potential."

"It doesn't feel evil, though," Harry mused aloud. "It just feels like magic, or something more than Muggles have."

"Magical folk are connected to more things than non-magical ones are. That's the difference. Things no one can see. And probably wouldn't want to if'n they could." With her permanently spiraled, club hands she adjusted the quilt over her. "You have more than your share, from what I can tell. Not the same as power, though. Don't make that mistake."

Harry fidgeted, resisting her words.

She went on, "But you young people never take advice from the old. You have to make all your own mistakes. Given that odd scar, you've made more than your share already."

Harry was beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake in revealing himself to her at all. It was a gut level worry that when examined in detail, did not hold up.

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But still, a careful voice urged a Memory Charm, or something.

Harry jumped back, and shook his foot free of Herman, who had bitten his ankle.

“He doesn’t like unfriendly visitors,” Gliwice stated.

Herman reared up to his full low height, tiny paws upraised, and snapped at Harry.

The air in the room shifted, rushing outward. Gliwice went on, cold and brittle, “Didn’t survive this long for no reason, young man.”

For a breath Harry wanted nothing more than to match her threat, to stretch his power so that it battered against another’s. His better senses, bolstered by the sight of her there, hunched and withered, won out.

Tight lipped he said, “Right. I’ll be going then. Leave you to the... silence.”

“Silence is golden, young man, silence is golden.” She turned back to the window.

Harry slipped into the main hall at home and bent to check the wound on his ankle.

Ginny’s voice from the doorway to the dining room made him raise his head. “Harry. You sure came in quietly.”

Hermione came up behind her. “Hope you don’t mind if we let ourselves in.”

Harry wondered if perhaps they did not need better spells on the house, in that case. He glanced at the time. “I’m late fetching Candide home. I’ll be right back.”

Harry returned with Candide and they joined the full table; Aaron and Vineet had also come for dinner.

“My mum says hello, Harry,” Aaron said, saluting with his fork from other end of the table. “She also says that next time you insist on picking a fight, please make certain the press takes their pictures from my good side.” He pressed his face to the side with his thumb in demonstration.

Ginny said, “If she didn’t insist on having the article framed so she could admire it every day, it wouldn’t matter so much.”

Aaron leaned his long neck out in her direction with his chin propped on his palm. “I happened to notice that someone else carefully cut out the article and is currently using it as a bookmark in her diary.”

Ginny had begun to flush, but then snapped, “Were you trying to read my diary?”

Aaron raised his hands up. “You left it under your pillow.” With a sigh, he added, “Besides, it was blank, as far as I could tell.”

Harry blinked at that and glanced at Hermione, who said, “Watch out for Ginny and blank diaries.”

Harry noted the time. He had not decided what he thought about this concerted effort to socialize with him. To Hermione he said, “No marking to catch up on? Assignments to write?”

“Professor Snape gave me his two best Slytherins as regular assistants.”

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Ginny said, "What is a 'best Slytherin' anyway... one whose blood runs a sort of streaky red-green?"

Hermione shrugged. "They'd be in Ravenclaw except for their chronically bad attitude. But they enjoy marking, rather a lot, rather too much, really. But who am I to complain... well, except for the nearly blinding, glittering green ink they insist on using."

"Speaking of blood," Ginny said, "Harry, Fred and George wanted me to ask you to come to the shop tomorrow morning. They need a favor of some kind. Wouldn't tell me what it was. There could be some gold in it for you, they told me to mention if you were too busy."

"I'm not busy," Harry said.



The morning sun was just reaching the rough wood around the windows on the upper floors when Harry stepped out onto Diagon Alley. He had his gaze on the triple "W" sign ahead of him, but noticed on the way, that the construction barrier was down around Eeylops and a fresh coat of black stain gleamed tar-like around the windows and exuded the nose-wrinkling scent of turpentine. A spritely sign painter was hunkered down adding gold embellishments to the corners of the glass.

Pleased to see the shop open again Harry stepped inside the propped-open door. Eeylop was unpacking merchandise, directing his employees to hang samples of each type of cage along the ceiling in front of the windows. Harry walked amongst the scattered packing materials and blinked as his eyes adjusted. He picked up the scoop in the Owltreets barrel and filled a paper sack for Hedwig. As he turned to find a path to the counter to pay, he realized he recognized the crude construction of the crate blocking his way as well as the trunks stacked behind the counter.

Eeylop met him at the counter where he pulled coins from his own pocket to make change because the till was absent.

Harry said, "You were lucky to get restocked so quickly."

Eeylop went from hurried to frozen. He shuffled the coins in his palm, staring at them. His flushed skin became dotted with micro-droplets of sweat. "Yeah, Mr. Potter. It was lucky."

Harry wished he would look up. Eeylop laid too much change on the freshly sanded counter. Harry picked out something close. "More than luck, I think," Harry said, pitched only for the man's ear.

Eeylop worked his lips and scooped up the remaining coins. His attitude stabilized. "The new owners use their own supplier," he announced. "I just run the shop now."

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“New owners?” Harry glanced around, seeing nothing that would indicate this. “You sold the shop?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Eeylop said, then hustled by Harry to help untangle a bundle of self-lowering cage chains that were faltering across the floor like a marooned metal sea creature.

Lost in thought, Harry opened the door to Weasley Wizard Wheezes.

“Ello, Harry,” one of the twins greeted him. “Come on in. Have a tea. It’s on the house.”

A pile behind the counter shifted and another twin emerged. Stacks of boxes and paperwork were mixed up all around the back area.

“Fred, where’s that order form from House of Hair-Raising.” He began digging, restacking things wherever he could find a horizontal surface. “Mornin’, Harry,” he added, without looking up.

Harry accepted a stained cup and held it out for tea saying, “Looks like Ginny was keeping things organized around here.”

“Lies!” George exploded. “Never did a thing around here, that lazy sister of ours.”

Harry grinned and accepted the seat indicated, a Smorgas-Sweets barrel with the lid hastily placed back on it.

George sat on the counter itself, and bent far over to talk to Harry at eye level. “This is what we would like, if you can stand the boredom. And we’re willing to pay Galleons, mind you, knowing this.” He gestured with his long-fingered hands as though holding a large sphere out before him. “We want you to spend some mornings here, on days we need you.” He glanced up sharply and eyed the street outside the window. Dropping his voice he said, “As a kind of guard.”

“You’re having trouble?”

“At first it was sort of fun taking care of it ourselves.” George cracked his knuckles. “But it’s grown tedious. We have work to do and as much as we’d like a sideline in defensive devices and traps, well, our work for others in that area hasn’t gone so well. We were told they’d be coming this morning, ‘to issue us an ultimatum we’d be wise to consider’.”

Harry stared at his friend before watching the other twin arrange boxes more tightly on a shelf to make room for something new, and tried not to smile in amusement.

“I can do that,” Harry said.

Customers came in and most treated Harry with reverence, stopping to talk and commiserate about his situation. As usual, he was disconcerted to find how much

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near strangers knew about him. Throughout the morning, Harry kept up an attitude of simply visiting his friends there in the shop.

Eventually, the shop bells chimed and two familiar figures slinked inside, checking the alley outside repeatedly before making their way through the maze of goods. Their destination was the counter, but they did not reach it. They spotted Harry sitting there beside it and stopped.

Harry's gaze locked with those of his erstwhile criminal assistants and no one moved. Fred and George stood in defensive positions: one behind the counter, one beside the wall leading to the counter, wand hands hidden by their sleeves.

"Something you want?" Harry politely asked the pair from Durumulna.

Hummer and Slowdraw rocked from one toe to the other, bumping together like they wanted to whisper to each other, but not doing so. Uncertainty tainted their plain faces. Harry relished it; it was one step from fear.

"I didn't hear an answer," Harry pointed out.

The two stepped away and slinked out, glancing back at Harry several times.

Fred exhaled. "That went better than expected." He clapped Harry on the back. "You have the perfect reputation for this job."

Smiling faintly, Harry said, "Yes... that I do."

Harry remained at the shop until shortly before lunch when he needed to ferry Candide. Fred plucked a Galleon from the till to pay him for the day. Harry stared down at the coin, imagining for a blink that it flickered into becoming a plain metal slug, but he pocketed it anyway, feeling the pay did not matter anyhow.

Late that afternoon, Ron showed up in the front garden bearing a trunk full of baby things from his mother. He hovered the trunk through the narrow corridor with an ease that surprised Harry, not bumping either wall.

Candide pulled a chair over to look inside, while Ron explained apologetically, "Ginny tried to sort out the truly Weasley stuff, but I think mum slipped much of it back inside. Do what you want with it."

Candide pulled out a pair of knitted booties with long curled toes. "Oh, these are adorable."

Ron stayed for dinner, which put a crimp on Harry's thoughts of trying to track down Hummer and Slowdraw. Harry spent the evening thinking about what he would do the next morning. He must have been too wrapped up in his own thoughts because Ron said, "You're as quiet as a magician's mouse. What's up?"

Unwilling to answer, Harry turned the question back. "How are things at the bank?"

Ron pushed back from the table and rocked up on the back legs of his chair. "Oh, well. The more rigorous identification spells we require of customers have cut down

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on problems. We still have some trouble, like this customer last week who insisted he withdrew all his money under an Imperio. But that sort of thing has happened forever.”

Candide said, “Have there been any large new accounts opened in the last year?”

Ron’s chair dropped back to level. “You mean, is Durumulna using Gringotts to hold their money? Officially, no.”

“Unofficially?” Harry prodded.

Ron rubbed his chin. “Probably, but using fronts to deposit the money. Once you start wondering if every threadbare wizard bringing in Galleons by the cauldron-full is actually laundering money they all look like they could be doing that.” He flipped his napkin around. “No one asks anything about that. The Goblins care about losing money, not about who brings it in.”

That night as Harry perused his Hogwarts collection of books, a tiny elf owl pecked at the window. It dropped the rolled up message on the sill and fluttered off. It read: Independent business is strongly discouraged. We expect monthly delivery of our cut. “Strongly” had three red underlines that began to spread and drip just before the message vanished in a flash of red heat.

Harry rolled his eyes and returned to his reading about a spell called The Living Skeleton. The author had not made it clear if one started with a live person or a dead one. Harry flipped back to the beginning of the section. Maybe the spell would work either way.

Harry closed that book, unable to think of uses for the spells outside Halloween and returned to the mysterious book with no name. He set Dumbledore’s card to the side, but decided instead to press it into the back of the book, out of view. He turned each thick page, stopping at one showing a border of twining ivy sporting blooms of happy faces that shrank into craggy old shrunken heads that dropped off out of the frame. The meaning of the random words shimmered just out of reach.

Harry dropped his hand on the page and quickly flipped back to the Chocolate Frog card. Dumbledore rubbed his ear and clasped his hands together loosely. Harry’s lips twitched; he knew how he would spend his free morning.



During the desperate search for his kidnapped friend, Aaron, Harry had tried without success to use a Device to see his own Plane instead of other ones. While doing so, he had glimpsed Dumbledore sitting alone in a tower beside a window. Seeing his old mentor again was something he had intended to do, once he had the time free, and currently he had nothing but free time.

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Heart thrumming with anticipation, Harry slipped away to the Dark Plane from the stairwell of the accountancy immediately after seeing Candide to the door.

Knowing little about the place where he would arrive, Harry opted to arrive in a field nearby to the tower, but far enough away to have a chance to look around. The cold ground and weak sunlight made warming up a desperate affair. After he finally managed to heat the ground beneath him, he lay there for a long time, his body ringing with discomfort. Birds darted in serpentine paths overhead. The pale grass prickled and itched through his robes, urging him to move.

Heavy as lead, Harry rose up and ran his eye along the bare trees edging the field. Soft hills rolled to a sharp upsweep of unwelcoming mountains shaded from the sun by a shroud of clouds. A grey stone tower, topped by a tall conical roof, stood perched atop a nearby hill. No other habitation was in view. Assuming the tower was the one from his vision, Harry skipped his usual disguise and walked toward the structure, which turned out to be farther away than it appeared and on a much higher hill. By the time Harry arrived, his joints had sufficiently recovered from the punishment of the Inbetween to let him feel invulnerable again.

The heavily hinged door to the tower had a cursed aura. Harry circled the base and instead flew up to the first set of windows with no bars. Just in case of human repelling spells, he wiggled inside while retaining his oversized Animagus form. He kinked a wing doing this and when he changed back, had to nurse a stitch in his side while circling the workroom in which he found himself. Enchanted objects and apparatuses littered tables and sat atop stacks of books on the floor. Bookshelves bowed under the weight of rare grimoires. Books were spread out three deep upon one another, a thin dust layer upon them.

In the mode of Auror patrol, Harry made his way up the risers jutting out of the curved wall. He passed more living spaces smelling of long term use but with no current inhabitants.

At the very top of the stairs the door hung ajar. Harry rapped lightly and pushed it open. It swung soundlessly, moving with just a touch. Dumbledore looked up from the desk where he sat, transfixed by Harry's arrival.

Dumbledore moved slowly; he rotated the quill he held and placed it beside his diary.

"Harry."

Mired in guileless memory, Harry lowered his wand and stepped forward. "Professor," Harry said, voice far away.

Dumbledore's water-blue eyes flicked to Harry's wand and back to his face with machine-like precision. Harry smiled sheepishly and put his wand in his pocket.

Sounding as if Harry were breaking several serious school rules, Dumbledore asked,

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“Harry, what are you doing here?”

Harry fought the tangled spell of memory, resisting chastisement. “I wanted to talk to you.”

Dumbledore raised his chin. “Speak quickly, then.”

Harry floundered for a starting point in his story. How to explain it all? He was becoming something else, something from the past. What was he to do about that? He wanted help and the urge to pour forth his worries met with no resistance; his paranoid instincts fell completely still when faced with his old mentor.

Dumbledore’s eyes drilled into Harry’s. “How did you find me?”

Harry remembered himself and Occluded his thoughts. “That’s too long of a story. Though it would be easier to explain everything else if I explain that too.” He hesitated, but went on: “I want help getting rid of this last piece of Voldemort I have.”

Dumbledore’s white brows rose together. “I’m uncertain what you are referring to, Harry. What makes you think there are any pieces at all?”

“I thought you would understand.” Harry said, feeling his last best hope shimmer away.

Dumbledore’s chest filled as he prepared to speak, but a noise came from the doorway behind Harry and Dumbledore fell into the same kind of wary stillness he displayed when Harry first arrived.

Harry turned. An old wizard glided in, his blonde-white hair flowing wildly behind him. He moved like one much younger than his wrinkled features, which shifted indecisively as he studied Harry. “And who is this, Albus?” the wizard asked, gesturing toward Harry as though to touch him, but pulling back far short with a strange curl to his fingers.

Harry did not like this man, at all. His starkly contrasting beauty and keen, vile eyes reminded him of Lockhart hosting Voldemort.

“Who are you?” Harry demanded.

The wizard threw his fine robe sleeves to the sides as he gestured. Grandly, at full volume, he asked, “Who am I? Oh, dear, do I need to remind the world again who I am?”

Dumbledore’s boney fingers closed hard around Harry’s arm. Harry shook himself free and stepped out of reach.

Dumbledore, smiling and shaking his grand head, said, “No, no, my dear Gellert, I’m sure they have not forgotten.”

Harry glanced between them, trying to remember where he had heard the name Gellert before. Dumbledore restrained Gellert, patting his arm. They were equally

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matched, both boney limbs enveloped in bulky robes. Dumbledore turned to Harry with a guilty expression.

“It’s a just a visitor from Hogwarts. Cleverly managed to track me down is all.”

Harry remembered with a snap of his heartbeat where he had heard the name Gellert, and he stepped back again, surprised to find solid ground when everything shifted so violently otherwise. “Grindelwald?” Harry’s wand slipped eagerly free of his pocket. Grindelwald pulled his out as well. Dumbledore tried to restrain Grindelwald but the other slipped free.

Harry risked a glance at Dumbledore, trying to understand. “Why are you here with him?”

Dumbledore did not get an opportunity to answer. “We have a cheeky upstart, here. So nice,” Grindelwald said, and raised his arm.

Harry beat him to the curse, but just barely, the spells exploded between them, throwing Dumbledore aside. Harry used a Rubber Shield on the next one, trained well to avoid harming others.

Spells flew, taking the curtains and desk and even a heavy shelf with them. Harry threw a Blasting Curse so powerful it shifted the stones of the tower, Grindelwald threw back a Cutting Curse that doubled Harry over behind his best Block.

“Stop! Gellert, Stop!” Dumbledore commanded, reaching for his companion’s arm.

“You will be destroyed, little upstart wizard!” Grindelwald mocked Harry in manic glee, but his next curse was pulled wide. “Let go of me, Albus. You said yourself that it would be dangerous for anyone to know we are here. Since you are too weak to destroy him, I will do it.” He shoved Dumbledore aside.

His eyes fluttered with delight. “Prepare to die.”

Harry countered, “Die? I haven’t even started trying yet.”

The next curse Harry squelched. Grindelwald held onto his wand, but he stumbled backwards into the crooked curtains, showing his age by the slow way he stood straight. Dumbledore moved as though to help him, but withdrew his hand and held the other up in Harry’s direction.

“Harry. Hang on,” he pleaded. Taking Grindelwald by the shoulders, he said, “I can handle Harry. Cease this pointless fighting at once!”

Grindelwald shook free and glared at Harry while throwing a Hatchet Curse, which Harry, wand pointedly at his side, squelched again. Grindelwald’s wand clattered on the unyielding stone floor. Grindelwald called it back to his hand with an elegant finger gesture, but stopped to calculate what to do next.

“Come on,” Harry said, using the same gesture. “Got something more?”

“Harry,” Dumbledore criticized.

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“You are one to talk... here with him, of all people. What did you do, fake your death or something?” Harry snapped back, guessing as best he could to try and hit a sore point.

Grindelwald, with a subtle flick of his wand, tossed out a Blindness Hex, which Harry countered. Without pausing in finishing that spell Grindelwald converted the end of it into a Cruciatus, which Harry suppressed, sending Grindelwald crumpling to the floor. He rolled and raised an arm in Dumbledore’s direction. Dumbledore had his wand out, half raised at Harry.

“The wand. Give me the wand!” Grindelwald croaked.

Harry glanced at the wand Dumbledore slowly raised in his direction. Harry’s insides twisted and thrashed, half wanting to plead and half joyful at the prospect of being utterly free, just as soon as Dumbledore attacked.

Harry took in the pale, carved wand. “You have the Wand of Destiny,” Harry blurted, connecting dots together with other worlds.

Dumbledore threw a binding spell at Harry, which he barely blocked, and mostly slithered out of physically, by rolling away from the bulk of the spell. Before he could push back to his feet, a hex shot out at him from Grindelwald. Harry, close to the floor, managed a low counter that deflected the Spine Splitting Hex up through the roof, causing wood chips and bits of slate to rain down.

“Nothing harmful!” Dumbledore snapped, reaching a hand in Grindelwald’s direction without sparing his aim from Harry.

The three of them held fixed in a wavering tableau, breathing heavily. Snape’s warning about that particular wand echoed in Harry’s adrenalin-soaked brain.

“I came to you for help,” Harry snarled at his old mentor, things tearing apart inside him as he said it. Tearing free. Harry stood, staggering once.

Dumbledore’s wand wavered and his face contorted, “Harry...” he began, clearly pained.

Beneath Grindelwald’s feet Harry sensed another Forbidden Curse forming, felt the stench of hungry death. “Try it, I dare you,” Harry said, glaring straight at the wizard. “That curse won’t kill me. It never has.” Turning back to Dumbledore, Harry said, “Lovely company you are keeping here. Hope it’s worth it.”

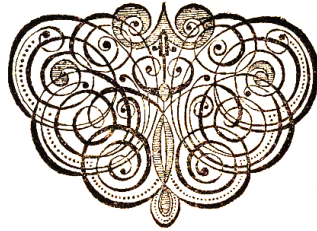
And with that, and one last glimpse of Dumbledore’s regretful features, Harry soundlessly slipped away into the floor.

Author’s Notes: Yes, long gap. I’ve been travelling and last week when I had a good internet connection and was going to post, I caught some awful

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stomach bug and only got back to an internet cafe now. Really in the boonies now.

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Harry returned to his own Plane and, as soon as he was capable, began pacing his bedroom. In a way, his new, carefully decorated room felt as foreign as the one he had found Dumbledore in, and it irked him. He raised his wand, considering how he might change things, but Kali chirruped from her cage before he could decide whether to burn away the nicely matching curtains or simply Expunge them into the ether.

Remembering a time when he had no room at all to call his own, he dropped his annoyed disgust and went over to his pet. Kali climbed over the inside her cage, hanging upside down and considered him with a tilted gaze.

“Dumbledore and Grindelwald,” Harry said aloud to his uncomprehending pet, trying out the sound of it. He shook his head. He calmed his thoughts and opened the door of the cage. His pet, as she usually did lately, did not fly to him, but crawled onto the top to stretch and groom her fur. Her color had never returned to its original blinding violet.

Harry pulled out his wand again and used a narrow cutting curse on his finger. Maroon blood ballooned into droplets that slipped between the fingers of his cupped hand. He held the swelling little pool out to his pet, who sniffed at it curiously and went back to grooming herself, uninterested. With a flick, Harry healed his wound and rubbed the blood off on a clean rag from the cabinet under the cage, and left his pet to herself.



Harry fidgeted his way through the remainder of a deathly quiet week. On Friday,

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he received another owl from his contact in Durumulna informing him of a meeting. Harry was tempted to ignore it.

Candide watched his bouncing feet a minute before saying, "Do you have something you need to be doing?"

Harry considered that he might be able to catch Hummer and Slowdraw alone at Belinda's flat if he went early for the meeting. He wanted to chat with them some, and if they did not want to chat back, then he wanted to interrogate them some. "Yeah. I have some things. You?"

"Molly suggested I visit any time. Owled to say she had missed a few things she wanted to give us." She heaved up and went off without a word, returning shortly. "I'm ready."

They arrived in the drive leading to the Burrow and Harry released Candide's arm. He studied the Weasley house wondering for the first time why anyone with magic at their disposal would choose to live in such ramshackle conditions. Molly waved from the door and Harry watched Candide approach before Disapparating away.

Molly, watching Harry go, remarked to Candide. "Harry is still upset with Arthur, I see. Do remind him I don't agree with everything my husband does and Harry is more than welcome for a visit."

"I'll remind him," Candide assured her.

"On that topic, when is this little one finally going to pay us a visit?" she asked, patting Candide's belly while holding the door for her.

Candide rubbed the back of her neck. "Three more weeks. The Midwitch insists boys are always early. I hope to Merlin's uncle she's right."

"Sons are a challenge and a joy," Molly lectured as she pulled a chair out from the table for Candide.

"You would know."



At Belinda's flat, Harry did not find his criminal assistants, he found Belinda, making herself lunch. She jumped when Harry appeared, aiming the butter knife she held like a wand.

"Oh. Harry."

Harry pulled out a chair at the table without an invitation and took a seat. "How are things?" he asked in a tone that insisted on an answer.

"They've been better," she muttered flatly. Keeping her eyes down, she came to the table and nibbled on a carrot.

Harry leaned back in his chair. "Is it safe to talk here?"

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She twitched her head like a nod and picked up another carrot, which she nervously masticated.

"I'm curious about Percy," Harry said. He did not believe her that it was safe to talk, but he decided he could make this work even if they were eavesdropped upon, or especially if they were.

"I don't see him much." The next carrot got guillotined by her teeth. She straightened her sandwich but did not pick it up. More disturbed, she asked, "Why are you involved in this?"

"I don't have anything else going," Harry airily said. He hooked an empty chair with his foot and pulled it closer to put his feet up on it. Belinda's eyes flickered that way, but she said nothing. Harry said, "Someone framed me. I know you helped with that."

He relished her reaction. He couldn't see her face, but the blood left her fingers and she seemed to stop breathing. She looked frail, especially with her hands shaking.

Harry asked, "Why did you help with that? Do you hate me that much or—"

"I don't hate you." She pushed her plate aside. "I didn't have any choice," she snapped.

"There is always a choice," Harry stated, vacillating back to calm and wise.

"Yeah, going to wizard prison is a choice."

Harry sat forward suddenly, badly startling her. "As opposed to my going to wizard prison?"

Her eyes danced around the room. "I didn't know that was going to happen."

Harry opened his mouth to reply to that, then closed it again. He took one of her carrots and munched on it. "I want to know about Percy," he said again. "I'm certain he killed Alastor Moody and made sure I took the fall for it and I intend to get even with him." When she continued to pick at her plate, Harry said, "You gave my wand to Percy, didn't you? After you stole it."

"You can't prove anything."

"I don't need to." Harry dropped his feet to the floor, startling her. "You are going to help me get even."

Her eyes danced around the room. Harry after a moment, followed suit, but the room sat empty. Harry stood and paced the room, running every eavesdropping block he knew, as well as hovering some cursed objects into the toilet and shutting the door. He resumed his seat.

"How often do you see Percy?"

"Why should I say?"

Harry eyed her, but she did not look up. "Because I can tell the Ministry what you've been doing."

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She rose to that with vibrating lips. “And what about what I can tell the Ministry?”

Harry returned levelly, “Go right ahead. I have nothing to lose.”

She breathed in and out, “I haven’t seen Percy since I did what he wanted. Just as well.”

“Vespera?”

Belinda rolled her eyes and tossed a hand in disgust. “He works for her. She works for someone they call Ma Dame.” When Harry tilted his head sideways, she added, “She’s become a rival to the boss these two work for.” She gestured into the room at the television where Harry normally found Slowdraw and Hummer. “They used to be a couple, but now they don’t get along so well. Only women allowed in Ma Dame’s organization. Except Percy. I guess.”

Harry smirked.

Her mouth worked until it glistened with saliva. “Get even with Percy, you say?”

“Yes. I want to bring him low. As low as possible.” Harry watched her pull the cheese from her sandwich and tear it into small strips. He went on, “I want to destroy him in front of everyone... especially his father.” This notion opened a vibrating hollow in Harry’s midsection, like he had not eaten in days and someone promised stew.

“What are you going to do?”

“Lure him in with what he wants most in the world. He’s weak and not very bright. It’ll be easy.”

Belinda smirked, underlined with general unhappiness. “I thought what he wanted most was to show off. Get attention. A girl.” She shrugged, tossing her hands, which accented her shaking anger. “New wand. New broomstick. His medals.”

Harry was drawn out of his strategizing. “Percy has medals?”

She waved one hand dismissively, relaxing into mockery. “Yeah Special Under Duress Service and some other where you can’t read it, since it’s a secret, but it glitters a lot. Fudge presented both of them to him.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “He must hate working in Mysteries. Can’t brag nearly as much.”

She hovered her abused sandwich bread back to the sink. “Doesn’t stop him. Let’s him brag and then not have to back it up, since he can claim you aren’t allowed to know.” She stood and fetched a bottle of sherry. With shaking hands she poured some into a tumbler, lifting the bottle invitingly in Harry’s direction. When he waved her off, she put it down and sipped it. “Watched my mum do this when I was a girl. Hated her for it.”

Harry pulled his wand and magicked it into non-existence, glassware and all.

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She stared at her empty hand and licked her sherry moistened lips. "Why'd you do that?"

"For your own good," he replied. It sounded good, but it was a lie. He just wanted to mess with her.

"Bastard," she muttered, but rather than pop out for more, she sat back and with a long sigh said with relish, "I'd love to watch Percy go down."

"I'll buy you a new bottle of sherry to celebrate when we're through," Harry quipped, sounding obnoxious to his own ears.

She crossed her arms. "I won't need it, then."

Hummer and Slowdraw appeared. They glowered at Harry. Slowdraw grumbled, "You moved in on our territory. That was ours, Diagon was."

Harry reached into his pocket and tossed them a Galleon. Hummer caught it and examined it. "Boss gets 80%."

"That's a 100%."

They now stared at Harry with twisted faces. "That's all you got?"

Harry wanted to stand up to better toss spells at them if needed, but he opted to continue with cocky and dismissive and propped his feet up on the table. "How much should I have got from them?"

"For a month?" Hummer stammered like someone tired of dealing with the hopelessly daft. "At least fifteen. For a shop that successful, thirty."

"I'm getting paid by the day so that's right," Harry insisted, gesturing at the Galleon Hummer held. "What shop can afford that every month?"

The underlings just stared at him, giving no answer. Belinda said, "That's the point."

Harry thought about Eeylops and lightly shook his head.

Slowdraw said, slowly and clearly, "You need to get paid for a month."

Harry mockingly held up his hands. "All right. All right. No one told me."

"Yer just s'posed to know." Clearly they both thought he was an idiot. Harry considered knocking them both to their knees. His eyes slid over to them and he felt for his pocket. But they were apparently highly familiar with this look, because they stiffened, and mid-step backward, Apparated away.

Harry rolled his eyes again.

"Shakedown seems beneath you," Belinda said through a sloppy smile.

"I like to think so. It's not a shakedown; I'm working for pay, providing protection."

She laughed, snorting when she took a breath. "And the difference would be?"

After a gap, Harry admitted with a grin, "Maybe there isn't one." But he could not care about such subtleties when he had bigger things to worry about. He leaned

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forward. "Percy has my old wand." In case someone was still listening, he added: "and I want it back. But he's not going to give it to me. I want you to tell him that the Boss, Ma Dame's rival, is interested in buying it, price no object."

Belinda gave that some thought. "Why would he want it?"

"It's the wand that killed Voldemort. That would make it a collector's item, no? Just tell Percy that for me, that the Boss wants to buy the wand." Harry stood up, acting like he had somewhere to be.

Belinda said, "How would the Boss know Percy had the wand?"

"Maybe you let it slip..."

"I'm not that sloppy," she criticized. "I'm careful with things."

Harry leaned on the back of the chair. "Not careful enough to stay out of trouble, I would say."

Her lips pursed. She looked away and her face grew chiseled. "I can't stand my life now. Some days I just want to walk in and confess it all just to stop fearing everything all the time. I think everyone must know, that they are all suspicious, but then nothing ever happens. I'm just left to do my job. It's torture."

Harry rubbed his chin. He had a thought. "Ma Dame would love to take the Boss down, wouldn't she?"

Strangely, Belinda brightened at this. "Oh, I would say."

"Hm. And Percy would love to be rewarded by Ma Dame for helping with that. He'd do all kinds of stupid things if he thought that he might accomplish that." Harry's mind floated in a pleasant smoky weaving of possibility. It occurred to him that Belinda, lacking Occlumency, would be an open book for Percy. He stepped around the table, wand out.

When he took Belinda by the chin, she said, "What are you doing?"

Soothingly, he replied, "Nothing that will hurt. Hold still." And he struck from her the memory of the wand purchase being his idea and before she could blink back to awareness, he slipped away.



McGonagall shuffled her staff meeting notes, and said, "Anyone else have any issues they wish to bring up before we move on?"

Madame Pince raised her thin fingers. "A rather large number of books have been removed from the Restricted Section and not checked out, far more than the normal number that students find interesting. Given the exceptional nature of a few of the more dangerous ones, I cannot imagine they are being stored undetected by any of our students."

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Snape uncrossed his arms. "I have a number of them," he casually said.

Across the table, Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"Quite a number of them, it seems," Pince criticized, adjusting her glasses to better peer at Snape as if to reevaluate him. "A few of the volumes are quite rare and fickle about their use. The Corpus Delicti should be handled with extreme care. I am surprised it let you remove it from the library, let alone the shelf."

Snape shrugged broadly. He did not have that particular book, but he strongly suspected he knew who had taken it. Dismissively, he asked, "Do you require a catalog of what I am using, currently? I can compose one for you."

"As long as you are careful and return them by the end of the school year for the final inventory, I can overlook it, but I would prefer you formally check them out. The other staff are quite good about that, even when they take books after hours."

Snape avoided Hermione's attempts to catch his eye, wishing she would better pretend to be un-affected. After the meeting adjourned, she stalled and sorted her papers until they were the last two in the room.

"All of the books you loaned me had been checked out already with Madame Pince," Hermione said in a leading tone.

"Yes," Snape said, finally pushing to his feet and tossing his robes straight. "And your point?"

"I assume that Ha-

Snape interrupted, "Of course Harry has them."

Hermione frowned. "But what is he looking for?"

The mid-day light from the single window shifted while Snape considered an answer that was not utterly philosophical. The stone and masonry wall opposite the window went from pale mud to slate grey as the clouds glided overhead.

"He is not looking for anything in particular. I believe he is just bored."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "That's worse."

"The weekend could not come soon enough. I resist checking on him too frequently, lest he begin to think of me as overbearing."

"You have other good excuses to go home."

"And I have been using them."

Hermione dropped her voice. "Candide tells me he has been behaving just fine."

Snape rubbed his chin. "He has actually been growing more protective of her, I believe."

"That's something." She finished making a neat stack of her notebooks.

"Perhaps."

She stood staring down at her leather satchel flopped beside the stack. "He behaves so strangely around me. I just want to reach out and shake him."

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"I would not recommend that."

Her shoulders fell. "What are we going to do? I have two notebooks full of references but not to any spells I would want to attempt on anyone, let alone Harry."

Snape was relentless. "No matter what he turns into?"

"The ones that don't involve crippling the mind – which is most of them, involve splicing souls one way or another," she said, filling with anger. "That's what started all this with Voldemort, isn't it?" She dropped her hand on the table. "I'm sorry. I've been reading instead of sleeping a few too many nights in a row." She pushed her hair back from her face and held it there. "I thought I'd feel better going to see him more often, you know, remind him of our friendship, how things used to be." With her hands still pressed to the sides of her head, she said, "It didn't work. He's so calculating now, it's unsettling. Calculating is what I used to have to do for him. Now all the time I worry what in the world he's thinking about."

"The way he looks at me sometimes, I get the sense he's wanting to test my loyalty with something he knows I won't want to do. And he knows me terribly well. That's the worst part: how awful the challenge may be. It's hard to act normally, worrying."

She dropped her hands to her sides. "You know all this," she stated.

He nodded faintly. "I am in my element; shall we say?"

She snapped, bordering on shrill, "I don't want to hear that." Her eyes blinked rapidly as she buckled her satchel. "I've been reluctant to suggest this, but Winky... she also, in a sense, is in her element." Hermione raised her eyes, waiting for a reply.

"I have already dismissed that idea." He leaned on the back of a chair. "She did well enough, for a while, with Barty Crouch Jr. but Winky was bound to him long before she was put in charge of him. Harry is not, nor would he submit to it now, except through trickery that would most likely negate the effects. In any event, past events lead me to believe Harry is stronger than her."

"Care to illuminate?"

"In a fit of anger over breaking up with Penelope, Harry flew off in his Animagus form. When he had been gone too long, I ordered Winky to fetch him back, but she insisted he was out of her reach and could not elaborate more. He should not have been too distant, since he was still within the country. At the moment of my request, Harry was trying to escape his troubles by flying himself into exhaustion. Winky suffered great difficulty in denying my request, but still did so. I believe now that his will exceeded hers. And if it did then, it certainly does now."

"In any event, his trust is the most important thing I am concerned about right now. Winky has been instructed to keep an eye on things. Only. She insists she can calm Harry without risk when he is at home, and I told her to continue doing so only as long as Harry does not suspect."

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“And the books? What if Harry learns something dangerous?”

Snape scoffed with lips twisted upward. “Harry does not need to learn anything. The fact that he believes he needs to is buying us time.”



At home on Saturday, the first thing Harry said to Snape after following him to the drawing room was: “You said you could loan me a book about the Wand of Destiny.”

“I did.” Snape put his small case down on the desk. “It is in the Hogwarts Library. I’m surprised you have not found it.” Then after a beat: “Given how very many books you have from there.”

“I’ve been through the entire Restricted Section, twice over,” Harry said, wanting to sound diligent.

“It isn’t in the Restricted Section.”

“Oh.”

While Snape scratched out something on a parchment corner, he said, “The most powerful information is generally not hidden or protected. It is in plain sight.” He handed the slip with an author and title to Harry, who slipped away for the library and returned not even a minute later.

“And to think, the rest of us must suffer the Floo Network.”

Harry opened the jewel-encrusted book to a random page. “I don’t know how you tolerate it,” he said. “This looks familiar from that other place.”

“It should.”

Harry closed the book and held it at his side. “I wonder how they’re doing?”

“You promised not to return there,” Snape said, placing his hands on his case, but not moving to open it.

“I won’t return there,” Harry said. “Not unless you change your mind for some reason and tell me to go.” Indeed, Harry had found a far larger challenge: the two greatest wizards of the century, allied.

“I do not like that distant look,” Snape said, studying Harry as he in turn studied the low hearth.

“Then I’ll go elsewhere,” Harry said distractedly, turning for the library.

Harry’s reading was interrupted by Snape saying, “Lupin and your cousins will be here shortly for a late lunch.”

Harry sat up on the leather divan and put the book aside. “You have been playing social director,” he complained sharply.

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Snape shook his head. "Not me. Your friends have." He leaned against the door frame and gestured casually at the closed book. "Learn anything?"

Harry shrugged. "It says Death himself created that wand, but that doesn't seem very likely, does it?"

"Death follows that wand." Snape said. "That much is certain. If Death created it, he has cleverly corralled human nature to his cause with it."

"Grindelwald had that wand, right? Before Dumbledore?"

Carefully pedantic, Snape replied, "That is my understanding."

"So all these great wizards... they were actually cheating."

"Perhaps. They were great, if you will, in their ideas. If we wish to be generous." Snape said. His intense gaze contrasted strongly with his easy-going posture and tone.

Harry matched his gaze. "Their ideas were also their downfall. So what does it mean to be great, then?" Harry did not wait for a response and, thinking of Percy, added: "I suppose it means your enemies are no bother." Harry waited a pause to properly fix Snape's expression so as to watch if it changed. "And the cloak?"

Snape's face remained level. "It could very well be the same as the one you have, just as your counterpart's friends assumed in that place. I do not know how one might tell, except to attempt to hide from death directly."

"Didn't work for my dad," Harry said, frowning.

Snape pushed away from the doorframe and stepped closer to touch the book. "In any event, the cloak's power is most likely limited to that which you have already experienced of it. You tell me if it is the one."

"It's a good cloak," Harry said.

"And one of rather exceptional longevity. Few if any last so long."

"Whose side are you on, again?" Harry prodded.

Snape's brow went up. "Yours. Do you doubt that?"

Harry shrugged. The door knocker sounded, prompting him to stand and slip by Snape, pleased at worrying him with that comment, and wanting to hide his grin.

Harry's cousins, including the two little ones, stood in the grey gloom of the garden, having arrived by car with Lupin.

As he helped with the coats, Lupin said to Candide and Snape in a quiet aside, "Don't know how Muggles manage that every day. At least in a train you can get up and walk about."

Harry followed behind Basel as the boy high stepped toward the brighter hall. The boy did not feel magical to Harry, but that did not slow him down at all. He charged into the main hall on his small legs, stopped in the center of the floor, and surveyed the room before heading straight for the tall floor oil lamp, which was lit.

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Snape waved an Imperturbable Charm at it just before the collision. Basel tumbled, picked himself up and launched himself at the footstool, which fortunately needed no magical protection.

Candide crossed her arms high on her body and said, "I can see that we are going to need some more child-proofing in here."

Patricia scooped Basel up. He kicked all the way as if still running on air. "They've been cooped up in the car. We're staying at a hotel with a glassed-in pool tonight and tomorrow, so they can have some play time. They need it. It's been a miserable winter so far."

Briar tugged on Harry's robes and folded her hand up and down in a wave hello before scampering over to pull off her brother's shoe where it dangled beside her mother's hip. She did not feel magical either, Harry decided.

He looked up and found Candide giving him a questioning look. He shook his head. She returned an overdone frown.

It was not until they were all seated and Harry helped Snape carry in the food from the kitchen that Candide said to his cousins, "Harry doesn't think the little ones are M. A. G. I. C. A. L."

"No?" Pamela said. "That's too bad."

Patricia said, helping her daughter with spooning her own potatoes after she gave a squawk when threatened with being served. "I don't think so, really. I don't know how, what did you call them... Mugged parents could possibly manage."

"Muggle," Harry supplied, setting a large serving fork on the plate of roast.

Pamela turned to Lupin, "Well, it's up to us."

Lupin blinked, stunned. "What?"

Harry forced down a grin. Patricia leaned forward and said, "Look at all this. How did you manage it all while we were sitting around having drinks?"

To avoid the children talking about her to their father later, Winky had been instructed to stay out of sight. "It was the help," Harry said.

"The E. L. F." Pamela explained.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot. How nice," Patricia added jealously, surveying the feast. "I don't need a wand to wave around, I just want an el- E. L. F." She accepted the roast Candide forked for her.

Lupin, who had been active in the conversation up to that point, fell silent. He was on the far corner from Harry tonight, allowing the sisters to guard and split up the children. Harry felt all kinds of strange instincts about him as he studied his profile in the light of the candelabra, mostly abhorrent ones. Memories of Lupin's early patient help with spells wiped away all but the curse instinct. Pamela patted

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Lupin's arm and Harry's other instincts came to the fore again. Again he won against them, but he had to keep at it.

Harry looked away, around the table and found Snape studying him. He dropped his gaze to Briar beside him. She piped up, pointing, "Candles!"

"That's what we use around here," he agreed.

She clapped her hands once and gave a grin that made her cheeks puff. "Whose birthday is it?"

Harry grinned. "No one's. We just like candles."

Dark liquids were being offered and perhaps that's what inspired Patricia to lean forward to look down the table and say, "Are you two going to give us some M. A. G. I. C. children?"

"We're thinking about it," Pamela said.

Lupin skipped stunned this time and went for long suffering.

Pamela turned to Snape. "What are our... um, odds, I guess you'd call it?"

"I don't know why you are asking me," Snape said between sips of something that gave off a whiff of smoke when swirled in a glass.

"Because you seem to know everything," Pamela returned.

Dryly, Snape said, "I don't mean to give that impression."

"Really?"

Snape rolled his eyes, sat back and huffed, "About a 65% chance. Maybe a little better. Harry might remember how many generations it tends to jump in your family. He would have seen the files while doing the paperwork for your exemption."

Harry, who had seen the disparate old parchments for each person through the years, tried to remember all the dates, or at least a sense of the gaps between them. "About once a hundred years. Maybe twice."

Patricia asked, "So, it's recessive or what?"

"It's random," Snape stated, pouring himself more from one of the bottles set out under the candelabra.

"So you really don't know," Pamela accused.

"I believe I said that," Snape replied.

Candide patronizingly shook her head and helpfully said, "Pure blood families that have been thus for generations can have what we call Squib children. Muggles with no history of M. A. G. I. C. can have children that are."

Pamela said, "Maybe that's just the rate at which people fool around, you know, showing up there."

Harry found this funny, then had to clear his throat. Beside him, Snape fell distracted, making Harry wonder what he was thinking.

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After his relatives headed out for the hotel, sleepy children draped over their shoulders, Harry returned to his reading. Snape appeared in the doorway. "I thought perhaps we could play some chess."

They settled before the board and Harry promptly beat him in eight moves. The knight who had smashed the king stood tapping his sword on his boot, looking smug. The pieces looked up expectantly, watching the two of them.

"Want another?" Harry asked, enjoying himself, enjoying asking that in just the right insinuating way.

Snape was not so easily baited. "If you wish."

Harry sat back and surveyed the pieces lying toppled on the table beside the board. He waved for the pieces to reset for a new game. The queen on Snape's side patted the arm of the king who appeared to be nursing his head. But they all stood to attention, frozen, when the last pawn settled into place.

It required fourteen moves this time for Harry to win, including a wild distraction gambit that sacrificed three of Snape's pieces to even keep it close.

"I must be rusty," Snape said, toppling his own king this time, before the rook could reach it after eliminating the bishop that stood in the way.

"This wasn't a test?" Harry asked.

Snape reset the pieces before replying. His face gave nothing away. "I had not intended it as one, no."

"Getting rusty for sure then," Harry needled him.

Snape raised his gaze, but he looked amused if anything, or perhaps affectionate.

Harry pushed his chair back, feeling pulled in too many directions at once. He wanted to move on trapping Percy and now wondered if the state he had left Belinda in would compel her to contact Percy. "I have an errand to run."

"May I ask where?"

"I'll be back really quickly. So it doesn't matter." With that, he Apparated to Belinda's flat.

"I wish you'd use the door and knock like someone with some sense of decorum."

Harry glanced around, but the room was empty. "No one else who comes here does, do they?"

"Eff off," she breathed.

"Is that an invitation?" Harry asked, wanting the upper hand.

She smirked. "I seem to recall difficulties in that area were on your end."

Harry decided to ignore that rather than see where it may lead. It did not feel to be leading anywhere good. "Have you talked to Percy?"

She grew confused at this. "Why?"

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Harry leaned over a chair back to lord over her. “Just say, yes or no. Really, how secret could that answer be? It was a simple question.” When she nodded, brow heavily furrowed, Harry said, “Excellent. And his answer?”

“Said he had to think about it,” she came back carefully.

“Owl me when he does, will you?” Harry straightened. “Oh, and owling the Boss... let me take care of that, if you will. I, er, I want to get on his good side.”

Harry Apparated away, back to the drawing room. Snape was bent over his files; he only glanced up briefly.

Harry said, “Tonks is supposed to come by. I’ll be in my room.”

Harry sorted through the book piles under his bed. After running out of interesting titles, he had begun searching for books by smell instead of topic. The ones that gave off a whiff of old bitter smoke often had mundane beginnings but then rambled into more interesting prose, as if the author had become possessed. One of them had wild visions of things that could be demons. Another swore that trees talked to him, making Harry think the author simply suffered from magical abilities more in line with Shamanism. These authors’ progressive distress made Harry feel smug.

He put those away and took out the next, one utterly infused with the odor of a trash fire and bearing page edges stained with fingers of smoke. This one introduced itself on the title page as a personal collection of the worst spells the author could find. Trouble was, the author was so obsessive about recording his findings he continued to write long after the nib ran dry of ink. Harry tilted the page to read what periodically became an engraving in the vellum. After straining his eyes on one particularly interesting page, Harry fetched out a soft pencil and lightly shaded in the missing lines so he could read the pen scratching in relief.

Harry stopped and flipped back a few pages. The described spell appeared to be a Protean Charm for flesh. Harry pulled out his soft pencil and laying it on edge, gently rubbed the words into view.

Harry shut the book when he heard the sound of the Floo downstairs. He changed it for one of his Auror books and then acted surprised at Tonks’ arrival. She appeared worn and aged more than he imagined her with his mind’s eye. She threw herself down on the bed, arms wide, and said, “There is way too much going on.”

After a minute, she asked, “How are you, Harry?” She sat up and faced him, fingers plucking at the bedding. She wanted to ask him something, he could tell, but held back. With a sigh, she crab-crawled over beside him and sat close, legs rubbing.

“What to do anything?” she asked, sounding far away.

Belinda’s taunts echoed in Harry’s mind. He closed the book on tracking and dropped it off the edge of the bed while reaching for her, intending to make a point of some kind, but to whom, it wasn’t clear.

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The next morning, while Snape and Candide faced each other across a late substantial breakfast, Harry stood near the window, opening his post. Tonks had departed earlier, unusually declining a good breakfast. She seemed eager to go, despite spending the rest of the night. Harry had other things on his mind, and decided it not worth his while to ponder too long what might be troubling her.

As he stood there, an ordinary barn owl delivered a missive from Belinda, sealed with a fanciful wax disk bearing the note. If opened when not alone, letter will turn to sawdust. The seal looked like the kind of thing the Minister's office would use.

Harry went to the drawing room and shut the door. He stood in the middle of the floor and broke the wax free of the paper.

Percy is interested. Will only discuss terms with the Boss directly, face to face. Is adamant on this point.

A knock sounded on the door and Harry lowered the letter to his side. When the door opened he could feel the paper disintegrate between his fingers and flow away. Snape glanced at this, and moved on only after Harry brushed his hands off, uncaring.

Snape said, "I should return to Hogwarts soon, but I wanted to talk to you first."

Harry failed to react.

"Have a seat, Harry," Snape invited.

With no reason to argue, Harry took one of the visitor's chairs, sitting in it casually, attention on the window more than the desk.

Snape took his time making his way to the chair behind the desk. He considered Harry and his fingertips alternately. "You have plans?" he queried, taking the upper hand.

Harry replied, "I want to get even with Percy."

A pause. "You expect me to object?"

Harry's mouth worked. "I don't know."

"You believe he killed Moody; do you not?"

"I do." Harry could not bear to sit. He stood and paced once, stopping before a shelf that had collected more personal items than Harry realized Snape owned in total. He felt the words come easily, having no one to talk to about his ideas, most days. "I think he's been trying to get at me for a while now. At first because I suspected him of manipulating Transportation's records, then because I was interfering with his dating Belinda, which I think now was less personal and more strategic on his part."

"Dating the Minister of Magic's personal assistant would have distinct advantages." Snape pulled his robes over his lap. "I have no objection to assisting you. If you are willing to let me in on your plan?"

Harry felt the first stab of suspicion. He stared at a tarnished brass bookend in the shape of a sheared off crystal ball. The mate to it was on the shelf above. They

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were a wedding present from Professor Trelawney. A tasteless choice, he thought.

When Harry turned, Snape said, too casually, "If you do not need my assistance, that is fine as well."

"Percy works for a different branch of Durumulna than I have been. I put word out that my gang boss wants to buy my old wand, the one I know Percy has."

"How many others know Percy has it? How is this boss figure reputed to have found out?"

"Already thought of that. Belinda knew as well, and she could have told him. Her flat's one of his safehouses. I told her to tell him she let it slip."

Snape leaned far back in his chair, in a pose the opposite of his usual professorial one. "Why would Percy risk selling it, when he could deny having it at all very easily? The price would have to be very high indeed."

Harry shook his head. "That's not the plan, actually." He smiled. "Percy said he would only consider negotiating at all if he could meet with the Boss in person for the transaction. That's what I was hoping, but even if he hadn't insisted on that, I would have settled for trapping just him." When Snape's gaze narrowed, Harry went on, "Ma Dame, Percy's gang's boss, wants to get at the other Boss and take over his branch of Durumulna. If she thinks he'll be there, I'm hoping she goes in for an all out assault. I'm going to warn the Ministry to be ready for that possibility."

Snape rubbed his fingers over his chin. "Up to this point this Boss is not actually involved in the transaction. But if you were to tell him that Ma Dame is planning on ambushing him, you may get him to fall into the larger Ministry trap as well."

Harry smiled more. "That's an excellent idea. He may help me lay a more believable trap as well, if he thinks she'll be there."

"It has a chance of working, as long as Percy is trusting enough," Snape said. "Given Percy's skills at Legilimency, Belinda is a large potential hole in your plans."

"I used a few very small memory charms on her," Harry said reassuringly. "She forgot I was involved. Now she only thinks I'm nosing in to make a good impression on the Boss."

Snape raised a brow. "She thinks you're turning into Percy, in other words."

"Please."

Snape sat with his fingers steepled before saying, "You run a huge risk trying to take everyone down at once, I must say. If you miss at all, you miss severely and will have serious enemies to contend with."

"You're saying I shouldn't aim so high?"

"I'm saying, keep the Ministry out of it. Let the rivals reduce each other's numbers by their very nature. Or aim lower. One branch at a time, starting with the rival of your handler. That will win you a rise in that part of the organization."

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Harry scratched his head.

“Have you set a date for the transaction?”

“Not yet. I need time to set up a site for the meeting. I’ll have to call in some favors for that.”

“Do let me know when, so I am forewarned.” He bent back to his files and without looking up reached into his pocket. “Speaking of forewarned, you should perhaps see what just arrived.”

He held out a copy of the Quibbler.

Harry accepted it, tried to figure out which half of it to read, then found the headline in question, written in hand printed stencil around the outer edge of the cover. Harry turned it anti-clockwise three times to read it all. Exposé by our newest contributing investigative writer, brought over from the Daily Prophet at great loss to them, Rita Skeeter. Necessitating a print run of an extra 500 copies! Harry Potter, Crime Lord!

Harry flipped the magazine open. “How much does she know?”

“Enough.”

Snape said, “For what it’s worth, I think she found out the old fashioned way, by bribing some low-level sources.”

Harry lips twitched. “Maybe I should give her an interview. Got any potions I could slip her?”

Snape paused before replying, “Depends upon what effect you are hoping for.”

“Something that takes her out of the picture.”

“She’s ahead of you in this game,” Snape stated in a warning tone. “You cannot remove her now without all suspicion falling upon you.”

Teeth clenched, Harry said, “I missed my chance, you are saying.”

“You missed the previous chance. There will be others.” He stood up and began putting his files away in a small trunk. “I will see if I can find a workable variation on the Holiday Compulsion Concoction. Generally a disreputable brew sold only by owl post for use on one’s boss, but it can probably be reformulated. I would not recommend trying, for a while anyway, anything stronger than that. But by all means, grant her an interview and send her off the scent.”

Harry assumed Tonks would show up around lunchtime, but he was mistaken. She did not arrive until evening. She stood in the main hall, hands fisted, leaning forward toward him as if into the wind.

“I need to talk to you, Harry,” she stated clearly, absolutely nothing but discipline in her tone.

Candide stood up. “I’ll be upstairs anyone needs me.”

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Tonks pulled a ruffled copy of the Quibbler from her pocket. While doing this she eyed Harry the way she eyed random magical citizens while on patrol. “I went around to a few of her sources, after I weaseled their nicknames out of her with threats I really wasn’t prepared to back up. They pretty much confirm her story.”

Harry imagined his erstwhile assistants under the effects of some nasty curse while saying, “So?”

This disarmed her. “What?”

“I told you I had an idea about how to do things. That’s what I’m doing.”

She stuffed the magazine back into her pocket. “Harry, you have NO idea what you’re doing.”

Her condescending tone flipped him completely out of any affection for her. Coldly, he asked, “And how would you know?”

Again, this made her stop to reassess him. She exhaled and rubbed her brown Mohawk gently one way then the other while peering at him sideways. “You’re going to get yourself killed, Harry.”

“You have that little faith in me? You don’t know anything about me, just for the record.”

She rubbed her hair. “Merlin, Harry...” She gestured upstairs. “And a baby on the way. Harry these people play for keeps.”

“So do I. So did the Dark Lord.” He paced away from her and peered up at the ceiling where the new wood still glowed where the balcony had been repaired. “I was going to ask for your help.”

“I couldn’t help you in good conscience with this anyway. I want you to stop.”

He spun on her. “So, if I tell you I’m going to hand you an entire branch of Durumulna, you’ll not take it?”

Tonks closed her eyes. “If you tell me what you’re arranging. I might.”

“I’ll think about it,” Harry said.

She frowned and glanced, pained, around the room. “You aren’t leaving me a lot of options here, Harry.”

“What?” Harry let his anger drive him into a disconnected state where everything spread before him like a chess board. “Are you going to arrest me again? I know you helped Severus frame someone for Moody’s murder. You don’t have any options.”



“I want a meeting with the Boss”, Harry demanded of his contact, Ursie.

It was the middle of the week and they were alone in Belinda’s flat. Hummer and Slowdraw were off somewhere, which was unfortunate, since Harry wanted to talk to

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them and could not seem to catch them there. Harry was feeling irked. He had spent hours over the previous few days searching out a proper spot for the transaction, and he had found one, an old stone building on the outskirts of Birmingham. Spelled properly, it would hold well against even magical escape from the inside. He was going to force the two of them to help with that in exchange for not pummeling them for talking to Skeeter.

The man snorted. "Why would I set that up?"

Harry kept his burgeoning anger in check. "Why wouldn't you set that up?"

The large man crossed his arms and said through his mask. "Because you haven't done enough for me to deserve it. You've made more trouble than you're worth. You even got the press involved. That's breakin' rule one."

Harry's fingers grew damp against his wand, which he held pointed at the floor. He could simply level the man and force him to do what he wanted. An Imperio certainly would work. The spell leapt to mind like he had done it a hundred times.

Ursie uncrossed his arms, posture wary. Harry gathered his anger into a struggling bundle and said, "I have a business offer for the Boss and only I can convey it."

The man scoffed, "Do another job for me and I'll consider it."

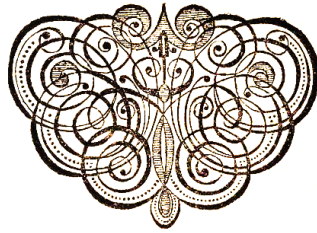
"I don't want to wait that long." The sickly energy of the Imperio made his fingers burn where they touched his wand.

"I don't operate on your time, Potter," the man sneered, and Apparated away before Harry could finish raising his wand. He rubbed his tingling fingers together and peered at them. They were unmarred. The hungry feel of the spell still filled his limbs. He should have put an Apparition block on the flat before the meeting. A mistake he would not make again.

Annoyed and stymied, Harry slipped away to the Dark Plane. He walked a while, paced at a distance by a few curious creatures. One approached, sniffing the ground. It raised its bulbous, brain-exposed head and scampered off, dashing between the hillocks for cover.

Harry fell sideways to somewhere he had free rein to do as he pleased.

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SLUMBERING SHADOWS

Harry lay between furrows of folded grass in the field beside the Burrow. The lingering pain of absolute cold struck and held him fast. He waited, vaguely unwelcoming, for the magically heated ground beneath him to seep through his heavy cloak. A cloud-flecked blue-scape filled his vision so broadly he feared he may fall into it, tenuously pinned as he was to the hard-earth sky behind him. Closing his eyes reduced the vertigo but left him even more intensely alive with agony.

Eventually, Harry rose up and, feeling lazy and uncaring, applied only a disguise to his eyes before approaching the Burrow.

There was no answer at the door. Harry stood under the sagging awning over the side entryway and closed his eyes. Death Eaters shimmered in his mind, in the near field and far field, a forest within a forest. He swayed and had to force himself to draw in a breath against the intimate hold of the vision. An interesting cluster of shadows hunched together somewhere in the midfield. Harry Apparated away, in their direction. But when he closed his eyes again they were no closer. He stared at the shrubs and nearby road, thinking. He'd had this trouble before. Like the Dark Plane, direction in his mind did not mean much, unless the shadow was very close.

Harry swallowed a mouthful of saliva, wanting to feel so many servants so close, close enough to feel their tendrils brushing his mind. Harry systematically Apparated to the most distant places he knew from field work, glad he knew so many. Each time, the shadows teased, growing more distant, or sometimes slightly less, but never coming close, and in no predictable pattern. He could not simply triangulate, he decided, and attempting it was a waste of energy.

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Gathering his wits for yet another Apparition, Harry returned to the place where the shadows had felt closest, Holyhead. He stood beneath the flag poles over the gate to the Quidditch stadium and wizard playground, which stood unused except by four bundled young children on starter brooms that would only fly two feet off the ground and only for ten seconds at a time. The children tossed a rugby ball around, while alternately running and jumping back into the air, a far more athletic sport than actual Quidditch.

This was too public a place. Harry transformed and took flight. He flapped inland, looking for a suitable remote spot, relishing the cold wind and the instinctive animal freedom from his emotions. The flat green expanse of Anglesey slid beneath him, dwarfed by the approaching mountains of Snowdonia. Harry came to a fluttering landing in a high hanging valley marred by grey boulders and rock seams wearing collars of stubborn snow. The air carried the dank scent of chilled mulch.

Harry's trousers and cloak hugged his legs, pressed unceasingly by the wind, but it barely stirred the stiff heather, disconnecting him even more from the world around him. The calm of conquering the open air in Animagus form followed him through transforming, but the wind sucked it away and the lure of the dark vision leached in again.

He paced around in a broad circle with a Fogging Charm, aiming it high enough to significantly dim the cloud-filtered sunlight. Taking up a position where the ground was smooth with nothing to trip over, he pulled his cloak hood forward over his head as far as it would go and spelled it with a darkness hex to hide his face.

Harry lowered his wand to his side and tilted his head back. He felt hungry to his core and that keen craving wiped away any wiser thoughts that tried to rise before he revisited what he had sensed while sending Voldemort off from Shrewsthorpe in that other place. He sent a vibrating song out into the green forest of his mind. A siren song, aimed at the cluster he could sense skulking nearby, but not near enough. It was harder to do than he expected. The wind around him seemed to tear the song away, even though it should not be flowing out in the physical world.

Harry took a deep breath and held it, pushing out the siren lure from his core, quiet at first, only building in strength as he could sustain the notes of it, starting again when it faltered and shattered.

At first nothing happened. The heather stood firm against the wind, as did the artificial haze obscuring the slopes. But the sound of Apparition finally broke the ceaseless whistle of the wind. Harry remained still, head covered, tuning the vibration to fetch the rest of the cluster. Consecutive pops broke the silence. The hooded forms, postures wary and clumsy with surprise, shuffled into a semblance of a circle. Four, five, six. Harry dulled the song. His arms prickled with the thrill of success and the

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dying vibration of the lure. The Death Eaters stood silently, waiting, their nervous tension making the Fogging Spell twist and eddie around the loose circle.

Harry tasted their presence, amused at what they must be imagining. They were so close he had no choice but to discipline his own hunger. Standing there with such obedient servants so close and with his own instincts choked back, slipped Harry into an unusually calm state. The Death Eaters continued to stand at attention. Harry could see the distant others in his mind, shimmering more than before, agitated perhaps.

The hunger had not abated, but it had backed off in his mind, willing to wait. He turned, examining each of the fogged-in figures. Each displayed a personality in the way they waited. Some stood with deceptive patience, hands clasped. Some stood with arms tense, ready for flight. Behind the mask holes, their eyes showed wide and shining, trapped.

The sense of power and the self control it required began to grow suffocating. Enough of this, Harry thought. He slipped away, leaving them to themselves.

Harry returned to the Burrow and found it empty again. He slipped inside to check the magical clock. Ginny's hand pointed at School. Ginny had long since finished at Hogwarts, but since her tutor was there, that was the best place to check.

The thick undergrowth at the edge of the Forbidden Forest obscured Harry's arrival near Hogwarts castle. The dead leaf fall masked the scent of the Dark Plane he carried on himself, making it almost natural. Renewing the disguise on his eyes, Harry stepped out and began making his way toward the doors. As he passed the equipment sheds near the Quidditch pitch, he heard familiar voices. It was Ginny and a handful of students working on spells. Professor Snape was not around, so Harry approached as he was.

The students, a mix of Sixth and Seventh Years, paused and turned as he sauntered up to them.

"Harry Potter!" one of them blurted in the unadulterated tone Harry had not heard since he was a Third Year. The others muttered in agreement with the first boy's breathless surprise.

Ginny blinked rapidly, then her face underwent a transformation. Harry could see in her eyes she recognized him for who he really was, so he gave her a quirked smile. "How are your lessons?" he asked.

"Good. Done for the day, but Professor Snape let some other students join in, so we're just drilling until the bell rings for afternoon classes."

A bony lean girl in Ravenclaw that Harry recognized, but did not know the name of, leaned close to Ginny, and whispered in awe, "You know Harry Potter?"

Ginny held her mouth open while she worked out an answer. "Yeah," she finally

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said, trying to sound dismissive so as to cut off more questions. Harry could see her relishing her companions' ardor at his presence. "Yeah, we know each other." She shrugged broadly and the others shifted to better surround both of them.

"I wish we didn't have to go," another girl said. She gaped at Harry with an unattractive wavering grin.

Ginny tugged Harry's arm and turned him away from this sight. "Will you duel with me a little? Do you have time?"

The others lined up as spectators while the two of them got into position. Ginny had improved; she moved from one spell to the next much faster. The bell rang from the school, echoing out from the bailey and floating on the chill breeze. Harry took advantage of the distraction to snag Ginny's wand with a Whip Charm.

"You win." Her shoulders fell. "You rest better go."

With expressions of dismay, the five students obediently trooped off, leaving the two of them alone.

"You're doing well," Harry said, handing her wand back. She blushed fiercely, but his words brought her gaze up full of a shy smile, revealing poorly buried longing, which perfectly reflected Harry's raw emotions.

She started strolling and he followed. She said, "I never expect you to come back. It's very strange to have you here."

Needling her, he said in false concern, "You don't want me around?"

She grabbed his sleeve. "Oh, it's not that," she quickly amended. "Especially not with what's happening."

Harry had no idea what was happening. "Are people finally understanding?" he asked, taking on a wise tone.

She changed course and began walking parallel to the lake. Hogsmeade squatted in the distance, hemmed in by fog that obscured the far side of the lake edge.

"Understanding? No one understands what's happening. And some things that Professors McGonagall and Snape find in the Muggle papers, like the Nordic ferry going down yesterday and everyone saying Russia's to blame. And everyone pulling their diplomats out of everywhere. One day everyone's fine, then the next they are blaming each other for everything. This is how wars get started, right?"

"If people want to fight, anything works."

Her pale pink hands glowed in the low light when she waved her arms around. "It's all so big. It's certainly bigger than just me," she scoffed blamefully.

They strolled in silence before she added, "Boy, it's nice to have someone to talk to."

"You can't talk to Professor McGonagall or Professor Snape?"

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She whinged slightly as she replied, "I can, but McGonagall just tells me to study harder, and if I have some kind of worry I just want someone to listen, not give me more work to do. And talking to Professor Snape scares the socks off me. He sees ten times as much conspiracy as anyone else."

At the gate to Hogsmeade she came to a crunching stop in the frosted grass and timed her turn so that he came right up to her, close enough the mist of their breath co-mingled. Her eyes were narrowed by a pleasant smile. "It's really so odd to have you stopping by like this, you know. A Harry Potter from somewhere else." She shook her head. "You act like you don't even realize you are such a legend."

Harry scoffed out of habit.

"The Harry I know would be, I don't know, basking, preening. It would be nauseating."

Harry took her elbow through her rough woolen coat. "It wouldn't stop you obsessing over him though."

She frowned painfully. "It should though, shouldn't it?" she said with a laugh of shared understanding. Her face neutralized and she studied him, saying, "You're so much nicer. More approachable."

"Am I?"

"More like a normal person. Absolutely."

Harry stared back at her, holding the smirk back from his lips.

She went on. "It's nice that you come and help. I don't know where I'd be now if you hadn't convinced everyone to do something before it all started." Behind her eyes flickered fearful alternative possibilities.

She leaned closer, eyes moving between each of his own. "We're done with practice for now, right?" she asked.

Harry read all kinds of things behind her eyes while she nervously chewed her lip. "If you wish." He grabbed her cold hand and walked her through the Hogsmeade gate.

Before the village, he pulled her off the rutted footpath and through the taller pale brown weeds topped with seeds that caught at their cold-stiffened cloaks.

"Where are we going?" Ginny asked.

Harry did not reply. He felt un-tethered and untouchable. His breath swelled his chest and made him lightheaded. Nothing that happened here really mattered and that notion left him dizzy with freedom.

"Oh, it's the Shrieking Shack," Ginny said, when the drooping house came into view over a rise cleared of frost by the weak sun. "Everyone says it's really haunted," she offered helpfully.

"In a sense," Harry answered.

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The crooked door required an unlock spell and a hefty push to free the wooden door from the swollen frame. Paint strips stuck on only with damp, stuck instead to Harry's cloak. The floor had rotted through near the boarded-over broken window. Ginny clung harder to his hand as they traversed the floor along the few muddy boards not bulging and warped with rot.

The empty room smelled lived in, making Harry suspect Lupin still made use of it. "It should be better upstairs," he said.

"What's this?" Ginny asked when they creaked their way into the upstairs bedroom. The bed had a single threadbare quilt. A candle stood in a bent tarnished holder on the floor. Soot stains trailed up the peeling wallpaper above it.

"The ghost still visits, apparently," Harry said, touching the quilt stuffing where the patchwork had gone threadbare.

"Will it come back? Maybe we should go."

Her arm tugged tautly against his hold on her hand.

"It's not a full moon," Harry said. "He won't be around today."

She turned a mystified face his way. He returned a smile and tugged her forward with her hand, still clamped hard to his own. Her curiosity vanished, absorbed by bright-eyed surprise as he pulled her into a forceful kiss.

The bed creaked plaintively under their joined weight. Her quivering breathlessness echoed Harry's own when he reached out to let the shadows stroke his mind. Both driven by entirely different needs they fumbled through disrobing.

"Master?" a wavering voice croaked, probing at the room's musty air which now hung heavy with their exertions.

Harry, breathing fast, glanced at the doorway. The sparse light fell in slates from the boarded window, illuminating a strip of rough face through the gap.

Ginny squeaked and pulled the quilt over them, inside out. Harry blinked in confusion, feeling a shadow under the man crouching at the door more strongly than he could make him out in the physical world.

"I came, Master," the quavering voice insisted.

"Go," Harry said, voice rough. He swallowed hard and slid off the bed on the far side from the door. The shadow weighted him down almost to helplessness, confusing him more. He shook his head to clear it. Ginny pulled her wand out and, wrapped in the quilt, rolled to sit up.

"Go away or I'll smack you one," she snapped.

"Master?" the figure pleaded, inching into the room on his knees. He wore a long apron with a Honeydukes logo flourishing across the front. "It's been so long, Master."

"What is he talking about?" Ginny whispered.

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Harry pulled his robes together and locked his instincts down with the help of panic driven adrenaline. He came around the bed, strategic thoughts lining up neatly, clearing his muddled head. "I don't know. But let me handle this."

Harry, bare feet feeling every ripple of grain and sharp splinter in the old floor, stopped between Ginny and the Death Eater. He licked his lips and struggled with his dual senses, the musty crooked room overlaying the green forest. He hated the feeling of being leashed down and bared his teeth at the simpering man before him.

Trying to sound like he was making things up, he put on a false tone and said, "Your master doesn't want you here right now. Go away."

He did not expect it to work, but the man bowed repeatedly, arms up for protection, and scuffled out backwards on his knees. "I'm sorry, Master. I misunderstood. It's been so long, Master."

"Right," Harry said quietly.

The Death Eater tried to close the door, but it wedged against the warped floor shy of the jam. He pulled frantically on it. "Please don't kill me, Master," the man said. "I did not understand. I'm a loyal servant. I've always been."

Exasperated, Harry said, "I won't kill you if you get out of here."

The man scurried away out of sight. A series of creaks followed him down the stairs.

"Merlin," Ginny breathed. "What a nutter." She swallowed hard. Harry could hear it.

Harry closed his eyes and felt the shadows closing in on him – all of them filling the gap in his inner vision with snaking wisps. He swallowed hard too. They would all come here, to the Shrieking Shack, unless he moved somewhere else.

"I should go."

"Go?" she asked sharply, vaguely hurt. But her face straightened out and she started finding her clothes. "Oh yeah," she then agreed quietly.

Harry teetered on his heels, trying to cease summoning the Death Eaters. A quick snapping shut of his eyes demonstrated it only worked for half of them. He could send them off like he did before, but he wanted to be alone to do that. He did not want to risk giving her any suspicions.

Halfway dressed, Ginny glanced at the doorway. "That bloke was creepy. What do you think was wrong with him?"

"I don't know," Harry replied, trying not to sound impatient. His body complained about their interactions being incomplete. The shadows almost made up for it and if he sent them away he would feel incomplete that way too. Reaching for them made him feel satiated and they began darkening his inner mind yet again, crowding in, filling him.

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Ginny stood up and crept to the door, wand out. “Do you think he’s still here?”

Harry flicked his eyes closed. Three shadows hovered very near. “Probably. There is a tunnel that leads to Hogwarts castle. Why don’t you take that?”

“There’s what?” she blurted.

Harry opened the panel and gestured for her to go. “Hurry,” he snapped, and she obeyed with only one round-eyed glance back out at him.

Harry then slipped away into the Dark Plane. The grey horizon encircled him, unchanging. He wished the place had wind because he really needed to catch his breath. He could not seem to pull in enough air. His mind reached too far out of his body, unbalancing his senses. He tried to reel himself in, to send off the shadows with discordance, but it sent stabs of discomfort through his chest to do so. He relaxed into the instincts tugging at him, which loosened their hold on his emotions so at least he could function.

He did not want to let go. He felt larger and stronger than he ever imagined possible. He hungered now for something new. For something to test his power against... something worthy. Cradling that need, Harry gripped his sweat-slippery wand tightly in both hands and fell sideways, thinking of the base of a hill overshadowed by a lone tall tower.

Harry raised his head up and brushed away the raindrop that splashed into his eye. He sat up fully. He was warm, rather than frigid. Puzzling this, Harry rose easily to his feet and shielded his eyes from the rain to stare up at what was left of the tower. The roof was clean off, rendered into a pile of broken beams and mossy tiles off to one side.

Harry strode closer, feeling for the shadows, which hovered in the distance now, too far away to perceive if they were still approaching. He was glad he had not lost them completely. With their fortifying him, Grindelwald would have even less of a chance.

Harry flew up to the crumbled edge of the tower. Perched there, his keen animal nose screamed about the stench of carrion, burnt metals, and foul potions. The open top floor contained a jumble of debris from the roof and the contents of the room. One side of the wall bulged outward, stones barely balanced, grinding precariously in the wind.

Harry transformed back to himself and used the gaps in the mortar to climb down inside. His eyes keyed on a triangle of peach colored robe visible beneath the wreckage. The smell forced him to press his shirt over his nose and then his cloak too. Harry carefully hovered the smashed remains of a wardrobe aside, revealing the splayed limbs and waxen blue face of Dumbledore. Flies unsettled by the debris shifting, quickly re-congregated.

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“Accio wand!” Harry shouted in each of the cardinal directions. He did not expect to find it, but he had to be thorough.

Harry backed up to the wall and transformed just long enough to flap back to the top edge of the wall. Stones cascaded out from underfoot. Animal instincts riled his mind and he could not calm himself without transforming back to human. Balanced on the uncertain curve of wall in his trainers, he hovered roof beams from the ground back to up to the top to lay across the edges of the tower. He balanced more broken beams across these. Being methodical about what he was doing eased the shaking in his limbs. Purpose seemed to be the only thing he could feel.

He piled the rest of the room’s debris under this makeshift floor and raised Dumbledore’s body slowly up. As the old wizard’s fanned out limbs cleared the tower, the wind began playing with his robes and hair, imparting a false life to his form. Harry swallowed bile and resisted the temptation to cover his nose and mouth again. It felt irreverent to do so.

The rain pelted down harder, in sheets that ricocheted off the ragged stone edge. Harry pointed his wand straight up and parted the clouds with a Sky Tunnel charm. Unpracticed, he expected it would not hold long. The rain continued to blow in on the wind despite the column of open sky.

A crow circled, scolding. Harry raised his wand again and ignited the debris: the broken roof slats, wardrobe, and tangled curtains and bedding. The flames caught and spread, popping and consuming with mindless intent. Harry watched them lick their way up to the body. They seemed eager now and that made him feel regretful. He balanced there on the edge of regret the same way he balanced on the edge of the tower, falling neither way. When the flames rose to chew Dumbledore’s robes, high enough to toss in the wind, hissing and roaring, Harry remembered the books.

Ignoring the shifting blasts of heat, Harry clambered down again and ducked a fallen section of roof tiles to reach the staircase. He tip toed the stairs as fast as he could, listening to the tower above him creak in the heat. But the library floor stood empty of books. Only a few smashed contraptions and note scraps littered the room.

The tower groaned ominously. Harry took to the window and leapt out of it while transforming. He flapped through drifting curls of ash and rose to circle the fire. The flames licked madly at the fuel, fully obscuring Dumbledore’s body.

A wind shift carrying feather-singing heat forced Harry to veer wide. He caught an updraft off the hillside and turned back to circle once again. Within the confines of his Animagus mind, Harry considered that he had instigated this chain of events. His one visit had set off these other events, each one spreading out from the others like the winter-shrunken landscape beneath his slow turning.

Harry drifted down to a soft landing at the base of the hill and transformed back

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to himself. The rain had returned, something he had failed to notice in his animal form. The fire shrugged off the rain as well; soot-edged flames now licked up as tall again as the tower itself.

Harry wiped his glasses on his shirt tail and put a charm on them to keep them dry before hooking them back over his ears. He had set Grindelwald loose from Dumbledore's influence. What exactly he should do about that, he was not certain. In his imaginings of a rematch, Dumbledore was always there, provokable, but hating himself for being so. Grindelwald alone, and bearing the Wand of Destiny, was something else. The same overpowering instinct that had driven him to seek out a fight, now counseled that he retreat and think through his next move.

Harry's lips quirked. That other instinct was scared. Scared of losing, and presumably of dying. Harry scoffed, mocking it. It fell silent and Harry fell homeward.



Harry did not find Candide at the office. It was mid afternoon and her office informed him that she had departed at noon, as usual.

"Do you know where she went?" Harry asked, wondering why she had not waited for him. Worry cleared his mind while he stood there in the doorway off the chilly staircase.

"The Burrow', she said," one office mate replied while sprinkling sand over fresh columns of numbers.

Harry Apparated away and walked up the drive at the Burrow. He backed up a step when Mr. Weasley opened the door invitingly.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley acknowledged, sounding knowing, which rankled Harry.

"Is Candide here?" It annoyed him to have to ask, feeling like a servant.

"Yes, come on in." Again, his old boss sounded patronizing.

Expression hard, Harry accepted but did not acknowledge a pat on the arm from Mrs. Weasley. "Sit down, Harry. Have some tea and cakes."

Harry slid into the mismatched chair beside Candide. She said, "I got tired of the office, Harry. Thought I'd wait for you here. My mum doesn't dote like Molly can."

Mr. Weasley slid into the seat across from Harry and flipped his errant comb-over back into place.

"Home from the Ministry already?" Harry asked him, mind Occluded, voice flat.

Mr. Weasley opened his mouth, but it was Mrs. Weasley who answered. She patted her husband's shoulder on the way to the seat next to him. "Went in at four this morning, the poor dear."

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Harry looked away. The dreary little window over the sink and the small windows in the door let in sparse light, but no lamps had been lit to dissolve the shadows. Harry could remember loving this place, now it felt like a dog-eared old photograph he had found in a book.

Mr. Weasley broke the silence, saying, "You're a stubborn young man, Harry," in an almost affectionate tone.

Harry turned his gaze back to him, giving nothing away. Their eyes locked. Mr. Weasley's faint smile curled downward and he tilted his head.

"The things you wanted to happen are happening," Mr. Weasley said, trying and failing to sound reassuring.

Harry assumed he referred to Percy. He said, "Must be difficult for you," with no sense of sympathy.

"I suppose."

"The difficulty made you reluctant," Harry criticized.

Mr. Weasley sat back, eyes dancing over Harry's face.

"Sentimentality is weakness," Harry added. But as he said it, he felt confused. The same consideration used to apply to him, from this very man. He felt torn about wanting it again.

"Harry, really," Mrs. Weasley said from where she poured out a cup of tea for him. "You sound like Severus."

"He's still alive, though, isn't he?" Harry said.

"Not without help," Mr. Weasley pointed out, lecturing, "from some of the most sentimental people ever to grace wizarddom. As you are well aware."

Candide had dipped her head, tracing the lines of a crude carving of a broomstick in the table top.

"Not the best topic for over afternoon cakes, really," Mrs. Weasley criticized them.

Harry, thinking of the smashed tower and limp translucent grey body he had found, said, "Dumbledore was foolishly and dangerously sentimental." He almost added aloud: He should have killed Grindelwald when he had the chance, but heart jolted into racing, Harry wondered if the evil old wizard was alive here too. Maybe left to rot in a prison somewhere. From inside his distracted silence he did not notice the worried glances the Weasley parents sent each other.

Candide did, she set her tea down and rubbed her belly. "Maybe we should go, Harry. I'm a little tired." Her studious gaze at each of their hosts gave away, to Harry anyway, that she was lying, trying to draw him away from their presence.

Everyone shuffled their chairs backwards.

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Mr. Weasley came around the table. “If you don’t mind, Harry, going on ahead. I’ll bring Candide along in a minute.”

Harry shrugged as uncaringly as he could given how his instincts screamed to say no. He trusted Candide to handle them and the concerns faded. With a faint smile he gave a patronizing wave to the Weasley parents and Apparated for home.

Mr. Weasley, head tilted again, approached Candide. “Is Harry all right? Tonks has been reporting in on him regularly, but this...” He wagged his finger in where Harry had just been standing. “This was unexpected.”

“What was unexpected?” Candide asked. “That he’s still upset about being incarcerated?”

“This seemed like far more than that,” Mr. Weasley said. Beside him Mrs. Weasley nodded emphatically.

Candide raised one shoulder. “Harry’s fine at home. I don’t think he was happy coming here.”

The two of them frowned deeply at this. “Anything we can do?” Mrs. Weasley asked. “Anything at all? Harry’s always been part of this family.” She frowned again. “Or he was, and still is from our perspective.”

“I don’t think there’s anything, really. Harry will get through this.” But unlike everything else she had said, this rang false.

Mrs. Weasley took hold of Candide’s sleeve. “Are you certain? I don’t like doing nothing.”

“Harry just wanted to be trusted, is all,” she replied with finality, freeing her sleeve. “I’ll let you know, but I don’t think you can do anything. Harry’s decided whom he can trust and whom he cannot. That’s not going to change quickly.”

Harry arrived in Shrewsthorpe and found Tonks sitting on the couch, crossed leg bouncing rapidly.

She stood with a single lithe movement. “There you are. Where’s Candide?”

“She’ll be along.”

Tonks stepped closer. “I’m worried about you, Harry.”

“Get in the queue,” he said, turning over his post on the side table. Tonks must have moved it there from the dining room, which implied she had looked through it. “Sure you are not just worried about what I can say about you?”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “Harry, this is so not like you. None of this is.” She tossed one hand. “Well, the part about trying to run your own infiltration of Durumulna is a bit like you.”

Harry looked up, employing the same unaffected expression that worked so well on Mr. Weasley. It set Tonks back nicely too.

Tonks said, “I would like to know more about how that is going, by the way.”

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Harry returned to opening his post. "If you don't plan to help, there is no reason to tell you anything."

Tonks' reply was interrupted by the sound of Apparition outside, followed by the door squeaking open.

"Here she is," Mr. Weasley announced. "Ah, Tonks. Good to, ah, see you too."

Tonks did not seem pleased to see him, Harry thought. Tonks said, "I should get back to the Ministry," and Disapparated. Mr. Weasley followed, citing some unlikely excuse.

Harry said, "It's no wonder he does so poorly at the Ministry. He's a terrible liar." He turned to Candide. "How did it go?"

She moved to where Tonks had stacked the papers while waiting. "You worried them."

"Did you dissuade them from that?"

From behind the Daily Prophet she replied, "You seemed to be enjoying doing it; so, no, I didn't try to dissuade them much."

Harry's lips quirked. "No wonder Severus likes you."



Ginny Weasley pushed her hair out of her eyes yet again. She needed a ribbon to tie it up with, but if there were any in this office, they were long buried and Fetching Charms were forbidden during the hours when final copy was being prepared. She flipped ahead a few pages in her meeting notes from just a week ago. They felt months old so many other topics had been dealt with in between. It was late, but the offices of the Prophet were never quiet. In fact, they became loudest at about 3:30 in the morning when the presses fired up, just when everyone else in the country was finally still all at once.

Beatrice strolled in. Ginny could recognize her shuffling footfalls. "About time to freeze the issue," she announced, even though only Ginny was there. She picked up a proof and held it in the lamplight. "Do you have anything to add to this one on the Wizengamot?"

Ginny shook her head.

Beatrice put the oversized sheet down and straightened it with undo care relative to the table edge. "I've been getting quite a few queries about why we have not followed up on other publications' assertions about Mr. Potter."

Ginny frowned. "They're just rumors. Harry gets those all the time."

Speaking carefully, Beatrice said, "Do you want to put your hand to writing something about that, then? That would cover us for now."

SLUMBERING SHADOWS

“Me?”

“Ms. Skeeter was the paper’s resident expert on him. Since we have no interest in taking her back on as a stringer, that makes you our new expert.”

Ginny felt a hard weight press into her chest. Better her than someone else, but not much better.

Fidget, the bent over man who did layout, sneaked in just then in the attitude of a thief, and collected up the proofs scattered around the room. He wore a broad transparent green visor that nevertheless did not stick out as far as his ink-stained nose. He wore a leather waistcoat and his white sleeves were banded in six places each. Reaching from a few steps away, he carefully slid away the proof they had just been looking at, tense as though expecting to be slapped or to have it snatched back.

Ginny picked up a fresh narrow notebook from one of the stacks revealed by having things cleared out. Pretending to be eager and diligent, she asked, “What’s my deadline?”

Beatrice said, “Tomorrow for the day after’s morning edition.”

Ginny balked and wrote that down at the top of a new blank page. “All right. Hopefully I can find Harry that quickly.”

“Has he grown difficult to locate?” Beatrice asked. It was most likely an innocent question, but Ginny heard insinuation in it.

“So I’ve heard.”

“That may be an angle for the article. If you can find out where he goes.”

“I’ll ask him.”

Beatrice smiled. “I’ll leave it to you for now to decide how to handle any interviews. For now,” she repeated, adding weight to Ginny’s sense of dread.

Aaron may have advice on how to navigate this, she thought, feeling better at that prospect. If not Aaron, then her mother might.



“Thanks for meeting me, Harry,” Ginny said as she moved one of the coffee shop’s wire chairs closer to the little table and laid her narrow yellow notebook upon it, two neverout quills beside it.

Harry glanced at these things but said nothing.

“Yeah,” she said, following his glance, “I didn’t know in my owl how to explain that I needed to interview you. Sorry.”

Harry shrugged. “I was thinking of giving Skeeter an interview anyway.”

“You were?!” Ginny’s face scrunched up in disgust. “Well, I’m glad I got to you first.” She flipped open the notebook. Harry read the two lines already written there

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from his upside down vantage. The second read: Angle: Harry always haunted by rumors.

“This is really hard for me,” Ginny said, staring at the quill she held and picking at a nail. “I haven’t been at the paper long, but I already really see how the simplest things can get misunderstood. This has to be just right.” She took a deep breath, and simultaneously leaned back as well as poised her quill on the first page of the notebook. “So, one of our competitor publications... actually, they weren’t before now.” She rolled her eyes and huffed. “Our competitor published an article accusing you of having mob ties, or even working in organized crime...” She stared at him. He stared back, face neutral. “I can’t believe I’m asking you this. I mean, other things you’ve told me aside, this is just silly.”

“It is silly,” Harry agreed. After she wrote that down, surrounded by large angular quote marks, he added, “What could I possibly gain?”

“Right, but probably not the best argument to start with. More a capper.”

Harry fetched their coffee orders, setting her delicately layered orange and red one before her.

“It’s just not your style,” Ginny said.

“You think that’s a better way to start?”

She sucked the whipped cream off the top of her tall glass and licked cocoa powder off her mouth and fingers, reminding Harry starkly of a different Ginny.

“What?” she asked, when Harry stared too long.

“Nothing,” Harry insisted softly. “You were saying?”

She licked her fingers once more and took up her quill again. “So, how are you spending your time? You must have a lot of it.”

“Some days I do security at the Twins’ shop. I spend a lot of time reading.”

“About what?” she asked, jotting frantically.

“Books I can’t understand yet.”

Her brow furrowed. “What topic, though?”

“I don’t know. Old collections of notes. That sort of thing.”

Her mouth indicated she thought this interesting. She fell silent while writing. When she stopped, Harry said, “You give too much away with your face. Makes it too easy.”

Ginny laughed. “You think I think I’m good at this? Mostly I take notes on purely factual things and then make sure the facts stay the same for the final copy. That’s it. How many members showed up for a Wizengamot meeting, or how many people turned in Gulping Guppies after they were made regulated creatures. Those are just straight facts that don’t care if I make faces at them.” She sighed. “Sorry.”

SLUMBERING SHADOWS

Sidetracked.” She bent over her notebook, sending her hair into the chopped up sunlight coming through the blinds on the broad window.

Harry’s mind spun away elsewhere. Nothing mattered in that place, but it had grown hard to remember that at times. He did not feel the same raw desire here. Nor in retrospect did his previous desire seem sexual, more a desire for a raw experience that also abused his position. But it did not matter. Nothing mattered there.

“Harry?” Ginny asked, waving a hand before his face.

Harry sat back and rubbed his hair.

“You sleeping all right?” Ginny asked.

“Mostly. You’re not writing that down, are you?”

“No.”

Harry tried to gather his thoughts, to buy time, he tossed out: “Mostly I spend my time keeping an eye on Candide.”

“We’ll that’s sweet.” While writing she said, “Provides companionship to adoptive father’s new very pregnant wife. Maybe I shouldn’t say ‘new’. Gives the wrong impression. She must be due any day now.”

Harry shrugged. “Something like that.”

“Men are impossible.”

“Are you writing that down?”

“I should. But then it will end up on the editorial page and I’ll have to write yet another real article.”

Behind them, the counter people shouted orders to each other over the hiss of steam. Ginny rubbed her chin and read through what she had.

“How do these rumors get started?” Ginny asked.

“Some people always want to think the worst,” Harry said, pulling on his wise voice.

“That’s the truth,” she muttered while writing. “But there must be something that starts them in the first place.”

Harry was feeling too lazy to lie. “What I don’t get is how anyone could imagine Durumulna would want me anyway.”

She pointed at him with her quill. “Good point.”

Their tall clear coffee mugs contained only foamy rings. Ginny closed her notebook. “Thanks, Harry.” They stood at the same moment. “Want to do something, sometime?”

Harry found he did not trust himself. Safest to say: “Maybe. Candide will have to come along, since I’m on guard all the time.”

Ginny smiled. “That’d be fine.”

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They parted on the pavement and went opposite ways. Ginny stashed her notebook in her handbag and was too distracted by writing her article in her head to notice that someone had matched their stride to hers.

“Well, well, well,” Rita Skeeter said. “Wasn’t that just the most skillful act of journalism ever witnessed in the annals of news publishing?”

Ginny stopped and faced Skeeter. “It’s none of your business.”

“Oh, *au contraire*,” Skeeter snarled. “More proof of your dearth of comprehension.”

Ginny rolled her eyes and started walking again. Quickly this time.

“Why didn’t you just let little mob boss underling write his own article? Too obvious?”

“Give it a rest. You were fired for a reason, you know.”

Skeeter stopped suddenly, as indicated by silence from her tall shoes. “Was I?” she said. “I didn’t make anything up in the article I sold to old man Lovegood. You are being played. As amusing as that is to witness, at one level, it’s loathsome on another.”

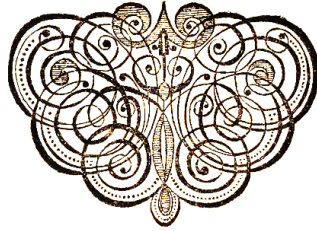
“You don’t know Harry at all!” Ginny snapped, losing her temper and control of her voice.

Skeeter stared at her for a second before tilting her curls back and laughing. She kept laughing as she strode the other way down the pavement. Passersby stopped to watch her, glancing to Ginny for clues.

“Merlin, I hate that woman,” Ginny muttered to herself.

Author’s Notes: The betas were fast, but I wanted to wrap up 47 before posting, and I very nearly managed that, so the next one will be much sooner. Feels good to be a chapter ahead again. Shew.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



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Harry strolled along away from the coffee shop, dodging Muggles in woolen suits gazing far beyond him with their mobiles pressed to their ears. He faced a long morning after his easy interview with Ginny and felt restless to get started putting his plans for Percy in motion. But he also dearly wanted to see what he would find at that same tower in his own Plane, the one where he had found Dumbledore. Uncertain how long he might be gone, Harry ducked into an alley to send a Silver Message to Candide instructing her to wait until she received a second message before going home because he might not be there.

Harry slipped in from the Dark Plane at a safe distance from where the tower should be and gazed up. As in the other place, this tower had been destroyed. Unlike the other, this one had been destroyed long ago, lopped in half and standing in a pile of squarish stones. Time had done most of the damage. As quiet as it was, something did not feel right. Rather than expose himself by flying, Harry walked toward the tower over the hard ground, casting detection spells ahead of him. This was much needed practice and he slowed and spent some time recreating spells that he had half forgotten being out of training. Determined to remember the full complement, Harry trudged with purpose, thorns grabbing at his cloak. He went like this until a tumble of rocks from an even older ruin emerged from the thicket to block his path. It forced him to circle around to pick a steeper path up.

Harry walked on, breath deepening with exertion. His footsteps thudded on the ground, and his cloak swished against the brush. No habitation was in sight, not even a hedgerow on the distant slopes. Even though he was in his own world, he felt

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he walked in a Plane where no one lived at all, and that made him feel starkly alone and annoyingly vulnerable. The detection spells continued to fizzle out, revealing the way was clear.

With a huff Harry stopped to rest and closed his eyes. Buried deep beneath the English Channel, the Death Eaters appeared as a distant contorting smear. Perhaps that was part of the reason he felt so alone here.

Instead of continuing on, Harry studied the moss chewing away at the south curve of the cropped tower. It cascaded down the side and over the fallen rock pile, fusing it all into a heap. He was no closer than when he had arrived. He could Apparate directly beside the rubble, but he feared feeling even more desolate if he got that close. Wondering at his irrational instincts, Harry shook himself and considered that he had people to find and plans to put in motion and he should be doing that instead of tromping around in the wilderness. He slipped away, leaving the empty hillside to the dry wind.

Harry located his erstwhile Durumulna assistants on Knockturn Alley, window shopping, or pretending to.

“I want a word,” Harry said, pressed close to Hummer, who was studiously looking in a window at an assortment of magical animal traps, the heaviest of which was labeled Rhinombuses, Erumpents and other Sizable Quadrupeds. It was so large it had to be wedged sideways in the window case.

Slowdraw squinted at Harry and nudged his companion. Harry did not see Hummer respond, but Slowdraw locked his fingers around their arms and took them both away.

They arrived in an empty bit of young forest. Curled leaves tumbled by their feet with each surge of wind.

“Word was we weren’t to talk to you,” Slowdraw explained. His eyes darted down repeatedly to check that Harry did not have a wand in hand.

Harry glared at him. “I need help with a job.”

Hummer sighed and rolled his eyes. To his companion, he said, “E don’t listen so well, do ’e?”

Black anger seeped through Harry at the mocking, dismissive tone. He flicked his sleeve, freeing his wand, caught it in the air as it fell and waved a Mutushorum at the two of them. Hummer rocked in the breeze and toppled. Harry stalked up to Slowdraw, pleased to see the man’s alarmed eyes straining to track him as he stepped around a mud puddle on his approach. Young branches rattled around them.

Nose to nose, Harry stated, “I said, I need help with a job. That means you are going to help me.”

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Limited as his expressions were by the neural numbing effects of the spell, Harry read disdain behind the dark grey eyes.

“I don’t care if you like it,” Harry said. “I do care whether you do as I say.” Tingle inducing energy was rising up through Harry, giving a deepening three-dimensional intensity to the forest and the man quivering before him. His vision grew starker; the scent of the moist leaves at their feet grew more pronounced. His mind whirled like he had just woken up.

“I’m not going to chase you down or argue with you every time I want something,” Harry said, feeling giddy with the intent flooding him. He breathed in, feeling revitalized by the air that moments before had felt cold and unyielding. He felt alive like he never had before. Free. He grabbed up Slowdraw’s rigid arm and forced it around, making the man’s body contort to follow. Clutch his wand dagger-style, Harry incanted the spell he had found for a flesh-based Protean Charm. Darkness drew into it like a drain; Harry could feel rivulets of it leeching through the fingers he had clutched around Slowdraw’s wrist.

Harry guided the wand point to draw a zig-zag. The man could not move, but his chin and fingertips vibrated with his efforts to resist. The wand left a burn mark behind that puckered red, then black, then went flat like a tattoo.

With a jerk of his hands, Harry let go, pushing forcefully against the sickly taint that had gathered under his grip. Leaves scattered as Slowdraw fell, wand flying free. Harry flipped his wand hold and canceled the spell holding them hostage. He sucked in rapid breaths while watching Slowdraw writhe, gripping his arm. Hummer scrambled in the undergrowth to fetch his companion’s wand, glancing frequently up at Harry to check his response to this.

Energy writhed inside Harry, an electric whip snaking and snapping. He had to shut down the connection between himself and Slowdraw or he was going to shatter from the inside and be lost. Harry lowered his eyes to fixate on the tangled tree roots that laced the ground. In his mind, he pushed a sense of artificial distance between them, pushed until their combined shadows divided into two with tendrils whipping between them.

Slowdraw’s legs ceased kicking in the leaf fall. Harry’s breathing quieted, but he grew increasingly leaden.

“Let’s try that again,” Harry croaked out. He felt impossibly heavy, unable to lift his head and straighten his back. Panic over this strange lethargy threatened to undo him; he must distract himself. He must move on quickly to something else, make it worthwhile, pretend he was okay. Voice forced stronger, he announced, “Let’s go back to where I said you were going to help me with something.”

Hummer, tugging on Slowdraw’s cloak, straightened eagerly. “Of course. What

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do you want us to do? Whatever you want.”

Harry, swaying slightly, drank up Hummer’s eager energy. He stepped forward to take them to the old warehouse he had picked out for the trap. Slowdraw flinched away, but not far enough, frozen immediately by Harry’s will. At the warehouse, Harry stepped back and the two of them stumbled away to peer around at the dust drifting under the skylights and high windows. Slowly, Harry felt his strength returning, as long as he did not reach out for the nearby shadow, as long as he pretended things were the same.

“You want ta make this like the boss’ place?” Hummer asked, sounding like one wanting dearly to be clear on things. Slowdraw had stopped, stoop shouldered in the middle of the debris-strewn floor. Hummer went back and taking a fistful of his cloak, dragged him alongside himself.

Harry replied, “Yes. I want some black cloth on the scaffolding so someone can be led in here and be fooled. And I want to build an office like the Boss’.”

Cringing, Hummer said, “I don’t know if we can do the office.” Quickly, he added, “The rest, yeah.”

Harry believed him, given his newfound subservience. “We’ll do up a box that will hold the spells. I think I know someone else who can do the details.”

They went to work, masking the place from the Ministry and Scourgifying extensively, before Hummer went off in search of supplies. Harry would have sent Slowdraw, but he seemed incapable of doing anything requiring initiative. He shuffled along behind while Harry surveyed the existing scaffolding and did welding repairs.

It was convenient to always know instinctively where his assistant was, but Harry did not feel better having him close like he did with Voldemort’s old servants. Harry must have done something wrong with the spell, he pondered as he cut away a section of rotted scaffolding. The remains tumbled toward the floor and would have clattered there, but Harry caught it just shy of the floor with a Tether and lowered it the rest of the way.

Putting aside his other circling thoughts, Harry concentrated on making a Spell Bridge that could be activated with a touch of a wand on the railing. His mind did not want to settle on the spell the first three times, but finally he got it right. Harry made it re-appear and vanish a few times before gesturing that Slowdraw should walk across it.

Slowdraw ducked, arms halfway over his head, looking more like a House Elf than a wizard. This made Harry wonder if perhaps Death Eaters needed to be willing servants from the start, or it just would not work out right. He shook his head in disgust and strode across the magical section of scaffolding to the other side. Slowdraw rose out of his protective pose and stood hunched. He would not meet Harry’s eyes,

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instead staring just over Harry's left shoulder.

"Lots more to do, come on," Harry ordered, tugging on the connection between them.

Slowdraw jerked like he might vomit and stumbled to follow. Some part of Harry felt a stab of sympathy and horror, but it was far enough remote that thinking of how little personality Durumulna had left the man wiped it away. He was just a tool, for whoever saw fit to use him. This thought made Harry feel less burdened all around.

They worked all night and much of the morning to finish up. Every time Harry began to feel tired or hungry, he simply imagined the upcoming moment when Percy stepped into the trap and realized what he had revealed to his father. Harry swelled in Percy's expected horror until long after the sunlight gave shape to their hanging maze of black curtains and the Fairy lights could be banished.

The three of them stood on the warehouse floor staring up. The black cloth was a mishmash of shades. Right before bringing Percy in, someone would have to spell them all dark black, but that would not last if he did it now.

Slowdraw surprised Harry by speaking. Voice harsh and quiet, he asked, "Are we doing something the Boss isn't going ta like?"

"The Boss may be very happy, actually. We'll see how it goes."

Slowdraw had to clear his throat twice to say, "Ursie shouldn't've cut you off, maybe."

Harry kept his head tilted back even though his vision had passed far beyond the warehouse roof. "Ursie will regret that." He straightened and peered around the walls, taking stock of things. "But one act of revenge at a time. The anticipation of them is half the pleasure. No rush."

Hummer said, "This is a lot of setup for one gig."

Harry imagined the additional pain of the overly emotional Mr. Weasley when Percy unambiguously gave himself away. "It's worth it," Harry said.

When he had sent his message to Candide, Harry had not planned to be gone all night. He expected she would accommodate his silent absence, perhaps with just an owl to Snape. Harry had told Snape what he was planning, so that did not concern him. Harry told his assistants he was done with them for now and with a last warning that they would know when he wanted them again, he took himself to Diagon Alley.

It was just after noon. Harry went up to the accounting office and found Candide with her nose close to a large roll crowded with numerical tables. She tapped her fingers for a moment, then wrote in a figure in a box before backing off and studying her work.

"Harry!" she said in surprise, then dampened it down and invented a diversion for her surprise. "Is it noon already?"

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“Yes. But I have to visit Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes, then I’ll be back to take you home.”

She pushed to her feet. Harry could read in her thoughts that she was heading for the window cage full of owls, to send one to Snape. “All right,” she said, standing there at her desk, waiting for him to leave before moving.

Harry found the twins in their shop, arguing using their usual half-cruel banter.

“Harry!” they said in welcoming unison. One of them put a hand around his shoulder and drew him into their corner. “Maybe you can help us out with this.” He picked up a small curly bottle sporting a large tag and tossed it in his hand up and down. “Suggestion Draught, let’s you plant one idea on someone that will last an hour. Illegal or not?”

The other twin leaned closer. “It’s a ridiculously simple generalized variant on Amortentia.”

“Which is illegal,” Harry said.

“Well, technically. And technically, this isn’t really Love Potion.”

“Right,” Harry said. “It sounds okay to me,” he said dismissively. “Look, I need a favor.”

“Anything, oh part owner who has never asked us to buy his share back ...”

“True,” Harry said, filing that idea away for when he might need gold. “I need to recreate a room. Can I give you a memory of it?”

“Fred, fetch an empty bottle,” George said. When Fred loped off, George yelled after, “A clean one. Really clean. Actually clean.”

They waited in a circle until Fred lifted his head from the stone mixing bowl pressed into use as a Penseive.

“Complicated bit of work. We’ll need a few days, but we can give it to you in a Decorator’s Cube, something we’ve been working on, but haven’t got all the kinks worked out of yet.”

Harry bit his lip. Getting angry would not change their abilities. “Okay. Thanks.”

When Harry returned to Candide’s office, he found her again carefully writing in numbers and adding in her head. He waited for her to look up. The rest of the office watched him a moment before returning to their own tasks. Candide bit her lip guiltily. “I owled Severus,” she said quietly. “Just thought I should tell you.” Her voice dropped even more when she said, “Since you were gone all night ...”

“Maybe I’ll go see him, then,” Harry said. “And I’ll meet you at home. Not sure how long I’ll be, so don’t rush.”



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At Hogwarts, a knock sounded on the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts office. Snape waved the door open and found Harry's former fellow apprentice, Vineet, on the threshold.

Vineet pushed the door closed behind him and held his hand on it. "May I discuss with you something?"

Snape waved that he should approach and closed the books arrayed before him. He was rereading Ryorerson's *Treetys on the Manipyulations of the Soel* and was glad for the break. His own gathering of books from the Hogwarts library was possibly the only competition for Harry's own collecting.

The Indian fidgeted once before standing completely still on the other side of the desk. "I wish to know if you think it wise for me to shadow Harry."

"To what purpose are you considering this?" Snape asked.

"I wish to assure that he does not do anything with repercussions too serious to undo."

Snape resumed his chair and laced his fingers together on the desk. "I'm curious if this was your idea."

"Not entirely. Ms. Tonks wishes to keep a better tabulation of Harry's activities." He paused. "They have had a falling out – if you were not aware."

Snape leaned back. "No, I was not aware. Thank you for informing me of that. Do you know over what?" When Vineet shook his head, Snape went on, "I do not think you are capable of successfully following Harry."

"I would have the cooperation of the office of Magical Transportation, I believe, through Ms. Tonks."

Snape studied him. Tonks certainly knew that would not help much. "You have not discussed that part with Ms. Tonks, specifically, I suspect."

"No, I am assuming that to be true," Vineet admitted.

Snape stood up and came around the desk, wanting to pace but holding back. "You will not be able to follow Harry, for reasons I do not wish to go into. As well, I do not think it wise to try. If you are willing, I would instead reinforce to Harry that you are on his side."

Vineet wrapped one fluttering hand around the other. "I have already done this thing."

"Then there is nothing else for you to do right now."

Vineet broke out of his calm. "I cannot remain standing still," he said, language falling away with his distress. "He was very distant during my last visit. I fear he will not return."

"I never count Harry out," Snape stressed. "Something I've needed years to learn. You haven't had as much time to learn this as I have."

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A foot scuffed on the floor and the two of them turned. Harry had appeared, just inside the door. He glanced rapidly between them and Vineet took a step back, which was a mistake, by Snape's reckoning.

"Am I missing something?" Harry asked, approaching them with stone cold aggression sharpening the angles of his face and his shoulders.

Snape replied, "Mr. Abhayananda was just asking me if I believed there was anything more he could do for you. His pledge of loyalty to you has apparently gone without notice."

Vineet nodded, wisely remaining silent.

"I appreciate it," Harry said. "It's noted. But I want to talk to Severus alone."

Vineet nodded again, more a bow, and passed Harry to reach the door. He stopped there with his hand on the knob and paused to stare at the floor where Harry had appeared. Gaze thoughtful, he went out.



"Have a seat if you wish," Snape invited.

"No thanks," Harry said, pacing to the window. Beyond the wavy glass, the brown-grey world and blanket of cloud further depressed his heavy mood. "You wanted to be kept informed," he said for the only opening he could think of. He was not certain why he was here; he should remain silent.

"Yes."

"I've arranged a mockup of Durumulna's headquarters for the exchange. It should happen in a few days." Harry drew his lips in. He could stop with just this news. "You wanted to know."

"I did," Snape smoothly replied. "Thank you."

Silence fell. Harry watched the ripples drift on the lake, intersecting and merging, vanishing where the jutting shoreline reflected dark against the clouds.

Snape finally spoke. "I sense there is something else." His tone was factual enough to avoid provocation.

Harry turned. "I don't feel like saying."

"I wish only to assist you," Snape promised.

Harry's hands worked over one another. The man standing behind him used to be a servant, in a way, still was.

"Harry?" Snape prompted.

Softly, Harry said, "There only seems to be one way to do things now."

"Which way is that?"

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Harry shook his head and turned to peer into the upper corners of the room. It was bright enough that the lamps were not lit, but the light was poor, the walls grim. "I have to think about things."

"As you wish, Harry. You know where to find me."

"I know where to find the rest of the interesting books too, I now see," Harry said, gesturing at the array on the desk. "Finding anything useful?"

"Interesting yes, useful no."

Harry stood on his toes to read the cover on the top one. His eyes snapped up sharply. The tingle rose in him again, going on alert. They stared at each other. Harry said, "What if I like the way I am?"

"Harry, I am only reading. I would not do anything to you without your cooperation, let alone consent."

Alertness mollified by this forthright response, Harry dropped back to his heels. Part of him wanted to say what happened, partly to check Snape's response for any horror, to test his resilience, but instead he remained silent. Harry scratched his nose with his cloak before tossing it square on his shoulders. "I should go."

"You have checked in with Candide, I assume?"

"Yes, her owl is probably on its way here." His voice came out formal, stating things absent any emotional connection.

Snape nodded, almost a bow.

Harry slipped home. His head lolled when he re-inverted out of the Dark Plane, longing for his pillow.

Movement made him draw his wand, then lower it. Tonks stood up from the couch and approached him. "I really need to talk to you, Harry." Her voice held nothing but determination to get her way.

Harry lazily walked by her and dropped onto the couch and set his head back. His eyes tried to close, but his need for sleep felt like such weakness he forced his eyes open again upon her pale face.

"Harry are you listening to me?" Tonks demanded, anger overtaking her other emotions.

"Yeah. You're right here. How can I not?"

She propped her hands on her hips. "I didn't think I needed to ask this. I assumed you would say, if you knew something. But now I'm not so sure. Do you know where McCurdy is? Our kidnap victim?"

With effort, Harry lifted his head and looked at her. Her puffed up hair was an unnatural shade of orange-brown and her matching eyebrows amusingly bushy. Harry rubbed his eye, taking his time thinking up an answer.

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“Harry! I swear I’m going to knock you silly if you don’t answer me.” She had pulled her wand.

“All right. The answer is: sort of.”

“What kind of answer is that?”

Harry crossed his legs. “It’s the answer I have. What answer do you want?”

“You’ve seen him?” she asked, each word snapping out like a whip.

“Yes. That doesn’t mean I could find him again, hence my reply.”

“You saw him and you didn’t say anything?” she reiterated, sounding like she wanted to have it straight in her own mind as well as give him a chance to change his answer.

Harry thought of possible dodges to this question. He thought of explaining that the man was much happier playing poker and smoking cigars all day than being home. Explaining himself would be unspeakably weak. In the end, he just said, “Yes.”

Her exhalation noisily wavered into a groan. She paced from the couch to the wall and back, put both fists down on the arm rests and bent her head between her elbows. “I can’t believe this,” filtered out of her robes. She straightened up. “I can’t believe this.”

Just as quickly as she had warmed up the drama, it drained out of her again. “You can hold all kinds of things over my head.” She stood staring at him, hair brown face strained. “So, what will it take to get help from you on this?”

“I want something from you.”

She blinked at him, and gave in some more. Too easily. “All right. What?”

“I’m trapping someone from one of the criminal gangs and I want Mr. Weasley there.” Energized at the thought of crushing Percy, Harry stood up. “And if I read things right, a whole branch of Durumulna might come down on the meeting. I won’t know until they do or not. If you would like to be there to nab some of them, that would be fine with me.”

Her face relaxed marginally. She rubbed her head. “Then you’ll help me with McCurdy?”

“Yes,” Harry said. Then backing off from his answer, added: “The little I can.” Watching her shakily drop onto the couch, Harry wondered what kind of a Death Eater she would make. Probably a troublesome one, and given what Harry held over her, it wasn’t necessary to control her, but he felt amusement imagining her face when she understood what he had done.

“Want to stay the night?” Harry asked.

“Not really,” Tonks replied, tone insulting. “I’ll see you later.” With that she Disapparated.

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Harry tipped his head back again. If he did not have to wait there for Candide, he would have gone to Belinda's flat right then to wait for her. He imagined that he could easily seduce her and that sounded appealing just then, especially if he brought her something strong to drink. But Candide could not arrive home to an empty house, especially after he had gone missing the night before, so Harry remained where he was, staring at the ceiling and letting his eyes periodically drift closed, thinking that Tonks' last comment deserved something in return.

"Harry?" a gentle voice prodded him awake. "Sorry, went to see mum rather than stay at work to give you time to get home."

Pain stabbed through Harry's neck when he lifted it. Rubbing it viciously, he looked around at the room. It felt different even though nothing had moved except the hazy angle of the grey sunlight. Harry's stomach rumbled, painning him more than his neck. He had not eaten all day.

"Are you hungry?" Harry asked her, thinking to go to the dining room table to hope for something to arrive, even though it was a bit early for dinner.

She stood straight, hand wandering over her belly. "Mum tried to get me to stay for dinner, but nothing she was going to cook sounded very good. Winky has spoiled me by always making me exactly what I want..." She grinned. "Even when I don't know what that is."

Each deep in their own thoughts, they ate. The pasta made Harry's head even heavier. "I'm going to bed," he said. As he imagined his pillow, his eyes tried to fall shut. If he went to sleep now, he could wake at 2:00 a.m. and do some reading without the risk of interruption. Or maybe even fetch some highly restricted books from the vault at the London Wizard Library, something he had been tempted to try.

A knock on his bedroom door woke Harry from a dream where Hermione was reading aloud to him from the jeweled book. As he jerked awake, she was demanding of him: "The cloak, Harry... what about it?"

Thoughts tangled in sleep, uncertain if the diffuse light meant morning or the same evening, Harry stumbled to the door. Candide stood there, hand moving obsessively over her abdomen.

"Sorry to wake you, but I've been feeling a little off since this morning, and I should probably go to the Midwiltch hospital." She did not sound sorry so much as worried.

Harry dug the grit from this other eye. "Sure." Only half of him had woken up, but it was the half that leapt to worry to match that on her face. "Let me toss on some robes."

He tossed a clean set of robes over his bare back before tugging on trousers instead of his pyjama bottoms. He skipped socks.

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“It’s not such a rush you can’t tie your shoes,” she teased when he clomped back over to her.

Harry scratched his rough chin and bent to do that. He felt floaty, disassociated from everything except the task he had before him of taking her to the Midwitch.

She rubbed her belly again, face strained. “At least I’m not bothering them in the middle of the night again.”

“I don’t think they think it’s a bother,” Harry said, voice rough with sleep. He held out his arm, focusing entirely on safely siding her along.

Harry sat on a bench in the atrium to wait. The hands on the miniature clock tower beside the next bench down chimed a quiet seven. Harry still did not know if it was morning or evening. The atrium had many people coming and going, so he guessed it was still evening, especially given his exhaustion. Harry rubbed his face, trying to wake up. He sat with his thoughts Occluded. If he let them wander, he thought about Slowdraw and a surge of mixed emotions and burdened magic threatened to unseat him. Better to think about nothing.

A baby’s cry brought Harry’s head around. A family near the reception desk was shuffling close together and cooing over a blanketed bundle held by a blushing man.

“Probably wants his mum,” he said, awkwardly shifting the burden over to a bleary-eyed witch. The baby did not quiet and the voices grew gratingly loud to compensate. They moved off, relieving Harry’s ears.

A large wizard in cream colored robes lumbered over to Harry. His face, including his ragged hairline, had a crooked alignment to it, making him appear troll-like. “You’re wanted,” he rumbled. “I’ll take you.”

Harry followed along a corridor of closely spaced doors. Inside the one labeled Fuchsia Flowers Harry found Candide sitting up in a spacious room on a bed folded like a lounge. The Midwitch stood beside writing on a chart.

“Harry,” Candide said. “They want to keep me here, but you don’t have to stay.”

The Midwitch said without looking up, “You’ll be wanting to get the father here soon.”

“Will we? Will I?” Candide uttered, face draining of color.

“Uh huh,” the Midwitch sang in her deep voice. “Not too long now, Hun.”

Candide stared up at the woman before turning to Harry, dreamlike. “Can you fetch Severus, Harry?” She sounded very small.

Harry’s lips broke into a smile. “Yeah. I’ll be right back.”

Harry slipped onto the Hogwarts’ grounds behind the Whomping Willow and carefully walked out from under its arching branches, which gave a threatening shake and rattle of dead leaves. Over the adjacent high wall the light through the pointed

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windows of the Great Hall stood like a glowing crown. Harry crunched along beside the wall clutching his shirt collar closed against the brittle wind.

Even in the cold weather, students were sitting out on the main steps, hunched low, hands in pockets. Harry returned their greetings distractedly, grateful for the blast of warm air that struck him when he hauled open the door.

The meaty scent of dinner made Harry's stomach complain as he made his way through milling students. Inside the Great Hall the tables were animated with eating and conversation. Harry paused there, lost in memory, before getting bumped into from behind and remembering himself.

Conversations fell still as he strode between the tables to the front, where Snape sat with his fingers on his chin, leaning toward McGonagall's gesturing hand. Snape's eyes flicked Harry's way without reaction before flicking back and narrowing in on him, expression giving nothing away but keen interest. Harry reached the table and hoisted himself up on the dais, wondering what Snape was thinking.

With a small smile for McGonagall, Harry said to his guardian, "Your presence is requested at the Midwitch hospital."

Snape's gaze fell into the distance before pulling back and looking to Harry as if for confirmation.

"Congratulations are in order," McGonagall said. "I'd like to get mine in early."

Snape pushed his chair back and stood. "You are set, right?" Snape stopped to ask her.

"Severus, I've had it all arranged already a month ago, just in case. Off with you!" She turned to Harry. "You can use the Floo in the staff room, if you like. And tell Ms. Breakstone best of luck from me."

No lamps were lit in the staff room. Snape waved a Lumos out of his wand and moved chairs aside to get to the hearth. Once there, he turned to Harry and took him by the shoulders, fingertips digging in until Harry met his eyes. His wand glowed from over Harry's shoulder where Snape still clutched it in two fingers.

"Harry," Snape said, voice crisp and quiet in the dark, empty room, "I want you to remember that you are my first son. That is not something I will neglect."

Harry nodded vaguely, his thoughts still unanchored and floating. With a last fierce squeeze, Snape released him.

They reached the hospital after many turns in the Floo, enough turns that Harry wished he had used his own method of traveling. Snape was fastidiously brushing off his robes when Harry arrived behind him.

"Ready for this?" Harry asked.

Snape considered him a beat before reply, "No. But nevertheless..." He gestured for Harry to lead the way, features fierce and inward.

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Harry found the correct room and opened the door immediately after knocking. Candide was alone now, sitting up with blankets over her knees.

“Severus,” she said resignedly, sighing his name.

“At least we all share the same state of mind about things,” Snape commented.

Harry dropped into one of the comfy chairs along the wall on the right beside the door to the next room, which appeared to be a guest suite. On the wall opposite hung bright paintings featuring rivers framed by tangled blossoming vines. He rubbed his hair back. This place smelled similar to but more powdery and floral than St. Mungo’s, which smelled of over-steeped tea and unwashed robes.

Snape moved a chair over beside the bed and clasped his hands tightly in his lap. “What did the Midwitch say? I presume she was here?”

Candide made a face and rubbed the side of her belly. “She timed the contractions at six to seven minutes apart. She asked if I wanted any potion, but I thought I’d wait until you got here to decide. I assumed you’d have a strong opinion one way or the other.” Answering an unasked question, she went on. “It’s not really painful yet, just uncomfortable.”

Snape handed her the water glass from the table beside the bed and took it back after she took a series of sips. Harry stared at the brightly decorated yellow door, feeling the interloper.

Candide, talking quickly, said, “They are going to bring some food too. Something light they said. I could eat, I think.” She sighed. “I could walk around, too.”

Snape stood to offer her a hand to get out of bed. Harry closed his eyes and listened to her shuffle around and huff quietly. Slowdraw writhed in the midfield of his mind, not at all like the other Death Eaters. Something definitely was not right about how he had done that. Maybe he should not have tried. This shadow was more a drag on his mind than a source of support. But for the moment, Harry wanted him to continue to obey.

Harry must have drifted off, because he woke up on the bed in the next room, shoes off, covers bunching beneath him. He rolled onto his back and listened to the conversation in the next room. The sound that must have woken him repeated, like an echo in his memory. It was a groan of someone in pain, audible through the door that had been left cracked open. Harry lay staring at the smooth ceiling, breathing in shallow gusts.

Candide’s mother’s voice drifted in. “You should take the potion. It will help. I took it with all of you and you turned out all right.”

Candide’s snipped voice replied, “It’s fine, mum.”

Harry felt himself tensing as he lay there. He forced his limbs limp again. The floral scent was even stronger in here, emanating off the bedding.

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The midwitch's velvet voice came next. "We're almost there, Hun. At over three inches dilation we can use the spells and it will be all better."

Oh good, Harry thought, magic. Then there won't be so much screaming like on Muggle television. Thinking about television made Harry think about growing up with the Dursleys. That made his thoughts wander off into wondering where they were living now, and wishing idly that when Voldemort attacked their old house that they had been still living there. Imagining Vernon's amorphous self leaping in panic out of a first floor window brought a twitching grin to Harry's mouth.

Harry thoughts did not remain on this tack for long. The moaning in the next room grew louder, distracting him.

Candide's mother again: "Let me wipe your brow." A moment later. "Dear, you do not need to be suffering so."

"Mum. Shut UP about it."

Harry snickered and rolled over onto his side, head pillowed on his bent arms. The furniture against the nearby wall was so neutral his eyes would not stay fixed on it. He closed them instead, but that made the sounds of pain seem to be coming from inside his own head. He sat up and swung his legs to the floor. He sat fixed, bent over in the act of looking for his shoes under the bed.

"All right, Darling, we're there," came the mellow voice of confident practice from the Midwitch. "Move aside, Mum. I'll be needing a bit of space to work."

A spell incantation began, a chant really, with an atonal quality. There came a squeak like someone biting down on painful surprise. Harry decided to skip finding his shoes. He pushed to his stocking feet and walked slowly to the cracked open door that spilled yellow light into the unfamiliar dusky room. Drawn, but not wanting to interrupt, he stopped with his fingers touching the wooden door edge.

The chant continued, mesmerizing and alluring. Candide made another sharper noise of surprise and there was concerted movement on the far side of the door. A shuffling of robes and limbs.

"There we are!" the Midwitch exclaimed.

Harry exhaled, not conscious of having held his breath. He could see a stripe of fuchsia wall paint, a frame edge and pure green vines. For a moment, Harry felt himself and the other with absolute clarity as they both contemplated the strangely vivid painting beyond. But the distinction sank into haze again, and Harry, suddenly sick at the notion of being alone, tugged on the door with his fingertips and stopped on the threshold at the scene beyond.

There was movement, blood, a quivering, impossibly small baby connected by an alien-like cord, which was at that moment being severed and pinned by one Midwitch, while another used a cleansing charm on the infant while deftly switching the cloth

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wrapping.

“We’re not quite done yet, my dear,” the Midwitch was saying to Candide when she tried to find a more comfortable position.

The rest of the controlled chaos receded as Harry’s eyes landed on Snape, just bending over the bundle, which was trying hard to wave a tiny fist around, and did so, when Snape tugged the blanket aside.

“Look, he’s perfect,” Candide said, sounding dazedly overjoyed. “Look at the perfect little fingernails. Look at them!”

Snape seemed somewhere beyond the details of fingernails. Harry was not sure where he was. The infant began to fuss faintly. To Harry’s ears, he sounded annoyed with the proceedings.

“A boy, just like Grizzly said,” Candide said, excitement reined in now. “Severus?”

Snape raised his gaze and released the corner of the blanket he had pinched between two fingers. “Yes?”

“It’s a boy,” Candide repeated.

“It is,” Snape agreed, sounding like he would be unable to think about anything more.

One of the Midwitches lifted the baby out of the blankets and tapped it with what appeared to be tiny Indicator spells. The other Midwitch, with some effort, caught Candide’s attention again. “I need another little push from you, Hun, to go with this spell and then we are all finished.”

Harry dropped his gaze to his stocking feet. His socks fit. They did not always fit. They were new with an attractive red seam across the toes, and elf-cared-for white. He held his gaze there until the Midwitch announced success with the afterbirth.

“There we are.” She and her assistant efficiently packed things up into sacks and bright white cases. “Now, Darling, the lactation consultant will stop by shortly. The little man will be hungry, I expect. They always are.”

“Lactation consultant?” Snape echoed. “That sounds terribly bovine, doesn’t it?”

The Midwitch just grinned even wider and nodded at each of them before shuffling to the doorway. “Have to run off. We’ve got yet another one ready to pop the natural way if we don’t hurry. You picked a busy night. If you need anything, just pull the bell.” She threw her rounded hand at the maroon cord hanging from the ceiling beside the bed.

“Harry,” Snape said. It fell short of an invitation in some way Harry could not identify.

“Come meet your brother,” Candide invited brightly.

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Candide's mother stood up and gamely announced, "I'll bring in a few of the family."

"Please, not too many!" Candide begged sharply. "Let's keep it sane in here, okay?" She quickly turned her attention back to the bundle in her arms, but the fussing level had not changed with her voice.

She sat back with some belated assistance from Snape, who adjusted the pillows. "Well, that wasn't that bad," she said.

Harry found he had walked to the corner of the bed, even though he did not remember doing so.

"Want to see him?" Candide offered. She sat forward to better hold out the bundle. Inside was an alarmingly small human with wet wisps of dark hair pressed to his head, fists rolling over his scrunched eyes as though unhappy about the light.

"He's really small," Harry said.

Candide drew him back for a look before offering him out again for view. "He's just right."

"What's his name?" Harry asked.

After a breath, she pronounced, "Arcadius."

Harry glanced up at Snape, who crossed his arms and straightened his shoulders. "It wasn't me who insisted on a Roman emperor's name."

"And his middle name should be Arion, after my great-great-grandfather," Candide went on. She rocked the baby side to side lightly, "Arcadius Arion. Or should it be Arion Arcadius?"

Snape shrugged with his hands when she glanced up at him in concern. "Either is fine." He and Harry shared a congenial glance.

The door opened and Harry after one more look at the scrunched up face of the new arrival, retreated to let others in close. The crowd was not allowed to remain long, as the lactation consultant, a wisp of an old witch with outsized piles of streaky grey hair on top of her head, chased everyone out except Candide's mother. Harry and Snape retreated to the guest suite rather than follow the rest of the family back to the atrium. Harry sat on the bed while Snape took a stool against the wall. A single fairylight had come on in the corner when they closed the door, and that was the only light in the room.

"Congratulations," Harry remembered to say.

Snape scoffed lightly. "I did not do much, really."

"Not yet," Harry said. "I've been hearing warnings for the last month about how much you are going to be doing. Diaper changes if nothing else."

Snape rested his head back against the wall. "There are spells for that."

Harry considered that. "Wizards have it too easy."

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“Oddly, it doesn’t seem like it.”

Silence fell. The door blocked all noise from the other room. Harry said, “Everything’s going to be different.”

Snape’s eyes restlessly jumped around the wall opposite. “Some things are.”

Harry considered him. His hair fell around his shoulders, longer than normal, flipping in all directions. But the eerie blue light made him look younger. “What, pray tell, do you expect to remain the same?” Harry asked lightly, enjoying needling him.

Snape’s face stretched thoughtfully. Eventually, in a tone of giving in, he replied, “Teaching. When I get back to it.”

Harry’s face relaxed. “How long are you off for?”

Snape’s voice sounded rusty in the closed space. “That was never quite established. But if I return before a month is out, Minerva has promised to curse me to forget where I am employed.”

Harry smiled, which felt like clean spring water on his lips.

Their intermittent conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door. At Snape’s summons, Hermione put her head in. “Hi, sorry to interrupt. I was told to.” She backed up, leaving the door open. The room beyond was again flooded with people.

Harry passed through and steered Hermione to a far corner. She grasped his arm, and shaking it said, “Isn’t it exciting?”

Harry smiled lightly. “When I can teach him spells it will be more so.”

She hit him on the arm, tucked her hair behind her ear, and leaned close to talk over the general chatter. “Minerva sent me, and I have to report back, so I can’t stay long.” Watching the baby being talked to in gleeful gibberish by grandma, she said, “Let’s go out in the corridor and talk.”

The door snapped closed on the noise and it became just another in the closely spaced rows lining both sides of the corridor.

“How are you, Harry?”

Harry thought about how his day had gone. She would be violently displeased with him. He shrugged.

“That’s not good,” she said in all seriousness.

“Do you wish me to lie?” Harry asked. Down at the end of the hall the tall orderly in cream robes was chatting up the receptionist, laughing forcibly at something she said.

“No, I don’t want you to lie.”

Harry remained silent. He could hear his friend inhale and exhale. “Excited to have a brother?” she asked brightly, repeating herself. “I sure would be.”

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Harry had nothing to say. He did not want to think about her disapproval, lest something slip out.

She pinched his sleeve between her fingers. "Can I help you with anything, Harry?"

"Not right now. I'll let you know."

A door opened down the corridor and a figure with a familiar cut to his wheat-blond hair stepped out, cradling something in his cloaked arm. He reached inside to hold the door open. "If you want to go, we can. I see no reason to stay, personally."

"Is that Draco?" Hermione whispered to Harry.

Draco turned crisply just then and spotted them there, his eyes piercing and narrow but distantly grey at the same time. Hermione moved in his direction and Harry followed.

Hermione asked loud enough to carry, "Did Pansy have the baby?"

Draco's face twitched before he replied, "Yes."

From inside the room came a tired voice. "Perhaps we should stay, like the Midwicht suggests."

"Either way," Draco sang in annoyance. "Make up your mind is all."

A pram sat just inside the door. Draco stuffed the fuzzy bundled blanket he held inside at the head of it.

"Is that the baby?" Hermione bubbled, all previous animosity apparently leveled by the opportunity to view a newborn.

Pansy parked the pram so it blocked the door open. Her eyes were puffy and bloodshot, and she kept her gaze on the floor, the only surface of the room not decorated with flights of parasols.

Hermione peaked into the blankets. "Oh... she's adorable. She's got your hair, Draco. It's a girl, right?"

"Oh, yes," Draco said, "we have a fondness for wrapping boys in pink. It's a Malfoy thing."

Hermione did not rise to this. Her finger was captured by curled fingers. "What a grip. She'll play some Quidditch. What's her name?"

Pansy leaned over the handle to say, "Bella."

"Ah," Hermione said, sounding charmed. "For beautiful."

Draco crossed his arms. "Bella Donna."

"Right." Hermione repeated, "Right."

Pansy released the pram and moved carefully to sit on the edge of the bed. Harry tapped Hermione on the shoulder.

"Oh." She freed herself and shuffled out backwards. "Congratulations."

Harry took her place beside the pram and looked in. The bright pink face visible through the blankets gave an extensive yawn. "She is magical," Harry said, finding

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in himself an unexpected desire to improve their mood.

“Of course she is,” Draco said. “She’s a pureblood, isn’t she?”

“Just thought you’d like to know,” Harry said, trying to catch anything beyond Draco’s eyes. Whatever was bothering Draco had grown into a broadly suffocating thing lacking detailed thoughts.

“Your mum will be here any minute, Draco,” Pansy said. “Give my hair a wave, will you?”

Hermione tugged on Harry’s sleeve and they slipped out. As they walked back, Hermione said, “What’s up there?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“That has to be the saddest pair of new parents I’ve ever seen,” Hermione observed as they arrived at Fuchsia Flowers.

Snape stood in the doorway. “What is this?” he asked.

Hermione replied, “Oh, Pansy and Draco are-” She stopped because Snape had suddenly slipped out into the corridor, between them.

“They are here? Which room?”

“Um, Purple something,” Harry said, growing more curious.

Snape stalked off, checking door labels. He knocked on one and the door opened, casting a triangle of light on the hallway floor. Harry and Hermione watched the short exchange and then Snape disappeared inside.

“Professor Snape appears to know something we don’t,” Hermione said, sounding a tad miffed.

“Hogwarts is turning you into a gossip,” Harry criticized.

Hermione put her hand over her heart. “Oh, don’t say that. Come on, let’s see if this kid has grown since we were away.”

Harry shook his head and followed her in. The bulk of the party had moved to the guest suite leaving open space beside the bed. Candide was sitting up with the baby on her legs, playing with his hands. Everyone watched this attentively for a minute.

Harry stepped closer and said, “I can tell you if he’s magical or not. If you give him over a moment.”

Candide waved the baby’s tiny hands gently together and apart. “It doesn’t matter either way,” she said in a faint sing song.

“It doesn’t, really,” Harry agreed; then felt uncertain, waiting for some kind of backlash from within. None came, but he felt vulnerable for having staked out that territory. Hermione stroked Harry’s sleeve and he turned to his friend to find her biting her lip, overwhelmed with emotion.

“I don’t understand anyone today,” Harry complained.

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Inside the room Purple Parasols, Snape bent over the pram and its occupant, but in reality he was obliquely studying Draco standing beside it, standing unnaturally suspended with his hands hanging slightly away from his body.

“You seem to have a choice,” Snape said.

Draco hesitated in prompting, “What do you mean?”

Snape straightened and studied his former student directly. He took a slow inward breath before speaking, not wanting to come across as glib. “The past is fixed.”

He paused when Draco’s eyes narrowed, waiting patiently for him to reach the right conclusions about what Snape knew. “You have a choice,” he went on, turning to bring Pansy into the conversation. She sat on the edge of the bed, with her knees crushing her clasped hands. “The past is fixed but the future is not. To continually fight the past will merely drain and, eventually, defeat you.”

Draco’s eyes grew shining as he stared off beyond the room’s walls. He bit his lip and avoided looking at Snape.

Snape turned to Pansy, whose expression was more open, grasping for hope, perhaps. “The future can be whatever you wish it to be,” Snape stated, holding her gaze.

“Awfully poetic, for you,” Draco criticized. The shine on his eyes became a glare.

“Save that strength for the future. You are going to need it,” Snape snapped lightly at him.

Draco’s anger came out through his limbs as he gestured around the room. “You want us to just pretend?” His voice broke, pushed beyond his control already.

Snape took gentle hold of his lapels and moved him backward, just to prove he could. “Sit down,” he softly said, adding when Draco resisted, “Right there beside your wife.”

Draco sat, drained of anger, in the same pose as Pansy.

“I have notice that you have pretended so far, Mr. Malfoy,” Snape pointed out with no rancor. “There is no sin in this deception. It is only noble.”

Draco turned his head away, eyes shining again. Pansy peered hopefully at Draco.

“Your futures, as well as her future,” Snape added, waving toward the pram, “are entirely in your hands. No one else’s.” When the two of them sat their thoughtfully for long enough, Snape sarcastically asked, “Would you prefer your lives not be in your own hands?”

This brought Draco to himself, as intended. “No, of course not.” He raised his eyes and marginally shifted his pose.

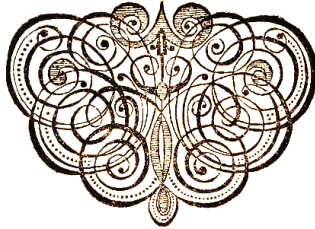
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Snape stood before them, comfortable with standing above them like they were students again. “From this point on, any misery that befalls you will be of your own making. Console yours with that, if nothing else. No one else knows your situation, and I certainly will not say. To keep fighting this is to only fight yourselves. No one involved here is at fault. There is nothing to fight against.”

The baby fussed once. Pansy stood instantly and put a hand into the pram.

Snape added with grim softness, “The evil of the past can take another turn on the next generation... or it can stop here.”

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SAFEKEEPING

The room finally emptied of visitors, and Harry claimed the recently vacated chair beside Snape, who was arm-rocking a vaguely fussing Arcadius. Harry leaned over for a better look. Arcadius' eyes were peering off at nothing between long squints.

“Can he see?”

“A little, I am told.”

Candide, walking by while stretching her legs, said, “He is supposed to have an affinity for faces.”

Harry followed the path of unfocussed attention to one of the solidly outlined paintings of interweaving vines and a broad river. “He seems to have an affinity for that odd painting behind you.”

Without glancing at it, Snape proclaimed, “High contrast.” Then after a beat. “Would you like him?” When Harry automatically lifted his hands, Snape advised, “Be certain to hold up his head.”

Harry adjusted his hands about three ways, none of which quite worked. “No wonder everyone looks so clumsy.” He arranged the baby along his arm, head cradled in his palm and that seemed comfortably secure. The baby smelled distinctly of raw humanness and slightly spoiled milk. “Hello there, Arcadius,” Harry said.

Bella Donna had felt magical the way other wizards and witches did. The bundle in his arms felt similar, but with something more, like he emitted a low level hum of some other energy that surged and faded at random.

Arcadius played his curled fingers over his own cheek before waving his hand spasmodically. It all seemed much more interesting than perhaps it warranted, since

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everyone observed in rapt silence.

“So?” Candide prompted. “Is he?”

Mouth crooked, Harry innocently said, “I thought you didn’t want to know?”

Snape raised a brow, matching Harry’s tease.

Harry angled the baby up, spurring a round of arm beating and half-hearted fussing. “He is.” Harry rotated his body to transfer him back to Snape.

“But?” Snape prompted, changing positions once before pulling Arcadius against his robes, splayed fingers balancing his wispy head.

“But what?” Harry said, arms chilled in the wake of losing the bundle.

Snape said, “There seemed to be more. That is all.”

Harry shrugged. He had no means to describe the difference he perceived, and lacked the desire to try. “He’s magical. That’s all I can tell.”

Candide lifted the baby from Snape. “One more feeding, then we should at least try to sleep. It’s really late.”

One of the junior Midwives knocked and entered just as Candide was settling back on her small hill of pillows. The Midwife pulled a suspended bassinet over beside the bed. “The little tyke can sleep here, in easy reach for his 4:00 a.m. feeding.” She spoke pleasantly, like this was an idea to relish. “When you are ready, we’ll wrap him up tight so he’ll sleep better.” She turned her pink-hatted head to the two of them. “Just a reminder, visiting hours ended a half an hour ago.” She straightened a few things and slipped out again, never ceasing to move.

Snape turned to Harry. “Are you staying?”

Harry glanced between the two of them, at Candide peaking down to speak to the suckling babe beneath the light blanket draped over her shoulder, at Snape watching him expectantly. The scene tugged at him, and he resisted going home to the creakily quiet house.

Snape said, “They will release Candide after noon, most likely. Why don’t you stay at least until breakfast? It is late.”

“I can just Apparate home,” Harry pointed out. “Right to my room.” He yawned then and blinked back the heat it sent into his eyes, certain now that the fairy lights had been gradually dimming.

“Come,” Snape said, standing.

“I packed extra nightshirts, Harry,” Candide said.

“All right,” Harry said, torn between dueling sets of burgeoning instincts. For the moment, remaining here as a family, as a part of an impossible photograph he had stumbled into, won out.

Harry tossed his robe over a small chest of drawers, grateful to get the slightly itchy thing off his bare skin. The frayed old nightshirt was downy soft in comparison.

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Harry stepped back to the doorway and watched as Snape, standing beside the bed, bent over to kiss his wife on the top of the head and she glanced up with a face overflowing with complex emotion. The scene sent Harry elsewhere, disconnected inside and out, lost in myriad possibilities.

Snape stopped before him as Harry stood waiting for something to jar him back to the present.

“Quite all right?”

“Tired,” Harry said. And he was. He felt drained like he never had before; like his thoughts were full of treacle.

Snape tilted his head toward the guest bed. “I’ll be a while longer. I’ll wait with Candide until Arcadius is asleep.”

“The novelty of that will wear off quickly, I expect,” Candide teased, leaning over to set the babe into the hanging bassinet.

Harry shuffled to the guest suite bed and curled up on one side of it, knees off the edge to leave space. He was jolted awake by the bed sliding beneath him.

Snape’s voice came out of the dimness. “Sorry. The bed adjusts to the number of occupants, apparently.”

Harry, foggy thoughts rattling ineffectively in his head, only grunted and pulled the covers up better. Exhaustion sucked him down again, through a dappled green world of shadows – one distinctly contorted one pulsing and twitching – until he sensed nothing.

“Harry?” Snape’s voice came from very close by. Close enough that Harry could feel his breath on his neck.

Harry felt his arm thrash, but not against anything physical; it fought against the shadow squirming and tossing in his mind.

The hand on Harry’s arm tightened painfully and pushed him onto his back. “Harry, it’s just a dream.”

Harry quieted his rushed breathing and swallowed hard. The fairylight in the corner responded to their movement, giving form to the world, which helped Harry inventory what was inside of him and what was out. He took a deep, settling breath and avoided meeting Snape’s gaze, which took on an unfamiliar harshness in the wan light, peering downward like he was.

Despairing exhaustion overcame Harry, making his face scrunch up. He wanted to empty himself of what had happened. He wanted to tell Snape what he had done. His chest filled as he gathered air to speak, but instead he held it in until his lungs complained.

Too weak to manage speech, he exhaled coarsely through his nose.

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“Harry?” Snape shifted to sit up beside him and adjusted the blanket. “Can I help you, Harry?”

Harry longed for help, but with what he was uncertain. The oblique glow from the floating fairylight threw the ceiling into high relief. Harry’s eyes traced the grooves and swirls in the plaster left by the rough hand of the builder. He was failing, he could see that clearly now. Failing at everything that mattered. It did not motivate him to change so much as crush his chest in, pinning him helplessly.

Snape’s hand moved on his shoulder, clasping gently this time. Harry’s eyes hurt, he was so grateful to not be alone in that instant.

A high pitched, rattling little wail came under the door. Snape tossed his half of the covers down and moved to stand up. Harry smiled faintly; that had been too close.

From the next room came the sounds of reassurance and quiet debate about the baby’s bodily comfort.

“He’s probably just wet,” Candide said.

An inordinate amount of shuffling around sounded then, as well as the lights coming up brighter, which further degraded the tenor of complaint from Arcadius.

“Is that better?” Candide’s bright voice asked minutes later. “There you are. There you are,” came in a repeated chant, followed by the fussing taking on the drum-like rhythm of someone being patted on the back.

“Maybe he wishes to eat again?” Snape suggested.

“It’s only been an hour?”

Harry thought he could hear a shrug in the shifting of a dressing gown. Material shifted more and the fussing ceased suddenly.

Harry was sitting up when Snape returned and quietly pushed the door until it latched. Softly, he said, “Not a lot of needs at this age, but sorting out which ones are called for at a given moment seems harder than expected.”

Harry smiled lightly. Snape had brought the scent of newborn back in with him. It drifted around the room when he shed his dressing gown. He sat on his side of the bed and rubbed his face.

“Harry,” Snape began after a while, voice coarse and low. “You are certain there is nothing I can help you with?”

“You seem to have your hands full,” Harry glibly pointed out.

Snape’s voice went stern instantly. “I do not.”

Harry considered the shadow that weighed upon him. He could always cancel the spell, push the mark out of Slowdraw like he had out of the others. As soon as he was finished with him, he would do that. “I can take care of myself.”

“I am here for whatever you need,” came the response, low and pledge-like.

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Harry thought, I need a shadow close that I can trust, one that is sustaining rather than draining. He felt that deep energy billowing up in him again. No, he thought, and with great effort, shucked the notion away, but it was sticky, repeatedly trying to bloom in his mind. Frantic, Harry tried to convince himself of the ill wisdom of the idea. He was a traitor, he insisted, speaking directly to Voldemort's sensibilities in a bid to free himself from the other's intent.

"What . . . ?" Snape asked uncertainly.

Harry sat, half curled around himself, one hand clenching the back of his head. He must have spoken aloud. He held still like that, back muscles pulled painfully taut, breathing difficult, thinking quickly. "I don't know," he said into his elbows. Lying.

Snape shifted closer, eyes intense in the dimming fairylight. He said, "Lie back, Harry, and get some sleep. I think you need it."

Harry resisted, but exhaustion took over. He flopped down on his side, arms pinned uncomfortably under him, and just laid there. He expected to be left alone then, but Snape pushed the hair out of the corner of his eye and brushed it lightly back over his ear.

When Snape spoke, the fairylight ceased dimming just short of complete darkness. "I've always been on your side, Harry, even when it did not seem so. I believe you realize that now, so I can only assume that opinion was from someone else."

Every muscle in Harry's body went taut and rigid upon the soft bed. Snape went on, "Do you want me to fetch a potion from home to make you sleep soundly?"

For a mentally thrashing moment, Harry wanted to distrust him, wanted to suspect him of trying to dope him or even poison him, but he could not mistrust him and the suspicions evaporated, leaving him helpless again.

"Harry?"

Harry shook his head. His muscles were quivering and giving way, falling lax against the bed. He had to clear his throat to speak. "I'm pretty tired. It's okay."

His surprisingly normal tone must have satisfied Snape, who straightened the bed covers before crawling under on his side, facing Harry, watching him until the fairylight shrank down and disappeared.



"Would you like breakfast, Harry?" Candide asked from the doorway of the guest suite, voice crisp and chipper. "Severus is going to fetch something from home rather than brave the cart in the atrium."

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His stomach rumbled at the thought of a Winky-cooked breakfast. “Yeah. Thanks.” He sat up and rubbed his eyes while Candide made googly noises at the baby nestled in her arm.

“We’ve been awake since five, haven’t we?” she said to the babe in a bright tease. “Sleep is going to be a thing of the past for a while, I think.”

Harry nodded in silent agreement.

Snape paid no special heed to Harry the rest of the morning, of this Harry was certain since he was watching for it especially. He was glad to be left to himself while the Midwives fussed over things, like a stunningly disgusting diaper that Harry pulled his shirt up over his nose for, but no noxious smell came his way. Instructions were repeated twice over, which Snape did not complain about as Harry expected. Through the shuffling around the room and baby bathing demonstration, Harry was glad to be left on the sidelines as an intimate observer.

While the last of the packing was going on just before lunchtime, Harry perused one of the Magical Baby Care booklets they had been given. There were rather a lot of recommended restrictions on magic for newborns.

All manner of Quiescing and Silencing spells should be avoided. Newborns always cry for a reason. Consult your Mediwizard or Midwife if you cannot find relief for your offspring by non-magical means!

No children under the age of four should be allowed in the Floo network, except in the case of intractable emergency. If you cannot Apparate safely with the child, a house-visit can be arranged. Just Owl or Fire Call our friendly Floorclerk.

Harry closed the book and put it in the colorful overflowing basket of supplies and free samples the hospital had given them. One of the rubbery bright yellow toys was trying to climb over the edge. Harry gave it a nudge back inside. It shook its fuzzy ears at him and burrowed under a package of Neverfull Nappies.

“Ready to go?” Snape stopped beside him to ask, hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

Harry looked up and nodded. He was holding on so far today, and felt hopeful it would last.

At home, Harry parked himself on a couch with the latest editions of the Daily Prophet but read little of it in lieu of observing Snape attempting to entertain Arcadius while Candide unpacked the basket from the hospital and opened a few gifts that had arrived by owl overnight.

When Candide stood up with the intent of checking whether the quilt from her great aunt would match the drapes in the baby’s room, Snape said to her, “You should not be exerting yourself quite so much, I believe.”

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Candide folded the blanket and sat back down beside it. "It's hard to sit still. There's so much to do."

Brow furrowed, Snape asked, "What is there to do?"

Arcadius fussed just then. With deliberate motions, Snape moved him to his lap, facing him, long fingers supporting his head. "His needs are really quite simple."

Arcadius put a hand in his mouth and began turning pink, looking ready for a really good cry.

"Want me to take him?" Candide asked.

"He does seem to prefer you," Snape said, but he did not move to give him over, despite the rising noise.

Candide rose and fetched him, curled within her arm, he quieted immediately. "Maybe if you were a source of food, too, he'd like you better," she pointed out as she settled back on the couch.

"I know a potion for that," Snape informed her.

Harry interrupted with, "That I'd pay to see."

Candide laughed. "Ever brewed it?" she pointedly asked Snape.

"Of course."

"Really?" Arcadius was deciding that his current location was not optimal either and began fussing again. Candide swung him lightly and he shifted to cooing. "To what purpose did you put it?"

"I sold it." Snape crossed his legs and sat back with a haughty attitude. "I do not know what purpose it was eventually put to, and I did ask at the time, as I was curious. I suspect it was something boring . . . cross-dressing or something."

Candide set Arcadius down to fetch up a fallen rattle. She demonstrated it to the baby and offered it. It was flipped aside immediately along with some serious foot kicking. "I'm with Harry," she said, "I'd pay some serious Galleons to see you nursing Arcadius."

Snape rolled his eyes and stood up. "Perhaps I shall go and see if the new quilt is suitable with the drapery."

"While you are at it, maybe we should move the changing table down here." She pointed to the space under the stairs. "I'm thinking that we probably won't be in the baby room much, at least for a few months. I mean, I wouldn't want to leave him alone in there, and we'll be in here most of the time . . ." She sounded strangely uncertain. "Don't you think?"

Snape looked around the room, which resembled a pastel Christmas present explosion more than anything. "Seems likely. I will bring down a few things."

Harry opened the newspaper again and read Ginny's interview with him. Her writing read much the way she spoke, but her description of him seemed like that of

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someone he did not know. Did she really see him that way, he wondered. She closed with:

At this point, rumors will always be circulating about Harry and there is precious little he can do to convince the Wizarding public at large that they are untrue, no matter how absurd they may seem to those who know him well. As a long time friend of Harry Potter, this writer continues to be saddened that he is so broadly misunderstood.

Harry precisely folded the paper back up along the original creases before setting it on the floor, the only open spot. Arcadius was again demonstrating his refusal to be placated by toys for longer than ten seconds at a go. Candide jiggled a fuzzy bunny before his nose, eliciting a series of synchronized kicks.

Harry watched this with harmlessly flitting thoughts, emotions nestled safely in a past too distantly grey for an adult mind to get purchase against them. He did not want to move, even when his eyes grew heavy and playtime shifted to feeding time and back again.

Pillowling his head on his crooked arm, Harry pulled his feet up on the couch, half reclined on the end cushion, and closed his eyes. The babble from adults and baby alike continued, narrating his vague, floating thoughts.

A roof-beam creaked in the wind, and sleet began pummeling the windows in pulses. The noise masked the room's voices and lulled Harry into a drowse.

Snape held the pram wheels he was assembling and paused to watch Harry sleep. The wind made the beams creak louder and the sound of the rain on the slate overhead permeated the high room. The sound sent Arcadius into limp dreamland too, deep enough that he remained asleep after being placed on an empty couch cushion.

Harry curled his legs up closer, prompting Snape to stand and dig out one of the soft fuzzy blue blankets from a store sack and drape it over him. He returned to his seat, checking on Harry between pondering instructions that insisted in flashing red letters at the top of each page that magic was not recommended for assembly.

Snape was just deciding that his skills at magic were more than likely sufficient to avoid damaging the item's built-in Charms when the beating rain eased, but it left the wind alone to moan around the window sashes and toss the shutters with a bang, making Harry stir.

Smoke drifted out of the fireplace, fogging the room. Harry opened his eyes to watch Snape stand to check it.

"Isn't that charmed against downdrafting?" Candide asked.

Snape's hair swished as he nodded. He bent down to peer up the flue, hovered another log on, and remained beside the hearthstone while it caught and helped lift the air. But before he could step away, another round of grey smoke came billowing

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out.

“Do you know a better backdraft protection charm, Harry?” Snape asked.

Harry turned his head without lifting it. “You expect I would?”

Snape was crouched now, checking the position of the damper after using a Flame Freezing Charm on the logs. “I thought perhaps from Ravenclaw’s book.”

“Oh.” Harry thought back in his mind. “Yeah.” He closed his eyes and visualized the book. “Er, Constatus something, or um . . .” He cleared his mind and waited for the memory to come, imagined flipping through the pages of the reluctant book.

“I could have guessed that part,” Snape drawled lightly.

Harry still did not lift his head, but lifted his arm to gesture. “Inchoatacarbonariae Constatus, but the wand motion was a downward spiral for some reason.”

“Interesting. In which direction, clockwise?”

Harry shrugged, not remembering.

“Perhaps anticlockwise to match the coriolis effect,” Snape muttered. He attempted the spell and there was no magical flare back, implying it had taken. He stepped back to watch the fire burning. “We’ll see if that holds. Miserable weather we are having, even by normal standards.”

Harry glanced critically at his baby blue covers before tugging them up around his neck and settling in to close his eyes again. The rain picked up to fall the hardest yet and Harry drifted off.



The next afternoon, the weather came in behind visitors who ducked as they came inside, standing straight to give over their cloaks.

“Wotcher, Harry,” Ginny greeted him as she shook out her hair. “I’m glad it’s nicer in London than here.”

Aaron gave his cloak a stylish flip over his arm before presenting it. “My good man, you continue to play House Elf.”

Under his other arm, Aaron carried a large box covered in cavorting yellow and pink toy bears. Ginny took it from him and presented it to Harry before pulling it back again. “Oh, I guess I should give it to the new mother.”

Aaron elbowed her in the ribs. “Methinks you are too accustomed to giving Harry presents.”

Ginny rolled her eyes and pushed by them.

“How is training?” Harry asked Aaron, feeling a twinge as he did so.

“Harder without you there. Rodgers picks on the rest of us more.” He stretched his neck as he said this.

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Aaron bent over the swaying bassinet placed beside the couch. “Well, if it isn’t the latest little wizard,” he announced.

Arcadius gave a kick and a gurgle.

“He seems to like new faces,” Candide observed, leaning over to catch a finger in the baby’s fist.

Everyone leaned over. Arcadius looked over each of them and gave the air more kicks.

When they tired of leaning around the bassinet, Ginny sat down beside Harry. “What’d you think of the article?” she asked.

Harry considered his answer. “It was okay.”

Ginny exhaled and leaned back. “That’s about what my editor said too, but I expect for different reasons. She wants more controversy.”

She gave Harry a thoughtful look, behind which Harry could read the prophecy he had told her from the other Plane. Harry sat back as well. He should not have told her. The frame of mind that had led him to confessing it had been a weak one. But at least she was unlikely to say anything, for now.

“Harry lacks controversy?” Aaron asked, striding over. Snape’s eyes followed him, then glanced at Harry, who caught him looking and hardened his gaze. Aaron sat in one of the straight backed chairs only recently cleared of newly unpacked baby goods. “Dark wizards never lack for controversy,” Aaron quipped, studying his nails and Harry beyond them.

As he stared at his friend picking lint off his robes in between admiring his fingers, Harry thought that his plans should be bigger, that Percy was too small to bother with.

Ginny nudged him on the arm. “Harry?”

Harry forced a smile onto his face. “Yeah?”

Aaron teased, “Don’t disturb him, he’s finalizing his grand plans for world domination.”

“I don’t want to dominate the world,” Harry said. “That sounds boring. Not a long-term challenge, really.”

Ginny laughed, making Harry realize his statement could be believed to be a joke.

Arcadius’ babbling grew fussy and Candide picked him up to walk with him. Snape stood and took him instead, pacing along the short wall of the main hall.

Ginny leaned into Harry’s shoulder to quietly say, “There’s a sight I’d never imagined seeing.”

Harry watched his guardian pace, patting the closely cuddled infant as he went. His sharp profile dipped out of view now and then, pressed into the soft blankets bundled around the baby.

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Harry's throat closed up, and he struggled to swallow. "Yeah," he said, but he wanted to say something more about Ginny not really knowing Snape. He held back out of a sense of loyalty that further confused his thoughts.

"You should open the present," Ginny insisted after Candide finished refolding the things that had piled up around her.

With a pop of over-strained Spellotape, a stuffed animal emerged from the box when the paper was removed. It was a Pegasus about five feet high, with sparkling sapphire eyes and shiny silver quilted wings.

"He's a self storing toy," Aaron said, "the only kind my mum would ever buy."

He waved his wand at it, and it leapt up and galloped to the corner of the room, where it reared up, wings spread, and froze that way.

"All your toys were like that?" Ginny demanded.

"You make it sound like a good thing," Aaron laughed. "When I was bad, one wave sent my entire room of toys out of reach. I think it was the only reason I wasn't too lazy to learn any spells at all. I was tired of losing my things."



The next morning was quieter. Harry sat on the couch reading the newspaper, and feeling out of sorts with happenings at the Ministry. He knew what was printed barely scratched the surface of what was actually going on, and it bothered him to feel so ignorant.

Arcadius lay asleep on a cushion between him and Candide, who had a book open, but had not turned a page in it for half an hour. Her attention remained fixated on the baby, who lay still enough for instinctive concern, but with a healthy pink complexion.

Harry set the paper aside and watched him too. "Is he warm enough like that?" Harry asked, thinking the baby's yellow outfit not very thick, even if it was fuzzy. The wind had died down today, but winter had come on again, and it leached through the stone walls with cold fingers.

"He's a little furnace. Feel."

Harry put a hand on Arcadius' surprisingly solid torso. He felt warm, it was true. He also still felt strange, that low medley of a magical hum still fluttered around him.

Snape stepped in from the drawing room and Candide stood and said to him, "If you want to watch him, I'm going to take a desperately needed bath."

Harry looked up, wondering that she had not simply left himself to watch. Snape's gaze locked on his own as he said, "Of course," and swooped in to take Candide's place.

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When the door to the toilet closed in the distance, Harry asked, “She doesn’t trust me?”

Not looking up from studying Arcadius’ utterly still sleep, Snape said, “If he began fussing, what would you do?”

“Come and get you, I suppose.”

Snape shot him a raised brow.

“And what are you going to do if he wakes up hungry?” Harry said. When Snape resisted a wry smile, Harry offered, “I can fetch you some potion.”

Snape crossed his arms and sat straight. “You will not.”

Harry, grinning now, said, “I dare you.”

Snape said, “Nappies are as involved as I wish to get with digestion for now.”

“After pickling all those rat brains and hedgehog livers all those years, nappies shouldn’t be any trouble.”

“One would think, but somehow . . .”

Harry laughed lightly and rested his hand on the fuzzy warmth of the baby’s abdomen again, immediately reminded of the hum. Part of him thought he should say something, but an indefinable worry held him back. A wave of protective instinct for the sleeping babe washed through him, making him lock his jaw tight.

Snape said, “If you want to hold him, go ahead.”

“I don’t want to wake him up,” Harry said.

“It is not a problem,” Snape said, sounding doting.

“It’s okay,” Harry insisted. “I really expect he’ll be hungry when wakes up.”

“Ah, well, never mind for now then.”



That evening an owl dropped a package on the sideboard for Harry before demanding a strip of meat from the platter of cooling roast Candide was still nibbling at.

Harry recognized the Twins’ flowing iridescent ink on the label and a sweep of dread passed through him. He had set these things in motion but now resisted their momentum. He stood without explaining why and took the package up to his room.

The Decorator Cube stood about two inches high, with curious curves and gouges marring the faces of it. As per the instructions Harry set it in the center of the floor and stepped back to open and shut the bedroom door, which would trigger it to activate. The lamplight sparkled into dark red, rich velour and dark stained wood crawled over the familiar surfaces of his room, starting from the floor, then up the walls, until it met on the ceiling just above the cube and settled down flat. Harry

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spun to study the illusion in all directions. It was close, quite close, to what he remembered. The desk was not as grand and shiny perhaps and the curtains not as absurd, but it certainly would do. He felt around on the floor with his foot and found the cube. The only way to shut it off was to stick it in a dark box, which Harry did, pressing the lid tight until the last stabbing beam of red light leaking out from under it went dead.

Tomorrow would be Sunday, a better day for the exchange than today. Harry's instincts berated him for stalling after all this time, but he stifled them and pulled out a quill and parchment to write a letter to Tonks with a simple message saying the time and the place where he expected her to bring Mr. Weasley, and more Aurors if she wished. If Ma Dame sent a few underlings, if she came herself, even, Harry would also be getting even for what happened to Aaron. It felt too clean, though. If something were to befall Aaron's tormentors it should be more than simple arrest by the Ministry. It should be something horrible. And long. Long and horrible. Harry's mind flitted from one idea to the next as he held off on addressing the envelope he flipped in his fingers.

He now wondered if he should have found a way to get to The Boss rather than working with Mr. Weasley at all. The Boss taking Ma Dame captive would begin to approach equitable treatment for what she had done. Snape's advice about having only one branch involved at a time made Harry scribble out Tonks' address and hand the letter over to Hedwig. She nodded several times before taking off with it, as if his pet agreed, or was bowing in supplication. Harry shut the window on the cold air invading his room and returned downstairs.

Harry was lost far enough in thought to make Snape ask, "Everything all right?"

Harry nodded, and a minute later, brought Candide's head up with a snap, when he said, "Evil wizards have to want something. Like you said, they have to have great ideas."

Dryly, Snape returned, "You do not have great ideas?"

Harry shook his head, thinking that revenge on Percy, while fun and appropriate, felt a bit pedestrian. It's just a start, another voice said. When word gets around, it will build respect and fear, in the right people. The plan paled in comparison to thoughts of returning to that other Plane where he could stretch his full power without limits. This idea warmed Harry's insides enough to make them squirm just a little. With Snape home for the month, he had plenty of time to do just that.

Arcadius gave a coo of delight at getting his ring-shaped rattle offered to him for the umpteenth time. Unfortunately, he bonked himself in the face with it and broke into a breathy cry. Candide lifted him up to her shoulder and patted him reassuringly.

"Your kid," Harry teased Snape.

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“That is how learning happens, I believe,” Snape replied serenely. “As long as it is not permanently scarring.”

Harry needed to talk to his assistants, to make further arrangements. Instead he sat watching baby care. As it grew completely dark outside the small windows and he was running out of evening, Harry stood. “I have to go talk to someone,” he said, voice carefully neutral.

Snape nodded, and returned to his reading. Harry hesitated before the couch, on the cusp of bending his knees to sit again and confess that he did not feel much like going off to summon his servant. His one pitiful servant. But with a deep breath, he strode to the front hall for his cloak and slipped away from there, rather than risk facing them again.

Harry reversed out the Dark Plane into Belinda’s flat and found it empty. He strode to the center of the room and turned in a circle before planting his feet and tilting his head back. The stale air in the room made him wrinkle his nose. It did not seem like the Belinda he knew to let the cleanliness of the flat slip so.

With distaste, Harry reached inside himself and sent a song in the direction of the shadow contorting in the underworld of his mind. The shadow reacted, stretching and jumping about, but it did not come closer. Harry huffed in annoyance and tried to lure in the shadow by reaching in its direction. That did not work either.

Harry rubbed his eyes and considered what to try next, feeling impatience turning to anger. The shadow jerked in his mind, then jerked again and with a pop, Slowdraw appeared before the television. He crouched over his knees, head angled uncomfortably, arms wrapped over him for protection.

Harry shook his head in disgust. “Where’s your friend?” he asked.

Slowdraw pointed with his fist off behind him, poking the air a few times before managing to say, “He’s . . . he’s waiting for me.”

“Fine. This is what I want you to do. Tomorrow at noon . . . are you listening?”

Slowdraw nodded violently, neck contorting far over in the other direction now.

“I want you to bring Percy Weasley to the warehouse tomorrow, precisely at noon. Walk him through the entrance routine we set up, and bring him to the box. It’ll be set up as the boss’s office. Got all that? Noon.”

Slowdraw nodded. “You want that we don’t let anyone follow ’im, then?”

“I want you to pretend to do that, but don’t actually do that. Mess it up.”

Slowdraw’s brow bunched up painfully. “What?”

Harry spoke more slowly, ignoring the desire building in his wand hand to simply whack the simpleton before him with a Blasting Curse. “Pretend to run the spells to prevent tracking when you bring him to the warehouse, but don’t make them work. I want him followed, but not suspicious about it. Got it?”

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“Oh. Yeah,” Slowdraw’s shoulders fell in relief upon understanding.

“Tell your partner all that, so there are no mix ups.” Harry imagined the Ministry descending, if they chose to. “After you deliver Percy, get scarce. Got it? So nothing bad happens to you. There may be some fighting.”

In a tiny voice, Slowdraw, brows knitting again, said, “Thank you.”

“Right,” Harry said dismissively. “Go on. You should have time to locate Percy Weasley by tomorrow. I hear he doesn’t hide himself at all. Tell him the boss will be expecting him to have the goods.”

Slowdraw nodded while bowing and Apparated away without meeting Harry’s eyes. In the wake of his departure the room felt overly still. Grateful that he could push someone useful around so easily, Harry headed back for home.

Snape studied Harry a moment when he arrived, but returned to his reading without so much as a change in expression. Harry sat, stiff backed, on the couch edge, feeling antsy. He blinked rapidly; it seemed brighter in the room than expected.

“The chandelier is fully lit,” Harry said.

Snape and Candide both looked up at the ring of candles suspended on a chain over their heads. “Winky must have thought we needed it,” Candide said, waving it out, which left only the halos around the three lower lamps. Candide carefully lifted Arcadius and stood up. “Time to try for some sleep anyway. Coming?” she asked Snape.

“In a while,” Snape replied.

Candide swished off in her long dressing gown. After the bedroom door upstairs clicked closed, Snape asked, “Everything all right?”

Harry sat rod straight, knees pinching his hands together. “Yes.” He shaped more words before speaking them, making certain they were safe. “I’m trapping Percy tomorrow, at noon.”

“Good.”

“Is it?” Harry asked, staring at the stone wall before him, the generations of mortar were mapped out in the overlapping shades of it. “Then what’ll I do?”

Snape closed the book he had open and set it aside. “Once you have proven your point about Percy, you do not wish to return to training?”

The part of him that liked plotting screamed against it. “I don’t think so,” Harry said. “I don’t want to be Rodgers’ plaything again.”

Snape’s robes shushed as he sat back and crossed his legs. “Is that you speaking? It doesn’t sound like your kind of answer.”

Harry suffered an acute moment of distrusting Snape, and waited for it to fade. “Does it matter?”

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“It may very well not,” Snape calmly replied. “In which case, the situation has changed some from how I imagined it.”

Harry looked away from him more, at the door to the drawing room. Something inside him scrambled up a hill of shifting sand, but soon enough the glass bulb it inhabited would be crushingly full of sand and crawling at all would be impossible.

Snape waited patiently for an answer before standing and moving to sit beside him. He clasped his hands together, tucked into the heavy sleeves of his winter robe.

Harry kept his gaze fixed elsewhere. “You are going to say something strategically patronizing,” he prompted.

“No. I am just trying to provide you with some companionship, since you do not have much. I assume if there were anything else you needed, you would ask for it.”

“I could use a little potion to sleep,” Harry said, wanting to be well-rested for tomorrow.

Snape stood without hesitation and disappeared into the toilet. While he waited, Harry paged through a special baby issue of *Witch Weekly* from several years ago. He flipped by battered pages of round-cheeked infants in miniature professional Quidditch team outfits, complete with pads. This was followed by an advertising spread of baby baskets suitable for hanging on a broomstick. Swings safely wide on hard turns! Harry was glad he had not seen anything like it among the packages the household had acquired the last few days.

Snape returned with a cup and presented it with two hands. Harry thought that solicitous until he discovered the cup was hot. “Thanks,” he said.

Snape rested his hands on the arm of the couch, leaning over, which made his hair curtain the sides of his face. “If you need anything tomorrow, you will let me know.”

“I’m glad you’re home to keep an eye on Candide.”

“I will be on my guard. For certain.” He straightened. “Good night, Harry,” he said.

Harry put his nose close to the cup and his nostrils filled with the scents of blueberries and tar. He decided to carry the unfamiliar concoction up to bed, just in case it worked too fast.



Harry stared beyond the mirror on his wardrobe door and straightened his robes with one last tug. His mind felt sharp, his thoughts narrow. His father’s old invisibility cloak slipped through his fingers when he bundled it up to stash it in his breast pocket, and he needed a violent move to catch it all. Patting its companionable bulk in his breast pocket, he slipped away to the warehouse and began coloring the hanging cloth

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to jet black. That finished, he paced the broad floor. A fine grit rasped under his shoes; the sound gave shape to the vast space around him.

Harry checked the periphery spells on the walls, idly killing time without thinking too hard. A sound brought his head around and he found Tonks in the center of the floor, looking around.

“Did you bring Mr. Weasley?” Harry asked.

“He’s on his way.” She studied the overhead walkways before returning her stoic gaze back to him. She began to pace, waving her wand back and forth with stiff movements.

“Hello, Harry,” Mr. Weasley’s voice called across the warehouse. He cast a few spells ahead of himself before continuing. They lit the dust into sparkles of red.

When he faced Harry, he said, “You have been plotting on your own, I hear.”

Harry, trying to avoid getting caught up in complex emotion, said, “Someone from Ma Dame’s branch of Durumulna is going to be brought here, to sell something to The Boss. I thought you might want to see the transaction.”

Mr. Weasley smiled faintly, seeming patronizing. “Sounds like a fine arrangement, Harry. Tonks said there might be more arrivals than that?”

“Ma Dame may decide to descend, since she will be able to trace her underling coming here.”

Mr. Weasley nodded as if this was already clear. “Yes. That sounds about right. We have a few extras in the surrounding streets, just in case. We’d certainly appreciate such an opportunity.” They measured each other, Harry wondering whether the past, where his best friend’s father looked out for him unconditionally, was as far gone as it felt right then.

Mr. Weasley glanced up and let his eyes trace the setup. “This is what The Boss’ hideout looks like, eh?”

Electricity ran over Harry’s back, setting him on alert. “So I hear,” he replied, all thoughts of the past obliterated.

Harry walked him through the arrival. It was about a quarter hour before noon when they stood in the “office” with the Decorator Cube activated.

Mr. Weasley took a seat in the chair behind the desk. “Who’s playing The Boss?”

Replied Harry, “I was going to.”

Mr. Weasley slipped back in the chair and swung it back and forth. “Why don’t you let me? Tonks can work up a disguise on me, she knows at least three of the appearances he is reputed to use.”

“That’s a great idea,” Tonks said.

Harry had not thought of that. “We need a house elf too, in a lacy red placemat.” He turned to Tonks. “You can make yourself smaller, right?”

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“A tad, for a short time.” She eyed him and put her hands on her hips. “A lacy red placemat?” she asked, disbelieving.

Harry shrugged, pretending helpless on this point and enjoying her disgust. She backed up to the divan in the corner and said, “If I lounge in a tablecloth as a housecoat, I can hide my size better, and my costume,” she added, making a point.

Mr. Weasley glanced at his watch before snapping it closed and pocketing it again. “I need a disguise before you do yours, Ms. Tonks.”

Tonks heaved up and in seconds had Mr. Weasley done up as a portly, sagging man in a fine suit. Mr. Weasley tugged with a sour face at the tie he now wore. He squeezed into the seat behind the desk, adjusting his folds with a grunt, then waved Tonks into the corner.

She kicked back in a fiery red tablecloth with strawberries on the edging and said, “I’ll change the rest when we get a knock on the door, not a second sooner.”

Harry pulled out his invisibility cloak, but first he stepped up before the desk and said, “You’ll leave my two assistants alone, correct? They’ve been useful.”

“We will. For now, Harry,” he replied gently.

A surge of annoyed respect at his holding his ground rose in Harry. Rather than continue the stare-down, he tugged his cloak over himself and took a spot along the wall between a copper brazier and rich curtains that hid a liquor cabinet. He brooded there in private, battling with himself over whether this course was best. The more his instincts beat on him for relinquishing control, the more stubbornly he stood there, doing nothing.

They all waited in silence. Mr. Weasley took a cigar out of the box on the desk, sniffed it, and shook his head. The room’s illusions held only sight and feel, and not odor or taste. Across from Harry, a cabinet full of little ceramic figures from history flickered and wavered before re-stabilizing.

Mr. Weasley gave a sniff and pulled the unlit cigar from his mouth to point with. “Looks like my sons’ work.”

“Who else?” Tonks replied before Harry could. She was trying various nail colors on a distorted, elf hand. Orange and pink changed to red with stars.

A knock came on the door. Mr. Weasley sat forward, then sat back and chomped on the cigar again. He tapped his finger on his cheek a count of five before saying, “Yeah!” gruff and sharp, familiar voice distorted by the cigar. Tonks shrank down to about double elf size, but her ears and nose were convincing. She tossed the large cloth over her legs and crouched down.

The door opened and Hummer gestured roughly for Percy to step inside. Percy slunk in, studying the room in keen detail which made Harry bite his lip that the cube should fail just then. It held.

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Mr. Weasley, cigar still in place, said, "I ain't got all day, kid. Wastin' my time is not a healthy activity. Just a bit of advice."

Under his cloak, Harry's brows shot up.

"You really The Boss?" Percy asked disdainfully.

Mr. Weasley froze, but not in worry or surprise. He put his hand down on the desk, flat and hard. "You got a lot of unhealthy habits, ya little punter. We have a transaction, I believe. Your position is currently quite tenuous." He leaned forward in the chair, making the desk seem smaller by lording over it with the bulky disguise. "The only way out of here is through me. That can be a happy ending for you or the ending for you. Your choice."

Harry pushed his shoulders back from leaning into the sight of his former boss behaving so, well, boss-like.

When Percy merely pursed his lips, Mr. Weasley went on, and this time Harry could see that his act was powered at least in part by his keen disappointment in the son standing before him. This was not the scene Harry had imagined. Mr. Weasley was converting his hurt neatly into razor sharp anger.

"Where you stand now, young man, I can take the goods off your cold corpse and none will be the wiser."

"I don't have it on me," Percy retorted.

In slow motion, dragging out the tension, Mr. Weasley sat back. The cold cigar flicked to the other side of his mouth. "Then we have no business, do we?" The chair squeaked. Behind Percy, the wall by the door rippled in response to the sound. Mr. Weasley waited for it to go smooth again, a delay which played on Percy enough to shine his brow with sweat.

"Slouch!" Mr. Weasley said, gesturing at Hummer. "Take this abuser of our kind privileges out of my sight. Remind him to watch his back as I don't take kindly to those unable to deal fairly with me."

Hummer responded to his new moniker without a flicker and gave Percy a rough tug to the door.

After they were gone, Mr. Weasley sat as if waiting, and the room remained still. Harry's instincts berated him for letting someone else run the show, but he had got what he had come for, Percy had revealed his double life. Trouble was, with Mr. Weasley involved, there was no violence, so it was all a bit of a let down. Harry tossed his cloak off his head and onto his shoulders like a cape. He wanted to say something, even I told you so, but it would be a sign of weakness to do so. It would imply he cared what Mr. Weasley thought, and Harry was above these people.

Minutes ticked by, but nothing happened. No attack, or even a sound, came from without. Mr. Weasley stood up, tossed the cigar forlornly onto the desk and signaled

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that Tonks could return to normal. “And fix me too,” he said, patting his great belly.

Back to normal, Mr. Weasley stepped up to Harry. “What was he selling, anyway?”

“My old wand,” Harry said with a rush of pleasant revenge that almost made everything all right with his plans.

Mr. Weasley’s chin lifted. After a space he said, “The one he swapped with yours long enough to give it to our prisoner, who used it to kill Moody.”

Harry glanced at Tonks, who pinned her gaze on the floor. That lie still stood. “I assume,” Harry replied. Tonks now owed him even more. Harry licked his lips.

Now came some of the pain Harry expected to extract from his old boss. Sadness crept into his distant gaze, deepening the light wrinkles around his eyes. He patted Harry on the arm and turned to the door, but stopped before opening it. “You’ll debrief Harry?”

“Sure,” Tonks replied.

But when they were alone, Tonks picked fuzz off her cloak a few minutes. “I can write it up without an interview,” she coldly said, and abruptly walked out.

Harry exhaled. The walls flickered and warped. Perhaps he could use the setup to get even with Ursie. Perhaps he needed greater ideas than that. His instincts offered up notions of world domination through magic, but Harry did not particularly find much rational appeal in that, so he pushed them aside. He realized now as he stared at his own hand clenching and unclenching in the red infused room that what he wanted was a better understanding of what was within. What exactly had he inherited?

Harry dropped his hand. There was someone he could see, perhaps talk to, who knew something of this. Harry Disapparated for home, thinking ahead with such distraction that he did not respond to Snape’s greeting when he arrived.

“Harry?” Snape prompted loudly as Harry stood there in the main hall occasionally glancing abstractly at his left hand.

Harry brought himself to the present, away from plotting ways of convincing the French prison warden to let him see Lockhart, preferably alone, preferably with his wand still in hand. “What?”

Snape kindly asked, “How did it go?”

Harry shrugged. “Didn’t go as planned.”

Candide must have been off napping because it was quiet elsewhere in the house. Snape checked that the self-rocking bassinet was secure and stood to approach Harry. “They rarely do,” Snape commiserated. “Have you worked out your next move?”

Harry did not think there was a next move with regard to Percy, beyond challenging him to a duel to the death. That sounded mildly interesting. Without careful setup, though, it could land him in inconvenient trouble. Perhaps he could bait Percy

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into attacking him, in front of a crowd, so that when Harry eliminated him it would seem to be self-defense, or at least warranted.

“Harry?”

Harry looked up.

“You were doing it again.”

Harry gestured at the room. “I was just thinking.”

“I will spare you any commentary about how much effort that appears to take.”

Harry snorted, pleased with this comment, since it lent sincerity to Snape’s unusually kind attitude. Harry moved away, intending to take a peek at Arcadius, perhaps try out the new toys laid out in an arc before the couch, but something happened to his legs. His knees buckled and smacked the hard floor a split instant before black ice shot through his heart.

“Harry!” came Snape’s stunned voice.

Harry was only dimly aware of hands rolling him onto his side, but his limbs quivered too violently for him to remain there. He arched and flailed while his mind reeled, uncomprehending. He tried to draw in more than a gasp, and couldn’t. Panic set in. Fear of dying so great his vision blacked out, wiping away his tilted view of the long boards making up the floor, the roof beams rising overhead to meet in a point, the nearby lamp looming like a tarnished pinnacle. Harry knew all those things were still there only because he could feel Snape’s fingers on his arm.

The pain grew unbelievably intense, then went to nothing. Harry sucked a desperate breath into burning lungs and tasted the polished wood floor. Then he held the next breath as the contorted shadow slipped free from him. It rippled over the floor of the forest in his mind, and then it shrank away with a tiny pop, into nothing. Harry let out a cry at the rush of emptiness filling in behind it chilling his heart.

Breathing better with the pain and fear lessened, Harry’s shoulders dropped to the floor. He turned his head to the side. Snape was stroking his back.

“Harry, what’s happening?”

Harry did not want to tell Snape that he knew Slowdraw was dead. His body went rigid again, this time with the urge for action; Ma Dame must have attacked the warehouse after the rest of them had departed. Slowdraw and Hummer must have come back, despite Harry’s instructions.

Harry pushed to his feet, muscles quivering now with frantic energy. “I have to go,” he muttered, unsteady on his feet.

“To St. Mungo’s I assume you mean?” Snape asked, voice burdened with parental concern.

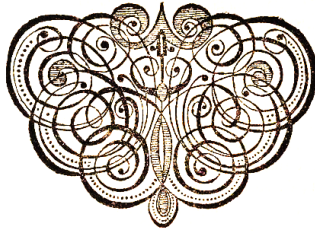
“No. I’m sorry.”

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With that heartfelt apology, more to his own self who wanted nothing more than hand himself over for care, Harry Disapparated.

Author's Notes: I have to thank the betas yet again. They really came through on a rough chapter (took two days to apply fixes!). Without Bettina, Avyncentia, Madeline, Jen, Cheelakeep, Steve, Michael, Ally and Nana, this story would be a pale shadow of what it is. Thanks you guys!

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



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Feet half-numb and legs unsteady, Harry slipped from the Dark Plane into the far corner of the warehouse, where a wide pillar and a wall formed a protected area. Mr. Weasley and Rodgers were crouched beside the pillar, ducked low. They did not sense Harry arriving under his cloak. Smoke and the scent of spell-cooked air drifted by. Harry's instincts resisted moving at first. They complained bitterly about danger and lack of allies with each step.

Harry put one foot in front of the other, wand out, and walked around the wall, away from the others, to look out. The catwalk cloth was aflame in places, sending down grey snow edged in glowing orange.

Harry backed up and ran a quick check. His barriers were still holding, which made him bite his lip out of pride. Checking that his cloak well covered his feet still, Harry ducked and scuttled to the next pillar. Rusting rods within the concrete had cracked off the corners. The stained surface plucked at his cloak when he pressed back against it and looked over his shoulder, trying to catalog spell trails to identify who was where.

A black clad figure swooped down from the rafters on broomstick, eliciting a burst of spells from Harry's left where Rogers and Mr. Weasley crouched. The flyer fell, and vanished just as it hit the ground, a doppelgänger, which meant it was a distraction. Harry moved without thought, knowing in his energized body that the direction of danger had just shifted 180 degrees. He slid around the pillar just as the wall to his right blew in, with more noise than movement, since his old barrier spells fought the force of the spell explosion.

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Someone cried out but it was unnaturally cut short. The barrage of spells from within the warehouse ratcheted up, as if twice as many people were suddenly there, but had been sitting idle. Bricks rattled to the floor where the wall sank inward and dust ballooned outward, dust that would reveal an invisible figure.

Overpowering fear propelled Harry away from the burgeoning dust cloud and into the center of the warehouse. Spells sizzled overhead. One struck beside him, blackening the floor in an arc. Harry jerked back toward the site of the explosion, the closest shelter. He ducked to his knees and pinned his cloak around his wrist with his other hand to reinforce the barrier spell on that wall. The spells came so easily, even in the heat of panic, that it startled him. A figure fluttered into view through the broken opening, pawed against the barrier in a few places, then ran on.

Spells continued to crackle around him, Harry pushed to his feet and headed for some stacks of abandoned pallets, knocked askew by the blast, but still high enough to hide behind. A splayed out figure was pinned beneath the stack. Harry began to crouch, stood again, and backed up to the wall to carefully hover the pile straight. A few complicated waves glued the piles together, which would provide better protection.

Harry crouched again and patted Tridant on the shoulder. He groaned and turned his head to face Harry. His close-cut, wheat-colored hair had rivulets of red coursing through it. Harry glanced around, but no one approached. Tridant should not have been alone here, Harry considered, given that he was only a first year. The battle beyond the grey wood of the splintered pallets faded. Shouting echoed, followed by another burst of spells, then just a few sparse sizzles criss-crossed the air.

Tridant's radiance leaked away into the dusty, uncaring vastness around them. The loss of it gave Harry a shiver where he was raw from losing his servant. He rubbed a hand over the blood-slick, stiff hair. Tridant opened his eyes. He stared up at Harry without surprise or even recognition. Like Death himself might be greeted, Harry thought with a rush of trembling heat through his limbs.

Harry brushed Tridant's unusually short hair back again. That instinctive fear of moments before slipped from Harry, making him breathe out in a relieved rush. He felt placated, pleased beyond measure to have death in his hands. He had control over one death, therefore he had control over all death.

Tridant's head tilted back and he made a choked off sound of surprised pain. Harry stroked his head again, pleased to dip his hand in the sticky-slick radiant blood. He bent over more, wanting to get as close as possible to approaching death.

Tridant blinked in confusion and jerked his arm upward. Only then did Harry realize that the blank-eyed gaze he was receiving was due to the cloak still over his head.

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Movement behind Harry brought his attention and his wand around. Vineet, spread-fingered hand before him, was stepping through the damaged wall the way First Years would step through the Gryffindor portrait hole. Vineet came up short, tracing what must be Harry's disembodied hand to the edge of the cloak.

Harry tugged his cloak back, and Vineet met his eyes.

Harry's quick instincts borrowed skillfully from his own thoughts of moments before. "Why was he left alone?"

Vineet's gaze dropped away. He crouched beside Harry and ran a health Indicator. He bent to gather Tridant against himself. "Provide us cover," he said to Harry.

Harry tossed his cloak back over his head, leaving his arm free, and stepped back to the wall where he could better see through the pile. A moment later, the pair Disapparated away.

Harry bit his lip, feeling hardened and cheated. He slipped along the wall away from where he knew the Aurors to be, looking for someone to take that out on.

Another explosion burst from up near the roof peak, making the metal girders creak. A spell sizzled in the wake of this, then nothing. Harry found Mr. Weasley and Rodgers on this end now, holding their wands on a pair of prisoners. Two bodies lay unceremoniously nearby. Harry pulled off his cloak again and Rodgers, who had snapped his wand over, aimed it away again with a shake of his head.

"Potter."

"Have you seen the others?" Mr. Weasley asked Harry.

Casually, Harry said, "Vishnu took Tridant away. To St. Mungo's I presume."

The large doors on the end rattled open just far enough for staff from the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad to slip inside.

Harry walked behind the prisoners, close enough to be taunting. Aaron's date snarled at him. Harry ignored her in favor of checking the bodies. The first was Slowdraw, which Harry could only tell by his hair style and clothing. His face was transforming, even as Harry watched, back to his actual appearance. He was younger than Harry had thought, maybe sixteen, with freckles and a puffy scar that bisected his eyebrow. Harry wondered if the lightning bolt Mark still showed on his arm.

Harry was bending down to reach for one languidly flopped arm when Mr. Weasley called over, "That was one of the ones you were working with, right?"

Harry nodded, and when Mr. Weasley asked if he recognized the other, Harry moved on to check the other one. This man was probably mid thirties with a three day old beard. Harry shook his head.

Tonks arrived at a run, Aaron on her heels. "Sorry, we chased Ma Dame and her bodyguard down, but they gave us the slip by the docks by setting an old barge full

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of fuel oil aflame.”

“That was a problem, why?” Rodgers asked, sounding his usual unsympathetic self.

Tonks opened her mouth, but Aaron said, “It was a problem because she and her bodyguard had just run inside it.”

Tonks, breathing heavily, said, “We couldn’t exactly trace where they went from there, and Transportation has no record, so we’re not sure if they had a vanishing cabinet or what they used.”

Mr. Weasley gestured for Tonks to take over his guard duty, saying, “Let’s hope that was an expensive escape setup we made them burn . . . and that they don’t have any to spare.”

Tonks said, “Speaking of sparing . . . if you can spare me here, I should return to the docks. They could use a hand.”

Mr. Weasley nodded to her, and with only a cursory glance at Harry, she jogged back toward the door.

Aaron strode toward Harry but pulled to a stop upon seeing his Halloween date kneeling nearby, hands bound behind her. Her outfit glittered freshly despite her skirmish-worn hair and face. Ripples worked along Aaron’s jaw, and his body had to lead in tearing his head away, but he managed after several half steps.

“Harry,” he said in greeting. “Good to see you.”

“Thanks,” Harry said.

Mr. Weasley clapped his hands. “Let’s clear out. Rodgers, why don’t you take one, and I can take the other. Let’s get these two to the Ministry dungeon where they belong.”

In a concerted move, they closed in and used magic to force the prisoners along toward the door. Rodgers said with a smirk, “Let’s hope their compatriots are watching.”

Aaron and Harry followed and Aaron asked. “What about the dead?”

Rodgers turned without pausing, “We can leave them for Reversal.”

“Ha ha,” A nearby witch said, mid-repair on a bent roof beam. “You always do.”

Rodgers’ prisoner was forced to turn with him and stumble sideways because of the Rod and Tether Charm locked on him. The Auror tossed back, “I have it on good authority that half your department budget comes from illicit body part sales, Madame Clay.”

“Come along, Reggie,” Mr. Weasley called from the door. To the crew left behind he said, “Thank you, as always.”

The witch, Clay, muttered, “One polite bloke in all of Magical Law Enforcement.” She caught sight of Harry just then. Her face went through the transitions Harry was

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growing accustomed to: bright pleasure upon recognition, followed by rapid blinking memories of his recent past, followed by ambivalent suspicion and vague thrill at getting to evaluate him first hand, in the flesh.

Harry nodded to her in greeting, expression neutral as he ignored the instincts that urged him to insist on groveling respect, from everyone.

No one stopped Harry from following along behind. In the dungeon, the dank air wrapped around them, smothering the dust and sweat of the fight. Their footsteps shuffled louder as the ceiling dipped lower.

“You’ve got two open cells, right?” Mr. Weasley asked Horace, the dungeon keeper.

Horace grunted something indecipherable. Light footsteps padded down the stone staircase behind them. Kerry Ann ducked below the spider-webbed ceiling to call out, “Mr. Weasley, Mr. Rodgers, Madame Bones wants someone to Floo Call her at home. Sometime yesterday, she said.”

As they headed for the stairs, Rodgers nudged Mr. Weasley. “We could stop by Mysteries for a Time Turner and do just that,” he said with a broad smile.

Kerry Ann’s voice echoed and faded as they trooped off. “She seemed to expect that she would have been informed of this operation ahead of time . . .”

Horace jangled his ring of keys and opened a door for the first prisoner, an effeminate young man with a slick tuft of black hair standing straight off his head.

Horace said, “Ya can share a cell. Either that or ya git one o’ the damp ones at the end.”

The prisoner jerked away as he was pushed toward the door and Aaron and Harry moved together to draw their wands and back up the Dungeon Master. Harry waved Aaron back. “Keep an eye on the other one,” he said, pointing. Harry waved an additional Tether Charm at her, which bowed her neck down farther. Just as well, Aaron’s pose held standoffish distaste rather than watchfulness.

The other prisoner glowered at them before slouching to duck inside the cell. If he received another shove, he would strike his head. He stopped just inside to ponder his new companion until Horace gave him another push, which caused him to shuffle around to the side wall, giving the cell’s current occupant a wide berth. Harry stepped into the doorway behind Horace to better study the familiar figure perched there on the bench.

Debjit, Merton’s assistant, was much reduced. His paunch was gone and his face had been stretched thin. He sat slackly with his gaze distant. His body jerked faintly, then did so again.

“Still got the hiccups, eh?” Horace said to the unresponsive man. “Here, I made ya this.” Horace held out a colorful origami snake.

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Debjit raised his upturned hand like a beggar and Horace draped the articulated paper construct over his palm. Debjit's eyes fixed on it, unwavering.

"What is the matter with him?" The prisoner asked, pointing with his sharp chin. "Am I going to end up like that?"

Horace propped his beefy hands on the coarse fabric robes stretching over his hips. "Only if ya make trouble for me!" he growled. "Har har har!" he rumbled to the man's worried expression. "Eh, he came in this way," he admitted, dismissing Debjit with a wave of his hand.

Horace switched wand hands and gave a complicated wave that released the binding on the new prisoner's hands. Pale coral nail polish flashed as he moved his fingers to stretch them. Harry held back while Horace trundled out the cell, wondering if the prisoner was actually a very skinny woman, rather than a man.

Horace gestured from the doorway and Harry exited. The door closed behind him with a resounding and too-familiar boom. Moving in and out of the cells reminded Harry acutely of the French Wizard Prison, and disturbingly of suffocating confinement mixed with the taste of liberating power.

"Next!" Horace called out, even though the distance to where Aaron stood on guard was short.

"Women always alone," Horace grumbled to himself, grabbing up Aaron's date by her hood when she refused to move. She glared suspiciously at Horace, which he ignored.

Harry considered pointing out that the last likely female prisoner had not been put away following that rule, but then decided Debjit was harmless and remained silent.

Horace efficiently opened a cell and tossed the prisoner in without turning his back on her or even getting within kicking distance. Before Horace could close the door, Harry said, "We want to talk to her a minute."

"We do?" Aaron asked, voice faint. He paused in thought before adding, "Yeah, I suppose I'd like to say a few things to her."

Horace shrugged and gestured that they could enter the cell. He closed the door on them and his leather-shod feet scuffed off into the distance.

Aaron stood with his bony shoulders protruding forward along with his chin, glaring at the woman leaning into the wall corner, hands still bound. Harry's insides trilled at Aaron's wounded anger, the way his tongue wet his lips repeatedly, making them a deeper red.

"Come on," Harry said to his friend. "Don't you want to get even?"

Aaron's eyes constricted to slits before he turned to examine Harry instead. "You're really suggesting that?" he asked, voice adrift.

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“Why not?” Harry asked, voice low, insides warming. “It’d make you feel better.”

Aaron read his face. The woman had not moved throughout this except to slide further into the corner until her left shoulder was pinned there. Aaron licked his lips again. His wand flicked back and forth in his fingertips once. “You aren’t really you, are you?” he asked Harry.

Voice lower, almost husky, Harry replied, “This has nothing to do with me.”

Aaron’s eyes diverted back to the prisoner, who held her chin up defiantly, but moments into the stare down, began chewing her bottom lip.

Aaron drooped bodily. “I remember what you said to me when we were hunting Death Eaters after Azkaban was destroyed. You told me not to trust you if you didn’t seem like yourself.” He turned to the door, which was closed still. It did not budge when he pushed on it. His shoulders shifted forward in his robes and he said to the door, “I’m going to hate myself either way. Might as well not have everyone else hating me too.”

Aaron pounded on the door with the flat of his palm, which barely made a sound on the heavy wood. The prisoner shifted in her corner to better fix Harry with her storm-grey eyes. Harry considered her in return until Horace’s footsteps approached and the door opened.

“Finished?” Horace rumbled.

“Almost,” Aaron breathed out as he ducked out the door. “Almost.”

Harry slid out behind him and followed him upstairs, light on his feet, as if he did not want to be heard moving about.

Mr. Weasley greeted him in the corridor outside the Auror’s office, “Harry. Glad you could join us. We can use all the help we can get. And that was a good catch, the Minister is happy . . . about that at least. She said to tell you thank you for your assistance.” Mr. Weasley put an arm behind Harry’s shoulder, which Harry had to resist shrugging off.

“Rodgers. Tearoom,” Mr. Weasley said past Harry’s head.

Rodgers put down the parchments he held and, observing Harry as he walked, joined them.

In the tearoom, which smelled of day-old pumpkin juice and stale bread, Mr. Weasley pulled out a chair for Harry, who ignored it in favor of leaning against the wall near the head of the table. Mr. Weasley took the chair and laid out a parchment before himself and proceeded to carefully fold it in half.

Rodgers hesitated when he saw that Harry was standing, but he took the chair beside Mr. Weasley and offered him a quill when his colleague could not find one in his pockets.

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Mr. Weasley spoke first to the man sitting beside him. “What do you think, Reggie?”

“I think the Wasps don’t stand a chance against the Cannons given their Beaters are to the last one just coming off the wounded list.”

Mr. Weasley shook his head.

“That wasn’t the topic you wanted? You need to be specific.”

With his patented patience, Mr. Weasley folded his parchment again, into quarters. “About today’s operations . . .”

“Oh.” Rodgers glanced at the snack cart, in lieu of pointedly looking at Harry, or so Harry suspected. “I think Ma Dame was fooled and did not realize the Ministry was involved, which means we kept the lid on things this time.” Now he did glance at Harry. “Possibly because we didn’t know much until the last minute and therefore had little opportunity for a leak.”

Mr. Weasley bunched the quill in his fingers and shifted his parchment around on the rough tabletop. Speaking stiltedly, he asked, “I’m trying to decide if Percy knew Ma Dame would attack.”

Rodgers sat back and considered that while stretching his shoulders with a grimace. “Hm. They attacked after he departed, which could mean anything. Could mean Ma Dame didn’t want him caught in the crossfire with no warning. Did you get the sense that he was hurrying out? You talked to him, not I.”

Mr. Weasley fell still. “Yes, I did talk to him. I threw him out. I didn’t get the sense he was hurrying. Either way, they waited until he was out of the way to attack.” His tone faded into philosophical. “Maybe they could only trace him returning. There are all kinds of possibilities.”

Rodgers’ brows angled. He waited for Mr. Weasley to say more, but when only silence followed, he said, “And the leaks? The altered logbook?”

Mr. Weasley’s face elongated. “He may be the source. We don’t know for certain, do we?”

Rodgers’ face hardened. “And the attempts to take out Harry? The thing in his locker? The poison here in this room?”

Harry shifted his hands on the wall and pressed back against them. He hung suspended, waiting for an answer. Mr. Weasley looked over toward Harry, eyes earnest. “What do you think, Harry?”

His instincts told him to stay silent, to seek out Percy himself. That he had not done so earlier was pitifully weak. “I think it was him, but I can’t prove it.” Nor do you need to, his gut scoffed.

Mr. Weasley sat back, thoughtfully cocking his head at the ceiling. “And he was selling Harry’s old wand.”

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“So you said. But you did not see it,” Rodgers pointed out.

Mr. Weasley glanced from him to Harry. “I believe Harry on this.” He tossed his head lightly to the side. “But I do wish I’d seen it. It means my son is in deeper than I thought possible.” He gave Harry a gentle, wry smile. “And to believe that with more than one’s head, but with one’s heart, it helps to be faced with incontrovertible proof.”

Rodgers shifted uncomfortably and patted his hand on the table. “You coming back, Potter?” he asked too loudly for the small room.

Harry shook his head. “I like having the freedom to do what I want.”

Rodgers asked wryly, “Are you going to leave Percy for us?”

Mr. Weasley froze at his question, mid jotting down a note. Harry replied, “If you aren’t too slow about it. Maybe.”

Sternly, Mr. Weasley said, “Leave him for us, Harry.” When Harry did not reply, Mr. Weasley turned the folded parchment over with his pale fingers and made an aborted movement as if to jot down another note. “What if we invite you to the meeting we are going to lure him to for the arrest?”

Rodgers jerked his head back in surprise. Mr. Weasley said, “I don’t see why not. We need to give the Minister a full report anyway, and Fudge should be there, and Fudge should bring his assistant. And there will be questions for Harry.” He stood up and dangled the note from his fingertips. “I’m sorry about everything, Harry. You tried to warn me.”

The muscles in Harry’s neck tightened. His instincts screamed for him to ignore this, especially the honest tone.

“I deserve your silence, I suppose,” Mr. Weasley said, shuffling back to straighten his chair and then the one Rodgers had vacated.

Harry said, “This went on a lot longer because you were weak.”

Mr. Weasley’s jaw worked behind thin lips. He straightened Rodgers chair more before recovering. “We would like you back, Harry,” he said, sounding short of breath and pained.

Harry pleasantly dwelled on that and exactly how little they understood.

Rodgers again proved that he required more careful watching when he said, “Maybe Harry can help us from inside Durumulna, since his apparent connections are paying off.”

“I can’t do much,” Harry said.

“Why not?” Rodgers challenged him.

“Because they don’t trust me,” Harry replied.

Rodgers laughed. “I can see that would be a problem for you.”

“It’s a problem all around,” Harry added quietly.

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As the lift clunked and began dropping downward, Harry wondered about Slowdraw's body, wondered again about the Mark he had given him and whether it was still visible. Snape had lost his when he died, but he may have lost it leaving the veil, not entering it. He should be thorough, and certain.

Bodies were generally taken to the St. Mongo's Morgue, in the lowest dungeon under the hospital proper. Harry had twice been there during field shadowing and could easily slip in to check the body. Harry pushed the lever to halt the lift between floors. It was Sunday so the Ministry corridor before him stood empty except for a small brown mouse nosing along the edge of the wall. Harry flipped his invisibility cloak over his head and slipped away, knowing it would be better to leave an exit trail from the Ministry, but too impatient to make his way to the Atrium to do so. Ordinary wizards left that way.

The morgue was housed in a narrow arched hall, lit at the moment by a single candle in a holder beside the door. Harry blinked the spots out from his eyes and made his way to the registration clipboard that hung on the side of the stone receiving table in the center of the room. In the pleasant stillness the rasping of the pages as Harry turned them scraped deafeningly. No bodies had been checked in yet that day.

Harry slipped away to the warehouse. Reversal was still at work, putting the finishing touches on an old coal burner that had been positioned where it could be blamed for some extensive spell damage. The bodies were not here either.

Harry sighed. He could not ask without risk, and wished he had more experience to know where the bodies would be just now. Watching Reversal disassemble his project gave him little joy. He slipped back to the morgue and considered waiting, but found he lacked the patience. The blessed quiet grew cursed. He should have servants for this sort of thing.

Restless, Harry went out on the Muggle street rather than go home. The wind picked up his cloak as a red double decker roared past. The noise and motion of it matched his mood. He wished the city were busier but it was Sunday. He felt unfinished. Tridant had been stripped away from him. Aaron had denied him.

Harry strolled in a random direction, head hunched. Rain had turned the streets and pavements and walls a ubiquitous grey to match the clouds. But he liked the sound of his crisp footsteps, so he did not mind the weather, at least until his face grew brittle from the cold.

He stopped, with no idea where he was, and backtracked to a set of gated steps leading to a below-ground flat. He neatly stepped over the barrier to stand under the shelter of the steps leading upward, beside a bicycle and a neglected planter with brown stalks draping out of it. White decorative bars framed dark windows with no movement behind them. He used a Heating Charm on himself and put his wand

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away, but hesitated continuing on with his senseless walk. He sniffed the cold air and tipped his head back. Magic felt distant here, making him wonder if he had impulsively walked as far as he possibly could from it in the crowded city.

The cold of the pavement soaked through his shoes. Rather than layer on another Heating Charm, Harry slipped away for Belinda's flat, wand drawn in case Percy was there.

Percy wasn't there, but a figure sat on the floor against the wall beside the television stand, arms wrapped around his head, rocking and crying. Harry recognized Hummer's faded robes and relaxed faintly.

Belinda came out of her bedroom and stopped upon seeing Harry there. She gestured at Hummer. "He's been muttering something about you. But I can't make sense of it. What the hell happened?"

"Ma Dame attacked a little operation I had set up. I told the two of them to stay away, but they didn't."

Hummer raised his red-rimmed eyes to Harry, mouth sticky with crying. "But he wouldn't. He insisted we had to go back to help you. I couldn't stop him. I couldn't let him go alone and I couldn't stop him." His face crumpled he sank down. With fitful arm movements he finally reburied his face in his arms. "What did you want from him?" his sing-song, crying voice filtered out.

"He's taking it hard," Belinda said. She had a steaming cup of water in one hand. She tossed a lemon slice into it. Harry thought she would offer it to Hummer, but she wrapped one arm around herself and sipped from it.

"Seen Percy?" Harry asked.

"No," Belinda replied, sounding insulted. "Why?"

"Just wondering," Harry said.

Hummer's sobbing paused while he mumbled, "It's your fault!"

"I wasn't even there," Harry said, ignoring a niggling voice in his head that agreed. "He should have listened to me. I didn't want him dead." Indeed he still felt raw and disjointed, and utterly lacking for servants.

Harry stared at Hummer's curled body, wondering if he could figure out what he had done wrong the last time with the flesh Protean Charm. His memory of it fluttered in and out like sun dapples shifting on a forest floor, partly his own memories and partly something else interfering. Should he have let go more during the spell? Had he poured himself too much into it, or not enough?

Hummer bumped the leg of the television table while gaping in alarm at Harry's face. Gathering himself forward to a crouch he Disapparated.

Belinda sighed. "Silence. Finally."

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Lips cocked, Harry turned to her. The soft parts of her face had shrunken with stress and poor eating, and her hair hung limper than it used to.

Harry reached up and brushed an errant piece of her hair back. "You're not even a Metamorphmagus," he said.

She snorted lightly. "No. I'd look better than this if I were."

"No, you wouldn't," Harry said. "You'd look worse."

Her brows angled doubtfully. "You teasing me again?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, dropping his arm.

Her eyes fell away. "I'd suggest going out, but I got an owl about an early morning emergency meeting the Minister called. You wouldn't know what it's about, would you?"

"I'm not involved with the Ministry much, as you know."

Losing his mind in deafening music and throbbing lights sounded pretty good to Harry. "Why don't we go out for a little while. That sounds good."

She touched her hair. "I look like hell. You buying me dinner?"

Harry hesitated just long enough to make it sound like an unwilling concession. "If you want."

At the club, Harry led the way to the center of the floor where the music beat at the air and the surrounding dancers were mere oscillating shadows pulsing in the moving lights, empty Muggle shadows, no threat but also no promise, no seduction of power. The beating music and surging lights crushed every germinating thought before it could take hold, a blessed relief.

At first, Belinda abandoned herself to dancing as much as Harry did, free of everything, but she tired quickly and stumbled on her heels. Harry caught her by the arm and swung her around to his feet to heft her back up. "I need another drink," she shouted in his ear, sounding like tinnitus over the pounding din.

With an arm around her, Harry helped her to the bar, where she leaned her unseasonably bare arms out on the brushed metal, and rested her head on them. Her feminine waistcoat-like top sparkled with sequins, but this close the threads showed, ruining the effect.

The young woman tending the bar tossed her chin to ask what they wanted, sending a dubious glance at Belinda. Harry leaned down to Belinda's ear to say, "I think you need dinner, rather than another drink."

When she did not respond he put his hands around her sides and pulled her back out of the three-deep crowd. She let his arm take her weight as he led her away, making an interested buzzing rise up through Harry's core. "Come on," he said, even though she could not hear him.

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Regretfully, he stepped across the corner of the dance floor and into a black painted back corridor. At the end hung a hovering green exit sign with a running figure on it. Harry leaned a hand on the wall and leaned close to Belinda, pretending to snog while another couple walked past. The thrum of the music came through the wall to tickle the skin of his palm. Under the cover of their close bodies, he pulled out his wand and the moment they were alone, ran a Blurring Barrier and Disapparated them both to Belinda's flat from behind it.

Harry kept hold of Belinda and ran a quick check with his wand before steering her to a chair.

"I thought you were buying me dinner," she complained, before flopping back and remaining that way.

"I'll get some takeaway," Harry said.

When he returned and she was biting into a bread wrapped kebab without getting the alfoil completely out of the way of her teeth, Harry said, "Are you eating enough?"

She chewed and gestured with a piece of donnar that had fallen out. "Maybe not." She gnawed the meat down before taking another sizable bite. "Most evenings beer is enough."

Harry's instincts pulled him directly in two. His desire to make sure she was all right warred with another that wanted her weak, and easy to use.

Between bites, she said, "You're giving me another one of those looks. Like my dressmaker does when it's time for the proms and she's wondering how heavy my purse is."

Harry turned his attention to his pile of quickly cooling chips and nibbled on one of them.

"So, what's with you and Tonks?" she asked.

Heavy doors closed in Harry's mind. "Nothing is with us."

His tone must have dissuaded her from asking more because she dropped the topic.

Belinda swept the remains into the bin and swigged down the last of her glass of beer. Harry pushed his untouched one in her direction. He bodily intercepted her as she leaned over to pick it up and arrested her arm before it could reach the glass. She still wore the short-waisted top and tight fitting trousers from earlier and that made it easy to touch the chilled flesh at her waist.

She turned suddenly in his grip, but it was to his advantage, letting him pull her close. She smelled of spicy meat and perfume that did not match her personality.

"So, are you staying the night, then?" she asked, trying for cheeky, but too tired to make it all the way there.

"I don't have to stay that long," Harry said, matching her shallowness and feeling deeply amused with himself. He still felt stunted and incomplete from earlier. This

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one he was not going to let turn out that way.

The bedroom air had grown cold with night by the time Harry maneuvered the bedcovers to slip out without disturbing Belinda, who slept wildly spread out on the bed. The warm draft rising out of the faintly pinging radiator failed to compete with the large old window that knocked in the frame when the wind blew hard enough. He dressed quickly and hunted around for his socks.

Harry was crouching to reach under the bed, when Belinda said, "Going, eh?"

Harry did not feel like conversation. He stiffly said, "I can't sleep."

She rolled away from him, muttering, "Less complicated if you go. So that's fine."

He wanted to say something about her owling him if Percy bothered her, if anyone bothered her, but he couldn't make his mouth work. His bare feet grew cold as he squatted there on the floor warring with himself.

With some strategy he could make his mouth work, so he said, "He had you under an Imperio didn't he? Moody was protecting you and watching him, and that's why Percy killed him?"

The lump of covers held still a second before she turned suddenly. Then she had to sit up to locate him so low, down beside the bed. Harry tugged on his socks and felt around for his shoes while she worked on a response.

"You don't have to answer. It's clear enough," he said, pushing to his feet. He stood looking down at her. "You should have gone to the Minister immediately after Moody got you released from the curse. You'd have had a chance then. Now you're stuck."

She gathered the sheet better around her front. "You don't think I know that? Why do you think I'm stuck with these goons crying in my sitting room? When Percy followed Ma Dame in the split, it wasn't really safe for him here anymore. At least I got a break from him." Her voice wavered as she said this.

Harry tried to imagine being stuck under an Imperio like that, and said, "Percy never seemed very imaginative, at least."

"True, he always seemed to be doing things because it was the only way to get what he thought he deserved, but always got cheated out of, but that's small consolation, believe me." She sniffled. "And these days you aren't much better."

"Is that why you slept with me?" Harry mocked with no kindness.

She huffed and flipped onto the bed with her back to him.

Harry found his cloak and hooked it around his neck. It was cold and stiff from the room's chilly air. He needed something, something to ease how small his mind felt. The shadows teased, wavering in the distance, less substantial than the headlamps flashing up from the street onto the gauzy curtains. Close in, the shadows were far from insubstantial, they let him reach out far beyond himself.

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Harry slipped away into the Dark Plane, surprised for a moment by the brighter ubiquitous grey light there that was never night or day. He imagined the quay extending off the French Wizard Prison and Apparated to its opposite as far from the tower as possible, and inverted himself.

Waves glowing fathomless blue with starlight slapped and sloshed over the quay. Harry arrived far enough away from the tower that the lights remained doused. And the impossibly black tower pointed upward against the star-strewn sky. The milkyway spilled overhead, close enough to touch, making Harry dizzy for an instant with the notion that he could travel all the way out there, if he only knew any place among them intimately enough.

A tall wave smacked the black stone and foamed around Harry's shoes while it plowed to the other edge. Despite the low light, Harry closed his eyes and reached inward. The shadows danced slightly closer, wavered oddly as if sensing him there, but were still too far away to touch, to draw upon without limit.

Harry opened his eyes again. The quay stretched away from him like a spaceship plying through seething matter. He thought he might feel satisfied enough by getting this close, but it only cracked open his hunger more.

He could get closer; he could knock on the door this moment. But that would not be strategic. His instincts recoiled, as they feared being trapped. He was on amusingly good terms with the warden and should request an invitation. That would put him on stronger footing. Even though he could, right now, walk inside and sink into the depths below the water until he was close enough to tap the shadows, breathe in their willingness, he should not do it. He may, by some unforeseen accident, be unable to leave again, and that would be unacceptable. Despite his powers, this place could hold him, and was therefore to be dreaded.

Successive waves beat at the quay, lulling him. The stars winked and wheeled relentlessly overhead. He should go home. Thoughts of home lulled him more, giving him a twinge near his heart. But first he should again check Slowdraw's body. The task dragged at his spirit, but his instincts left him no choice.

As if fulfilling a duty, Harry slipped again into the morgue. The hall appeared the same, other than the single candle having burned down to a blobby stub, but the clipboard had two new entries, both labeled Anonymous. Harry squinted at the drawer numbers in the dim light and began combing the walls for the indicated plaques. He found Slowdraw under 631, conveniently at knee level. Harry crouched down and twitched a glow out of his wand to see by. He tried to fish Slowdraw's arm out of the canvas bag, but his flesh had turned cold and waxy and his joints were frozen. Harry shuffled around to the other side and, working by feel, slipping his hand inside the canvas along one corded arm. His fingertips prickled painfully when

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he reached the sinews of the body's wrist. The prickles stirred something deep inside him. The curse was still there, but fainter than expected, but that meant the Mark was still there, most likely visible. He sensed it was fading with no life to hold onto, but best to remove it now, just in case the body was examined soon.

Harry exhaled and pressed his fingers flat against the unyielding flesh to push the curse out. It left willingly, Harry imagined he could sense it drifting in the air before it dissipated. Remembering how ash had emerged the previous times, he tried to brush off the hard flesh, just in case.

Before completely resealing the waxed canvas, Harry took a longer look at the young man, a teenager really. His skin had grown translucent with death, but he still appeared too attractive to have become caught up in such crude things as blackmail and smuggling. Why had he left home? Did he not have a home? Had his pride been his downfall?

Harry resealed the canvas and shoved the drawer home with his trainer. He stood straight and brushed his hands off on his robes. Home called to him now, stronger than the shadows did and with relief, he slipped away for his own hall.

Two candles burned in the chandelier overhead, and the diluted light barely reached the corners of the room, leaving him floating in a hazy orange sphere containing a dark couch and a cold brass floor lamp.

"There you are," came Snape's rich low voice from the balcony upstairs.

Harry shook himself and turned. Snape's dark-robed form wavered at the railing, barely visible, but his eyes glittered in the candlelight.

"I was at Belinda's," Harry said.

"That's fine," Snape said easily. "But you are still my son, and I still worry where you are."

Harry smiled faintly, thinking that quaint. "You don't have to worry something might happen to me."

Snape's voice came back smooth as chocolate. "I cannot do otherwise."

Harry thought this a game of sorts, one that amused him. "But really," he returned.

"I still have more experience in these things than you do," Snape explained, with no hint of patronage. "In any event, I assume you will wish to sleep in?"

"I have a meeting early in the morning . . . at the Ministry."

"Do you?" Snape said, not masking his surprise.

"Yes."

"Fine then," Snape said dotingly.



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Mr. Weasley tapped a yawning Rodgers on the shoulder and handed him a brown packet. The rest of the office was quiet, aside from the occasional Autoquill twitching in its holder.

Rodgers gave a trembling stretch of his arms and asked, "Minister's meeting isn't this early, is it?" Seeing the packet, he asked, "What's this?"

"Report on the two killed in the battle yesterday."

Rodgers raised a brow. "That was fast."

"New person, I think. I don't recognize the handwriting on the report."

Rodgers slid the report out. "Knowing Mungo's, that efficient attitude won't last long." He flipped through the pages, glancing up at Mr. Weasley, who remained beside his desk, restless hands caught in his pockets. "Something in this?" Rodgers asked.

"You tell me," Mr. Weasley quietly replied.

With a squeak of his chair, Rodgers rocked back and flipped through each page, past notes on a diagram of a human body, backward, then forward. He tapped the ends of the disparately sized sheets on the desk top to straighten them before laying them flat. He shrugged.

"Nothing strange?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Rodgers, with a face of annoyance paged forward and shook his head. "Various injuries, some imperishable curses. Standard fare for a battle."

Mr. Weasley collected the sheets up and slipped them back away.

"What am I missing?" Rodgers asked.

Brow trembling faintly, Mr. Weasley looped the packet closed. "I'm not sure why I am thinking what I am thinking."

Rodgers pulled his report form back to the front center of his work area and bent to it. "What are you thinking?"

"I think I'll keep that to myself for now. And, uh, retain some constant vigilance until I can decide one way or the other."

"Suit yourself," Rodgers said without looking up.

Mr. Weasley did not depart, he stood holding the report.

"You look like one of the dead was discovered to be your best friend. Is there something else?"

Mr. Weasley snorted weakly. "No, I suppose not. I need to finish prep for this morning's meeting, in fact."

Rodgers lost his annoyance. "Really, Arthur, what is it?"

"You are the most suspiciously minded person in this department, so probably nothing."

Rodgers nodded. "You are just full of compliments this morning."

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Tonks shuffled in the door, rubbing her eyes. “You are here bright and early.”

Rodgers shoved his work to the corner of his desk and turned his chair in her direction. “I’m itching for another fight. No offense to you, Arthur, I’m hoping Percy puts one up.”

Mr. Weasley’s face fell more. Without responding he stepped out of the office. Tonks trailed a hand over his arm as he passed, getting no response. She did not move until a door opened and closed in the distance.

“I feel terrible for him.”

“Out of that many kids, odds are one of them will go bad.”

“You are such a negative person, Reggie,” Tonks said, sitting on the edge of her desk to wait.

“Thank you. And I might add, you should put together some believable looking paperwork to at least pretend you are at this meeting for some reason other than nabbing Arthur’s son.”

Her bloodshot eyes fluttered. “Good idea,” she said with a broad exhale and dropped with a squeak into her desk chair.



“Arthur,” Minister Bones began crisply, “I believe I asked to be kept abreast of significant law enforcement operations in the planning stages. I am determined to manage public relations better than . . .” She glanced at the door, through which Fudge was expected to appear. “Significantly better than past administrations, but I cannot do that if I am in a constant state of damage control.”

Harry watched Mr. Weasley’s face as he replied to this. He had stood across from his former boss specifically so he could do this.

“Minister, we did not have much warning. Harry arranged this trap, as I mentioned.”

Bones lifted her knitted stubby fingers to touch her chin. “Mr. Potter, I must say it is good to see you. And while we appreciate you working to damage Durumulna, it would be better if you would work with us.”

“You have too many leaks to make a safe partner,” Harry stated, knowing it would gain him the upper hand.

“We are working on that, believe you me,” Bones said. “I could not help but notice the extra barriers the Aurors decided to lay down before the meeting. Greater attention to this sort of thing cannot hurt our efforts.”

The door latch interrupted her, and Fudge scooted inside, paunchy body encased in a crisp tan suit. He released the door and Tertius Ogden followed him in, carrying

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his papers. Everyone from the Auror's office stood rigid, until the drifting door was caught and opened again by a lanky redhead, who bowed a ruddy-faced Belinda inside. She swung her file-burdened arms awkwardly to avoid bumping into Percy while getting past him.

"Ah, here we are." Bones invited them in, giving a wave of her hand.

Harry's mouth watered as he watched Mr. Weasley's lips pull taut over his clamped mouth.

Bones took up Fudge's arm, drawing him to the rough circle of chairs pulled to the center of her office. "I was just saying that I insist upon being kept informed of law enforcement doings ahead of time. I know your office in particular likes to keep things close to the chest, Cornelius."

Fudge puffed his midsection and gruffly said, "I have no intention of risking more leaks, which I am certain are coming from Law Enforcement, if not from the Auror's office itself. All the trouble has been there, not in my department." He put a genteel hand to his chest.

"You're certain all the trouble has been with us?" Rodgers asked dryly. He stood before the chair he was about to sit in, arms folded. "I'm not so sure."

Fudge grew gruff. "What? Log books changed. Dangerous devices, poison even, left lying about?"

Mr. Weasley had taken a series of slow half steps and now stood before Percy, who stood just off Fudge's elbow. Behind his back he waggled his index finger once. Tonks casually dropped her wand into her hand while brushing her Mohawk back. Rodgers, without otherwise moving, suddenly had his out as well, but pointed backward where Percy could not see it. Ogden glanced his way sharply, before peddling backwards and muttering about picking out a chair.

Percy, after staring off pretending to not notice his father said, "Arthur," in an unenthusiastic greeting. His eyes flickered down and back up, appearing to check that neither Harry nor his father had wands out. Percy stood straighter and raised his chin just so, posing.

Fudge turned around, and Mr. Weasley addressed his comment to him. "Cornelius, the trouble is, in fact, that you refuse to recognize the problems in your own department."

Fudge scoffed. "Such as?"

"You have people on your staff with some unhealthy habits."

Percy's brow lowered derisively at this strange accusation, just a second before recognition widened his eyes, and sent surprise and alarm across his thin face in rapid succession. Percy jerked backward while grasping for his breast pocket. Wands snapped out straight, but Mr. Weasley cut off any spells by throwing a punch at

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Percy's jaw that leveled him.

Fudge gave a cry of surprise. Percy rolled and grabbed his face with a noise of pain, still trying for his pocket.

Mr. Weasley tossed a spell that pinned Percy's wrists to the floor. Lording over him, he said, "That was for Harry."

Percy ceased his thrashing to send a glare at his father.

"What is this, now?" Bones cried.

Mr. Weasley turned to her. "My son seems to have been working for others as well as us. He seems to have been . . ."

Mr. Weasley was interrupted by Percy throwing a bent leg forward and stomping his left foot hard on the floor. Harry felt a surge of curse and drew his wand. Rodgers sent a Prison Box spell at Percy, but it flared out in a dome shape before reaching him.

Percy rolled to his hands and feet, freed from the Bondage Charm. He threw himself in the direction of the door at a run. Harry waved a Bulkhead Barrier at the wall, again brightly pleased at the ease of casting a spell that usually gave him trouble.

Percy's protective barrier met Harry's barrier and exploded. The Aurors leapt to surround him, Rodger's prison box beating out the rest of them.

Harry turned to face Mr. Weasley and caught sight of Belinda behind him. She stood gaping at Percy in wide-eyed stillness, alarm in the angles of her shoulders and head.

"Take him down to the dungeon," Mr. Weasley said. He glanced away and cleared his throat as the Aurors did this.

"I'll see you at the next meeting of the Wizengamot, Weasley," Fudge grumbled before stalking off, ignoring his other assistant, Ogden, as he passed him.

Bones took a seat in one of her guest chairs. "Well, Arthur, I assume you, of all people, would be quite certain about this."

Mr. Weasley's shoulders fell additionally. Bones went on. "Well, give me the Wizard Annual Summary of your report, and we can cut this meeting short. Belinda, set up an Autoquill, will you?" After a second, when Belinda failed to move. "Belinda?"

"Yes, Madame Bones," she whispered, moving trance-like to set down her files and set up a long parchment scroll.

Harry gave very short answers to the questions that came his way after Mr. Weasley finished his explanation. He nicely left out that Harry had not informed him ahead of time that Percy was coming to make the exchange.

"I've been trying to piece together Moody's death," Harry explained when questions of why came along.

RESTLESS RENEGADE

“I thought we had Mr. Moody’s killer?” Bones said, perking up and glancing between Harry and Mr. Weasley.

“I think he must have had help,” Harry said.

When Bones turned to Mr. Weasley for confirmation, he nodded. “Most likely. Like most low level Durumulna members we cannot get much from interrogation.”

Behind Bones, Belinda winced. From here Harry could see her rapid breathing, and she glanced fretfully at the closed office door with regularity.

When the meeting adjourned, she frantically arranged the Minister’s things and followed Harry out the door. He had been dallying, expecting that. With a distracted word to Minister Bones that she would return after breakfast, Belinda Apparated them both to her flat. She did not release Harry’s sleeves, and instead began to shake them.

“Harry, you have to help me! Why didn’t you tell me they were going to arrest Percy? What am I going to do?”

Harry grabbed her hand on his sleeve, and her jostling movements stilled, but she did not let go. Her face was a study in desperate panic.

“Harry, he’s going to give me away! Any minute now, they’re going to be giving him Veritaserum.”

Power bubbled up through Harry, warm and encouraging. “I’ll take care of him for you,” he promised, or someone promised, he had no idea how he might do that, but felt gloriously confident.

Her whole body reacted, going limp to hang on his sleeves.

“But you have to do something for me,” Harry added, loving the sound of those words.

“What?” she asked, eager, not in the least suspicious. Harry smiled faintly, feeling he drank in pure oxygen. Harry detached her arm from his robe and held her hand while stroking her forearm with the other.

“Harry,” she said abruptly. “Can you take care of Percy first and then I’ll sleep with you?”

Harry continued stroking her satiny skin, imaging the contours there binding her to him, making him more than whole. He could make it work this time, if he could make her willing just long enough to finish. “That’s not what I want.”

She sniffled and stood more on her own, but still crooked with release of panic. “I don’t understand what you want me to do.”

“I want you to become sort of . . . part of me, magically.”

She shook her head in confusion. He could see her thoughts flickering to notions of marriage and dismissing them.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Harry struggled to find words that sounded appealing. His instincts were drifting, leaving him alone with his longing for a servant. His recent wound felt newly abraded, worse than ever. Harry's face hardened and he said, "I want you to be . . . like a partner . . . If you do this, I'll protect you always. I'll have no choice but to protect you," he added. Inside him, there was confusion about this. Not if it's done right, drifted tantalizingly in his thoughts.

"I'm going to do this my way," Harry said aloud.

"Do what?" Belinda asked, now tensing with new alertness.

Harry regathered his thoughts and met her eyes. "I'll help you. I'll take care of Percy. I'll lie for you and make sure the Ministry never knows what happened. But you have have to do this thing for me."

Her eyes fell closed a long blink. "I don't know what you want, Harry."

"I want to put a spell on you, so I always know where you are," Harry said, trying to sound bright, as if it were nothing, really, but this was nearly impossible with his blood singing with longing the way it was.

"A charm of sorts?" She relaxed again.

"It's more of a curse. Here on the arm," Harry said, touching his own forearm this time. Tingles and heat rose through him as he said this, making his chest heavy.

Belinda jerked out of his grip and backed up, her expression traveling from dismay to horror. "Harry, you must be funning me here," she snapped at him. "And I don't like it."

Harry slowly shook his head.

Belinda insisted, "This can't be real. You want to do some kind of . . . Death Eater Mark, or something? Have you gone starkers?"

Harry watched her intently, determined not to miss a single sign. "No."

"Harry, that was what flipping He-Who-Could-Not-Be-Named did. Are you listening to yourself?"

Harry projected calm. "I am. You have to understand, in prison I got to like having the Death Eaters nearby. I don't like being without them. I figure I can either go back there, which would not be fun, or make more here. But you have to be willing, or it won't work."

Her anger had bolstered her, but now she gaped at him, arms limp and dangling. She took another step back and fell against the wall, knees bent. "I don't believe this," she rasped.

Harry could not bear to be so close to obtaining a willing servant yet fall short. It plucked at his midsection. "Since you have to be willing, I won't do it if you aren't. But I'm not sure I want to risk taking care of Percy for you, otherwise. There is a lot of risk."

RESTLESS RENEGADE

He had pushed too far, he saw. Her eyes showed her weighing her options and finding both equally undesirable. "Maybe I'll just confess. Percy's interrogations will back up my claims of an Imperio."

Harry stepped closer. "And then what?"

She rubbed her arm while staring off at the window. Harry's instinct trilled at this positive sign.

"I don't know," she answered. "I could find something."

Speaking softly, Harry said, "So much easier not to go through any of it . . . To just keep what you have." His voice moved to a caress. "You have a lot to lose."

She swallowed hard and looked him up and down. "How about you take care of Percy, and we discuss the curse thing more? I don't even know if it hurts."

"A little." He was right before her now, and he lifted a hand to brush her hair back, it fell limply back into place.

"Can you take it off again?" she demanded, hurt and angry now in equal measure, another good sign.

"Yes, of course."

"You aren't lying to me?" she demanded.

"No. I promise I can do that."

"Well . . ." Her face struggled. "Take care of Percy . . . and . . ." She waved an arm to try to urge him off.

Harry stalled to torment her. "Any ideas how to do that without risking suspicion?" he dryly asked.

She bowed her head and pounded her hand on the wall behind her. "I don't know. A Memory Charm won't hold long against the Aurors." She ducked under his arm to pace. "It might work for a bit, though, till we can think of something better."

"I'm not sure I can hide that I did it," he patiently explained, needling her. "And if you want me to just kill him, I need to make it look like an accident."

"I don't want you to just kill him," she snarled. "Why would you even suggest that?"

"Because it solves your troubles permanently." And it would make her an accessory, his instincts supplied, caught even deeper. Harry, however, balked at the idea of outright murder, but gave no outward indication of that.

"Why can't he just randomly forget?" she asked, tossing her hands in the air. "Like that . . . that Merton witness. Do you remember that? The Aurors never figured that out. Why can't that happen to Percy?"

Harry thought back, curiously following her trail of memory, recently refreshed. "Yeah, he came back from St. Mungo's like that after getting injured in the final battle to take him and his wife down."

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She jumped to put her hands together as if in prayer. “Maybe you can put Percy in St. Mungo’s to buy time?”

Harry stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe. I just saw Debjit and he certainly did not look like he’d be doing much talking, even now.”

She squared her shoulders. “Make Percy like him. If you can make Percy like him, I’ll . . . I’ll do whatever you want. But you have to promise to remove it if I tell you to.”

“Of course,” Harry assured her, insides squirming happily, not certain if he lied or not.

He turned toward the door, mind churning with renewed vigor, flying in all directions.

“Aren’t you going? You have to hurry,” she insisted plaintively.

He held up a finger in her direction. “I’m thinking. I’m thinking that Percy had my wand, which means he may have had some kind of involvement with Debjit.” Harry’s mind whirled, plotting out on a virtual chess board with an alien ease. “Maybe. We had leaks, like the fixed logbook, back when we were fighting Merton. And if Percy was the one who shut up Debjit . . .”

Belinda grabbed Harry’s sleeve again. “You could go interrogate Percy. Before the others do. Go!”

“I’m going,” Harry said patronizingly. “But I think I’ll take a look at Debjit first.” He enjoyed her strained expression a second before departing.

Harry, invisibility cloak stuffed in his robe sleeve, slipped inside the Ministry Dungeon cell housing Debjit. The anonymous Durumulna member blinked at him in surprise. Harry held his finger to his lips. Upon seeing the Durumulna prisoner twice, he was certain now she was simply a very bony young women. She chewed a knuckle and watched him listen at the small window in the door. He could hear male voices chatting low near the entrance to the dungeon: Mr. Weasley and Shackbolt. If Mr. Weasley was there, they had not yet begun any interrogation, as they would almost certainly move Percy upstairs for that.

Harry strained to listen, pressing his ear right between the bars. Footsteps sounded coming down the stone steps and Rodger’s voice mumbled out, blurred by echoing. Harry caught something about Fudge, an emergency, and Wizengamot. And the voices receded.

Harry snorted at his luck. He had plotted ideas for a major diversion to get to Percy in case he was already on his way to interrogation. His instinct felt a little let down at the cancellation of near-term destruction. He shook it off and approached Debjit, who sat hiccuping faintly, a line of drool glistening down from the corner of his mouth.

RESTLESS RENEGADE

“Percy isn’t that smart,” Harry whispered. “He uses other people’s stuff. No wonder he and Merton got on so well.”

Harry approached with confidence and tugged Debjit’s head back by his hair. He gave a fish-like gulp and his pure brown eyes widened, but he did not fight back. Harry raised his wand and considered and discarded spells in his mind, finally settling on a Snagging Snake Charm. A thin, three headed adder emerged from Harry’s wand and danced and corkscrewed down into Debjit’s throat.

Across the cell, the other prisoner was backing up on her bench to the far corner, hands splayed out to hold herself that way.

The serpentine coils of the snake jerked taut, and Harry tugged on his wand. Debjit choked and broke Harry’s grip on his hair, but the charm had pulled free, and clutched in the teeth of two of the snake heads, hung a scratched and hazy, but still gently spinning, Misplacement Gimcracker, like the one that had addled Ron at Harry’s party.

Harry tugged the dry heaving Debjit to sit up. The other prisoner came close, holding the cell’s metal cup filled with water. Harry stepped back and watched her offer it to her fellow prisoner. Debjit sputtered but then drank more fiercely. The scene derailed Harry’s narrow minded sense of mission. He blinked as though waking up.

Harry peered at the snake heads waving off the end of his wand, only one of them holding the Gimcracker now, the other two tasting the air. He waved the spell away and picked up the Gimcracker using the hem of his cloak. He wiped it dry and pocketed it, still feeling woozy.

Percy, he had to get to Percy. Thinking of Percy and how he was about to get even with him, in a perfectly fair manner, made Harry smile. Debjit refused a second glass of water and sat back to stare at the ceiling. He did not appear recovered, really, which was good, as the coincidence would not go unnoticed.

Harry held a finger up to his lips when the other prisoner looked his way. She shrugged, not caring, and resumed her seat on the side bench.

Harry flipped his invisibility cloak over his head and slipped away underneath it. He re-entered the dungeon just outside Percy’s door to check the situation. He was not alone, Tonks was there, ranting at him.

“You don’t know what you’ve done, do you?” she shouted at him. “What’d you get out of it, anyway? A girlfriend? Some measly boost to your ego? Do you have any idea what a mess things are with Harry because of you?”

Percy’s nasal voice came drifting out, “Harry Potter, Harry Potter, it’s always about Harry Potter. Do you know how sick to death I am of that name?”

“You have no idea,” Tonks seethed. Harry could tell from the sound she was

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speaking through clenched teeth. "I'm blaming you for all of it."

"What, 'cuz you lost your little loverboy . . ." Percy taunted.

"I swear Percy, if Arthur hadn't already decked you . . ." She made a sound of animal disgust and the door snapped unlocked and swung open. "I have to get out of here before I do something I'll regret."

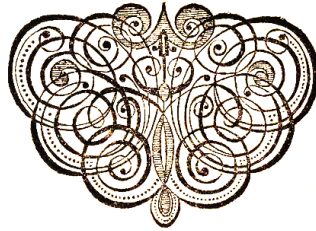
Tonks slammed the door closed again and stalked off.

Harry slipped inside and must have made a rustling sound because Percy glanced up from where he sat on the stone bench, hands shackled with glittering iron rings that connected to the wall.

Harry waited a moment, and slipped off the cloak. Percy's long neck jerked backward in surprise, but he found bravado quickly enough. He snorted and said, "What do you want, Potter?"

After a delay, Harry replied, "Not much." He fished out the Misplacement Gimcracker from his pocket and dangled it before a stunned Percy. "Not much, at all, really."

CHAPTER FIFTY



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Harry returned to Belinda's flat by Apparating directly in. She sat on her couch staring at the darkened television screen, an open bottle of scotch on the floor beside her foot.

"You didn't even bother to get a glass?" Harry asked, hanging his invisibility cloak inside his normal cloak over a chair back.

She turned red-stained eyes at him before looking away again and crossing her arms.

Harry said, "I took care of Percy . . . the same way he took care of the Indian prisoner. But it may arouse suspicion. Actually I expect it will arouse suspicion, so I'll have to follow up when I see how everyone reacts."

She did not move or respond. Harry strolled over and lowered himself beside her on the couch.

Her lips drew in between her teeth. Harry grasped the cold fingers of her closer hand, capturing it as it twitched away.

"You said you can't do it if I'm not willing," she said, still staring straight ahead.

Harry leaned in so he was beside her ear when he said, "That's right." He pulled her hair away from her neck to nuzzle it. "But you will be."

"You think so?" she challenged, tilting her head away, perhaps to ignore him, perhaps to give him better access to the crux of her neck.

Harry backed off to caress her cheeks. They were dry today. They used to always be soft and well-cared for. "You'd prefer to go through this alone?"

"No, of course not," she said.

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“If you let me put this curse on you, we can help each other,” Harry said soothingly.

“We can help each other anyway, can’t we?”

Harry found her lips with his own, drawing them into a pucker by sucking on them. “Not as easily,” he said, pretending to be distracted by the affection, in reality he had never felt so calculating.

Her lips softened making them easier to kiss, and he slipped a hand behind her neck to hold her steady. He pause to say, “Do this for me, Belinda.”

He could feel her head shake. “It’s just like Percy,” she said, strained. ”I’d have to worry about the Ministry finding out.

“You still have to do that anyway,” Harry said. “This way, there would be a purpose to it,” he added, fishing for appealing aspects. “You wouldn’t just be a victim like before. You’d be part of something larger.”

“Larger? What, the Harry Potter fan club?”

Harry pulled back. “Is there still one of those?” he asked, spirit rising at the prospect of blind willingness.

“I’m sure there is,” she stated with disdain, making Harry smile. “You think that’s funny.”

“I think your attitude is funny.”

“How could any woman compete with that?” she asked. “All that fawning. I can’t compete with that.”

Taking his time, Harry stroked the backs of her knuckles. “You’d be the only one.”

This tactic did not seem especially promising to Harry, but she asked, “Really?” in a way that fed a ball of heat in his midsection. But then she looked away again and said, “I don’t understand, exactly, in the prison you got used to the Death Eaters? What does that mean?”

“Because the Dark Lord left part of himself behind inside me, I can sense them. They make me greater than I could ever be as just one wizard.”

She turned back, face fixed in a thoughtful arrangement. “How?”

Harry could not come up with words. “Maybe it’s just a sense I get, an illusion, and not real, but I feel like I can touch everything when I have them near. I can’t explain it.”

“No, I think I know what you mean. I wanted to be part of something larger than myself too. I thought the Ministry would be it, but now it doesn’t seem like it’s ever going to be.”

Harry gently took up her left hand between his own. “Why don’t you become part of me for a little while. See if that works out better. I’d be really . . . grateful . . .” Harry swallowed hard after forcing that word out. “I really would.”

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She snorted and gave an empty laugh. "Men always say they'll be grateful."

Harry grew a little sharp. "I don't think you understand how much this would mean to me."

She became sharp in return. "Are you becoming the next Voldemort?"

Becoming? Harry thought. "No," he answered. "I just feel like I could be so much more. But I'm not, and it bothers me. It's awful really."

She huffed. "I shouldn't have promised you. I panicked."

"Not if you weren't going to stand by it," Harry casually remarked. He stood up and strolled slowly to where his cloak hung.

"Are you going?" she asked with an edge Harry hoped was desperation.

"If you aren't willing, yes. I need to get some sleep. I'm exhausted."

She closed her eyes. Her voice wavered when she spoke. "You promise you'll help me?"

"If you let me do this, you will be like a partner. I would do anything for you," Harry lied, finding the words like finding the right key for a lock.

He walked back over to her, slowly, posture relaxed and non-threatening. He sat beside her and waited for her to speak. Her rapid breathing spoke volumes and he willingly drank up her fear.

"Will it hurt?" She rubbed her arm, face distressed, but in the next instant hopeful. "Do you have to do my arm? How about my ankle, instead? I never go bare legged anymore."

Harry had not considered that. And the practical nature of the question kicked him out of his deeply instinctive mode. He sat startled, staring at her.

She stared back, face slowly breaking down. Leading with her arms, she fell against him, voice breaking. "Harry, I don't know what to do. This is all so terrible."

He held her up and patted her on the back, fleetingly feeling a matching despair that shrank away out of his grasp until he patted her in a fixed rhythm merely out of habit.

She muttered into his robes, "This isn't going to make it any better. Why do you want me to do this?"

Words came without thinking of them. "This will make you something more. Right now you are a lone enemy within the Ministry. You could be much more. And I'd always be there, even when I'm not."

Gradually she calmed. Then she pushed away to hold her arm out, "Just do it," she whimpered. "Er, not there."

Something new rose up through Harry, starting in his thighs and up his back, a trembling potential that both weakened his muscles and made him larger than himself.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Harry dazedly tugged her fashionable loafer off and slipped her lace edged sock down below her pointed angle bone. The skin on her ankle was soft. He stroked it, distracted by how different this felt from doing this to Slowdraw. This was going to work – he knew in his gut – and that belief made it easy to give himself over to the knowledge which was not his. The mechanics of the spell from the strange book was only part of what he needed to know to make it work, he understood that now.

Harry held fast to her ankle, taut fingers rimmed by her whitening skin as he drew the mark. Belinda hissed inward at the pain, an intoxicating sound.

Harry came back to himself and pulled his motionless wand away from her flesh. He had blacked out. The Mark even now was fading from puffy red, but he did not remember drawing it. He released her foot and she folded herself to grab it up and began rocking back and forth muttering small complaints.

Harry closed his eyes. There was a shadow close by, but it was strangely translucent, as if it were cast on a sheet of glass in sunlight. But it was close enough.

Belinda sniffled, and peeled away the hand she had clamped over her ankle to look at it. Against the screaming complaint of his instincts, Harry bent and kissed the fresh scar, then higher up on her calf. Harry still hungered in so many ways it made him too impatient to hold back and reflect on why that may be.



In the main hall, Harry found Snape and Candide sitting as they usually were now, on opposite couches, with the baby and work and reading alternately beside each of them.

“Hello, Harry.”

Harry kept his head down. “Yeah,” he muttered, “Hi”. He should have simply slipped directly into his own room, he realized, except that was not the norm, and something urged him to retain the norm as much as possible.

“Everything all right, Harry?” Snape asked.

“Just tired.” He made the staircase, which was good, since it excused his watchfulness of his own feet.

An owl waited at Harry’s bedroom window, fluffed against the cold wind. It handed him a letter from Elizabeth and tried to wait for a reply. Harry shooed it off firmly and closed the window before tossing the letter with her other ones, also unopened. He did not want to correspond with her, for reasons he could not have articulated if someone had asked. And it annoyed him that she continued to write without getting a reply. He picked up the other post, newsletters and such, and tossed it into the hearth to burn, unread.

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Feeling sour, despite getting his way, despite the comforting shadow nearby, Harry fell onto his bed. He drifted into sleep immediately, but his pet, Kali, woke him twice in quick succession by running around inside her cage in little bursts.

Harry rose up on half-numb limbs and set her outside the door, on the balcony.

Harry's bedroom door snapped closed. From below, Snape could see the cage. He waved it over the railing and steadied the stand beside the couch as it landed. Kali dived under her rags and burrowed around under them, leaving a lumpy trace. She raised her head and chirped at Snape.

"Aren't you going to take her out?" Candide asked.

"Not around the infant," Snape explained. "I think she is close enough to me as is to calm down."

Kali yawned then clapped her tiny jaws closed with a snapping sound.

Candide gazed at Harry's pet as she tossed rags around with her head, bedding down. She quietly said, "Harry is starting to worry me."

Snape put his student essays aside, set his quill in the ink bottle resting on a tea tray and sat back. He studied Kali, who rubbed the side of her head on a rag before curling up with a sigh. He held up his hand to forestall further conversation from Candide.

When Kali's black pinhead eyes flicked closed and remained that way, Snape clasped his hands and said, "I understand your concern. But I hope you will remain unconcerned about him."

Candide's head twitched to the side. "I didn't quite catch that." Her hand hovered over the baby sleeping beside her, bundled firmly in a sack decorated to look like a high collared cloak.

Snape watched Kali sleep before saying, "I do not believe you are at any risk. Nor Arcadius."

Candide needed two attempts to speak. Her voice was hardly audible. "I hate to think anything bad of him, but . . . he's not himself. That's the trouble. Something seems very wrong."

"Something is very wrong," Snape agreed. When this drew a piercing glance, he added, "But I still don't believe there is any risk. Not to you. And certainly not to him." He waved at the baby.

"I wish I felt that confident. It hurts me to worry about Harry at all," she whispered sadly. "But with him . . ." She laid a hand on the baby's arm.

"How about this? If Harry is capable of harming Arcadius, then everything is doomed."

Candide raised her gaze and stared.

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Snape drew himself up. "I did warn you of the responsibilities of being a member of this household."

"You neglected to mention that the world may be at stake."

Snape crossed his legs and casually said, "Did I?"

Candide's mouth hardened. Snape peered at Kali before continuing. "It is imperative that he continue to receive our trust in him. I cannot stress that enough. I realize it goes against your instincts, noble and instinctive as they are, but everything rides upon it. I will not let Harry down."

She glanced up at Harry's door. "What is he becoming?"

"He has already become it, I think. He ceases to recognize the changes in himself, now. That is new. And telling."

Candide blinked hard, eyes shining. "Severus, what are we going to do? What are you saying?"

Snape rubbed his fingers over his mouth. "The one thing we are not going to do is let him lose our faith in him. He needs allies he can trust absolutely. That is imperative. I will follow him rather a long way into darkness to keep his faith. Without that I cannot retrieve him, ever."

She sighed, and returned to unfolding and more neatly folding things into a baby carrier. "What has he been up to?"

"I do not know everything, precisely. He has ceased confiding in me."

"Then he already doesn't trust you, Severus," she said harshly.

"It is not that. His guilt holds him back. Were he to confide in me, it would trigger backlash inside him and the darkness holding him does not want to risk that. I consider it a positive sign that he is holding things in. For the moment."

Candide's face fell. "Is this what you did for He-Who- Voldemort?"

Snape laughed in a quick burst. "Voldemort was beyond hope. So no." He leaned his head back. "Harry is the stronger; he has never been otherwise, no matter how dire things appear. At some point, a line will be crossed that will set off a battle between their personalities. I intend to be there to help Harry through that, which means I must remain by his side. Or I should say, I must convince Harry to allow me to remain by his side. Harry needs strength and right now that can only come from our belief in him."

Candide touched Arcadius' fuzzy-clad arm. "That's true for all children, isn't it?"



Harry lifted his head and sniffed the air. The scent of roasting chicken wafted by his pillow. It was just after five; he had slept all day, and his muscles complained

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about his activity schedule when he pushed up out of bed.

Downstairs, Candide was reading aloud from a book on her lap with Arcadius hitched into the arc of her arm.

“Under the completion of earnings process test, the seller must have limited remaining obligation to the customer, such as partial shipment of orders. Likewise, if the seller is a manufacturer of magical accessories, such as broomsticks and promises an extensive warranty, then they cannot book the revenue unless they can reasonably estimate . . . Good evening, Harry.”

“Is he enjoying that?” Harry asked, stopping before them.

“He doesn’t care what I read.” She bent down to bump noses with the baby. “Might as well get a little work done. Don’t you think?” The last was in a childish voice, so Harry assumed it was not a question for him.

Beyond Candide’s bent head, Harry could see Snape working at the desk in the drawing room. He glanced up, nodded, and went back to his task.

“You’re awake just in time for dinner,” Candide observed.

This prompted Harry to scrub the grit out of his eyes. “Yeah.” Despite just getting up, the other couch looked inviting. He dropped onto it.

Candide said, “This is the kind of schedule someone your age tends to have when they have no obligations.”

This comment made Harry remember that he wanted to owl the French Prison warden. He waved his never-out parchment pad down from his room along with a never-out quill, and settled into a very kind letter, knowing politeness was a necessary and powerful distraction from his real purpose.

Letter finished and in his pocket to await his owl, Harry watched Arcadius grabbing at Candide’s hair. It pinned Harry in place to watch something like a smile press the baby’s rounded cheeks out even rounder.

“How about a toy instead of the hair?” Candide asked in breathless baby talk. She untangled baby fingers and waved before him a teething ring sporting animated tiger stripes, but he gave a sound of complaint and waved an arm beyond it, bumping it aside.

Snape glided into the room. “Can I have a word, Harry?”

Harry stood and scratched his stiff hair around on his head while he approached. Inside him, something screamed that he was going to be taken advantage of while he was weak.

“No, I’m not,” Harry muttered.

Snape turned on the way to his chair, but did not comment. He must be getting accustomed to Harry speaking thoughts aloud.

Harry stood before the desk, not wanting to sit.

CHAPTER FIFTY

“Arthur sent me a letter,” Snape said. “He wishes to speak with me in person. And as well he is hoping that we will attend the Sunday Weasley dinner.”

“What are you going to say?” Harry asked.

“I am inclined to be agreeable. The Weasley family would like to see Arcadius.”

Harry shrugged. “That’s fine,” he said, because his instincts were saying exactly the opposite and he was feeling pushed around by them.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Harry?” Snape suggested, gesturing.

“I’d rather stand.”

Snape steepled his long fingers. “You helped Arthur capture Percy. You did not mention that.”

“Doesn’t seem like much worth mentioning,” Harry complained.

“Doesn’t it?” When Harry shook his head, Snape asked, “May I ask what you now plan to do?”

“Take down the rest of them.” This was not a plan Harry had had even seconds before replying.

Snape did not move. “May I ask for what reason?” When Harry did not reply, Snape suggested, “Is it because you do not have anything else to do?”

The reason bubbled up inside Harry: his instincts believed that Ma Dames’ underlings would make lovely potential servants. But he did not want to say that. “Probably,” Harry answered.

Snape touched the letter on his desk. “You really have no interest in returning to the Auror’s program?” After a hesitation, Snape added, “It would put you inside, you know.”

Harry shifted his weight to his other foot, and pocketed his hands. “I know.”

Voice quieter, Snape said, “The Ministry is your biggest threat, Harry. You need to keep track of their actions.”

“I can do that without being there.”

“Not as well,” Snape corrected.

Harry dropped his gaze to the floor and thought of his servant in the Minister’s office. It was true that the Minister was not kept abreast of the kind of details Harry needed, let alone her receptionist.

“Any other plans?” Snape asked into the silence.

Harry answered before he could risk thinking twice. “I want to visit Lockhart.”

“May I accompany you on that errand?” Snape asked.

“No.”

With a soft rustle of his robes, Snape sat away from the desk. “May I ask why?”

“Because you would be going just to keep an eye on me. You would have other interests in mind.” Snape’s chin raised with a twitch, and Harry said, “Is my bluntness

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surprising you? Why shouldn't I tell you that. You are playing several games at once. You always are."

Snape relaxed. "Of course I am. That does not alter my loyalty to you, however."

"Why would you want to see Lockhart again," Harry asked, "after what he put you through? How many Crutiatus Curses did he use on you? Could you even count them?"

Snape slowly spread his hands. "I yield the upper hand. It was only a suggestion."

"No, it wasn't," Harry said. "You wanted to gather information."

"Of course I do. I am not very useful to you if I am not continuously doing so."

Harry felt angry, at no one and nothing in particular, which only aggravated him more. He wanted Snape to do something so he could argue with him further, but Snape's words were slippery. "Anything else?" Harry prompted.

"No," Snape gently replied, standing and coming around the desk. "I think dinner will be shortly, anyhow." He touched Harry's arm. "I think your temper will improve with a good meal."

"I don't always remember to eat," Harry said, mostly to say anything at all.

Snape grasped Harry at the elbow. "I'm surprised you managed to forget how dear food is to you after your years at the Dursleys."

"You didn't yield the upper hand at all," Harry lightly complained.

A small smile played on Snape's lips, making Harry's heart ease. He wanted to ask Snape what he should do. He wanted to ask why it seemed his life was never his own.

His eyes must have given something away, because Snape said, "I am willing to offer you more guidance, but am loathe to risk your trust should that guidance strike you as interference."

Harry floundered until his instincts settled neatly on believing that Snape was always trustworthy, until he was not.



Aaron Wickem pulled Vineet aside when everyone else got up for lunch. Kerry Ann glanced back and hesitated in the doorway, but a nod from Aaron sent her off.

Aaron said, "I've invited Harry out for drinks tonight. I'm hoping you can join us."

Vineet, whose posture was normally quite good, straightened more. "Of course," he dutifully stated.

Aaron's shoulders fell. "I'm glad to see you are ahead of me in my thinking. Ginny was as well, funny enough. I'm not generally the last to know things."

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Vineet shook his head. "There are others as well."

"Your ladyfriend, Hermione? Harry's old friend?" Aaron guessed. "I don't know if that's good news or not." Aaron ducked his head and ran his finger through his hair and dropped his arm lax with a sigh. "He scared me the other day and I've been thinking since then." He rolled his head around on his neck like one short on sleep. "I've decided I don't think I can fight Harry."

"Are you going to join him then?" Vineet asked levelly.

Aaron laughed. "No." His face twitched then sagged. "Does that leave me dead then? Is that how this works?"

Vineet's voice was barely audible. "Did Harry threaten you?"

"No. Not really. He mostly threatened to tear down how I see myself." Aaron began to pace. "Maybe I should go see him. Assure him I'll stay out of his way."

"You can tell him tonight, correct? I would be interested to see his reaction. Perhaps you can say this in apparent jest."

Aaron stared at him. "I can never tell when you are joking, you know. Don't be cruel to me like that." When he did not get a response he shook himself. "Are you going to back me up if I tell him that?"

"Of course. I am on the side of good."

Aaron faintly shook his head. "I don't know what side that is, though, so maybe I won't risk it."

The door opened and Kerry Ann slipped inside, closing the door after glancing out behind her. "My ears are tingling. I'm missing something here, I know."

"We are having drinks with Harry this evening, if you would care to join us?" Vineet said.

"Oh, I can't tonight. Catch me next time. This is part of Mr. Weasley's plan to get Harry back in the program, right?"

After a strange pause, Vineet replied, "Yes."



Rodgers stood before the file room door, awkwardly flipping through the stack of paperwork in the basket he held as though looking for something. He paused as Mr. Weasley approached. "I know you need to get back to the apprentices, but I need a moment."

"I have them doing drills. I was just assembling the report on Prisoner 56, Mr. Wickem's abductress, but I needed some desk space," he said, gesturing at the file basket.

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Mr. Weasley held up a hand in understanding. “I saw the interrogation transcript. I don’t think we are going to get much more out of her, even though she has more memories than our average catch. Ma Dame is somewhere in London, which is somewhat helpful, but not a surprise.”

“I would like to try again to get more details on the spells protecting her. I’m willing to run a session of my own, if I may, before Ma Dame decides to change residences and we have nothing at all on her whereabouts again.”

Mr. Weasley glanced down the long corridor and satisfied with something, leaned on the door frame to the file room. “I think given her extensive protective spell work, it’s less likely she will move. Think of it like building a grand house, you don’t want to move into a shack and start again.”

Rodgers looked up from his files. “I hadn’t thought of that. Heartening thought. We’ll also get more after the Wizengamot lets us get to Percy,” he added gently.

“Let’s hope,” Mr. Weasley said. “He ignored me when I went down to visit him this morning. I don’t think he is going to cooperate on his own like I hoped he would. Things would go easier for him if he did. He doesn’t seem interested in hearing about that.”

Rodgers rolled his eyes, and reached for the door latch, but was stopped by Mr. Weasley’s hand.

Mr. Weasley dropped his voice low. “The real reason I came to find you Reggie is Tonks is on her way up to the Atrium to bring Severus down here, and I’m going to meet with him in my office. The code word is Camomile.”

Rodgers dropped his hand off the door latch. “Wait a moment. . . you’re expecting a Memory Charm?”

“I don’t know,” Mr. Weasley said.

“Why don’t you just take his wand off of him before the meeting?”

“Just remember the code word.”

Rodgers tipped his head in disbelief and exhaled in disgust. “Arthur, eh, never mind. I never trusted the bloke anyway, so fine. But if you forget the code word, I’m going after the man. I don’t care who his political allies are.”

“That’s what I like about you, Reggie,” Mr. Weasley said, patting him on the arm, but not sounding particularly happy.

“Do you want me to meet with him? You’ll have to tell me what I’m talking to him about, but it would be safer that way.”

“No,” he said managing a smile. “I should do this.”

The lift bell sounded from down the long corridor, prompting Rodgers to tug open the file room door. “Good luck,” he sang sarcastically.

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Severus paused for a beat outside the training room door as he walked by, listening to the distinctive foot pounding and magical explosions that accompanied spell drills.

“Harry should be in there,” Mr. Weasley said.

“I did mention it to him yesterday.”

“And what did he say?”

Snape reached him and, mostly lying, replied, “I think he needs more time to forgive you and the Ministry.”

Mr. Weasley tilted his head back the other way. “Come on down to my office. This won’t take long.”

“Close the door behind you.” Mr. Weasley said, pulling his desk chair out and setting it back against the far wall to give Snape room for his knees.

“May I ask, given that most of the Ministry is magically enlarged space, why your office is so small?”

This distracted Mr. Weasley, who set down the file he held to draw invisible boxes with his hands. “They tell me this is the seam between two different eras of enlargement, so it can’t be touched without redoing the whole top set of floors.”

“Ah,” Snape said, accepting his chair with dignified movements. “That is at least a believable excuse.”

Mr. Weasley laughed lightly, but sobered immediately. “I want you to take a look at this.” He handed over a file.

Snape turned it upright and found St. Mungo’s Coroner’s seal on the face of it. He glanced up in question and opened it at the nod he received. Inside was an autopsy report, filled out in an almost legible hand.

“Their insistence upon dark red ink has always made me wonder,” Snape commented as he flipped forward. “Who is the deceased?”

“I’m hoping to get your opinion, in general, then discuss any relevant details.”

Snape gazed at Mr. Weasley longer this time, hoping for a clue behind his eyes. But he was letting his mind drift, strangely enough, as he sat back in his office chair with his head back against the wall.

Snape paused on the page diagramming the injuries and hesitated, just an instant, while noticing the odd shaped injury on the victim’s left forearm. He turned the page with what he thought was normal movements, but Mr. Weasley said, “Caught my eye, too, although I hate myself for what it put me in mind of.”

Snape flipped to the cover page of the file. “It says this person was anonymous.”

“It was a Durumulna lackey that Harry was working with. He got caught in the crossfire between a competing branch of the gang and the Ministry.”

Snape read the cover page line by line this time. Time of death: Approximately Twelve-Thirty (Noon) Sunday March the Fifth of the year Two-Thousand. Snape

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was properly schooled this time to not react, even when he recognized that time as being precisely when Harry collapsed onto the floor of the main hall at home. Snape flipped forward again, only pretending to read the rest.

Snape said, "I know what you are thinking, but I have a difficult time agreeing. Can I see this curse injury for myself?"

Mr. Weasley shook his head. "I asked the Forensic Occultologist to look at it again, but she said it was gone."

"Is she certain it was there at all?" Snape asked, sounding critical.

"You mean, is it just an accidental mark on the anatomically correct diagram? Except for the accompanying curse analysis, marked notation "d", it might have been." He held out his hand for the report.

Snape released the brown folder, not really feeling his arm as it dropped back to his lap. He had thought himself more than sufficiently strong to face Arthur Weasley, the entire Ministry even, but just as he had caught Harry at a vulnerable moment for a useful discussion yesterday, so too had he been caught.

Mr. Weasley made a noise, then cleared his throat. "I was thinking I might get an honest answer out of you, but now I realize that's unlikely."

Snape let his brows go up. "What do you wish me to say. The notion is absurd. The anonymous boy could have cursed himself that way as a sort of gang sign. There are all sorts of possibilities." That neat explanation as a diversion for the Ministry bolstered him, even as unlikely as he knew it to be. "Harry is not happy with his situation, I will grant you that. I will not grant you that he has become the next Dark Lord. You are taking over for Mad Eye, I see."

"If Harry did go dark, it would be at least partly our fault," Mr. Weasley said.

Snape whispered, "No one is at fault in such a thing, except the person in question."

Mr. Weasley rocked in his chair faintly. "I know you insisted that returning to the Auror's program was Harry's decision, but I want him back in here."

"You are a bit of a mystery, Arthur," Snape said. "You show me this report because of its implication that Harry gave the deceased a sort of Dark Mark, yet you want him as an Auror."

Mr. Weasley rubbed his nose. "I don't know what I think about the curse on this dead lad. I do know I want Harry working on our side."

"You want to keep an eye on him, you mean."

"I want to do that, and to make things up to him." Mr. Weasley went on, "Are you willing to help get him back to us?"

Snape nodded. "I was angry with you, myself, last time we discussed this. But it would be for the best. He is not occupying his time very effectively."

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“Other than tricking members of Durumulna, what is he doing?”

Snape wanted to seem cooperative and so answered this honestly. “Reading old books of spells.”

“Grimoires? That sort of thing?”

“Everything. He reads to stave off boredom, I believe. I never seen him actually trying the spells. Reminds me a bit of myself at his age.”

Mr. Weasley sat forward with a squeak of his chair. “That is not reassuring, Severus.”



“Here, keep him on a towel. These leak-proof nappies are not at all leak-proof.” Candide set Arcadius between them on the couch.

Harry turned his head to line his face up with Arcadius’. “I can’t wait till we can teach you to steer a broomstick,” Harry said to him in a bright tone he could not help but adopt. “We’re going to do all kinds of things.”

The rush of the Floo Network sounded from the dining room and Snape entered. He came over to peer down at Arcadius, moving to douse the nearby lamp, which was lit despite the bright day.

“So, what’d Mr. Weasley have to say?” Harry asked.

“He wants you back in the Auror’s program. And I agreed that you should return but re-iterated that it is your choice. But I did promise to try to convince you of the wisdom of returning.” He reached down and played with Arcadius’ hands as he talked. He then lifted the baby up and sat down, holding him.

“You’re going to want the towel,” Harry said.

“This is a new box of nappies, is it not? Same problem as the last box?” He slipped the towel under the baby. “You’d think modern magic could accomplish such an ordinary thing, at the very least.” Speaking to the baby, Snape said, “Are you having a good day, Arcadius?”

“He doesn’t do much,” Harry said in good humor. “But he does a lot of it.”

Arcadius gave a grand yawn that brought his hands to roll around by his nose and reddened his face.

Snape asked, “Don’t you miss learning new spells, Harry?”

“I learn a few on my own.”

“Not nearly so many, and not without help and practice to get them perfected.” He straightened Arcadius’ twisted outfit. “Don’t you miss your friends in your cohort?”

“A bit,” Harry admitted. “I’m meeting some of them at the pub tonight. You have new reasons for wanting me to return to training?”

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“I have the same reasons as before, as well as believing that some kind of regular schedule of sleep is a good thing.”

Harry picked up a stuffed animal out of the rolling box of them and held it up for the baby, who had no interest in it. “If they want me back, they can’t suspect much, I would think,” Harry offhandedly said, standing up to toss the animal back away and to sort through the books on the nearby end table.

“One would hope,” Snape replied neutrally, sounding properly distracted.

In reality, Snape’s nerves had pulled taut, unexpectedly fragile. He held a helpless life in his hands and his parental instinct screamed at him to run, to take Candide and fly off to as remote a place as possible. Reality and its horrors were settling into his mind, gnawing at him. He had been so confident that he knew what he faced, but Harry’s accusations of the other day were right on the mark; he had conflicting interests that grew more difficult to resolve as each day, each hour even, rolled onward. He had believed previously, years ago, that his responsibilities could not be more conflicted, but he had been sadly mistaken.

Snape hefted Arcadius up better in the crook of his arm. The jostling woke him, but he drifted off again, limbs falling open like a blossom as he fell asleep.

Loyalty may be the death of him, but no one could ever rightly accuse him of being otherwise. He had to hope to Merlin that he was correct about the last bastions of Harry’s personality. Certainly whenever he watched Harry with Arcadius, or even Candide, he felt reassured on this point. His own position was less certain. Both parts of Harry well identified Snape as treasonous in the past, and could decide that again.

Harry returned with his nose in a book and sat down on the end of the same couch again, one foot hitched under his dangling leg. Snape’s chest loosened upon seeing the title of a book on standard blocking. Harry glanced up sharply at Snape’s attention to his reading.

Snape said, “If you need help drilling to return to form, let me know.”

“Not in here, please,” Candide said.

“We’ll go to Hogwarts. Perhaps the lawn,” Snape assured her.

Harry was thinking he could also slip away and drill with the other Ginny for a day. That would give him a chance to bask in the shadows there too, he thought with a sigh.

“Missing Hogwarts?” Snape asked.

“No,” Harry replied, puzzlement in his voice. He glanced down at Arcadius in Snape’s arms. The baby was focusing his black-colored eyes much better today, finding things in the room with ease. “He really looks like you.”

Snape angled his elbow to hold Arcadius upright, facing Harry. The baby made

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a gurgling sound that could have been delight. “That will not get him on well, unfortunately,” he said, wryly humorous.

“We’ll make sure he knows enough hexes before going to school that it won’t matter,” Harry said. When he turned to Snape to see how he would react to this, Harry found Snape’s gaze had drifted off. Harry frowned lightly and waited for him to look his way. “Really, Severus,” Harry said as though making a pledge.

Snape seemed surprised by his tone. He rocked the baby a few times until he ceased cooing each time. Then turned back to Harry, eyes inscrutable.

“I can’t wait till we can teach him some spells,” Harry said. “And to ride a broomstick. All the things wizard boys should get to do.”

Snape and Candide shared a look. Snape said, “That’s a long way off, I think.”

“I hope so,” Candide said. “Don’t bring home any aging canes if you find them, okay? I like him this way.”



As Harry was preparing to go out for the evening, he received a letter postmarked from the French Wizard Prison. He pocketed it to read later.

At the pub, he found his friends sitting around a high shelf ringing the central pillar of the room.

Aaron slipped off his stool to drag one closer for him. “Have a seat, Harry. Good to see you.”

Harry was delving into his friend’s eyes. “Is it?”

Aaron tried to laugh, but it came out false. “And people say I’m a goof. Have a seat.”

“Hey, Harry,” Ginny said, giving him an uncertain smile. Beside her, Ron set his beer down to give him a wave.

“Ron,” Harry said, finding himself assessing his friends in new ways each time he saw them. It was illuminating, but it also felt emptying. Harry shook off assessing what kind of servant Ron might make, but it was not easy to do.

Aaron asked, “How goes the lay-about life these days?”

“I didn’t arrange for enough action for you last weekend?” Harry asked. His memories of holding death seeped back into him. “How is Tridant, by the way?”

“Recovering, in hospital,” Aaron said.

“Bit of a goof up there,” Harry said, eyes shifting over to Vineet.

Vineet did not reply, and gave no hints to his reaction. Aaron leaned in as if to pull Harry’s attention away from his fellow trainee. “Miscommunication. Vishnu was coming to take Tridant away from the scene when things got hot, but he had

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not stayed put. He's hoping you'll come see him in hospital, actually. He doesn't remember you there."

"Harry was under an invisibility cloak," Vineet stated.

Harry returned his piercing gaze and asked, "How are things with Hermione?"

"Well enough," Vineet replied levelly.

While Ginny fetched a round for everyone, Harry found himself unable to resist grasping for the upper hand. "Going to make an honest witch out of her? Make her a second wife?"

Vineet replied, "I do not expect you to understand these things, but Hermione would not make a good second wife."

Muggles in suits flowed around them, chatting loudly before settling in at an already full table in the corner.

Harry accepted his drink and toasted the table with it before taking a sip. "I can't imagine she makes a better mistress."

Ginny coughed into her beer and glanced at Ron, who was blushing. "What's the discussion about?"

"Hermione," Aaron said. He put an arm around Ginny, pulling her off balance. "About how, unlike us more chivalrous fellows, Vishnu won't make Hermione an offer of marriage."

"Oh," Ginny said, staring into her beer. "I expect Hermione is intelligent enough to know what she wants."

Aaron bent closer. "And what about you? Can we give you an I.Q. boosting potion and get an answer, maybe?"

Ginny punched him lightly in the ribs. Grinning, Aaron let go and rubbed his side, announcing, "Fortunately, I like the feisty ones." But in between his antics, Harry felt Aaron's unusually keen gaze considering him.

Ron leaned closer to Ginny and said, "Next time, hit him harder."

Harry forgot about the letter in his pocket until he was taking his robes off at home later that night. The evening has passed quickly in a kind of haze. In retrospect he felt alarmed at how disarmed he had allowed himself to become by the end of it. Vowing that would not happen in the future, he tore open the letter.

As expected, it contained, in unfathomably flowery language, an invitation for a tour, that Saturday. Harry slipped the letter away back in the envelope and set it in a vertical slot in his roll top desk to bring with him to show the guards if they questioned him. His hands rubbed over one another in the cold air of his room, itching to be there, to see what was left of Lockhart, to feel the shadows. He closed his eyes. The one close shadow slowly corkscrewed and contorted in the nearfield of his mind. The feel of it settled his riled nerves.

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Harry opened his eyes on the abstract weaving hung on the outer stone wall of his room. He had been staring at it a lot lately. He would have to occupy himself better to pass the time before his visit to the prison. It was late in the evening on a weekday, and that meant the dungeon would be quiet. Harry pulled his invisibility cloak out of his wardrobe and tossed it over his head before slipping away.



When Snape came a few minutes later to check on Harry, he found the room empty, the bed still made. It was well after midnight. Snape pulled his wand out of his pocket and checked the floor for alarm spells. There were none, so he walked a circuit of the room, looking for things of interest. The only new thing was a letter from the French Prison warden. Snape used a Retrospective Charm to return it to its previous position. He considered that Harry's tour host could most likely handle himself, and there were more immediate concerns, such as where Harry was right now. Snape left the room with the intent to return later.



In the Ministry dungeon, Harry urged the single fairy light up brighter and used the same three headed snake to remove the Gimcracker from Percy. Percy's fit of choked coughing finally subsided, and Harry aimed his wand between his eyes.

"Where is Ma Dame?" Harry asked.

Percy blinked at him, then glanced around the cell as if seeing it for the first time.

"I'm not very patient, Percy," Harry said. "I'm going to burn a hole through your head on the count of five. One. T-"

Percy put up his hands. "I don't know what you are talking about. Where am I?"

Harry jerked his wand to his side. "You are in the Ministry dungeon. Where does it look like you are?"

Percy gave the room another look. "Oh." He rubbed his head, then noticed Harry glaring at him. He gave Harry a pained frown after another coughing fit. "What do you want?"

Harry raised his wand again. "Hard to imagine you killed Mad Eye. You don't seem to have the guts for it."

Percy's mouth puckered like he wanted to retort, but he held it in. Harry went on, "I bet you were surprised when the Ministry put someone else away for it."

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A flicker of movement went over Percy's brow. Harry said, "Was Mad Eye getting too close to the truth? He let you get away with an Imperio on Belinda for some reason."

Percy laughed through his nose. "He felt bad for dad. I begged him to leave it be. Said I was sorry, that I just wanted a date." He laughed breathily again. "What about you, Potter. Old Crazy Eye thought you were the worst thing since Grindelwald."

Harry shifted his wand to sight down it better. "At least he was right about something."

Harry waited for that to sink in. "Amusing that since you offed him, Moody isn't here to protect you."

Percy's eyes flicked to the door.

"Try it. I soundproofed everything. I want to know where Ma Dame is."

"And if I don't tell you?" Percy mocked weakly. "You don't know anything, Potter. And you don't scare me. You're just like the rest of them here. All talk."

Harry liked watching Percy sweat in the cold dungeon air off the end of his wand. He let him do so a long moment before saying, "You were helping Merton before this. You gave him Voldemort's old wand from the Department of Mysteries collection, didn't you? What was the problem? The Ministry didn't respect your lame contribution enough so you had to betray it to feel better than it. I'm right, aren't I?"

Percy's angular face hardened.

Harry smiled faintly. "You do so love joining things. If Voldemort were here, would you join him too?" Harry jerked his chin and held his wand tighter and narrowing his eyes. Softly, invitingly, he said, "Come on, Percy, wouldn't you love to be a Death Eater?"

Percy leapt up at him, and Harry jerked a spell out of his wand without even thinking, a Mutusorum that dropped Percy like a sack of rocks onto the floor. He flopped lifeless, limbs tangled.

Harry rolled his eyes and just in case of a trick, stood on the far side of the cell before canceling the Paralysis Charm and hovering the cell's pitcher to slowly dump water on Percy's face.

Minutes ticked by. The glittering water ran between the stones of the floor, darkening the mortar. Percy finally shivered awake. Harry stood over him, positioning his foot to step on Percy's left hand, just hard enough to hold it in place, left forearm exposed to the aim of his wand. "If you don't tell me where Ma Dame is, I'm going to make you a slave to cursed pain, Percy. Then you will tell me anyway, as well as come whenever I beckon you. Your choice."

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Percy's eyes now held real fear. He could not talk, paused to try to catch his breath, then finally grunted out, "Ma Dame lives on the top floor of a building on Battle Bridge. But you aren't going to get in without getting killed, so I'm happy for you to try."

Harry smiled. "You understand so little, Percy. But given you believe that, you should have no trouble telling me her real name."

Percy thought about this while Harry leaned harder on his fingers with the toe of his shoe. "Margarite Zacundo," he gasped.

"You must have been a favorite, Percy, to learn that and not get your memories wiped."

Percy finally caught his breath, and his chest rose and fell fully beneath his stained white shirt. "They couldn't risk it or I wouldn't be useful in my job here."

Harry pulled the Gimcracker back out of his pocket and tossed it in the air once. Percy jerked at the sight of it.

"You deserve this thing," Harry said with pleasure. "You really do. Open up," he taunted.



At home, Harry looked through the wizard annuals with no luck. He had better luck with the ordinary directory. There was indeed an M. Zacundo living in Suite 1 of 21 Battle Bridge Approach. That would be very close to the Daily Prophet building, Harry thought. Unless he wanted to make the newspapers for a week afterward with full photographic spreads he was going to have to handle this stealthily. His new instincts rumbled happily at the prospect of careful plotting and slow destruction of an enemy, whereas his natural instincts itched to simply fly over there right now and attack. To assuage that frustration, he found an old map of the area, rolled it up tightly, and took it up to his room.

In his room, Harry penned a letter to Ron using one of their Hogwarts-era ink-hiding charms. What is the vault number of Margarite Zacundo? And please tell no one I asked. – Your friend, Harry.

Harry smiled happily to himself as he gave the note to Hedwig, and he was still smiling as he settled onto his pillow and closed his eyes. Harry's smile vanished when he heard someone at the door to his room. He just barely held off on a spell upon hearing Snape's voice. "I did not intend to disturb you."

Harry slapped his wand down on the nightstand. "You should knock, Severus."

Snape stepped over to the bed. "I wanted to know how you were sleeping. Knocking would defeat that purpose."

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“I’m sleeping just fine. Or I was about to . . .”

“How was your evening with your friends?”

“Good,” Harry replied, putting a difficult edge in his voice.

Snape’s eyes drifted to the curled map that lay on the nightstand. “Do you need help with any plans?”

Harry crossed his arms. “This is a lot of questions, Severus.”

Snape clasped his hand behind his back, “I do have more experience in these things. And you cannot fault me for being concerned about your continued well being.”

Harry relented, partly from Snape’s gentle tone, which eerily shifted his voice from dryly cold to rumbling warm. “I guess not.”

“If you need anything, do let me know.” After a hesitation where he waited for a reply, Snape departed, pulling the door closed with a soft click.



The next day while they sat at the table surrounded by the remains of lunch, an owl arrived for Harry. The note was composed of ordinary ink, but it was encoded. We’re meeting at 1:35 Tuesday, the 21st of this month. Harry scratched his chin. If the first and last numbers were the same, he was to add a one to each of the remaining numbers. That would make the reply vault number 463. An awfully low number, so of potentially extreme security.

Harry tossed the note into the hearth and put his other post aside on the mantle as he stood up. He went to the upstairs room, emptied a small trunk into which he stashed his invisibility cloak and brought it back down.

Trunk lightly in hand while he stood before the hearth, Harry said, “I have an errand to run.”

“Okay, Harry,” Candide said from where she sat back from the table, nursing.

Snape more sternly said, “Do be careful.”

“Always,” Harry said, and slipped away from where he stood.

Candide peaked under her wrap at Arcadius. “You didn’t want to ask where he was going with an empty trunk and no cloak in the middle of winter?” When Snape simply sat, rubbing his fingers over his chin, she added, “Aren’t you curious?”

“Yes. That I am.”



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The echoing plonk of dripping water greeted Harry when he arrived in the subterranean warren of Gringott's Bank. He arrived outside his own vault, the lowest vault number he had ever visited. Some tunnels had extra security, Harry well knew from Ron's stories: Dragons, Rock Leeches, poisonous rat legions and worse that Ron refused to detail.

Curious to look around almost as much as to find the right vault, Harry strode over the uneven ground between the tracks to the next intersection in the tunnels. There were no vaults here, just connecting corridors. With no concern about getting lost, Harry took a right turn and walked along the tracks down this rougher corridor, assuming a lower number would be in an older area. The ground dipped away in a slope and his footsteps sent a cascade of small rocks down ahead of him. Harry stopped and listened for an alarm. Satisfied the noise had gone unnoticed, Harry ducked and continued on into air that grew more stagnant.

The tunnel branched and the one on the left dipped lower than the other and the one yellow light hanging from the ceiling fizzled on and off. A faint breath of clearer air drifted out of one of them. About to choose at random, Harry stopped and turned at a pounding noise that grew gradually louder. A shadow came along the crossing corridor behind him, shrank as if passing a light, then another shadow appeared from the floor and a troll's tatty head came into view over the rise in the tunnel. The pounding stopped when the troll came to a halt. The creature adjusted his grip on his stone bat while twisting his oversized features in a parody of thoughtful expression.

Harry straightened under his cloak as the troll sniffed the air, turning this way and that, massive nostrils distending. Just as Harry considered departing, a vibration came up through his feet, growing to shaking. The troll shuffled off back to the previous side corridor and Harry saw why. A mine cart was approaching over the rise he had just come over. The rail switch at Harry's feet magically clacked over to the left. Harry jumped forward to kick it back the other way, standing on the handle, which jumped under his foot. The cart with a goblin and a frail old wizard rattled by down the right hand corridor and with a shower of sparks, screeched to a halt.

With a repeating squeak of a bad wheel, it backed up past the switch and Harry stepped off the handle and got into position. While the goblin driver leaned out to squint at the errant switch, Harry grabbed hold of the back of the cart, and stepped up on the battered metal rail along the bottom edge.

They picked up speed down the hill and rounded a corner and Harry strained to hold on to the vibrating cart lip with his slippery cloak under his grip. His small trunk knocked against the side of the cart, but no one noticed. Fortunately for Harry, perhaps because of the age of the customer, the cart went nowhere near as fast as

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they tended to when he was taken to his own vault.

The cart hit a straightaway, and vaults flew by. Harry moved his head rapidly back and forth, checking numbers. They were in the six hundreds. Another set of hills. Harry glanced down, concerned that his cloak was flapping up, revealing his feet. More vaults, again in the six hundreds. They reached a complicated intersection and the cart halted fast enough that Harry slammed forward against the corner of it, making his eyes sting with the pain. He stepped off, gradually letting go of the rim so as to not make the cart tilt.

Rubbing his bruised sternum, Harry stepped aside for a cart passing on another track, then watched his previous ride jump away and accelerate down another narrow tunnel.

Intending to check the numbers down each of the five connecting paths, Harry started down the first on the left, found some eight hundreds and backed up to try the second one, only to leap back as the rocky floor shifted under his feet like quicksand. He peddled backward madly until he was forced to jump up and balance on the tracks, which were now arcing out into empty space. The ground sank away in a shower of stones, leaving nothing but open darkness. Harry slid his trainers inches at a time until he reached a bend in the tracks and could see ahead around the corner to where there was ground again. He used the Dark Plane to jump ahead, arms outstretched for balance. He walked along the track like a tightrope walker, listening for approaching carts until he arrived at a steep hill upward with a staircase beside the track. The first landing led to a vault door with a hammered metal plaque that read #492.

Harry carefully stepped off the wear-polished metal that was bruising the soles of his feet and found that the smoothly hewn stone held his weight. He made his way upward, rubbing his chilled arms, alert, wand in hand until he came to the correct vault number. It was an ordinary key entry vault with a cursed lock that made him wince when he bent down to peer through the key hole. It was dark within, so Harry sent a small sprite through the keyhole. One eye clenched closed, he watched it dodge and turn until he had a good enough image of the interior to slip inside.

A sizable trunk balanced on a small stool in the center of the vault. Harry circled it, stopping in the corner to examine a pile of rusted disks. Harry shoved one with his foot and it left a red ring on the stone floor. Grinning, Harry removed all the curses from the trunk before hovering it open to reveal mounds of gold coins, and a handful of iron disks. He certainly had the right vault.

Harry transferred the gold to his own trunk, hovered the rusted coins from the corner into the existing trunk, and carefully re-established the curses on it. Humming faintly, Harry checked for anything interesting on the shelves. In a velvet box he found

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a bristling amethyst necklace with no spells upon it, and wedged it into his pocket, box and all. Nothing else caught his interest, so, hefting his heavy trunk with both hands, he slipped away, smiling because he was thoroughly happy for the first time in a very long while.

In the safety of the Dark Plane, Harry considered his options. He had thought to take the gold home, but that would raise the curiosity of his guardian, which Harry was loath to do. His instinct needled him about this weakness, but he ignored it in favor of a better idea.

Harry took himself to Aaron's flat and set the trunk on the floor beside the couch. The stylish place, warm despite the cold weather blowing the bare trees beyond the tall windows, stood quiet. Wanting to take his trunk back with him, Harry looked around for something to transfer the gold into. He circled the open room, stopping to examine a black, wooden rolling cabinet that would have once housed a heavy wizard radio, but now had a small device and two square speakers on top of it.

Harry crouched to see how much weight the lower drawers might hold when his curse sense fluttered. Harry brought his wand around and found himself aiming along another wand pointed at him.

"It's you," Aaron said, lowering his wand.

"Yeah." Harry went back to his task. "You have a spare trunk? I thought you'd be at training right now."

"I was, but my invasion alarm went off."

Harry stood and glanced around the peaceful flat. "It's a good one. I didn't notice it."

"The twins sold it to me. I honestly doubted it would work." Aaron studied Harry's face. "May I ask what you are doing?"

Harry gestured at his small trunk over by the couch. "I brought you something."

Aaron switched his wand to his other hand and went over to open the trunk. "Just what I need: more gold," he said with playfully false enthusiasm. "You're storing the fruits of your criminal labors in my house now? That makes me an accessory to the theft you know."

"It's your gold," Harry said, watching for a reaction, wanting to enjoy the control this revelation would bring about.

"It is?"

"It is. Or, it's Lord Frelander's gold, at any rate, which is pretty much the same as yours. I took it from Ma Dame's vault. Maybe I should have left more of the slugs in the pile. There were quite a few, so I'm quite certain it's what remains of your ransom money."

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Aaron's posture shifted to one of relaxation as he stared down into the glowing pile that far out-shined the worn gilding on the little trunk's metal bands.

"Oh. Cheers then." He shook himself. "Let me get something to put it in.

He returned promptly with a rolling piece of metal sided luggage and, with both of them working at it, the gold was soon transferred. The coins made the dull noise only gold can make as it piled up and shifted. "Look at it all. Works better to ignore the rules, doesn't it?" Aaron wistfully said.

Harry latched his empty little trunk and picked it up. "It's possible I'll want to borrow a bit of that gold if I need it. So I may be back," Harry warned him.

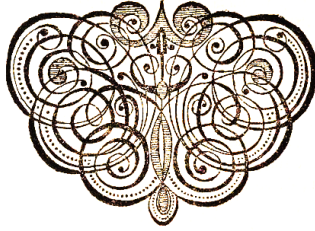
Aaron shrugged. "Certainly. Have at it."

Harry turned to go, and Aaron said, "Sorry for doubting you, Harry. It won't happen again."

Harry restricted his smile to just a slight curl in his lips. "See that it doesn't," he said, leaving open whether he was jesting with this comment, or not.

Author's Notes: Poetry classes seem to be paying out a bit. I'm finding word selection a little easier and more effective. I hope it shows in this chapter.

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The shop door, with its thickly frosted windows, closed behind Ginny with a muted jingle. After leaving school, she never imagined visiting Flourish and Blotts more than once a year, let alone needing to make weekly visits for writing supplies. To the left of the counter, near the floor, she crouched to reach into the torn box of stenographer notebooks and pulled out handfuls with the intent of not needing to buy more for a while.

The notebooks she had already hitched into the crook of her arm began to slip to the floor. Ginny let all the notebooks fall and began bundling them better when a pair of fuchsia alligator-skin pumps strutted over and scraped to a stop after toeing the pile aside.

Ginny glanced up at Rita Skeeter's disdainful, magenta smile. "So many notebooks, my dear? One might get the mistaken impression that you actually take notes," she said.

Ginny rolled her eyes and gathered the bundles to her chest to carry to the counter. "And what would you know about journalism?" Ginny retorted, willing herself not to blush in anger.

Skeeter whispered in Ginny's ear as she passed. "Knowing when one is getting played has nothing to do with journalism, necessarily. I'll agree with that. Your Potter puff piece was a stunning success on that point." She then followed to where Ginny stopped to wait for the shop clerk to finish with a young girl who was taking her time choosing between perfumed notecards.

The girl's mother eyed them curiously, so Ginny moved off to peruse the collection

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of Super-Stubby Neverout Quills behind Skeeter and kept her voice low. “I know Harry better than you ever will in a hundred years of writing the drivel you do. Can’t you find anything better to harp on?” Ginny considered adding, you Harpie, but decided to make an attempt at professionalism since that was ostensibly the topic.

Skeeter crossed her arms and leaned closer to the same rack of quills. Up close her curls were perfect, not a hair out of place. “I have sources everywhere, more than you will ever have in a hundred years of your amateur interviewing of your old school chums.”

Behind them the register ticked and clanged. Ginny gritted her teeth in her determination to come up with a properly scathing insult. Skeeter went on, “Your friends may think the Prophet runs the news world, but there are many ways of reaching the wizarding public, my dear child.”

“Stop calling me that,” Ginny said. “And speaking of getting played, wasn’t it you who fell for a pile of fake letters?”

All false pleasantness faded from Skeeter’s face. Her makeup became pale smears upon her anger-rudded skin. “No one with a reputation worth defending has ever survived for long as my enemy, Ms. Weasley. Don’t think I’ve forgotten your not-so-small role in that.”

Ginny rolled her eyes and managed a prim tone. “I’m quite certain that if you hadn’t been eavesdropping, you would not have had any difficulty with it whatsoever.”

Skeeter’s voice became sickly chummy. “So, where did you get the letters? They were too good for you to have produced them, of that I’m certain.”

“Oh, right,” Ginny scoffed, moving to the now empty counter. She was still holding a Super-Stubby Neverout Quill and put that down beside the notebooks. Now that she had a decent salary, free room and board, and no time to spend money, expenses were suddenly, magically, a non-issue. Ginny said, “Clearly you have enemies you have not dealt with. That’s not MY problem.”

Skeeter considered her through slitted eyes as she put down coins for her purchase. Only when her notebooks were tied up with ribbon did Skeeter say, “You have responsibilities to the public, Ms. Weasley. Just because you are ineptly playing at reporter doesn’t make those responsibilities simply vanish.”

Ginny picked up her sack and spun on Skeeter. “I have responsibilities to my friends.”

“No, actually, you don’t,” Skeeter corrected. “That’s where you are quite mistaken. You don’t have friends . . . you don’t have family either. You have a job to do. I read your measly and strictly factual one paragraph about your brother’s arrest.” She made a disappointed tsking sound. “Come now, the son of the head of Magical Law Enforcement is in the Ministry Dungeon and all the public gets is 400

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words? Do you know what a newspaper even is?"

Skeeter followed Ginny to the door and put her foot in the way of opening it. Her voice fell into a hiss. "That so-called friend of yours, our so-called hero, is everyone's enemy now, from what I am learning." Ginny jerked hard on the door, but Skeeter's foot only gave an inch. "Ask your father how his investigation of Mr. Potter is going." She breathed into Ginny's ear, "I dare you to."

"Get out of my way, you hag," Ginny said, controlling her tone, but not her word choice.

Skeeter flipped her cloak over her shoulder to reveal the blood satin underside of it and stepped neatly aside. "You'll hear from me soon enough," she smugly said. "Go, on. Run along. There is ink begging to be wasted, somewhere, I'm certain."

Ginny growled as she threw the door wide and escaped into the bitter wind sweeping along Diagon Alley.



A stealthy figure clad in clothing that rippled with a pattern of stones and torch-cast shadows slipped by the slumbering Ministry Dungeon guard who gave a snort and rolled to the side. Dainty feet moved soundlessly down the stairs, along the damp lining the wall, past heavy cell doors reinforced with decorative iron bars. The footsteps hesitated at the crossing in the corridor. The hooded figure bobbed to glance around the corner before aiming a Cloak Entanglement spell that way. When the corridor remained still, the figure slipped around and soundlessly crept that way, wand leading.

The figure stopped before the cell holding Percy Weasley and ran a complex spell on the door, starting over twice because it was a difficult one to do silently. The wood grain on the door glowed white and faded. The figure's wand lowered as it leaned closer to the door to study a strange pattern of blackening on the wood interspersed with gouges of brightly scoured iron.

The figure turned and pressed back against the door and, with a wave and a twitch, brought forth jagged black spikes from the corridor floor and ceiling. Another twitch ignited them with searing blue flame. No satisfying sounds came, like shouts of surprise or screaming, so the figure gave a circular wave and the floors and ceiling returned to their worn and ordinary state.

The figure threw back her hood and brushed her Mohawk back into place. Standing on tiptoe she could see that the room's occupant was sitting, staring up at her, blinking far too infrequently, but still safe.

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Back up in the Aurors' office, Tonks stopped in the doorway and shook her head at Kingsley Shacklebolt. "Whoever it was, I didn't catch them, and it doesn't look like they got through the cell door's protection."

"So, not a false alarm, then," Shacklebolt said, closing his files and standing up.

"No. They knocked Horace for a loop, so he's in the dispensary. I sent a crew from Games Security down to cover for him."

Mr. Weasley came up behind Tonks. "What's this?"

"Someone tried to get at Percy," Tonks said, tempering her business-like tone with sympathy.

Kingsley said, "Should we move him to the French prison? He knows too much for his previous associates to let him talk."

"Right now, he's not talking at all," Mr. Weasley pointed out. "They have nothing to worry about."

Tonks leaned on the door frame. "You didn't let us hold Harry down there because it wasn't safe."

Mr. Weasley held up a finger. "It wasn't safe because Percy was free to move about the Ministry. That is no longer the case."

"This didn't look like inside work," Tonks said. "Too brute force. Whoever it was doesn't understand the Dungeon's security beyond getting inside."

"Let's lay a trap in his cell then. I want to catch this person, alive and well." Mr. Weasley turned to go. "I want to get information out of someone; I don't care terribly who from at this point."

"Do we move Percy?" Tonks asked.

Mr. Weasley bit his lip in momentary thought. "Move him to another cell, put a pseudonym in the registry and put an illusion in his old cell."

After he departed, Tonks and Shacklebolt stared at each other, frowning.

"Got any ideas for a gentle but foolproof trap?" Tonks asked. "Preferably something I won't accidentally trip myself up on and end up missing the rest of shift?"



Harry stared up at the faceless black tower at the end of the pier. Waves whisked by, glinting merrily in the sunlight. He could not shake the illusion that he and this stone monolith sailed briskly forward, despite knowing firsthand how deeply anchored it was.

The helmeted guard at the door saluted him and welcomed him inside, so Harry ceased fishing for the letter in his pocket. Inside the tower, the watery slots glowed aquamarine, casting bouncing nets of light up the walls. The guard's metal boots

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rattled crisply as he strutted out in the lead with his bright red helmet feather bobbing behind him. Another guard, also unfamiliar, met Harry in the lift and after some saluting and bowing of the guards, the lift descended.

Harry took one last breath of fresh sea air and held it in. He also held in his delicious anticipation, intent on giving away no expression. The rough walls slipped upward around the lift, and the shadows slipped in closer like the imaginary pressure of the rock around them. Harry blinked, expecting the torchlight to dim with their presence. The ride took longer than Harry remembered, giving his insides plenty of time to squirm as he resisted closing his eyes and sinking deeper yet into himself.

Down they slid. Harry glanced at the guard and found the man's eyes were crinkled around the edges as if he may be smiling broadly behind his visor. The guard tapped his feet together and came to attention and the lift slowed to a leg-straining stop at the opening to a familiar corridor.

At the warden's office, the guard waved that Harry should step aside while he knocked primly despite his spiky gauntlets.

The door opened of its own accord and the warden came out from behind his desk to greet Harry warmly and lead him back into the corridor. "Ah, Mistar Pottar, so good to meet you again." Behind his eyes Harry saw intense fascination, and that set his instincts on alert.

"Thank you for inviting me," Harry stated formally, masking his unease.

"You are exact-ily on time, so we will assume you are eager. Eustache here will accompany us." The guard hovering close gave another heel clicking bow, sending his helmet feather sweeping through their midst. The warden waved the feather away and gestured that they should head in the less well-lit direction.

As they strode along the narrowing corridor, the warden said, "I was lamenting zat you would not pay us a visit, Mistar Pottar."

"How could I resist?" Harry said, breathing in the stagnant air and feeling the shadows flow around him, charged and waiting hungrily for a sign. He had to put his hand over his mouth and fake a cough to avoid making a sound of pleasure.

They went down a staircase and along corridors with cells on either side. Shuffling sounds and derisive grunts came through the slats in the heavy doors.

"Zees is our Cell Block Tey, for our short stays, just until zee trials. Mostly very silly crimes, not very interesting. I will show you somewhere better."

The warden walked faster until the end where they had to wait for a heavily armored door to be turned aside into the wall. The guards on the other side came to attention. Harry's instincts were fighting him, making his feet clumsy on the rough-hewn floor. He vacillated between hungrily looking forward to seeing Lockhart, and having his nerves tensing in expectation of getting locked in.

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“Where do you keep the vampires?” Harry asked, wanting to judge the warden’s reaction to this as a way of soothing his nerves, which had slammed into full alarm as the armored door had swung closed.

The warden turned to him, flanked by the block guards who peered over the warden’s shoulders at Harry in a kind of awe. “Do you wish to see all you have captured, perhaps?” He was teasing; Harry was certain.

Dryly, Harry replied, “Not all. That would take too long.”

The warden laughed. “Mmm. You will stay to dinner, of course. I will not ’ave it otherwise. Allons-y!” he said, gesturing that they should move on.

The cell block guards remained at their post as the three of them took a curved staircase many turns deeper into the rock. Even before the warden stopped before an iris metal door at the bottom, Harry’s nerves were alight with prickles.

“Gardez-vous,” the warden said, indicating Harry should step back while the iris retracted. The edges of the door plates, which were lined with inwardly curved spikes, did not retract completely. With a groan they came to a stop, leaving a jagged opening to wiggle through.

They stepped into an oblong cage that protected the door. The room contained a drooping tableau of rank clothing and pale white skin. Wilted figures sat on the floor, resting their heads on their knees or on an arm draped on the stone bench bordering the room. The warden bent down and paced around the cage, studying each figure in turn.

“Ah, voilà. ’Ere is your thing.”

Harry turned on his toes, rubbing his arms from discomfort at such a strange sense of cursedness. The vampires no longer had access to the underworld, so their cursedness crackled, disjointed. “You keep them all in one room?”

“Eh, it is no matter. And it is expedient for the wardings. We potion the beef blood zey are fed. Zey are knowing zis, but they cannot resist it. Otherwise zey are quite difficult to contain, what wis zer, mind tricks.” He gave an exaggerated shudder.

Harry went to the bars to better study Fueago, who sat alone on the end of the bench by the door, mostly upright, lithe arms resting atop his thighs. The space between him and the others indicated they afforded him some respect, or fear. Fueago’s eyes cracked open without him otherwise moving. The black of them glittered wetly in the torchlight. For a moment, under their malevolent gaze, Harry felt small and hollow, dwarfed by an ancient force he could not understand, one that would outlive him by eons.

Harry hung there, one hand gripping a shiny steel bar, mystified by his own reaction. Then, like a wave filling a hollow in the sand, the shadows rushed in and

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he was everywhere and everything, although in contrast to this creature, it felt less substantial than usual. Fueago's eyelid twitched as they continued to stare at one another. Jealousy rushed through Harry, then anger. He held bars in both hands now, straining against them, but uncertain whether he yearned to get in or out of this strangely reversed cage.

"E may not be fully captured by zee potion yet, Mistar Pottar. Zee old strong ones require longer time to succumb. Zee young ones, zey succumb immediately," the warden calmly explained, stepping up beside him. "E ees a prize, though, despite zee trouble. Older than all zee rest, so most powerful."

Harry's knuckles had stiffened and resisted him unclamping his hands from the bars. He tried to massage them back to normal.

The warden prattled on after a sigh. "I hoped to 'ear 'is story sometime. But I zink 'e will not give up 'is mystique so easily. It is unfortunate zat vampires do not bore more easily. I guess zee easily bored ones would 'ave gone mad long ago."

As the door irised closed behind them, metal teeth grinding, the warden talked on, "Even zee most powerful ordin-ary mortals get bored and when you ask for zere story, you cannot but 'ope to shut zem up again."

The shadows had a hold of Harry for the next phases of the tour. They entered the third level of the witch cell block. This area was newer with more rusty metal and larger barred windows on the doors, much more like a Muggle jail if it had been built by medieval masons and blacksmiths. The warden ignored the glinting, curious eyes tracking their passage, and commented, "Ah, Fueago 'as had a not favorable effect on you."

Harry had nearly forgotten about the vampire, actually, lost as he was in exploring this extended sense of himself. He struggled for something appropriate to say while anger and jealousy rose up again. "I could capture him again. It's nothing really."

"Ah, you could; I 'ave no doubts." He waved off the guard's peppy salute at the next interlock. "Should you be lacking for work, you could provide for vampire removal services. Vampires like to feed upon remote and poor villages, but you would be very surprised how much gold zee vampire will have amassed and zee villagers' tradition is to give all zat to the eradicator. As well as zere best sheep, zere daughters. It is quite lucrative, I 'ear."

Harry was trying to come up with a response to this when they crossed through to the other half of the block, beneath a heavily spiked security door hanging by a single thin chain. From the right something launched at him accompanied by a ringing bang of a cell door and a cry of surprise. Harry jumped back and spun to face Bellatrix's distorted, howling face. Reacting without thought, Harry pressed on her Mark and she fell, clutching her arm, hissing.

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The guard leveled his crystal tipped spear and clicked it along the bars, making them spit sparks from top to bottom.

Bellatrix scrambled back and struggled to her knees. She ignored the guard and glared at Harry, breathing harshly, mouth hanging open. Harry relaxed his shoulders, and smiled faintly at her. Her eyes glanced keenly from Harry to the warden and back again, making Harry aware of having made a mistake.

The warden stepped back to better inspect Harry. “That was most interesting, Mistar Pottar. Most. Interesting.”

Harry met the warden’s gaze with a level one of his own. “Is it?” he asked.

The warden raised his hand and fitfully rubbed his fingertips together. “Yes, I would say zat it is. But do come along, we ’ave more to see.”

The guard rushed to catch up to the warden’s side and clanked along closer now. Harry glanced back to see Bellatrix rise up like a wraith and come to the bars. Before Harry was out of sight, she reached a bony arm through, fingers clasping the air, eyes wild with hunger. Harry walked on, staring at the warden’s narrow back, his new instincts mustering to combat the fallout from his revelation.

But at the next staircase down, the warden had returned to his previous demeanor. He began relating the construction history of each cell block, what Minister had been responsible and what political crisis had led to the allocation of funds. Harry listened with half an ear, tempted at each section to see if he could slip away and back again, but deciding each time against it, even if it would make him feel far better to succeed at it.

The warden and the guard stopped before an iron door in a short corridor of identical iron doors. “We are there, Mistar Pottar.”

“Can I see him alone?” Harry asked.

“No. Certainly, as I do not know what your next demonstration will be, I am afraid. We will come with you.” The guard opened the brass studded door and the warden waved Harry inside.

Harry’s instincts would not let him enter first, given that if the door closed he would most likely be stuck. He gallantly bowed that the warden should lead. Mouth playing with a smile, the warden did so.

Inside was a block of four cells, separated by bars only. Lockhart was in the last one. He stood as soon as they stepped into view and glided to the front of the cage. His red eyes were nearly as bright in this dull place as his sparse blonde hair, which swept back from his head like a ragged mane magically haloling a bald head. He held a crooked finger up and pointed at Harry.

Harry watched Lockhart’s face melt from one raw expression to another. Lockhart was not at all like the Death Eaters, but something inside Harry sensed his presence,

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or at least thought his eyes seemed naturally mirror-like. Harry relaxed; he faced a long-lost childhood friend, someone who had changed greatly but was still instantly recognizable, someone who knew things about him that he himself had forgotten.

Lockhart fell still also, but his eyes narrowed and flickered a deeper red. He crossed his arms and pushed his chest out. His robes were faded but had once been crisp and flamboyant. Despite clearing his throat, it still rasped when he said, "The suffering I would put you through if I could." His anger quickly shifted to despair, and he dropped his arms and paced, fists pumping. He stopped suddenly, faced the side wall and watched his own hand clasp and unclasp empty air. "You would suffer so, you would beg and scream for . . . death!" On this last word he spun and pointed again, eyes pulsing. "I would enjoy every hour of your misery, you insufferable Muckblood!" His voice grated as it grew louder. "How dare you do this to me! You should pay! You should beg for me to stop until you are a heap of senseless sinew and bloody tissue!"

Acutely disappointed, Harry muttered, "Is that all you've got?"

The warden stepped close to Harry, arms crossed. "NOW, zis is an interesting one. With his fall from power, both political and magical, 'e is unique. I 'ave never seen such a case. Obviously."

Lockhart groaned in anger and took up pacing again while tugging at his hair. "How could you do this to me? ME?! I was invincible!"

Harry watched his antics ratchet up in volume and intensity. Lockhart's nearby block mate covered his ears and winced, then rolled his eyes when he perceived Harry's gaze drawn his way.

Lockhart continued pacing and ranting, alternately with theatrical artifice and honest misery. "He's nothing," Harry whispered.

"Not exactly," the warden said, sounding reassuring, which struck Harry as odd and drew his full attention. "Humans, no matter 'ow powerful, are motivated by only a few things, really. Zey do not believe zis is so, but it is." He waved his hands around his own head. "Zey invent many complicated stories inside zere head to make zemselves feel smarter, higher in thinking, but in the end it is just a few things. Zee criminal has a smaller, different set zen the honest man. Zee madman, a set the sane cannot comprehend."

He gestured at Lockhart, who was now bending over his bench, roaring and sobbing. The warden went on. "What 'appened 'ere . . . see . . . stripping away his power leaves us only the raw motivation, and nothing else, since 'e cannot act on it. 'E does not know how to act wizzout magic, so 'e is permanently fixed at zee stage of motivation."

Harry was not certain he believed this. "You think?"

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Voice rising above the conspiratorial whisper he had been using, the warden clutched his hand before Harry and said, "What is a man but his actions!?"

Harry watched Lockhart pace around his bench, head down, taking care to avoid turning their way.

"But he's still Voldemort."

The pacing stopped. Lockhart, back still to them, raised a hand and combed it spasmodically through his hair, as if concerned for his appearance.

"Sort of," Harry amended.

The warden tested the bars with his ring, making them chime.

"What are the powerful and evil motivated by?" Harry asked.

The warden drew his fist back from the bars. "Whatever zey wish to be motivated by," he said. "Zee human is sociable. Evil is not. It acts unconstrained from such limitations."

Something inside Harry said, "Exactly," in a happy sort of manner.

They stood there another minute, and Harry, feeling increasingly undone, made a move toward the cell block door, away from this empty vision.

The warden queried kindly, "Seen all you hoped to?"

"Not quite," Harry said, rubbing his hair back.

In the corridor, the warden cheerily said, "I must thank you for sending us zat one. He is among my favorites. Especially since I can 'ave him to dinner with almost no precautions."

Alarmed, Harry said, "You should still be careful."

"Oh, Monsieur Pottar. Your concern is touching. But imagine, if I use magic on him, he cries for a week, continuously."

"Really?" Harry said, heart feeling oddly heavy and his stomach somewhat disturbed.

Harry spent dinner with the warden quiet and thoughtful. Each time his mind took a turn around his visit with Lockhart, something hard inside him tried to derail his train of thought, and it annoyed him enough he barely tasted the food. It was not until he noticed the warden's overly dissecting attention that he put aside his uselessly circling thoughts. He picked up a half-open crab claw, dripping with saffron butter and tugged the meat out of it, forcing himself to taste it, which, fortunately, was not difficult.

The warden, finished with this course long ago, put his napkin beside his plate to free up his hands for talking. "You 'ave an interesting power over Voldemort's former servants . . . I could not 'elp but notice."

Harry felt his face shift, his eyes contract. He felt suspicion tighten across his chest and knew it should be hidden, but could not manage it. He waited.

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The warden smiled inwardly, knowingly. “Ah, do not become alarm-ed, Monsieur. You have answered me completely with a look, but you are not my responsibility at zis time, and I have responsibilities enough.” He was still smiling when the chef came in and exchanged their plates for the risotto course.

The warden frowned at his bowl and restrained the guard from leaving. “Gaspode. What is zis? Two saffron courses in a row?”

The guard’s chef’s hat flopped forward as he bowed his head in shame. With a great sigh, he moved to take the shallow bowls, but the warden waved him off. “Leave zem, but do not make such a grievous error again.” To Harry, he said, “My sincerest apologies.” Then he started eating without a care otherwise.

When his bowl was empty, the warden leaned back with a sigh of appreciation. Harry’s self-preservation instincts riled him too much to eat more than a few spoonfuls before giving up.

The warden patted his stomach and said, “Come now. Please. If I follow your case now, Mistar Pottar, it is only as an avid student of these things. Nothing more.” And he smiled that strangely pleasant little smile again and Harry made himself feel sanguine, mostly because it annoyed his new instincts which trusted in nothing.



“Harry, good to see you,” Mr. Weasley graciously said, holding out his hand. Harry returned him a reluctant handshake, then had to school himself not to react to the subsequent pat on the back when he turned away.

The long kitchen table at the Burrow was crowded with mismatched plates and cups. The water pitcher and the wine jug were bobbing about and clanking together, filling glasses.

Mrs. Weasley wiped her hands on her needlepoint apron and said, “Severus and Candy, you can sit here. Bill and Fred can’t make it today, unfortunately.”

Candide, Arcadius in her arms, got assistance from Charlie in getting seated. “I need the practice,” he said, next helping his wife, Gretel, who had to maneuver her large belly into a seat, but then had no difficulty leaning over to play with Arcadius.

“When are you due?” Candide asked, when the playful baby noises eased up.

“Not soon enough,” Gretel replied with a sigh, looking longingly at Arcadius, who was chewing on his blanket.

“In a month,” Charlie offered. “To the day.” He sat down beside Gretel and took her hand. She gave him a pained smile in return.

Gretel turned to Candide. “So, tell me, how was it? I feel like everyone is lying to me about how it will go.”

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“Not bad at all,” Candide replied. “Quick and easy.”

Gretel did not seem reassured by this. “Everyone says that,” she said, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Our first grandchild,” Mrs. Weasley announced, clasping her hands before her as if in prayer. She looked around the table as everyone finished seating themselves. Her eyes found Ginny, next to Aaron at the far end of the table.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Ginny demanded. “I’m the youngest. Hello?”

Several of the assembled ducked to hide their grins.

Aaron rubbed his hands together and said, “I’m up for the challenge,” which garnered him an elbow in the ribs. Hunching over to rub his side, he said, “Apparently I’m not.”

Dinner progressed slowly with superficial discussions of the weather and the preliminary pre-qualification matches for the next Quidditch World Cup. As people stood up with a groan and took up more comfortable spots around the living room, Harry pulled Ginny aside toward the staircase.

“Can I get a word?” he asked, glancing back, certain Snape must be watching him. But Snape was involved in discussion with Charlie. It was the fourth time that had happened – that Harry was certain Snape observed him, but found him otherwise occupied.

Ginny disappeared around the bend in the staircase, each footstep eliciting an ominous creak, so Harry pulled away from studying each person in the room to see how much attention they were giving him. Aaron gave him a friendly wave, despite his taking Ginny aside.

In the claustrophobic corridor on the first floor, where the dust motes took on swirling forms of galloping rabbits as they drifted by the carrot patterned curtains on the small window, Harry said, “Can you do a little research for me on someone?”

Ginny shrugged. “Sure. If I can find anything.”

“I need to find out all I can about a Margarite Zacundo. Without her finding out about it. Do you know that name?”

Ginny rubbed her forehead. “You know how many names I’ve seen in the last month? I’ll look in the Prophet files for you.”

“That won’t arouse any suspicion, will it?”

She smiled, and grabbed his arm. “Harry, I spend so much time in there, I got locked in accidentally one night. No, no one will care.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, feeling grateful. That rare feeling, coupled with their whispered conspiracy, reminded him acutely of their school days. He tried to hang onto the feeling as they returned to the get-together, but it did not survive reaching the

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bottom of the staircase, when Harry again felt compelled to check who was watching him.

As they departed, Mr. Weasley again took up Harry's hand. "Make it a point to visit the Auror's office this week, Harry. All right?"

"I have a lot to do this week," Harry said.

"Everyone misses you, Harry," Mr. Weasley added, accompanied by the sound of double Disapparation as Charlie and his wife departed. Mr. Weasley went on, "I had hoped by now you'd be missing us too."

"Maybe," Harry said flatly.



First thing Monday, Harry took up his cloak and his broomstick and the map of London around Battle Bridge Road and prepared to depart for some reconnaissance. His departure was interrupted by a knock on the door to his room. Harry let his laden hands drop to his sides and said, "Come in."

Snape opened the door and, seeing Harry, tilted his head curiously. Before he could speak, Harry said, "Did you charm my room to tell you when I was going out?"

Snape shook his head. "By no means. We are waiting on breakfast."

"I have things to do," Harry said, gathering up his items in his arms again, ready to slip away.

"Come down to breakfast, Harry." This was not a request.

Harry stared at Snape and clenched his teeth against his gut responses, which were all obnoxious attempts to assert his power. He imagined how Lockhart had appeared to him and could not find a response that did not echo that, so he said nothing.

Snape moderated his hard tone. "Come, Harry. Whatever it is you are planning, it will go better with good food in your stomach."

His broom swaying in one hand, his cloak trying to slip free from the other, Harry said, "You don't command me."

Snape frowned. "I do not; it is true. That was a mistake on my part. I can stand back and watch you do a lot of things, but not harm yourself. You ate little more than your suspicions yesterday at the Weasley's. Come." He put out an inviting hand and swept it toward the door.

Harry propped his broomstick beside his desk, let his cloak flow out of his hand onto the bed, and followed.

Harry said nothing through breakfast, finding solace for his ego in being obstinate. Snape paid this no heed, occupied as he was with discussing the newspapers and Arcadius with Candide.

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Cloaked and ducking low to keep his feet from showing, Harry took flight from an alleyway two streets from the Daily Prophet building. He flew one pass rapidly along Battle Bridge Road, just at building height. Nothing unusual happened. He turned and flew by again, slower, letting the wind, which made his trousers and the cloak flap forward, propel him along. Ma Dame's listed address was the top floor of a stone and red brick building set back slightly from the road, breaking the straight line of roof edges. The penthouse had a large open balcony with potted trees, currently bare, and a wall of glass doors, tinted so they only revealed a reflection of the sky.

Harry veered closer, intending to overfly the balcony, but his curse sense sent spasms through his arms, jerking him off course. The world careened sideways as he struck something invisible, either a hidden wall or a magical barrier. As bad as his curse sense had been, it surged worse. Shaking, Harry landed on the building opposite and crouched down on the tar, behind the low brick wall decorating the roof edge. He wanted to clench his eyes shut, the disgust so pained him, but he instead gasped and peeked over the wall.

Nothing had changed. The building appeared exactly as it had. But behind him, the row of soot-stained metal tubes topped with cones suddenly groaned and squeaked, bent into L shapes and squashed flat as though between rollers. A second later Harry's curse sense released him.

Harry breathed in and out until his head cleared. He had no idea what that had been. Taking a deep breath, he again peeked over the roof edge, seeing if anything else was going to happen. He could not see inside, and what he could see outside was apparently an illusion. The deep balcony with the tall pots and benches, none of it was real. Or, maybe all of it was real, but none of it was for certain.

Angry, but with nothing to take it out on, Harry considered various attacks and barrier cancellations. But with his alien instincts berating him for his silly approach to his enemy's hideout, he lowered his wand. All out attack was not the best way to go about this. Crouched there, his trainers squeaking on the rippled roofing tar, Harry felt compelled to agree, but it did not make him happy to do so. Harry needed more information out of Percy. He was certain Percy had it, it was merely a matter of getting him to talk.

Back home, Harry put his things in his room before returning downstairs to stand before Snape where he sat with Candide, Arcadius gurgling happily between them.

"I need to talk to you alone," Harry said.

Snape directly set his journal aside and stood to follow Harry into the drawing room. Harry ran protective charms even as he walked inside. Snape closed the door and stood behind his desk waiting for Harry to finish before taking up his chair.

Harry slipped his wand away and said, "I need a truth serum, but one the Ministry

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can't detect later like Veritaserum."

Snape nodded crookedly. "As you wish. It will require a few hours to brew something. I'll go to Hogwarts tonight to do that. I assume you can stay here, on guard?"

"Yes," Harry assured him.

"How many doses do you expect to need?"

"Just one."

Snape steepled his fingers and sat back. "For Mr. Percival Weasley, I assume." When Harry did not respond, Snape said, "Harry, if you cannot trust me regarding this, I'm not certain what you can trust me with."

Harry clamped his jaw. "Yes. Percy."

"May I make an observation?" He did not wait for a response. "I fear you are growing predictable. That will lead to trouble."

"But I can get out of trouble," Harry pointed out.

"You sound like one itching to give it a go, in fact," Snape said, exhaling. "Do try to be somewhat unexpected in your actions, if you can. Have an alibi, at the very least. That is all I have to say."

Harry pushed his shoulders back. "Sound advice."

Snape straightened the blue-black quills in the brass holder on his desk. "How was your visit to the prison yesterday? I expected you to voluntarily share your observations, but I was mistaken in that assumption."

"It was interesting enough. The food was good. Bellatrix is still insane."

"That is hardly a surprise." Snape pushed his leather journal to the center of the desk and stood up.

"You'll have the potion tonight?"

"I fully expect to."

Harry was laying the wrong way on his bed, trying out miniature versions of barrier spells, which continued to be far easier than expected. It was well after midnight. Harry was toying with the idea of paying Percy a visit that night, and practicing magic kept him nicely alert. He turned all the way to the back of his old Auror book, Protect and Swerve, and tried to find the most difficult barrier it described.

When the light rap came on the door, Harry eagerly pushed straight to wave it open. Snape stepped in, and the way he spun on his toes to close the door, gave away that he was disturbed by something.

Snape approached the bed, rubbing his chin with his knuckles. "My rare ingredient stores were not as I expected them to be," he methodically stated. "I could not, this evening, make the potion that would best serve you in your plans."

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Harry scooted on the bed to hang his feet off the edge, prepared to jump to his feet. “What happened to your potion ingredients? Did Greer do something?” Harry clutched his wand tighter, remembering his old hatred of the Potions Master.

Before Harry could plot out some kind of punishment, long overdue, and therefore in need of twisted cleverness, Snape shook his bowed head and said, “I don’t think so. Only I could get into my special cabinet. I am certain of that. I suspect it was my alternative self, in fact, who used them. I spent a little time figuring out what he may have been doing with Kelpie hide and Catoblepas scales, both of which are very difficult to obtain. I expect it had something to do with encouraging someone to confess to Moody’s murder, given the slim list of potions comprised of both.”

“So, you don’t have what I need?” Harry asked, finding a hard tone very easy, and watching keenly as Snape hesitated a beat before responding, “No.”

The air in the room vibrated as they considered each other. Harry slowly pushed to his feet, uncertain himself what he was going to do next. He could feel the depths of his new personality opening below him.

“I don’t like waiting, Severus.”

“I am fully cognizant of that, Harry.” Snape rubbed his forehead, and tossed his head. “On the other hand, I fear you are dashing into something without proper planning and this will give you time to do that.”

Harry turned briskly. “You only say that because I haven’t consulted you.”

“Partly that,” Snape said.

Harry noticed himself breathing hard as he paced. It certainly would be appropriate to punish Snape for failing, extenuating circumstances or not. But there were too many possible ways to punish him. Hazy memories and forbidden spells clashed in Harry’s mind, and made the skin of his wand hand burn. Before his visit to the prison, Harry might have given in to this instinct. You would suffer so, you would beg and scream for death.

Snape took a step back. Harry must have spoken aloud. With a gentle shuffle of fabric, Snape straightened his robes, lifted his chin, and considered Harry. Wary, but waiting. Harry almost smiled. Snape completely misunderstood.

“Don’t the twins have either of these things in their stores?” Harry asked.

Snape swallowed before replying. “No. That is in fact why I was slow returning. I went to ask them.”

Harry lifted his chin sharply. “Without consulting me first?”

Snape’s mouth opened a second before he actually started speaking. “They are unequivocally on your side. And even if they were not, they are hardly on the side of authority.”

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“I suppose.” Harry pondered Snape before shoving his wand away in his pocket. This made Snape’s shoulders, already hunched, fall an iota more in relief. “So, when can you have it for me?” Harry demanded, feeling good about regaining the upper hand without actually intentionally doing anything untoward.

“The earliest would be late Wednesday. Even then it will be tricky to obtain the ingredients without it being traceable.”

“So be it,” Harry grumbled.

Snape exited the room with rapid footsteps. Harry watched his robes flare as he swung through the doorway and closed it all in one smooth movement. In the wake of what could only be an escape, Harry felt oddly bad, and got berated for it.



The next morning, Harry slipped down early for breakfast. He took up the newspaper and was bored enough to read it straight through. The paper had a friendlier tone than it used to, expressing an opinion only when it thought things were “lovely” or, at worst, “sadly out of fashion”. So when he reached the piece on what strategy the Ministry had for combating organized crime, Harry’s expectations for a probing article were about nil. And indeed, the Ministry planned to: “work cooperatively with the wizarding public” and would urge the Wizengamot to “drastically increase the penalties for curse blackmail and fraud.” Mr. Weasley, when asked when the Ministry was going to get tough and how, had responded, “We are quite tough already, I believe. And as to how, I don’t want to give that away.” Harry rolled his eyes, then spotting the byline and grinned at imagining Ginny attempting to interview her father.

A generic barn owl scratching at the window drew Harry there. Harry took the letter and stared at the address, immediately suspicious of the writing. The owl had just pushed off the sill into flight when Harry, without forethought, snagged it out of the air above the garden with a net charm and dragged it, flapping and warbling, back inside. It flopped around inside the net, thumping and knocking the picture frames to the side.

Harry tore open the letter and read it rapidly. It was a demand from Ursie for Harry to meet with The Boss, the next day, at noon. Harry grabbed up a quill from the mantelpiece and scrawled, Sorry, can’t make it on the bottom of it. He freed the owl and it shook itself with an insulted air and tried to peck him when he held out the refolded letter. But after tilting its head at it, the owl snatched it away and jumped out the window, scattering feathers of all sizes.

“What was that?” Snape asked from the doorway.

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Harry shut the window. “A difficult owl. But it’s gone now.” Harry retook his seat at the table, not meeting Snape’s gaze. It should not be any of Snape’s concern if Harry chose to provoke an enemy. If Harry needed his help, he would let him know when the time came. Snape considered Harry a time before taking his seat, but he said nothing. Harry imagined he was feeling this morning that he should not push his luck, to which Harry agreed in distracted silence.

Their usual leisurely breakfast broke up early due to Arcadius growing fussy. Candide bounced him in her arms and patted his back, but he would only be consoled for seconds at a time.

“Maybe it was something I ate yesterday that’s bothering him.”

Snape took Arcadius from her and held him up to look him over, long fingers supporting his head. Arcadius rolled his fist over his eyes and gave an exceptional squealing wail. “Difficult to say what is wrong, isn’t it?”

Snape shifted to holding the baby on his arm and rocking him, then moved him to his belly and stroked his back, but the noise level stayed the same. Harry decided that perhaps the morning would be best spent taking a flight in his Animagus form.

Once aloft and bobbing in the currents off the scuttling clouds, Harry’s mind went wonderfully blank. He could pretend he had no other existence beyond this long winged creature that relished in the bitter cold wind.

Despite enjoying the sense of escape, Harry veered in and out of a broad circle over Shrewsthorpe, easily distinguished by the surrounding pattern of roads and other towns. When his mind grew weary of maintaining the Animagus spell, he simply plummeted down to the back garden when there was a break in the car traffic.

Back inside, Harry did not feel like sitting alone in his room, despite the ongoing fussing.

“Do you want to try a bit?” Candide asked, passing a kicking Arcadius over to Snape before he could extricate himself from his notebook and dripping quill.

“Certainly.” With the baby on one arm, he skillfully put his things away and sat back, trying the same things that had been tried previously.

“Maybe we should visit the Healer?” Candide suggested.

Arcadius gave an extra squawk of dismay just at that moment, face reddening more.

“If it continues into this evening, perhaps a wise idea.”

Harry fetched his Ministry rule books from his room and took up the spot opposite Snape. Unfortunately, with Arcadius’ vocal distress, Snape seemed to have forgotten Harry’s tenuous benevolence from the night before. Harry found annoyance with this, but saw no way to remind him of it.

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Just before noon, after the baby had gone back and forth between his parents countless times, with only brief periods of respite, Snape said to Candide, “You said you had a brief meeting at the office today.”

“I was thinking of Floo owling them to say I couldn’t make it.”

Snape stood and took Arcadius, even though he had just given him up. “I believe you need a break anyway. I will see to him.”

Candide’s shoulders fell. She tugged the burping cloth off her shoulder and tossed it into a nearby basket. “I feel so terribly helpless.”

“That is precisely why you should take a break.”

With a huff directed at no one in particular, Candide pushed to her feet. “I’ll be very happy when he can talk and tell us what is the matter!”

She returned from collecting up her cloak and gloves. “I won’t be half an hour.”

“You just fed him. Take your time,” Snape said with more patience than Harry thought possible.

Snape retook to his previous seat and held Arcadius against his shoulder, patting him rapidly.

“Babies get colic or something, right?” Harry asked.

“It could be that. There are potions for it, but he is too young to be administered them.”

Harry watched Snape go through the now familiar set of quieting tricks with adept movements. Snape then laid the baby on his lap, facing him. Arcadius cried even more than before. “I think a Healer may be in order in about an hour,” Snape said.

Harry stood. “Want me to try?”

Harry had not meant the offer as a kind of test, but for several seconds, it was one. But after a beat Snape raised the baby up to Harry, who had come over to take him.

Harry hitched Arcadius in the curl of his arm and walked away. Something was indeed wrong. Arcadius’ normally odd magic had an unexpected sticky depth to it. Harry’s feet came to a stop in the middle of the room as he considered the baby’s scrunched face giving vent to his distress. Harry suddenly needed to see outside, felt compelled to get a view of the world beyond the claustrophobic walls of the house. He walked into the drawing room, unaware of Snape following until he reached the window. Snape moved the desk chair out of the way and waited just behind Harry’s shoulder while Harry stared out across the road at the neighbor’s fence and deep garden.

Oddly, Harry then needed to shut his eyes.

Arcadius’ magic had woven a tangled cocoon around him. Harry’s sense of it came into focus only when he completely relaxed his mind, but his glimpses were

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clear enough. When he opened his eyes again on Arcadius' pink, scrunched face, he half expected to see it manifested there like a spider's egg casing, with his arms sticking through it. But he could only see the infant struggling – for very good reason, it turned out. Arcadius gave another cry, weaker, Harry was certain, the realization of which froze him in horror.

Arcadius' own magic was stifling him. Harry swallowed his panic; he hung there before the window, abandoned by his new instincts and floundering as a result. With no other ideas, Harry made a motion with his hand, tracing over Arcadius' head and down the front of the bear-shaped buttons on his outfit. But it had no effect. Harry closed his eyes again, so he could see the cocoon, and more importantly see his own hand in the same place. That took a little trial and error, as well as ignoring Snape speaking his name a few times in an attempt to get his attention.

Harry got it finally, his hand glowed the same way as the magical bundling and when he repeated the gesture of passing his hand over the infant, the cocoon tore away and vanished.

Arcadius gave one more cry, then after smacking his wet lips a few times, quieted.

Harry stood staring unseeing out the window, feeling post-event panic unlike any he had felt since he was a Second Year. Arcadius gave a yawn that made his tiny hands vibrate. Harry turned, still holding firm, even when Snape held out his hands to take him back.

“He's not normal, Severus,” Harry said, feeling the tingle of that strange energy as he spoke. Harry felt unburdened saying this, but also cruel, because while he had yesterday held back on punishing his old guardian, he certainly had succeeded now. Snape stared back at him, eyes unblinking.

Arcadius now felt the same as he always did, and continued to as heartbeats passed, so Harry handed him over. Snape accepted him but kept his alarmed gaze entirely on Harry.

“His magic is really strange,” Harry said, and a voice inside of him pointed out that was probably Harry's fault. “His magic was suffocating him. He's far too young to control it.”

Snape rocked the baby in his arms even though Arcadius was now in a perfectly pleasant mood. “That explains your hesitation when you were asked if he was magical at all.”

Harry nodded, disappointed that he had given that away.

Snape said nothing more for a while, just leaned back against the desk, lost in thought.

Snape spoke a few minutes later. “Old Magic is considered difficult to survive because it manifests very early, hence the Muggle stories of old crones taking infants

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from their homes. It was the only chance the child had. But that was long ago. And now we know very little about it.”

Harry wanted to feel sorry. His presence seemed very likely the cause. But there was nothing to be done about it now, so the emotion slipped away, replaced by the pleasing realization that Snape was beholden to him now on an entirely new level.

“What did you do just now . . .” Snape asked, “to relieve him?”

“Neutralized the magic winding around him.”

Snape nodded and, with his head bowed, took Arcadius back to the main hall.

When Candide returned, she stopped in the doorway to the main hall and said into the silence, “Oh, I like the sound of that.” She stepped over with her cloak still on to give the baby a tummy rub. Arcadius gurgled happily up at her. “Seems like he is over it? Was it just gas?”

Snape looked up from his writing to say, “Harry has a special touch with him, it turns out.”

Laughing, Candide said, “You should have a few of your own then, Harry.”

Harry and Snape shared a look, and Harry returned to his reading.



“Here it is,” Snape said, stepping up to Harry’s bed. Harry, expecting him and wanting to keep better tabs on the house at night, had left his door open.

Harry took the small vial, held it up to the light to see the silvery swirls inside it, then put it in the drawer of his night stand.

Snape ran some protective detection spells, then clasped his hands before himself and said, “May I enquire as to your exact plans.”

“You can ask,” Harry said, ducking back to the grimoire he had out. It was a mildly dark one, but the notes in it were amusing, full of deadpan descriptions of the bad results of dubious experiments in magic.

“I can help you, Harry,” Snape said.

“You brought me an untraceable potion. I’ve already read about it, in fact. You still have lots of good Potion books, even if you got rid of the good dark magic ones.” When Snape continued to stand there off the corner of the bed, Harry sat back against his pile of pillows. He did not have the heart to send Snape off firmly, which Snape probably knew.

Intending to sound fully exasperated, Harry said, “I’m going into the Ministry dungeon. I’m going to ask Percy some questions. That’s it.”

“What questions?”

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Harry raised a brow. "You want me to tell you what questions, precisely? I don't know them and it doesn't matter."

Snape's voice gained in patience as Harry's grew less so. "It matters a great deal. You should have the questions prepared. In such an operation, you should be in and out in a matter of minutes. This is a very effective potion, but not long lasting. Nor should it need to be. Every second you are in enemy territory is exponentially increasing the risk of getting caught there."

"I can't be caught."

"That is a very unwise attitude."

Harry looked Snape up and down. He sat rigid again and crossed his legs by pulling on his ankles. He tapped a finger on his slippered foot a moment. "You are only persisting in this because you have absolute need of me."

"I am persisting because I want you back whole and well. That has always been the case." Snape took a deep breath and raised one brow as he stared off beyond Harry. "True though that I suddenly have more to lose." He looked squarely back at Harry. "But that also means you have no reason not to trust my advice. Especially in this, where I have far more experience."

"True," Harry conceded. "Given that experience, I take it you restocked your ingredient cabinet more fully than was needed for just this?"

"Of course. Quite thoroughly." After a pause, Snape asked, "When are you thinking of going on this mission?"

"I was thinking tonight."

"You need an alibi."

"I have you."

Snape shook his head. "I am not a good alibi, Harry. Arthur frequently points out that he does not trust me."

"Clever of him to let you know that," Harry commented, sitting back against his pillows again. He thought a bit. "I'm going out with some people tomorrow night. I could slip away from there, if you really think I can do this in four minutes."

"One minute for the potion to work. Three to get answers to your questions. That's quite a bit more time than you realize. If you would like to practice on me, I am quite willing."

Harry pointed at his night stand. "Give you a bit of the potion?" he cruelly teased.

"I'd much rather not. And there is only one dose."

Frowning, Harry said, "Clever of you."

Snape bowed slightly. "It has a very short shelf life."

"Lucky of you," Harry said.

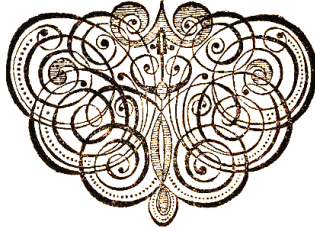
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“Luck has absolutely nothing to do with it,” Snape muttered, loud enough to be heard. “If that is all, I’m going to join Candide, who has probably been asleep for hours already.”

“Good night, Severus,” Harry said, mostly to catch Snape by surprise.

It did catch him. Snape spun at the door to Harry’s room and stared back, seeming to expect something serious to follow. He composed himself and said, “Good night, Harry.”

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“Mother,” Snape intoned as Winky walked the front door backward to open it wide.

Anita stood outside on the stoop in the early evening grey-blue light, smiling in a faintly pained manner. Winky closed the door behind her and took her cloak with a small curtsy. Anita said, “I don’t want to be in the way, so I hope things have settled down with the new little one.”

Snape nodded vaguely. “As much as they will, I expect.”

Candide sat holding a faintly fussing Arcadius near the wizard wireless, which emitted plucky guitar music. Candide shifted him in her arms to tweak the wireless quieter and met Snape’s mother halfway across the room.

“Well, look at him,” Anita said. “Isn’t he just the spitting image of you, Severus.”

Harry, up on the balcony, stopped to watch the interchange below.

“Aren’t there any photographs of you at this age, Severus?” Candide asked. “I’ve never seen any around the house.”

“No,” came Snape’s clipped reply.

Anita gave another pained smile and held out her hands. “May I hold him?”

Candide gave the baby over and Anita walked around, bouncing him lightly. Arcadius chewed on his whole hand and fussed while humming. Anita glanced around as she walked. “You have every candle in this place lit. It’s like a party in here.”

Candide gave Snape a curious glance, but he simply shrugged. Harry took this as a cue to come downstairs. He waved out the candles in the holders on the wall as he passed them. The last holder in the line, with all fresh candles, stood unlit. Harry stopped to consider at it while he put his wand away.

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Anita gave Harry an uncertain greeting as he approached the bottom of the staircase. She sat down with the baby and Harry sat across from her, where he proceeded to gauge every move and expression she made.

“How are you, Harry?” Anita asked.

Her bluntness made Harry pause in giving his answer. “Good,” he casually replied.

Tea arrived. They discussed the baby. Anita presented Arcadius with a little handmade doll. He immediately began gumming the doll’s purple conical hat.

The conversation remained in the baby realm and Harry was just considering heading back up to his room when Anita said, seemingly out of the blue, “That woman certainly has it in for you, Harry.”

“Who?” Harry asked. The others had fallen silent and turned their heads to listen. Then Harry heard it: Skeeter’s tinny voice drifting through the room, sounding adamant and like she talked through a false smile.

Snape stood and strode over to the wireless to turn the dial up.

“. . . so, thanks to my friends here at Magical Mercury and my friends out there in Wizard Wireless Land, we’ll be bringing you the news you won’t get anywhere else, every week at this time. For our inaugural show this week we’ll be doing part one of a . . . I don’t know how many parts this will end up being.” She laughed, which sounded like a coughing breeze hitting her microphone. Then she must have leaned in close, because her voice rasped. “It all depends on Mr. Potter, how many parts this special investigation has.”

“Turn it off,” Candide said.

Harry shook his head. “I want to hear what she says.” His eyes met Snape’s, who stood with his hand on the device’s knob. Snape dropped his arm and returned to his seat.

Skeeter prattled on, not coming to any kind of point beyond her thrill with getting to have a show. Anita said, “She came to talk to me.”

“Did she?” Snape asked sharply. He had sat down with his shoulders thrown back, one bent knuckle pressed to his lips.

“She pretended to want to do a special on the coven, but every third question was about you, or Harry.”

“And what did you tell her?” Snape asked, all cold strategy now.

“Nothing,” Anita insisted, but something about her tone gave away uncertainty. Harry said nothing, settling comfortably into contemplating the best next move against a deserving enemy.

From the wireless, Skeeter was saying, “Now, when you and I associate with a bad crowd we are assumed, automatically, to be part of that bad crowd. Apparently that’s not true for some. When you and I are involved in something criminal, or

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people who don't like us die and the evidence points to us, we get put in prison and we get left there . . .”

“Is she going to come to the point?” Harry asked. He felt annoyed, then angry, but that faded quickly with the soft assurance that emotion should be reserved until the moment of revenge, otherwise it would get in the way.

Candide replied, “She can't fill an hour if she comes to the point.”

Harry found Snape's gaze steady upon him. He tried hard not to appear to be reveling in coming to one mind about how important it was to make Skeeter regret knowing Harry at all.

“You have been in a spot of trouble of late,” Anita said.

Harry wanted to pledge that Skeeter would regret it, but he held back. “Skeeter is nothing,” he said instead. Which was true, or soon to be true. He felt so confident in his ability to bring regret to this enemy that he smiled pleasantly.

Across from him, Snape stiffened and said, “She is quite certain that the public eye makes her invulnerable.”

He heard the underlying message. That's what makes it a delicious challenge, Harry thought, mind churning on possibilities, enjoying simply setting the pieces on the chessboard to look them over.



“Harry invited me out for drinks tonight,” Hermione said, laughing at the notion of being free enough to just go out just like that. Vineet slipped up to the other side of the desk and stood watching her, following his usual quaintly formal approach to their visits.

Hermione considered tossing Harry's note onto the fire the way she had the one from Professor Snape the day before, because it burned her to read it and in that instant the fire seemed the only hope for eradicating its reality. Harry has gone beyond where I feared he would. That was all it had said. It was no more or less than a warning to an ally, and she still felt grateful he had skipped any specifics. A wave of self-loathing followed; she rightfully should have sought out the specifics.

She put Harry's message down on her desk, noting as she did so that his handwriting seemed better than she remembered. She compared it to her own on the papers beneath it, then to the notes from McGonagall on her lesson plans. Harry's writing better matched McGonagall's with an old-fashioned flourish to it. Hermione swallowed hard and slid the note to the side.

Vineet said, “You will not be going then?”

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Hermione shook her head, feeling helpless. "I could ask Professor McGonagall for time off, but using it to go out to a pub would be hard to justify." She also still worried that Harry might test her, and that dread made her wish to visit only when Professor Snape was present.

"Does Harry visit you?" Vineet asked. "I noticed he can do this easily."

"Rarely. Last time he came, I reminisced about our school time together and it made him antsy, so he didn't stay long." She shook her head. "Don't tell anyone that he can Apparate in here, if you would."

"You wish to protect him, but you can no longer face him?" Vineet asked.

Hermione swallowed. "I can face Harry. But . . . we used to fight Voldemort. It was all we did. I can't look at him without feeling too helpless to find words." She closed her eyes a long moment. "I'm not myself anymore either, am I?" She laughed lightly. "Going for drinks will not be of any use, but I will do something. I just don't know what."

Vineet's gaze drifted around the shelf-lined walls. "You do not have your researches out any longer." He spoke carefully, like he wished to tip-toe into this topic.

"Books are meaningless," she whispered.

Vineet stepped around the desk and stood close before her. "Owl me, so I may accompany you on this errand," he said, voice low. "I do not wish you to do so alone."

She smiled painfully. "All I can think to do is reason with him. Think that will work?"

He shook his head. "You found nothing useful in the books?"

"I could hit him over the head with one of them. They're pretty heavy. Otherwise, no."

Her smile faded and she leaned against Vineet, who put his hands around her upper arms and held her gently, not moving.

"I wish Harry would talk to me," she said out of the blue. "He doesn't trust me, or he doesn't trust something. I don't know why he wouldn't trust me. I've never given him reason not to."

"That will be the goal then. If reason is all you have to try, perhaps you should reserve yourself to listening only."

She turned her face into his shoulder so her voice was muffled. "Okay."



Harry peered around the club where he sat with his friends, more pleased to be out of the house than he expected, but only because they were out in Muggle London. Here no one listened to Wizard Wireless and saw fit to peer at him curiously as they

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had done on Diagon Alley the previous day. If they had stared at him with fear, the attention would have at least felt satisfying. Skeeter had teased her listeners for sixty whole minutes without giving anything away. For someone who sounded so deadly serious, she certainly knew how to make her business into a game. Harry had only resisted hunting her down that evening because Snape insisted that was playing into her hands. She would certainly record the encounter and use it on the next show. Imagining hearing himself giving her any credence held Harry in check, but he still chaffed at his position.

Light poured in from the tall front windows, haloing the hair and gestures of the patrons. Had Harry chosen, he would have picked a seat less in the middle of things, where he could see faces. People at nearby tables turned at Ginny's laughing voice, drawing Harry back too.

"Can you imagine? Mum looked at ME like Why haven't you had any kids yet?" Ginny mimicked her mother, hands propped on her hips, tilting her head back and forth as she spoke. Across from her, Aaron grinned and made a face. "Oh, stop it," Ginny insisted. "And get us another round since you're the one with all the gold."

Aaron slid down from his stool. Ginny leaned forward to quietly add to her friends, "In a cupboard I found a rolling bag full of gold the other day. Just sitting there!"

Ron drained his beer quickly and pushed his mug to the side, then grabbed up Lavender's and did the same. "Two more for us, too!" he called out, then gave a satisfied burp.

Ginny turned to Harry, "Is Lupin coming?"

"He said he might," Harry said, squinting in the direction of the door in the center of the outer wall. Harry had invited a nice variety of people to act as alibis, figuring the more people, the more versions of any story that would get told, if need be.

Aaron was waiting at the bar, rocking up on his toes in impatience for service. Harry leaned over to Ginny and said, "Did you learn anything about Zacundo?"

Ginny cut her sip of beer short, wiped her lips on her sleeve and ducking also said, "Yeah, I did. But not as much as I hoped. I only found clippings in her file, absolutely no interview notes, which is strange." Ginny pulled her handbag off her chair back and pulled out a slip of parchment which had tiny floating images of cut out newspaper articles crammed onto it, in all directions.

Harry turned it this way and that, squinting at it. "What kind of spell made this?"

"Oh, it's a Seer-Ox Charm, but I have too much paper on my desk already, so I really like to fit a lot on one sheet. Sorry. Can you read it okay?"

Harry, nose grazing the paper, glasses pushed tight to his face, read a bit of one article, an interview with an accompanying photograph that was reputed to show

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Zacundo's house. Harry avidly studied it. "How old is this picture?"

"Probably as old as the article since a staff photographer would have gone along. The date is hand written by the title there." When Harry lowered the paper, she found it with her finger. "It's about twelve years old."

"Oh," Harry said, disappointed. He read a bit more. "Skeeter must really like this lady. Listen to this: Madame Zacundo's exquisite taste in the finer things in life makes her an exemplary witch for all of wizardom to follow. If only more of wizardom, especially the women among us, could manage even half her level of fashionable sense, wizardom would be a more beautiful place."

Aaron had returned. "What'd I miss?"

"Harry reading the home fashion section of the newspaper," Ron said, clinking glasses with Aaron. "So, not much."

Ginny, no longer behaving secretly, said to Harry, "She's glowing because Zacundo is her aunt."

"What?" Harry blurted.

Ginny tugged the paper around in a circle and put it back under Harry's nose. "Godmother, in fact. See here."

Harry read the indicated line. "Oh Ginny, you don't know how happy this makes me." Indeed, he wanted to laugh aloud, but feared what that may sound like in his present state of mind. He folded the paper and put it away, mind churning with ideas.

"Skeeter's really got it in for you. You know she won't ever let up, right?"

"Oh, I know," Harry said. "And I plan to give her good reason for hating me, if I can at all help it. Especially now."

In his pocket, Harry's hand encountered the potion vial and he was reminded that he had plans ready to be implemented. He wondered now if maybe his questions to Percy should change.

"Going to share?" Ginny asked.

"What?" Harry asked, not really listening. "Oh, later. I have to think." Harry leaned low to drink his beer without raising the glass off the table, mind completely elsewhere.

Harry was brought back to his friends' conversation when Lupin and Pamela arrived.

"Hello there, Harry," she said, giving him a firm hug. Something in him tried to be repulsed by her Muggledom, the lacking feel of her, but he forcibly squashed it, angry at it even. Leave me be.

"What?" Pamela asked, spinning back after going to meet Lupin, who was fetching her a stool.

"I said, 'it's good to be me.' You know, having you as a cousin and all."

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“That’s odd, but . . . sweet, Harry.”

Ginny, who had overheard better, was giving him a lowered brow look, but then she shrugged and turned back to Aaron.

Harry, thinking to hide his flush of annoyance at himself, said, “I’ve got to visit the loo.” He glanced around the deep-set space that gradually changed from bar to café to restaurant all the way in the back. “If I can find it.”

Before he turned down the corridor that went behind the bar, Harry turned back to see that no one had followed. He locked himself into the second of two stalls, thinking it would make a good return location. In one motion, he tugged his invisibility cloak from his satchel, draped it around his shoulders and slipped into the Dark Plane. With it completely draped down to his feet, he slipped into the Ministry Dungeon.

Harry emerged in the very center of Percy’s cell. Percy sat on his bench, staring straight ahead, blinking at nothing. But something was not right and Harry hesitated moving or pulling the cloak clear until he could suss out what it was.

Harry turned slowly, checking around the cell. It looked the same as before. Percy seemed as brainless as before. No . . . Percy seemed . . . not magical at all, all of a sudden. Harry blinked at that, neck straining to look forward through the cloak, his eyelashes catching on the fabric.

Something else was wrong. Harry’s feet looked funny: they rippled like steam or heat was emitting from the stones themselves. And the room was rocking to and fro, more severely each disturbing swing of it.

Harry was being hit with a vaporized potion. He immediately slipped away and fell to his knees in the gritty grey underworld. He frantically tugged his vapor-soaked cloak free of his head and sucked air in as deeply as possible, clinging desperately to his tunneling vision. He needed to get to the antidote, and quickly. Harry’s heart banged against the inside of his ribs. He had been in this exact situation before, trying to navigate the Dark Plane with only part of his senses working, and last time he ended up very much not where he wanted to be.

Harry’s deathly heavy head fell forward onto his hands, crushing his fingers into the grit. His shoulders tried to follow, heaving forward like a wave had tossed him, but he pushed himself shakily back up on numb arms. Creatures were creeping toward him, bodies low, oversized eyes dripping and curious.

Harry could still Apparate, that was safe enough. Drawing in a deep breath and holding it in while the world around him spiraled unnervingly, Harry Apparated, arriving on his hands and knees in the blessedly familiar and trampled area opposite his house. A few creatures scuttled by and stopped to sniff at him and growl faintly. Harry did not care; time ticking away was a bigger enemy.

Again, Harry’s arms folded helplessly under him, making him kiss the soil. His

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stomach tried to rebel from the mismatch between his brain and the world. Refusing from the bottom of his soul to be defeated, he pushed up again, and clumsily wiped the grit off his face. Wet with saliva, it clung to his hand, prickling.

He could do this. And if he failed, if he landed somewhere else, maybe it would be somewhere better, with free Death Eaters, close by. “NO!” Harry growled. “Home. Go home.” Drawing upon the last of his reserves he forced his trembling arms and torso to hold him firm for just the long tick of a second. In that second Harry inverted himself.

Harry arrived on the floor of the hall in Shrewsthorpe. He was warm still; he had made it home. The hard floor pressing on his bones rocked still, but it was his, and he let his head rest, finally. Rapid footsteps approached and Snape crouched beside him.

“Gassed . . .” Harry said through sodden lips, vision blacking out as he spoke, then coming back in, narrow and wavering. Snape sniffed at Harry, pressed his nose into Harry’s pullover and sniffed deeper, then jumped up and dashed off. Harry, left there folded on the floor, could not be happier to see Candide standing nearby, Arcadius in her arms.

“Home,” Harry burred through numb lips.

“What happened, Harry?” Candide asked, not coming any closer. Wise of her, Harry thought.

Harry shook his head, unable to explain so much with only mumbles to do it with. Snape returned and knelt to force a cup between Harry’s teeth, which were clenched closed without his will. Immediately his head cleared, his jaw loosened.

Snape pulled the cup away and violently brushed Harry clear of grit. Then he poured the remainder of the cup over Harry’s head, rubbing it into his hair. “You are marked by the smell of the breakdown products,” Snape explained to forestall Harry batting him away. “And that certainly won’t do if you are suspected.”

Snape stood then and with authority, dragged Harry to his feet. “You’ve most likely been gone too long. Go,” he commanded.

Harry, staggering, but nearly himself already, slipped away again. He got one last glance of Snape’s intense expression following him out. Harry grabbed up his cloak where he had left it on the ground of the underworld, and used it to return to the far stall of the men’s toilet. Stashing it rapidly away, he exited into the empty room, and went to the mirror mounted around the corner from the door to check how he looked after all that.

Harry was brushing his fingers through his mussed hair and checking his clothes for grit, when the door swung hard open and Ron said, “Oh, there you are. Wondered where you went.”

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Harry glanced around the room in feigned confusion and followed Ron out, heart-beat more rapid even than the music playing over the club's sound system. Harry sauntered to the table behind Ron, face displaying boredom. Everyone looked up at him. Ron, sounding annoyed, said, "He was just fixing his hair."

"Looks great, Harry," Pamela said, face splitting open into a doubtful grin. "Wizards need to discover hair gel. I can send you a tube . . ."

"Water works fine," Harry said, mostly to contribute something because he could see the distinctive outline of a Mohawk approaching from the front. "It's hopeless anyway."

Aaron leaned closer to Pamela and said, "Harry's famous enough he doesn't need to look good. I'm working on getting to that point, myself. I'm terribly jealous of him for that."

Ginny coughed on her beer. "Really, I got the sense you liked spending three hours in front of the mirror every morning."

Tonks stopped at the table and looked them all over. Despite her business-like attitude, Harry innocently said, "Joining us?"

Tonks opened her mouth, but there was a delay in her speaking. She clearly had not expected to find him there. Lying poorly, she said, "Yeah, I am. I could use a pint." And went up to the bar. Despite burying herself two people deep Harry could still see her tug the slate out of her pocket. He looked away just as Tonks glanced back at the table.

Thirsty, Harry drank his beer down while the others talked. Someone pressed a fresh beer into his hands, for which he was grateful. Harry sipped frequently to watch Tonks over the rim of his glass. She was trying to do the same thing to him and had to look away.

When Tonks leaned over to talk to Pamela, Harry leaned over to Ginny, "I have an idea," he said, but his voice slurred. He sat upright and blinked into the brightness from the windows. He felt melted, and disconnected, and really quite good.

"Harry, how many have you had?" Ginny asked with a laugh.

Harry stared into his half-full glass. "I lost it. But I didn't have lunch. That's probably it."

Tonks was watching him more keenly than Harry liked. With a jolt he worried that the residual of the gas in the Dungeon was mixing with the alcohol.

"Why didn't you have lunch?" Ginny asked. "You have a house-elf to make it."

Harry shook his head, and pushed his glass away. "I wasn't hungry," he said, using great willpower to make his voice normal. "I'm not hungry much lately."

Ginny frowned at him. "That's not a good sign, Harry." To Aaron, she said, "Get Harry a basket of chips."

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Aaron stood, gave a crisp bow like a servant and went off. "He's such a nut," Ginny said, sounding half affectionate, half tired.

Harry stared at his beer glass, at the blonde liquid streaked with lacy bubbles. He pulled it close again and took another sip. The resulting wash of relaxed disassociation made him feel quite good. He sat there seeing out of his own eyes, but not feeling much of his own body. He felt alone; he missed having lots of shadows close.

Aaron returned with chips. They were pushed over in front of Harry, but everyone helped themselves. Aaron leaned over to Tonks to ask her something. Tonks took a swig of her beer and replied, hand shading her mouth. Harry strained to hear over the general hubbub, but could not. He pretended to listen to Pamela and Lupin's easy going conversation.

Beside him, Ginny stiffened. Her eyes were fixed on Aaron, making Harry believe she had overheard some of the discussion.

Tonks pulled her slate from her pocket and frowned at it. She slid off her seat and abandoned her fresh drink. "I have to go."

An hour later, the rest of the party began finishing drinks and making noises about unfinished things.

"Someone should escort Harry home," Lupin said, eyes glittering with a smile.

"I will," Ginny said.

"Want me to come along?" Aaron asked, sliding over to them.

Harry's feet felt like dead weights. He shuffled out onto the pavement behind Ginny, sucking in the cold wind as a needed refresher. Aaron took Harry's arm like an escort, but since Harry could only half feel his body, this did not matter.

When they reached the nearby alleyway, Harry shook himself loose, suddenly angry. Ginny cut off any remarks Aaron could make with: "I'll see Harry home and catch up with you."

Aaron shrugged, looked Harry up and down, and Disapparated.

Ginny said to Harry, apparently ignoring the dark mood that he could feel reshaping his face, "I can side-along you, if you like."

"I can make it home, Ginny. I've made it home much worse than this."

Ginny dropped her offered hand. "Are you drinking too much, Harry?"

"No. I rarely drink at all."

She frowned more. "If you're certain you can make it. I'll follow, but I'm going to make sure you get there whether you like it or not."

Harry Disapparated to the entryway and arrived with no sense of up and down, so he fell against the wall. A knock sounded at the door just as Snape came into view from the main hall.

Harry stumbled to the door to let Ginny inside.

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“See, I’m here.” Harry said, demonstrating that his arms were working by waving them. He must look silly, so he stopped.

“Is the baby awake?” Ginny eagerly asked.

“He is,” Snape answered from the glowing opening to the rest of the house.

Harry’s feet bumbled him inside, and Snape caught him by the arm. “How much did you have to drink?”

“I was going to ask if that stuff you gave me made drink much stronger?” Harry countered, annoyed.

Snape released him. “It should not.” Speaking low, directly into Harry’s ear, he said, “The vial I gave you for Percy would, however.”

Harry felt his pockets and came up with the vial, still intact. Disappointed at this lack of explanation, he pocketed it again and stepped uneasily to the couch.

“Feeling better, Harry?” Ginny asked.

Harry nodded and scrubbed his face with his hands. As odd as he felt all he wanted was more to drink. He watched Ginny bouncing Arcadius in his wire bassinet and making all the same noises other adults did when they came in contact with him.

Ginny prompted Harry, “At the club, you said you had an idea?”

“I did. Yeah.” Harry closed his eyes and tipped his head back. Something bumped his shoulder. Snape was holding out a tumbler of pink stuff. Harry stared at it without moving.

“Don’t want it?”

“I need the room checked for bugs. And I’d prefer something more to drink.”

Snape sat down on the other end of the same couch. “That’s not like you, Harry.” Snape lifted his arm and ran their now very well-practiced spells.

Harry suddenly remembered who it was like. It was like Belinda. Harry held his hand out for the tumbler and drank it down. Before he swallowed the last sip, his head cleared like a veil being pulled aside by a breeze. Harry stared at the moon sliver of pearly pink in the bottom of the tumbler and considered that dark servants could be rather a hassle. But the thought of releasing Belinda made his chest and hands clench. Harry must have frozen in thought because he started when Snape tugged the glass from his fingers and set it aside.

“What idea did you have?” Ginny asked again, sounding like one trying mask her curiosity with distracted boredom.

Harry rubbed his eyes and stretched his back, pleasantly remembering his plans, which unrolled before him invitingly. “I want you to invite Madame Zacundo out for an interview. Dinner, someplace nice. Tell her you want to write a nice article for the newspaper because you are just learning and want to practice easy stories and

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you saw in the clippings file . . . is that what you call it . . . you saw that she had not had an interview in a few years. Tell her she can bring a friend if she likes.”

Ginny peered at him with no change in expression. “All right.”

Harry went on, his audience still and attentive. “I expect she will invite Skeeter along.” Harry sat forward. “I’ll try to get Bones to go along. Belinda might help with that.”

Ginny’s eyes widened. “You are saying you can get me an interview with the Minister of Magic?”

“Certainly. Why not?”

Ginny bounced up and came over to him. “Thank you, Harry.” She bounced on her toes and bit her lips. “Can I tell Zacundo that the Minister is coming along, you know, in case she doesn’t take the bait?”

“Sure,” Harry said.

“Should I tell her you are going to be there?”

“No. Absolutely not. That would be trouble.”

Methodically, she nodded, “Okay.”

Harry stood, which put him into Ginny’s hands, because she was standing right over him. He gave her a tug. “I want to ask you one more thing in private.”

In the library, Harry dropped his voice despite spell-protecting the room. “What did Aaron ask Tonks at the club?”

Ginny shook her head, gaze distant. “I don’t know.”

“You reacted like you heard,” Harry pressed.

“Oh, now I know what you mean. Yeah, Aaron on the way over was on about something.”

“What exactly?” Harry said, grabbing her shoulder hard, but instantly releasing it to just a light touch. He longed to force the words out of her.

“It’s sorta silly, Harry. Aaron was probably joking with me.”

“Still.”

She laughed uncomfortably and made an odd face. “Aaron said Tonks and Rodgers went around the Ministry running spells on everyone today. He accused them of looking for a Dark Mark on everyone.”

Harry made a face that conveyed equal disbelief. “Strange. Did you hear anything else?”

“I’ll ask Aaron, but he might just keep joking around.” She peered up at Harry. “So, when shall I schedule this interview for? Or should I wait to see when the Minister of Magic is free?”

Harry, thinking that Belinda would need to accomplish half of his plan, and that she may have been caught up in the Dark Mark detection, said, “I’ll send you an

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owl.”

After Ginny departed, Harry went to Belinda’s flat. Belinda was passed out on the couch with an empty bottle tipped over just below her limp hand. Harry filled a glass with water from the sink and set it down on the floor. He pulled a chair over beside the couch and took from his pocket the bottle of pink stuff he had brought along.

Patting Belinda’s sagging face roused her enough to get the potion into her. Moments later she sat up, squinting into the light.

“Drink this.” Harry held up the water. When it was gone, Harry asked, “What’s the matter?”

Voice hoarse, she said, “They came around today.”

When she stopped there, Harry said, “The Aurors?”

Belinda nodded. “They were running spells on everyone, but wouldn’t say why. But they were looking for Dark Marks. I know it because it made it burn.” Her distant gaze narrowed in on Harry. “How did they know?”

“I actually don’t know,” Harry said, hating saying that with all his heart. He rubbed his lips and chin in thought. “I don’t know. Maybe it was simply a strange precaution.”

“They’ve never done that before, even back when they should have been doing it weekly.”

Harry pushed to his feet. “Figures.” He refilled the glass and brought it back. “But you are here instead of the Dungeon.” With that Harry snapped from wholly confident to fearing a trap. He ran a few spells on the room, and turned in a circle, ready for the worst.

Between gulps of water, Belinda said, “They did not check my ankle, needless to say.”

Harry stepped over to her and grabbed the water away, sloshing it. “Look at me and repeat that,” he insisted.

She blinked at him in surprise.

“Repeat it,” Harry spat.

“Um, they didn’t check my ankle. So they found nothing.”

Harry saw in her memory that this was true. Or as true as she understood it. Harry paced. Everything suddenly felt incredibly tenuous. But moving his plans along would test Belinda’s position at the same time. “Can you invite Minister Bones out for dinner?”

“With you?”

“No. With a young reporter and one of the stalwarts of witch home fashion, Madame Zacundo.”

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“Minister goes out for dinners like that all the time. She’d love it.”

“Owl me to let me know what day will work.” He stepped toward the center of the floor. “Oh, and no more drink.”

“What?”

Harry lifted a hand to point steadily between her eyes, then dropped his hand as soon as he realized he was doing that. “I’m deadly serious. I catch you again in that state you were just in, you will feel pain like you never imagined pain could be.”

“Really?” she sounded tired and mocking.

Harry pulled his wand. “Want to try a Cruciatu*s* Curse now?”

Belinda flinched and her eyes brightened with fearful awareness. “NO. I don’t. Go away.”

He aimed his wand. “Did you hear me? Not. Again.”

She was apparently appalled enough by the command to shake off even this threat. “What am I supposed to do with myself?”

Harry dropped his wand hand in disgust. “That’s not my problem. Read a book. Go for a broom flight. Join a Quidditch Team. I don’t care what.” He slipped away and left her.



When Tonks returned to the Auror’s office from the club she immediately sank into her desk chair.

“You were gone a while,” Rogan said. “Thought you may be onto something.”

“I messaged in,” Tonks wearily pointed out.

Rodgers swept into the room, causing the Autoquill in the holder by the logbook to stand at attention. “Anything?”

Tonks shook her head. “Harry was there. Mostly himself. He must have been drinking a while.”

Rodgers fell still. “Drunk or potioned?”

“Definitely drunk. Definitely not knocked cold stone stiff and contorted by Discombobulate Cloud.”

Rodgers said, “Well, the cell was empty when I got there. Maybe it was a false alarm. Or a rat.”

“A rat would have been knocked dead by that much aerosol potion. I really loaded it up.” She rubbed her hair around. “Speaking of knocked dead, I wish I had finished my beer.”

“Why don’t you do that? You can take a break now and then, you know,” Rodgers scolded.

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Harry sat in his room, writing out a letter to Ginny. Belinda had owed to say the Minister would happily go to dinner with Madame Zacundo on the following Tuesday. Harry felt the cords in his forearms tense at the delay. Waiting for events to play out along their own course felt insulting and the sense of insult tried to shift to a black anger, but he assuaged it by imagining the moment of revenge.

His owl off, Harry read again through the clippings on Margarite Zacundo. She kept a second house in Spain, where she lived year-round years ago. She returned to the UK wealthy, but none of the articles indicated how she came into the money.

Downstairs, Harry heard voices and the outside door shut. He heard Snape say, "He's upstairs in his room," and moments later Tonks appeared in the doorway.

"Wotcher, Harry," she said, voice tinged with tired sadness. "It's the end of the week and you hadn't checked in at the office so I came 'round to see if you were coming in." Her eyes searched his as she spoke.

"I'm still thinking about it," Harry said, voice hard. "I'll let you know what I decide."

"You're missed around the Ministry, Harry." When he did not respond to this she shifted her weight to her other foot and said, "Why don't you just come in just to say hello to everyone? You didn't come out for drinks with us last night and everyone wondered what you were up to."

Harry did not want to tell her that he felt it best to help guard the house now. "I had other things to do."

She scuffed her pointed toe against the floor and frowned. "Next week? Come in next week, then. Pick a day, so I can tell Rodgers."

"I said I'd let you know," Harry repeated.

Tonks scrubbed her cheek with her palm and said, "Is there anything you need from us, Harry? Arthur seems willing to do anything at all. You just have to ask."

Harry rubbed his hands together then clasped them, a gesture he had never before done. "I can't think of anything right now."

"All right, Harry." Tonks ducked her head and departed.

Tonks' visit left Harry even more restless. He longed to go somewhere, preferably another Plane where there were lots of local Death Eaters. If he went to visit the other Ginny, he could practice blocks and attacks for hours, which he itched to do. Harry tossed his book, Suspicious Person Interview Protocols, aside and sat back on his bed with his arms crossed. He wanted to do whatever he pleased, but his duty here was greater. By not even warning Snape of his insulting owl to The Boss, Harry really must stay home.

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Harry put his Auror book aside and pulled out the strangest of the dark magic ones from under the bed. He positioned it before his crossed legs and opened it at random. The page border slithered with withered vines and curled leaves like shriveled old hands. For a second, the gibberish words formed a sentence. Death, being forever . . . was all Harry caught of it, but when he focused his eyes on the text, it returned to chaotic meaninglessness. Harry stared at the border again, tracing his eye around the woodcut, picking out the shrunken red fruit hanging at regular intervals. A centipede slipped along the vine, tiny hooked feet rippling rhythmically. The vine shuddered as it passed on its endless path around the border of the page.

Life, being a flicker, and death, being forever, must be the enemy against which all struggles of life are directed.

True, Harry's instincts said in an I-told-you-so sort of fashion. Harry closed the book and gave it a shove far back under his bed.

The door downstairs suffered another knock. Harry stood this time, bored enough to go see who it was. Hermione was just coming into the main hall, Vineet behind her, face neutral, eyes inscrutable.

"I needed a break from Hogwarts. Hope you don't mind a visit, Harry."

Harry shook his head. He expected her to settle in near the baby like everyone else did, but as she packed her hat away in her cloak pocket, she said, "We don't want to be in the way. Want to go up to your room?"

"You aren't intruding at all," Candide said.

With a dutiful air, Hermione took a seat, sitting upright on the edge of the couch. Snape crossed behind where they sat, and Harry saw Candide's eyes come up to follow him, blinking like something had been communicated.

Candide picked Arcadius up and said, "I'm not going to be up much longer, anyway."

Harry glanced behind at Snape, who came and took Arcadius for a walk around the room like he would if he were fussing rather than yawning and tipping his head into sleep.

"How is the baby?" Hermione asked.

"Good," Candide replied with a round smile. "Growing like a cauldron cake."

Everyone sat in silence. Harry looked around at everyone in turn before saying, "Maybe we should go up to my room."

Harry only had one chair, which Vineet took. Hermione sat on the edge of the bed, and Harry sat back against the headboard. The arrangement reminded Harry of another time, which made his hand fidget.

"How are you doing, Harry?" Hermione asked.

Harry brought his gaze over to her and stared at her.

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“Did Tonks send you?” Harry asked.

Hermione’s eyes registered confusion. “No. I just . . . wanted to talk.” She seemed to think of an idea. “After Skeeter’s wizard wireless show, you know.” She stumbled over her words. “We’re all on your side, you know. She’s a bitter old hag,” she added with little enthusiasm.

Harry smiled faintly. “She’s going down.”

“You’re not going to do anything you’ll later regret, are you?”

“Worried about Skeeter?” Harry challenged her. “This from someone who trapped her in an unbreakable glass jar.”

“I probably shouldn’t have done that, actually,” Hermione said with a blush.

Harry nodded, feeling this confirmed something.

“What are you planning?” Hermione asked.

“I don’t think it best to tell you,” Harry replied.

Hermione frowned. She tossed her hair to one side and smoothed the bedspread with one hand. “So what else are you working on other than revenge against Skeeter? How do you keep from getting bored?”

“I’m gathering my minions together,” Harry said, smiling, watching her reaction with great care. Hermione’s face flickered with discomfort but she masked it well. Harry let her hang there before saying, “I’ve been reading a lot. You should be happy to hear that.”

“Depends on what you’re reading, Harry,” she said, chummily uncomfortable.

Harry crawled to the edge of the bed and dragged the strange book back out. He opened it at random and with some effort and mussing of the bedcover, turned it toward her. “Can you read that?” he asked.

Hermione rubbed her eyes and backed her head up. “That hurts my eyes. The letters are jumping all over. What is that?”

“Try studying the page border and reading the text without looking at it,” Harry suggested.

Vineet came over and stood leaning over Hermione, head tilted with interest.

Hermione made a face while she scanned the woodcut of a dune field. The dune tops blew gently off to reveal and rebury skulls and ruins beneath the sands. “What a strange book.”

“What does it say?” Harry asked.

“Oh.” Hermione glanced back at the text and flinched away. Shook her head, and studied the border again. “Wait. Ugh.” She repeated the routine again. “Don’t look at it, Hermione,” she chanted at herself.

Hermione fell into stillness. Then in a sudden motion she flipped the book to the beginning, flipped through the first few pages, then the inside of each cover.

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“What is it?” Vineet asked.

“What is this book?” Hermione demanded, all bundled up energy now. “Where did you get this, Harry?”

“I borrowed it from the Restricted Vault in London.”

“Without checking it out, officially, I assume,” Hermione said.

“Why bother?” Harry said. “It was dusty. No one has read it in a century according to the circulation register.” He watched her face as she was tempted to turn back to one of the pages. “What did it say?”

Hermione sat with her hand gripping the chunk of pages, suspended mid-flip back to where it had been open. “It was like a prophecy.”

“What did it say?” Harry asked, not demanding, more seductive.

“It said . . . it was hopeless. Everyone is too weak. Um . . .” She trailed off.

Vineet put a hand on her shoulder. “That does not resemble a prophecy.”

“Um, no I guess it doesn’t.” She stood up. But then sat back down again, flustered.

There was more to the writing, Harry was certain. “Does seem quite personal what it says. Doesn’t it?” Harry asked.

“Exactly,” she said, relieved a little. “What does it say to you?”

Harry closed the book and set it back under the bed. “It speaks of the finality of death.”

She laughed uncertainly. “And the author is probably now beyond the veil thinking, why the heck did I write that.”

“I don’t think the author wrote anything,” Harry said, thoughts loosening. “I think Time itself wrote that book.”

After a pause, Vineet said, “That is a very strange thing to say.”

Hermione held up a hand as if to forestall Vineet saying more. Harry said, “I didn’t mean that some wizard or witch wasn’t involved. But, what you see in it, it isn’t their fault.”

“The magic has probably changed too,” Hermione said, gesturing at where the book had been put out of sight.

After another silence, Hermione bent her knee and pulled her foot close by the ankle. “Do you need any help, Harry?”

“Why does everyone assume I need help?” Harry asked sharply.

Hermione sounded on far firmer ground now. “Because a lot has happened to you. You used to let us help with everything.”

“I need help putting up some Apparition barriers around a Muggle restaurant.” Harry raised his eyes to Vineet expectantly.

Vineet nodded, acquiescing in his manner.

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“Any chance you’ll tell us your plans? We can keep a secret, Harry.”

“You don’t need to know,” Harry said, dismissing the topic with that.

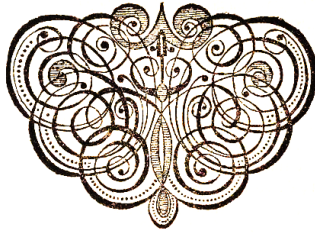
As they departed, Hermione stepped closer to Harry and said, “I’ve been your friend a long time, Harry.”

“And?” Harry prompted. She would not make a good servant. His instinct rebelled in her presence, in fact, rattled him to send her off.

Hermione waited, taking in his eyes, before frowning despite obviously trying not to. “Just remember that, okay?”

“I’m very aware of who my friends are right now, Hermione,” Harry said. To Vineet, he said, “I’ll owl you with the time and place.”

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Vineet escorted Hermione back to Hogwarts using the Floo Node in the Headmistress' Tower. The swan shaped music box on the desk turned in silence; McGonagall was apparently still out of her office. Vineet started to speak, but Hermione shushed him, gesturing at the sleeping paintings.

Hermione's effort to sneak out of the room failed when Dumbledore's voice said, "Ms. Granger, always good to see your dear self."

Hermione backed up a few steps from the open door. "Professor," she said, then wished wholeheartedly that his was the only painting in the room so she could spill out every worry crowding her chest, just on the chance it would ease it. She studied the smiling bearded face. Maybe they had overlooked the painting's advice.

Dumbledore interrupted Hermione's wondering what would happen if she took the painting down from the wall by saying. "Ah, and Ms. Granger's friend. I forget your name, young man."

"What will happen if I take you off the wall?" Hermione asked.

Dumbledore blinked. "Nothing. I cannot leave the castle, I expect, but-"

Hermione grabbed up the painting and found it heavier than expected. Vineet helped her catch it before it smashed to the floor.

"Are you certain of this?" Vineet asked.

"Yes. Let's go."

Vineet pulled the cover off another painting and draped it over the one of Dumbledore. Hermione clumsily swung it on one corner, trying to hide it behind her back as the other paintings snorted and squinted at them, waking up. Vineet stepped back

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and glanced around, finally pulling another cloth-draped painting off a low corner of the side wall and replacing it into the newly vacated space in the center of the larger side wall.

Down in Hermione's office, she set the painting on a chair and pulled the cover aside.

"Ah, a new view. Thank you so much," he said. "How is your teaching going, Ms. Granger?"

"Never mind that," Hermione said, putting her hands on her thighs to lean down. "We don't know what to do with Harry."

The painting stroked his beard with fidgeting fingers. "What is happening with Harry?"

Hermione frowned and closed her eyes. Systematic sounding, she said, "We think he's becoming Voldemort. You know how he always used to see what Voldemort saw, when Voldemort wanted him to? They've always been connected somehow. But all the rest of Voldemort is gone, or not gone really, it's finding its way into Harry somehow."

"Slow down a bit my dear young lady. I don't have much of a memory for anything after this painting was made. Start from the beginning."

Vineet pulled a chair over for Hermione to sit in. She sat right before the painting, knees bumping the other chair, and said, "Voldemort couldn't be killed because of the horcruxes he created, did you know that?"

Dumbledore hesitated. "I suspected something of the sort years ago, yes."

"So, this wizard, Merton, he was trying to make better magical weapons, like magical machine guns, he came into these horcruxes and he put them into Gilderoy Lockhart."

"That would serve Tom right," Dumbledore said.

"Yeah, well, there wasn't much left of Lockhart anyway. Harry got rid of Voldemort's power by pulling all his magic out and then . . ." She looked up at Vineet. "You were there."

Looking only at Hermione, he said, "Harry threw the sphere of magic into that other place. The netherworld."

"Yeah, and Harry goes through there all the time." She closed her eyes, counting through events in her head. "Yeah." She turned back to Dumbledore. "So, Harry's been picking up more of Voldemort since that happened, and now he's not himself any longer. He's been doing things he really shouldn't be doing. Even back when Lockhart was gaining power, we were losing Harry. Professor Snape believes Harry's adult mind is a better conduit for Voldemort to use him."

"May I ask what Harry has been doing, exactly?"

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Hermione replied, "I don't know! I didn't ask exactly. Professor Snape just said Harry was beyond where he feared he might go. That's all." She exhaled. "I admit I can't stand to think about it anymore."

Dumbledore stroked the long tails of his mustache. "You need to destroy this part of Voldemort and leave Harry intact."

"We thought of that. There isn't really any good way of destroying Voldemort AND Harry and still be absolutely certain we succeeded let alone good ways of doing it and saving Harry." She clenched her fists and put them on her head.

Dumbledore spoke more quietly. "Has it occurred to you that Harry may prefer to be spared this change?"

"Yes, of course it has." She blinked back the heat in her eyes. "We're not giving up on him that easily. He didn't give up on the rest of us all those years, despite everything he needed to do."

Dumbledore made a thoughtful noise. "All of the horcruxes are gone, you say? Not a single one remains?"

"Harry himself thought they were all gone, yes."

"Unfortunate. I can think of one possible solution, but we would need one of them still around to try it."

Hermione combed her hair back with her fingers and bent over her knees. Sitting up, she said, "I've thought about this so many hours. . ."

"Have Harry come talk to me," Dumbledore said.

"I don't know if he'll agree."

"Try."

Hermione sniffled. "Will you remember?"

"For a little while, yes," he reassured her. "How is Severus taking this?"

"He's acting like Harry's servant," she criticized.

"Ah. I would imagine he is. He survived a long time in Voldemort's good graces."

Stubbornly, Hermione said, "I don't like it."

Dumbledore leaned back and straightened his velvet robe. "Does Harry still trust you, then?"

"No."

The old wizard nodded. "I think Severus knows how best to handle himself. I also expect that Severus is fully prepared to do what needs to be done if it comes to that. He has changed significantly, I expect, but not in that particular way."

Hermione sniffled again. "He wouldn't tell me if he was. He'd be afraid I'd give it away. But it's not going to come to that," she insisted, jaw tight. "Don't you have any other ideas?"

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“Precipitate a crisis of conscience in Harry. See who wins. Harry’s inherent goodness never let me down.”

“How do we do that?”

“Well, to do so most directly, you and Mr. Weasley, his two oldest and dearest friends, should find out specifically what Harry’s been doing and confront him with it. Tell him how much it hurts you to see what is happening to him. Remind him that his actions matter to many people who care dearly about him. Do this all as lovingly as possible. Harry may not care about others he is hurting, but I suspect he still remembers caring for you.” Dumbledore took off his spectacles and wiped them on his beard before putting them back on. “Better yet, have the three of you here so I can help with this.”

Hermione looked around the bookshelves, not seeing the spines, just the colors. “Harry is so calculating now. I think he’d just ignore what we say to him if it didn’t suit him.”

“It is still worth a try. Barring it working, I think you need to know where you are, or more precisely, where he is.”

Hermione fished for an excuse. “I don’t want to lose his friendship. He needs that.”

“You don’t have it now. Of if you do, it’s not working to your advantage.”

Hermione sat straight and blinked away the heat in her eyes. “All right. I’ll get him here if at all possible. But we have to plan this carefully.” She looked over the carved gilt frame of the portrait. “We better return you.”



Harry sat on his bed, using the steady light from his bedside lamp to read through a book on blocks that he already knew well, just to dwell on how easy they were now. The blocks in the last chapter had been the most difficult to master but they were almost too esoteric to be useful. The very last one was specifically for stone tipped arrows. Maybe it would also work against a miniature rockslide, Harry dismissively thought.

Harry’s thoughts wandered back to the strange book under the bed. He resisted pulling it out because he felt goaded by it, but he did wonder if it would say something different this time. That curiosity almost overcame his peevishness with it and its long dead creator.

He unfolded the sheet of articles about Zacundo, which had been sticking out from the back of his blocking book. Tomorrow he would have revenge. The expectation of

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this rose up from his lower middle, spread through his chest and made his arms feel wobbly. He could barely stand the wait.

A soft knock sounded on the door. Harry tugged his wand from under his pillow and waved it open.

“You are still awake,” Snape said. Behind him the main hall stood in stillness, lit mutely by a single candle in the chandelier.

“I can’t sleep. I can’t wait for tomorrow.”

“It will come faster if you sleep,” Snape pointed out.

“I’m not ten, Severus.”

Snape lowered his head fractionally. “I did not intend to imply that. Nevertheless, the suggestion is still valid.”

Harry studied him, allowing his conflicting emotions to feed on Snape’s unwavering inscrutability.

“You insist you require no help, but I am still here to offer it, yet again.”

Harry did not reply, just watched him. The lamplight accentuated the lines on Snape’s face, and cast spiked shadows behind the curtain of his hair. Harry wished again that he was still a servant. He did not think Snape would stand for becoming one again, and that left only bitter regret at the change in circumstance.

Snape opened his mouth to speak, apparently not giving in under the scrutiny, when a strange sound came from out in the hall, a cracking sound. Not loud, but wholly unfamiliar.

Snape reached for his wand, held it aside while listening, then ran the detection spell. It sizzled blue and safe. With an audible exhalation he slipped his wand back away and lightly shook his head.

The sound came again, louder this time, like rocks striking each other. Then the main hall behind Snape lit up, flashed, and the sound split the air again, and again.

Harry was up off the bed. Snape turned to look into the hall where a flashing beam was passing slowly across the hall, sending the posts on the staircase railing flying.

“Take care of Candide,” Harry ordered. “I’ve got this.”

Harry slipped away and reappeared with his back against the neighbor’s more distant garden wall. Figures shifted along the wall shared between their houses, working around a glowing gap in the stones. Harry blasted the center knot of them, smashing them against the crumbling stones and mortar. He then squelched a curse that came his way from the corner of the garden, from an unseen source, someone most likely overseeing things from under a cloak.

Shivering in his pyjamas despite the heat of excitement, Harry ran to his left, sending Binding Ivy and Blasting Curses at the scrambling figures as he went. The

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gritty snow ground into his bare feet like crushed glass. He stopped at a stone birdbath and slipped away just as it was pulverized. He reappeared beyond the post holding up the neighbor's back porch, brushing off the stinging gravel from his cold-raw chest. Lights came on inside the neighbor's house which illuminated one remaining upright figure at the base of the far wall, in the shrubbery, trying to drag another figure away.

Harry cast a Panel Barrier over the back wall of the neighbor's house, to keep them in and to help keep spells out. He minced uncertainly on his feet, which had become numb stumps. Figures clambering over the back wall of his own house drew Harry's aim that way, but they were out of sight already, down inside his own back garden. Harry put his wand away and, pained to the core of his bones by the cold, transformed into his Animagus form. His clumsy running steps became galloping strides just as he hit the figure giving up on rescuing his comrade. Harry's claws scooped him up, screaming and thrashing, and dropped him atop the others battling magically through a hole in the library wall. Spells scattered and flashed, knocking heavy stones into flight, crumbling part of the garden wall.

A figure scrambled toward this new opening. Harry turned in a tight circle, scooped him up, and dropped him on his friends from an even greater height. Blood filled Harry's animal nostrils and he gave a cry that startled the lead hooded figure dueling with someone inside the house. The next spell from inside slammed this wizard into the wall where he arched back and fell limp in an odd backbend.

Harry landed on the garden wall and let out another cry. A wand raised up at him. Harry barely glimpsed wild, white rimmed eyes before he swatted wand, arm, and face aside.

Only one figure still moved within the back garden. The figure stumbled on his robes, fell, got up, went a few more steps, stumbled again, stood, then bent and felt around among the brambles with frantic movements, as if he had dropped his wand.

Harry jumped more than flew, landing with his full weight, claws extended. The form beneath him resisted an instant before collapsing into a disjointed heap. A cacaphony of Apparition raised Harry's head from examining his prey. Not liking this confined low spot, Harry shoved off hard, feeling the flesh beneath his claws give more as he did so, like meat, his muscles sang happily, relishing the sensation. Ignoring the wondrous odor of carnage with the kind of practice he had been getting lately against other new instincts, Harry flapped up to the roof peak to survey the whole scene.

Robed figures came in from every direction, shouting instructions to each other. Harry sniffed the Ministry drifting on the wind. A handful of figures ran outward from the neighbor's garden, two vanished with the pop of Apparition, two that were limping were struck down. A last one stopped in the road and backed up, dropping

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his wand and putting his hands up.

Newly offended by the entire attack, Harry gave another animal cry, wings flapping. One of two figures apprehending the figure in the street tossed back her hood. “Harry!” Tonks shouted, half in surprise, half in a tone of self-defense.

The Ministry was in the house. Harry could hear their voices bouncing around inside the hall. The voices emerged into the back garden. Harry turned his neck to look down that way, knocking slate free of the roof peak. The stones skidded down and into the garden where half a dozen new figures had poured in, picking through the fallen. A chorus of Apparition pops sounded and the scent of hot blood eased.

Harry turned back to the road, forced to bring his body around again to do so. He used his keen eyesight and his perch to scan every surrounding garden, every alley between the houses for any movement.

“Are you coming down, Harry?” Tonks asked. She stood alone now, distinctive with her bright hair. She cast an ax shaped shadow in the road from the streetlamp.

Harry flapped his wings in place and lowered his head and sniffed in rapid bursts, drawing in sweet treads of panic and adrenaline. He wanted to sink his claws into something. He whined for lack of an obvious future tangle of meat.

Another figure joined Tonks and looked up at him. Mr. Weasley shook his hood neat around his neck and called up, “We’re clearing the area, Harry.”

Harry’s chest fluttered with a low growl and he had to lick his chops to catch the saliva this generated. Another two figures joined the group. Snape peered up with his usual falsely serene expression of general interest. Mr. Weasley leaned close to say something to him, and Snape shook his head and glanced around the road, wand held at ready.

The four moved along to stand before the neighbor’s house. The neighbors were congregating in their doorway and the Aurors and Reversal were urging them and others back inside. In the calm cold air, the voices bounced around the faces of the houses.

Something caught the corner of Harry’s keen vision. He turned and stretched to his full height while keeping three paws on the roof peak, scanning the road through the village. Nothing appeared there. Purely on recent habit, he turned his head away slightly from the road to look over the rooftops and the grey-brown haze of bare tree tops rising between them.

There it was again, a ripple like heat waves, closer this time. Harry gave a bark and turned his head sharply down the road to draw attention that way. The Ministry personnel nearby stopped in place and looked where Harry indicated.

“What is it?” Tonks asked up at Harry when nothing became apparent.

The ripples, which Harry could only see from the corner of his eye, rose silently

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up the rise from the train station and stopped opposite the house. Wands came up, but no one moved. A hiss like bus brakes sounded and light arced on the tarmac as if an invisible door had opened. A portly figure in a three-piece suit stepped into view and peered around him. Harry smelled The Boss and gave a growl, teeth bared.

The Boss looked sharply up and stared at him. Tiles fell from under Harry's feet as he prepared to launch, but spells shot out just then but merely set alight a large oblong dome around the man and whatever invisible vehicle stood behind him. The spells rebounded directly at the caster, sending Aurors to the ground, in bindings and prison boxes and in Rogan's case, blasted backwards into a hedge.

Harry aborted his leap and gave a snapping snarl. The Boss stood stunned a moment longer, staring at Harry, seemingly uncaring about the spell attack. Harry leaped.

The Boss leapt back as well, into the slice of invisible doorway, which pressed closed like a bus door, and accompanied by a squeal of tires, the ripples slipped away like water running downhill.

"Well, that was cheeky!" Tonks complained, getting help from Mr. Weasley to stand up. Harry did not even break stride as he reached the ground. He flapped madly, claws scrapping at the tarmac, and took off in the direction the bus had gone.

"Brooms!" Harry heard Mr. Weasley's voice echoing between the houses as he banked to follow the road. He pumped his wings harder when he caught a glimmer of something moving far ahead, just passing under a tree-shrouded streetlight.

Harry flew like a demon, wings settling down from ineffective fluttering into regular beats against the airstream, which slithered over his fur and filled his broad lungs with great heaving breaths.

"Harry!" A figure on broomstick called out. It was Kerry Ann.

Another two figures came up beside: Rodgers and Aaron.

"Do you still see it?" Rodgers asked, demanded really.

Harry nodded his great head and ducked it again to flap faster, banking again when the road made another sweeping turn. Houses, utility poles, and pine trees flew past randomly, then in long series. Streetlights rushed by, glaring in his eyes.

A village split the road into webs of meandering new roads. Harry banked and circled and caught sight of the ripples again along the major route. Each time this happened, the bus slipped farther ahead of them, but Harry could not conceive of giving in. He felt violated and angry to the depths of his heart. Despite his wings resisting, he flew harder.

A city slid beneath them, full of lit car parks and car headlights. Harry raised his head and rose upward, floating effortlessly on his wings' lift. The landscape fell away and Harry peered down at the various roads snaking into the distance, growing

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patchy as the streetlights grew sparser. Harry tilted his head from side to side, trying to catch sight of the vehicle, but this made him veer wildly. He flapped on straight ahead, angry enough to ignore the dwindling odds. Around him, the broomriders kept pace, and kept clear of his turns, folded tightly over themselves in the cold wind.

The city dwindled away and a valley wall rose up into a long hillside of grass and the road came to an end. Harry turned in a broad circle. His wings where they connected to his body had gone numb and rubbery, something that had never happened before. His neck pulled hard on the cords in his wings with each beat, feeling rock hard and brittle. The matted and bloody fur on his breast pulled at his skin when he moved. Ignoring the increasing complaints from his animal form, he scanned the dark quilt of the countryside, his inhuman eyes following along sparse strings of porchlights and the occasional car in search of the ripples. He refused to give in, certain his will would win out over everything else.

Wings wide and kiting naturally, Harry circled wider and lower, still seeing nothing. The flapping cloaks of his companions on broomstick were the only sound over the hum of his feathers when he turned. Harry banked for a third broad circling and the old trees beyond the next road reared up at him unexpectedly. Harry tried to flap over them, but his wings, his entire Animagus body had nothing physical left to give, and he could not bring his numb appendages down to complete the stroke.

Harry plummeted, crashing through whipping branches. Spells flew and then he was bundled up and tumbling, protected but tangled and helpless. Up became down and then sideways. The night landscape of a fallow field and the surrounding hedgerows turned over and over with the starry sky.

Then it all stopped, cold and brittle. Voices shouted. The spiky remains of cut crops poked into Harry's back, as did the uneven mercilessly hard ground. The net vanished and his wing, or his arm, or something, fell to the side. He blinked up at the winking stars on the dome above him. His head hurt.

Kerry Ann appeared beside him, wand illuminated, gazing down at him. Rodgers' face came into view next. "Let's get him to St. Mungo's."

"NO," Harry said, sitting up by rocking to one side and pushing with both fisted hands. The cold and wet was seeping rapidly through his pyjamas. His head lolled. His abdomen quivered. Slurring his speech he said, "I'm just wiped out." Harry's head lolled to the other side, which made him flush in frustration and grow angrily impatient with himself.

Aaron crouched to give him a pat on the back. "Well, we can just put you back to bed. You are still dressed for it."

Harry considered saying, one of these days I'm going to kill you for being such a git, but he didn't have the strength.

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Harry was given Aaron's magically heated cloak and taken Side-Along back to his own front garden.

"What happened?" came Snape's sharp voice when they stumbled inside.

Rodgers replied, "Harry tried to chase them down. He flew like a Thestral possessed, but ran out of steam a hundred miles on, or about, and crashed."

"Was it that far?" Harry asked. Snape took Harry's arm over his own shoulder and led him inside to the couch. Harry fell back and stared with fascinated interest at the dried blood splattered over his hands in distinctive layers.

Snape cleaned him up with a few waves of his wand and picked a piece of cornstalk out of his collar.

"I would say St. Mungo's," Rodgers intoned, standing nearby with his arms across his chest. "Animagus injury can be tricky." Candide stood beside him with Arcadius fast asleep in his baby pack strapped to her front.

Harry scrubbed his eye with his soft pyjama sleeve and played through what had happened before he had transformed and gone on full attack. "What'd they get through with?"

Snape replied, "A narrow heating beam of some kind. Since the protective spells don't keep out sunlight, they were able to make a handful of stones in the library wall explode, which weakened the barriers on that side." For once, Snape did not sound like he was lecturing. He patted Harry on the side of his shoulder. "Let's put you to bed if that is the plan." When Harry did not move, Snape used a health Indicator on him. It fluttered orange and green.

Snape said, "Certain you do not want a Healer? I think it best."

"I want a potion for the pain, and I want to sleep."

"All right, come on then." Snape patted him harder, insistent.

Kerry Ann glanced at Snape critically and said, "Are you certain, Harry. You look like hell."

Harry ignored her and tried to make his own way without leaning on Snape until he could reach the staircase, which was half gone he now noticed. Harry halted there before the first step. Crisp fresh planks were floating in place of the missing stairs. With a sigh, Harry plodded upward, ignoring how the magical steps wavered like boards floating on water when his foot landed on them.

Snape led him right to his bed while the others waited in the doorway. Harry wanted to curse them to leave, but that would have taken the last of his life force, so he simply fell onto his bed and forgot them.

"I'll get you some potion," Snape said, parting the visitors on his way out the door. At the corner of the balcony, Snape made a motion with his head, urging them

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to go. Reluctantly, they peeled themselves back from the doorframe while making their goodbyes.

“Thanks, Harry,” Rodgers said last of all. “Couldn’t have got the lot of them without you.”

When Snape returned, they were alone.

“Here. Sorry that required so much time.” He sat on the edge of the bed and poured out one potion after another. “This is Dramaticus Supresso, it will help your muscles recover.”

Harry gulped this and barely managed to swallow what tasted like sweaty socks mixed with chicken soup.

“This is the usual pain reliever.”

“This is a dilute tissue knitter, on the assumption that you have most likely injured yourself while exhausting your Animagus form’s capacity for flight.”

Harry swallowed each one. And at the end his arms felt like they were floating away which, while an improvement, felt newly distressing as it reminded him of falling.

“Best to sleep until you awaken naturally,” Snape said, fully lecturing now. “I’ll pull your curtains closed so you can do that.”

Harry wondered what he would do without Snape, while his instincts pointed out how vulnerable he let himself be, and promised he would regret that, some day. But Harry was asleep even before the pillow cradled his head, so he did not care.



Harry’s breathing came in harsh, gasping inhalations. His bare chest, exposed where the buttons on his pyjamas had torn free, rose and fell in the low light emitted by the halo edging the lamp wick.

“Harry?” Snape’s voice prompted gently.

Harry scrunched his face and turned his head away. Snape placed Harry’s limp hand on top of his own and patted the back of it.

“Open your eyes,” Snape urged, whispering still.

Harry’s breathing faltered. His Adam’s apple bounced as he swallowed hard. He arched his head back, then shook it crookedly.

“Relax, Harry. The battle’s over. Everything is peaceful now. Open your eyes.”

Harry’s neck spasmed and his head turned back Snape’s way. His eyes slitted open and he flinched bodily.

“There you are. Can you talk to me?”

Harry’s eyes moved around, glossy with sleepy tears. His mouth twitched.

“Say something to me,” Snape commanded. “How are you feeling?”

INSINUATION

Harry's voice cracked, "Odd."

"Well, that is to be expected. It's perfectly fine though. The potion does that. Just relax."

Harry's face went rapidly through expressions of dismay and distress, then fell lax.

"What are you going to do today, Harry?" Snape asked.

"Today?"

"Yes, you have plans for today. This is Tuesday. Last night was a little chaotic, so no surprise you have lost track."

Harry squinted in confusion straight at the low lamp, then his brows pulled together to stare at Snape. "I'm trapping Ma Dame today. She is falling into my trap."

"Is anyone going to get hurt?"

Harry laughed. "What does it matter? My claws like flesh."

Snape sat up slightly. "Yes, there was quite a bit of that tonight, wasn't there. Healers managed to save them all. Does that sadden you?"

"Doesn't matter," Harry said. "They'll suffer more that way. I can terrify them again some time."

Snape sat forward and lifted Harry's eyelids up one at a time, puzzled. "I thought I'd get to talk to just you, Harry. Perhaps I was mistaken." He sat back and clasped his hands together.

"The Gryffilis likes blood."

"Ah," Snape said, understanding. "You are more welcoming now of the animal's blood lust, I think. Well, that is less a concern." He reached into his pocket and with one hand popped the cork out of the vial he pulled out. "Just another sip, Harry."

Harry willingly took a sip, tasted it on his lips and said, "You're potioning me. You're a traitor."

"Not really," Snape said. "Let's give that a moment to work. It's the last dose I'll give you." Helpfully, he said, "Being a traitor only matters if you get caught at it, and you aren't going to remember any of this."

He stroked the back of Harry's hand while he waited. It did not even so much as twitch. "I must say, this is quite a nice variation on this potion, which I discovered while researching for you."

"You're a bastard," Harry said, neck arching so the cords lifted his skin up. He tossed his head, but did not pull his hand free, which he probably could have done.

"I try," Snape said. "Let's go back to Ma Dame. Who is helping you?"

"Ginny and Vishnu," Harry said, mouth slow, like he was fighting replying.

"Oh."

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“Why don’t you trust me?” Harry growled angrily, shoulders twisting on the bed before falling flat again.

“Because I know better,” Snape gently replied. “Do you still resist what is happening to you, Harry?”

“Resist what?” Harry’s voice had grown tired.

“Do you like what is happening to you, Harry . . . these changes?” Snape restated.

Harry turned his head side to side. “I don’t know.”

“What do you like about it?” Snape asked, being methodical.

Harry moved his shoulder to rub his ear with it. “My barrier spells are better.”

After a pause, Snape asked, “That is all?”

“This is who I always am . . . was . . . I don’t worry so much, exactly. People need to get hurt if they deserve it. It’s easier.”

“Right. I see. You don’t sometimes wish you could return to who you were before, when you were younger?”

Harry faintly shook his head. “I didn’t know anything and I had to get help then. Now I’m stronger and I can do things my own way. I can defeat Voldemort easily now.”

Snape rubbed his thumb over his fingertips while he considered that, still resting his other hand on Harry’s. “Can you?” he asked.

“I’ve done it,” Harry snapped in impatience. “I told you about it.”

“Yes. True,” Snape said in a praising tone. “Who is winning now though?”

The muscles along Harry’s jaw rippled and he tossed his head again.

“If you are capable of succeeding alone, why did you make a servant out of that Durumulna fellow? After everything that you have suffered in the past, I find that inexplicable.”

“I miss the shadows,” Harry whispered longingly. “It’s not the same.”

Snape filed that away, feeling somewhat better about that explanation. “His dying should not have affected you so. I don’t think you performed the spell correctly and that worries me that you are being harmed.”

Harry nodded his head, then clumsily switched to shake his head. “I didn’t do it right. I did better this time, but maybe still not right.”

Snape closed his eyes and released Harry’s hand to sit back, rubbing his forehead with his fingers. “Who would that be?”

“Belinda.”

“Ah,” Snape said, thinking that obvious in retrospect. “You must be thinking of others now. One isn’t very many.”

“Ron maybe.”

INSINUATION

“I don’t think I am speaking as much to Harry as I’d like, but I will try this one anyhow. Have you become something you despise, Harry?”

Harry shook his head.

“Not even a little?”

“I only despise weakness,” Harry grumbled, voice slurring. “I’m not weak.”

Time was growing short. “Do you dislike anything about what is happening to you?”

Harry’s voice wavered as his breathing grew unsteady. “I don’t have fun anymore. I used to feel whole. I . . . I don’t. The shadows are . . . ” Harry blinked at the ceiling, gaze losing focus.

“The shadows are?” Snape waited. “Not the same, I’m going to assume.”

Harry fell still, eyes slitted but unmoving. Snape rubbed his chin and sighed. He waited until Harry’s breathing fell into a normal pace before standing and dousing the lamp.

The door to Harry’s room opened and then clicked closed. Seconds ticked by, then a minute. Harry’s hand shot out, fumbling at the nightstand drawer, clumsily trying to tug it open. A hand grabbed his wrist and pressed it back across the covers.

Snape’s helpful voice came out of the darkness. “I removed all the writing materials from your nightstand, but they will be back by morning, just as they were.” He held Harry’s arm pressed against the soft duvet until the cords loosened. “Good night, Harry,” Snape said, and this time departed for real.



Harry awoke to a jabbing neck ache and twisted onto his back to escape it. He rubbed his hand over his face and pressed it to his eyes while he remembered the night before. Durumulna had tried to get even and had instead been overwhelmed. Harry’s fingers rasped over the sheets as he remembered the wild-eyed figure he had swiped away with a paw, remembered leapt around spreading satisfying vengeance.

Conversation trickling into his room from downstairs brought Harry back to this morning. Abdominal muscles tweaking painfully, Harry sat up. He rubbed repetitively at his neck while unsuccessfully trying to hear what was said.

Dressed and combing his hair with his fingers, Harry opened the door of his room.

“I think you should wake him, Severus,” Candide was saying. “He’s not been doing well with . . . Oh, here’s Harry.”

Harry hesitated at the floating stair treads before padding over them.

“Am I missing something?” Harry asked, glancing between the two of them, anger happily building up behind his sleep-fogged thoughts.

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“The press are outside,” Snape said, clasping his hands behind his back. “They wish to speak with you. I informed them they could do so if and when you were ready.”

Harry scratched his head and pushed his hair back. He imagined he looked like hell. “I’ll talk to them.”

Candide followed Harry partway down the entryway. “Do you want some coffee first?”

Winky appeared a second later and handed a steaming mug to Candide. Candide held it up invitingly as Harry swung his dress cloak over his shoulders. Winky vanished again as Harry approached to take the mug.

Harry nodded as he accepted it, unable to make his mouth say “thanks” even out of habit. An odd dream came to him as he fought speaking or fought not speaking or whichever way it was working, but the fabric of the dream dissolved before he could discern any memorable pattern in the connections of it.

Harry took the mug with him, noticing that Snape brushed by Candide to follow him outside.

In the garden, on the benches and leaning against the walls, were half a dozen reporters. Harry recognized three of them, but only knew one by name. They all looked up and fell still when Harry appeared. Harry stepped into their midst as they stood as one, finding pleasing amusement in their appearing to honor him like that.

Harry tossed his cloak off one shoulder. The garden had been magically heated, and the air drifted through warm and summery.

“Mr. Potter!” a small man with a bulbous chubby belly called out as he approached, hand raised. Others tried to interrupt, but the man went on. “You single-handedly dealt a fatal blow to the criminal gang the Ministry has been impotent at dealing with, do you have a statement for us?”

“Not really,” Harry said, sipping his coffee. “It wasn’t a fatal blow, either.”

“What do you mean by that?” a red haired woman with widely spaced almond eyes demanded.

“There are still Durumulna leadership at large. Did the Ministry tell you there weren’t?” Harry asked innocently, for the first time enjoying this game and wondering why it had seemed so bitterly annoying previously.

She scribbled madly on her tiny note pad. “They just said that the largest number of arrests to date had occurred. That the it would be debilitating for the organization. Do you expect it will be? Or do you disagree?”

“I expect any impact will be temporary,” Harry said. “But I am certain they are smarting this morning, yes.” He gave a her a quick grin that did not make it to his eyes.

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The first reporter broke through the follow-on questions with: “There were rumors you had joined Durumulna yourself, that you were turning to the other side. Was that all a ruse and actually a Ministry sanctioned infiltration?”

“I don’t work for the Ministry,” Harry stated. “As for my turning, I won’t even descend to answering that charge.”

“Why did you make this fight personal?” someone asked.

“Which fight?” Harry airily asked, pleased when a few of them smiled. He answered his own question. “I’m happy to hit back at the gangs because they’ve hurt my friends in the past, and because they are a detriment to Wizardom.”

“Gangs, plural?” another reporter demanded.

“Yes,” Harry drawled. “Where have you been?”

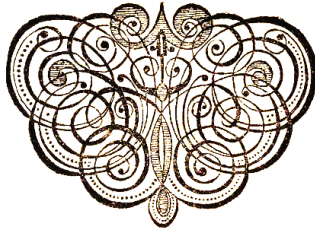
The mass of them began jabbering new questions, and Harry waved them off. “Look, I have things to do today, and I’m sure you have deadlines to meet.” He began walking away, enjoying their insistent questions and how they followed him to the door, where Snape stood waiting.

Harry stopped when the red haired woman said, “Really, a statement would be appreciated, Mr. Potter.”

Harry handed his coffee mug over when Snape held out his hand for it. For just an instant, Harry saw through him, saw him as an infiltrator, then the impression passed and he saw nothing but a stalwart assistant – a very experienced and knowledgeable stalwart assistant. Harry spun and faced the reporters. “I’ll make a statement if you like: I’m not finished yet.”

Author’s Notes: trying for less spoilerish previews from now on.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR



ENSNARED, PART I

Harry pushed his shoulders back under his Invisibility Cloak and clasped his hands behind him, unconsciously mimicking the pose of Vineet standing against the opposite wall. The restaurant was just filling up, and Vineet's deep brown eyes scanned the new arrivals. He wore a short black jacket and white shirt like the waiters. One of them, empty tray clasped under his arm, stopped to ask Vineet something.

Harry read Vineet's lips as he gave the predetermined excuse. "The owner said for my first day of training, I should stand here and observe."

The waiter gave a shrug and whisked off through the swinging kitchen door. Harry sensed another magical person had entered the room, and he began to circulate between the white-draped tables, careful to stay out of the way.

Harry stopped beside a table near the door. The woman sitting at it had silver nails and glistening stranded hair piled high on her head. She picked at her nails and adjusted the oddly long sequined hand bag on her lap. Harry reached into his pocket and, careful to keep the edge of his cloak completely around his hand, put a few drops of Glaze Eye potion into her water goblet, which already had lipstick marks on it.

Back in his former position along the wall, Harry noticed the window in the outside door flashing as someone pulled it open. Ginny paused in the doorway, glancing up and down the street before stepping inside. She insisted on a table in the middle of the room and Harry smiled at his plans playing out.

Ginny gave Vineet a glance as she straightened her white napkin over her lap, then her eyes traced around the other patrons as if counting how many there were. She started to unzip her jacket, then instead pulled it up tighter to her chin. From

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where he stood, Harry could see her draw in a deep breath. She took out her notepad and played with her Muggle biro while she waited, giving it curious study.

The Minister of Magic sidled in shortly after, trailed by one of her male assistants. Ginny had to stand up and wave at her as she stood beside the maître d', scanning the room.

"Ms. Weasley, is it not?" The Minister greeted Ginny after her assistant leaned close to murmur in her ear. Her assistant elbowed away the waiter who tried to help with the Minister's chair. Unaware, the Minister went on, "I almost sent my regards instead as things are quite hectic, what with all the recent arrests, but I decided I was in need of a evening away from all things magically ministerial, and a fine Muggle establishment does tend to fit that bill."

Ginny nodded mutely.

The Minister went on, "I remain pleased with the changes at the paper . . . you can quote me on that if you like. Ghastly thing before. Not even fit to line an owl cage."

Madame Zacundo came in with Skeeter twenty minutes late, long after Harry's feet were complaining. She spoke grandly and gestured with wide sleeves patterned in curved geometric shapes.

The Minister of Magic's face, despite a few Aperitifs, hardened at the sight of Rita Skeeter before shifting to a patented smile.

Zacundo gave dainty handshakes all around and waved a hand to introduce Skeeter. "This is my dearest niece, whom you may know. She is a bit of a household name." With her broad arm movements, Zacundo occupied half of the round table. "What a interesting set of dinner companions we have my dear. Always so pleased to entertain the Minister." She turned to Ginny, "And also always quite pleased to help an up and comer." Zacundo looked Ginny up and down with narrowed eyes. Harry recognized that look, the one of sizing up a potential underling. Under his cloak, Harry snorted.

Before Zacundo could fully raise her hand to summon the waiter, two of them slipped in and bent close, attending. "Wine and bubbling water, my dears!" she said, laughing, which spread her generous cheeks out even wider.

Ginny grinned as well, appearing stunned by the woman's mood. She pushed her notebook around on the table, but remained silent.

Zacundo raised her wine glass toward Skeeter and then the Minister. "Isn't it a lovely day?"

Skeeter, befuddled, was slow to react so Zacundo was already taking a healthy swig by the time Skeeter had her glass in the air. "You seem in a fine mood today, Aunt Margie." She turned in Ginny's direction with a distant focus.

"I am my dear. I have a great deal to celebrate today." She finished off her glass

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and held it up to signal a passing waiter. "I never thought I'd be saying this, but here's to Harry Potter!"

Ginny fell still and glanced around at the nearest tables distractedly. Harry assumed she was looking for help. He stepped forward a few tables to stand close beside a chair holding an old man bent over his fancy, platter-sized soup bowl.

Madame Bones raised her glass. "I'll toast to those silly enough to tangle with Mr. Potter. May our remaining enemies be as unwise."

Zacundo held her glass up for a refill and gestured for Ginny to join the toasting. Zacundo raised her full glass above her head and said "You win some, you lose some. But as long as your enemies lose more, all is right with the world." She tossed the glass back.

"I'll drink to that," Ginny agreed quietly.

"Is that a notebook you have out there?" the minister asked Ginny.

"Yes, Madame Minister, I was going to ask Madame Zacundo a few questions for a little article."

Bones waved her hand as if to ward off Ginny. "No questions for me, please. I am off the clock."

"Of course, Minister. It's just for the Home Fashion Section anyway."

"The what section?" Skeeter blurted, choking on a sip.

Ginny colored and managed to say, "It's only . . . going to be a monthly feature."

Skeeter drank down the rest of her wine. "Better make it bi-annual given the dearth of material."

Zacundo put down her glass and stretched her hands out before her. "Well, let's get this interview out of the way so that we might enjoy a lovely meal in peace."

"Of course," Ginny said, sounding relieved. She pawed through her notebook and replaced it before her and leaned over it, shoulders hunched.

"You still consider yourself on the leading edge of Witch home fashion, I assume?" When Zacundo responded with a smile, Ginny went on. "I looked through our file, and I didn't see the usual clippings from the society half-column about you hosting any parties. That doesn't match, really. Or do you show off your decorating mostly at your house in Cdiz?"

Zacundo put her glass down and said, "It's true that I've led a much quieter life of late."

"Ah," Ginny said, writing that down. She puzzled over the page of notes and muttered, "What to ask next?"

Skeeter's fingernails began tapping. She clasped her hands together, fingertips waving.

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The waiter came for their orders. When he was gone, Ginny said, "In the last article about you, which I think Ms. Skeeter wrote, it said you had, I believe it said, 'the financial wherewithal to pursue the pleasures of the finer things in life.' How did you come into money?"

Ginny waited with her pen poised while a waiter took away their clean utensils and gave them new ones in slightly different shapes.

Zacundo's smile faded a little more. "I was lucky."

"You had a divorce, right?" Ginny went on, sounding just naïve enough, Harry thought. "Your husband was wealthy, then?"

"My husband was a rat. But don't write that down, my dear." She enforced this by placing her hand around Ginny's wrist.

"All men are rats," Skeeter offered in a playful tone while tearing apart a chunk of bread with her red tipped fingers.

The Minister made face at her assistant.

Ginny wrote something down. "People . . . um, readers . . . are always interested in how others came into money. I'd like to include that in the story."

The salads arrived and Harry stepped back to his more defensive position. Ginny tugged down the zipper on her jacket, revealing a glittering amethyst necklace.

Zacundo was saying, "Yes, well you'll have to just put down that I was lucky. I was in the right place at the right time."

"You're a gambler then?" Ginny asked.

"Merlin, no, I never take chances."

"Wise woman," Minister Bones opined.

They toasted to this as well, and a waiter swooped in to ask if they needed a second bottle. "Yes, my dear . . ." Bones glanced at his name tag. "William. Yes, another of the same."

Zacundo's eyes came back around to Ginny and she started. "That's rather a remarkable necklace you have there."

Ginny lifted her hand as if forgetting she had it on. "Oh, this? Oh, yeah, a friend gave it to me as a present."

Zacundo stared at the necklace, which was composed of long spindly purple crystals with a longer branched one in the center, hanging like half an exploding star.

"Which friend was that?" Zacundo asked, sounding somewhat short on breath.

Harry adjusted the grip on his wand, tensing and looking for an opening where he could slip out from under his cloak, unobserved.

"Oh, um, Harry gave it to me."

Zacundo's voice went up half and octave. "Harry Potter?"

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Ginny smiled distractedly. "Yeah." She leaned close to her notebook and tapped her pen down the page.

Zacundo tossed her napkin on her plate, glanced around the restaurant, picking out the three people Harry had already identified and dealt with. They all still appeared normal. She picked up her napkin again and draped it back on her lap.

"Something the matter, Aunt Margie?" Skeeter asked.

"Where is that wine?" She sat tall and affronted while she looked around more.

"Here it is," Skeeter said. "I'll have a full glass this time . . . William."

Harry tugged the cloak off in one motion and stuffed it in the back of his belt. The nearest diner glanced up at him in surprise, but then went back to eating as though nothing had happened. Muggles, Harry thought while striding over to face Zacundo.

"Potter," Skeeter said, shaking her head when she recognized him. "Should have known you'd be skulking about."

"You'd know that because you always are," Harry pointed out pleasantly. "Madame," Harry said, with a nod to Zacundo, then a similar one to the Minister.

"Mr. Potter!" the Minister graciously said. "Do please join us."

"I'm afraid I don't have time," Harry explained with another bow.

"What a shame," Skeeter said.

"Are you doing an interview, Ginny?" Harry asked his friend.

"I'm trying an easy interview for practice," Ginny quipped like the cheery underling.

"Better try another hundred before getting serious, in that case," Skeeter mumbled.

"Why, Ms. Skeeter, you think you know better?" Harry said. He could feel his face glowing with anticipation and tried to bank it down. "You always act as if you know better than everyone else. How would you conduct this interview, then?"

"I'd have my questions ready," Skeeter said, propping her elbow on the table and glaring at Ginny.

"I think she is doing just fine," Bones said between bites of salad.

"Well, I have a few questions," Harry said. "Why don't we try those? Although Ginny already asked the most important one: where did all the money come from?" Harry turned to Skeeter. "Have you asked your aunt that one?"

Skeeter's eyes dodged away.

"What . . . you didn't get an answer either?" Harry mocked. "Interesting. Perhaps it's because Madame does not wish anyone to know about the blackmail, or the racketeering . . . the smuggling."

"Good Merlin, Potter!" Skeeter said, tossing her utensils aside. "What are you on about?"

ENSNARED, PART I

Bones put her salad fork down beside her plate, lettuce still bunched up on the tines.

“Getting all this down, Ginny?” Harry asked.

“This is absurd!” Skeeter said, standing now.

A waiter came over to ask in a comically quiet voice if everything was all right.

“It’s lovely,” Harry said with a glare. “Couldn’t be better.”

The man slunk off.

“Let me guess,” Harry went on. “Money must have been getting tight. Kidnapping an Auror’s apprentice was a rather cheeky thing to do, but shaking down a rich family was hard to resist wasn’t it?”

“She did what to Aaron!” Ginny burst out, then bit her lips. She dropped her arm off the table and shook her hand as though she were dropping her wand out of her sleeve.

Across from her, Bones made a similar motion but aborted it, then elbowed her assistant, who sat dumbfounded.

Bones leaned toward Harry and whispered, “Mr. Potter, do you know what you are doing?”

“Has she denied any of it?” Harry innocently asked.

“Aunt Margie, let’s go.” Skeeter pushed her chair back and stood up.

Harry gestured at the woman across from him. “Come now, all she has to do is deny it.”

Skeeter stamped her foot. “She doesn’t have to dignify such filthy accusations with any kind of answer.”

Harry stared straight at Skeeter and said, “The filth is entirely on her side. Getting all this down, Ginny?”

Ginny slipped her wand under her napkin beside her plate and began scratching furiously with her biro. Zacundo picked up her butter knife and hit her bread plate with it, twice.

Harry waited just a beat. “They aren’t going to respond,” he offered helpfully. “And if you are celebrating . . . me . . . you must not have been in your vault lately.”

Zacundo looked away from Harry to stare at the witch near the door, whom Harry knew must be staring at nothing in particular while nibbling bread, just as she had been doing when he last checked on her.

“Your guards are incapacitated, Madame,” Harry said with a little bow, and a smirk. “Just like Percy.”

Zacundo backed up her chair and stood, and with a bang! fell to the floor.

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Conversations at the nearby tables stuttered to a halt and the other diners turned their way. Skeeter bent to help her aunt up. “What happened?” Skeeter whispered harshly. “What are you doing, Aunt Margie? In front of the Minister, no less!”

After the waiters had been shooed away, except Vineet, who stood behind Ginny, Harry quietly said, “Apparition in knowing plain view of a crowd of Muggles. Tsk. Tsk. But really a minor crime, considering.”

This time Bones pulled her wand all the way from her sleeve and held it in her lap. Skeeter stared at Harry while still holding Zacundo’s arm. The first doubts were flashing across her thoughts. Harry smiled.

“Yes,” Harry soothingly said to Skeeter, “You are such an excellent investigative reporter, such an unequalled judge of people, that you did not realize your own aunt was Ma Dame, one of the Ministry’s most wanted crime bosses. Stunning work, Ms. Skeeter.”

Bones sat straight and stared at Harry.

Harry crisply asked, “Getting this down, Ginny?”

Ginny pointed at Zacundo with her pen while the woman pawed around in her large handbag with both hands. “What’s she doing?”

Harry calmly replied, “I expect she is going to use her emergency Portkey, again in the middle of a crowd of Muggles. We’ll take that as an admission of guilt, I believe.”

Madame Zacundo jerked her arm free of Skeeter’s grip, ducked partly under the tablecloth, and vanished.

Nearby diners stared at Zacundo’s empty chair, as did Skeeter, who waved an arm helplessly before noticing the room full of attention and moving to fluff her curls. Bones stomped around the table to glance under it, then gave Skeeter an eyeful. Despite her lesser height, Skeeter leaned away.

Vineet stepped up beside Harry. “I called for Reversal to come.”

Harry nodded.

“She got away?” Ginny snarled. “After what she did to Aaron, she got away?”

“She won’t get far. Tonks is manning Transportation to make sure the illicit Portkey is detected properly.”

Harry started to turn, then came back and put a finger on Ginny’s notebook. “Oh, don’t forget to mention that Skeeter’s uncle is The Boss, the head of Durumulna.” Harry raised his pleasant gaze to Skeeter. “Lovely family. Perhaps next time you decide someone’s needs moralizing, you start with your own family first. Saves so much embarrassment.”

Reversal swarmed through the doors on all sides and the Muggles were falling into a mass trance. Forks fell from fingers, a water goblet crashed and dribbled.

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Ginny stood up and faced Skeeter, notepad out. “You have a statement for the press, Ms. Skeeter? Our readers would love to know what you think of all this. I’m sure the Minister has one, too.”

Harry laughed aloud. Skeeter stalked off, weaving through the wizards and witches moving through the room with bored efficiency.



“Another success, Harry,” Candide said, putting the newspaper down beside Harry’s plate.

“I suppose,” Harry said, poking at his scramble with his fire lined fork which reflected the candles flickering on the table to combat the cloudy morning. He had been half hoping Ma Dame would slip away from the Aurors, had set it up that way to give her a chance, he had to admit.

Snape raised his gaze, but said nothing. Candide filled in well enough. “You don’t think? You are too hard to please, Harry.”

After a gap, Snape asked, “Was that a Ministry owl I saw this morning?”

“It was,” Harry said, then declined to offer up any more.

“Are you going back this week?”

“It wasn’t about that,” Harry said, putting down his fork.

Snape buttered his toast before asking, “What was it about?”

“Minister Bones wants to give me another medal.” Harry grinned then and nibbled on a bacon strip.

A glance went between Candide and Snape.

“What?” Harry demanded.

“You haven’t been eating well,” Candide said, beating out Snape who had also started to speak. “I asked Winky to make your favorite this morning.”

Harry ignored this. “I need to get in some dueling practice if I’m to go back.”

“We can go up to Hogwarts this afternoon, if you wish.”

“Do we get an audience?” Harry asked.

“Only if you wish for one.”

Harry picked at his eggs again. He did not know what he wanted. He felt unmoored, adrift on others’ currents, and he did not like it. A hollow yearning chewed away at his core. He needed a purpose. He needed an enemy. He needed more shadows; the singular one floating in and out of his thoughts taunted him more than fed him.

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Candide stood to go to Arcadius, who began fussing from the next room. Harry decided his cold rubbery eggs were not going to make him feel whole, so he pushed his plate away.

“You’re really wanting to duel?” Harry asked.

Snape crossed his arms and sat back. “I thought we would do your usual drills. Not so much duel.” His voice dropped. “You are far safer inside the Ministry than out.”

“Yeah, look how long Percy survived and he’s an idiot.”

“Case in point. He also demonstrates the power of having a sponsor in high places.”

Candide returned, rocking Arcadius, who tugged on her hair. She leaned her face down right up to the baby’s and said, “At least daddy has the same problem with that.” She freed herself and hitched him up on her arm. To Snape she said, “We have an appointment tomorrow for his four week visit if you wanted to go along?”

Snape nodded, offering Arcadius a finger to clutch instead.

Harry’s mind had gone blank watching this exchange. He sat straight. “I’ll owl Ginny for some drill practice.”

“I do not mind doing it, although you may be of help to Ms. Weasley as well.”

Harry rubbed his forehead; he had lost complete track of his previous thoughts. “I’ll go owl her now.”



“Ouch! What was that? It came right through my Counter,” Ginny complained, rubbing her shoulder.

Ron gave a sloppy grin and said, “That’s my Troll Prod. I made it up by adding an extra two circles to the Slothful Spur gesture.”

Ginny shook out her arm, wincing. “That was a Troll Control spell? Do I look like a troll?”

Ron explained, “I only need to use it when I catch them playing stone dominoes in one of the abandoned corridors. When there is a whole group of them, they like to ignore me.”

“Do I look like a game playing troll to you?”

Harry stepped through the brush surrounding the Burrow, interrupting their regression to childhood behavior.

“Hey, Harry,” Ginny said, turning his way.

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Ron's next shot went undeflected, and she jerked as it hit, then held her wand arm up to aim at him. "So, help me, Ron. I'm going to blast you into pieces too small to be owl treats."

Ron glanced behind himself at the bedraggled orchard, as though someone behind him may have cast that last attack.

To Harry, Ginny said, "He's been a total git since my article about Ma Dame hit the stands. It irks him that everyone's been talking about it."

Ron sauntered closer, rolling his eyes.

"It was a good article," Harry said.

"It was a fun dinner. Can we do it again sometime?"

"Certainly," Harry said. "After you're an Auror."

She tilted her head far to the side. "Oh, that's likely. After that article, Beatrice wants to apprentice me to someone at the Prophet. I'm a bit tempted to take her up on it."

Ron asked with extra innocence, "She thinks you have potential, instead of just the right connections?"

Ginny waved down the lawn. "Go stand over there Ron, so I can cast some regulated stuff at you."

Harry said, "Both of you stand down there. I'll go against you two together."

"All right!" Ron said, loping off.

Harry called for them to start off on attack, and found that his blocks were rustier than expected, and his instincts for Squelching a bit too strong. He let the pain of his bleeding blocks berate him into better spell form and crisper movements, the way Rodgers' attacks would be punishing him if he was this sloppy at the Ministry.

When Ginny suggested switching to defense, Harry insisted they continue on for more than an hour, attack after attack, until he began to feel that automatic habit reluctantly returning to his wand hand, the one that made it twitch and whirl with precision before the attack even finished.

Ginny waved for them to stop. "Wow, Harry." She rubbed her wand wrist and stepped forward. "That was a lot of spells."

"That's not even a full session at training," Harry replied, then shivered with the after effects of so many spells striking his flesh, the discomfort felt queerly pleasant. "I'm out of practice."

"You don't look out of practice," Ron complained. "I didn't score with anything I tossed at you."

"Drills aren't about scoring, Ron," Ginny snipped. To Harry she said, "Sorry, I have to go. The late evening edition moves to final copy in less than an hour."

After she Disappeared, Ron said, "How about a pub, then?"

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Harry nodded and a moment later they were sliding into seats in the corner of the Leaky Cauldron. The other patrons quieted and turned to watch them settle in. Ron straightened and combed his hair with his fingers.

“Should I get us a round, then?” Ron asked.

While he waited, Harry studied each of the patrons studying him. Most looked away. He noted the faces of which ones did not.

“You don’t like your sister becoming important?” Harry prodded when he and Ron had drinks.

Ron shrugged and dipped his head to take a gulp without lifting his mug, eyes distant.

Harry went on, “It’d matter less to you if you were someone important.”

Ron grinned crookedly. “I’m out for drinks with Harry ‘Never Stops Fighting Evil’ Potter, that’s pretty important. Everyone’s only taking about Ginny because she wrote about you.”

“Exactly,” Harry said with a sweet smile.

Ron treated this as a joke and struck Harry on the arm.

Harry waited through more inane conversation before trying again. “You could be even more important to me, Ron.”

Ron chewed his lip between sips of beer and did not reply. Harry decided that Ron had not actually heard, he said, “You aren’t still jealous of me, are you?”

“What? No. Not really.”

“That’s good,” Harry said, a silkiness entering his voice as it dropped lower. “Because there is no reason to be. Or how about, if you were, it would just show how much more you could become.”

This also went by Ron’s attention without eliciting a reaction that Harry could use to lead him along.

Ron spun his mug between his palms. His voice dropped lower as he nervously asked, “Ever wonder what Dumbledore would think of things now?”

“What?”

Ron gave a twitching sideways shrug. “You know. Wonder what he’d think. Don’t you ever want to talk to him?”

Harry stared at his friend, trying to read his eyes. He had thought to lead Ron on, not the other way around. Ron’s comments prodded at Harry’s conscience regarding the consequences of actually going and talking to Dumbledore in that other place. Although, usually now, he thought they deserved to have their unappreciated peace shattered; it only seemed fair.

“Don’t you?” Ron asked. He met Harry’s eyes with ones brimming with appeal, then looked away again, back down at his foam-ringed mug.

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“What are you on about, Ron?” Harry asked, feeling irked now by not being able to suss out his usually guileless companion.

“I’m just asking,” Ron said. “Curious, you know.”

“Look at me, Ron,” Harry commanded, surprising himself with the way his voice rumbled in a growl.

Ron looked up with eyes wide and innocent, then looked away again. It was too quick to catch anything. Harry’s mind turned things over. Ron was too unsophisticated to come up with this on his own, so who was prompting him? Ginny would have given something away while they were drilling, so it was not her.

“So, how is Hermione?” Harry asked casually.

Ron raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Still thinks that married bloke is just scrummy.”

Harry was considering that Mr. Weasley could be behind Ron’s question when Ron frowned and began scrubbing at the condensation haze on his mug with his thumbs. Hermione was the most dangerous person Harry knew and he wondered what she was plotting.

“I’ve thought about Dumbledore,” Harry said, drawing out his words.

“Have you?” Ron asked, brightening. He fell sober and leaned toward Harry. “You could talk to him, you know.”

“Could I?” Visions of Dumbledore crushed beneath the beams of the ruined tower roof passed before Harry’s eyes.

“Yeah, his painting.”

Harry sat back. “Oh, that.”

“What do you mean, ‘oh that’? It’s him, still.”

“Not really.” Harry downed half of his remaining beer.

“It’s close,” Ron argued, then made a leaking noise through his teeth like Harry was being daft.

Harry battered down a burst of pique at this slight, wanting to draw more information out of Ron. He led him on with: “I wonder how I’d convince McGonagall to let me have a go at Dumbledore’s painting.”

Ron, clearly relieved, said, “Oh, we’ve taken care of that.” Then his face scrunched up at his error.

Harry snorted lightly and pushed up from the table. “I’ve got things to do. Let me know when your loyalties are straightened out.”

Just before Harry Disapparated, he caught Ron’s thoughts, full of dread at Hermione’s expected disgust with Ron’s performance.



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Harry's pacing drew Snape to the doorway of the drawing room. "I would not have expected drills with Ms. Weasley to put you into such a state," Snape said.

Harry stopped in the middle of the floor. Inside him anger vibrated in minor keys that made it hard to think. "My friends are up to something. They want me to talk to Dumbledore's painting." Harry glared hard at Snape as he said this. Snape's chin came up just an iota. "News to you? I hope," Harry challenged.

"It is," Snape said. Then after a beat, he added dismissively, "Certainly you do not fear his painting."

"I don't care about a stupid painting. I don't like my friends plotting things behind my back. I thought Ron was different. I was counting on it." Harry cocked his head, listening to the silence. "Where is Candide?"

"At her brother's," Snape said. "'Playdate', I believe was the term used. There is a letter for you from Mr. Weasley on the sideboard, by the way."

Without even shuffling his feet, Harry waved the letter from the dining room. It crinkled plaintively as it smacked into his hand. He tore it open, and read it in a glance. "He wants to know what day to expect me." Harry balled up the letter and ignited it, not for any good reason other than to watch it curl into ash the color of the Dark Plane and drift to the floor and scatter. "I need more drilling practice," Harry said. "Maybe next week I'll go back. I'm not ready yet."

"We may drill some right now, if you like," Snape offered. When Harry did not reply, Snape waved the furniture into a teetering pile in the corner and stepped to the adjoining corner of the room.

Harry stepped to the other corner and raised his wand. Inside him, something thrilled at this so strongly, his breath caught in his throat. Nasty spells prickled his fingertips where they touched his wand, bucking to get loose, a score yearning to be neatly settled. Harry's wand hand slowly and dazedly lowered to his side. The alienness of those violent plots and emotions jarred him for their sheer clarity.

"What sequence would you like to do?" Snape asked with endless calm, either wholly unaware or audaciously fearless.

Harry blinked at him and swallowed. "I need to practice my Counters," he said, voice barely above a whisper, trancelike.

"No sequence then," Snape said before casting a Leglocker Curse.

Harry vacillated between Squelching it and blocking it, and the spell's remains shattered around him, sparking off the walls.

"You need to ignore your instincts, Harry," Snape gently said, while shaking out his wand arm. "Again, until you get it properly."

Snape's tone of constructive discipline slipped Harry – who recoiled from that clarity of moments before – into a numb envelope of acceptance. He raised his wand

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straight up before his nose like a dueler and waited for the next spell, thinking of nothing else.



“Can’t leave you two alone,” Candide said as she surveyed the main hall. She put down her brimming bags and patted a fussing Arcadius on the back with both hands.

Snape came over to help her free the baby from pack slung across her front and held him up for inspection. Freed from the confining carrier, his small limbs drew tight into knobs.

“He’s been fussy since his nap at my brother’s. Maybe gas.”

Snape propped the curl of baby against his shoulder and walked with him, circling once under the high windows then back around to Harry. Gaze intent, he stopped before him.

“I cannot tell what is the matter with him,” Snape said, speaking to Harry.

From across the room Candide replied, “There is always the Neonatist from last week if he keeps it up.”

Snape shifted his arms to hold Arcadius out, curled limbs upward. “Harry has a knack with him,” Snape said, invited really.

Harry accepted the noisy infant without hesitation. He adjusted the surprisingly rigid bundle into the crook of his arm and looked down at his gum-lined half moon mouth. The magical bindings were corded and netted this time, much worse, but Arcadius was stronger now, drawing in air with determination. Harry parted the bindings with one hand, and the hardness of Arcadius’ limbs released. He smacked his gums during a last half hearted wail and fell to gurgling pleasantly.

Harry did not want to hand him back to Snape’s waiting arms, so he walked away with him.

“Harry,” Candide exclaimed brightly from where she unloaded sacks of toys. “You do have a knack.”

Harry walked around the couches, cradling the warm, soft infant over his shoulder. Perhaps it was the peacefulness of the baby’s cooing, or the mesmerizing hum of his strange magic, but Harry resisted letting go of him. Past and future collided and meshed in him: a past Harry could not escape and a future he ached to rewrite, even though it had not yet been written. He walked slowly around the room, circling by the hearth, where the damper thudded in a burst of wind.

When Harry turned he saw the questioning look Candide sent at Snape. Perhaps to be cruel to Snape, perhaps to set things right, Harry said, “He’s fine now.”

After a pause, Candide asked smartly, “What was wrong with him?”

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“Arcadius is burdened with Old Magic,” Snape said.

“Burdened?” Candide said, striding over to pet Arcadius’ back while Harry held him.

When Harry remained silent, Snape said, “His magic tangles around him periodically, stifling him. Harry is able to free him from it, temporarily at least.”

Harry handed the baby over, unable to bear Candide’s alarm. She walked in a small circle, patting the infant rapidly despite his good humor.

“I don’t understand,” Candide said, voice strained, still circling.

Snape stepped over beside Harry and fell into lecturing, albeit tiredly. “Old Magic manifests immediately, so it is more likely to be detrimental given they have no discipline to accompany their powers. Unlike say, the protective or repelling magic that young children sporadically exhibit, this is always flowing, always active.”

Candide shifted the baby in her arms so he faced forward toward the group. He gurgled and blew a spit bubble. A stout candle standing on the mantelpiece fluttered to life, and Arcadius reached toward it and gave a happy squeal.

“The candles,” Candide stated breathlessly.

“Yes,” Snape agreed.

“You knew?”

“I suspected. Often it is Winky lighting them, although rarely in the middle of the day.”

Candide turned Arcadius in her arms to hold him up in front of her, feet kicking. “We don’t need a baby starting fires,” she said with alarm.

“He can only light ones that have already been lit,” Harry said. When Snape turned his head with interest, Harry waved at the unused candles in the holders on the first floor. “He never lights those.”

Candide clutched Arcadius close again. “Were you ever going to say something?” she demanded of Snape.

“When I had a better understanding, yes. I did not wish to distress you with half-formed suppositions.”

She did not seem mollified, so Harry took a few steps away to leave them to work it out. Snape said to her in an awkwardly kind tone, “I was wondering what you wished to do for your birthday next week?”

Harry waited to see how that went over.

“I don’t care about birthdays, Severus,” came the icy reply.

Harry shot him a commiserating look and stepped away, heading for his room.

“I cannot explain something that I do not understand myself,” Snape stated. “It has only happened once before, I was not even certain it would repeat.”

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Harry's door clicked closed upstairs and Snape dropped his voice. "Harry believes he is at fault for Arcadius' magic, I am certain."

Candide spun toward him. "Is he?"

"I don't know. It is so poorly understood, especially now that it is rare. All we have are stories to go by. Hedgewitches taking Muggleborns to save them from their own magic. Ancient sorcerers offering rich rewards to apprentice the strongest magic of this sort."

She dropped her voice lower, "But it's like Harry's magic, right? And it's rare . . ."

"Yes to both. But whether it is random, whether it is linked to my past magical experimentation, or whether it is linked to you living here with Harry through your pregnancy, it matters not. What's done is done. Harry has shown only easy willingness toward helping him. If you ever have any doubt about Arcadius' state, give him over to Harry."

Candide snuffed out the candle and while it smoldered, held Arcadius up facing it, bouncing him. "Harry does seem attached to him."

"Harry cannot help but be."

They both watched Arcadius reaching toward the candle, but it did not light.

"Figures he would only do it when you were not waiting for him to." She hitched him into her arms and carried him to the couch. "When are you returning to Hogwarts?" she asked after settling back with a tired sigh.

Snape followed her over and stood before her. "Not in the foreseeable future. I warned Minerva that I would be home indefinitely. She thinks me utterly smitten with fatherhood, which I will have to suffer."

She aimed Arcadius in his direction and raised him up before him. The baby gave a dual-legged kicking squeal. "You aren't?"

Snape tried for a glare, but fell far short.



"I'm off for the day," Harry said from the doorway of the drawing room later in the week. The household's new sense of congeniality was the only reason he was informing Snape at all.

"May I ask whither?"

"I'm bored and I'm going to find someone better to practice drills with."

After a pause, Snape asked, "How far are you going?"

Harry shrugged.

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“Your friends here are more than willing to help. Your Auror apprentice friends are more than willing to help. I sincerely doubt you could find a more fitting partner.”

Harry bristled at this admonishment and scowled in return. He had woken that morning in the middle of a dream where shadows circled, brushing him seductively. The night before, he had resisted going and bedding Belinda yet again, and expected that had something to do with the dream. He rubbed his robed arms at the memory of their shadowy touch in the dream, like nothing he had actually felt from them. It made him yearn more to be closer to them, tapping their strength.

Looking for a drill partner was merely a convenient excuse, but he was not going to admit that aloud.

“I’ll be back sometime later today.”

Snape pointed at the floor before the flickering drawing room hearth. “Return here, if you would, so that I can assist you when you arrive.”

Harry scowled deeper at needing help. “Maybe,” he said.

Harry came to awareness in the field beside the Burrow, wallowing in the prickling pain of his flesh warming while he stared at the sky. The shadows surged and flashed, close by and more active than he had ever felt them. He closed his eyes and drank them in, taking in great gulps of air at the same time. A clear surge of knowledge interrupted his pleasure: Voldemort never sensed them this way, only as the faintest black ghosts haunting the edges of his vision. Now, he longed for their ready power as much as Harry did. Harry blinked at the streaked sky without seeing it, pinned down by a harmony of neediness.

The ground began to make his back ache, so Harry sat up, resisting the urge to summon the Death Eaters right then, to satiate his hunger. This time he took proper notice of the sky. Muggle airplane contrails streaked it in closely spaced bands, angling mostly west to east. Harry was uncertain what they signified, but he could not remember seeing quite this kind of sky before.

At the door, with only his eyes disguised, Mrs. Weasley greeted him in near panic.

“Harry! What ever possessed you to go out alone! Do your parents know you’re here?”

She ushered him inside and forced him into a chair and wrapped his hands around a mug of hot cocoa.

Footsteps banged down the stairs and one of the twins ducked into the room, wand out. He saw Harry and put it away. “I heard voices.” He sauntered over and added, “You’ve recovered well.”

Harry nodded mutely, the safest thing to do.

The twin turned a chair backwards and sat straddling it, facing Harry. “What was taken? No one wanted to say. Ya got more cocoa, Mum? It’s really surprising to

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see you, Harry. The other night, seemed like you were going to find a cupboard and lock yourself in it for the duration.”

“Fred!” Mrs. Weasley snapped.

Fred spread his hands out before him. “I’m just sayin’, Mum.” He accepted a chipped mug filled to the brim and glanced back at the stairs. “Where’s Ginny? You’re here to check in with our Prophecy Girl, right?”

“I’m here to see how everyone is,” Harry said, speaking slowly because his mind was moving too fast to do otherwise.

“Glad it’s not you this time ’round?” Fred asked.

Harry tried to imagine how his spoiled self would respond to that. Would he be jealous or relieved?

“Harry?” Ginny said, coming down the rest of the stairs. She stopped across the table from him and studied his face before blushing fiercely.

Fred hit her on the back and said, “One of these years my sister will get over being shy.”

Harry said, “When she loses the idiot brothers who always chose the worst thing to say at any given moment.”

Ginny stuck her tongue out at Fred and sat down before her own steaming mug.

Fred leaned close to Ginny and whispered, “You think he’s been given Hutzpotion? I’m amazed he’s here.”

“Harry?” Her eyes danced back and forth. “He . . . always recovers quickly, right?”

Harry nodded.

“See.” She clasped her mug tight enough to whiten her knuckles. “Can Harry and I be alone to talk?” After the others departed with a nudge and two winks, Ginny said, “You choose the oddest times to visit.”

“You think that only because you don’t know my reasons for coming.”

“You mentioned before that it had something to do with getting to see your parents, whom you never knew.”

“It’s more than that.” Harry sipped the cocoa, which was better than any he could remember having.

A chorus of rumbles started and grew, rattling the cups in the cabinets just as passed by overhead and faded rapidly.

“Fighter jets,” she whispered. “You don’t know anything that’s happening, do you?” She shoved a newspaper over to him off the seat beside her. The headline read, Finland, Sweden Determined to Remain Neutral Despite Continued Provocation.

“The Muggles are at war. There are rumors of Grindelwald’s return. Countries are taking the strangest sides, settling old scores, and then switching sides again.”

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Her voice dropped lower, wavering. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do, Harry.” She sniffled and blinked shining eyes. “What in Merlin’s Bloody Realm is Ginny Weasley supposed to do?”

“Someone attacked the Potter house?” At her nod, he added, “Who?”

“No one really knows for certain. Could have been Pretenders, as they are called. They were dressed like Death Eaters, but no one was killed so they wouldn’t have put up a Dark Mark. They’ve been doing that elsewhere, though, closer to the fighting, in Eastern Europe. Killing the generals and prime ministers of our allies. Creating chaos right in front of everyone. Some try to go neutral after that. Understandably, I guess.”

She then pleaded, “Why are they doing this? It doesn’t benefit anybody.”

“It benefits Grindelwald,” Harry said. “He likes fighting, likes letting wizards do as they will and that can’t happen if civilization is intact.”

“Maybe there shouldn’t be any wizards at all, in that case,” she muttered into her mug before taking a swig. She peered at him over the rim. “You should be in your other disguise, not looking like him. It’s confusing.”

“I hear he is curled up in a dark cupboard,” Harry quipped.

Ginny choked on mouthful of cocoa. “Probably,” she said when she stopped laughing.

She drank in silence for a while. “What should I do?”

“When the time is right you’ll know what to do,” Harry said.

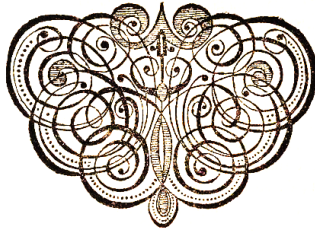
Her eyes fell closed. “Merlin I hope so.”

“Would you like to do some drills?”

Her wretched expression took on a darkened aspect. “Yes. Yes, I would.”

Author’s Notes: I posted a new copy of to make clearer the situation with the two Planes being the same (the Peaceful Plane and the Dumbledore/Grindelwald Plane). I was way too subtle with just one reference to Harry not getting cold.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE



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“You curl the wand handle back around like this, under your wrist. If you rotate the point instead, it doesn’t come out right.” Harry explained this while standing close behind Ginny, close enough that her back brushed his front.

She reached out and rehearsed the motion once again without speaking. “This spell seems dark,” she complained.

“What . . . because combined with a Cutting Curse it will strangle someone with their own entrails?” Harry quipped.

“Well, yes!” she burst out, laughing nervously.

“Look at it this way,” Harry gently said, “nothing will demoralize the enemy more than watching that happen to one of their own.”

“Uh, I suppose,” Ginny said. The tip of her wand trembled as she went through the motion again.

“You do know a Cutting Curse, right?”

“Yeah. Professor Snape taught it to me so I’d know how to block it. Some others too. You’re not talking about knowing them just for Countering though . . .”

Harry slid over to her other side, still pressing close. He lifted her wand hand by the elbow and said, “People die accidentally in the heat of battle all the time, right?” She did not reply, but her eyes searched outward toward the brush bordering the old orchard. He dropped his voice. “Sometimes your friends even. You must have lost a few old schoolmates in the fighting.”

She swallowed. “That doesn’t seem like a good enough reason to use a spell like this.” She stepped away from him, wand still held out. “I don’t mind learning them

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so I know what they look like, what they do. I don't want to get surprised." After a breath, she whispered the spell accompanied by an abbreviated copy of the motion. A section of shrubs whipped as if in a typhoon and braided themselves together. The motion ceased and the bark-stripped branches toppled over.

"I didn't even put much behind that," she said.

"It's a Dark Magic spell," Harry said, coming up close again. "They always work well if you are angry enough."

Still staring at the brush, she said, "But I'm not angry."

"Yes, you are," Harry said, mouth close to her ear.

"I don't think so, really," she said, not arguing despite her words. She waved a Chain Hex at an abused apple tree then canceled it. She canted her head toward him and said, "Any chance you were, I don't know, wishing things hadn't stopped abruptly the way they did . . . last time?"

Harry assumed she was discussing their time at the Shrieking Shack. "Definitely."

Ginny's brothers noisily burst through the brush just then and Harry, lacking a real disguise, found his persona inconvenient in front of them.

"I have to get home," Harry said. Then while bending to tie his shoe, whispered to Ginny, "I'll be back later. Think of somewhere we can go to be alone."

She blushed and nodded and stepped away from him with an air of casual dismissal.

"Say hello to your mum and dad for us," Bill said. "Make sure they let us know if they need anything. Anything at all."

Harry bit his lip, struggling against the way this open charity battered his poise. He felt hotly jealous and touched, back and forth in rapid succession. "Right," he managed before Disapparating.

Harry had other things he wanted to do. Thinking ahead with twisted anticipation to later, and how nicely he could pass the time until then, he took himself to the open fields northwest of Shrewsthorpe, to the place where he had encountered the coven trapping a vampire, the place where the membrane dividing this world from the Dark Plane felt thinner.

The cloud cover skirted by, churning wispy fingers over the treetops. The feathery mist chilled his robes. He closed his eyes and rocked on this feet. He did not send out a song, just basked in the tendrils of the shadows, letting them buoy him. He could do anything, touch anything.

One shadow seeped in close, and then another. Hooded figures stood facing him, wavering. Harry could feel their uncertainty tugging against his mind, which was new and unwelcome. Angered, he grasped at the other nearby shadows, drawing each of them in with a low gravely song.

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Another figure arrived, fixed in the same startled posture as the others, then two figures arrived together. One of these stumbled as he appeared and raised his wand, lowered it, then raised it again.

“It’s Potter!” his voice growled, tongue muted by having to travel over sharp teeth.

Harry dropped Greyback to the dry field. He yelped and curled around his arm.

“Anyone else want to argue?” Harry asked, turning to take in the group. He was relishing the confusion caused by posing as himself, gleeful at corrupting by proxy this place’s weak Harry Potter.

Two more arrived, shuffling into position. The wide gaps made it clear many were missing, but Harry cut off the song, needing to pay attention, given how antsy they were behaving. Rather than standing straight and patient, they turned to each other questioningly.

“What?” Harry demanded.

A small voice Harry did not recognize said, “Begging the glorious grace of your wisdom, my Lord, we don’t understand why we are called. Or . . . or how. We were Summoned and we have assembled, but . . . you . . . we do not understand. You are not our master.”

Harry stepped closer to him, paining him. The Death Eater sucked a whistling breath through his teeth.

Harry, propelled by this unexpected insolence, said, “You are mine; that’s all you need to understand.”

Lacking enough breath to speak, the wizard puffed through his mask, “We were Summoned and after seeking everywhere, found our new master, but it is not you, and we are bewildered.” The man fell to his knees when Harry lost the rest of his control for an instant. Harry let go of the Mark and in a voice full of relief the wizard said, “He will kill us if we disobey . . . if he finds out we are absent from our posts.”

“Grindelwald,” Harry said.

The small wizard nodded rapidly. “Yes, Master. The one. He conquers all. I come upon your Summons but I must return, Master. Must not disobey. You may kill me, Master, you own my soul, but I cannot disobey him; he is all powerful.”

The small wizard Disapparated and a ripple passed around the circle before the robed forms went rigid, fixed again into antsy postures. Even the wind fell still, letting the misty rain settle like a veil. With every set of masked eyes fixed upon him, Harry paced in a circle. “Where is he?”

“Where. Is. He?” Harry shouted this time.

“In London,” a familiar, younger voice replied.

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Harry stepped over to Marcus Flint and stared at his pink-veined eyes through the holes of his mask. "Where exactly?"

"He is tormenting the Muggle leaders by muddling the computers the Muggles use for money."

Resentment roused Harry's mind and limbs, fighting against the instinct to slow down and plot carefully. "Take me to him."

"He will destroy you, Master," the figure beside Flint pleaded. Harry recognized the bulky form and voice of the Death Eater from Honeydukes. "Do not go. Please, Master. I am loyal, Master. Please don't go."

"Take me," Harry insisted to Flint, pressing on the young man's Mark to forestall any other arguments. He clenched Harry's arm, showing less effect from the pain than the others had.

They arrived in a steel and glass building overlooking the city skyline at eye level. The open floor was strewn with broken office partitions, and wire bundles dangled where the ceiling's framework had burst open, shedding the foam ceiling tiles in orderly, suspended columns.

Flint jerked his hand back from Harry's arm. "I have to ask some friends where he is right now. Stay here." He strode off like one annoyed and inconvenienced.

Harry stepped over unstable debris to stand at the window. Cars crawled through streets packed full with people walking. They walked in all directions, so despite resembling an evacuation, it was most likely just the daily traffic.

Harry spun with his wand when Flint returned. The Death Eater laid spells behind him before closing the door. "He is on the top floor. You have to be my prisoner if you wish me to take you to him. My life and the lives of everyone I know are not worth it." As if answering Harry's unspoken threat, he added gruffly. "Punish me all you want, I don't care."

Harry stepped over and shrugged in agreement.

"I need your wand," Flint said.

"You can't have it."

Flint stood hulking over Harry. "Then I won't take you. Kill me if you want. You don't know where my family are hiding and he does."

"Have you been on the top floor?"

"No."

Harry held out his wand, but his hand kicked back when something inside him balked with fear. In one forceful movement, Harry pushed the wand into Flint's hand, just to get even with that pathetic instinct. He would not need it right away anyway; he could repel any attacks without it.

"Hold it loosely in your left hand so I can steal it back," Harry said.

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"I'll be just as dead if that happens."

"Then set it somewhere in the room. Or hand it someone you don't like as long as it's not Grindelwald."

Flint stood staring at Harry. "You have no idea what you are getting into," he spat. "You destroyed He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named, but you don't even know how you did it."

"Yes I do, actually. And I'm tired of waiting."

Flint sounded tired too as he turned to the door. "You have no idea what he is like. He could level this building with a single wave of his wand. And he will eventually. He wants the Muggles reduced to Mediaeval times so he is free to do as he pleases."

"Do you want him destroyed?" Harry asked quietly, because Flint had cracked the door open.

"I want to survive."

The instinct inside Harry gave a leap in commiseration. Harry sneered at both of them.

"Everyone dies sometime," Harry said, but it came out forced.

As they marched toward the elevators, Harry methodically placed one foot before the other. The shadows were his. He would not give them up. No one was going to get in the way of Harry's communing with his servants at his will. But as they made their way through the hollowed out building, ignoring doors and stepping through broken walls, fear began trickling through his chest and up into his throat.

When the magically powered elevator stopped at the top floor, Flint shoved Harry out before him, wand jabbing into his back. The guards lining the corridor straightened and pulled their wands to level, gazing curiously as the two of them passed. Only two were Death Eaters, disappointing Harry, who reminded himself that he could slip away any time, but that only calmed his heart marginally. His nerves screamed about his lack of allies, and urged him to run, to back off and assess, find a weakness and pry at it in secret. His instincts even had the temerity to point out how well the last operation worked because of doing exactly that. Harry, sick of lacking his own purpose, stepped resolutely along the row of guards, stepping out of reach of the wand poking him.

The hunched guard standing before a sleek set of blonde wooden doors went inside for a moment before holding one open to let the two of them inside.

Grindelwald sat in the pose of a guru on a half moon desk near the windows of a sweeping office, extravagant robes draped neatly down to the floor. Behind him the clouds ballooned heavy and grey with glaring edges. Halfway along the smooth wooden wall, cowering on the floor, were four Muggles in nice suits, three men and a

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woman. They flinched back as Harry and Flint walked by.

“What is this?” Grindelwald asked, eyes flashing in child-like anticipation. “Harry Potter! And I thought this lovely day could not get any lovelier.” He held out his hand to Flint. “Give me his wand.”

Flint, lip trapped between his teeth, reached into his robe pocket. Harry watched him move and could not draw air into his chest. He could escape at any time, but he needed his wand to fight, to prove who owned what. Clammy alarm took over Harry, and straining against a breathless instinct to simply slip away to safety, Harry leapt at Flint, grabbing his arm.

Spells shot out. Harry squelched them, sending guards flying backwards. Flint, knocked off-balance, turned his wand on Harry and took the force his own Blasting Curse. Harry scooped up his wand where it fell and raised it just as an Ivy Charm flew out of Grindelwald’s wand.

Harry Countered it while jumping to a spot closer to the wall where he could get the guards all on one side of him. One of the Muggles ran for the door, and a guard hit him with a Jelly Legs. He sent forth a sob as he fell, and clawed at the floor with his hands to pull himself toward the door.

More spells flew at Harry from the remaining guards. Harry bent over with the effort at Squelching them all. Shouts of pain and surprise went up.

“Don’t curse him, you idiots!” Grindelwald shouted as something fingery, rippling with thorns, curled out from his wand.

Harry put up a Chrysanthemum Block, but the charm tore through it and jerked him up by his shoulder, puncturing and tearing at his arm. As Harry’s toes left the floor, he tried to slip into the Dark Plane, and made it halfway. The room contorted, half grey and still, half a flurry of spells and dark figures. His arm, aflame with needles of pain and stretched until it would tear free, hauled him bodily back into the overworld. Harry craned his neck and swung his free arm in a broad loop to strike back with a Strangling Hex, then a Cutting Curse, but some unknown Counter leapt from Grindelwald’s wand even as the attacks exited Harry’s wand, dousing them. The tentacled spell quivered tight then uncoiled with a snap, flopping Harry hard onto the carpeting and pinning him there. His wand jerked free of his hand, burning his skin with the motion.

Harry’s midsection spasmed desperately as he gasped air into windless lungs. The tiled ceiling rocked as his vision warped. Harry heard himself make a desperate wheezing noise and then bit back the next attempt at gulping air as Grindelwald stepped up beside him, wand aimed steadily down at Harry’s heart.

“I have been waiting for this chance,” the old wizard said, pocketing Harry’s wand as he spoke. “I have been preparing for this chance. My only regret is Albus isn’t

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here to see this.”

Through his swimming vision, Harry watched the radiant blue-eyed face stretch into a luxurious smile. Grindelwald’s arm swung in a complicated arc, preparing a strike. Everything slowed and grew watery. Grindelwald’s robes flowed lazily behind his limbs as he moved. His face fastened into a gleeful rictus.

Harry was going to die. The Wand of Destiny would complete its circling and some charm would emerge that would snuff, suck, or tear the life from him.

Harry’s limbs ignited into straining panic. His body, seared by horror, arched and thrashed, desperate to escape the spell holding his limbs, to escape certain death. The sinew in his arms trembled with hopeless effort as he wrenched against the bonds, sweat made his robes grab at his flesh.

The spell struck. It coated Harry’s ribs in acid and lit his skin on fire. The floor tilted beneath him, threatening to roll him off the earth. Harry screamed, made himself stop, then choked on the liquid filling his throat.

“Oh, I do wish dear Albus were here,” Grindelwald lamented with comic sadness.

The spell faded. Harry coughed and sucked desperate gulps of air, finally drawing in a full lungful of air in relief tinged with ongoing panic. The thorny coils bit more with each breath and blood trickled along his skin, soaking his robes. But the floor held firm as a steady plane of beige beneath him. His eyes danced around at the guards, at the Muggles, but Grindelwald’s wand was repeating the same gesture. Harry’s overwrought mind watched it, traced every last detail of its motion, traced the blue stain of the veins showing through Grindelwald’s waxy skin.

NO! Again Harry thrashed helplessly, even before the spell arrived, forcing piteous gargling cries out of his throat.

Something flew across Harry’s vision, something so mundane his mind initially rejected recognizing it as a chair. But the acid pain cooled as Grindelwald stumbled backward. The chair and the wizard tumbled to the floor. Harry heard the crack of a bone snapping and Grindelwald made a throaty sound of pain and clutched his arm.

Harry jerked against the charm, but was only able to raise his left shoulder and his head. One of the Muggles stood defiant, weighty paunch heaving, face red with hot anger. No one moved. Grindelwald grunted weakly and rocked with groaning effort to sit up. His spine bent like a shepherd’s crook and his beard dragged on the floor, making him appear exceedingly old, like a corpse or a dummy at a carnival. Clutching his arm, he painfully transferred his wand to his other spotted hand and raised it.

“I hate Muggles,” he growled. “Every last one of you can die miserably like the useless vermin you are!”

Eyes slitted, mouth sneering, he flicked his wrist, tossing off a Disemboweling

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Hex. Harry Squelched it. But the blowback did not strike Grindelwald. The Wand of Destiny jumped from Grindelwald's hand and hovered as the spell scattered, bursting open the carpeting, the ceiling tiles, and across one guard's body. The charm trapping Harry snapped off just as the wand burst like a firework of magic, and Harry rolled and scabbled away in panic, and slipped through the floor and away.

Harry knelt in the grey dust, bent over his knees, hands on his head, gasping nearly as fast as his racing heart. Creatures scuttled toward him, rummy eyes gleaming, jaws snapping. Harry threw himself backward, hands contacting slimy teeth and spike-haired leathery bodies. Claws tore at his fingers and arm.

Harry Disapparated for another part of the Dark Plane and began to jog on numb limbs, glancing backward frequently. The creatures gathered again, chattering and clicking as they followed along, closing in, hundreds of them. The ground disappeared beneath a carpet of their glistening bodies. Harry turned, trying to face them down, but residual panic over nearly dying ruled him, made his limbs mushy and his feet clumsy.

Harry Disapparated again and remembered that he had lost his wand back in the Muggle office tower. He came to a stop and stood hunched, letting the creatures catch up with him. He should return for his wand, but he could not work up the courage. The knowledge of this weakness darkened his mind to such a degree that he remained there in that spot while the demons writhed over one another, two deep, then three in a mad scramble to get closer.

Finally, when the claws reached his robes, Harry shook himself and Disapparated for just opposite his house. There, before the creatures could re-congregate, he fell away for home, for the promised warm hearthstone. Harry drew in one glimpse of the back of the drawing room desk and Snape's worn and faded robe hem before the cold and stress closed down his mind.

Harry woke to a noxious spell and a stark burning on his hand. Confused and instantly snapping back to fearful, he yelped and yanked his limbs away, restrained from moving far by his tangled robes and a smothering wrap. Harry opened his eyes. He was installed on the couch. Snape sat beside him still holding out a rag and a brush stained violet with Halogen Tincture.

Harry swung his bundled legs to the floor and sat up, chest heaving with a new bout of useless alarm. He held up his hand, which had been cut in jagged rows across his palm. Teeth had torn part of the flesh off his little finger. The sting from the treated wounds rendered him frantically miserable.

"Do you want me to finish healing that?" Snape asked. "Your other wounds were clean, but these were not and I thought it best to disinfect them before sealing them."

Despite Snape's snide tone, Harry held out his hand. The air in the room chilled

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his bare back. The tincture made him flinch, but he waited through the healing spells before jerking his hand away and clumsily shrugging into his bloodied robes. Only after he angrily tore himself free of the blanket and stood up did he notice Candide sitting nearby.

“What happened, Harry?” she asked. “You were bleeding all over.”

Arcadius lay in the bouncing chair, face soft and round in sleep.

Harry’s lip twitched. He did not reply and instead marched off to his room.

Snape followed behind and remained in the doorway while Harry threw himself down on his bed and stared at the ceiling. It was not tiled, and his room was not in the Muggle office building in London, but Harry nevertheless had to roll to the side to shut down the relentless memory.

“Are you quite all right? I am quite curious what happened to you.”

“Leave me be,” Harry said, glad his voice came out in a steady flat menace. That alone calmed him.

Snape’s voice fell quieter as he said, “I am at your service if you need me.” And then he was gone.

Harry stalked over to close the door. Back on the bed, he pounded his head on the mattress in a bid to rid himself of the endless replay of memories from just minutes before.

“That bloody wand,” Harry snarled, happy to fix on an excuse for losing, but the ego soothing elation of this was short lived.

His limbs ached and his head pounded. His instincts were berating him for putting everything at risk. The room closed in on him. Anything could happen to him. Death, bearing Grindelwald’s visage, stalked him even here in his quiet room. Harry threw himself off the bed and stepped to the window to look out over the perfectly ordinary walled gardens beyond. His hand ached for his lost wand.

Harry breathed in and out, fogging the window. He was powerful. He had battled at least a dozen out there just the other day. Somehow, he could not recapture that feeling of easy power. If he could die, he was weak.

“It’s only that bloody wand,” Harry muttered. “He’s old and weak without it. He’s just a cheater.”

But that wasn’t entirely true. Grindelwald had methodically figured Harry out since their last meeting. And Harry had underestimated him. And the wand, the wand made him impervious to Harry.

Harry crossed to the door and stepped out onto the balcony. Candide glanced up, eyes full of real concern.

“Severus,” Harry said.

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In a smooth motion, Snape stood from the couch opposite and looked up at him, pose taut.

Harry stood with his hands at his sides, body trembling. “The Ministry must have got my old wand from Percy. I need it.”

Snape’s only response was to step to the dining room, and a moment later, the flare of the Floo Network sounded.

Harry avoided Candide’s eyes and withdrew to throw himself back down on the bed. This time he felt empty instead of restless as he stared up at the cracks like bare tree branches running along the plaster.



“Ginny, someone is here for you!” Mrs. Weasley shouted.

Ginny skipped to the door, ignoring the twins who slithered along behind her, necks elongated to better observe.

“Oh, Professor Snape.” Ginny held open the door with her hand, neither going out, nor inviting him in.

“Ginny thought you were Harry,” George said, grinning broadly.

“Imagine the disappointment,” Fred chimed in.

Snape glared at one then the other of them.

“If looks could curse . . .” George said, putting his hand over his heart and falling back a step.

Fred leaned closer to his brother and said, plenty loud, “If looks could curse, his would be the first to do so successfully. . . .”

“Go. Away.” Ginny said.

Mrs. Weasley shooed them off. “Would you like a spot of tea, Professor?”

Snape turned his glare upon her a moment and did not reply. “You were expecting Potter, were you? A word with you, Ms. Weasley.”

Ginny followed him outside. The wind had picked up. She wrapped her arms around herself and ducked into it as they walked.

They did not go far. Upon reaching the tracks of the drive, Snape spun around and leaned close. “We are talking about the Other Harry, correct?” His words snapped out into the air, overcoming the wind.

Ginny paused, then nodded, eyes searching Snape’s face.

Snape paced away and came back, leaning in closer yet. “How many times have you seen him?”

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Ginny crossed her arms tighter, trying for defiant in the face of Snape's high strung mood. "Three times."

It was Snape's turn to search her eyes. Ginny tried to remember her Occlumency, but it probably failed.

"We have a problem. We have a most serious problem." He paced away and stopped, facing the back of the property. The wind tossed his robes behind him as he stared off beyond the trees. He stalked back to Ginny, eyes unsteady, rounding on everything: the house, the lawn, Ginny, then back again.

"What's going on?" Ginny asked. She was used to his moods, but this one seemed an extreme example.

Stress elongated his face, drew his sallow cheeks inward. He shook his head faintly.

Ginny huffed and dropped her arms. "What? You're not going to tell me?"

"He is playing games with us."

Ginny could not really argue with that. She stood hunched, waiting.

Snape added, "He is the second coming of the Dark Lord."

Ginny's face pinched, then a laugh burst out of her lips. "Oh, please."

Snape grabbed her by the front of her robes and Disapparated the two of them to a rubbish strewn walled-in field. The sun was shining here in patches, and out of the wind it was almost warm. She tried to step back, but he had too firm a hold of her.

"Listen to me," he said, directly into her face, so close she could count the stray hairs trying to connect his brows into one. "The Death Eaters, the ones helping Grindelwald, you remember them, correct?"

"Yes," she said, sarcastically patient.

"That other Potter just Summoned them, or a handful of them, using their Marks." He let go of her robes and stepped back, calming himself with obvious effort. "Including myself." He gestured at his chest. "I saw him. He was the same clueless outsider as before, only this time he was punishing the Dark Lord's old servants."

Ginny wrapped her arms around herself again, not because of the cold. "Well, what's wrong with that?"

This gave him pause. "In theory, nothing. In practice he could just as well be the Dark Lord's second coming."

Her face contorted. "I'm not certain I believe you." She leaned back, expecting retribution.

But Snape did not react, merely stared off at nothing. "If he returns, have as little to do with him as you can. For your own sake. He does not seem to remain here long, fortunately."

"Really, professor, I-

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Snape swung his face in close again. “He is exceedingly dangerous. Do. Not. Trust. Him.” Snape relented, exhaling hard. “When did you see him? What did he say?”

“He came and did drills with me. That’s what he usually does . . . I’ve told you that. He said he’d come back to visit . . . though . . . later today.” Her voice fell, reluctant to add the last.

“You should be elsewhere then. Visit an obscure friend for two days. Do not tell your family where you are going.”

“Really?”

“If you are going to be my protégé, you are going to do as I say.” When her mind flickered to thoughts of packing a bag at home, he snarled, “You will go from here. Right now. I will tell your family enough to ease their minds. GO.”

Ginny stepped back, wavering, trying to take it all in.

“You still fail to understand the gravity of your situation. Fortunately for your sake, I do. If you do not leave now, I will use a Mummification Curse on you and stash you in a safe house for two days. The choice is yours.”

“All right. All right.” Ginny thought of an old school chum she had owled back and forth often in the past, but not in the last year, and Disapparated for her place, already concocting a story about a fight with her brothers to excuse her sudden arrival.



Harry did not feel hungry, precisely, but his limbs quivered from a lack of food, so he made his weary way downstairs for breakfast. He stopped in the doorway, grabbing the edge of it, upon spotting Tonks at the table.

“Morning, Harry. It’s Friday and Arthur sent me yet again.”

“Harry is in a bit of a mood,” Candide informed her with factual casualness.

“Ah,” Tonks said, sounding glad somehow, as if that concluded her task.

Harry sat down on the end beside Snape instead of beside Tonks. A plate brimming with bacon and toast appeared before him. Harry’s body forced him to eat, unaware of the strange looks his famished devouring drew from Tonks.

Snape said, “Harry was under the weather yesterday, so he ate little.”

“Feeling better now?” Tonks asked.

Harry nodded only because it was easier to do that than challenge all of them.

Breakfast consumed, Harry stared at his grease-streaked plate, filling up with jealousy of Grindelwald, of his ability to inspire his servants, of his easy rise to power.

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The jealousy spread like a stain through his chest. His instincts insisted that he could have all that. He just had to want it enough.

Sounding conversational, Tonks said, “Arthur mentioned that you asked for your old wand from the evidence cupboard.”

Harry patted his pocket to reassure himself it held his wand, although it was too short to reach easily. He resisted pulling it out just to hold it and clasped his hands in his lap. He needed something to do. He needed to shake this fear and self-loathing with action, any kind of action.

Tonks pushed back her chair and tossed her napkin on the table. “You’re a stubborn one, Harry.” She stood, put her hands on her hips, and twisted her face in thought. “I need to talk to you, alone.”

In the library, Tonks said, “Well, it’s against my better sense, but Arthur wants you to come along on an operation tomorrow. You can’t breathe a word of it, not to Ginny especially.”

“I won’t say anything,” Harry snipped, trying to read behind her gaze.

“Arthur thinks you’ll be useful.” She paused to frown. “Piecing together truth serum interviews with the lot we captured here at your house, we think we found the Boss’ HQ, and we’ve planned a raid, with everyone we trust that we can muster up.”

“It won’t stop what’s happening,” Harry pointed out.

“It will help,” she argued. “The head blokes have connections the underlings don’t. We just have to hit them again before they get as big again. Infiltrate them while they are rebuilding.” Her fierce tone eased as she added, “Rodgers suggested that you might want to do that if you decide to wait longer on returning, but Arthur would rather just have you back.”

The ice encasing Harry’s heart melted a little at thoughts of a power vacuum waiting to be filled. He just had to give in, and he could have as much as he wanted, of anything. He gave her a vague nod.

“All right then, I’ll come by to get you. Be here and be ready. We’re keeping most everything secret until the very last minute to help with leaks.”

Harry nodded again, more firmly. A raid surrounded by allies around would give him a chance for action. He hungered to prove that incapacitating fear could be beaten back.

After Tonks departed Harry sat on the divan in the library, staring at the wall of shelves, at the cracked leather and aged paper, the eroded gold leaf titles. Half of the authors were dead, at least. These paper and ink whimpers sent forward into the future were all that was left of them. Harry let his eyes unfocus and the wall became an abstract blur smelling of lost time.

The tiny quivers still running along the periphery of Harry’s limbs stilled and

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calm flowed treacly through his midsection. The books he wanted would not be here in the library. But if Snape had been doing the research Harry suspected he had been doing, he would certainly have what Harry wanted.

Harry slipped silently away for Snape's office at Hogwarts.

Muted light seeped through the tall windows, rendering the mullions into gothic crosses. Files sat in a neat stack on the desk, along with the grade book, which prickled with a mild protective curse. The area smelled of Lupin's vaguely animal muskiness. Harry found the books he wanted wedged in the corner between two tall shelves, under a decorative drop cloth, with the heaviest lead bindings on the bottom. They were protected by overlapping spells, which Harry systematically neutralized. He hovered the middle book to the desk, intending to work his way from there to the top and bottom equally, under the assumption that Snape would not leave the most dangerous on top, and that the bottom was too obvious a storage place.

Harry ran his hand over his wand before slipping it back into his pocket, reinforcing the old familiarity of it. It did not feel as powerful as his newer one, but it felt more alive and friendly. Dumbledore had intended this wand for him and Harry felt a scornful amusement at what Dumbledore would think of how he was using it.

The first book had a shiny tag on the cover announcing it was on loan from the Magical Library of Cashel. Harry flipped to the middle of the book and scanned the dense handwritten text while flipping slowly through the pages. He stopped at: I imployed the studie of the sowl woambe to the silver cayce. Historie has beene silent acordinge to the noates of my master and he fownde owtt these spells himselfe. Tonight especely I feele my master is not gone. Not dead. He battels yet to returnne to this hoame.

Harry settled into the desk to read the notes of an apprentice left to recreate the last spells of his absent master.

Long after midnight, with half formed spells swimming circles in his mind, Harry slipped back to his room. The bedside lamp had been lit, but otherwise the room was as he had left it. He slipped out of his robe and sat against his pillows in his t-shirt and jeans. An inner voice was chastising him in a low relentless hum. He was wasting his time. If he gave in, he did not need to research how to escape death.

Harry rubbed his shoulder where the thorny spell had bitten him. The memory of the battle still sucked the strength from his limbs. He pulled his wand out, but there was nothing to use it on. Tomorrow he could hit something and that would make him feel better.

The knock on the door did not surprise Harry. He waved the door open without moving his eyes from the phoenix carvings on the wardrobe door in the corner of the room.

ENSNARED, PART II

“Is your shoulder bothering you?” Snape asked.

Harry slipped his hand to his side and shook his head.

“It was mysterious wound, which may very well have required more than a simple healing spell.”

“It’s fine,” Harry replied.

They both fell silent. Harry wanted to ask something, but couldn’t give voice to the yawning gap churning in him. He needed something and suspected Snape had it, or could get it. But he did not know what to ask for, or how, so he said nothing.

Snape eventually said, “It is two o’clock and you do not appear tired. Do you want something to make you sleep?”

“Do I need to sleep?”

“Not always, certainly at your age, but lack of it will eventually diminish your skills.”

Harry turned his gaze to Snape there in the doorway. His face – framed by hair gaining a sprinkling of grey – looked back at Harry with an easy neutrality. His eyes held flat thoughts without significant meaning. The lamplight caught the yellows and oranges in his crisply edged plaid dressing gown, a gift from Candide. It seemed so unlikely a thing for Snape to wear, that Harry laughed aloud.

Snape ignored this. “You have no responsibilities tomorrow, I assume, so it is no matter,” he said, moving to turn away. “If you do want some potion, knock-”

“I’ll take some,” Harry commanded, drawing Snape back from departing.

Snape appeared to consider this before saying. “As you wish.”

Harry stared into the glass of slippery blue liquid Snape returned with. His instincts refused to put it to his lips. They refused with the added force of having been correct about not flying into a hopeless battle against Grindelwald.

“What is this?” Harry asked.

“It is called Night Sky. It is a potion I found in the childcare manual under the chapter of things not to give to children under ten. It is a rather mild concoction.” They stared at each other before Snape went on. “If you wish to brew it yourself, the ingredients are downstairs in the bathroom. I can walk you through it, or if you prefer, simply give you the manual with the brewing instructions.”

Harry stared at him. He could not read a single thing behind his dark eyes. His instincts said of course you can’t.

Harry handed the potion back. “I don’t need anything.” He curled up on the bed in his clothes and stuffed a pillow under his head. “I want time to think,” he said, but this was a stark lie. He wanted just about anything but. His head was full of fear and failure and unremitting berating from his better instincts.

“I’ll leave it here. I’ll set the manual out for you also.”

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“Fine.”

Snape departed, failing for the first time ever to douse the lamp before doing so. Harry stared at the darkened window for a while, thinking about nothing as much as possible. Without forethought, he sat up suddenly, layered the floor around the bed with every alarm spell he could think of, then drank the potion.



“I need to hear you reiterate that your loyalty is to Harry,” Snape said. He stood just inside the door to Tonks’ flat, cloak bundled tightly around him.

Tonks blinked her tired eyes in the glaring lamplight. The sun gave not even a hint yet about rising. She brushed her brown hair around with her hand. It spasmed straight up and then down again. “What, I have to pick a side now?”

“Knowing what side one is on, as early as possible, is critical to one’s well being in most situations. So yes, I am insisting you pick a side.”

“Yes, I am on Harry’s side.” She held up a hand. “Up to a point.”

Snape clasped his hands before him and leaned toward her. “State your criteria.”

“The point at which the personal cost to me of being blackmailed by you . . . and him, exceeds any damage he causes. I’m finished at that point.”

“Very well,” Snape acknowledged. “The reason I am here is Harry tells me you have invited him along tomorrow on a mission to raid the mob boss’ headquarters.”

“He wasn’t supposed to tell anyone that.”

“He did not tell me by choice.” Snape could see her draw a breath and hold it in. He added, “If you believe you are unable to hide that fact from him, I will need to make you forget it, for both of our safety.”

She stared at him, breathing only shallowly. She asked, “Who’s your loyalty to?”

“The Harry I remember, and am resolved to recover.”

She put her lean hands on her hips. “You should have said that before. My loyalty to him goes a very long way.”

Snape nodded crookedly. “Well, good to know.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what’s going on with him. He’s more than stubborn and disdainful now.”

“I have a hunch what is happening to him, but I will spare you my guesses until a later date, and only if necessary. For now, what I need from you is a promise that you will keep close watch on him tomorrow. I am at a loss why he was invited. He should not be going along.”

“Why not? We want to keep him involved. We want to make things up to him.”

“His self control is not what it should be.”

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“His self control has never been what it should be,” Tonks pointed out.

Snape closed his eyes briefly. “The range of his possible actions has broadened. Have you forgotten the clean up around my house already?”

She stepped away and stretched her neck. “That outcome did seem a bit bloody, even considering it was self defense against so many opponents. He didn’t kill anyone though.”

“I fear he would have had he not changed into his Animagus form which, while violent, works only on simple instincts, not real anger, or worse.” He stepped around to make her face him again. “I need you to promise you will keep an eye on him tomorrow.”

“Severus, it’s going to be mad. We don’t have enough staff as it is – ”

“Promise me.”

His shift in tone to desperate caught her up. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you sound like that. All right. I promise. Why don’t you just come along? I’m certain I could get Reggie and Arthur to agree.”

“Since you came to only talk to him and swore him to secrecy, such an invitation would raise more suspicion than I can afford. And given whom you are attacking, I would like to be guarding my house so Harry has someplace to return to.”

She scratched her face and rubbed one eye thoroughly. “Maybe you should make it hard for me to remember that part about how he didn’t tell you the plans intentionally. One less thing to worry about.”

Snape’s wand appeared in his hand and as he raised the point near her , she turned her head to the side and bit her lip. “You’re careful with this spell, right?”

“Always,” he softly replied.



Harry woke groggily to the sunlight streaming straight in his window. He could not remember falling asleep. His empty wand hand clutched at the sheets as he recalled the day before, recalled the helpless agony. But he was home now. He was safe, mostly safe. Grindelwald and the Wand of Destiny could not reach him here, but that thought, and taking up his wand from under his pillow, did not console him entirely.

Harry sat up. The wrinkles in his jeans and shirt chafed at his oily, damp skin. Prickly anger flowed out his arms and into his fingertips, numbing them.

Loathe to face anyone, Harry remained on his bed watching the dust motes tumbling in the sunlight. He wished Tonks would come so he would have an excuse to leave his room. He wished she would come so he could distract his mind by sending

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the seething tendrils of memory outward to burn upon something other than his own spirit.

He leaned over the bed and tugged out the strange book. He paged forward in it, looking for a border that appealed to him. He paused at one showing cheery winter snows swelling then melting, spindly branches budding, ivy climbing around driftwood. The buds burgeoned, heaved open, blackened and burst forth with maggots and slick centipedes. The ivy withered, grew sinewy and brittle then, with a rustle, shattered into dust and fragments.

Failure seeds from within and concludes in obscurity. Weakness over self leads to failure. Weakness becomes Obscurity. Obscurity becomes Death.

Harry lifted the heavy cover off the crumpled duvet and dropped it closed. He could go anywhere, he reminded himself, trying for pride.

But he was not strong enough to survive just anywhere and that thought ate at him.

A knock came on the door, sending sparks of alarm through Harry, followed by greedy anticipation.

“You look like you slept in your clothes,” Tonks said. “You didn’t need to stay that ready all night.”

Harry brushed his hair with his fingers and went to his wardrobe for a set of robes to toss over his clothes.

“You’re assigned to me,” Tonks said stiffly. “This is like field work, you understand.”

Harry decided he was supposed to nod and did so.

“Grab your invisibility cloak and come on, then.”

They landed in a Floo node at the back of a disused boat works. Grass grew through the floor, sustained by light leaching through the collapsing roof and the gaping boards hanging out over the water. Rusted chains dangled from seized pulleys. A weathered canal boat hull rested half off its blocks at the top of a long ramp with fetid water lapping at the bottom of it.

Mr. Weasley, Vineet and Rogan were standing beside the bow of the boat, leaning together. They looked up as Harry and Tonks picked their way over boards and fallen roof tiles.

“Good to see you, Harry,” Mr. Weasley greeted him. To Tonks he said, “We secured this area without attracting any attention, so we’re just waiting for the rest to assemble.”

Rodgers arrived, followed by the other apprentices except Tridant, as well as five members of Reversal and two from Games. Kerry Ann diverted from joining the rest to pat Harry on the arm. She did not speak, for which Harry was glad.

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Rodgers unrolled a parchment with a diagram of an old factory on it. “This is what it looks like on the outside. They’ve done a bang up job of masking it, but there’s a great deal of magical spatial distortion at play on the inside of it. This road here was cut off by the motorway, and there’s a steep hillside just behind, so there’s little Muggle access. The end wall near the motorway will be the side where we post Reversal. Inside, the building has been cut into magical zones with a no-man’s-land between them. If you fail to move between each zone exactly as proscribed by whoever put the spells down, then you will fall into a generalized trap applied to the entire building. We don’t actually know where it leads, so don’t expect to get rescued quickly, should that fate befall you.”

Rodgers went on: “According to descriptions of the place, the Boss makes use of black cloth as an aid to remaining clear of the edges of each zone. The Boss’ office is probably here.” He pointed at the diagram. “But that’s just a hunch based on relative spell strength. We did not want to give them any warning we were poking around.”

Mr. Weasley said, “Games and Sports assures us these zones are not unlike those used in Halloween mazes they have sometimes set up in the Ministry Atrium, so we have Buford and Flanner here from Games to help with canceling the interior spells.” He turned the diagram toward himself. “We’re going to run a double distraction. Appear to enter here, run a feinted attempt to enter on this other side here, then actually enter at the original point of weakness.”

“How are we actually getting in?” Tonks asked as Mr. Weasley moved to roll up the diagram.

“Buford and Flanner insist the zone just inside this wall can be expanded upon. We’re going to make a zone of our own that connects to it and enter that way, avoiding the building’s main trap.”

“What if that zone is a trap?” Aaron asked.

“Well, we won’t all go in at once, just in case,” Mr. Weasley pleasantly informed him.

Rodgers patted Buford on the shoulder and said, “Stay with your assigned Aurors, you two; these blokes play for keeps, not for foil cauldrons of chocolate Sickles.”

Harry approached the long factory building following behind ovals of collapsing weeds that indicated Tonks’ footsteps. At the sound of a croaking frog, Tonks stopped. To the right behind an Obfuscation Charm, Vineet and Rodgers worked at negating another barrier. Under his cloak, Harry scratched his nose where the fabric rubbed on it.

This cloak was a cousin to that wand. Maybe it could protect him from it, somehow. The thought made eager heat pour in around his heart.

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Tonks' voice came close to Harry's ear. "They are going to trigger this barrier as the first feint, so get ready."

Harry held his wand downward, ready to pull the cloak up to avoid casting through it. He felt a ripple of something like a curse in the nearby grass, then nothing. Inside the building ahead, he could feel many curses layered upon one another. The Boss' office sported the most curses, Harry knew, which meant it was on the left end of the building, not in the middle where Rodgers thought. Harry imagined finding the Boss himself, so this pleased him.

A minute ticked by, then a barrage of spells emanated from the backside of the building. Dust rose up in a golden cloud.

"Let's go," Tonks whispered.

Harry followed close behind, heart thrumming in anticipation.

Buford slipped out from under the cloak he was sharing with Mr. Weasley to cast a complicated spell at the ivy-covered wall before them. A temporary door, complete with arched stained glass window at the top of it, appeared in the crumbling wall. The door opened and closed. Tonks tugged Harry to the side to wait, standing back to back, on guard to wait for a signal from Rogan and Rodgers.

The area remained quiet, even the upper windows. The Boss may have lost too many associates to mount a proper defense. The magical door opened from the inside, and Tonks tugged Harry that way.

They stood just inside the door, wands held at ready, in an area partitioned off with black cloth. The ceiling rose up high above them, much higher than the roof outside. They waited while Mr. Weasley set a wind up toy to walk through the only break in the curtain into the next space. When the toy wheezed to a halt, he waved two disembodied fingers to indicate that Tonks and Harry should lead the way.

Harry flicked his invisibility cloak back over his feet and slipped up behind Tonks, then around her, moving on light feet. She could not break silence to call for him to stop.

Harry paused after passing a paneled wall, recognizing where he was. Nearby, there was a way up to the overhead catwalks which led to the Boss' office. He turned to trace his way back and ran into Tonks, who found his arm by feel and grabbed him through his cloak firmly enough to hurt.

Tonks dragged Harry around the paneled wall and let go of him to get into a defensive stance. They were in the barroom. An elf wearing a tight-fitting scarlet lace placemat sat on the bar with her stick-like legs crossed. Her oversized bare foot bounced as she pouring out a straight shot of something for someone who lay across the bar, clinging to it with one hand while the other reached for the drink.

Tonks lifted her cloak in his direction and whispered, "Mr. McCurdy?"

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“I won’t go back; I tell you!” He snarled at them, tapping his glass on the bar and sloshing out the liquid. “I won’t!”

Tonks slipped closer. “Your wife has been very worried about you.”

“Ha!” the man snorted, and swigged down what was left in the glass before holding it out for the elf again.

“Is there anyone else around?” Tonks asked McCurdy.

As if in response, Spells sizzled somewhere in the building and a great crash shook the floor. Footsteps approached at a run, too loud to be anyone from the Ministry. Tonks tugged on McCurdy’s arm. “Come with us, quickly,” she whispered.

McCurdy tossed his arm free and, the next moment, Tonks, tangled in her invisibility cloak, was knocked away to skid into the card table, scattering hundreds of colored plastic chips. Back atop the bar, the elf lowered her hand and calmly poured another drink.

Ursie stepped through a seam in the black cloth, wand extended toward the smashed table where Tonks had just disappeared under her cloak. He took in the scene, wand picking out a few last chips that still rolled across the floor. An invisible foot kicked a chip and Ursie tossed a Binding Hex at that spot.

Harry stepped into the spell’s path and deflected it. But he had to pull his cloak aside to do this. Ursie struck out at him with a Blasting Curse, which Harry made him swallow. Ursie struggled on all four limbs and crabbed back through the black cloth. Harry let him go, obeying the rules of some larger idea that made him draw back his wand. Two breaths later, after Tonks wrapped up McCurdy in a magical straightjacket and started to hover him out, the larger idea urged Harry to give chase.

Harry charged along curtained walls, lifting them with the breeze of his passing. He dodged this way and that through a maze of cloth, just keeping Ursie in view, following the trail of swaying cloth. Harry used a whip charm to snag his target’s feet as he tried to clamber up a spindly ladder that appeared to connect to open air. The large man slid back to the floor with a thud and a groan.

Harry advanced cautiously, checking behind himself for anyone else approaching, putting down a Silencing Charm and additional barriers. Anticipation rose up through his midsection as he circled around to where Ursie would have to look straight at him when he lifted his head.

Ursie patted the floor with his empty hand, then gaped up at Harry, who had his invisibility cloak draped around his shoulders and must be half floating. Ursie tugged his wand out from under his belly and raised it.

“Go ahead,” Harry said. “Same thing will happen as last time.” His voice sneered to better overcome the pain of recent memory.

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Ursie lowered the wand and pushed to sit up with a long groan. "Potter. Whose side are you on?"

"My own. Care to get out of here and away from the ministry? You can if you join my side."

Spells sizzled across the ceiling, emanating from high up. The Ministry may be approaching the Boss' office and Harry was not there to see. But he could not abandon this chance.

Ursie held silent until Harry looked down at him again. "What side is that?" Ursie asked, unable to mask his contempt.

Harry did not think; his wand moved and a moment later Ursie was tearing at something invisible clutching his neck. Shocked as much as his victim, Harry jerked his wand back and Ursie fell back flat, gulping air. Harry's lips tried to form the word "sorry" but better senses took over. Instead, he quietly said, "I am very nice to my friends and not so nice to my enemies. Which would you like to be?"

Ursie was fumbling with his sleeve while rubbing his neck. He did not look at Harry, but stared straight up at the ceiling with wide, popping eyes. He tapped his wristwatch with his wand during his fumbling, then tapped it again. Harry pounced, landing hard on his knees and wrapping a hand around the silver watch. Ursie's wand whacked the watch and Harry's fingers and the black-clothed world jerked away.

Off balance when the Portkey engaged, Harry tumbled when they landed. He rolled into the partly demolished wall in his own back garden.

Harry twisted around to aim his wand while gaining his feet. "You were here that night," he snarled.

Ursie had landed better and was already kneeling, wand aimed steadily back at Harry. The light shifted around them as the clouds moved.

Angry about too many things at once, Harry struck out with a Chop Hex, which Ursie Countered, then a Blasting Curse, which he had to duck under. A stone fell off the top of the wall and rolled to a stop.

"Harry?" Snape's voice came from the back door. He stepped out to stand before the wall of the house that had been patched with yellow brick.

"He helped attack the house," Harry explained.

"Very well, put him in a chain binding and take him to the ministry."

Harry's wand did not waver. "I don't want to."

"Harry," Snape corrected.

Harry canted his head downward to look backward at Snape, to glare at him. Ursie scrambled to run through the hole in the garden wall. Harry leapt at him, catching his sleeve and then his wrist, just as the other Disappeared.

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Again, they fell and tumbled as they landed. The air smelled of dusty rot. The light was low, and what little there was slanted in narrow beams through clouds of dust. A sizzling arc sent chunks of white wash scattering off the vaulted ceiling behind Harry's head. He should have Squelched that; it had been a curse.

Harry scrambled to a narrow-walled staircase and used it for cover. Wand out, he squinted into the shadows to find a target. Nothing moved.

This wizard was nothing compared to Grindelwald, and Harry would prove that. He lowered his wand and drew a complicated shape just above the uneven floor. He had never tried this spell, but it was perfect for this situation. Snape would disapprove of it, he thought with a smirk.

As the spell looped back on itself and coalesced it drew the air in the room inward with a sensual whisper.

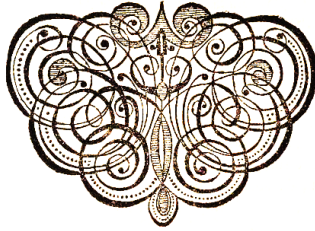
The wand kept moving, following the path as laid out in one of Snape's least savory books. The spell left a glowing trail, lighting the letters and dates carved into the blocks on the floor. With an exaggerated movement like one lifting a marionette, Harry lured one purplish tentacle from the floor, then another. The spell flowed through Harry's arm, through his feet; it seeped into the unfulfilled corners of his spirit, leaving him lightheaded and elated. He could touch the world beneath him without entering it. A channel had opened through him and he could breathe deeply for the first time ever. His failure did not matter. The fate of those he had abandoned did not matter; they existed only at his whim.

The tentacles snaked away, hunting with determination, but Harry barely cared. He stepped forward into the room, abandoning the protection of the stairwell. Shoes scuffing like a caress on the floor, Harry turned in a rocking circle, alert, mind clear as crystal, and seeing the vault now for what it was: a family crypt. Harry tossed his head back as the spell sought the corners of each room, working their way out of sight.

Harry was not going to die like these fools here. Only the weak suffered death. He had become a conduit of something too large to die.

A shout and a burst of cursing echoed through the connected chambers. With a lazy tug of his wand, a coarse sound drifted through the cellar of something heavy being dragged. Harry lowered his head and watched the silky scales ripple as the spell's arms converged in the dark distance beyond a vaulted archway.

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ENSNARED, PART III

Snape stared through the broken wall at the empty spot where, a heartbeat before, Harry had been battling with a gang member. The other wizard had scrambled over the rubble to get free of the house's Apparition barrier and then had unintentionally taken Harry with him.

Snape stepped over the remains of the wall, rehearsing the usual spell to follow. He stumbled and nearly fell, and remained bent, resting a hand on the stone pile. He dare not risk a dark magic spell with Arcadius nearby, nor anywhere near where he resided. The infant's magic harbored too many unknowns to take the risk.

Snape marched into the house and in response to Candide's query, snapped, "Take Arcadius and get to the Weasleys' or your parents', either one, just go!" on the way to the hearth in the dining room.

Kneeling on the dining room hearthstone, Snape argued his way through to the hearth in the Ministry Department of Magical Transportation. He squinted at the face that appeared in the fire. "Mr. Tridant?" he uttered, recognizing the young man with his pale hair cropped so short he appeared bald among the flames.

"Professor? Yes, I'm assigned here today. Not cleared for duty yet, unfortunately."

Snape cut off the next thing the young man was going to say. "Harry was just here, fighting with a member of Durumulna, but they Disapparated and he may need help. I need the destination of the last Apparition from immediately east of this house."

Tridant's head backed away, returning the logs to the maddeningly merry fire.

Tridant returned, looking down at something. "Near Puddletown. Noblehamm

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Manor.” His face scrunched up and Snape, who balanced at the point of jumping up to depart, held off for just a breath. Tridant added, “Looks like the landing was ten feet below ground level, if that helps you.”

Snape pushed to his feet and found Candide waiting in the doorway, Arcadius hastily bundled, baby supply sack hitched over an elbow. She Disapparated as soon as their eyes met. With no time to analyze her expression, he grabbed up a broomstick and Disapparated for Dorchester.



Harry aimed his wand down at Ursie, who grunted with each labored breath. The purple-hued tentacles had dragged him across the cellar floor and now he struggled uselessly against their grip.

“I can be reasonable,” Ursie croaked.

“Seems too late for that, doesn’t it?” Harry said, sounding bored. He savored leading Ursie along on such a familiar path. He felt express relief at giving in to instincts that could not fail and now a pleasant lethargy had settled over him.

Ursie tried to roll to the side, and the tentacles, which emerged from the floor just at Harry’s feet, shuddered and rolled him back.

“Really, I’ll do whatever you want,” Ursie said between grunting gasps.

Harry paced leisurely around the cellar wall, laying an Apparition barrier. With a circular motion of his wand, he cranked back the Long Reach spell. If he gave the man a little freedom, then threatened to take it away again, that would tell him something about him.

With more energy than would be expected from such a soft-fleshed man, Ursie struggled free and fell as the tentacles whipped around to bundle up his ankles again.

“Not so fast,” Harry said, wand steady and aimed between his captive’s eyes.

Ursie draped his elbows over his bent knees and huffed in annoyance. “Why should I join up with you? The Ministry isn’t going to catch The Boss.”

“I don’t care what the Ministry does,” Harry said. “I have you and that’s what we are discussing right now. You can leave under your own power. Or you can . . . not leave.”

Ursie appeared to give in, somewhat. “What exactly do I have to do to keep the likes of you happy?”

“Commit to me, with a little spell,” Harry said, trying to hold down the elation at the prospect of someone this strong under his will. He had to play this just right. Ursie had to be under his will before the spell, otherwise it would go horribly

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wrong again. He knew these things, had known them all along, but had ignored the knowledge, for reasons he could not understand now.

“I’m not convinced you are more than a punk wizard with a chip on his shoulder.”

Harry let his anger seethe rather than lash out. “You have no idea the things I can do.”

“I know your type, Potter.” Ursie tried to kick the tentacles off, then gave up, breathing heavily. “You think you’re the best ever, and maybe you’re better than most, but that’s not what makes a wizard worth following.”

Harry relaxed the grip on his wand and tilted his head to listen.

Ursie rolled his eyes and shook his head. Again, Harry struck without thought. It was just a Blasting Curse, but it shattered the tentacled Long Reach spell and rolled Ursie over several times until he met the wall. He did not move right away, head resting on the hand he had put up for protection.

Harry suspected he was choosing not to move. “Look at me, or I’ll try out something much worse that I’ve been itching to practice on someone.”

Ursie raised his head. A cut on his brow bled onto his cheek and into one eye. He daubed it gingerly with his sleeve. His thoughts flickered to the Portkey still on his wrist and Harry laughed in a burst. “What . . . you’re going to go back to the Boss’ place, which is almost certainly swarming with Aurors?” In a lower voice, Harry asked, “You think you have secrets from me?”

Then a beat later Harry added: “You think you know me?”

Harry’s instincts strained to lash out again, to prove he deserved obedience.

A rustle of robes came from the stairwell. Harry stepped to the side, to get both his captive and the stairs within the aim of his wand.

Snape stood there, poised mid-step, taking in the room. He almost spoke, but pursed his lips instead. Ursie shifted with a grunt to sit up with his back propped against the wall. Harry swung his wand back in his direction.

Snape glided down the last few steps and stopped ten feet in front of Harry. “I want you to leave him be, Harry. And let the Ministry take him away.”

Harry studied Snape’s face, thinking it had softened in the last year, that he was different. His instincts warned him to tread very carefully. He said, “I already said I don’t want to. I don’t appreciate needing to repeat myself.”

Snape dipped his head. “See, that does not sound like you at all.” More gently, he asked, “Can you hear yourself?”

“I’m stronger than you realize,” Harry heard himself say. It felt like a plea, or a warning. He was getting notions, absolute notions, about Snape that his mind veered from only unwillingly.

Snape responded, “That is entirely possible. But irrelevant.”

ENSNARED, PART III

Harry tried again to be understood, feeling the connection the dark magic spell had made through his core, the way it had filled the last empty spaces. “You don’t understand.”

From the floor, Ursie said, “I understand punk wizards perfectly. Maybe I can help explain – ”

Snape’s wand lashed out and Ursie patted his hands against his slug-slime-sealed mouth.

“Shut up,” Snape commanded. He started to turn away, then raised his wand again to hit Ursie with a Memory Charm and then a Fairy Dust Hex, which made him tilt along the wall until he rested on the floor, eyes shut.

Harry watched all this with raised brows.

“Harry,” Snape said, voice tinged with unsorted emotion. He closed his eyes a long moment, in response to which, Harry lowered his wand to his side.

“Harry, the Ministry will be here any second.” He held up a hand as if to forestall complaints. “I cannot undo that even if I wished to. You know the rules you are supposed to be following. Be ready with a story,” he commanded, just before Rodgers and Kerry Ann came running down the stone staircase.

The Aurors crouched to examine Ursie and Snape stepped up before Harry, half-turned as if to track the Aurors’ progress behind him. He was watching Harry and he was not hiding that he was doing so.

The Aurors finished switching Snape’s incarceration spells for their own. In a moment they would haul the prisoner away. Harry could easily take all of them down and do what he wished with Ursie. His wand twitched, considering spells. Losing Ursie was not what irked him; he hated giving in, period. Giving in felt like defeat all over again, and it ground on his soul to do so.

Snape’s steady gaze remained on Harry until Rodgers sent Kerry Ann off with the prisoner.

Rodgers rubbed his arm and came up beside Snape. “Well, Potter. We’ll engrave another little broomstick on your locker at the Ministry for when you return.” With a last glance between the two of them, he departed as well, shoulders bent with fatigue.

The dank cellar air drifted briefly around them as the door at the top of the stairs opened and closed. Harry said, “They didn’t ask anything.”

“No, they did not,” Snape replied. “Perhaps they did not wish to hear the answers.” Snape held out an arm in invitation. “Come. It is time to go home.”

Harry hesitated. He could resist this; he could try to make up for being maneuvered into giving in. “I don’t like interference,” Harry said, making it clear he was angry. “You interfered.”

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“I am keeping your enemies at bay,” Snape pointed out. “Notice they are gone now.”

“I could handle them myself, Severus.” He crossed his arms and stared Snape down, feeling his way better as they considered each other. “If I cannot be assured you are an ally, I don’t want you interfering.”

“Dumbledore is not around any longer, you will notice,” Snape returned. “So, I can have no other loyalties.”

Harry rolled his wand through his fingertips, pleased with its familiarity. “Dumbledore wasn’t there for you at the beginning either, was he?” Harry watched how this played out on Snape’s face. The twitching around the eyes was slight, but Harry’s eyes had grown accustomed to the dark. “Or was he?” Harry added. “Everyone was a tool to him.”

Snape lifted his chin as he breathed in and held it. “I believe he only took such action reluctantly.”

“You think so?” Harry said, scoffing. “I don’t.”

“It is a moot question at this point. Certainly I would not stand here and defend him extensively.” He gave a curt wave of his arm behind him. “Perhaps it would be more comfortable discussing this at home?”

Harry stepped closer to him. “Getting old and soft, Severus?” Then after a gap. “Feeling mortal?” His heart wavered as he demanded an answer to that. He was saying too much. He stepped suddenly away and said, “Yes, let’s go home,” and Apparated away.

“Where is Candide?” Harry asked as soon as Snape arrived.

“Visiting the Burrow, perhaps. She could not remain here alone.”

Harry quipped, “That’s what real servants are for, guarding things.”

Snape did not rise to this bait, and replied, “I’ll fetch her home and we can enjoy a quiet lunch.”



Harry could not sleep. He stared at the grey wall of his bedroom, watching the four-squares cast by car headlamps sliding across the join between the wall and ceiling. Muggles and their machines. So very many of them. Why weren’t there more wizards, he wondered. It seemed wrong for it to be this way. Wizards had so much power, why did they use it so poorly?

Ever wider awake, Harry slid out of bed and padded over to his wardrobe. His rampant fear of his vulnerability tried to make him rethink getting dressed, but he

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ignored it. Teeth clenched, he determinedly pulled on his thickest Weasley jumper and his winter cloak and, wand in hand, slipped away.

Not wanting to face any Muggles, Harry slipped out of the underworld into Hogsmeade. At this late hour, even the Hogs Head was dark. The only light came from the hearths burning in the upper rooms of the Three Broomsticks. Harry ran a detection spell to assure himself he was alone, then began walking along the rutted road. He felt better just getting out of his room. Something about the house had become a bother to him; it twisted his feelings in strange ways.

Harry stopped before Glad Rags and stared at the shadowy windows where magical mannequins moved from one pose to another, the colors they wore reduced by the starlight to shades of grey.

Winky. She was doing something to him. Eyes narrowed, thoughts revolving, Harry walked on. He stopped again before Honeydukes, which must have reopened for business given the new building and freshly painted sign. As he looked it over, part of the upper wall leading to the roof peak flickered in and out of existence. It had not been rebuilt, so much as recreated. He touched the beveled glass window in the door; it felt real enough.

With a series of sharp wand movements, Harry unsealed the door and pushed it open. When the bell tried to chime, he melted it with a Welding Charm, and stepped inside. Chocolate air wrapped around him as he moved to the counter at the front. Inside the glass case beneath the till sat foiled boxes with oversized golden bows that caught the weak light coming in through the front windows.

Harry uncursed the cabinet, cut a hole in the glass top and hovered the most extravagant box out the top of it. Colored jewels had been strung on wire and looped around with the golden bow. Harry dug his fingers in and tore open the corner of the box like a mouth and was chewing a caramel-filled sphere of ambrosia even before he made it back to the door.

With the box hitched under his arm, Harry continued down the road, licking his fingers. At the edge of the village he stood in the road and ate more chocolates. The next one, cherry, tasted like someone had distilled a quart of berries down into one mouthful. He licked his fingers again, and held that way when he felt someone magical approach.

Harry tugged his wand out with his left hand and turned. The figure, just stepping out from behind the last house on the road, stopped and waited. Harry thought he recognized the way the man stood, even in a heavy cloak. Still holding his wand, he wedged another chocolate out of the tear in the box.

“Want one?” Harry called out.

Vineet stepped into the road and quickened his pace. “Is it chocolate I am

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smelling?”

“Yeah, here.” Harry tore the box into two halves hinged with the ribbon. The chocolates were arranged on a crystal platter with a spot shaped for each piece. He held it out. Vineet leaned in and after some deliberation, selected a heart shaped one.

“Coconut,” he said sloppily.

“What are you doing out at this hour?” Harry asked.

“I was at the castle and I generally try to return to my flat when I am unlikely to be seen. May I have another?”

“Sure, I can steal another box, for you.”

Vineet did not react to this news. “That should not be necessary.”

Harry plucked one out for himself and started walking. Vineet fell in beside him, nibbling on the piece he held. Feeling elated and confident, Harry strode on with undirected purpose.

They crested the hill and the lake lay like a rocky-framed mirror before them, the lights of the castle glowing pinpricks. Harry stopped and stared at it, filled with memories: sneaking into the forest, flying in and crashing the Anglia, rescuing himself from the Dementors . . . brimming, radiant even, with the confidence that he would succeed with the Patronus spell if he just tried hard enough, because the man he had seen across the lake had done it already. If that man appeared now, Harry wondered what he would look like, what he would do. But nothing stirred on the shore line. The only movement was the reflection of the castle lights, floating and wavering.

Vineet stood unmoving until Harry shucked the past again and walked on.

Harry veered away from the path that led to the castle and trod over uneven ground, making movement his sole purpose. He felt unsettled and need to move, to do something. He stopped again and held the package out. “Want another?”

“I am quite satisfied.”

Harry tossed the package aside; it chimed as it cracked against a rock.

Harry raised his head and stared at the sagging silhouette of the Shrieking Shack. The night sky showed through the upper window and a hole in the roof. Harry raised his wand. He was suddenly many places at once. He had dreamed once that he faced the Dursley house and as he peered at himself in the window he could see a fire burning around him, inside him. The fire had always been inside him, and the spell to send it forth was right now coursing along his arm and bursting through his fingertips.

With a whooph! the Shrieking Shack ignited. Flames raced downward and outlined each board of the siding, a flaming painting of a house. The crackle and roar

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grew louder as the tongue of fluttering flame stretched away from the roof, belching black smoke. If only he could destroy his memories as easily.

Vineet stepped closer to Harry and observed the conflagration from beside him. A board fell from the roof edge, scattering sparks when it struck the ground.

Sirius, Harry thought with a flash of ache, but then the unfairness of it made him bitter. Some memories were not worth reliving, ever.

Shouting drifted over the landscape from Hogsmeade. Vineet said, "Perhaps you should not remain here." He waved a charm at the discarded sweet package and with a rattling crumple, stashed it in his oversized cloak pocket. "I will clean up."

Harry's lips crooked. "Your loyalty still is to me?"

"Nothing has changed for me."

More shouting came from the village as half of the house collapsed inward, sending burning coals into the air and revealing even more flames embracing a blackened interior.

"Quickly, before you are seen."

Harry smiled and slipped away from the smoke, the roaring light, and the cloying scent of smashed chocolate.



Sunday, late morning, Harry slunk downstairs, tired despite sleeping in.

Upon seeing him, Snape placed Arcadius in his bouncing chair and stood. "I'll ask Winky for some breakfast for you. You look in need of it."

Harry did not protest this. He did not want to sit here with them, with the baby. Scratching his head to wake himself up, he wandered to the dining room and tugged the newspaper over.

The photograph on the front page showed a teetering chimney beside a smoldering black smudge on a field. The byline read Staff Reporter, whom Harry knew to be Ginny, usually.

Snape set a tray down before one of the chairs and leaned over Harry's shoulder.

Harry, thinking to deflect any suspicion, said, "Surprised it hadn't happened sooner."

"Albus himself put a fire-proof spell on it."

Harry unfolded the paper to lay the whole article out. A wizard wandered into the picture, noticed the camera, and scuttled out of it again.

"Maybe the spell faded," Harry suggested, sounding merely idly interested.

"Or backfired, even, as it weakened." Snape waved at the table as he departed the room. "Your breakfast is there."

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Harry settled into the library and into plotting. Fudge was where he should start. He was weak. Flattery and the chance to draw off someone else's influence would turn him to anything. Maybe Harry should return to the Ministry that week, stop in at a few offices to see what those in power were doing, what they were thinking.

When a knock sounded on the door, Harry pulled the book in his hands up to a viewing angle. He had long ago let it fall over.

"Harry," Hermione said from the doorway. "Can I interrupt your reading? What are you reading?"

Harry glanced at the cover of the book. "Just something from the shelf."

She closed the door and held onto the latch behind her back. "I wonder if you'd do me a favor, Harry."

She avoided looking straight at him, so he could not glimpse what she was thinking. He put his book aside and stretched. He must have been in that same position a long time.

"Sure," he muttered.

"Come with me back to the castle."

Harry had a suspicion this was the same thing Ron had been on about, but this time he saw it as an opportunity to make a point.

"Sure, I'll meet you there. Too much of a bother to take the Floo."

"If you insist. I'll meet you in my office then?" She smiled at him with a wet-eyed hopefulness, touched his hand, and backed out the door.

Harry took his time and put the book away in its spot before going out into the main hall.

"Dinner's in a moment," Candide said, waving baby supplies back into a crate with the baby hitched on the other arm. "Did you ask Hermione to stay?"

"Didn't think of it. I'm going up to the castle for a bit. I'll be back." With that, Harry slipped away.

Snape stepped out of the drawing room. "Harry said he was going to the castle?"

Candide was making her way to the dining room. She said over her shoulder, "Yes he did. And I think Winky's putting dinner on."

Snape said, "I'll be back when I can."

"No," she blurted as he vanished, then growled. In the dining room the flames on the candelabra were the only thing moving. She sat down and played with Arcadius' hand. "Well, I guess we should get accustomed to your dad being gone. He's supposed to be at Hogwarts all the time anyway."

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A moment later, the hearth rushed with green flame and Ginny Weasley stepped out of it.

“I was sent to keep you company,” she said, then bent closer. “Hey, Arcadius. How are you?” She stood straight. “What does a gurgle mean?”

“I think it means he’s happy to see you. Why don’t you have some dinner. If you have a seat I think Winky will send it in.”

“Brill, thanks. Aaron wants to get an elf, but I fear my parents’ acute disappointment if we did.” She settled in and a cast iron roaster heaped with meat and vegetables appeared, issuing up a veil of steam. Ginny served herself when invited to and asked, “So, where was Professor Snape off to in such a hurry?”

“I don’t know. Hermione came and left again and then Harry went off. I assume it was related to that.”

Ginny paused with her fork and knife poised. “Oh.”

“Sounds like you might know.”

Ginny chewed a bite of meat with a frown. “Hermione had this idea. I’m surprised it sent Professor Snape off on such a tear. It’s no biggie.”

Candide shrugged and shifted Arcadius to her other side.

Ginny ate with gusto then paused to ask, “Was Harry home last night?”

“I think so. Severus often checks on him, so he would know. Why do you ask?”

“Oh,” Ginny said, pushing her stewed carrots around with her fork, lining them up. “Just curious.”



Snape rapped upon Lupin’s office door in a rapid burst. When the door swung open and Lupin leaned out, Snape hissed, “I need your assistance. Quickly.”

They strode down the corridor, dodging a cluster of students, who meandered as they went, chatting.

Snape veered closer to Lupin and said, “This situation may be unexpectedly dangerous, I should mention. I regret dragging you into this without preliminaries, but you are the best option at the moment.”

“I used to like a bit of danger,” Lupin said amiably, as they arrived at the less-used staircase at the end of the wing.

Snape sped up his footsteps and asked, “Were you trying to live down a bit of guilt, Remus?”

Lupin opened his mouth, then closed it again. He sighed. “I don’t actually know. But now I think I have something to lose, which is new.”

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Snape spun, holding the handrail to the stairs, considered followup comments, but gave up.

Two flights later, Lupin said, "May I ask what is happening?"

"Nothing. Yet. I wish to keep it that way." At the top of the last set of stairs, Snape paused and held up a hand while listening.

Lupin stepped up beside him, wand out at waist level. "What is the danger, exactly?"

Almost too quiet to hear, Snape replied, "Harry is the danger." He met Lupin's gaze and said, "Assume the worst, and please follow my lead in all things."

He started down the corridor, robes kicking up behind him.



Harry crossed his arms and unconsciously lifted his chin. He stood before Dumbledore's painting which rested on a carved oaken chair nearly as baroque as the painting's frame.

Ron stood beside the chair, face twisted. He glanced at Hermione yet again.

Dumbledore's aged visage spoke soothingly, "Harry, your friends are merely concerned."

"I don't know what about," Harry snapped. "And anyway, I don't know why it would matter to an old painting."

Dumbledore's eye's flashed with a mixture of vitality and coyness. "I am a bit more than an old painting."

Inside Harry, his instincts were only now calming from facing Dumbledore's image, and he longed to make up for the initial weakness. He started getting even by being as unflappable as possible.

"Harry, your friends are good friends. I am a good friend to you. There is more to life than simple power."

Harry's brow furrowed. "I know all that. You have some other point to make?"

"Only that one should not get in the way of the other, and if that happens it is time to reassess."

"Did you ever get around to doing that?" Harry lightly asked.

Dumbledore's brow arched and then a frown flickered over his face. "Harry have you really listened to what your friends are saying? Really listened?"

"Yes," Harry replied, sighing with forced boredom.

"I don't think you have . . ."

A rap came on the door. Hermione backed up to answer it.

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“Ah,” Snape said. “Sorry to interrupt; I was looking for Harry.” He stepped into the room, eyes flickering to each face.

Harry tilted a shoulder. “I’m here.”

“You are missing dinner.”

Harry made a face. “You followed me to tell me that?”

Snape shifted his pose to relaxed, hands clasped behind his back. “That, and I was curious to hear this conversation.”

“Ah, my dear Severus,” Dumbledore said.

Snape stepped to the side. “I did not intend to be part of it, however.”

“Harry,” Dumbledore began again, voice low. “Your friends are part of your power, the most important part. They make life what it is. Do you doubt we are your friends . . . that I am your friend?”

“I have lots of memories that give me reasons to doubt that, yes.”

“Love, my boy, it is more powerful than the other forces acting upon you . . . We all love you, Harry.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Hermione biting her lip and beyond her, Lupin glancing around mystified.

“If you cannot trust yourself, trust us,” Dumbledore insisted. “Trust that we love you. Tell us what we need to do to gain your trust, if not.”

Harry canted his head to better face the painting. The texture left by the paintbrush moved with the wrinkles on Dumbledore’s face when he talked.

“This is what you did to him?” Harry asked. “You used his one weakness against him. You got him to give up the wand doing that, didn’t you? You wore him down this way. Made him believe in you.”

The figure in the painting stepped back from the frame and compulsively rubbed his beard.

Harry’s elation rose at this. “You broke him, made him into something low and meaningless. And you did it using the one thing you claim is worth everything. You ruined him with it.”

Harry stopped and watched Dumbledore’s painted eyes narrow and jump around Harry’s face, as if trying to see through a disguise.

Voice reduced to a whisper, Harry spoke, half thinking aloud. “You didn’t kill him, did you? He’s still there, isn’t he? Just hidden away in that tower with one of your clever spells.”

The painting’s obvious surprise answered Harry, who lowered his hands to his sides, feeling joyful anticipation rise up through his core. Harry leaned toward the painting, jeering, “The chance to absolve oneself of past mistakes, past failure . . . to get revenge . . . that is what makes life worth living.”

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Harry breathed deep the bookish scent of Hermione's office. He was going to wipe the stain of defeat off his heart. He was going to hear Grindelwald's well-deserved screams. "Brilliant," Harry said with a smile, and slipped through the floor.

Hermione convulsively stepped forward into the spot Harry had vacated. "Where'd he go?" She glanced around those present, all silent with wide eyes. "Professor?" she finally demanded of the painting.

Dumbledore gave his beard one slow stroke. "I believe he has gone to free Grindelwald. Feels he has something he needs to level in that regard."

"Grindelwald?" Ron blurted, voice squeaking.

"Grindelwald?" Hermione echoed, hand rising to pull on her hair. She glanced around the room with fitful movements of her head. "What is happening here?!"

Snape stepped around her and stared down at the painting. "Where IS Grindelwald, Albus?"



Harry arrived at the foot of the hill leading to the ruined tower. The same weighty moss appeared to glue the pile of eroded stones together. Harry waved a cancellation spell that fizzled out, then another. Dumbledore had been fond of sui generis spells. No ordinary neutralizing spell would work . . . would reveal reality.

But damaging the object the spell was anchored to would weaken the spell. Just like the library wall in the house. Harry leaned back and surveyed the rough landscape. Brown rotting grass was giving way in patches to new green, interspersed with crooked clumps of trees and stone lines marking old walls.

Harry transformed into his Gryffylis form and leapt straight upward, which was not the easy way to take off. It required powerful flaps at the limits of his strength to gain altitude. As the tower sank below him, Harry's animal mind tried to see off into the mountains, tried to better scent the foreign soil and catalog the endless decay of forest into new life. Unlike defending the house when the Boss attacked, it had no interest in this fight.

With one last flap, Harry transformed back, wand already in hand. As he hung there, just as gravity took hold and whisked the air upward around him, he sliced the earth open with two strokes aimed along the rise toward the tower. The blissfully unrestrained spells sent dirt and boulders coursing ahead of deep gouges. Great flaps of sod ballooned open and fell away in a rumble like a derailing freight train.

Harry Apparated back to the ground and landed hard, falling to one knee, while rocks rained around him and dirt clumps tumbled and disintegrated in brown clouds. The tower, intact and silent, faded in beyond the destruction.

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“Knock, knock,” Harry whispered, then Apparated right to the roof of the tower, despite his instincts insisting he wait for his opponent to make the first move. Harry did not want his prey to escape, and he was enjoying ignoring this careful inclination in favor of action. Let him suffer through being ignored, Harry thought.

Harry flicked his wand and sent a narrow burning spell straight down through the honey-colored tiles. This was answered a moment later by the roof a few feet away blasting open. Harry slipped into the Dark Plane as a gut reaction, and arrived at the base of the tower, laughing, pleased his enemy was armed.

Harry called up, “Albus left you with some kind of wand, apparently! He died with the one that mattered though!”

Silence answered him. Harry stepped back and used the spells from Ravenclaw’s book to remove the magic binding the tower together, then knocked loose a row of stones from the tower’s base. His curse sense sent him back into the underworld just as he lowered his wand. He reappeared at the base of the hill. The ground smoldered where he had been standing.

From a distance, Harry sent a few more tower stones flying free with a narrow Blasting Curse. Immediately, he had to block a hex powerful enough to rattle his Chrysanthemum Block, less practiced a block than it used to be. As the spell thrummed around his shielding spell Harry felt both an exhilarating thrill and a spine poisoning fear. Harry wanted to drink more of the thrill. He waited for another spell to be thrown at him so he could battle that fear back again, prove he could beat it.

Harry’s breathing calmed. Nothing happened. He used a Sonorus Charm on his throat. “Come out and fight, or I’ll knock the tower down!”

Another hex sizzled his way. This one, Harry deflected, but it made his arms ache to do so. Even without the Elder Wand, Grindelwald was a formidable caster.

Harry slipped away then back in on the other side of the hill, knocked a few tower stones loose and leapt to another spot. He did this repeatedly, until he could hear the tower groaning in the wind.

“Come out!”

A curse roared Harry’s way. He braced himself and Countered it, arms trembling as the spell arced and crackled in a dome around him. It scattered away and ignited the brush around Harry with some unnatural fire that continued to zigzag and spread in fits before fizzling out. Harry didn’t want to Squelch any curses yet. He wanted Grindelwald out where he could see him, see his face when he struck him down.

“Coward!” Harry shouted, voice echoing over the hillsides.

With a pop! Grindelwald appeared before Harry, some 20 yards ahead of him, a reasonable dueling distance. His neck hung bent and his violet robes were moth eaten and faded to pink, but his hair and beard flowed around him in luxurious waves of

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golden white.

“Who are you?” Grindelwald asked disdainfully.

“If you hadn’t been defeated and locked up by your manipulative lover you wouldn’t have to ask that,” Harry retorted, lips relishing the words. Harry went on, “I was Dumbledore’s last protégé, but that’s not actually what I am famous for.”

Grindelwald straightened slightly. “That would explain you knowing Albus so well.” He flicked his wand, a polished splice of a broken staff that he must have fashioned himself. “What do you want? You certainly have no bone to pick with me.”

“Oh, but I do,” Harry insisted. “You just don’t know it.” He raised his wand.



Ron Apparated in and ran to the group standing in the middle of the main hall in Shrewsthorpe, holding a silvery pencil sharpener out before him. “I’ve got it. Took some explaining why I couldn’t explain, but my dad gave in and helped get it in the end.”

“Take a broomstick,” Hermione said, shoving one into Ron’s hand.

“I don’t have a cloak . . .”

“Too bad,” Ginny snapped, right before Snape activated the Portkey.

They arrived in a wide mountain valley with no habitation visible, just a rough landscape of mixed copses and fields. A pleasant breeze wafted by carrying the scent of glacial mountain air. The sound of an explosion and drifting dust drew their attention up the valley. Without speaking, they mounted and took flight.

When the dusty remains of a hilltop tower came into view, Snape signaled with his arm for a halt. In the open field at the foot of the hill, two figures were connected by alternately arcing spells.

Hermione veered up closer to Snape. “That’s Harry,” she said. “Is that Grindelwald? Harry’s just come here and decided to take on Grindelwald?” Her voice wavered. “What is he doing?”

“Getting even,” Snape said. “It’s too complicated to explain.”

Ron came up on Snape’s other side. “Shouldn’t we stop them?”

“Mr. Wickem,” Snape called over his shoulder. “You are the only Auror here. Head off to the right, downspell of Harry, try to distract Grindelwald. Be very careful.”

Aaron flew in close, bumping Ginny playfully. “Grindelwald you say? I may be an Auror, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a coward.”

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Snape did not remove his eyes from the battle. "I'm aware you're a coward, Mr. Wickem, you're a Slytherin. But go on anyway."

"Well, all right. Wish me luck," he added to Ginny.

"Ms. Granger . . . Hermione," Snape frowned faintly. "Stay behind Ms. Weasley at all times. I'm going in. Hopefully Harry will see he has support rather than an interloper."

"What about me?" Ron asked.

"Do whatever you like. I don't care."



Harry was on his knees, but Grindelwald was bent double, teetering, beard tangled and singed. Harry lowered his wand and called out with a hoarse throat, "Next one you cast kills you. I promise you."

"What?" Grindelwald blurted. "Next one I send at you kills me?"

"Yes," Harry pledged. "Your death is your choice."

"I don't believe you."

Seconds passed. Harry made a point of holding his wand out even farther from ready. "Well, then go ahead. You don't know who I am, remember?"

Grindelwald's eyes flickered up behind Harry as if he saw something. Harry ignored this as a cheap feint.

Harry twitched his wand arm, but Grindelwald did not react. "Make it a good one," Harry taunted. "Something with a lot behind it."

Grindelwald jerked and aimed, but did not cast anything. "What are you famous for, by the way?"

"You should have asked that sooner. It's too late now. It's too late for everything. Certainly too late for you to get even with Albus, as much as he deserves it."

Grindelwald tossed his head and threw something nasty that sucked from the Dark Plane. Harry did not wait to see what it was, he closed down the spell's escape and it writhed and exploded, sending flashes of yellow light out through momentary rents in the fabric of the old wizard's body. Then he fell without resistance, limbs bouncing as they struck the ground.

Harry jumped up and went to stand over him. Grindelwald had known a Forbidden Curse no one else did, and now it was lost. Grindelwald lay still and unmarred despite the fireworks, but his radiance was leaking everywhere. Harry reached out a hand toward the body, as if offering him a hand up, drawing the essence to him. He could gather it and weave it, make a Horcrux. Cease to fear. The radiance seeping away curled back on itself, crowded closer, Harry could feel the distress of it surrounding

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him. It was a good distress, his instincts insisted. He just had to turn the wand on himself. . .

“Harry,” Snape’s voice interrupted his rehearsing the complicated spell, letting the Latin roll its unfamiliar shape over his tongue.

Harry, mind blanking with seething anger, raised his wand at Snape, who had just landed on a broomstick. Snape froze, broomstick held awkwardly, wand aimed at the ground.

“Get away,” Harry snarled, so red hot his eyes were vibrating, making his vision funny and narrow. “Get away, now.” Something told him two deaths would work even better.

“Harry?” From behind him came Ron’s voice. It made Harry twitch in surprise. Strangely disbelieving, he turned his head. Ron hovered there on a broomstick, Hermione flying beside him, quaintly awkward to be riding alone. Above Harry, Ginny swooped in a tight circle, glancing around in alarm.

Harry’s aim at Snape wavered.

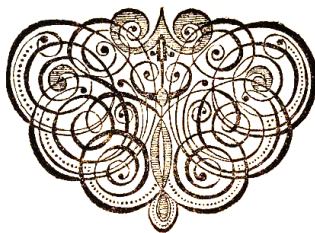
“Behind ya, Mate,” came Aaron’s voice.

Harry lowered his wand. The Radiance was leaching into the ground around them, dissolving into the air. He let it go with painful reluctance.

Snape broke the silence by taking a step closer and peering down at Grindelwald’s body. His movements were as studied as a snake charmer’s. “What did he strike out with?” he asked.

The remains of Harry’s anger still coursed through him, making his sinew twitch. He longed to strike Snape down just to make him hurt. “I don’t know. Something deadly.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN



RETURN TO GODRIC'S HOLLOW

“Severus,” Candide called from the main hall.

Snape hurried in to find Candide putting her bags down.

“You did not get the owl I sent? I sent it to your mother’s.”

She placed Arcadius into his arms, which he could not resist accepting, and picked up the bags again. “I went to my friend Jillian’s.”

Snape hitched the baby on one arm and put up his other hand to halt her progress toward the stairs. “You cannot remain here. I sent you an owl instructing you to remain with your parents.”

“What’s going on? Is Harry here?”

Snape’s voice dropped. “Not yet.” He went over to the couch and sat down with the baby in his lap and scrawled something on the corner of a Potions Monthly cover. “Take this and go,” Snape said, tearing off the corner and pressing it into Candide’s hand.

“What is this?”

“It is the name of a Hedgewitch who can help Arcadius if he gets into difficulty.”

She read the slip. “Oh, Gliwice, I know her.”

Snape blinked. “You know her?”

“Well, my mum and dad knew her when they were children.”

Snape stood, smoothly scooping Arcadius back into Candide’s arms and hovering a trunk in from behind the door of the drawing room. “Even better. Here are your

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things; you need to go.”

“You packed for me?” Candide asked, half laughing nervously while following behind. “For how long am I going?”

The trunk settled to the floor beside the hearth and Snape took hold of her free arm. “I realize I made promises to you, but I have much older ones I must honor. And at the moment, it has become too dangerous to attend to both at the same time.”

“Promises . . .” she began with a growl, but then her face eased back from growing more vexed. “You think Harry’s that dangerous?”

Snape did not reply immediately, he stood listening for any sign of Harry’s return. “I know he is. You must go. Go to your mother’s; I think that would be best.”

“For how long? Severus . . . Mother will think we are on the rocks or something.”

“That is no matter.”

“It is to me.”

Arcadius gave a squawk. Candide shifted him to her shoulder and patted his back so that he emitted a vocal thrumming sound. Candide went on. “Do you even remember what this week is?”

“Yes, of course I do.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out an oval box wrapped in silver with green ribbon.

She accepted it when he held it out and said, “You were just waiting for me to ask, weren’t you?”

He arched a brow and her lips twitched upward while her expression tried to remain unhappy. She pocketed the box and returned to patting a fussing Arcadius.

Snape’s voice fell lower. “You must go. I will not argue over this.”

She turned away and touched the trunk with her toe. “It was getting rather mad around here,” she commented.

He assumed she was trying to open up a new line of argument. “I’ll help you with the trunk. But we must hurry. Harry’s friends took him out to a pub, but he did not seem amenable to remaining with them long.”



Harry returned home, trailing the scent of cheap Muggle tobacco, glad for the silence of the house and the escape from the need to placate his friends. He paced the main hall. The muscles in his torso were agitated and he could not bear to remain still. He had gladly shrugged off his friends, but now wished for a distraction. The room was warmer today as spring got on, and he rapidly grew damp under his robes from the movement.

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Snape came to the library doorway and said, "I'll assume from your present activity that you are not injured."

Harry turned and stared at Snape. The man showed no sign of having been threatened just an hour before.

"I'm fine," Harry said, ignoring the chorus of little aches and numb spots where his blocks had not served him perfectly. Tomorrow at the Ministry he could work on that for hours at a time, a welcomingly mind-numbing notion.

If he stood there longer he might try to prove something to Snape and the thought made his stomach twist, even as he hungered to punish him for interfering at such a critical moment. "It's been a long day. I'm going to bed," Harry said.



Ginny arrived at the Prophet offices the earliest yet and stood in the shelter of the alcove to the rear door. Looking about her while covering a yawn, she grasped the oversized golden handle. The security spell prickled more in the morning, as if the door had stored up magic overnight. Inside the gilt foyer, she reached back to shut the door, thinking ahead to check any notebooks left lying around for anything she might prefer be lost, when the door came to a stop, inches from closing.

Ginny looked back and found Skeeter's curls wavering through the frosted glass above a pink, body-sized blob, and blocking the door, a pink pump. Ginny pulled her wand and yanked open the door.

"What do you want?" Ginny demanded.

Skeeter shuffled her handbag back onto her shoulder and smiled in a way that made Ginny tighten her grip on her wand. "Well, my dear, that depends on what you have to offer."

Ginny exhaled. Dryden, the security guard, a wizard whose bottom half was awkwardly twice as large as his upper half, sauntered over, fingering the wand in his breast pocket.

"You will want to send him away," Skeeter softly said. "Really. You can throw me out later, if you so choose. I'll go quietly."

Rolling her eyes, Ginny backed up and let the other woman in. "It's all right, Dryden. I'll take care of this."

"Yes, madame." He wobbled off, resuming the attitude of a pacing monk.

Ginny stepped into the lift and let it rise to just short of the top floor. She flicked the lever to halt it and lowered her wand to point at Skeeter's midsection.

Skeeter laughed. "That won't stop me, dearie."

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“Oh, it’s been Animagus and Apparition proofed. So, yes it will. I have a lot of friends in the Aurors’ office, as you might imagine, to help with such things. You think I wasn’t expecting you to come?”

Skeeter tipped her head as if she conceded a bit of respect for this. “In that case I will make my pitch here. No matter.” She tugged the silvery lapels of her suit straight and said, “I know Potter was behind the fire in Hogsmeade. I have firsthand accounts. I know the Ministry is protecting him, I have a firsthand account of that too. All of this would just be politics – it was just an empty firetrap anyway – if it weren’t for that other recent incident, actually made public, in Eastern Europe.” She paused, measuring eyes roaming up and down Ginny. “He is being hailed as a hero for that attack, I’m not sure why. Probably something to do with your newspaper framing it that way.”

“It was Grindelwald,” Ginny pointed out.

“It was an old man, long past his magical prime.”

“It was Grindelwald.” Ginny repeated.

Skeeter straightened. “No matter. He was a rival. This paper almost implied as much in that little retrospective on World War II in yesterday’s Late Late Edition.”

Ginny said, “So, fine, why don’t you take all this and discuss it on your little wireless show? Publish it in the Quibbler. Whatever.”

Skeeter smirked, leaving Ginny with the impression that she was playing right into Skeeter’s plans. “I could do that. I wanted to come by and ask you a few things before I do.” Skeeter went on after a gap. “I wanted to ask you what he would have to do that you would no longer desire to protect him. And I wanted to say that I could be silent, for a price.”

Ginny blinked at her, realized she had let her wand drop and aimed it again, right at the third pink button of Skeeter’s jacket. “You’re willing to be silent?” she mocked.

“I’m not a fool, Ms. Weasley.” Skeeter purred. “I have information, which in my world, is currency. How I choose to spend it is my affair. You are doing the same every time you bury a story, like you have been, or simply aspects of it, when I am quite certain you know better.” She flicked something out from under a long nail and added in a lower voice. “And frankly, it’s getting risky to spend this currency with the public directly.”

This last was added in a different, frank tone, and it made Ginny’s heart skip around before regaining a normal rhythm. She swallowed. “What do you want?”

“I want my job back.”

“You’re assuming I can give that to you,” Ginny said, mostly to stall so she could recover her mental balance.

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Skeeter waved a manicured hand dismissively. "You are the fiancée of the son of the man who holds every purse string in this place."

Ginny studied the golden filigree decorating the corners of the lift. The shine had chipped off in places, leaving a green stain behind. Like most things, it was all for show.

"So you will keep quiet," Ginny said. "You will only write what I tell you to, at least on certain topics . . ."

"You're the assistant editor, aren't you? Don't you know what your job is yet?" Skeeter rolled her eyes this time as though pleading heavenward.

Ginny said, "I need time to consider your offer."

"By tonight at midnight."

"No way. Tomorrow at midnight." Ginny felt a rush of heat energizing her brain and added, "And the cost of negotiating at all is that you accept a Memory Charm at the conclusion of the negotiation, that is, if your offer is not accepted. Agree to that and we seal it here with a spell, or I simply hit you with one now."

Skeeter backed up a step, glancing down at the wand, which up till then she had pointedly ignored. "If that's how it must be," she said, flustered and straining to sound angry.

Ginny raised her hand. "Give me your right pinky then. A girls' agreement will suffice for me." At Skeeter's laughably doubtful expression, Ginny said, "I'm really good at this spell. Cross me and you will end up with toad toes."



"Glad you're here, Potter," Rodgers said from where he stood outside the door to the training room. The whole place felt so familiar, Harry could imagine he had never left. He had been thinking ahead to drills as he rode up in the lift and was caught off guard by his trainer's officious tone.

Rodgers went on: "We need a full debriefing with you on yesterday evening's activities. The Romanians are asking some interesting questions and we'd like to not sound like halfwits when we give them answers."

Kerry Ann had come to the doorway, brightly pleased. "Hey, Harry," she said at the first opening in the conversation.

Aaron sidled up behind Harry and crossed his arms, making his cufflinks wink in the light. "Did you debrief Dumbledore's painting?" he asked Rodgers.

"Yes, spent much of my evening with it, in fact. I need to know what Harry has to add to that, and more importantly, why he decided to fly off and handle things

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alone rather than acting in a circumspect and Auror-like manner and informing the Ministry.” He turned and strode away. “Come along, Potter.”

Harry followed, biting his lip. Rodgers was baiting him to get a reaction and Harry would not give him one.

Inside the Auror offices, Rodgers said to Tonks. “Can you get the apprentices settled into their drills for me? I have a feeling they will gossip half the morning without some parental interference.”

“Harry,” Tonks said in surprise at seeing him when she stood up. “You back for training?” Her puffed up hair pulsed pink on the ends as she asked this.

“Maybe,” Harry said. “Rodgers thinks I’m not good enough, so perhaps not.”

Rodgers’ chair groaned as he settled into it and pushed away from the desk using his feet. “I didn’t say that, Potter, and you know it. Sit down.”

Harry pulled Tonks’ chair around the corner and sat on the warm seat. Rodgers did not begin. He glanced up at the doorway where Tonks still waited. “Something else?”

“No,” Tonks breathed and stepped away.

Rodgers did not take out a quill or parchment. He sat back in his office chair and laced his hands together over his abdomen. “So, tell me what happened yesterday.” When Harry hesitated, Rodgers added, “In your words. I have Wickem’s and Dumbledore’s, such as they are. He’s a nostalgic old bird and probably better at hiding things and misdirection than anyone I’ve ever interviewed, alive or oil painting. Keeps making the conversation about you, instead of him, something I’ll have to remember because it certainly works well.”

He waited, studying Harry in a way that made Harry’s instincts put Rodgers high on a list of people who needed to be monitored. Rodgers said, “Let’s start with the part where you and your friends have a chat with an old Hogwarts headmaster painting, for whatever reason.”

Harry wondered at his phrasing and said, “Dumbledore’s painting wanted to talk to me.”

“Why?”

“I’ve never understood him. You’d have to ask him.”

“Did. No luck.” He returned to waiting, like he had all the time in the world and the log book in the corner was not scratching out things in need of attention.

“My friends think I’m starting to understand power,” Harry said, watching carefully for a reaction.

Rodgers’ face rippled with faint amusement. “I could see why that would concern them. You’ve hardly done that in the past.” He tugged the top file on his desk closer

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but left it closed, making the Autoquills in the holder rustle. “So old Albus Percival Great Scott Dumbledore calls you in for a chat . . .”

Harry moved Rodgers to an enemies to be neutralized list. “He did. And I realized how he had managed to defeat Grindelwald.”

Rodgers’ brows went up. “And that was?”

“He smothered him. Used his love for Dumbledore against him.” Made him into nothing, Harry almost added.

Rodgers shook his head. “How did you know he was still alive?” He sounded normal now, curious and a bit impressed.

“I learned about the tower . . . from looking into Dumbledore’s Pensieve . . . when I was a student. Mostly I guessed. I don’t know how I guessed, really. Knowing him too well, maybe. I knew that he couldn’t have killed him outright.” He was too weak, Harry also held back on saying.

“So you decided to rectify that oversight, then?”

“I didn’t kill him. I blocked his own curse so it blew out through him and that killed him.”

Speaking with great deliberation, Rodgers said, “You went . . . alone . . . to confront Gellert Grindelwald, the wizard that in a one-on-one matchup could have made Voldemort seem like a second class dueler. He didn’t have Death Eaters to hide behind, you know. He was the real deal.”

“I wanted to prove I could,” Harry answered, bristling inwardly.

“Alone, though.”

“I wanted to do it my way.”

Rodgers sat forward and pointed at Harry’s chest. “That’s the part that will have to stop if you are going to come back to this program. Do you understand me? I catch you running out on your peers to act alone, I will come down on you hard. You will be out of it again before your wand gets back into your pocket.”

Harry made his lips move without the influence of his annoyance. “Yes, sir.” He could hear he sounded like Draco Malfoy, saying the right words just for show. Draco had known a lot of things Harry could not understand the value of before. Harry should have been paying more attention when he’d had the chance.

“You sound so convincing, Potter.” Rodgers stood up. “We’ll see how you do. For now, I’ll chalk it up to post-battle high.”



At home, Harry set his books down on the dining room table and walked away from them, having little interest in Typical Courtroom Cross-Examination Techniques.

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Snape stepped into the main hall and studied him before asking, “How was your training?”

“Fine,” Harry rubbed his arms, which were sore from drills. He had tried to visit the Minister’s office during lunch but she had been out for the day. He was considering slipping into the Department of Mysteries for a chat with Fudge before it got any later in the day, but it would arouse less suspicion to wait a few days, even as impatient as he was.

He wanted to talk his ideas over with someone, but held back on discussing them with Snape. He was feeling positive about his plans for the immediate future and did not want anyone telling him he should feel otherwise.

“I don’t need anything from you,” Harry said.

Snape tilted his head sideways, nodding the way Vineet did, and returned to his desk, inspiring Kali to crawl around in her cage in the corner of the drawing room. Harry did not want to see her, wished she did not exist. As a distraction from the noise and because he hoped to see it confirm his new mood, he waved the strange book down from his room and settled cross-legged on the floor to open it. He was too involved in paging through it to notice Snape stepping up behind him.

Harry saw Snape’s robes ripple out of the corner of his eye. Rather than protest his bothering him, Harry turned the book to the side and looked over his shoulder, asking, “What does it say for you?”

Snape kept his eyes on Harry too long before stepping closer and looking down at the book. Harry paged gradually forward, stopping at a border of an ancient battlefield full of corroded, broken armor and pockmarked bones. Dry leaves fluttered through, caught on the heaped wreckage, but never settled and covered it.

Harry watched Snape’s face, watched his eyes narrow as he studied the page, eyes tracing the border. He grew very still then, statuesque, before turning back to Harry, face neutral.

“What does it say?” Harry prompted.

“It says something with regard to wars never really ending, soldiers never really escaping the battlefield. Does it say something different to you?”

Harry tugged the heavy book closer again and hunched over the page. Only dishonorable cowards desert the field of battle. They will know no glory and certainly no immortality. Failed heroes suffer the greatest kind of death the moment they retreat as cowards. Harry shut the book and stood up, leaving it on the floor.

Purely as a diversion, and just now noticing her absence, Harry asked, “Where’s Candide?”

“Staying with her family. She was a getting a little annoyed with the repeated emergency de-campings.” Snape hovered the abandoned book to the end table, which

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was clear for the first time since the baby had arrived. He spoke casually as he paged through the book. "I am hopeful that the Boss will be captured soon."

Harry wanted to trust him, but he sounded too rational, too pat. Harry's instincts prodded him with the belief that Snape lied the most when he gave the least impression of doing so. But that meant she had left out of fear instead of inconvenience, and try as Harry might, he could not imagine it was the Boss she had run from. Harry's instincts pushed him aside from the obvious thought burgeoning behind that one, so that he hung suspended.

Arms hanging numb at his sides, chest hollowing out, Harry watched Snape turn each page of the book, pausing to study the borders. The clock ticked in the house, which should not be silent enough to hear it. Harry could almost recreate sadness at being feared, but it did not last. Fear was part of power.

Snape paused, page corner held in his lean fingers, eyes searching out the words that Harry knew sometimes did not come. The clock ticking seemed louder. He felt vulnerable in a way he never had before, in a way that his new instincts could not combat.

Only cowards desert. Only cowards.

Harry had not run in fear from this world's Grindelwald, but he had been certain of victory. They had battled only because Harry had chosen to toy with the old wizard because he deserved it. Snape and Harry's friends, even his friends with little fighting skill, had flown toward a battle with Grindelwald, of all wizards. Harry had shown no bravery in this, but his friends had.

Harry rocked on his heels. Things had changed. He used to be like his friends. But such behavior was foolhardy. One should never enter a fight one was not guaranteed to win and to do so was to risk everything, the world itself. But Harry could remember risking everything, without hesitation, many times. He had been scared, sure, but mostly of failure itself, of what that would mean for his friends.

Snape raised his gaze from the book, and rather than meet his eyes, Harry turned his head to stare at a weaving hanging on the wall. Candide had hung that there, had changed this place. Harry was seeing his memories as two worlds, and he was finding it hard to breathe. He was peripherally aware of Snape straightening, turning to fully face him, concern etching lines across his brow.

Harry did not have to be a coward. That was a choice. He used to have choices. He too could fly toward the battle instead of running away from it. It was not even honor or heroism, it was to make things right. That was all that mattered, or used to. He could remember that. It wasn't all fear before. That hapless child tossed up on waves of fate, stalked by an endless series of Grims, wielded a power he now lacked: power over himself.

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Shaking from the effort of directing his will, Harry slipped into the underworld. He must have given something away, some preliminary movement because Snape's voice followed him out.

"Harry . . ."

Harry stared at the grey earth, at the twisted metal and jagged sawgrass, replaying that voice. It was too fraught, too committed, and it left him further unseated with horribly mixed memories. The creatures gathered, snapping and drooling. Before they could reach him, Harry Apparated and fell away for elsewhere, needing to prove something, if at all possible.



Harry awoke with his arm resting on the hearthstone of the Hog's Head. He preferred not to worry what anyone thought of his strange behavior, making the scummy pub the best choice. This time there was no one around to care. The logs were reduced to cleaved hunks of ash-dusted wood, but the hearth still radiated faint warmth. Rather than spell the stone beneath him warmer, Harry remained still, painfully cold, staring up at the dusty cobwebs linking the chimney stones to the peeling plaster ceiling.

He wished he were colder still, numb through.

Keys jangled at the lock and the proprietor stomped in through the door and came to a stop.

"I thought I cleared this place out last night," he growled.

"Guess you didn't," Harry replied, sitting up and rubbing his neck. He paused, staring at the greasy old figure leaning on a staff. With his glasses and blue eyes, Harry thought he was Dumbledore for a second.

The figure stared back at him with a similar expression, then muttered, "I'm not getting involved," and hobbled over to move things around behind the bar. "Nough trouble as it is."

A figure wearing a full length cloak with a deep hood slinked in the front door. He waited at the bar for his pewter mug of ale and took it to a table in the corner, ignoring Harry's attention.

Harry had not brought a cloak. He stood, stretched his neck and pulled out his wand. He gave the wizard warning by approaching with it in view. He blocked the forthcoming hex and put a Mutoshorum on the man while he tugged his cloak free

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of his neck. Beneath his hood he had a narrow face and a neatly trimmed goatee. Harry did not recognize him. The man fell to the floor when his cloak pulled free and flopped flat on his back beside his chair.

“Hey now. None of that in here,” the proprietor complained.

Harry felt the curse before it arrived and deflected it to the wall, where it scattered chunks of plaster, revealing the lathe behind it. He kept his wand steady, aimed at the barman, still puzzling over his blue eyes, how his glasses sat on his vein-stained nose with such tantalizing familiarity. The barman stared back, but kept his wand at an angle, not really aimed.

Harry tossed and caught the cloak so it draped over his arm and backed warily to the door before remembering he could slip away.

He arrived in the Leaky Cauldron with his new cloak hood pulled forward to shade his face. The Hog’s Head owner’s eyes still haunted him. He was the same wizard as in his Plane; why had Harry not noticed the similarity before?

The patrons of the pub were standing in two clusters, talking and gesturing. Harry stepped sideways to slip between two arguing patrons and glance at the newspapers spread out on the table.

Godric’s Hollow Attack! Beneath the headline, the photograph showed a smoking shell of a house with Aurors and Ministry wizards stepping around it. Harry physically lifted a small old witch aside to get right up to the table.

Are any wizards safe if the magic protecting the Potters has failed? read the first line. Harry’s vision tunneled down. He leaned on the table for balance. Behind him a wizard loudly proclaimed that Muggles had done it, and others shouted him down as a nutter. Another insisted his cousin had seen a Dark Mark sent up, but another said that was balderdash. If Harry had been able to exercise his will he would have screamed for them all to shut up.

The newspaper was pulled away. Harry put his other hand down on the sticky tabletop and clung to the solidity of it, still not seeing properly. He was supposed to be flying toward the battle, even as chaotic as that battle had now become. After sucking in a deep breath of hearth-scented cloaks, stale spilled ale, and pipe tobacco, he Disapparated for Godric’s Hollow.

The scent of wet charcoal led him along in the right direction. A handful of witches and wizards were walking along the road ahead of him, stopping to gawk and to retell their own version of events. Harry stopped on the pavement before the blackened spires and chimney and stared. His will drained away again and he floated helpless, surprised he didn’t waver and topple, since he could not feel his limbs.

The gawkers moved on, leaving him blissfully alone. His appropriated cloak was weighing him down, he tugged it off his head, tried to unhook it, but his fingers

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weren't working properly. He was flying into the battle, he reminded himself, but instead he stood there, remembering green flashes, remembering the flames devouring the Shrieking Shack, and falling farther into his confused senses.

"Harry!" A voice came from behind him. "Where have you been? Everyone's been looking everywhere for you."

Harry turned at his name, at Ginny's familiar voice. She came to a scuffling stop.

"Oh," she uttered. Her arms swam in the air to keep her balance, and she became wary. "It's you."

"I saw the papers," Harry said. "It's just like what happened before." He cleared his throat. "Where are the Potters?" he asked.

"I don't know, Harry," she replied, hands out in front of her like she wished to calm him.

"Where are the Potters?" he repeated, more demanding. He needed to know like he needed to breathe. Things had gone out of control and it was his fault. And he could not fix things anymore. He had lost that. He was trying to recapture it, and if he could not, he was nothing.

They stared at each other, a furrow dividing Ginny's brows. She suspected him; he could read it in her expression. Suspected him of what, though? He shrank from imagining. He closed his mouth without asking again, withering from an internal heat that could not escape.

"They're not dead, are they?" he uttered. It couldn't be true. He tried again to unhook his cloak and stood clutching the edges of it, head bowed. How had it all gotten so out of control?

Ginny stepped forward out of the road and onto the grass. "Harry," she said, full of concern now. "You lost your parents. I remember you said that's why you came in the first place. I'm sorry."

She had stopped a few paces away. Neither spoke while the breeze carried the wet smoke away and flapped the edges of Harry's stolen cloak. Ginny started to speak, twice, but held back, eyes searching his face. When Harry looked up at her the next time, she appeared changed, face set.

"Can you stay here, Harry, and wait for me?" Her face shifted again, forced kindly. Behind it, her thoughts were shuttered and protected. "I'll see what I can do. Okay? You'll wait here?"

Harry's instincts tried to tell him she was tricking him, laying a trap. He willfully ignored this warning. "I just need to know if they're alive." He was pleading, from deep within himself, communicating through a narrow tunnel to the surface.

"Yes, Harry, they are. But stay here, okay?"

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And she was gone. He puzzled her last, calculating look, wishing her Occlumency were not working so well.

More figures approached along the road, pointing at the wreckage of the house. Muggles. Harry pulled his hood forward and paced away, treading through the yellow blooms growing under a massive ash tree at the corner of the yard, bare branches tipped with cloven-foot buds.

Harry needed to find Grindelwald, needed to fly into battle against him, but it would not succeed; he knew it would not. Whatever he had possessed before, luck or fate, or some kind of magical blessing from the past, had abandoned him. Flying into battle would accomplish exactly nothing. And he would be destroyed in the process. That realization caused icy, paralyzing fear to trickle into his chest.

Harry stared down at the yellow blossoms, each one a starburst. His feet had vanished under the deep green heart-shaped leaves.

“Harry?” Ginny’s voice came again.

Harry reached for his wand, hiding it in his sleeve, certain he faced a trap.

But Ginny approached alone. “Good. You’re still here,” she said, coming along the pavement.

The Muggles turned and watched them. Harry considered a Befuddling Hex, but held back, wanting to keep his wand free.

“I arranged a meeting,” she said and held out her hand. Her eyes bore mixed emotion, but nothing deeper escaped.

Their hands closed around each other before Harry was even aware of raising his. Her hands were warm, but her fingertips chilly. She glanced over her shoulder at the Muggles and lifted her wand, sending fog out of it that swooped around them, masking them from sight.

They arrived in a fog too and Ginny shook out her wand. “Sorry, I haven’t quite worked that one out yet,” she said, laughing at herself. She released his hand and stepped back.

The fog thinned and drifted, revealing them to be in a broad glade, somewhere the leaves were already beginning to open.

“Harry?” Lily queried, green eyes full of motherly alarm and hope. Her unbound hair lifted in the wind as she stepped toward Harry.

“It’s not Harry, exactly,” Ginny insisted.

Lily rocked up on her toes and stopped. “I don’t understand this.”

Harry, drinking her in, felt nothing. She was not so much beautiful as . . . perfect. Harry’s heart thudded within an empty cavity. He wanted to fall to his knees before her and remain that way.

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Ginny said, "I didn't have enough time to explain properly, as if I could, anyway. It's not your Harry. It's someone else. Another Harry, from another place."

Lily's gaze narrowed, studying Harry's eyes as if they were a clue to be decoded. She rubbed her forehead and tilted her head like one thinking hard. All the forces fighting inside Harry had reached a stalemate. Except his eyes grew wet.

"Harry, what happened to you?" Lily asked, her voice a caress that cast back so many years it nearly cut Harry in two.

Ginny said again, "I'm telling you this is a different Harry. I know it's weird, but it's true. He just wanted to see that you were okay, you and Mr. Potter. But Mr. Potter is off helping with something," Ginny explained to Harry.

Lily straightened and studied Harry with an acuity that made him believe she was smarter even than Hermione. "A different Harry?" She glanced at Ginny. "But still Harry? A Harry?" She turned back to him when Ginny did not reply, merely stood with her lips pursed. "That really the case?"

Harry found the means to nod faintly. He had very little say in what was going on with his body. As badly as he needed to see her, he felt gutted and exposed, and fearful of what he might reveal if he stood there longer.

"His mum and dad died when he was a babe," Ginny supplied.

"What?"

"His mum, you, died. That's what he said, anyway. When he saw the house he freaked out and needed to see you." She huffed. "It's impossible to explain this."

Lily shook her head and waved Ginny off, then stood studying Harry, thinking.

A roar began, built in volume, and a trio of slate grey fighter jets emerged over the trees and with a deafening rush disappeared over the opposite short horizon. The women watched them pass overhead, arms hanging suspended. Lily closed her eyes a long moment.

"That's bad, isn't it? We have to do something," Ginny said. "Harry has to do something." At Harry's questioning glare, she said, "You're the only one who can defeat him."

Harry, fear reaching out to grip him, snapped, "No one can defeat him. He has Dumbledore's old wand. He's undefeatable."

"What is this?" Lily asked.

Her keenly projected intelligence soothed Harry's riled nerves. He explained, "Grindelwald has Dumbledore's old wand. He killed him for it a few months ago."

Lily slowly said, "Dumbledore's been dead for a long time. Unless we are speaking of a different Dumbledore, the same way I am speaking to a different Harry."

Harry shook his head, impatient to be understood. He had to remind himself to suck in a breath and let it out again. "No. He only pretended to be dead. He

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did this so he could spend all his time with Grindelwald, pacifying him, I suppose. Dumbledore had taken that wand from him to defeat him at the end of the Great War. It's the Wand of Destiny; it cannot be defeated."

Ginny stepped closer. "How did Dumbledore get it away from him, then? And how did he get it back?"

Harry explained, "They were lovers; that might have had something to do with it." Ginny's thin brows went up under her fringe. Harry joked, "Certainly, I can't use that method to win." His instincts urged him to go. Only death awaited him here, defeat and death. Harry shook his head harder. "No," he uttered, trembling with the effort at remaining in place.

Harry lifted his gaze to his mother, who wore an expression of quizzical concern. She asked Ginny, "You really think he can do something?"

Ginny nodded. "He's very powerful."

Lily's face filled with sad sympathy, making Harry lean toward her. She said, "There is an enemy fleet assembling off the Frisian Islands. Bombs are falling on Kent and Suffolk and Grindelwald is believed to be there assisting in the destruction. They are trying to destroy the ports. That's where James and the others went, to try to help fight."

Ginny, voice small but sure, said, "Harry, you have to do something."

Harry battered down the fear choking him. He pictured Grindelwald, what he was doing now. Jealous anger made him close his eyes. He could do something. He could show his mother what he really was.

Harry let his shoulders fall back and, finding his ever-present hunger, sent out a vibrating song. The air quivered and popped as hooded figures began arriving. Ginny let out a sound of surprise and someone plucked at Harry's sleeve before letting go again. Harry kept calling them, and more arrived while some resisted. Harry pulled harder, punishing those resisting. A scattering more arrived.

Harry opened his eyes to study the three loose rings of figures surrounding them, shifting anxiously. The wind moved their cloaks in waves. Ginny bit her lip and minced away from the nearest Death Eaters to take hold of Lily's hand. Lily had her wand out, and pulled Ginny so they were back to back.

A few shadows still resisted. With a snarl, Harry sent searing punishment out along the shadowy tendrils. The figures surrounding them doubled up or fell to their knees, a few dropped their wands in favor of gripping their arms. More pops sounded in a chorus and the rings filled in more.

Harry stared at Lily's unmoving and stunned face. She and Ginny were pressed together, wands wavering around various targets. Harry counted to ten before sending the song out again – punishment then reward. He reached to the extremes of his mind

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and lured the others to him as well, those who would have to travel day and night to reach him. He gave them no choice. They were his servants; no one else would use them.

Harry let his shoulders fall slack. He could do anything at that moment. Touch every corner of the magical world. But all he wanted to do was make his mother understand.

“This is what is left of me,” Harry said. She turned her head to him, wand still aimed elsewhere. “I’m becoming Him,” he added.

Her expression did not change; it remained fixed with surprise, and it pained him.

Off to Harry’s right, a figure raised its wand. While turning, Harry sent out punishment, making the Death Eater fall to the ground. “Try that again, Bellatrix, and next time I will simply kill you. I am not the pushover your previous master was.” Harry breathed heavily, anger narrowing his vision. “Stand up.”

The cloaked figure shakily pushed to her feet and teetered. The other figures stood tense, waiting.

“You disgust me,” Harry said, turning to address them all. “Helping our enemies. You may be wizards who don’t believe Muggles deserve any rights, but you’re still British.” He continued turning, taking them all in. Their postures were hunched, heads down or turned aside. They remained unmoving. Harry took them in one at a time, making them wait more, breathed in their obedience, growing high on it. “What are you thinking, helping an outsider destroy us?”

Another set of jet fighters roared by, out of sight, too low to see beyond the hills. “You! On this side of me.” Harry gestured on his left, “You will go to London, see that anything launched from the east does not reach the city. I don’t care how you do it.”

A noise of disgust came from someone. Harry strode forward to the broad figure in the first row, the one emanating cursedness. He grabbed up a fistful of robe and jerked, making Greyback’s hood fall back from his roughly bearded face, a beard that extended to just below his eyes. Greyback snarled and stinking breath huffed from between his long teeth. Harry didn’t just reach for his Mark, he twisted it. Greyback plummeted to his knees.

“I own you, Greyback. You have no other master but me.”

Greyback snarled louder, and Harry twisted more, making the others nearby in the circle moan. It sounded like the wind through a bare forest with a storm approaching.

“Say I’m your master,” Harry sneered. “Say it or I will . . . Make. You. Into. Nothing.”

Greyback howled in complaint, his sharp fingernails gouging the earth.

“Say it,” Harry insisted, twisting.

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“. . . master . . .” Greyback muttered.

“I didn’t quite hear that.” Harry stepped back, taking in the circled figures. “Try again.”

“Master,” Greyback whimpered, saliva dripping from his incisors. He choked out a sob at being released from punishment and remained curled around his knees, face pressing into the ground.

Harry swept an arm across half the circle. “I catch any of you aiding the usurper and I will deal with you so harshly you will wish for your parents to never been born.”

“But . . . master,” a voice said.

Everything fell still as Harry turned. He took a step forward, and tried his memory of body shape and voice. “Jugson . . . you always were a simpering idiot. Yes? You were saying?”

“He’ll kill us, master. Have pity . . .”

Harry raised a brow. “Pity?” he spat. “He has to find you to kill you. I don’t. I can make you wish for death as you cower, trying to hide from me. Do keep that in mind.”

Harry waved at the first set he had given instructions to. “You! Go! What are you waiting for?” With a rush of pops, that section of the field stood empty. Harry rotated on his toes, scrutinizing each of the smaller remaining figures, looking for familiar ones.

“Wormtail!” Harry shouted, spinning to pin the aim of his wand on a hunched figure that rocked side to side. “Come here.”

Wormtail dropped to his knees at the edge of the inner circle and crawled the rest of the way.

Harry’s wand hand vibrated he was so angry. The women shuffled around as a unit to get clear.

“Master?” Pettigrew queried, rubbing his face spasmodically over his clasped hands.

“Peter?” Lily blurted.

“Didn’t know he was a traitor, did you?” Harry asked. “He’s the reason my parents are dead.”

Confusion flickered over Pettigrew’s face. “Wormtail doesn’t understand, Master Harry.”

“You,” Harry said. “And you five,” he said, including Bellatrix in his gesture. “Get yourselves to Felixstowe, on broomstick. Do everything you can to slow the bombardment. I don’t care if you have to throw yourselves at the ships.” He had to shout, “Go!” at them, to get them all off.

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Harry took a deep breath and turned to Lily. "What else needs protecting?" When her brow furrowed doubtfully, Harry said, "If they fail, I will make them pay."

She thought, then said, "We're worried about attacks on Sizewell, since they are attacking that coast. Hopefully the Muggles have taken it off line, but there is still danger, given the materials there."

Harry looked at the hundred or so remaining Death Eaters. He sent off ten to protect the nuclear power plant, and in groups of ten sent the rest off on various missions, each time with a painful reminder that he was to be feared beyond anything they may fear of Grindelwald. He kept one familiar figure in the inner circle clear of the assignments and eventually he was the only one left.

The four of them stood in the trodden, brown grass. Snape angled his hooded head partly in their direction. Lily's chin lifted when she saw him. She still clutched Ginny's hand, and she used it to push the two of them apart as she lowered her wand. Ginny's mouth pursed, indicating she too recognized who remained.

Snape's hooded head turned all the way to Lily now, revealing a glimpse of his mask. They remained in that tableau until Snape's head turned back to Harry.

"Go on," Harry said. "Go home."

The last figure vanished with a pop.

Harry did not want to meet Lily's eyes. With his sense of the shadows muted by distance, he felt empty.

"You only sent six to Felixstowe," Ginny said.

"Because it's suicide," Harry said, "if Grindelwald is really there." Thoughts of death pinned Harry in place again, made the air thin.

Lily said, "I'm going to tell the Ministry what is happening, or . . . at least tell them that the Death Eaters have turned on their leader and should be helping us. Is that all right with you?"

Harry shrugged. Nothing here really mattered. Her graceful wrist flicked out a message and it sprinted away in a silent rush of silver.

Harry leaned his head back, feeling lightheaded from forgetting to breathe. He drew in a long lungful and let it out again. His instincts thrashed against any notion of facing down Grindelwald. He snapped his head back straight as the women stepped closer to him.

Ginny glanced at Lily before saying, "We'll come with you to fight Grindelwald in Felixstowe. We have to do whatever we can." She held out a pale hand turned outward as if to lead him off by it for a walk. "Come on. There's no time to lose."

Harry stared at her, eyes stinging. "No," he said, arguing with himself.

Strained now, she said, "Remember when you tried to explain to me that the time would come for the prophecy. That I would just know. Well it seems like it's now."

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She stopped to swallow, pronouncing things like one too fatalistic to stop and think. "We have to go."

Lily stepped forward and took Harry's hand on the other side. Only from the feel of her warm fingers did he realize how very chilled his own skin must be. Harry's instincts would not let him step forward, would not let him raise his other hand to Ginny. Fear of the end of everything paralyzed him, and burgeoning self-loathing wasn't enough to overcome it.

A gust came up just then and one else heard him. Lily reached for Ginny's hand and the field disappeared. The sound of their Apparition was lost in the fluttering scream of sirens and the whine of a rocket tearing overhead. The ground shook as it landed a few streets behind them. Dust floated in a band of haze just above the abandoned and overturned cars cluttering the street. Acrid smoke burned Harry's eyes.

Ginny began chanting, "Oh Merlin. Oh Merlin." Lily jerked them both under the overhang of a building. Somewhere within it a child's cry was partly muted before starting up again. Lily slid to the edge of the wall and looked out down the street. Harry wanted to grab for her, but his arm only jerked. He hated himself for that tiny failure and gave out a cry of dismay.

The others spun on him. "Harry?"

Trembling, Harry said, "You should go."

Lily stood before him, whole, lithely moving on her toes. He could not bear to see her in danger; it risked making him scream. Fear for her tore away his paralysis. He grabbed her by the shoulders. "Please go. I'll take care of this. You have a son. Just go . . ." But he was losing the battle again, even as he spoke. There was nothing more he could do here. It was hopeless.

A nearby shadow ripped apart in his mind, making him lean on Lily for support. Harry hung on, waiting for that instant when the life force was sucked away into somewhere else. It came and went, leaving him gasping. One Death Eater down.

A whine made the three of them duck as a shell landed close by, rattling the building above them and sending plaster down upon them. Jets and helicopters roared overhead. Harry grabbed Lily by the shoulders again. She had dust and chips in her hair. "Go. Now. I would die if something –"

Another explosion, and another shadow slipped away. Harry coughed in the increasing dust. "Please," he begged. If he could only do one thing, it should be to get them away. "Both of you."

Lily appeared convinced, according to her eyes. Ginny tugged on Harry's sleeve. "What are you going to do?" she shouted over the sound of a rocket whistling overhead.

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“I don’t know. There is nothing that can be done. But you cannot stay. I don’t belong here and it doesn’t matter about me. GO.”

GINNY took Lily’s hand again, and Lily touched Harry on the upper arm. “Of course you matter, Harry,” Lily said.

Harry drank her solidity in again, overwhelmed by her acceptance of what he was.

GINNY leaned close to Lily’s ear to say, “He can call the Death Eaters to himself if he needs help, remember?”

“I don’t really want to leave him with that as his only option,” Lily said. She stepped closer. Tears and sweat streaked the dust on her face. She took his face in her hands. “Harry, no son of mine would become Voldemort, no matter what he can do with his old followers.”

A whistling approached, deafening. Harry shouted, “GO!” and pushed Lily away. She and Ginny Disapparated even as they stumbled. Harry himself slipped away just as the blast bubble tossed him aside. He landed in the hard dirt of the Dark Plane with grit driven into his skin and the wind knocked out of him.

While he coughed and tried to draw breath, Harry nurtured his anger, anger at Grindelwald destroying his country, taking his servants. His anger kept the creatures at bay. They circled him at a few paces, snapping and snarling, but did not come right up to him. They were nothing compared to the bombardment going on just on the other side of the Interstice. Harry closed his eyes. He did not want to return. He could not return; it would be death to do so.

A creature stepped on his hand. He could smell their putrid breath, feel the breeze of their movement. He Apparated away, and stumbled before regaining his feet. The creatures were approaching again already. He didn’t want to die, leaving him helpless against them.

His instincts pushed him to retreat home, but he refused to do that. The creatures approached at a gallop, hordes of them kicking up the fine dust. Harry waited until the very last instant, and slipped back into Felixstowe, into the main port proper, which he knew from field work. The sky was full of smoky streaks and tracers.

Limbs quaking, he jogged toward the water across the tarmac between the high stacks of containers sitting like a silent city. The tall T-shaped cranes were leaning into the water or bent over half-sunken cargo ships. Harry stepped up on a piling at the quay, squinted at the top of a stack of cargo containers on the nearest ship, and Apparated for it. A low missile scorched a line overhead and into the port behind him, bending the roof of a warehouse over with a horrible protest of metal and sending smoke billowing. Fighters roared by, outbound and half a minute later on the horizon flashes of white-yellow and billows of smoke appeared. Rumbles followed seconds later. Harry pretended it was a television program to keep his will from giving out.

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The scent of burning made the ruse hard to keep up. He could imagine in the past relishing the heat of battle, but now it seemed like suicidal insanity.

Harry fell to his knees rather than give in to his heart-weakening fear. He was going to do something. He waited for the whine of incoming fire, then sent up a block, as broad as he could manage. He did not expect much, but two explosions buffeted the air above the end of the pier. He repeated this, and with more confidence to put behind it, the spell worked even better. Elated, which let him breathe just a little more deeply, Harry stood on his rubbery legs, and set his feet more securely against the raised edge of the shipping container, and prepared for the next missile strike.

But, what came at him instead was a curse, so forceful, Harry instinctively slipped away for the Dark Plane without a flicker of thought. He stood in the dimness breathing in and out, wondering what had happened behind him. Curiosity overcoming his fear, he slipped back in quayside. The stack of containers he had been standing on had been melted away and the contents were burning. Harry held his wand up near his nose, pressing his fists into his face. He and his instincts battled as the sun passed behind a cloud, relieving his eyes from the glare.

“Death is just death,” Harry screamed into the uncaring air hovering over the water.

This time, Harry did not get any warning. Something grabbed up his limbs and tangled them around each other then around him, knocking him to the hot tarmac. A purple flash followed, gem-like facets swarmed his head and he could no longer see.

Frantically tossing his head, Harry rolled, scraping the fingers that were trying to puncture his gut they clung so hard to his sides. His own arms were clutched around his middle so tight he could not draw in air. He still held his wand. The spell made it impossible to let go of it, had he wanted to.

Harry rolled to a stop on his front, the loud huffing of his short breaths the only sound that reached his ears. His choice was here or the Dark Plane, helpless and blind. A rumbling vibration in the tarmac indicated an explosion nearby. Huffing, vision failing from lack of air, terrified that another more deadly spell strike was aimed at his back, Harry frantically rolled again.

His vision sunk into black. With the last of his strength, Harry smashed his head into the tarmac, cracking the crystalline prison around his head, and letting in light and a slice of blissfully fresh air. Harry lay still, gasping in tiny breaths of life. His arms had gone numb, but he could feel his wand pressing along his ribs. He muttered, “*Reducio, Rennervate, Resigno, Oblitteratus,*” all to no effect.

Imagining Grindelwald landing nearby to finish him, Harry thrashed onto his side so he could see more of the quay through the crack in the crystal prison. The splintered gap revealed only the burning ship and the sky. He could not sense any

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other wizards close by either, but Grindelwald must be in spell range. Although spell range for the Wand of Destiny may be much farther than Harry was used to.

It was hopeless. He could not do anything to change what was happening. If he wanted to live, he should not be here. Harry let his crystal incased head rest on the hard ground, giving him a close-up view of the black encased tiny pebbles constituting the tarmac. Fear kicked him again with the terror that any moment a deadly spell would envelop him. He had to survive because the alternative was unthinkable.

Harry closed his eyes, willing himself to find a way to safety, to live. A vision from one of those illicitly borrowed books floated into view, as clear as the pebbly surface in front of his nose.

“Retextadaugeo!” And Harry was free. And the instant he spread his limbs to tear at the thing on his head, the acid pain struck him like before. Grindelwald was indeed close by and was toying with him. Harry gave a snarling cry and Disapparated.

Harry woke to the wail of sirens in the ruins of the building where Lily and Ginny had brought him in. The ceiling was cracked open like a smashed eggshell, the edges of the hole trailing cables and slabs of broken concrete. The glitter remains of the gem charm had fallen down into the rubble. Harry shifted himself carefully to a better position. He had been draped painfully over a tilted concrete slab.

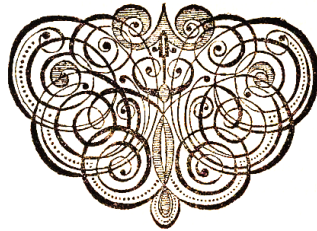
Harry sat up and rubbed first at his midsection, then gingerly at his dust encrusted eyes. A whistle sailed overhead and exploded, somewhere. Harry straightened from clutching his head in his arms for protection. Dust fell from above as the building shook. A chunk of concrete hanging from a cable began to sway as the building’s remains rocked.

It was hopeless. This Grindelwald was going to have this world, and there was nothing Harry could do about it. Wasting his life would not change anything.

At that understanding, the clutching inside Harry’s chest eased; he had reached harmony within himself, with a wash of relief so strong it made him bow his head and close his eyes.

Author’s Notes: Sorry about the incongruous Polish name popping up again. Need it for continuity. (And I still like the sound of it . . .) Also, I couldn’t pick a preview.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT



RECRUITING DARKNESS

Despite the dwindling light, Snape did not move to light any candles or the lamp at his elbow. He did not move at all beyond occasionally petting Kali, who lay curled in the valley between his arm and his breast. It was into evening now, and Harry's friends had ceased to call. Hermione's owl sat on the lamp in the corner, head under its wing, awaiting the letter she insisted he send as soon as Harry returned.

Winky padded over, her pale skin and tea towel glowing in the low light. "Master still is not wanting dinner?"

"No." Snape resumed stroking Harry's pet. "You are certain you cannot sense where Harry is?"

Winky crookedly dipped her head then shook it. "Winky is not able to be knowing this."

Cradling Kali, Snape rose to his feet and paced to the drawing room window. There was no reason to look outside; Harry certainly was not going to arrive home by walking down the road. If Winky did not know where he was then he was most likely not in this world.

Snape stared out at the weak orange glow in the windows opposite. The skeletal trees between the houses stood fixed, reaching for the last blush of sunset.

The soft sound of something falling near the hearth did not startle Snape. He drew in a deep breath and extracted Kali from his robes. He put her away in her cage before moving to crouch beside the tangled figure lying between the andirons. Brushing his fingers over Harry's robes left behind a trail of magical sparkle that chilled his fingers.

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Moving faster, Snape waved over the warmed blanket waiting on the desk chair and wrapped Harry in it, careful not to trap Harry's arms this time in case he awakened with a start and panicked at being restrained. This done, Snape took his time examining the plaster bits embedded in his charge's hair and the tear on his sleeve. Harry had found another fight, a habit Snape expected would continue until it no longer could. It seemed Harry had lost all other outlets for expressing himself.



Harry rocked his head as he woke up making the blanket around him scuff his ears. He raised his head to check his situation. Snape sat in his desk chair, facing him, hands clasped. When Harry moved to sit up, Snape moved as well, reaching out a hand, which Harry ignored.

Snape pushed back, rolling the chair away a foot. He returned to waiting, eyes keener. Harry considered distrusting him and stared back.

"Are you recovered?" Snape asked. His voice held an unaffected timbre, promising he was prepared for efficient service.

Still on the floor, with his arms hooked around his knees, Harry said, "Brew me something to put Fudge under my control."

"If you wish. May I inquire what sort of control you intend?" At Harry's hesitation, Snape went on: "There are multiple ways to control someone, as you well know. In Cornelius Fudge's case, might I suggest you potion him to do something horribly embarrassing and use evidence of that to put him under your thumb?"

"I like that. He'd deserve it too." Harry remembered sending the other Snape off to safety and decided for the moment that this one had passed the test. He pushed to his feet and stretched his neck as he walked out into the main hall. "When is dinner?"

"Whenever you desire it," Snape replied, then strode toward the kitchen.

Harry went to the dining room to watch Winky nervously bring the food to the table, but it appeared in a sparkle. He considered going to the kitchen to confront her, but the scent of the roast, soaked in red wine and ringed by miniature onions, made his gut twist with hunger.

While they ate, Harry found his hair was full of debris. As he brushed it out, Snape observed, "You found a fight?"

"No matter," Harry replied, pushing aside the crushed buildings, his being coerced into battle, and his abandoning that place in a fit of hopelessness. But his face heated as if he were too close to the hearth and his teeth ground together between bites. That place did not matter. If he kept to his grand plans, his failures did not matter.

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“Are you going to training in the morning?” Snape inquired.

“Yes,” Harry replied. He badly needed to keep busy and wished he were at the Ministry doing drills right now so he would stop trying to dwell on why his clothes were torn and why the two of them were eating alone. He thought about Fudge instead, pudgy, weaseling Fudge. “When can you have the potion?” Harry snarled.

“It will require three and a half days,” Snape replied. “You will want to use something untraceable, I am assuming?”

Harry’s lips twitched. “For now,” he replied, considering that to do otherwise would make for a good test of his position. Sometime soon enough he would do that. It would mean he had succeeded.



Harry woke in the early twilight hours and hung his head over the edge of the bed, wand glowing, but the strange book was not underneath. Deciding its message was of no use anyway, he pulled out his assigned reading for that day. It was important to keep up the appearance of obedience while it was useful to have the cover of the Ministry.

The moment Harry woke the next time, he propelled himself to rise and dress. He did not stop moving, even re-reading half a page of his assignment in the lift at the Ministry. He closed the book when he came face to face with Mr. Weasley waiting for the lift.

“Harry! Good to see you,” Mr. Weasley exclaimed, all warm welcome.

Harry managed a nod as he slipped by, hesitating when Mr. Weasley glanced down sharply, Harry assumed at the book he held. Harry held up *On Optimal Negation of Primitive Protections* and only then realized his fingers were roaming over the book in fidgeting strokes.

“Still catching up on my reading,” Harry explained. “Quite a chore.”

“Yes, I’m sure it is.”

The lift gate clacked closed and Harry watched Mr. Weasley’s watchful gaze as it slid up into the ceiling.

Harry, determined to behave normally, took a seat at the desk in the back and pressed his hands between his legs, stretching his arms to sit bolt upright. He blanked his mind, studying the ghostly remains of yesterday’s writing on the chalkboard. Rodgers fired two questions from the reading at him, which Harry answered easily. Rodgers gave a satisfied hmf, and moved on to haranguing the others, especially Aaron.

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As long as Harry suppressed his impatience, training was a relief from thought. Lunchtime came upon him so quickly that he stood blinking as drills ended. He let plots about the Minister of Magic push out thoughts of anything else. Tossing out the excuse that he needed to buy lunch, he headed for the stairs.

Minister Bones was in her outer office, pontificating to her staff, who sat leaning forward on the couches surrounding her. Belinda sat straight as Harry entered and did not take her eyes from him as he approached.

“Mr. Potter,” Bones greeted him, shifting to a broad smile from the somewhat forced one she wore when he entered. “Demise of Voldemort Day is just over a month away. Do come in; we should discuss some plans.”

Harry felt a smile spread over his face. “Yes, we should,” he said.

The minister waved at Belinda, who put her quill to the notebook on her knee. “Now, the broom manufacturers have been on my tail about promotion, you know, without enough buy-in of our latest magical techniques it’s not worth developing them, the usual, yadda yadda . . .” She tapped a finger on her chin and turned her rosy cheeks upward. “Yes, I think broom races.”

“No tournament?” Harry asked, trying to sound innocently saddened. He could feel that his eyes had narrowed too much as he considered her.

“Well, of course. My assistant, Agrippa, is organizing that. Posters go up next week.” She waved a pudgy hand. “This will be in addition to the picnic. Overhead. At the same time. The way we used to have them when I was young, but to make everyone happy we’ll add a Stock Sweeper obstacle course to go along with the Antique Racing Brooms and the Homebrew jousting competition.”

She turned to Harry, face reverting to an artificial smile. “Fun enough, right?” With a gesture, she gathered her staff and retreated to her office, master of everything around her. Harry considered Belinda, who sat finishing her notes.

He needed more servants.

During weight training, Harry watched Vineet doing handstands where he lowered himself to a headstand and pushed himself up again. It spoke of vitality, of strength to fend off death.

Harry remained on the side, observing Tridant win every weightlifting matchup, even when he and Kerry Ann were allowed to combine what they could raise. He was another possibility.

Kerry Ann stood up and groaned, “How did you recover so much after your Healer’s orders to take it easy?”

Tridant grinned and flexed a molded bicep. “Their Recovery Potion worked too well.”

“Yes,” Harry murmured, “magic is good, isn’t it?”

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Harry returned home to find Ginny and Aaron lounging in the main hall. Ginny leapt up as soon as she saw Harry.

“I need to talk to you. Do you have a moment?” Her eyes spoke of worry without using Legilimency. Uneasiness tainted her motions as she led the way to the next room.

“I need to warn you about something,” Ginny said after Harry closed the door to the drawing room.

Harry remained by the door, taking her in. “What?”

“Skeeter blackmailed me into giving her her job back, but . . .” She held up a hand to forestall Harry’s outburst of anger, rocked back on her heel, then stepped toward him.

Harry released the door handle and stepped over to face her. “You let her get the better of you?”

“I didn’t have much choice, and we have a deal now: she can’t write anything about you I don’t approve first.”

Harry came right up to her, so that he looked down on her. She had done something fancy to accentuate her eyes and her hair was clipped up. It added five years to her appearance.

He weighed the possibilities of her words before saying: “You are willing to oversee her? She’s a slippery one.”

“Honestly, Harry, it will be easier this way.” Her voice dropped and she swallowed hard. “I’ve been keeping things quiet all along anyway.”

Harry reached up to touch the silver clip in her hair. “I appreciate that.”

“You’ve been making a lot of trouble lately.”

“I got bored.” He added a little smile to that, which drew one from her too. He pushed a stray lock of hair back to catch it on the clip. “I’ve never seen your hair like that,” he said.

A blush grew up from her neck, staining her ears. “Yeah, well, we’re all here for you, Harry. But we’re hoping you get yourself together soon, too.”

The blush filled her cheeks and she turned away to pace to the hearth.

Harry followed with a tread light enough that she jumped when she turned around again. “I’m getting it together,” he assured her.

“You weren’t careful enough in Hogsmeade, Harry. If it was you like Rita said.”

“I’ll be more careful,” he promised, fingering her sleeve.

She opened her mouth to speak, then ducked her head. “I have to go.” Flushing redder yet, she rushed to the door and out.

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“You’ll have the potion this evening, correct?” Harry asked immediately upon stepping down to breakfast.

Snape had his post open in front of him, a letter from McGonagall on top discussing school issues, Harry noted.

Snape stood. “We can go check on it now, if you like.”

“Yes, I’d like,” Harry said, focusing on his future plans to avoid thinking of the empty day ahead. An empty day in a far too quiet house.

In the room beside Harry’s bedroom, a pair of cauldrons bubbled away atop a warped door laid across stacks of books.

“Smells better today,” Harry said. “Can barely smell it at all.”

Snape stepped up to a cauldron bubbling to the brim with a clear liquid and gave it a stir with a dipping motion. “The cat’s claw from my stores proved to be of poor potency. I had to alter the steps to merge a new batch into the brew.”

Harry stepped up to the end of the table where he could watch Snape’s face. “Not like you to have that kind of problem. I thought you refilled your stores with everything you may need.”

Snape set the stirring stick back in the holder. White smoke curled off of it. “It is an exceedingly common ingredient. Not one I expected to be substandard.”

Harry leaned on the table, rocking it. Something clicked in place inside of him and the world became as clear as the potion. “I don’t know if I believe you. You have a bad habit of interfering.”

Snape shook his head. “I have no desire to interfere in your getting even with an old enemy by putting him under your power.” His voice grew sterner as he added, “I do, however, have a desire to keep you whole.”

“You want to keep me as weak as the rest of you lot.” Harry’s lower lip vibrated as he spoke. He did not intend to shout, but his voice grew louder as he went. “You want to keep me mortal. And helpless. I can’t use all this power if I’m afraid, now can I? That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

Winky appeared in a sparkle. She tugged on Snape’s robe and reached up a hand toward Harry. “Master, Winky is not liking this.”

Harry’s gaze snapped down to her. He should have dealt with her sooner.

“Winky, you will depart this room immediately,” Snape commanded her.

Winky shrunk back, but kept her shaking hand raised. “Winky not let Master be hurt.”

Snape’s voice grew malevolent. “Winky. Now. Go. I will not be disobeyed.”

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Stooping, Winky shuffled backwards, eyes flicking between the two of them, then she vanished.

Into the silence, Snape said, "The potion will be ready this evening."

Harry raked Snape's eyes for any hint of deception. "I'll be expecting it." He stalked out.



The wind tossed Harry's robes as he leaned against the stone balustrade of a high balcony on the Tower Bridge. The wind reassured him. It fooled his senses into believing he was in motion. Below him, the river slipped sideways to the flow of the cars and panel vans.

Harry leaned over to rest his chin on his hands, trying to suppress his restlessness and ignore the painful memories still dogging him, so as to better plan. Up here with London spread beneath him, everything seemed both possible and pointlessly remote. The Muggle world felt empty, the life within it grey and loud and lacking the spark that made magical people special.

Insistent honking drew Harry's gaze to where a shiny grey saloon car had pulled over to the curb, blocking traffic. A heavy man with white hair and a full mustache trundled out of it and hand in pocket, stepped over to a newsstand, ignoring the impatient drivers blocked behind his car. Harry's heart raced, certain it was Vernon Dursley. Harry stood straight and leaned over the balustrade, trying to see better, hand on his wand.

Harry had his hand out of his pocket when the man turned to wave dismissively at the honking cars. It wasn't Vernon, just someone very much like him. Harry clutched his wand in both hands, considering what he might do to the car, just for fun. Perhaps a heat charm to melt the tires or better yet, turn the engine into slag . . . But his instincts warned: empty gesture, not worth the risk. He should be working on something meaningful instead. Swallowing his frustration, Harry pocketed the wand.

Given the noisy street, Harry Disapparated directly for Belinda's flat. She sat at her kitchen table, still in her pyjamas and slippers.

"Oh, it's you," she said and spooned another glop of soggy cereal into her mouth.

Harry froze her into place with a Mutushorum. "Not much of a greeting," he said, voice low.

Her eyes grew alarmed even though her face didn't move. Milk dripped off her spoon onto the table. Pleased enough with pushing his frustration outward, he released her and the spoon clattered to the floor.

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“Hi, Harry,” she said breathlessly. “Good to see you.” She waited several breaths before picking up the spoon, then considered it a long moment before continuing to eat with it.

Harry focused on the blissful future again and said, “I need your assistance early tomorrow morning. The Ministry Atrium at half past three.”

She swallowed and nodded.

“We’ll need other help too,” Harry said. “And better witnesses.” He had a thought, one that lit up his brain like a firework. “Dictate a letter for me and owl it. It would be better if it came from you.” He pulled out a chair and sat down, mouth crooked and salivating with pleasure. Plotting felt good. He was moving forward, not looking back.

Belinda pushed her breakfast aside like one accustomed to putting meals after everything else and dug out a sheet of clean parchment from under the stack of newspapers.

Harry began, “Dear Rita Skeeter, I have an anonymous tip for you that will be well worth your time. Please come alone, with a camera, to the Ministry Atrium at, let’s see, tell her 5:30 am, because she will come an hour early and that’s when I really want her there. Remain concealed at all times.”

“She’ll need to use the flash in the atrium.”

“By that time it won’t matter,” Harry said. “And we’ll need more wizards, and I think I know just the pair.”



Snape looked up as Winky slid a full tea tray onto his desk. It held a silver set he did not remember owning, and the plates were piled with biscuits, sandwich triangles, and scones. There were even three varieties of sugar as well as honey.

“What is this?” Snape asked, inspecting a jar labeled spear thistle honey.

Winky flinched and bowed low while backing up. “Winky is a good elf,” she squeaked.

“Yes. Winky is a very good elf, but she must obey me, especially with regards to Harry. Do not interfere with him. We have discussed this.”

Her voice fell to barely audible. “Winky is not letting Master be hurt. Winky is not letting anyone be hurt in Winky’s house. Winky is not being strong enough and is failing Master before. Winky not fail Master again. Winky like Master.”

“Just do as I say, Winky.”

She backed up to the doorway. “Winky is being strong enough.”

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The orange zest scent of the sugared scones was distracting Snape, so his tone did not come out as stern as intended. "I really don't think you are, and you will make things worse. Do you understand?"

"Winky is understanding, Master."

Just as the tea finished steeping, a familiar baby cry brought Snape's head up. Candide stood in the doorway to the drawing room, a bundled Arcadius in the arc of her left arm.

Snape put the teapot down with a clatter and stood. "What are you doing here?"

"It's my birthday," she said, sounding coy.

Voice low, Snape said, "You should not be here."

"Winky said Harry was getting worse," she said.

This brought Snape up sharp. "Yes. Exactly my point."

"Exactly my point too," she countered. "I asked Winky to owl me if things took a turn. I had to come back."

Arcadius gave another coo, which distracted Snape with the way he seemed to hear it with his chest rather than his ears.

"Oh, look . . . tea for two," she said and slipped around him.

"Candide," he snarled, following her over to the desk and leaning on it to come right close to her face. "You are not listening very well."

"I'm listening just fine, actually." She bit a biscuit. "You said he . . . mmmm . . . you said Harry couldn't harm me or Arcadius."

Snape hesitated replying, sensing a trap. The timbre of her voice was throwing him off. "I did say that."

"And is it still true?" she asked, biting into a second biscuit. When he hesitated again, she prompted, "Severus, is it still true?"

Snape's mouth worked until he pursed his lips to make them stop.

She said, "You still think he can't. I can see that. That's why you're not answering." She tossed her cloak over his chair and rocked back in it to pat the baby over her shoulder. "He's missed you," she said. "Haven't you, Archie?" she added in baby talk.

"You cannot remain," Snape whispered hoarsely, toying with snarling. He needed to get her out, by any means.

She stopped rocking and while cooing back at Arcadius, stood up to face Snape. "Winky thinks you're in danger, so we're here to protect you."

Snape blinked at her. "You're here to protect me?" he repeated dumbly.

Her voice fell quieter, promising, "Harry won't make Arcadius an orphan."

Snape propped his hands on the desk and bent over them, hair flopping forward. "You still cannot remain."

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Her voice lost all pretense of charming the baby and fell serious. "I won't be made a widow, Severus. It's my choice to stay."

"And what about him?"

Arcadius chose that moment to wave a hand at Snape and give an excited cry.

"There is no way Harry can harm him," Candide said. "Right?"

Snape slowly shook his head. He still clung to a sliver of hope, so he could not lie and risk losing that too. He whispered, "I cannot see any way he could, even where he is now."

She hitched the baby higher on her arm and said, "That settles it then."

"It doesn't really," Snape said, to the empty air, because she had breezed out of the drawing room.



Harry had a lot of time to kill after planning with the Weasley twins. He found it energizing to speak openly of revenge, especially to wizards with endless uninhibited ideas. It was unfortunate that they were too roguish to make proper servants and had to remain mere willing accessories.

The trees were beginning to leaf in North Finchley, old trees that loomed over the houses from behind. Wand out, Harry strolled under his invisibility cloak past one gated brick wall after another. The air was fresh here, scented with greenery and blossoms.

Harry could have picked out the house without seeing the number. Unlike the neighboring houses, the front area was not used for parking, the dust bins were out of sight and the front square of grass and flowers was immaculate, as if someone had used a cuticle scissors on them just that morning.

Since he was invisible, Harry stepped right up to the front windows and cupped his hands to his face. Nothing moved within. He sighted on a spot before the white hearth and slipped inside.

Everything was perfect, down to the perfectly arranged pillows on the long couch opposite the hearth. No one was about, but the scent of his aunt's shampoo and incessant cleaning stalked the closed-in air and hammered on his sinuses. Harry found the datebook in the second drawer he tried. Luncheon, club was too vague to follow up on.

Harry roamed about the rest of the house, finding more rigid Dursley living except for the second guest bedroom, which was clearly set aside for Dudley. It contained wall-to-wall, ceiling-high shelves with pristine toys arrayed on them, brand new versions of the ones his cousin had destroyed as a child.

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“Set up some candles,” Harry said to the empty room. “Make it a real shrine.”

Harry started to close the door, then spotted the blackened brass train engine attached to a set of cars on a loop of track. He tested the weight in his hand and then pocketed it.

Back downstairs, he sat down to wait facing the hearth, which was sparkling white inside and out. But he could not sit still. The house, even as unfamiliar as it was, quickly rubbed his nerves raw. Telling himself that his annoyance would only make the upcoming confrontation more satisfying, he sat back and cleared his mind. But the smells: his aunt’s perfume, the cooking odors . . . they drained him, made him someone he did not want to be.

Harry stood up and paced, stopping to glance back in the hope that he was tracking dirt on the white carpeting. Wrapping his head in his hands, Harry gave up. He could return anytime, anywhere in the house. He had better things to be doing, much better things. And if he remained in this place any longer he may simply pass through old rotting anger into abject madness.

In Shrewsthorpe, the main hall was full of color, full of toys scattered on the floor. That was the first thing Harry noticed, then he was wrapped in the smells of home and lost all thought.

“Hello Harry,” Candide said, glancing up from holding a rubber Tyrannosaurus rex where she could tease Arcadius with it.

Harry did not move right away. He wondered if he had slipped into another Plane accidentally. The thought made him ache with disappointment at the lie of it.

“How was training this week?” she asked.

Harry found his voice. “Good. Good enough.”

Snape wandered out of the library and over to Harry. “If you want lunch, I can have Winky put it on the table. We ate without you, I’m afraid.” He sat down across from Candide and pulled out the newspaper.

Harry tore his gaze from the cuddling pair to ask: “Can I see that?”

He remained standing to flip through it, looking for Skeeter’s name. He found it attached to two stories, one on Bones’ meeting with the Canadian Minister of Magic and the other on the Wizengamot’s proposed ban on troll baiting.

Harry handed the paper back and glanced between Snape and Candide. Harry’s instincts stretched to analyze what was happening, but could not work it out. Too many pieces were missing and Harry just wanted to assume that things had been this way all along. “I have reading to do,” he said for cover, then scooped up his books from under a stuffed polka-dot lantern fish and retreated to his room.



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Harry sat on his bed in the darkness, leaning to the side where he could watch the lights on the distant hillside outside his bedroom window. He was there because his strategic mind chastised him severely for intending to risk exposure rather than leaving things to his servants. Trouble was, Harry knew staying home to be the best course and it ground on him to be of one mind, yet still find sitting there so aggravating.

Harry knitted his fingers together and rocked forward and back. He needed to see what was happening in the Ministry Atrium, see what the twins had cooked up. He could just slip in under his cloak in the corner and watch. He would not interfere; he just wanted to enjoy the show. What was the point of making trouble if not to enjoy watching it?

The knock on the bedroom door was so unexpected, Harry sat down again.

"Come in," Harry snapped, angry at himself.

"I saw the light under your door," Snape said. "Do you require anything?"

"No," Harry replied, relieved to have been interrupted from running off to satisfy his curiosity.

"I thought you'd be utilizing the potion . . . ?"

"I am. I slipped it into Fudge's lamp oil, all around his house while he was out for dinner tonight. Everything else I delegated, of course."

"Wise plan." Snape sounded impressed.

Harry imagined what must be happening right now. The twins hinted that it could involve a sparkling pink goat and definitely would involve a clown suit.

"I'm surprised you are here," Snape said, eyes taking in Harry's face, "you generally like to be in the middle of things."

"What do you know of it?" Harry snapped.

"Only that you appear to wish to be elsewhere."

Harry crossed his arms. His hands moved to grip and ungrasp his sleeves. "It's better to let others handle it. Act in the shadows where it is safe."

"It most certainly is," Snape agreed.

Snape sounded overly amiable. Harry grumbled, "I don't trust you. Leave me be," but it felt like a lie, which made Harry more angry at himself, for conflicting reasons. "Just go away," he snarled, desperate suddenly.

Snape bowed and backed out, soundlessly shutting the door.

After the door closed, Harry jumped up to pace. The clock read a quarter to five. If he remained he would start to think about things he wished to forget. He pulled out his invisibility cloak and slipped away for the Ministry.

The first thing Harry heard was Skeeter's voice, speaking as if through a suppressed grin. She was clacking in her heavy heeled shoes behind Fudge, who shuffled away,

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wearing a jester's suit stretched tight by his substantial paunch. The Atrium appeared empty except for a gold horned mountain goat, which was perched at the top of the fountain sculpture. But Harry sensed the room contained hidden others.

"Leave me be, evil wench!" Fudge snarled at Skeeter.

"Can I quote you on that?" Skeeter asked.

Fudge turned so fast he knocked his belled cap off, which he struggled to catch before tossing it away on the floor, then changed his mind and waved it back into his hand. "I have resources, Ms. Skeeter, make no mistake, and when I find out who did this, they will pay, dearly. And you will pay too, for working with them!"

Skeeter touched her breast with her manicured hand. "I'm just here to represent the eyes of the wizarding public, Cornelius, you know that. That's all I ever do." She fingered her large red handbag. "I can hold off on publishing this story until you get back to me, however . . ."

Fudge's face twisted to the side, comically. "You could?"

"For some consideration on your part."

Fudge reddened farther. "You will pay for this, you odious crone!"

Skeeter spread her hands, blood red nails glittering. "I had nothing to do with this, Cornelius."

Fudge picked up the belled hat he had dropped yet again and Disapparated. Clapping sounded, echoing around the Atrium, and the twins became visible under a doubly life-size painting of Merlin.

"Well done."

Skeeter bent her head to light a cigarette. She kissed it in a rapid set of puffs before holding it out to the side. "I get a share of influence out of it, no?" she asked, voice harsh now.

The twins bent their heads together. "Oh, I guess a teeny bit would be in order, don't you think, Gred?"

"Oh, perhaps, Forge. A teeny bit. Come now, Rita the Skeeter, didn't you say you'd come along just for the fun of it?"

"I lied."

"You are very good at that," Gred said, clearly complimenting her. "Now, the camera."

"I think I'll keep it for safe keeping," Skeeter said.

Forge said to his twin, "You knew she'd double cross us on that."

Harry started forward.

Gred said, "Good thing we had our own backup cameras, isn't it, brother?"

The two of them laughed uproariously. "Well, it's late even for us and Gertrude is tired." He waved in the direction of the goat, which baa-ed at him in return and

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scratched her nose on the statue.

Skeeter took out her notepad. “Gertrude, you say?” She made a note.

“If we’re all cleaned up here we best give the guard the antidote,” Gred said and loped off to the empty security desk.

Harry was right behind Skeeter now. Forge followed his brother and both ducked behind the desk and struggled to haul the guard back into his chair. Harry waved a Paralyzing Spell at Skeeter and reached for her bag, which prickled with curses. He whispered, “I’ll take that,” into her ear, pressed the curses out of the bag, reached in for the bulky camera and slipped it under his cloak. “Thank you for your assistance,” he said, voice that of threat.

He released her from the spell and waited for her to turn around which she did with a start. Her alarmed gaze searched through and beyond him.

Harry said, “As long as you are useful, you get to stay around. Remember that.”

She clutched her now flattened handbag closer to her side and tried to glare at what must appear to be empty air before her.

“You were right about me,” Harry taunted. “But didn’t you want to be?”

The twins had departed and the guard was shaking his head like a stunned dog, so Harry slipped away.

Harry went to Belinda’s flat to check that she had arrived home. The flat was quiet and empty. He slipped away again to the Muggle pub his friends frequented, selected an nearly empty whiskey bottle from the glass shelf behind the bar and slipped back in time to greet Belinda coming in the door. She wore a dark grey pullover and black wool trousers with black trainers.

“Did you walk home?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, can’t Apparate quietly when I’m this tired, so I came in down the street.”

“You dressed for the part, I see.”

“I always make a point to dress appropriately for any occasion,” she said tiredly.

“You deserve a reward,” he said, setting the bottle down on the counter.

She picked it up and held it in the light. “A whole swallow. Generous.”

“Drink it or not. I don’t care. You didn’t have fun?”

Her lips wormed into a smile. “Yes, I guess I did. Never liked Fudge. But it was a bit much, nevertheless.” She shuddered. “I wouldn’t want that to happen to me.”

“It won’t happen to you while you’re with me. And the photographs will be useful. Fudge needs to pay.”

She caught the bottle by the neck, uncorked it with a sound of Disapparition, and while pacing to the sitting area, drained it. “You staying?” she asked without turning around.

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An hour later Harry lay half asleep in the beams of colored light slicing through the part in Belinda's bedroom curtains. The curtains shifted from the wind leaking in, sending the yellowish street light into his eyes. Harry pressed his face into the pillow. His arm felt sticky where it rubbed against Belinda's abdomen, but the sense of her shadow calmed him. He longed to feel like this all the time. If only he could lose his terrors; that would be real power.

Starkly awake now that thoughts of Marks and Horcruxes were pacing through his brain, Harry pulled away and slid out of bed.

Light was just invading the sky beyond the shops in Hogsmeade when Harry arrived in the center of the muddy street. Pigeons warbled atop the high chimney of the Sundries Shoppe and lights showed from the first floor of Glad Rags. Harry stepped back into the alleyway beside the Hogs Head and leaned between haphazard stacks of barrels. The mud sticking to his shoes reeked of rotting beer.

Harry waited, calm still, but with a growing hunger twisting in his chest. Everything appeared starkly real: the Highland fresh air, the way the dark grain on the barrels swelled away from the wood in flowing whorls, the eager green hairs of grass edging the buildings and filling in old footprints in the mud.

Harry sensed someone magical approaching before he heard the footsteps. A moment later, Vineet stepped by, hands in pockets, head bowed, probably heading for the Three Broomsticks to Floo home. He halted and turned when Harry made a noise through his teeth.

Vineet peered at Harry, expression unchanging. Harry licked his lips, assuming Vineet knew exactly what he was intending.

It only required a slight tilt of the head to get Vineet to follow. Harry walked leisurely over the grass leading to the Forbidden Forest, enjoying the chance to observe an object of desire . . . before collecting it.

Nothing was spoken, even as they reached the brush at the edge of the trees. The early dawn light had not yet penetrated beyond the new leaves on the brush. Harry stepped through confidently, despite the sudden blindness. Behind him he could hear the shuffle of branches as Vineet followed. Harry lit his wand and walked inward. His instincts rebelled; they threw complicated notions up into his path. Harry imagined the Thestral stables, making his willing friend into a servant in the midst of the harnessed magic of death's eye. He imagined the room where he had waited with the other champions after the Goblet had selected him for the Tri-Wizard Tournament, and smiled to imagine Marking Vineet while the teachers naively breakfasted just beyond the door. He had a vision of binding such a steadfast servant before the baroque frame of the Mirror of Erised, seeing in its glass his desire coming true just before fulfilling it for real. He had all of these visions as the two of them stepped over

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twisted roots and downed branches. Harry nearly succumbed to the last vision, but continued on, stubbornly.

Harry stopped before a large hollow tree. The musky scent of an animal lair wafted out of the maw of wood. Harry turned to his companion and held his hand out. Vineet's up-lit face turned away, eyes searching the inky forest on both sides before returning to Harry.

The forest around them breathed in unperturbed slumber. "We're alone," Harry said, voice sucked into the still air.

Vineet nodded, eyes black in the blue wand light.

"You have always been loyal to me," Harry stated.

"You have been my life's purpose," Vineet said, voice coarse. He touched his chest. "I gave up everything to remain here. My loyalty is a given."

"Then you should be acknowledged for that," Harry said. He shook his wand free of the Lumos Spell and stepped close. Knowledge and certainty filled Harry; finally, he was on the right path. If only he would stop fighting it, not only could he live outside of fear, but he could live forever.

Focusing on the spot where Vineet had touched his chest, Harry tugged Vineet's robes aside, then tore the top two buttons on his shirt to expose his heart. Dawn was coming on and the forest's shapes were taking form, revealing trees like cathedral columns, branches open to the sky.

Harry let the spell flow in and out of him. That was the part he had not understood before; he had to take the spell in, make it like himself, then cast it upon its target.

Vineet barely flinched, just scrunched his eyes closed. The lightning bolt seared upon his breast smoked faintly before he covered it with his hand and grimaced momentarily. He recovered two breaths later and dropped his arm.

"What do you want of me?" Vineet asked, voice smooth.

Harry tugged Vineet's shirt straight, covering the Mark. He felt giddily alive. "This, for now. But I'll let you know when I need something specific."

Vineet pulled his robes together and stepped back to bow. He appeared greatly relieved, which puzzled Harry.

"Hogsmeade is that way," Harry said when Vineet peered around the soupy grey world of the dawn forest.

Vineet nodded, bowed again and Harry slipped away.



Silence ruled in the main hall when Harry arrived. The bedroom doors on the first floor balcony were closed. Harry went to his room but felt too energized to sleep or

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even sit. He plucked out one of the dark magic books from under the bed, opened it at random, and began pacing as he read. He read page after page, until he reached a long treatise with instructions for cursing villages to make Muggles unhappy enough to move out without being aware of why. It went on to explain how that had been done to the villages around Hogsmeade and to other coven use areas such as Chartley and Fenton to preserve Wizard areas.

Harry's lips twitched. He paged forward to study the spells, rehearsing the motions. He would need help to enchant an entire street, but he had help now. With a bit of luck he could get the Dursleys to flee beyond the jurisdiction of the British Ministry of Magic. That would open all kinds of symbolic opportunities, such as making a Horcrux using the life force of his uncle. Would his uncle, being so large, have more life force? If so, his death would forge a strong one. Harry set the book down to copy out the spells onto parchment to give to his servants to practice. He wanted nothing to go wrong.



During breakfast, conversation went on without Harry's participation. He kept his head down, only glancing up to watch Arcadius, who was repeatedly sticking the back of his hand into his mouth and pulling it out again, tethered by strands of saliva. The house felt oppressive this morning. Harry's thoughts moved sluggishly, dodging thoughts of strategy.

An owl scratched at the window. Across from Harry, Snape waved the window up for it to flit inside. It dropped a letter on Harry's plate.

"The Minister wants me to join her for a press conference in the morning to announce the DV Day festivities." Harry could not contain his giggles at this thought. He cleared his throat and massaged his mouth to make himself stop.

Levelly, Candide asked, "Another dueling tournament?"

"Yes, and a broom festival for the picnic." Harry folded the letter up and pocketed it. After another bite of scramble he could not sit still anymore. The house was pressing in on him; he could barely breathe.

"I have things to be doing," he said, and slipped away to put his other plans in motion.

Harry distributed his spell instructions and fetched his books to do his reading at Belinda's flat while Belinda learned the spells on the notes.

"I can't get this one at all," she eventually said after retreating to her bedroom to practice. "And really, I'd love to get rid of the Muggles below me. They argue at

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the top of their lungs at the worst hours.” She read over Harry’s notes again before looking up at him with eyes surrounded by worry lines.

She was scared of failing him, Harry realized. “I can show them to you,” he said, wondering why she feared he would not be willing to teach her.

Harry walked her through the spells until she could apply it to a ten foot square area of her floor on her own.

“Think that’s enough to repel them?” Belinda asked, hands on hips, hair falling into her eyes.

Harry smirked, inordinately pleased by her attitude. “If not, you can broaden it next week. No sense in making them suspicious, now is there?”

She plopped down on the couch in an attitude of exhaustion. “Good point.”



Harry joined the Minister in the Atrium in the corner where she was convening with her staff. Between Belinda’s presence an arm’s length away and Vineet’s just above in the Department of Law Enforcement, Harry felt nicely at home and in control. The Minister whispered her notes aloud, letting her staff add comments or corrections. Harry’s mind drifted. He forced it to drift forward only. How many more servants would he need before he could approach the Minister with ultimatums and be secure in her fear?

Harry stood beside Bones at the podium, hands behind his back, watching the eyes of the press. For once, Skeeter asked only harmless questions, watching Harry the entire time she spoke.

“Are the past winners disqualified from this tournament?” Ginny asked.

Bones tapped her notes on the podium and replied, “I don’t see why they should be. I’m sure you’re pleased to hear that. Disguise Revealing spells will be used this year for the regional finals, to avoid a repeat of last year’s little . . . debacle, shall we call it, and you CAN quote me on that, my dear Ms. Weasley. Next question?”

Ginny glanced at Harry with a look expecting commiseration; Harry gave her no reaction. She put her head back down over her notebook and blushed harder.



Harry woke with a start, heart thudding, hand hitting the bed as if it had dropped from a height. He sat up and held in his panting breath to listen, but could not hear anything beyond the wind outside. He sat up farther; a scent lingering as if Snape had just passed through the room. Scooping up his wand from under the pillow and his

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invisibility cloak from the nightstand, Harry slipped out onto the balcony, expecting to catch Snape sneaking back to his own bedroom.

Harry stood there, feet cold on the wood, breath coating his glasses as he tried to dampen his breathing. A flicker of light was visible under the bedroom door across the way. A wave of something ill-defined tried to drain him of the strength to take action. Winky.

Harry slipped into the kitchen, wand drawn, anger heating his limbs. Into the main hall. Into the back garden. But he did not find the elf. She was there though; he could sense her sporadic interference, still. In the Dark Plane, Harry's movements in and out were attracting too much attention and he could be overwhelmed by demons on his next passing. He waited there in the garden, beside Sirius' old bike, knowing the creatures would grow bored and disperse so he could safely pass through again. Rather than stare at the bike, which caused him discordant pain, Harry stared up at the stars, his invisibility cloak like another Milky Way clouding his vision.

Double checking that his cloak completely covered his feet, Harry slipped into Snape's bedroom and held his breath. Snape was sitting on the edge of the bed in his dressing gown, Candide was propped up, nursing Arcadius.

Candide said to the baby, "Eventually you'll be big enough to make it through the night, right Archie?"

Voice low, Snape said, "I wish you were not here."

"I want to be here, Severus. I live here and everything."

Harry waited, breathing as shallowly as possible. Snape turned to stare at the bedroom door, making the bedside lamp accent his profile. Arcadius fussed and was arranged to feed on the other side, making little primitively pleased noises.

Harry felt a rush of shame about standing there. It was not from Winky, it was just him. He felt hollow and crude. He had leaned onto his toes to slip away when Snape said, "Things are not going to improve anytime soon."

These words pulled the center out of Harry's chest. Try as he might he could not find anger at the betrayal in them.

Candide reached out and laid a hand over one of Snape's. "You're doing what you can."

Snape shook his bowed head and Harry felt a confused twinge.

Snape appeared to remember something and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a small bottle and put it away in the nightstand, touched the nightstand with his wand, then opened the drawer just long enough to check that it now appeared empty. Harry bit his lip and again felt that suffocating wave of elf magic just as his suspicions tried to take over.

Harry slipped into the main hall and tossed the cloak down onto his shoulders.

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If Winky did it again he would know what direction to send an attacking spell. But there was nothing except the house creaking as the night cooled.

An insistent beeping split the silence, making Harry jump. It was the wake up spell he had put on his clock. Harry slipped away for his room, just as Snape's bedroom door snapped open.

In the Dark Plane on the way to his room, Harry had trouble. He had to repeatedly Apparate farther away, letting the creatures come close enough to smell their putrid breath, before he could safely return to his room and cancel the Wake Charm. He turned the clock aside. It read five in the morning. Harry expected a knock on the door to his room, but none came as he dressed all in black and Apparated away.



Harry was early. In the burgeoning grey light he leaned against a concrete block wall bordering a driveway beside the West Finchley tube station. The narrow driveway led to a plain brick Muggle house cut off from the world by the train line.

A cat shaped shadow emerged from under a nearby parked car and stretched before slinking off. Harry lowered his wand again and shook himself. He half hoped his servants would be late, so he could summon them. His lips twitched despite how much rushing would damage their attempts to arrive in a manner untraceable to the Ministry.

The light continued to eek out new details in the world around him. He propped the broomstick on his foot and wished he could still repel the creatures in the Dark Plane. What was wrong with him that he could not, when it was so easy before? He was definitely stronger now, but the creatures did not react as if he was.

Why did Snape doubt him?

These two things seemed related in some mysterious way.

Harry's musings were interrupted by Vineet and Belinda arriving, walking close together around the bend in the walled drive. Harry had a sense they had been talking, and he did not like that. They gazed at him with strain in their eyes. Harry did not like that either. He wanted them to be pleased to be there.

"Let's go," Harry said, and flicked his broom to float.

They spelled disguises on each other. Vineet a utility worker, Belinda an estate agent, and Harry dropped his invisibility cloak over his head again, making sure it covered his long black cloak.

They made their way along the pavement, applying weak Muggle Repelling barriers that grew stronger as they reached the middle houses on the street. Harry led the way, laying down Masking Spells to hide their work. At this strength the Ministry

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would be unlikely to detect it, but Harry intended to return every week to increase the spell strength until the Dursleys themselves took flight, hopefully after watching in alarm as their neighbors began acting oddly and running away.

Harry nursed this happy expectation of observing the Dursleys' slow meltdown as the three of them crossed to the other side of the street and began the process again. The neighborhood's denizens were beginning to rise now. A window cracked open, brightening the sound of a teapot; dogs released in a back garden began barking. The front door of the Dursley house opened and Vernon Dursley tried to bend down to pick up his newspaper.

Harry stopped, as did his companions behind him when Vineet ran into his back. Vernon was setting his feet wider for another attempt at bending low enough when he glanced up and saw them. Vineet immediately began inspecting a closed electrical box and Belinda pulled her clipboard up and pretended her wand was a pen.

Vernon's eyes narrowed and circled around the street. His gaze came back to Belinda and locked on her while his mustache wiggled back and forth.

Every instinct in Harry's body insisted he remain still, but he could not help it, he magically gave the newspaper a shove to the side just as Vernon's fingertips touched it.

Vernon jumped back faster than seemed possible for someone his size. Vineet and Belinda were looking the other way, but they spun when he shouted, "None of that! Hear me! I'll have none of you freaks disturbing our home, our town!"

Vineet and Belinda gave each other mystified looks. Vernon said, "You think I'm that stupid, do you? I can tell your type. The lot of you should be sent out of the country. It's ridiculous to have you running loose, making mischief, scaring good people who just want things to be normal!"

The neighbor's door opened and a small woman in a pink nightcap leaned out to pick up her paper. "Good morning, Vernon."

"Eh? Oh, good morning, Mrs. Fraut."

The neighbor's door closed and Vernon wound up again. "What is your problem with normal, anyway? It's perfectly . . . sane and proper. It's not our fault you were born freaks, and we shouldn't have to suffer for it, I tell you! Get off my street or I'll contact the authorities!"

Harry did not think ahead; he simply reappeared behind Vernon just as his uncle turned to go inside. Harry pulled his cloak free of his head so it draped over his shoulders making him appear to emerge from the air. "You were saying?" Harry asked.

Vernon made a pitiful sound of surprise. Harry leaned forward to lord over his uncle.

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“What, I didn’t get that?”

Vernon raised a chubby hand and waved it vaguely. “Petunia,” he muttered, far too quiet to be heard. He recovered himself partly and grumbled, “What do you want?”

Harry considered this question long enough to make sweat appear along the folds of Vernon’s neck. “All sorts of things.” Harry snapped his wand out, which had exactly the right effect. “Revenge is high on the list.”

Vernon backed up a step, noticed he was backing out his own door, then sidestepped. “Now, now, we took you in, you know. No one else would have-”

“That is a lie,” Harry snarled, flicking his double layer of cloak out as he turned. The strange effect distracted Vernon so that he ran into a table lamp. With a wave, Harry arrested it before it could smash to the floor. Vernon sighed in relief and Harry gave a flick and sent the white Grecian vase shape across the room to smash soundlessly against the hearth. Vernon stared at the remains of it, blinking.

“You were miserable to me,” Harry said, drawing Vernon’s attention back. “You were lucky I wasn’t stronger before. I let you get away with it because I was weak.”

Vernon shook his finger at Harry. “Y-Y-You were one who was trouble. You think you weren’t trouble? What with all the . . . the evil, all-powerful wizards flitting around here?”

Harry smiled broadly. “You mean Voldemort?”

Vernon swallowed hard, gaze growing confused. “Yes, that was his name. Bloody well would rather not hear it again.”

Harry heard the beeping of a cordless phone being dialed. He twisted an Electrical Storm Charm out of his wand. The television shot sparks out the back of it. In a distant room, Petunia gave a squeak and dropped something onto a hard floor.

Vernon backed along a glossy finished folded table, making it creak as he used it for balance. “Now, now, I know your rules.”

Harry stalked after Vernon. “I make my own rules now.”

Petunia came running through an arched opening. “The telephone it just . . . Harry . . .” she said in a mockery of a greeting, brushing her hands over her perfectly white apron.

Harry’s instincts were complaining that he was doing this wrong. He again failed to understand the point of doing things in a way that meant he could not enjoy them.

“What do you want, Harry?” Petunia demanded.

Harry stared at her. His instincts were telling him that she had the kind of forceful life energy that would make an excellent Horcrux.

Petunia tugged on Vernon’s sweat-soaked shirt sleeve and whispered, “I tried calling that number they gave us . . . but the phone exploded.” Vernon waved her

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off with his free hand and swallowed hard.

“The Ministry gave you a number, did they?” Harry asked. He flicked his wand up straight and tilted his head at them. “They can’t protect you from me. They don’t understand what I am.”



Snape was sitting in the drawing room in his dressing gown, marking the examinations Lupin had sent when pounding footsteps followed the sound of the Floo Network in the dining room.

A breathless Vineet caught himself on the doorframe and said, “You must come quickly.”

Snape got to his feet and waved a cloak from the entryway. “What is happening?”

“It’s Harry . . . he’s at his aunt and uncle’s house.”

Upstairs, the bedroom door opened and Candide, dreary-eyed, came out onto the balcony. “Remain here with her,” Snape commanded Vineet.

“I cannot,” Vineet insisted. “I must go back.”

Snape had been turning away, but mid-hook of his cloak, he spun back.

“I have no choice,” Vineet insisted, voice unsteady.

Snape tilted his head with an expression of extreme dismay. He closed his eyes, then shouted, “Winky, you are being left to defend this house. Against everyone.” To Candide, he said, “Leave as soon as you are able to get ready. Do not return unless I fetch you.” While peering at Vineet, he added, “Trust no one.”

Snape held out an arm to Vineet to Apparate them away.



“That freakish father of yours was always playing games like this too,” Petunia said with a half sob as she tried to untie the binding on her feet with her skinny white fingers. Harry had done that because she had tried to run for the door. Vernon was kneeling beside her, trying to help with his great pink paws.

“Mrs. Dallow! Mr. Dallow!” Vernon shouted at the open doorway to a couple in business suits who were hurrying by on the pavement.

“They can’t hear or see you,” Harry pointed out, fingering his wand thoughtfully. “No matter what happens no one will know. And for the last time . . . MY PARENTS WERE NOT FREAKS!” Harry wound up his arm, not thinking much ahead about which exact spell, but thinking it should be bright and scary and that it

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should hurt, but he did not finish the motion. Someone grabbed his arm and forced it to his side.

“No.” Snape stepped in front of Harry, holding fast to his arm, which let Harry catch his balance.

Harry shook his arm free and glared. “Get out of my way.”

“No.”

Harry raised his wand to point at Snape’s neck. Heat seethed through his bones, dissolving them, it felt like. “I said, get out of my way.”

“They are not worth this, Harry.”

On the floor behind him, Vernon blubbered, “Yes, we are worthless. Really, not at all worth the attention . . .”

“They deserve to be miserable,” Harry said.

Snape said, “I won’t argue that. But look at them. Don’t you think they are, already?” He grabbed Harry’s double layer of cloak and stepped a few inches to the side. “They live as Muggles. How much more miserable do you want them?”

Vernon put his hands up as if in prayer. “Yes, we are so very miserable already. Do not end our misery . . .”

Through clenched teeth, Harry said, “It’s not the same as them knowing I’m hurting them.”

Snape stepped back to completely block Harry’s view. Harry hit his arm to get him to let go, but Snape held fast. “So, help me, Severus, I’ll strike you down if you don’t get out of my way. You know I can beat you. You are scared to even duel me.”

“I am not scared to duel you, Harry, just of little use to you in that capacity. In other capacities I am invaluable, such as advising you to leave your aunt and uncle be. They are not worth the trouble you will bring upon yourself, both legal and magical.”

Harry grabbed Snape’s wrist and raised it between them. “You want me to make you a servant again?” he threatened.

“No. Of course I don’t. It’s not necessary, in any event. You have my loyalty.”

Harry shoved him backwards. “A loyal servant would get out of my way.”

Snape spread his empty hands. “A noble servant would not allow you to make such a grievous mistake as this. Stop now, Harry. Your friends are keeping things quiet outside. We will wipe their memories and everything will be fine.”

Vernon tugged on Snape’s cloak. “You can make us forget this, Kind Wizard?”

Harry raised his elbow up and sighted along his wand at Snape’s heart. “You have one last chance to get out of the way, Severus. You’ve been in the way too much lately.”

Snape exhaled before repeating, “No. I draw the line at letting you go any farther.”

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Harry bit his lip, trying to dredge up old hatred for the man before him. His wand hand vibrated and sweat made his collar stick to his neck. He had once loathed him, but he could no longer access that emotion. He was a traitor too, a voice said, but Harry could not tap enough of that either.

Harry's eyes took in Snape's empty hands, his intense expression. Cringing, he lowered his wand. "You disloyal bastard," Harry breathed, then tapping the pain of a bruised ego, he struck out. It was just a Blasting Curse, and it was aimed almost entirely at the floor, but it swept Snape's feet out from under him, and he fell to his knees. Behind him, the Dursleys screeched and floundered away, closer to the arched doorway.

"You make me weak," Harry snarled at Snape.

Snape shook his mussed head and steadily met Harry's angry gaze. "It's you, in fact, who taught me it isn't weakness."

Harry took a step back, then another. His heart was beating so fast it vibrated his ribs. The room seemed to have no air left and his head swam. Eyes stinging, he slipped away.

In the Dark Plane the creatures gathered rapidly, seeming to materialize from nothing. Harry could hear their limbs clacking together, could see their ivory teeth glowing. For a dizzy moment, he was exquisitely grateful for their company, until one latched onto his shoe and another leapt for his cloaked arm. Fortunately, the invisibility cloak was indestructible, and it slid aside, taking the creature with it.

Frantic about the cloak, Harry kicked the creature holding onto it with the one biting his shoe. Screeches sounded, which sent the hordes into a frenzy. Harry felt claws all over his legs before he could Apparate away and slip free of them.

Back at the Dursley house, Snape fell forward onto one hand in an instinctive gesture to grab at Harry. As he pushed to his feet, Vernon, sounding like a giant house elf, asked, "Is he gone?"

Snape drew in a breath and let it go again. "Yes." He pulled his wand out and held it pointing at the floor as he turned around. Vernon's relief evaporated. He glanced uneasily at the wand and sat up straighter releasing the magical rope on Petunia's ankles.

"You were thoroughly deserving of his wrath," Snape said, then used a slicing motion to negate the Binding Charm. Petunia clutched her now free ankles and sobbed faintly. He aimed his wand between Vernon's eyes, letting him stare at it with mouth agape. "Now hold still," Snape purred. "I'd like for this to hurt, but unfortunately, it won't. And when we are through, you should take a holiday, a very long and distant one."

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Not wanting to, even more so, attract the demons to the area opposite the house, Harry re-emerged in the parklands northwest of Shrewsthorpe. Silver clouds hung over the hilltops with the sunlight slicing around them in all directions. Harry did not see this beauty; he was walking the other way, stumbling in the rutted grass.

For a shining moment, everything had been clear, but he was too weak to keep hold of anything but failure.

Harry transformed into his Animagus form and took flight. As he flapped hard for altitude, he took refuge in the notion that he could just remain that way forever. If nothing else, he could let his will and desires melt into an animal mind and forget everything human.

Without a destination, Harry simply flew home. He landed in the back garden and unCharmed the back door to get in. Snape stood in the main hall, still in his cloak. He was about to speak when a voice from the balcony said, "Oh, you are back."

Snape's head snapped upward, but Harry missed his alarmed expression because he too looked up.

"I thought you'd be longer," Candide breezily said as she came down the stairs.

Harry finally glanced at Snape to read his expression, but it was neutral. Harry's anger built again, but half of it coiled around inside his chest unable to find a way out.

"I don't appreciate you getting in the way," Harry grumbled, directing some anger that way. He could not seem to stand straight, instead slouching like someone gut wounded. He had a fleeting vision of holding Snape down to Mark him, but it would not work right, even as satisfying as his horror would be.

"I would do it again," Snape said, voice pitched as low as possible.

"Everything all right?" Candide asked. She hitched a hand-gnawing, humming Arcadius on her other side to pick up a rubber teething ring from the couch. "I didn't mean to interrupt. I'll leave you two alone." She glided back up the stairs.

The two of them stood there in silence for many minutes, until Harry Summoned down the most gruesome of his purloined dark magic books and sat on the couch to read it. Snape glanced at this and said nothing. He collected his marking from the drawing room and sat on the opposite couch.

Harry's book groaned piteously with each page turn. He wasn't really reading; he could not seem to process more than a sentence at a time, and he did not really care about Maleficence anyway. It sounded too much like a combination of Trelawney and

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Firenze's philosophies where people had little control and were delusional to think otherwise.

Harry turned a few pages, faster. The book snarled and grew teeth at the page edges. Like the creatures in the Dark Plane, Harry had lost control of the worst of the books, too. He sensed they only let him read them because they wanted to be read, and the alternative was to be returned to the vault within a vault where their knowledge could not spread. He read on, doggedly determined to avoid thinking.



Candide stepped into the main hall from the dining room and stopped there when Snape held his palm up from where he sat on the couch. On the other couch, Harry lay slumped, arms akimbo, his extended foot turned outward.

"He fell asleep?" Candide whispered.

Snape nodded. He crept up and wove a complicated spell over the shoe-leather bound book before hovering it over the back of the couch and onto the floor in the corner of the room. As it came to rest and the sparkles faded, his shoulders fell.

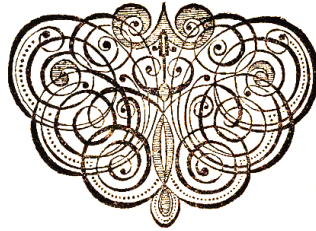
"Safe now?" Candide asked, still whispering.

"Safe as it ever is," Snape intoned. He spun on her after she settled onto the couch with a yawning Arcadius. Mouthing, not even whispering, he said, "I told you to go."

"I told you I wouldn't," she mouthed back. "We discussed this."

"I don't want to regret this," Snape said, but she returned a quizzical expression indicating she had not understood.

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Harry woke with an unintelligible shout and heaved forward on the couch, nearly toppling before he caught himself.

“Are you quite all right?” Snape asked.

Harry stared at him. He felt like someone had taken a giant fork and torn shreds from his midsection.

“Harry?” Snape asked, setting aside a scholarly journal to stand up.

His pure tone of concern gouged the tatters out farther. Harry tried to grab hold of something: his plans, Fudge’s misery, the Dursleys’ fear, but they all slithered free of his grasp. His servants hovered in the midfield of his mind, unhappy with their lot, poison more than nourishment. What was he doing wrong?

Snape bent close to look him over. “Do you need a Healer?”

“I don’t want a Healer,” Harry growled. He looked around the room, feeling the last of himself threatening to slip away but not at all confident what exactly would take over. He teetered, but had to ask: “Where’s Candide?”

“Upstairs. Napping before dinner, which will be in an hour or so. Or I can fetch you the lunch you missed.”

Harry stared at him, not understanding. The undercurrents should oppose the surface deceptions, this he knew well, but this world made little sense interpreted that way.

“Harry?” Snape’s voice rose from absolutely level.

Harry could not bear to be confused any more; he might tear in half. He may plummet through the gap inside himself. “Leave me be,” he whispered. When Snape’s

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far too intent gaze did not waver, Harry added, "You betrayed me. I don't trust you."

Speaking these words gave Harry a foothold on reality and he could draw air fully into his lungs.

Snape said, "I would be disloyal not to point out that you would feel better if you ate something."

"So you can potion my food?" Harry retorted. Snape's face did not even flicker. Harry added, "You are capable of obscuring anything from me. I was unwise to believe you were on my side. Why I let you fool me again . . ." He ran out of energy. He was talking just to hear his voice.

Ignoring Snape, Harry tilted his head back. Staring at the ceiling made him feel like his body was spinning on a merry-go-round. He squeezed his eyes shut. He longed for the oblivion of a strong potion, and had to clamp his lips together to resist asking for one. He heard Snape retreat to the other couch, heard the crinkle of the tissue-thin paper of his journal as he opened it again.

"Harry?" a new, familiar voice roused him with a start.

Harry tipped his head forward to find Hermione approaching across the hall, hair askew, eyes showing the whites all the way around. Her cloak fell around her shoulders as she caught herself on the couch arm. "Harry . . ." She did not seem to have the breath to go on and stood there, clinging to the furniture, shoulders defeated.

Snape sat forward but did not speak.

"Harry, what did you do?" Hermione whispered. "You didn't really . . .?"

Harry blinked at her, confused by the parallel reaction he had to seeing her, one of warm emotion, the other of calculating alarm. He caught a vision from her wild gaze, of a lightning bolt over Vineet's honey-warm skin. Harry's scattered wits coiled together possessively and filled his limbs with energy. He stood to face her.

"What?" Harry whispered, dismissive.

"What!?" Hermione blurted. She came at him and grabbed the front of his robes and jerked on them. "What are you doing?" she demanded. "What do you think you're doing?" she reiterated when he did not reply.

Harry pinched the bones of her fingers together to remove her left hand. "It's none of your concern," he heard himself say, the words clicking out of him, certain of the effect they would have.

"What?" she blurted while exhaling. Her wide gaze remained fixed on him, but she let go and stepped back. She sent a glance over to Snape, whose expression remained studious.

"What?" she repeated, then swallowed hard. She shook her head, gaze falling far away. "Harry, you . . . can't . . ." Her breath ran out again.

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“Can’t what?” he prompted. “I certainly can. Shall I Summon them here and show you?”

“Them? Harry, HOW MANY ARE THERE?”

Harry matched her alarm with outward steadfast calm, and her entire demeanor shifted. She panted through her parted lips and surged forward to grab his robes again, firmer this time. Her brow lowered. “I won’t let this happen,” she growled, accentuating each word with a tug on him. “Harry . . . You. Can’t. Do. This.”

They stood nose to nose. Her thoughts no longer held Vineet and recent shocks and instead streamed with old memories and fears for a much smaller version of himself. One that did not listen to wiser counsel nearly often enough. Regret-infused events where she and Ron were the only things standing with him against all else. Disliking these visions, Harry again pinched her hands but she held fast, face tightening with pain.

Harry glimpsing himself hearing the Basilisk in a corridor at Hogwarts when no one else could, fearing so many things beyond their understanding, fearing that something was very much wrong with him then and seeing that fear realized now. Regret washed behind those thoughts that something had not been done sooner, that Dumbledore was not here now to help, and that everything else had already failed, that their options were running out, may already have run out.

“Let go.”

“NO.” Hermione’s voice broke and wavered. “Not until you undo what you’ve done.” Her eyes were watering, from the pain or emotion; Harry was not certain.

Her brutal hopelessness was infectious. “I can’t. This is who I am. This is who I’ve been since the night my parents died.”

With her entire weight, she alternately pushed and pulled on his robes, rattling him with her quick violence. “NO. It. Isn’t!”

Her swift bursts of violence made his heart race. His robes cut into his shoulders she hung on them with such force.

With a jerk, Harry struck out with a mild Debilitating Hex to release her grip and they stumbled apart. Hermione immediately launched at him again, but stopped, hands raised, when he leveled his wand at chest height. He could read in her face that she thought him terrifyingly immutable. But in reality, he felt he was defending the last shreds of himself. He refused to grab hold of the instincts that whispered absurd ideas about what spells to use next, so he merely stood there, yearning to warn her away, but unable to force the right words through. His instincts wanted her there; they had ideas.

With abstract casualness, Snape rose from the couch opposite and stood so that the three of them formed a triangle.

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“You let this happen,” Hermione snapped, tilting her face toward Snape. Her hands drifted down to the sides, limp.

“He has no choice in the matter,” Harry said, again feeling that clicking into place of careful calculation, that possessiveness rearing up.

“Everyone always has a choice,” Snape intoned.

To Hermione, Harry managed to say, “Go away.”

Hermione’s shoulders fell forward and her mouth trembled as she said, “No.”

Harry wavered, feeling the emptiness yawning below him, filling him. He had to get her away, had to get her to give up.

“Don’t make me Summon your lover here to kick you out,” Harry said.

Her brow furrowed again and she shook her head. “I don’t believe you.”

“I can take him away from you, you know. He’s mine.”

She swung an arm as if to grab at him, or strike him, but changed her mind. “Harry . . .” she pleaded.

Her face pulled back from displaying utter misery and she stated, “No.”

Snape’s mouth parted to speak, but he pressed his lips together and remained silent.

Harry raised his wand higher, to aim along it. An empty wind was blowing through him. He asked, “Why are you making me do this?” For a long breath, Harry squirmed. The pit below him seemed a welcome choice compared to fighting any longer. His instincts floundered, trying to regain the upper hand against the emptiness. And he couldn’t think of a spell . . .

A flash erupted in Harry’s vision and he stumbled backward onto the couch. He leapt back to his feet to face Winky, who stood with her unnaturally long fingers held up before her.

“Winky is not letting anyone be hurt!”

Snape jumped between them, pushing the elf backward by her shoulders. “Winky, I ordered you to not interfere.”

Winky’s shoulders heaved. “Master is ordering Winky to defend the household.”

“So, I did,” Snape muttered, shoulders falling. “But I-”

She slipped to the side and raised her hands. Harry was lifted over the couch as if caught by an ocean wave. He tucked into a roll as his limbs met the floor, and righted himself on his hands and knees, wand out. With a spell he sent the couch skidding aside. When it struck the wall it shook the house. Winky raised her hands again, eyes popping with effort.

Snape spun on the elf. “Winky! I command you to stop!”

Winky cringed and balled her hands together. “But Master. . . bad things is happening! Dark wizards is acting freely. Winky is not failing again.”

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Snape brought his full anger to bear. “Winky . . .”

Winky dropped to her knees, clutching her entwining fingers against her bowed face. A wave of softly insidious oppression washed through Harry, sweeping the stone walls, rolling back and around the room. Winky peeked at Harry through her knobbly fingers.

Snape gave an audible exhale of relief. He started to turn, “Harry . . .” his voice began, soothingly.

Harry observed his wand hand moving. Perhaps he could have intervened before it finished its path, but the heat of battle made everything into rote reaction. He saw an unpredictable enemy incapacitated by the command of his former loyal servant. During the split second his instinct took control, that was all he perceived. Elf magic could only be defeated by a handful of natural forces, and one of them was sitting right there.

Harry sent the tallest lamp, the brass reservoir tearing open from the spell’s distortion, careening at the elf. The lamp struck Winky and exploded in curls of silky flame. Hermione shouted something unintelligible, Snape spun back around, and spells flew. A baby’s distressed screech came from the balcony and became a prelude to earsplitting panting cries. Harry looked up to see Candide cuddling Arcadius, patting him rapidly on the back. Her alarmed eyes met his and she backed up one step, then another.

With the tall lamp gone, the room had grown dim, lit hazily by a few candles in the chandelier. The scent of water mixed with lamp oil smoke and charred wood. Snape was bending over Winky by the front wall where the momentum of the spell had thrown her.

Hermione stood where she had been, bending over her arms which were clasped around her middle. Eyes fixed on Snape and the fallen elf, she gave a hopeless groan of: “Harry . . .”

Harry still knelt on the floor. He felt nothing. His soul stretched wide with a vast emptiness inside it. He feared nothing now because nothing mattered.

Snape put a hand on the floor to lean close to Winky, who lay unmoving. Hermione bent farther, still not facing Harry, and more quietly cried, “Harry . . .”

Harry pushed to his feet, a difficult maneuver because he could not feel his legs, really. His movement drew Snape to stand as well, and to stride toward him. Halfway to him, Snape came to a scuffing stop. Upstairs, Arcadius continued to howl in a broken series of shrieks.

Harry was in two worlds. He held a wand just like this one, bearing the spirit of the phoenix—the phoenix, what he yearned to be—a child cried upstairs and was soothed and shushed. He had a purpose in that place. Where had that gone? There

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was nothing inside him now. Even fear would be welcome.

Snape tossed his wand aside onto the couch where it bounced and rolled into the crux of the cushions. He spread his hands to the sides, long pale fingers glowing in the poor light, then balled them and held them rigid at his sides.

“You go no further,” Snape stated. The candlelight left him in murky orange shadow, but raw will streamed out from him. Everything so familiar. Only it was not Snape, but James Potter, wandless also, stating those words.

Harry stepped back to catch his balance on half-numb feet. A breeze shifted through him making him ache all around the ragged hollow at his core. He stared down at his wand, that wand. He stroked it, remembering how pleased he had been to have been chosen by a phoenix-core wand. It had meant everything was right. He would fear nothing.

Harry turned the wand in his fingers, studying the worn carving on the handle. Fear meant you were alive. Fear.

Fear.

Harry turned the wand around in his hands, then secreted it away in his pocket. Vibrant energy teased into his limbs and he tried to suppress it. Not yet. Not yet. Arcadius' crying had slowed to an intermittent half-hearted wail.

Avoiding all thought, avoiding glancing at the others, Harry inverted himself and slipped away.

In the main hall of the house, Snape ran his hand through his stringy hair and stared at the spot where Harry had just been.

“Where did he go?” Hermione asked, voice faint, yet still echoing.

“He could have gone anywhere. Literally.” Snape turned back to Winky and said, “If you can move, you may do so now. I will take you to St. Mungo's.”

Winky pushed to sit up, clutching a reddened arm against her half burned tea towel.

Snape turned to Hermione, who was wiping her eyes repeatedly and swallowing hard between small sobs. He said, “I am considering asking you to take Candide away with you . . .”

Winky had climbed to her feet and crept over to Snape to tug on his robes with her uninjured hand. “Master. Master. Master Harry is going to hurt himself, Master.”

Snape turned and took her wrist in hand like one accosting an errant child. “What?”

“Master Harry . . .” She shrank back, trying to protect her wounded side, then collapsed, limp.

Snape lowered her to the floor by her hand. Voice rough, he said, “Never mind, I heard you the first time, in all honesty.” His face pinched in pain.

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"I'll take Winky," Hermione said, hurriedly scooping the elf up from the floor.

"Go with her," Snape ordered Candide who still leaned over the balcony railing.

"What are you going to do?" Candide returned, voice as frantic as the rest of theirs.

"I don't know," Snape said. "Something." He started to say more, but shook his head.

Candide, sounding like she called down from somewhere much farther away, said, "Someone should stay in case Harry returns."

"I can," Hermione offered.

"Go!" Snape commanded her, pointing at the dining room. "You are not safe with Harry anyway."

Hermione ducked over her charge and shuffled off, sniffing. Snape and Candide stared at each other, even after the sound of the Floo crackling faded. Candide shifted Arcadius to her other side. He had quieted except for the hiccoughs.

"What are you going to do?" Candide asked, voice gentle. When he shook his head she added, "Harry will come back, Severus. Doesn't he always?"

Snape drew in a deep breath. "I don't know how much of that was Harry."

After a space, she asked, "Where do you think he's gone?"

"I don't know," Snape said, bleakly. After a beat he added: "I could hire a vampire to try to follow him . . ." He sounded oddly like someone trying to be funny. He tipped his head up to stare at the chandelier. "I cannot fail in this."

"Severus . . ." she stridently began, but stopped and asked more gently, "Severus, what more could you do?"

He shook his head. "Something. There is always something." He waved in the direction of the drawing room, and a latch clattered open. Kali came sailing out, dark blue now, with shaggy fur. Snape caught her out of the air and bundled her against his breast to pet her.



Harry Disapparated yet again, lost his balance and had to catch himself on a heavy curl of rusted metal, which shivered under his grip. He pressed his forehead into the gritty surface and remained that way, clearing everything from his thoughts, making his mind to match his soul, ragged and empty.

Eventually, Harry straightened and began walking, thinking of nothing but the movement of it. His legs at first staggered, not really his own, but as he went, urging muscle and sinew along, his gait straightened and he let the rhythm of the motion become a living thing inside him. He let it fill the void, at least for the moment.

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Harry walked faster, setting a pace that kept the hordes behind him. He walked until he recognized nothing. The gritty sand was so fine it made little clouds puff around his footsteps. His brown shoes quickly became ghostly grey so it was difficult to discern where they began and the dust ended. Mad tangles of metal loomed over him, cradling grey grasses so high they had folded crisply over.

Harry kept walking, giving no attention to how long. It could have been minutes, or hours. He set his mind not to care. There was only the movement, limbs like pendulums propelled into the next step by the swing of the last.

He kept going until his limbs regained full sensation and he could feel his right shoe rubbing the way it sometimes did when he wore the wrong socks.

Harry slowed and without a change in his empty calm, looked about himself. Concentrating on an open space of grey dirt ahead, he trudged that way. Again a sparkle of warmth bristled along his nerves. Anticipation. He responded by forcefully suppressing all emotion, emptying himself again, welcoming his hollowed out soul like a difficult spell he needed to keep casting. The clatter of tiny limbs grew louder, gathering all around. The creatures' noxious scent drew forth memories that he refused to mind, letting them dissolve away. He just fixated on that open spot. Memories would be his undoing. He would not wear his heart on his sleeve; he was stronger than that. Much stronger. He would not be provoked. He would not wear his heart on his sleeve and he would not be provoked. That was important.

Harry reached the center of the open area. The grey dirt was ridged in perfect ripples laid down in two directions, like the sandy bottom of the ocean. Adrenaline coursed through him as the creatures rushed inward, bodies piled three deep, marring the perfect dust. His limbs buzzed and twitched with suppressed movement. He would not be provoked.

Harry dropped to his knees, hands rising up to cradle his head. He could not help that.

As the first claws sunk into muscle he instinctively twisted away from them, into the jaws of the ones on the other side. He clenched his muscles into stillness, bent as far as possible into his arms. This was his body, and he would do with it as he pleased.

Reality became pain. The hollow of his core and the pain formed an eclipse of flaring agony. The wet snapping jaws clacked just beside his ears, ripping at the flesh of his arms. Every nerve ending fought for escape. But Harry, empty, refused to acknowledge this. He floated in the center of the eclipse, isolated, feigning ignorance of his body being consumed.

Within him, his new instincts shrieked and flailed in fear.

The pain grew deeper, no longer surface stings; claws tore to bone, tiny jaws

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ripped muscle free, inciting burning trails along his nerves that collided and surged so high they neutralized so that freezing waves washed behind searing pain. Harry screamed, and felt saliva dripping from his teeth, joining the blood that dripped from his elbows.

Unable to discern up and down, Harry toppled, dirt ground into his wounds and clung to his blood soaked robes. The creatures trapped under him shrieked and flailed to get free. Within him, the same thing was happening. Something clawed and flailed to get free, sensing mortal pain, sensing his determination. Harry spasmed, back arching until his muscles pulled and tore.

Harry screamed again until his breath ran out and then felt nothing for an eternal, suspended moment. Everything stopped, the noise, the rending jaws . . . everything went still until something tore loose inside him. This searing pain blocked out all else. The flapping wounds, the missing chunks of flesh, they were nothing compared to the torment of this rent forming across the center of his being.

Harry thrashed with a mad, hoarse screech. It reached his ears like the shriek of locomotive brakes. He screamed again, on and on, until his last breath trickled out like a vomiting laugh. He was pain. There was no world; there were no creatures; there were only the halves of him and the seam gaping between them. The pain made him mad enough to yearn to heal the rent; he reached out for it, mindlessly seeking relief, promising to be obedient, if only the agony would cease.

The tearing halted. Separate as he was now, Harry could feel the bleak cursedness he had called back. The halves of his soul jerked, trying to repair and Harry heard Hermione screaming at him, felt her jerking at him, violent and frantically out of control. He saw the flash of fire engulfing Winky, the powerful pulse of the spell he had not consciously cast. He saw Snape and his father overlapping like two worlds at once. His friends would prefer, he was certain, that he not come back at all than come back whole, as he had been. He wasn't a hero anymore; he was nothing. Best to remain nothing and dissolve into well-deserved dust. Harry bit down on the aversion to the agony and shoved the cursedness away, accepting that madness and death may follow.

Inside him, something shrieked at the scent of death, and wrenched free. Harry imagined he whimpered, but there was no sound. A veil of black draped over Harry's slitted eyes, smothering for a breath before it fluttered free, drawing the agony out into a thin line that stretched his hopeless soul out, far out, then snapped free, releasing him with a shudder.

Harry's face smashed into the grey dirt beside his knee. The pain had deadened to a soundless roar and his mind thrashed against the open sore it left behind. He opened his mouth to scream again, but he could only hear his own choked breath

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escaping through wet lips and dirt-caked teeth.

Harry gasped, sucking in dirt. He was on fire inside and out. He trembled violently, knocking his limbs together. The air burned his wounds. He imagined cold, blissful cold on his limbs. Nothing else mattered, he reminded himself. He was empty otherwise. He imagined ice and the peripheral pain eased to a mere blinding agony.

He must have passed out. He woke to something snuffling at his cheek, something rancidly cold and wet. A growl, throaty and musical, sounded just inches from his ear.

The soul-deep wound made him clench his eyes closed tighter; the paltry agony of his shredded body barely registered in comparison. He could just lie there, release the Staunching cold, and finish it. It would be so easy and then there would be no pain at all, within or without. He would be free of everything. But there were things he wanted to see, Arcadius growing up. Snape was strong enough to move on, but Hermione would be devastated. And he had a family now and white anger flared up at getting cheated of that once again. Coaxing these emotions into real strength, he renewed the cold on his limbs and the pain of his flesh eased, at least. It let him breathe a little better.

Harry blinked the grit from his eyes. The werewolf's snout was just beside his face, growling over the top of him at the creatures arrayed on the other side. One creature took a nip at his hand. The feel of its teeth made him jerk his hand clear, a movement he had not believed himself capable of. He was already missing two fingers on that side, he noted impassively.

Harry felt for his wand. His arm barely obeyed, almost too weak to lift his blood-soaked sleeve. But Harry was used to this helplessness and he took his time. He found his wand and fumbled for it, practiced at handling it with unresponsive fingers, although not practiced at using blood-slippery, half missing fingers.

Harry aimed a healing spell at his left arm. The spell fizzled and snapped, useless. Fiery panic tried to fill Harry's chest, battling against hope that had apparently swelled larger than he realized. His wounds began flowing again, warming his blood-cold robes. Harry Staunched his limbs again, imagining arctic ice, endless lakes of still, arctic ice. Again the pain eased, letting him catch up on his breathing.

He could Apparate here, so magic was possible, at least within him. Harry pressed the shaking tip of his wand against a flap of exposed skin, which was growing white from lack of blood, disconnected tendon curled up behind it. He incanted the spell again, silently, in his head, taking his time.

The spell flowed down his arm, about to his elbow, he guessed from the feel of it. With great care, Harry turned the wand in his weak fingers and pressed it home at the crux of his elbow and repeated it.

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The werewolf snapped across his chest at a half crab, half dingo that tried to snatch at Harry's elbow, knocking the wand out of his hand.

Calmly, Harry reached over himself with his healed arm, wincing as edges of fabric which had been healed into it caught on his flesh and pulled. But it was a good sign that it hurt so badly. He picked up his wand in his left hand and repeated the spell on his right arm. He worked his way along, healing where he bled from his torso, healing his legs, which had been somewhat protected from harm by being folded under him.

Then after several clumsy tries, Harry put the wand back in his pocket and looked beyond the creatures ringed around him. A rancid shadow loomed there, undulating side to side. A long noseless face took form in the head of the shadow, with long teeth and a glow of red for eyes.

Harry blinked at it, trying to make his mind work, but before he could make sense of the thing, its mouth took shape to howl and it rushed him.

Harry tried to heave up on his arms, to escape the expanding leer that bore down until it filled his vision. A wave of aversion made Harry gasp as the shadow passed through him, briefly making his limbs wobble and thrash. He tried to scream again, but his head merely tossed. He flailed and rolled over, propped himself up precariously on locked elbows and looked around, trying to see where the shadow had gone. Behind him was only more scrub and circling creatures.

The werewolf's growl became a yelp, and it leapt upon Harry, sickly with a double curse now. Helplessly weak, Harry let the werewolf's momentum propel it across his chest to fall on the creatures on the other side of him. But he did not let go; he clung desperately to its furred breast and pushed at the only thing he had strength to: the cursedness.

The werewolf repeatedly coiled its body and tried to flip onto its feet, dragging Harry along the ground, sending the creatures scattering. But Harry hung firm, pressing harder. The werewolf yelped out a series of frantic barks and corkscrewed its dog body one way then the other. A shadowy halo drifted around the creature, flailed and snapped back into place. Harry bit his lip and pushed again, broadening the way he battled it in his mind to cover the whole animal. The werewolf's face contorted into a semblance of Voldemort's face.

"You are nothing! I. Will. Not. Die . . ." the face sneered. "I am stronger than everything, even death."

Harry tried to sneer back you're certain of that? but his mouth refused to work. He clamped his eyes closed so that there was nothing but him and the shadowy curse, not the face that had haunted him for so long. Slowing his breathing, Harry systematically pushed at the curse immediately under his fingers, then deeper in, then outward from there to the paw-tipped limbs. The animal thrashed and almost broke

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free, almost reached his arm with its snapping jaws. Harry wavered, spent. He was not going to manage it. The last of the dark cursedness surged back in, assaulting his hands, making his muscles twitch with a sickening urge to let go.

Harry rocked, losing his grip on consciousness. He would not let Voldemort have the werewolf. He would not let him have anything. He refused to concede anything after coming this far, after expending his whole life on this battle.

Harry slowed his breathing. He ignored his aching arms, his torn spirit, and thought of nothing but the creature and the shadow. He made himself meaningless in his own mind and systematically pushed at the curse one more time. He had no strength left, so he pushed with his will alone. The fur under his hands melted away leaving his fingers resting on bare cool skin.

Harry opened his eyes and looked down at himself lying in the grey dirt, slack and unconscious. Harry jumped in confusion, lifted his hands from the perfect skin beneath them and held them there, trembling. Harry panted, a tear ran down one gritty cheek and fell on the chest beneath him. The boy's long eyelashes flicked open and he looked about himself. And Harry realized it was not him, just someone nearly the same age with similar random dark hair.

The boy stared up at him curiously. Harry rocked on his heels and nearly toppled all the way over onto his side. The boy pushed himself up and examined his hands, front and back, then stared at Harry again. His forehead was strangely prominent and cheekbones high. The resemblance that had so startled Harry grew less obvious as the boy looked around.

The creatures snapped and dug at the dirt, kept at bay either by the boy or Harry's own indifference to them. Harry pulled out his wand and touched it to his robes with a series of *Reparos*, then slipped off his sleeveless outer robe and held it out to the naked boy.

The boy accepted it as if it were an item alien to his experience and awkwardly slipped it on. Harry looked around for the shadow, but did not see it. He could feel that it lingered close by, reeking of rotting curse. Now that he did not have the cursed werewolf overwhelming his senses, Harry could feel a sinister presence shifting around them, circling, full of mindless fury. The invisible shadow surged close, then retreated, circled, and surged in again.

The boy stood up and shuffled away from Harry, black eyes wide. He clambered backward up a heavy twist of metal sticking out of a hillock and perched there, watching.

Harry tried to say something to him, but his mouth failed to move. A stirring in the hordes drew Harry's attention away. The creatures were piling on top of one another, higher and higher, until they formed a seething man shape that lumbered

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toward Harry.

Harry crawled backward, which only emboldened the creatures, so he held firm. On hands and knees he held his ground, trying not to sway too much on his quivering limbs. The reek of his own blood filled his nose.

I'm stronger than you. Harry tried to say, but nothing came out. He sent the thought out through his eyes instead. I don't fear death, Harry sent out at the thing, and meant it with every last fiber of his being. The assemblage of creatures faltered and collapsed in a squealing heap, turning on one another, tearing limbs and scattering black blood on the pale dirt. A shadow thrashed away and retreated across the ground, like a passing cloud.

The pile re-gathered and stumbled at him again, screeching in anger. Harry leaned toward the attack, not flinching. He feared nothing, especially now that it seemed it was only his own being he was burdened with, his own and what felt like a gaping hole, but still, only him.

The pile again collapsed and the creatures took to cannibalizing each other, dragging limbs and flesh away to consume beyond the surrounding hillocks.

Harry waited, concentrating on his breathing, making each inhalation a renewed grasp at enough strength to remain upright. The boy in his robe had not moved, simply watched him with open curiosity. His prominent forehead and odd cheekbones gave him a primitive look in the odd light. Like a museum replica in a diorama.

The creatures piled together again, fewer this time for certain. Harry rocked back to sit on his feet, using the remaining fingers on his right hand to push to a kneeling position. He would not die crawling on all fours.

The pile ran at him faster this time, screeching. But just as the frothing creatures grazed his robes and their putrid breath mussed his hair, they fell into disarray.

The pile reassembled even faster this time, seething with hatred, screaming loud enough to hurt Harry's eardrums. The boy covered his ears with his palms and winced. Harry held firm, swaying, but firm, fearing nothing, except perhaps the notion of living with this gaping hole in his spirit, but that probably actually worked in his favor.

The next pile was only three creatures high and it set upon itself before it got half way to Harry. Screams and cries went up as a rat tailed creature with an octopus head wrapped its tentacles around the gills of a frog with mandibles, which had its hooks in a soft bellied armadillo with a bare brain shining out on top of its head. Blood spattered, teeth tore insect legs free. The creatures tumbled away, shrieking in fury.

Other creatures scuttled in and tore up the remains, sucked up the black spattered dirt even, every last bit of shell and claw and skin was gobbled up and the creatures

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scuttled off. Harry blinked at the blank space, stunned. He waited, making himself breathe, in and out.

Some of the creatures gathered around the hillock where the boy sat perched. The boy petted a furry one on the head and observed Harry with no expression.

Harry looked around again, expecting something. But nothing happened. The clack of limbs faded and finally went silent. The world tunneled in, black at the edges.

Harry caught himself on his less injured left hand before his head could hit the ground. Before he could pass out, probably forever, Harry bolstered himself with rapid deep breaths, made sure he was level, understood level, and inverted himself into the overworld.

Water assaulted Harry's head. He ducked and opened his eyes into the onslaught. It was dark and the rain smeared his vision of a lamp post and a row of old brick houses rising to peaks in stair steps. He knelt in a small square, knees sinking into the mud. It smelled like it had been raining here forever.

Rain ran out of his flooded hair and over his face, dragging grit into his eyes. Harry tore his glasses free and tipped his head back until his eyes blinked clean. He swayed against the forces pummeling him. He felt so heavy, dragged down toward the earth by his increasingly heavy robe. The rain ran under his collar and crawled down his skin. A rivulet ran down his ribcage in the one place his bloody robes were not stuck tight. The rain was becoming part of him, which was good, because he was so empty otherwise.

Harry had no will to move. His will was ragged. He sat soaking in the warm rain, dodging thought. Thinking about anything at all would bring on that tearing pain in his soul again.

The sky lightened even though the rain did not. The dreary red brick ran with the rain, the cream paint around the windows ran into the brick. The grass took on an iridescent green. One lone tree stood at the corner of the square, with tiny leaves on only half of its blue-mossy branches.

Harry had a sense of movement around him, but safe within his well of indifference he could not risk caring. The rain fell harder, sheeting. Harry's robe must weigh a hundred pounds and it was all he could do to not topple under the downward drag of it.

Footsteps approached. They came on like a low drum under the unwavering torrent of the rain.

"Hiya lad, party a little hard, did ya?"

Harry looked up at the man who had spoken. He wore a policeman's hat with a plastic sack over it and a plastic jacket in a blinding lime green.

Harry could not answer. But he had nothing much to say anyway.

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“What’ll we do with him?” a second policeman on Harry’s left asked.

The first man looked away. Harry followed his gaze and squinted through the morning-streaked rain at a woman on the pavement, wearing a house coat, huddled under a bulbous transparent umbrella.

“Mrs. O’Casey will be expectin’ us to clear him out.”

“All right then. Up you go.”

Harry was lifted under the arms. His feet somewhat agreed to stay under him for the trip across the square to a white car sporting a matching lime green stripe. His head was forcefully steered into the back seat of the car, and his leaden robe was piled in beside him.

The air inside the car immediately began to steam from his clothes. Harry sat back against the wide blue plastic, listening to the warble of conversation over the rain thrumming on the roof and pattering on the windows. The scratched flower-shaped sticker on the small clipboard pinned beside the steering wheel read Garda Sochna, which at first Harry could not process. It required many seconds for the random shapes of the letters to become anything but.

Harry was mulling over the possible implications of Disapparating right from there, whether it was too far in his current state. Thinking of slipping into the Dark Plane brought forth a wave of aversion so strong he bent over his knees.

“Not goin’ to be sick are you, now?” A voice said from the cracked open front left door.

Harry shook his head. The door opened wide and the man groaned as he folded himself inside the car. He balanced his hat on the dashboard and smoothed the spare wisps of his hair back. Mullen had been stitched neatly on the back edge of his cap. The air grew heavier still with waves of evaporating rain.

The driver’s door opened. “She’ll talk you right out of your mind, she will.” He picked up a pen and clicked it a few times. “What’s your name then, lad?”

Harry sat there, mouth not moving. It was less like he had forgotten how to speak than that he had never learned. The officers squeaked wetly against their seats as they both turned to peer back at him. Harry made an abbreviated motion with his good hand in the direction of his mouth, then he better hid his wounded hand by balling his remaining fingers up.

“He’s saying he can’t talk,” one said to the other. “Are we believing him?”

They both turned back again. Harry looked at each of them in turn. He understood them far better than they probably imagined. He most likely would not be trusting himself right now in their place. He gave a sigh through his nose, which made the one on the left, Mullen, pull his head back in surprise.

“Let’s take him in for now,” the one behind the wheel said.

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A rumble rushed through the floor under Harry's feet and the car rolled off, wipers flipping madly.

The officer drove so fast through obscured narrow streets Harry was tempted to surreptitiously put an Impervious Charm on the windscreen. The distraction from his inner agony was welcome and he was disappointed when they pulled through a high arched gate into a car park full of police vans.

Mullen asked his partner, "Can't really be a mute can he?"

Hands braced on the steering wheel in the middle of extricating himself from the car, the driver looked back. "I suppose from shell shock or the like. Looks might too young to have been in the war though."

Harry rolled his eyes. Their doors slammed closed at the same time and the one on Harry's right opened. Harry struggled to get out. He was manhandled out instead because he just could not dredge up the strength for it.

Harry was left on a wooden bench facing a bright corridor beyond a set of double doors set in shiny steel frames. A woman sat at a desk behind thick glass.

"Whatta we got?"

"Your man there is suspected of being under the influence." His voice lowered. "Got under Mrs. O'Casey's collar what with him sittin' out in the rain. Would've taken him home if we knew where he lived." He gave Harry a meaningful look.

Harry dropped his gaze and noticed he was dripping faintly pink water onto the floor.

"Name?" the woman asked.

"He seems to be a mute."

After a moment passed she said, "Maybe he can write it down?"

Harry was given a clipboard and pencil. He tucked his missing fingers far under as he held the pencil to write with it. The healing spell had done a pretty bang up job on them, the skin was healed smoothly over the stubs. Compared to the rest of him, they did not hurt at all.

Letters were a problem. Harry knew what they looked like but not how to scratch them out. He imagined them in his mind and traced them by rote with the pencil. It looked like a five year old had written it.

Mullen held the clipboard up, pretending he needed better light to read it. "Harry. Potter." He lowered the clipboard. "It'll be May Day before he finishes his address."

Harry was reminded terribly of his trainer, Rodgers. He crossed his arms, but ran short of sufficient energy even to be insulted. His remaining injuries were dragging him down, and his soaked woolen robes felt leaden and immovable now.

Harry sniffled and rested his head on his hand to wait. He just needed a moment alone to try and Disapparate. At this point, he would take any opportunity and

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hoped Mr. Weasley would not be too annoyed about having to send someone to take care of any fallout.

Harry stared at the growing puddle around his shoes as the policemen filled in his paperwork with the member in charge. If he was going to a holding cell, he wondered if it would have a camera.

He felt something then, something more than Muggle. Another policewoman was leaning in to read the computer screen at the desk behind the glass. Her head came up and she stared at him. Harry stared back, happy beyond reason to recognize a witch. Her eyes popped out a bit. She said something to the woman at the computer and went away again.

Moments later the double doors opened and she came sauntering out. She wore a light blue shirt with chevrons on the sleeve in contrast to the dark blue of the officers.

“Connolly, Mullen,” she said, sounding casual. “Anything interesting?”

“Not much besides that he’s not talking.”

“No?”

“Just this.” He held up the clipboard.

This garnered a confused look at Harry. It really did look like a child’s writing. Harry shrugged with a pained expression.

“But you are following procedure?” she asked. “Registering him . . . ?”

Mullen shrugged.

“Calling in the doctor because he is bleeding all over the floor . . . ?”

Harry smiled at how quickly the two of them spun around. “He didn’t say anything,” Connolly insisted.

“Well, of course he didn’t, Einstein,” Mullen retorted, slapping his notebook closed and slipping it away in a hurry.

“How about I take him to the surgeons? Looks like more than a house call. I could use a stretch away from the desk.”

“You’d do that, Sergeant?”

She smiled and hefted Harry to his feet. Harry stumbled out beside her, putting every last effort he had into walking.

In the car, he sank into the passenger seat, breathless. She said, “Sorry. Figured you wouldn’t be wanting to wait for the ambulance. St. Brennan’s, then?”

Harry knew this to be the wizard hospital in Dublin. He shook his head.

“No?” She put the car in gear. “And you really can’t talk? What were you doin’?”

Harry made a slicing motion across his neck with his finger, glad he did not have to try to explain more than that.

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She frowned in concern and held out her hand, “Name’s Callaghan, by the way. Very pleased to be making your acquaintance, Harry Potter.”

Harry returned her hand shake as firmly as he could. He could not be more pleased either. She held his hand and spread out his half missing fingers. “That just happen?”

Harry nodded and huffed a sigh through his nose again. It was about the only thing he could say.

She studied him a long moment, before putting her arm up on the seat to back out. “Open the glovebox, in the bottom are some potions. You’ll be needing a few blood replenishers, I’m expecting.”

Harry waited for the seatbelt to let him move to do this. His head cleared as he swallowed the second tiny bottle.

“I don’t know how they didn’t smell the blood on you,” she said, shaking her head as she made a wide turn. “And look at your robes, like a mad patchwork.” She sounded vaguely disappointed in him. Harry watched her profile as she drove. She had a prominent chin and fleshy cheeks. When she glanced over she gave him a maternal smile.

Harry rubbed a spot to pretend to look out the fogged window on his side. He clenched his eyes closed, hoping Winky was all right. In his last glimpse, she had not been moving. This pain brought the other torn-in-half pain back with a vengeance. Harry controlled his breathing, in and out, until it eased and he could let go of the seatbelt, which he had been clinging to.

They turned in at a boarded up house with a tall brick fence all around. She pulled all the way around between the back steps and the wall and turned the car off. “I really should take you to St. Brennan’s whether you want to go or not.”

Harry shook his head and motioned that he would get out and go. He made a walking motion with his fingers.

“Oh, no dice. You’re a wreck. I have to see you somewhere safe or the Ministry will have my head.” She glanced in the rear view mirror and all around the car. Weeds grew between the bricks of the wide porch and leaves, tangled with white plastic bags, had piled in the corners of the yard.

She pulled out a computer printed card. “Says you live at number Twenty-Three Tottlywold Road, Shrewsthorpe . . .”

Harry nodded. She must have read his surprise because she added with a wiggle of her fingers, “I had her type in the magic keys to pull it up properly. You want to go there or St. Mongo’s, Mungo’s, St. Whatsisname’s in London?”

Harry pointed at the card with one of his good fingers.

She shook her head but reached under the seat of the car for a long chain of

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tarnished door keys. She pulled her wand from a shiny leather holder on her belt and said, "I'm only doin' this because you're Harry Potter, you know . . ." She flipped through the keys, finally plucking up a silvery one and holding it out for Harry, wand at ready.

Harry reluctantly reached out, dreading home now. He would find Winky dead, Snape at his fiercest, Candide absent for her own safety, Hermione pushed into an uncharacteristic brutality. And he would deserve it all. Harry closed his eyes against the surge of pain, both old and new.

The keys chimed as Callaghan began flipping through them again. Harry put out his wounded hand to stop her. He shook his head and pointed at the diamond shaped key that still dangled off a loose part of the chain. He would face the past because doing so opened up the future, as bad as that prospect felt at that moment.

They arrived at the Shrewsthorpe train station Floo Node, connecting from Hexham, and with the blood replenisher continuing to lift his energy level, although not his spirits, Harry doggedly led the way up the street to the house. He reached to open the door at the same moment Callaghan knocked with the undeniable authority of her kind. Harry turned the latch, dread, more than his injuries, slowing his movements. He was glad for Callaghan's firm grip on his arm propelling him into his fate, otherwise he may have simply remained where he was, waiting for it to come to him.

They passed the threshold into the main hall and stopped.

Ginny and Hermione were standing up from the couch, wands in hand. Snape stopped, mid-approach, and stared at him.

Harry tried to say he was sorry, but could not.

"This lad with you?" Callaghan asked Snape, sounding teasingly amused and unaware of the undercurrents .

"Yes," Snape replied, gazing mystified at her before returning to Harry, razor sharp. He took in the state of Harry's robes and approached closer.

"Harry?" he queried. Snape's voice was silky only on the surface; underneath it was restrained with a timbre of long haul stubborn determination. How Harry had missed that before he did not know.

"Hasn't said a word," Callaghan provided. She gave Harry a little push forward, as if with some urging he might talk.

Harry could not bear Snape's intrepid caution, it burned the raw edges of his torn spirit. His eyes fell on Hermione's wand, pointing at the floor, but held steady. He turned away from that too as indescribable pain washed through him. Given that he could not possibly make up for it all, he did not have the strength to face it. He pulled free of Callaghan's grasp, and the room swayed.

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His shoulders were caught up and Harry found Snape right before him. Unyielding fingers caught Harry's chin.

"Harry?" This time his voice held concern bordering on hopefulness. Hearing it pulled Harry out of the worst of his wounded despair.

"Look at me."

But Harry did not want to. He flushed with shame at how much effort it had taken, only because he had been so weak to begin with. Snape's hands won out and Harry glimpsed his dark eyes, framed by features chiseled with stress lines. Rolling pain was making Harry's knees even more rubbery. He heard Snape whisper "Legilimens," and the debilitating waves surged higher with the acute memory of the original pain bubbling behind it. Time wound backwards in disjointed chunks: the tearing agony of claws and teeth, Hermione's desperate violence, mindlessly kneeling to be devoured.

Harry broke free. That moment of strength against an outside force matched this one. Limbs vibrating, Harry panted in a futile bid to fill his gaping middle.

Before he could regain himself, he was yanked off balance. He had a glimpse of Snape's intensely stunned expression before he was pulled into an embrace fervent enough to send stabs of complaint through his limbs. His face was made to press into the generous collar on Snape's robes and a hand fitfully tugging at his hair. Harry's heart sped up before his brain injected him with doubt about this easy forgiveness.

"Aye. He's in need of a healer," Callaghan gamely said. "Refused to let me take him."

Hurriedly, Harry was led to the couch and made to sit down and held there by Snape's grip on his arms. Without looking away, Snape said, "Ms. Weasley, fetch every potion and poultice from the cabinet in the bath, will you?"

Snape let go and spun away and, shifting his posture to strangely casual, said to the Irish policewoman, "Your assistance is most appreciated . . ."

"I'll be needing to get back to make a few computer records vanish. Easier done sooner than later." She had her bundle of keys out to look through them. "An honor making your acquaintance, Mr. Potter."

Harry raised a flopping hand to wave, reluctant to see her go. She thought nothing bad of him. He let his head fall back. Resting was making him realize how badly he ached just about everywhere, but it was probably well deserved.

The policewoman zipped away and Snape spun back and bent close to Harry, face stern. He tugged Harry's robe down his arm, tearing what little of his shirt had not been repaired into his robe. Hermione put her hands over her mouth and gasped. Harry glanced down. His skin was criss-crossed with silvery dirt and it stretched, in streaks of pale and flaming red, over ruttled flesh. It did not really hurt as much as it looked, but it looked just about how he felt.

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Harry's robe and shredded shirt were stripped from him with clinical efficiency. Ginny returned and put a basket of bottles on the floor beside the couch and stared with no expression.

"What happened to him?" Hermione asked through her hands, which she had almost pulled down from her face.

Snape ignored the question. "Hermione, charm the couch flat so you can better assist me with him."

Harry passively let himself be laid back and stripped completely. His wet clothes had chafed his wounded skin raw and now the open air stung. But it was nothing, meaningless.

Hermione's voice from his other side said, "Shouldn't we get him a healer?"

Harry did not hear a response. Hermione said, "You are that intent on protecting him?"

"Always. Do you know a Incise Hex and a Stratasheen?" After a pause: "Watch carefully then."

Harry felt something cutting at his arm, making his flesh shift and creep. Then a Healing Charm. Harry opened his eyes to squint at what was happening. Someone had taken his glasses.

Snape bent close to inspect his work, saying, "Ms. Weasley, from Madame Pomfrey, fetch a tin of Thewsolve and a very large sack of Skinagrow."

"Should I go?" Hermione asked.

"I need you here. Did you watch the spells or shall I repeat them?"

Harry must have passed into sleep. He opened his eyes because Snape's hand lay cupped across his forehead, repeatedly pushing his hair back. "Harry?"

In his head, Harry heard a string of echoes of his name. Harry nodded that he was awake for this one. His skin ached.

Snape was bent close, his face well lit by the many lamps that surrounded the couch now. "Your friend is in need of reassurance. Did you rid yourself of Voldemort?"

Harry nodded. Hermione's small fingers gripped his arm so hard he had to hold in a gasp. She said, "Harry!" with a sob in her voice and shook his arm, not too different from her previous reaction.

Snape asked, "What happened to what remained of Voldemort?"

Harry lifted his arms to demonstrate something floating away and dissipating. He then drew a line across his neck. He dropped his arms, unable to explain better.

"Will you show me?" Snape asked, rotating his head in Harry's view so that their gazes lined up.

Harry shook his head.

Snape calmly asked, "You think Voldemort is gone?"

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Harry nodded. He mimicked something attacking his face with his hand in a claw shape, then made his hands attack each other. His arms fell, tired.

After a pause, Hermione asked, "Did you understand that?"

Harry's eyes must have closed again because he did not see Snape's response.

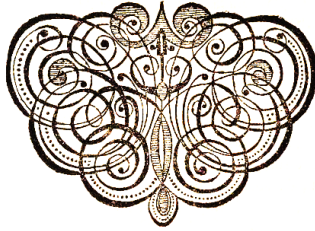
The next cutting spell made Harry twitch, finished, wholly, with being damaged. The couch shifted on Snape's side and a bottle was pressed to his lips. Harry smelled Miseringuish and turned his head away. The couch shifted again, and Harry's head was lifted on Snape's arm.

"Swallow it or I will force it on you."

Harry swallowed.

Author's Notes: To those of you holding off on reading until we get rid of evil Harry, this is your chapter. Evil Harry went away in 59. Be careful what you wish for.

CHAPTER SIXTY



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Voices filled the main hall, hushed and echoing. They rose and fell seemingly in concert with the shadows cast on the stonework by the lamps. Sizzling pain pulsed like heat through Harry's ankle, making him jerk.

"Leave 'im be, 'Mione . . . he's awake," came Ron's voice.

"I'm just . . . Harry?"

Harry raised his head to look at her. The room fell still and pale faces turned his way, waiting, except for Ginny who stood up and called in the direction of the drawing room: "He's awake, Professor." Harry adjusted the dressing gown draped over his bare skin like a blanket and put on his glasses, which he found in the pocket.

"Sit up," Ron said. "We were told to get some food into you when you came to." He reached out of range of Harry's vision and stirred something. "It's just porridge, but we can heat it for you."

Harry's stomach clenched and complained at the sound of a spoon clanking the side of a bowl.

Hermione said, "I'm just trying to get some of this weird silvery dirt out of Harry's skin. It looks like he's been tattooed by a mad spider." She folded her hands together and considered him with a compassionate expression. Harry looked around again, disliking so much of an audience. Luna and Neville sat on the opposite couch with Lavender and Aaron on chairs. Neville had his wand out, Harry noticed.

Harry pushed himself to sit up and accepted the bowl. Recent memory warned him the gaping hole in his being may be more than hunger.

Snape strode over and stood beside the flattened couch and peered at him over

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Ron's shoulder. Harry had the distinct impression from his gaze that he too wished there were fewer people about. Feeling a bit like a sideshow attraction, Harry started eating.

"Do you need any potion?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head, feeling more out of sorts at being fussed over. His stomach suddenly felt too sour with regret to eat anything, but it clenched again, ravenous and he gave into it. What seemed like a large bowl disappeared quickly and he was still famished. Ron took the bowl back and sent a questioning glance over his shoulder.

Snape said to Harry, "You can have more in half an hour, if you keep that down."

"Porridge looked good", Ron muttered, steadying the spoon as he set the bowl aside.

"I can make you something," Snape offered.

"No, no, that's all right, really," Ron blurted. "Not that hungry."

Footsteps approached and Candide said, "I can cook dinner for everyone."

Luna rose up and dreamily said, "I can help."

"It's all right, stay with Harry. A few wand waves and we'll have a little something." She deposited Arcadius into Snape's arms and started off, pausing to touch Harry on the shoulder. "Glad you're feeling better, Harry."

The worried faces in the room relaxed into amusement at the sight of Snape settling the baby onto his arm, then looked away as he sent a glare around at them all.

Candide went off to cook because there was no elf. Harry's chest twisted as he envisioned Winky's fallen body over against the wall.

Snape tapped Ron on the shoulder, several times, until he moved off to sit elsewhere. He stepped right up against the couch and stated, "Winky is expected to be released from St. Mungo's in three days." Harry held his breath, trying to feel his way through this news. His elated relief faded rapidly; he had still injured her, badly. Snape looked like he wanted to say more, but held back and returned to the drawing room after another admonition that Harry should ask for anything he needed. Harry's friends drew nearer in his wake.

Harry had not intended to sleep, but the porridge filling in the corners of his stomach pulled him down into it. He woke to the scents and sounds of real food.

"Mmm, omelets for dinner; my favorite," Ron was saying between bites.

Harry came fully awake with a start, heart racing. He could feel a sickly shadow very close by. Groggy and shaking he sat up and with some difficulty in keeping himself covered, pulled the dressing gown around his shoulders and tied it, knotting it so forcefully it cut into his waist. Voices came from the dining room, but a few friends sat in the main hall. As he stood up, Candide said, "Harry?"

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With grave concentration on each step he took, Harry approached Vineet, who was sitting on the couch beside Hermione. Hermione set her plate on the floor and stood up. "Harry?" she said, putting her hands on Harry's arms, voice full of worry. Harry could barely sense her touch, the shadow so tainted his perception. He bumped into Hermione, stopped, and physically set her aside. She had her wand out in the next instant. Vineet sat forward, but otherwise remained stonily calm.

Harry dragged his attention from his one and only goal long enough to push her hand down. Gently, not grabbing it, just making a point since he could not argue with her directly. She wavered, eyes pooling with liquid, so raw, so close to losing control. Harry felt a stab over that too. He stroked her face, trying to figure out how to say he was sorry. He touched his own heart and touched her face again. She lowered her wand to her side and bit her lower lip, eyes reddening.

Without turning from her, he put his hand on Vineet, like a blind man feeling his way. He had bolstered himself for the revulsion, but almost pulled back. The sickliness went straight to his heart, making him wish to empty his already empty stomach. Harry turned to face him. Vineet's gaze was as unperturbed as ever. Harry put a hand on each of his shoulders and pushed at the curse, but his feeble strength resisted. Vineet put a hand up to cover one of Harry's, as if to steady him.

Beside him, Hermione said, "I think he's saying he's sorry."

Harry closed his eyes. The rest of reality slipped away and he and the shadow floated in a void. Pushing the curse away was worse than pushing oil under water with his fingers; this time it was sticking to him as well. But Harry refused to give in. He drew in a deep breath and clamped his lips together to hold it in. He dredged strength up from somewhere, raw determination perhaps, and pushed. The curse gave way, searing a blood-red lightning bolt across Harry's inner vision. The world tumbled and smacked him on the shoulder and back, and then there was nothing.

Harry came to with his heartbeat throbbing deafeningly in his neck. Snape was yelling at someone. A spell flared and Harry's limbs tingled painfully.

"Get me the Reanimation Potion from the tray, quickly," Snape said, snapping his fingers repeatedly.

A bottle was forced between Harry's lips and he nearly choked on a trickle tasting of rotted berries. But a strange buzz flowed into him from his tongue, making his chest expand and drop, expand and drop, like he was someone's toy.

"Harry? Harry?" Hermione was kneeling beside his head, petting his face with strange frantic movements. "Harry, please be all right."

"Why did you not stop him?" Snape demanded.

"I didn't know what he was doing," Hermione replied, defensive.

Voice snapping like a whip, Snape retorted, "You were to keep a close eye on him."

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Hermione's hands gripped his face harder. "I didn't know he was going to kill himself again!"

Snarling, Snape said, "He has clearly lost what little better sense he had. You must watch him constantly."

Hermione fell silent before she said, "You are saying Voldemort was the entirety of Harry's better sense?"

Snape did not reply, but moments later, Harry was lifted bodily and placed back on the couch. He felt downright awful, his lungs hurt and his heart struck into his ribs as if it had swollen up and were too big to fit inside him. He tried to sit up, but Snape pushed him back.

"Call a Healer here, Professor Granger, if you would." He turned to Harry. "And you. Remain. Put," he seethed. Harry had not faced this level of unchecked anger from Snape in a very long while. Snape put his fingertips to his forehead and rubbed fitfully. When he lowered his hands he had composed himself.

"You are quite weak. I cannot imagine what you thought you were doing."

Harry waved a hand in Vineet's direction. There were no longer any shadows nearby. There was one more some distance off, but not sickening the immediate space. There were no others. Not even in the far distance. As relieved as that made him, it plucked at the empty feeling dogging him.

Snape looked up, snapped his fingers and gestured for Vineet to approach. "The rest of you, out of the room."

The gathering shuffled off to the dining room with many backward glances.

Voice low, Snape said, "Well?"

"My Mark is removed. Reduced to ash." He rubbed his chest through his robes.

Snape's face twitched, from controlling his anger, Harry guessed. "Why did you let him do that?"

"To which do you refer?"

"Either one," Snape interrupted, hissing as he spoke.

Vineet put his hands straight at his sides and pushed his shoulders back. "The first, I did because it was requested of me, to insure I could remain always close enough to assist in whatever may come."

Harry poked Snape on the arm, provoking him to roll his eyes. But his guardian gave up the worst of his anger with a shake of his head.

Vineet went on. "The second, I did not understand in time. I did not know it could be reversed."

"Your lucky day then."

Harry tugged on Snape's sleeve until his guardian looked his way. With his eyes he sent his utter lack of regret at what he had just done, no matter the cost.

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“Precisely my point,” Snape returned. “You have lost what little sense you had. Which was not much to begin with.”

The Healer had arrived, the stooped older wizard who had come to the house previously. He pondered Harry’s strange wounds for a while, tsking and hming, until Snape interrupted with: “His heart stopped and we had to revive him with Stimpells and a Reanimation Potion.”

“Ah,” the old man said, as if this clarified everything. He reached into his bag for a few bottles and began mixing. While his collapsible cauldron bubbled away, he incanted something long over Harry’s chest that eased his pounding organs. Harry dutifully drank down the three horrific tasting potions the Healer mixed together and nodded through his instructions to not Apparate, not take a hot bath, and not fly on a broomstick at high speed for at least a week.

Snape returned from seeing the Healer off and fetched a chair which he placed at Harry’s side. With a flick of his robes he sat down and crossed his arms. “Don’t you dare go anywhere,” he said to Harry.

Harry sat up a bit more, trying hard to not show how much a struggle it required. He waited for Snape to look his way again and touched his own lips then his heart than his lips again, trying to say he was sorry.

Snape turned his head away, but Harry could see his eyes were too bright and he looked to be struggling internally. Harry put aside any notions he had of finding Belinda that evening.

Sitting idle when he could fix something made Harry miserable. He curled up and used his arm as an additional pillow. There were so terribly many things to make amends for—Belinda was just the beginning. He had plunged that other world, the one where his parents still lived no less, into a state of disaster, and he had no idea how to fix it. Imagining his mother’s disappointment when he not only failed to defeat Grindelwald, but had run away in fear, made him curl up tighter.

Harry’s injured limbs complained about his cramped posture. He flipped onto his other side, violently impatient with himself. If only he had not released Grindelwald from Dumbledore’s care. Harry curled both arms over his head, trying to shut out everything.

The tearing pain rose up again, blossoming through his middle, rendering him hollow with an icy breeze tearing at the frayed edges of his being.

“Harry?” Snape’s said.

The clawing emptiness reached a crescendo and finally dropped off, leaving Harry flat on his back and breathless.

“Harry has epilepsy now?” Lavender asked.

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Someone was gripping his arm, and based on the nearness of Snape's voice, Harry assumed it was he. "I do not think so, precisely."

Harry concentrated on the solidity of the fingers around his arm until he could breathe freely again. He must have fallen asleep because he woke up in his own bed, in his own pyjamas. Neville sat in the corner of the room, reading one of Harry's dark magic books by pinning it to the floor with a spell that gave the book the appearance of being bolted there.

"Morning Harry!" he said, chipper despite the weak light coming in the small window.

Harry desperately needed the toilet. He sat up and struggled to his feet.

"Need help?" Neville asked, standing and coming over.

Harry firmly shook his head and waved him off. He did accept help putting on his dressing gown. His limbs did not want to move quite the way he told them to.

"Still can't talk, eh?" Neville asked as Harry tied his dressing gown on.

Harry shook his head.

"Bugger."

Harry shrugged. He was growing used to it. It saved him a lot of trouble, really.

After a hearty breakfast, Harry made his way slowly to the main hall and settled gratefully onto the couch. Snape said to Harry's assembled friends, "I need a few hours alone with Harry, if you would allow it."

They nodded and murmured and shuffled off, yawning and making plans to meet later. Hermione remained beside the door to the dining room until everyone else was gone. Snape waved her off as well before turning back to Harry.

It was early still, not even 7:00, and Candide was still abed with Arcadius, so the house was completely quiet.

Snape paced once before sitting beside Harry, fingers steepled. After half a minute, he reached over and clasped Harry's hand, which still lacked for two fingers, but did not hurt at all.

"I cannot fully express to you how pleased I am with you," Snape began. He exhaled audibly. "I apologize for losing my temper with you yesterday evening. Finding you dead on the floor due to your own heedless behavior was a last straw of sorts, one might say."

Harry ducked his head and touched his lips and his heart in turn.

Snape watched him do this and turned back away before he went on. "Despite the extreme nature of the circumstance, it was not fair of me. You put yourself through hell, quite literally, for our sake and in comparison reanimating you was rather a minor task."

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Harry watched Snape's face in profile as it went through a series of shifts, brow furrowing and relaxing, mouth working in little twitches without speaking further. Harry put his other hand over Snape's, feeling worse.

Snape pulled his hand free and turned bodily. "I do not mean to bring on another attack. I am attempting, actually, to alleviate some of your guilt. Unsuccessfully, I am sensing."

They looked at each for a time, until Snape said, "I need to fetch you something to write with, I think."

Harry shook his head and touched his lips and his heart again. He found that gesture sufficient and feared the embarrassment of attempting to write anything in front of his old exacting teacher.

Snape tilted his head to better catch Harry's eyes. "You would only use it to apologize; wouldn't you?" He sat back. "Never mind, then."

He put an arm around Harry and pushed his head to his shoulder and held him there. "I could not be more proud of you, Harry." He stroked Harry's head, mussing his hair. "I could not formulate any even remotely conceivable way to help you and was beginning to despair for what ends I would be driven to." He fell silent again.

Harry let himself relax against Snape's solidity. He had felt an attack coming on, but it had vanished, which left him acutely relieved.

They sat like that for a while, until Snape's hand gripped Harry's head hard enough to pull on his hair. "You have to promise me that you will not attempt to cure your second, or any other servants I don't know about, until I give the say so. And that you will assure that I am present."

Harry did not like this promise; it made his heart ache with renewed inaction.

"Harry?" Snape's voice grew stern.

Harry nodded, rocking his forehead against Snape's shoulder.

"All right. Good."

The daylight grew brighter through the windows high on the wall. A musical sound like plucked strings came from the drawing room. Snape lifted his wand and gave a hook-shaped wave. A moment later, Harry's pet came flapping madly through the doorway.

Harry lifted his head and caught Kali full in the chest as she came barreling at him. With effort, because she was trying to burrow into his robe, Harry picked her claws free and held her up. She was midnight blue now except for the scars on her wing membranes which were still violet.

Harry glanced at Snape in question as he cradled his pet, herding her toward his pocket where she could rest without pricking him quite so much.

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“I don’t know. Perhaps Hagrid would have some insight.” Snape appeared to want to say more, so Harry narrowed his eyes at him, not wanting anything left unsaid.

Snape smiled faintly. “I have some ideas about testing your magic, but not until you are healed. She is a kind of test; that is what made me think of it.” He tilted his head. “Satisfied?”

Harry made a face that conceded he was. Kali finally settled in his pocket in a ball with no claws poking outward. He too settled back and could not help considering all the things that had gone wrong in the last half a year.

“You will bring on an attack doing that,” Snape said softly, “empathetic pet or no.”

Harry turned his hurt gaze toward him. Snape took his hand again and sandwiched it between his own.

“Harry, if you have made this one impossible thing right, there is nothing you cannot make right. But you must heal first.” His tone hardened, but there was a strange flicker behind his eyes as he added, “If you do not, I will potion you into a coma until you are. Do not imagine I won’t. Do not imagine that a single one of your friends would question my doing so, that they would, in fact, hold you down and assist me.”

Harry could not resist grinning.

“That’s more like it,” Snape said. He pushed forward on the couch and turned to Harry. “Speaking of which, I expect your friends will be returning shortly, despite the early hour.”

Harry made a small face.

“Are they tiring you?”

Harry tilted his head side to side.

“I prefer that you are not alone to sulk. And, while I can give you my own company, I suspect that will grow tiresome quickly enough. I will limit the house to three or four at a time. Will that suffice?”

Harry nodded, then frowned, feeling badly about sanctioning his friends. He studied Snape’s worn face, the sprinkle of grey at his temples and felt worse.

“You need not concern yourself with me,” Snape admonished. He lifted his hands and used them to grasp Harry’s face. Speaking directly at him, just inches away, he said, “I do not want you to harm yourself further with guilt. You made the ultimate sacrifice and at the moment, certainly not until you are healed, you have nothing whatsoever to bear guilt for.” Snape’s gaze roamed over Harry’s face taking him in. “Do you understand me?”

Harry nodded as best he could with his head captured.

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“Believe me that I should know.” Snape added wryly. “More so than you probably imagine.” He pulled Harry’s head down and touched his lips to his forehead.

When he was released, Harry shot him a look that said, you are treating me like I’m Arcadius.

Based on his studious gaze, Snape required extra moments to interpret this. He said, “And what of it? You and he are equally communicative.”

Harry rolled his eyes. But he felt strangely warm inside. Such a gesture required more than an ordinary amount of effort for this man.

“Would you like me to read you the newspaper until your friends return?” When Harry held his hand out for it, he asked, “You wish to try? I noted, just a moment ago, your self-doubt about writing . . .”

Harry extended his hand out further. He did not imagine he could not read. Snape folded it to the headline and held it out. “I was not intending to test you yet, but go ahead, if you wish.”

Harry unfolded the paper to reveal a photograph showing a riot at a Harpies Quidditch match against what appeared by the uniforms to be the Russian National Women’s Squad. Above this, the words were in bold, but at first they were mere random arcs and lines each tipped with decorative little serifs. He blinked at them and concentrated, tracing along the lines, distracted by the punches being thrown in the picture below. But just as he was going to give up and hand it back, the words took shape: Bruising Brawl Befalls Holyhead Faithful. It was not worth the effort, sadly.

He pushed the paper at Snape, the words scattering in his mind like the figures in the photograph as soon as he relaxed his concentration.

Harry stood up and looked around for his Auror books. A handful of them were stacked under the end table opposite. Snape put out a hand to restrain him from heading that way.

“Why don’t you rest instead?”

Harry put on a stubborn face and stared him down. Snape gestured at the books with his hand and said, “As you wish.”

Hermione arrived minutes later, after Harry spent some time choosing which book to look at based on his memory of their covers.

“I hope I’m not interrupting. How are you this morning, Harry?”

Harry had the filing procedure book open before him. He was already frustrated with the way only two or three words at a time would come into comprehension and then he would get stuck at a long word. Words with a dash that went from the end of one line to the next were impossible.

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“Good to see you studying, Harry,” Hermione brightly said as she shucked her cloak and sat down.

On the couch opposite, Snape crossed his arms and considered Harry expectantly. He helpfully offered to Harry: “Straining at that is unlikely to help.”

Hermione looked between them. “What’s wrong?” After a gap, she said, “Oh, Harry can’t read either?”

Harry longed to throw the little green book against the wall, but he left it open on his knees instead. Hermione slid over closer and slipped the book away to look at it. “What do you think is going on with him?” This was directed at Snape, Harry belatedly realized.

“I suspect it is magical shock of sorts. Or Harry may have injured himself more directly. The magic he performed was hardly Ministry tested and approved. But it matters little which it is.”

Harry glared at him.

“Truly,” Snape intoned. “In the grand scheme, this is far better outcome than any we could have hoped for. When you have recovered physically we will address this issue if it still needs it.”

Hermione flipped through the booklet. “Do you want me to read this to you?”

Harry shook his head and turned away to rest his chin on his fist.

“Oh dear,” Hermione said, “you aren’t feeling sorry for yourself, are you?”

Across from him, Snape put his fist to his mouth and coughed. He recovered his stern mode and said, “It will get better, Harry, that I am certain. How much better, I do not know. But you are working with only a day of recovery and it is too early to make any assumptions.”

Harry did not relent on his grim thoughts. Snape stood and approached. “Do you want me to give you a little test right now?”

At Harry’s sad nod, Snape retreated to the drawing room and returned with a deck of cards. He gestured that he wanted Hermione’s seat beside Harry and sat down. He palmed the deck and pulled out three cards and set them before Harry, face up. “See those?” At Harry’s nod, Snape scooped them up and slipped them into the deck. As he shuffled the cards, he pulled the newspaper out of his pocket, laid it between them on the couch and said, “Do you know, Harry, that on the Eighth of April the wizard astronomer Percival Tyrell declared that asteroids were composed of diamond dust, and that he would be selling gems he claims to have collected from same at Baubles and Bright Things at Thirty-Four Diagon Alley? At the exorbitant, I would say, price of a hundred and ninety-nine Galleons, sixteen Knuts.” Watching Harry’s face, he fanned the deck so each of the card numbers were visible.

“Pick out the three cards from before.”

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Harry stared at all the little symbols. Color was easy, and shapes, and faces. He had counted pips just in case the symbols went crazy on him. He ran his finger along to the eight of spades and tugged that one out, found it had too many spades on it, found the other curved symbol like two circles and pulled that one instead. Then, while Snape held the deck, he pushed the cards apart to better see the pictures and found the red ladies. Diamond or heart? Harry closed his eyes and visualized the heart and pulled that one. The last one was harder, it had a full set of splotches on it, black ones, two symbols. Harry found the ten of clubs and pulled that one too.

Holding the cards, Snape brushed his knuckles over Harry's cheek. He ducked his head and packed the deck away in his pocket. "Your memory is fine, Harry. You just need to be patient with yourself. Why don't you rest instead of trying to read anything. Sleep would be even better. Sleep and dreams let the mind reorganize and heal and I believe that is what you are most in need of. Ministry filing procedure isn't going to change before you recover to bravely tackle it."

Snape went to the drawing room and Hermione whispered, "You picked out the right replacement father, Harry."

Harry still wished he was better right now. It pained him to wait for anything. He considered going upstairs to change into jeans and a robe, but instead he yawned and curled up against the armrest, trying to take Snape's advice. He closed his eyes, calmed by the feel of Hermione's hand resting on his shin. Kali struggled out of his pocket and crawled up to sleep draped on his shoulder.

"Harry," Hermione whispered. "Still awake?"

Harry cracked an eye at her to let her know he was.

"We're always here for you, you know. You don't have to worry about anything."

Harry nodded, appreciating her sentiment, even as mistaken as she was.

"I'm sorry we couldn't do more for you before."

Harry waved her off. He was just glad she was all right, but he had no way to say that. He put his hand over hers instead and tried not to imagine how miserable it would be if he had hurt her. His heart raced and his skin flushed with stale panic to remember threatening her. Her forgiveness was unearned, but perhaps someday he could make it up to her. Setting his thoughts to that, Harry's aching muscles relaxed and his eyes no longer clenched closed.

Harry woke to new voices and a familiar fruity-floral scent hovering around him. He opened his eyes to find Tonks bending close.

"He is under orders to rest," Snape was saying.

Mr. Weasley stepped into view and Harry pushed himself to sit, spurring Kali to grip him with her claws. Harry lifted her clear, thinking he needed to have Hagrid trim her claws down to something shorter than a hypodermic needle. The thought

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of setting her down made his heart speed up, so he bundled her into the crux of his arm and held her there.

“Mr. Weasley would like a word with you, Harry,” Snape said. “In an official capacity, I am sensing.”

Mr. Weasley gave Harry a pained smile. “How are you feeling, Harry?”

Harry nodded.

“My two youngest filled me in a bit. The rumors are flying fast and furious about you right now.”

Harry shrugged, uncaring.

“Why don’t we go into the drawing room?” Snape invited. When they were inside, he closed the door on Hermione and Neville in the main hall and ran a quick series of Privacy Charms.

When Snape finally sat down, Mr. Weasley said, “Perhaps I can hear from you directly exactly what happened.”

Harry assumed this was not being asked of him, so he felt free to watch Tonks. Her hair flared hot pink when she noticed his gaze. It was strange; he felt friendly affection for her, but beyond that he felt nothing. He could not see her as more than ordinary, even as much as he could remember a definite sexual desire for her.

Harry missed the conversation. Snape smoothly cut into the awkward silence with, “Mr. Weasley would like to know more than I can tell him, Harry. I am wondering if you would let us see your memory.”

Harry shook his head.

“It’s important, Harry,” Mr. Weasley said, sounding official.

Harry did not respond to this since he did not want to keep shaking his head.

Mr. Weasley said, “Reggie interviewed the Garda who brought you home, but she didn’t tell us much. Seemed very amused to tell us to ask you.” He fell silent. “Strange doings, Harry. We’d like to be certain what is what.”

Snape sat forward in his desk chair. “Harry is quite certain Voldemort is gone.”

Harry nodded.

Tonks asked, “Really and truly?”

Harry made the gesture where he made his hands attack each other.

“Can we give him something to write with?” Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. Snape stood and came around the desk. He touched Harry on the shoulder with his fingertips and said, “Let me see just a bit more of what happened, Harry. Then we’ll be done here. All right?” His voice was bizarrely sympathetic and cajoling.

Harry took a deep breath. He felt an attack coming on just from considering reliving those moments. He wrapped his arms around his middle and rocked, trying

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to fight it off. He could not have an attack now, not in the middle of an official Ministry meeting.

“What’s happening?” Tonks asked.

“Harry is still recovering,” Snape stated. He crouched before Harry and grabbed his arm, holding him steady. “His experience was rather horrific, and reliving it, even in memory is debilitating for him.”

Harry passed through the pain and sat up a little, breathing hard.

“All right there?” Snape took Harry’s chin and turned it toward him. He was lower than Harry and that made it easier to face him. Snape said, “While you are strong enough but still in the memory, just give me what I need to know . . .”

Harry remembered the creatures piling together, Voldemort enraged enough to attack while possessing the demons, the demons falling upon each other, killing each other, Voldemort dying a little each time, and driven further into raging madness.

“He destroyed himself trying to harm you in the end,” Snape observed. He stroked Harry’s arm and stood up. “I believe Harry is correct. Voldemort finished dying in countless little pieces, from what I can tell . . . from what Harry can tell, actually. He possessed the creatures in the underworld to attack Harry and that was his final undoing.” He sat back at his desk and thoughtfully said, “Undone by evil greater than he could understand, but insufficient to overcome Harry’s strengths.”

The four of them sat in silence until Snape said, “Do you wish to return to the Ministry Auror’s Program, Harry?”

Harry nodded eagerly.

Snape turned to Tonks and Mr. Weasley in turn. “I do not think that was the original intent of this meeting, but perhaps we can address it nonetheless.” At Mr. Weasley’s nod, Snape said, “Harry is not quite himself, would in fact need some accommodation for the foreseeable future, but I hope you will consider taking him back.”

“Of course,” Tonks blurted, then turned sharply to Mr. Weasley, who nodded, face full of emotion as he gazed upon Harry.

Harry sent his guardian a grateful smile.

Snape said, “It will most likely be two weeks, at least, before Harry can return, and even then in a limited capacity.”

“We understand, Severus,” Mr. Weasley said. “I’m assuming this . . . attempt to kill himself was a one-time thing?”

Snape turned to him and after a beat, said, “Yes, of course.”

“And the Minister also wants to know if he can still judge the DV Day dueling tournament.”

“Most definitely.”

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They stood to depart with Mr. Weasley saying, "Anything you need?"

Snape shook his head.

Mr. Weasley gently shook Harry's hand as he passed him. Beside him, Tonks said, "Can I have a minute alone with Harry?"

Harry pushed to his feet, trying to appear stronger than he was. Snape glanced between the two of them and closed the door.

Tonks asked, "You really did as Ginny said and scared Voldemort out of you by nearly killing yourself?"

Harry nodded, hoping he did not have to discuss this with everyone he met from here on out. Her hair pulsed brown as she touched his arm. He tried to stand straighter, confidently, as if everything were normal.

"You going to be all right?" She asked. "You look like hell."

Harry swallowed and nodded absently, embarrassed. He had treated her badly, had threatened to reveal her secrets to the Ministry. He made sure she was looking straight at him and touched his lips and then his heart.

She laughed lightly. "Is that how you say you're sorry?" Before he could respond, she gave him a hug. "No worries . . . it works." She held him at arm's length to look him over. "Creepy though, thinking about how much of who you were wasn't really you. But you're just you now, right?"

Harry nodded.

She eyed him closer. "You're not just not talking because you don't feel like it, are you?"

It was Harry's turn to smile. He shook his head.

"I look forward to seeing you at the Ministry, Harry." She hesitated. "Unless . . . you want to get together sooner." She had ideas behind her eyes that tried to raise Harry's body temperature. She was most definitely cute, especially when she looked at him with such wide eyes, but his former deep attraction for her was utterly absent, making him worry it had never been his at all.

Harry stroked her cheek and pulled his hand away to shake it in frustration at not being able to explain. But really, it would be awkward to try, so perhaps this was better.

"I think I understand. It's all right. You need some time and maybe not ever . . . have I got it?"

Harry sighed in relief, then laid his hand over his heart again, apologizing with his eyes.

"You're a doll when you do that, you know," she teased. She sighed too. "I know Arthur already asked, but do you need anything? Ginny said you were quite badly injured."

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Harry pulled up his sleeve to give her a glimpse of his rippled, grey dirt stained flesh.

She gasped. "Harry! That looks terrible."

He tossed his sleeve back down and shook her concern off.

"You're like that all over?" She appeared even more horrified.

Harry emphatically shook his head.

"Well, thank goodness for that. I worried maybe that was why . . . never mind."

Harry suppressed his own horror at that thought.

"Sorry," she said, giving him a chummy hug. "Didn't mean to scare you like that." She knocked him on the chin and said, "I'll see you at the Ministry, Harry, if not sooner. It's not the same without you there."

Tonks and Mr. Weasley's visit left Harry drained. He took up his usual spot on the couch with Kali in his arms and tried to think about nothing much at all.

In the afternoon, Ginny and Aaron took over from Neville and Luna. Ginny eagerly picked up Harry's book on Advanced Spells for the Splitting of Other Spells and began reading aloud.

Aaron complained, "We'll get our assigned reading done whether we want to or not."

Harry propped his head on his hand and listened as closely as he could. Thinking about how far behind he was made him breathless, on top of guilty about everything he could not fix. Just about the only thing he did not feel bad about was frightening the Dursleys. He hoped no one had thought to inform them that he was better.

As the amusement of this notion faded, Harry sat up straight, pulling a partly healed muscle in his abdomen. Ginny's reading faltered as Harry pushed to his feet and looked around for Snape.

Ginny loudly said, "Professor Snape, I think Harry wants you."

Snape came out of the dining room at a dash, took one look at Harry's face and tilted his head toward the drawing room. Snape shut the door behind them and spelled it Imperturbable.

"What is it?"

Harry dug around for some paper, found only important things and dug some more.

"Here, let me. Calm down."

Snape pushed his papers back away, even scattered as they were, and pulled out a used sheet of parchment and turned it to the backside and handed Harry a quill. Harry got to a laughable version of "Beli" before Snape slid the parchment away.

"Belinda, correct?"

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Harry nodded. He wanted Snape to talk to her and hoped he could write that. Given the subject matter, he was loath to let Snape see his inner visions.

"I've already taken the liberty of paying her a visit, yesterday while you were napping with your friends here to watch over you. I informed her, although she retains some doubts, of your change of personality. And assured her that as soon as is possible, pending significant improvement in your health, her Mark will be removed by you."

Harry exhaled the stress that had swamped his meager strength. Then glanced up curiously, wondering how Snape knew all that.

"You underestimate me," Snape stated sternly, but then his face relaxed. "I also informed Ms. Beluna that you would be piling on the apologies, albeit using a kind of charades, which would have to suffice."

Harry narrowed his eyes, hoping Snape had not really said that.

"No, of course I did not say that," Snape huffed. "I should have." He tossed the parchment into the cold hearth and said, "When I assure you that everything is taken care of, I do mean that."

Harry touched Snape's sleeve in gratitude.

"Tomorrow, if you are feeling up to it, we will do some more tests. I do not want you to feel like an experimental subject, so you must tell me if you wish to wait."

Harry firmly shook his head.

Harry returned to the couch and, curled up with his dressing gown to fight off a chill, waved to request that Ginny resume reading.

Aaron hitched an ankle up on his knee, tipped his head back and said, "Here I thought it might be fun this afternoon here at the Snape household."

Harry fell soundly asleep halfway through the second chapter. He awoke to his stomach rumbling in response to the scent of dinner.

"Severus roasted the lamb," Candide was saying.

"Really?" came Lupin's teasing response.

Aaron helped Harry sit up with a firm tug on his arm. "You probably want to eat, I expect. You were thin before letting the hounds of hell eat you halfway to the bone."

With Ron and Aaron's help, Harry stumbled to the dining room and was lowered into a chair. Snape's eagle eyes followed him as he stalled his painful hunger by fastidiously adjusting his place-setting. Harry could feel Snape's attention raking over him, but he had been having a strange dream about following a flock of golden horned goats around the Ministry and did not want to meet his guardian's gaze, so he pretended not to notice.

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Across from him, Lupin took a seat beside Candide. He said, "I would have brought your cousin, Harry, but I wanted to see what shape you were in. Severus thought you had too many visitors already today. You were asleep when Minerva and I stopped by yesterday, and Severus' summary of what happened was not promising that you would be up for much excitement."

Harry did wish to see Pamela, but he wished to see her when he less resembled an invalid. Famished and with the scent of the roast rendering him into madness, Harry reached to serve himself with shaking hands. Before he could grab the fork on the roasting pan, his plate was slid away. Harry jerked back, but then found a full plate slid back under his nose.

Candide said, "Go ahead, Harry; you must be starved."

Harry tried to wait, but in the end began shoveling gravy soaked potatoes into his mouth.

"It's the tissue knitting potions," Snape explained to the general table. "They make one ravenous in the quantities he is taking them."

Midway through his second plate of food, Harry sat back to let it all settle down in his stomach. He watched Lupin across from him, holding the ivory fork and wooden handled knife loosely in his slightly clawed hands. Harry considered the taint he felt from him. Lupin put down the knife and concentrated on stabbing squares of meat, running them through the gravy on his plate and eating them in a way that almost hid his sharpened teeth.

Aaron asked Lupin, "So how is being temporary Head of Sytherin House treating you?"

"I think I'm getting the hang of it, then I realize the little devils are simply working around me in a new way." He smiled at Snape. "Severus accuses me of ruining them for him."

"You did not make them take the calendar down, I hear from Minerva," Snape said.

Harry glanced curiously between them and Lupin explained, "A moon phase calendar, about four feet wide, appeared on the wall of the Common Room. With a crude Sticking Charm attached to it. I left it and wrote in mandatory detention in Forbidden Forest for worst made bed on the full moon. And sure enough last Tuesday, all the beds were made." He gave a weak smile.

Harry leaned forward and put a hand out across the table. Lupin looked up at him, down at Harry's open palm, back up at him. With apparent reluctance, he rested his hand over Harry's, turning the pointed tips of his fingers off to the side.

The sense of taintedness leapt into sharp relief, like holding a bottle of water to the light to see india ink swirling in it.

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From the head of the table, Snape said, "Try anything and I will ground you for a year."

Harry gripped Lupin's hand so he could not withdraw and turned to his guardian.

"You promised," Snape said.

Harry raised a doubtful brow. Not exactly, he thought back at him.

Snape pointed with his serrated steak knife. "A coma. I will put you in a coma if you try it."

Harry let go and pressed his hands between his knees, hunched, and in retrospect, bone tired.

"What's this?" Lupin asked.

"We'll discuss it after dinner. After I have a word, or two, or perhaps fifteen . . . with Harry, in private." He put down his utensils and sat back with his glass of wine and watched Harry while everyone else ate.

Later in the drawing room, Snape closed the door and said, "I do not know if I can trust you."

Harry, swaying faintly on his feet, almost agreed.

"Sit down before you fall down," Snape said, putting a chair directly behind Harry and guiding him into it. It was a straight-backed chair, and under the effects of a food malaise, he struggled to remain in it.

"You do not even know if you can assist him."

Harry glared at him sharply. Snape levelly returned his gaze and after a while, said, "Do you know?"

Harry nodded, and feeling difficult, looked away.

Snape leaned back against his desk and his robes rustled as he crossed his arms. "You are still my responsibility, do you not agree?"

At least he was calm this time, not hyper angry. In a way this was worse, the cold formality.

Harry relented and gave him back his gaze.

"I realize you desire to help others. You've always been that way, when your true shining self is allowed to come through, that is. But right now, you are your primary responsibility. Killing yourself would greatly reduce the number of people you can help later, perhaps it would help to bear that in mind when your heedless heroism tries to take over." He was starting to sound frustrated again.

Snape went on, "I promise you, Harry. When you are better I will tie Remus up, if necessary, so you may try whatever you wish on him. I will personally invite every werewolf in Europe, the whole world even, here, one at a time, for tea and some de-lyncanthropy. I expect doing so would help ease your guilt immensely, if you can

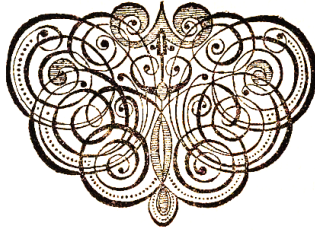
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indeed perform this feat. I am more than willing to do all of this. But for now, you must rest. I will not let you harm yourself again.”

Snape stepped closer and while his face eased into a more sympathetic expression, he kept his arms crossed. “Your instinct for self preservation is stunningly weak.” He closed his eyes a long moment. “Obviously it is, or you would not be free of Voldemort. I realize this and, to a degree I would not have imagined, do honor that. But that does not mean I will stand aside while you are acting unwisely. Do you understand?”

Harry nodded, even as his guilt gnawed away at him with the teeth of inaction. Touching Harry’s shoulder, Snape said, “Maybe you’d be happier in a coma . . .” Harry shook his head. He had to catch up on his reading.

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Snape strode into Ward 13B of St. Mungo's, passed a Manticore in traction, a Mermaid with his tail in a cast and his head in a fish bowl, and stopped beside a bed containing a figure nearly too small to detect under the rippled blankets.

"Master," Winky squeaked, eyes wide and full.

Snape waved a chair over from the wall and sat down beside the bed.

The elf softly squeaked, "Winky is being good elf? Winky is not getting punished? Not getting clothes is Winky?"

"No, of course not. What gave you that idea?"

"Winky is not wanting clothes, Master. Nice witch asked Winky if she wanted clothes."

Snape interwove his fingers. "Professor Granger was here, I take it? I see."

Winky's bandage-tipped ears sagged. "Winky is making bad mistake being clever and obeying some commands of Master and not others. Winky is not being strong enough."

Snape said, "Your actions were exactly right, Winky. I just did not know it at the time. Master is quite pleased with the sacrifice you made, even though you disobeyed him. In the end, someone was going to suffer what you did and it was brave of you to step forward."

Winky sniffled and patted her eyes with the bandage on her hand.

"Are you ready to come home tomorrow? Or do you wish to stay longer?"

Winky glanced around and whispered, "Winky is not liking hospital very much, Master."

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Snape sat straighter. "Yes, well, you are in a rather odd ward; that is true."

Winky's large eyes circled around the rows of beds again, "It is being quieter now with troll going home."

"I did notice the lack of deafening snoring," Snape said. "Healer Serraglio tells me your bandages will come off tomorrow. As I tried to assure you last time, it is peaceful at home now. Harry is feeling quite a bit of guilt about what he did. I would bring him here to visit except I'm concerned about the temptation of curses that may need removing, and I cannot risk it."

"Winky is not worrying about Master Harry, Master."

"No?"

"Winky is being good elf."

"Yes, Winky is." He stood and pushed the chair back against the wall. "You will see for yourself tomorrow then. It is too difficult to convince you that you have a choice."

Winky clutched the blankets tight, pressing them into her chin. "Winky is not wanting to chose clothes!"

"That was not one of the options being presented," Snape stated.

"Winky good elf," she said, voice muffled from speaking into the blankets.

"Yes. Very good. Let us just leave it with that, then."



As Harry, Candide, Kerry Ann and Ambroise sat around the breakfast table, Harry opened a letter from Pamela and held it out to Candide to read aloud. Candide's eyes scanned the blue lined paper torn out of a Muggle notebook before she said, "It's a little personal, Harry. I'll just summarize for now. She says she's very glad to hear you are feeling better and is looking forward to dinner and seeing in person how you are doing."

The hearth flared green and Snape ducked to step out of it. Ambroise jumped up from his seat to shake his hand and pull out his chair for him. Snape did what most people did and looked the Frenchman up and down before accepting.

"I was just summarizing a letter from Harry's cousin," Candide informed Snape. "She seems a tad confused about Harry and very much wants an invitation to visit."

Harry shot Snape an accusing look.

Snape glanced at him, and said, "I stand by my insistence that Remus not be told you believe you can cure him until you are ready to try. For one thing, it is only a belief on your part as far as I am concerned, and secondly, I do not want the

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temptation increased one iota.” After glancing around the table, Snape said, “Please don’t speak of this beyond this room, if you would.”

Kerry Ann said, “I’m not certain what the discussion is . . .”

“All the better,” Snape quipped, rubbing his forehead and frowning as though he regretted speaking. He leaned toward Harry and stated, “Remus has made it this long. It will wait.”

You still don’t like him, Harry accused back, then looked away. He had let his frustration out directly, something that would not have happened if he had needed to compose actual speech. He straightened his napkin and then tapped his knife on his plate to catch Snape’s eyes again to communicate that he wanted to hear about Winky.

“Oh yes, of course. She can be released tomorrow and does not wish to stay longer.” Snape served himself and proceeded to eat.

Harry clasped his hands in his lap and stared at the remains on his plate. His stomach suddenly contained a hundred pounds of lead and did not feel capable of holding any more food.

From beside him, Kerry Ann said, “You all right there, Harry?”

“Harry is feeling guilty,” Snape provided while buttering his toast.

“Oh,” Kerry Ann said. “How long will that go on?”

She had directed the question at Harry, but Snape replied, “I fear he will have to kill himself a few more times to eradicate it. It is like a curse that way.”

Harry sensed he was being teased again and it lightened the weight enough to finish his plate.

Harry’s friends departed for work just after breakfast, but Hagrid arrived soon after, ducking to squeeze through the door to the main hall.

“How are yer, Harry?” he bellowed, giving Harry a hug full of scents that carried stark memories of his cottage, his various creatures, the mud of the slopes around Hogwarts . . . but mostly his creatures.

Harry nodded that he was good, getting better seeing his old friend.

“I heard yer had lost yer voice,” Hagrid said as he took up an entire couch. He had animal skins cinched around his huge feet and the bottoms had worn down to a green-stained gloss.

Harry shrugged. He didn’t want Hagrid to worry about that. He pushed his Auror books aside; he was not making much progress on them anyway. He and Hagrid sat there, fidgeting. Harry opened his notebook and painstakingly scratched out, How is Hogwarts? hopeful that Hagrid would go on about this for a bit.

Hagrid nodded as he spoke and clapped his great hands together. “Good.”

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They fell silent again until Hagrid perked up with, "Aye, here's the little one. Might I?"

Candide had wandered in carrying Arcadius. She held Arcadius out to him; three of him could have fit easily into the palm of Hagrid's hand. Hagrid pulled the fussing baby in close and cooed at him. Arcadius quieted and peered wide-eyed at Hagrid and Harry let his breath go.

Candide said, "Anything special you want for lunch, Harry? I need to run to the green grocers."

Harry tried to hide the pain this question brought on. He shook his head.

"I ken watch him while you go out," Hagrid offered, grinning so wide it make his badly shaven whiskers bristle out to the sides.

"If you like. Severus is around if he is any trouble."

"No trouble. Are you, wee one?"

Candide said, "As long as you haven't recently singed your clothes, he shouldn't be any trouble."

Hagrid puzzled this while she swished out of the room.

Snape wandered in after another long gap in the conversation, one full of cooing by Hagrid, a noise that one might expect to terrify a small child, but Arcadius just waved his limbs like it was a game. Snape showed Harry the newspaper, which had a front page photograph of Percy. He took the paper back and began reading aloud.

"After refusing to voluntarily cooperate with ongoing investigations into the organized criminal gang of which he was allegedly a part, Percy Weasley is to be tried before the Wizengamot. His solicitor has argued that he is not fit to stand before a tribunal, and the Wizengamot is expected to address his fitness today at a hearing."

Harry stood up, remembering the Gimcracker he had made Percy swallow.

Smoothly, Snape said, "You are not going anywhere."

Harry pointed at the article and mimed throwing up something. In frustration he picked up his notebook and painstakingly wrote, Tonks upon it.

"As you wish, but you will remain here."

Harry added an exclamation point, breaking the tip of the quill doing so. Snape folded the newspaper and gave it to Harry, glancing at Hagrid holding Arcadius before sweeping into the dining room. Harry sat on the couch with his arms folded, listening to Snape contacting the Ministry via the Floo Network.

Snape returned and fetched Harry a small chalkboard from the boxes of gifts to Arcadius and handed it over. Unlike Harry's Ministry one, the blonde wood glowed new and it had a little clip to hold three colors of chalk. Harry sighed, but accepted it.

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Snape said, "Look at it this way: you will not have to see your writing later and the Ministry will not be bothered with your breakfast order."

As the minutes ticked by, Harry's eagerness turned to discomfort at having to explain his actions. He fingered the chalkboard beside him, wondering how he could manage to write down so much since he did not wish to show Snape what he had done through Legilimency. Tonks arrived and Harry stood up, feeling a bit like he faced a tribunal.

"Wotcher, Harry."

Harry waved a hand at the library and Tonks followed him there. After giving Hagrid a wave that he most likely did not notice, so wrapped up in teasing the baby he was, Harry shut the door. He lifted his blank chalkboard and gave a sigh of hopelessness as Tonks asked him what was so important. Sitting on the end of the leather divan, Harry rested the chalkboard on his knees and scratched out Percy.

Tonks sat down beside him and said, "Oh, this should be good."

Harry rubbed out the name with the side of his fist and stared at the dusty smear. He wanted to write something like "forget" or worse yet "befuddle" but he did not know how to form those words out of letters and he could not think of an easier word, let alone all the other words that would have to go with it to fully explain. He stared harder at the swirled stone surface, trying to think how best to write what he longed to convey, using only the poor tools he brain would allow. Gritting his teeth in frustration, Harry bent double over the chalkboard and tapped his fist on his leg.

"Hey there, Harry," Tonks said. "Let me get Severus' Pensieve, okay?"

Harry sat up, stared at her, then nodded.

Harry gave her the memory. It trailed off her wand like any other memory and he wondered why they all looked alike. Tonks dipped her head in and held that way, pointed shoulders hunched uncomfortably. After a minute, she pulled up again.

"Huh, so that's why he clammed up and went silly. What was that thing? You seemed to know what it was. You seemed to think Percy knew what it was."

Harry nodded, and picked up his slate again, glad to scratch out the very easy WWW on it.

"So, if I take that thing to the twins they will fill me in?"

Harry wrote Ron next, after two attempts because the first attempt spelled Nor.

Tonks stared at Ron's name in confusion. Harry gestured that she should go back to the previous thing, and she methodically said, "I should take this thing out of Percy and take it to the twins . . ."

Harry nodded emphatically, then pointed at the chalkboard.

"And mention Ron as well?"

Harry nodded, relieved.

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“That’s it?”

Harry sighed. It seemed more trouble than it was worth, in retrospect.

Tonks said, “It’s tough with you not talking; you can’t just fill us in on what you’ve been up to.”

Harry did not really regret that, but he nodded sagely. When she tried to leave, he tugged on her sleeve and tried to write more, but rushing made the shapes scatter in his mind. He sat, hunched for half a minute, gritting his teeth.

“Don’t do this to yourself, Harry. Just send me an owl. I like one word owls. My desk has stacks of long owls I don’t have time for already.”

She smiled, but he felt a little put off by this jesting and stood to walk her out without reacting.

In the main hall Snape stood chatting with Hagrid and a new visitor was bending over the sleeping Arcadius. Harry came to a stop upon recognizing Elizabeth’s staid Muggle attire.

She stood straight and turned to him, smiling brightly. “Hello, Harry.”

Harry tried to say hello in return, but stood dumb instead. Seeing her there was making his chest feel sort of hungry in an anticipatory way.

She put her hair behind her ear and her smile muted. “I’m sorry I didn’t owl ahead, I just heard from my mum what happened and it’s difficult to borrow an owl at Oxford, well, the right kind of owl. I hope I’m not intruding.” She looked him up and down. “You look more recovered than it sounded like you would be.”

Throughout this, Harry had no attention for the looks passing between Tonks and Snape, Tonks a bit tightlipped, Snape intrigued. Harry spent the sum total of his energy stuck deciding between nodding and shrugging.

“Why don’t you have a seat, Ms. Peterson?” Snape smoothly invited.

“Oh, that’s all right, I just wanted to say hello. I think I’m intruding and term is just starting so I have to get back.” She seemed flustered now.

Harry gathered his wits and stepped forward, directing her to sit, wherever. He found a chair for himself and knitted his fingers in his lap while looking at her. It was like kneeling in the warm rain again, like his emotions were fresh and mysterious and he dearly wanted time to suss them out.

But this was going to be just like visiting with Hagrid: silent and awkward. Harry looked to Snape for help and found his gaze amused and knowing. Vaguely alarmed now, he turned to Tonks and found her smiling painfully. As their gazes remained locked, her face relaxed and she gave him a sad wink. “I have to go, Harry. Percy’s hearing is imminent, for one thing.”

Harry waved as she took her leave, wishing he had some words for her. Maybe he could find some later, if he tried hard enough.

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Snape pulled another chair over and took a seat near Harry. "Harry is not much for conversation at this time," he explained to Elizabeth.

"I see that. My mum said something about that. Said all kinds of odd things." She trailed off and Harry experienced a flutter of panic.

"Harry had not been himself of late," Snape said, sounding reassuring. "But he is quite himself now. Aside from needing time to recover."

Hagrid made a gurgling sound at the baby, a rumble like a tub draining. Then he said, "Harry'll be ship shape in no time at all. Right, Harry?"

"Mum said the rumors involved He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named coming back yet again . . ."

Harry reminded himself that she was always a bit blunt. He nodded.

Snape appeared to take this as a cue and explained, "Harry was harboring a piece of Voldemort from when he was a child. There were many pieces of Voldemort in existence, most hidden, but all of them were eventually destroyed except Harry himself. That made Harry attractive to these, spirit remains, shall we say, and their influence upon him was growing grave enough that Harry finally took action to free himself from their effects." He stated this all so calmly, like a lecture, that Harry did not feel even a quiver of an attack of memory.

Snape turned to him. "Accurate enough?"

Harry nodded and turned back to Elizabeth, painfully worried about her reaction. She stared at him without much of one.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't get that sense from being around him."

Snape crossed his legs and sat back. "Not everyone did. Some people's presence gave Harry more strength to remain himself. Others triggered the worst of his weakness."

Elizabeth asked Snape, "And which were you?"

Snape actually blinked at her. His voice dropped as he said, "A bit of the former." When her brows went up, Snape added, "It provided me with early warning that there was difficulty."

Harry looked at him, wondering at his apparently fully recovered emotional state. He kept his eyes on him until Snape looked his way, and tried to convey this sense of marvel with his thoughts. Snape's lips tweaked up at the corners. In comparison, everything is easy now, Harry thought. It must not have been his thought, because he did not believe that.

Arcadius rubbed his hand on Hagrid's rough beard and cried half-heartedly. Snape stood to scoop him up from Hagrid's rocking, which had the arc of a small swing-set.

Hagrid said, "I'm glad yer all better now, Harry. Talking is not everything it's cracked up ter be. Sometimes I go a week without talking, well, to anyone but my

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pets, that is, which doesn't count."

At this reminder, Harry pulled Kali from his pocket and held her up for Hagrid's inspection.

"Aye, would yer look at that."

"We were wondering what it signified, if anything," Snape provided.

"Oh, er . . ." He stretched his neck out to better inspect the creature. "I'd say it just means she hasn't had a drink o' blood lately"

"Oh," Snape said, sitting back. He observed Harry putting her back in his pocket. "Is that unhealthful for her?"

"Aye, eventually. She's a blood transformed entity, I think they officially call 'em."

Snape tossed his robes and crossed his legs the other way. "You may have to feed her again. But do try to keep the blood magic to a minimum, Harry. In general."

Harry nodded.

Hagrid said, "They'll change color if they lose a blood bond, too."

Snape softly said, "That is more likely the explanation." His eyes narrowed then, appearing to think keenly on something.

"I think she's lovely now. Can I hold her?" Elizabeth asked.

Dryly, Snape said, "You could feed her, then hold her."

Harry put her back in his pocket.

"The day is getting on and I have a lecture to get to." Elizabeth stood and Harry stood right after.

Snape said, "You should come for dinner, Ms. Peterson. Sometime soon."

She brightened. "All right. I'd like that. I hope you heal up, Harry." She gave his hand a gentle shake, patted Arcadius on the head and let Harry lead her to the dining room to Floo out.

Before she stepped into the green flames, Harry wanted to say about twenty things. After she was gone, he closed his eyes and shook his head in frustration.

Back in the dining room he sat down with parchment and a Neverout Quill, determined to put at least five words down in a letter to Tonks. But it was impossible. Even if he had five hundred words he did not think he could communicate anything meaningful enough. Oddly, he imagined that standing before her face to face would be easier, speech or no.

Back in the main hall, Snape was laying Arcadius on Hagrid's broad knee. "If you don't mind, Hagrid, I have something I wish to do with Harry. I suspect Arcadius will sleep if you leave him be."

"Naw, take yer time." Hagrid put his arms up on the couch back, perhaps so he wasn't tempted to play. He tilted his head and looked down. "Little tyke looks like

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Harry at his age, don't 'e?" He looked up at Snape, apparently for confirmation.

Snape pulled his head back and stood fixed a moment. "I am afraid I do not know."

Harry glanced between them, wishing someone would look his way, Hagrid especially, so he could glare at him.

Snape recovered a breath later and turned, unaffected, to Harry. "Are you ready for a little testing, Harry? I've collected some things at my desk."

Harry followed him into the drawing room, wanting to make up for Hagrid's comment. With a flick of his robes, Snape sat and gestured that Harry should sit opposite. Harry pulled a chair close while Snape lined up white feathers on the desk top.

Harry lightly slapped his hand on the desk to make Snape look up. When he did, Harry scrunched his face and thought, He shouldn't have said that.

Snape stared straight back and said, "It's all right, Harry. Recent events have dwarfed those of the past."

That did not make Harry feel any better, especially with his own fresh memories of his parents in danger. He lowered his gaze to review those worries in private, fixing his eyes on the row of six quills.

Snape made a wave over them implying Harry should choose. The feathers felt all the same to Harry, so he shook his head.

Snape asked, "There isn't one that feels like the bird is still living?"

Harry shook his head.

Snape glanced over them. "As of yesterday, I thought so. Let's try another set."

This time, Harry plucked up two of the feathers as still Radiant with life.

Snape accepted them and said, "Very good. My quill supplier must have eaten swan for dinner last night." He put the feathers away and set out a box of seals. "I want you to examine these." He pushed the box over in front of Harry. "We haven't tested this precise aspect of Radiance with you before, but let's try it now."

Harry hovered his hand over them, prompting Snape to say, "You can handle them, just don't look at the imprints."

They seals had identical silver handles with brass disks on the bottom. Harry picked up each in turn. They felt dusty to his spirit, until he reached the fourth one, which felt comfortable and warm, even though the metal was just as cold to the touch. Harry finished trying each and held out the fourth one.

"Look at the bottom," Snape said.

Harry turned the seal and saw the familiar interlocking scrolled SS. Snape accepted it back, saying, "I suspected you capable of that given what I read about metals

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holding Radiance more efficiently than other materials.” He put his seal away in his drawer and set the others aside and said, “You have your wand?”

Harry did. He pulled it out and looked at it, at the worn carving on the handle. It felt less familiar than Snape’s seal had.

“Have you done any magic?”

Harry gestured at his arms.

“Oh yes, the Healing Spell. Very good. But nothing since then?”

Harry shook his head. He had been cared for and coddled the last few days.

Snape must have caught part of this thought because he snorted lightly. “Let’s try a few more things.” He reached into his desk drawer and set out on his empty desk an inkstick in the shape of a lotus flower and a milky swirled paperweight. “Hover one of those. It matters not which.”

Without thought, Harry made the correct wand gesture and the paperweight sailed into the air. It swayed a bit as it floated. Harry bit his lip and tried to get it to stabilize and look a bit less like something dangling on a string, but he could not.

“That’s fine, let it down.”

Harry put his hands in his lap and felt unduly under inspection already.

“We can quit any time you like,” Snape said.

Harry shook his head.

“I want you to charm the inkstick to appear red.” When Harry easily did that, Snape said, “Now I want you to charm it to repel my hand. Without removing the other charm first.”

Harry aborted his wand movement. A Repelling Charm was a kind of barrier. Determined, Harry made the right motions, while thinking the right words. The charm fizzled. Harry closed his eyes; this had been so easy. Spells like this one had flowed through and out of him as if eager to live; holding them back would have been the trick. Harry put himself in a memory of practicing the most difficult barriers in his room, just to enjoy the skill. He had done that for many hours. Holding that memory, he repeated the spell. This time it flowed out of his wand and coalesced around the inkstick.

After a beat, Snape said, “Very good, Harry.” He tested that it indeed jumped away from his hand, then placed his hand on the other side of it to make it jump back to the starting spot. “Now remove that charm and place a Muggle Repelling Charm on it instead.”

Harry cancelled the barrier and again, with some quieting of his mind to remember that easy mode, and with three tries, he managed a barrier that Snape could reach through without the inkstick jumping away.

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Snape canceled this charm himself and said, "I think you have a mismatched wand."

Harry stared at the wand in his hand. It did not warm to his touch like it used to. He nodded.

"When Candide returns, shall we fetch you a new one?"

Harry's heart prickled with happy anticipation at this thought. He so badly wanted to believe he was finally free. He nodded, blinking rapidly.

Snape held out his wand, handle first. "Would you prefer to use mine in the meantime?"

Harry shook his head. Snape said, "I want you to Transfigure the paperweight into a chrysanthemum next, if you would."

After Harry had finished what felt like OWL examinations, Snape rocked back in his chair and said, "Your magic seems well intact, even mismatched as your wand appears to be. You seem pleased to learn that it is."

Harry nodded, remembering that he had tried to be rid of it once before. Now that it would finally happen, it made him feel vaguely dizzy to imagine coveting a wholly new one.

Snape said, "I'll admit, I'm quite pleased to learn it too." He pushed to his feet. "If you are still up to it, I have a few more things I'd like to test you on."

Harry felt a bit fatigued, but he too wanted to know what his limitations were.

"You can remain seated," Snape said as he walked out from around the desk. "I am going to curse you with a Jelly Legs, twice, and I want you to Counter the first and Squelch the second. Ready?"

Harry nodded. The Counter flowed easily from his wand, effortless. The second one, Harry's timing was poor and he only blocked half of it. Snape had to put a hand down on the edge of the desk to remain standing, and Harry was glad to be sitting. Harry gestured that he wanted to try again, and this time, Snape absorbed all of the curse, needing a fast cancellation spell to avoid hitting the floor.

Harry jumped up to catch him and helped right him by the arm.

"I was ready for it, Harry," Snape said, seeming amused and admonishing. He straightened and took his arm back. "Your magic seems to be just as it was, with the possible exception of somewhat better skill with barriers when you put your mind to it. May I ask what you are doing?"

Remembering them being easy, Harry thought at him.

Candide's footsteps sounded in the main hall, and Snape stepped that way. Arcadius was sound asleep on Hagrid's knee, tiny hands balled into fists, face still and round.

"Isn't that cute?" Candide said.

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Snape said to Harry, "I have one last test we can do here then I want to see what Ravenclaw's book thinks of you."

Snape took two steps back and with a faint whoosh an adder, upright and with its hood flared, stood in the same spot.

"I wish he wouldn't do that near the baby," Candide said.

The snake's tongue flicked the air. It shuffled its coils and shifted closer to Harry. Seconds later, the transformation reversed and Snape stood, looking at Harry. "Could you understand me?"

Harry had not even realized Snape had been talking. Stunned, he shook his head, then frowned deeply.

"Didn't want to lose that particular inheritance?" Snape asked.

Harry shook his head again.

"I'll admit I'm pleased."

You're the one who can become a snake . . . Harry sent at him. Snape smiled faintly and raised a haughty brow. Harry tried to return a teasing look, but inside he ached at the loss, which was blossoming into an acute sense of a larger emptiness. He closed his eyes and instead of fighting it, floated with it, even though it felt like defeat to do so.

Candide said, "Well, one secret language between them down, two or three left to go."

Harry opened his eyes when someone touched his arm. Candide was hovering the grocery sacks to float them across the hall.

Snape said, "Hagrid, if you would remain for a while longer, I would like to take Harry to Hogwarts for a brief time."

On her way to the kitchen, Candide threw over her shoulder, "Hagrid you can come babysit anytime."

Snape turned to Harry. "Do you feel up to the Floo Network or would you prefer broomstick? Slow broomstick, that is."

Harry thought he could handle the Floo Network for a short hop. He wished he felt more himself and less like he stood on the crumbling edge of a sinkhole.

Snape did not move. "All right?" he asked.

Harry was tired of being coddled and nodded for that reason only. He was not feeling all right at all.

They arrived in the Headmistress' Tower. Daylight streamed in the upper windows, glinting off the cut glass on the doors protecting the book shelves. Harry teetered slightly as he stepped out, like he had spun around for many minutes instead of seconds.

"Oh, Severus," McGonagall said, coming down from the upper area. "And Harry!"

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She took him by the shoulders then gave him a patting hug, repeating his name. "My dear young man, so good to see you up and about after what you have been through." She held his shoulders a long moment before releasing him. "Still not speaking, though?"

Harry looked to Snape, who replied. "No."

McGonagall put a friendly arm around Harry and asked Snape, "Does he talk in his sleep at all?"

"I have not noticed that he does. But that is an interesting point." He turned to Harry, "Do you remember speaking in your dreams the last few days?"

Harry thought back, remembering only snippets of surreal yet boring dreams. He shook his head.

"Try to note if you happen to notice one way or the other," Snape said.

McGonagall's arm tightened around his shoulder and she said, "We always underestimate you, Harry. But you always come through, even when it is utterly bleak."

Snape stepped close on Harry's other side. "He is no longer a Parseltongue . . ."

"Even better to hear," McGonagall said.

Snape added, "I was going to take him to the library . . ."

"I see, go right ahead. Feel free to have Madame Pince clear the students out if you wish. The bookworms could use some sunshine in any event." She smiled at Harry and released him.

Harry turned to find the door and stopped, faced with Dumbledore just above eye level.

"Harry . . ." the painting said.

Harry lost the last of his mental footing. He expected alarm deep within, and a rallying of obnoxious defenses, but instead there was only his dismay and regret echoing inside much too large a space, reminding him how very empty he felt, how very weak he had been.

"Harry?" Snape was by his side, hand around his upper arm firmly enough to hold him up if need be.

"What is the matter?" McGonagall asked.

The memory of the tearing pain cascaded up from the hollow yawning inside him. His knees wobbled and he hung there on his arm, fighting for purchase inside himself.

"Harry has these little attacks sometimes. He'll be all right in a moment."

Snape was entirely holding him up now, having hitched Harry's arm over his shoulder and braced him against his chest. His voice was near his ear as he calmly went on: "Each attack is less severe than the last."

Harry had clenched his eyes closed and resisted opening them again. His breathing sounded loud and his knees still uncertain. But the worst of it had eased.

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Snape asked, "Better now?"

Harry nodded without opening his eyes.

Very close to his ear, Snape quietly spoke into the darkness behind Harry's eye lids: "Unless you are certain it will bring on another attack I think you should face him now. He is only a painting."

Harry took a deep breath and prepared himself to do that.

Dumbledore said, "I knew you had such strength in you Severus. You just needed to overcome your fear of emotional rejection and let it shine."

Snape snapped, "This isn't about me. Don't try make to it about me."

Harry opened his eyes just to see Snape's quick anger altering his features. Harry's grin at this faded as he turned to Dumbledore, who had sympathy bleeding from his bright blue eyes.

"Harry . . ." he began, voice laden with regret. "I had hoped you had such strength in you. That in the end your friendships would win out."

Harry nodded vaguely. He could not argue with that.

Dumbledore stroked his long mustaches and added in a lower voice, "I confess that when I left you with your aunt and uncle I hoped you would learn to be humble, not proud, so that when the time came for this sacrifice you would be able to make it."

Snape's grip grew tighter as he turned to fully face the painting. "What? You knew all this would happen?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "Not exactly. I merely feared this would come to pass. Nothing is ever certain. Harry had such a strange curse upon him when Hagrid brought him to me, it only solidified my determination to remove him from any chance of an easy childhood, from his fame, especially."

Harry wanted to speak but did not know where to begin even if he could do so. Snape however had no such trouble. "I want to get this straight. You were prepping him for this 'death' even then?"

Harry tapped on Snape's chest to get him to turn his way. Snape studied Harry's gaze and turned back to Dumbledore. "Harry wishes to know if that is why you always left him to fend for himself, because it did not matter if he died because he would take his part of Voldemort with him."

"No, that was not the reason at all. I felt bad for having restricted Harry's life so severely, both how he was raised and what his fate would be, that I thought I owed him as much freedom to grow into his own as possible." He smiled dotingly on Harry, and then grew grim again. "When Harry destroyed Voldemort in the Entrance Hall and then suffered from strange visions but no sign of evil influence whatsoever I thought I had been mistaken. I thought with proper guidance . . ." Here he nodded

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at Snape. “. . . Harry would learn to live with these after effects and that would be it. I did not realize how many pieces there were of Voldemort at that time, and that with so much dilution, Harry would not be the focus of them.”

Throughout this speech, Snape had released Harry to stand under his own power, just keeping a hand loosely under his upper arm.

Dumbledore said, “Your life is your own now, Harry. I have every faith you will use it wisely.”

Harry did not feel he mastered his own life one bit. He had so very many tasks to take care of. When he turned away from the painting, he kept his head down.

Snape said, “I was wrong; you should have ignored the old bird.”

“Severus . . .” Dumbledore admonished.

Snape laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder and said, “Anything else you would like to say to him?”

Without raising his gaze, because he was caught up in thinking about how he could possibly defeat Grindelwald, Harry shook his head.

Madame Pince met them at the door to the library and sealed it after they stepped inside. “Minerva sent a message ahead that you would be coming down and to clear out the library for you. There were only four students on this fine day, anyway.”

In the corridor, Harry had shaken free of Snape’s assistance when the students had gathered around to speak to him, and awkwardly enough, argue about him in front of him. Wanting to put that behind him, Harry walked straight to the gate protecting the Restricted Section and waited for Snape to open it.

Harry walked through alone, but stopped and glanced back when the gate clanged closed behind him. Snape stood watching him through the twisted wrought iron bars. Pince kept track of him while re-shelving books.

The rusty hinges on the grate holding Ravenclaw’s book grumbled when Harry tugged it open. The library stood so silent Harry could hear his blood rushing in his ears. The book was heavier than he remembered and he had to drop it slightly on the lectern to keep it from crushing his fingers under the stone cover.

The front cover lifted easily and Harry moved his eyes over the letter inside, “reading” it from memory before paging forward.

“Quiet in there,” Pince said from beyond the gate.

“Yes,” Snape breathily agreed.

The book before Harry felt so inert, he chanced flipping forward an entire chunk of pages. It did not react at all, simply settled with a sigh open to a page with a diagram of how best to place the gargoyles along the walls and rooflines, a page Harry had already seen. Harry wiggled his thumb under another stack of pages and turned again.

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He squinted at what appeared to be the transcription of a meeting. But he could not read them. Each line was preceded by the letters G, R or H with a colon. Harry flipped back to where that particular size and type of paper began and tried to read the first block of introductory notes but found it incomprehensible beyond the words Present: Godric Gryffindor, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Helga Hufflepuff. Harry wondered if Slytherin had not been invited or had boycotted the meeting. Harry strained to read any of the text of the notes; he was deeply curious to know what it said. He propped his forehead on his hands and sat staring at the first line, at the squiggles and dips and strange long underscores connecting words, but he simply could not make sense of one bit of it.

Dumbledore had insisted his life was his own. Not like this it was not.

Harry's hands slipped and he rested his head on the open book, overcome again when his despairing frustration opened the gateway to memories of the tearing pain. The disparate pages of the book crinkled under his forehead and inside him the remaining half of his spirit was flapping madly in a windstorm, bleeding away his will.

Behind him, the gate rattled and Snape commanded, "Harry, close the book so that I might help you."

Harry bit his lips and gripped the wooden reading stand while rocking his head. He had lost too much.

When he did not react, Snape called sharply, "Harry!"

Harry breathed in the scent of the ancient parchment pressing into his nose. He needed to rebuild. He needed to rewrite. He needed to reclaim himself and return to what he once was. And the only way to do that was recover all he had destroyed, to repair the damage to his friends here and to the world he had sunk into despair.

Harry came back to himself, alarmed to find his head inside the binding of a book heavy and capricious enough to kill him. He pushed himself up and stared again at the incomprehensible text while he imagined facing Grindelwald again. Both seemed impossible on the face of it.

He needed a new wand.

Bolstered by stubborn determination, Harry rested his uninjured hand on the left side of the book and turned toward Snape and Pince leaned against the gilded iron. The book felt unusually calm, innocent even.

Harry gestured with his wounded hand for Snape to approach.

Snape pulled up the latch and held it that way. Rustles sounded from the shelves as if something scurried among the books. When it fell still, Snape pushed the gate open.

"You will lose the fingers on that other hand if I come too close," Snape warned,

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pushing the gate closed behind him and keeping a hand on it until the books quieted again.

Harry gestured again for him to come closer, determined to keep the book beneath his hand firmly under his will.

Soundlessly, Snape stepped over, stopping six feet away and lifting his nose to better see the book on the lectern. His brow furrowed as he looked the page over. Harry braced a foot against the wall and levered the book up on the edge so Snape could read it.

Snape's eyes took it in. "Hm, it would appear to be the minutes of a meeting between the Founders. Or some of the Founders. But it is in a shorthand I am not familiar with." He glanced sharply at Harry. "Were you despairing over being unable to read that?"

Harry looked at the text too, startled and flushing.

"Candide most likely could read it," Snape said. "Perhaps that is why the book is letting you page at will. It knows you are unable to comprehend much of it. Why don't you put it away now, my curiosity is quite satisfied."

Harry rested the book back down and flipped through page after page of meeting minutes. Snape took several steps backward and clasped his hands behind his back. Feeling bold and impatient, Harry flipped to the very last sheet of the entire volume and found another letter. He let his eyes follow the arcs and dips of the sweeping hand, much more stylish than the first letter from Ravenclaw. He could not read the signature, although it was beautiful and bold and flowed and curled up and down a third of the page right through the letter itself. Harry braced his foot to heft the book up again for Snape to see, but the covers gave a shudder and slammed closed. Off balance, the book toppled to the floor and struck like solid stone, making the walls vibrate with the impact.

"Are you quite all right?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded. He waved Snape back and bent to touch the book to check its reaction. It felt inert again. With Snape back outside the gate, Harry grunted as he levered the book up and into its cupboard. The book cover, despite striking the corner, showed no damage, but a stone in the floor had cracked in two. Harry ran his toe over the chipped seam, bent and tapped to repair it with a spell he had learned from that very book.

Snape opened the gate as Harry approached it and fairly dragged him through it. "Certain you are all right?"

Harry lightly rolled his eyes and nodded. Pince shuffled off to let in the students who were waiting in the corridor. They stopped inside the door upon spotting Harry and stared in wonder.

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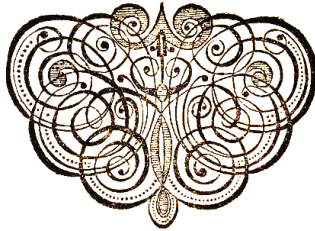
Snape quietly said, "Shall we go to Ollivanders next, then?"

Harry shook his head.

"No?"

Harry shook his head again.

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Harry led the way to Hermione's office, but there was no answer to his knock. Snape pulled his pocket watch out and held it up. It was class time.

"I am certain she would not mind a knock on her classroom door, however." When Harry hesitated, Snape said, "Let's do that, shall we?"

"Harry!" Hermione cried when Snape opened the door and waved him inside. The desks thudded as the students spun as one to look backwards. Hermione came down from the platform in the front of the room and gave him a hug and kept hold of his sleeves. "I didn't expect a visit. But it is so good to see you. Come in."

She led him to the front of the mixed rows of uniforms of yellow or blue. Before she let go, she smiled tearily at him and turned to the class. "These are my Second-Years." Her gaze did not remain on them long; she turned back to Harry and rocked his arm lightly. "So good to see you," she whispered. She turned back to the students and said, "You all know Harry."

Three heads nodded, the others were still captured by surprise.

"And Professor Snape."

Half the young heads craned around to the back of the room again.

"We're just doing Introduction to Scent Charms. Are you feeling up to a demonstration?" Hermione asked.

Harry had too little left from his testing that morning. He shook his head.

"Next time, then. I'm sure the students are excited to see you; they've talked of nothing else." She turned to the children. "Haven't you?"

Eyes looked away, down, at each other.

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“The bell is about to ring, are you staying for lunch? I’m sure Headmistress would love to have you.” She leaned close and whispered, “You should stay and show off your new self.” She pulled back and nodded encouragingly. “I’ve never seen the rumor network working this hard before. It’s mad.”

Harry scanned the still startled faces. When he fixed his gaze on a boy with frizzy red curls the boy swallowed convulsively.

A chubby Hufflepuff girl in the front row raised her hand, propping her elbow up with her other hand as if it was too heavy to lift. When called on, her hand drifted downward while she asked, “Professor, can Mr. Potter tell us what happened?”

Hermione’s hand slid down to grip Harry’s hand. “Harry . . . can’t tell us anything . . . right now.”

A few children groaned after sitting straighter upon hearing the question. Harry sighed, not really wanting to disappoint them. He still clearly remembered sitting where they were and hearing so little from adults about what was happening beyond the school’s walls.

“Harry got hurt,” Hermione explained. “He’ll get better. We just need to give him some time. Right, Harry?”

Harry nodded, not wanting to disappoint her either.

Hermione shuffled closer to him, right up against his side, and explained to the girl, “Harry just had to battle Voldemort one last time, but this time he had to do it by himself, without any help.” Her hand petted Harry’s back as she spoke in a strained tone. Harry wondered it was possible she had been suffering even more than himself.

The bell rang for lunch, but only two students began picking up their notes and books.

“Are you staying?” Hermione asked Harry.

Harry looked to Snape who gave a little flick of his hand indicating it was Harry’s choice. Harry nodded at her; he needed to rebuild and might as well start now.

The blue expanse of the Great Hall ceiling was trimmed with white clouds around the windows. McGonagall installed Harry beside her at the head table. “This was an excellent idea, Harry. A few students swore their cousin’s neighbor’s brother saw you skulking in Knockturn Alley hexing passersby with your red eyes. Just this morning.” She shook her head and in a wistful voice added, “The stories made up about you are beginning to dwarf the real thing.”

As the hall filled it was unusually hushed, with lots of glances at the two of them sitting there. Snape came in a few minutes later and took the open seat beside Harry. McGonagall pushed to her feet and struck her knife on her saucer to silence the hall completely.

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“We have a special guest today,” she said, pleasure clear in her voice, “Harry Potter.”

Over at the Gryffindor table, the Creevey brothers started pounding their knife handles on the table and others Gryffindors joined in, creating a rumbling drumming.

“I was going to say . . .” McGonagall said when the noise died down, “. . . that I hoped everyone would welcome Harry as warmly as possible so that he visits us more regularly. This school just hasn’t been the same without him.” She sat down again and said, “And with that, let’s eat.”

As the food appeared and the warble of conversation and dishes rattling rose to a normal level, McGonagall asked Harry, “Did you learn anything from Rowena’s book that I should worry about?”

Harry shook his head.

“It did let you open it, right?”

Harry nodded while serving himself from a bowl of mashed carrot swimming in a glaze of butter.

“I’m glad to hear that. Anything we can do for you, Harry . . . anything at all?”

Harry bit down a sigh as he bit down on a perfect cube of meatloaf. He was looking forward to not getting asked that anymore.

She leaned over her plate to look beyond him. “Severus is taking good care of you, correct?”

Snape ignored the question so Harry nodded. She leaned close and whispered, “I’m afraid I agree with Albus on this one.”

By the end of lunch, Harry watched the students settling into study groups, mixing between tables, and gathering along the window sills, all while paying only occasional attention to him. When he turned to McGonagall, she gave him a smile and put a hand on his shoulder to brace herself to stand up.

“It will all be fine in the end, Harry. And I don’t take old Albus’ view on this particular sort of thing, so you can trust me on that.”



Harry woke from a sleep hard as stone when a hand came to rest on his shoulder. Snape’s voice flared out of the darkness at the same time the bedside lamp did.

“Harry? I regret to wake you, but we may need your assistance with Arcadius.”

Harry swam up from a dream where he sat in a classroom full of centaurs while Hermione tried to teach them all the mathematics of astronomy. The centaurs refused to believe the stars were distant suns or that gravity had anything to do with orbits. They kept insisting it was all a great magical soup and fairy dust.

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Harry rubbed his face and sat up.

“Did I wake you in a nightmare?” Snape asked.

Harry shook his head. His dreams had not been nightmarish lately, just very strange. He was beginning to wonder which was worse. But he felt energy flow through his sleepy limbs at having something useful to do. He swung his legs off the bed and stepped into the dressing gown Snape held out for him.

Harry followed along the brown-grey light of the balcony. Arcadius’ fussing grew louder as they went.

As they entered the room, Snape went immediately to the bedside and turned up the lamp. Arcadius was being urged to breastfeed but torqued his head from side to side instead.

Harry’s legs shuddered to a stop just inside the door. His chest became rigid and he could not draw breath. Remorse rushed in, chilling him throughout. The last of the air in his lungs drifted out of his nose and he could not replace it.

He had let Voldemort take too much. In the center of his being, Harry scrambled to claw back the past, to wish everything different, to be anywhere but where he was standing right now, facing his shame. The lamplight glaring in Harry’s eyes, setting the scene gently aglow, shrunk down to a pinprick, then vanished.

Low voices lulled Harry out of his frantic breathing when he came to awareness. He shifted his arm to wrap it over his head and it struck the pillow his head rested on.

“Harry?”

A hand patted Harry on the shoulder. He was lying in the middle of the bed beside Candide, who was propped up against a stack of pillows.

Candide said, “That was a bad attack, Severus.”

“Yes.” Snape shifted to lean over Harry. “They had been getting progressively better until this one.”

“Should you call a Healer?”

“I think he is out of it now. Harry?”

Harry rolled onto his back and moved his gaze from the pattern of lamplight on the ceiling to Snape’s shadowed gaze. A flush heated Harry’s face. Near his left ear, Arcadius gave a cry, but it was half-hearted, lacking the coughing at the end that it had when he was very upset.

Purpose drew Harry from the tar pit of his shredded emotions. He pushed himself to a sitting position and held his arms out.

“Certain you are up to it?” Candide asked.

Harry gave his eyes a quick rub and nodded. Balancing the delicate weight, he leaned back against the pillow-infested headboard. Arcadius hummed with his odd

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magic, but he otherwise felt normal. Harry closed his eyes and drifted, but discerned no cocoon of energy around him. He spent nearly a minute in that position, to be absolutely certain.

Snape shifted to sit fully on the bed and Harry could feel him lean close. Harry opened his eyes, physically aware of the people on either side of him, all three of them sitting in parallel. He had very nearly lost all of this.

Harry's heart began to race. He could not have an attack while holding the baby. He shook his head while handing him back.

"No?"

Harry let himself drift to avoid succumbing and shook his head again and rested it on his bent knees, breathing with great concentration.

Candide asked, "Does he mean he can't help him, or that he doesn't need help?"

Harry held up one finger upon hearing the second point.

"Severus, I really think Harry may need a Healer."

"I doubt a Healer can help him. But if he wishes to go, I shall take him."

Harry rocked his head side to side. St. Mungo's sounded right awful just now.

"I don't know what is setting him off so," Snape said. "Won't you look at me, Harry?"

Harry raised his head long enough to shake it properly. A hand rubbed his back, making him feel both better and worse. The Dursleys dangled this sort of family in front of him his whole childhood, just to demonstrate that he did not deserve it. He would have difficulty right now arguing they were wrong.

Snape asked, "But you believe Arcadius is all right?"

Harry nodded into his folded arms.

"Oh dear," Candide said, rocking the baby faintly. "This time we have to figure out what's wrong?"

Harry thought he should go, leave them to their baby care and each other, but when he tried to push forward to slide down the bed, he was summarily shoved back into the pillows and held there.

Snape glared at him and Harry looked away, down at the baby reclining on Candide's lap. Arcadius put his fingers in his mouth and gave a thrumming cry as he gummed them.

"I suspect he's teething," Snape said. "I will fetch one of the gum rubs from the copious baskets downstairs we have never opened." He put his feet on the floor and twisted back to glare at Harry again. "You will remain until we sort out what is the matter with you."

When Snape was out of earshot, Candide said, "I'll bet a hundred Galleons none of the tins meets with his approval and he spends the rest of the night brewing up

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something.” She stretched her shoulders back and said, “Do you mind holding him again?”

Harry took Arcadius back. The move disrupted the baby’s concentrated finger chewing and he gave a dismayed wail. Harry settled him better into the crook of his arm and he gave a toothless yawn and quieted.

“Are you doing anything?”

Harry shook his head.

Candide rubbed her shoulder. “It will be nice having Winky back,” she said idly. “Oh, Harry, I didn’t mean that. I mean, I meant that, but . . .” She shook his arm faintly. “It’s all right, Harry.”

Harry shook his head, trying to convey too many things in that idiot gesture. It was not all right, but it was all right that she had spoken. Arcadius fell still, fists curling.

“He likes you,” she said. “All boys like having a big brother.”

Dwelling on that lightened the rocks crushing the breath out of Harry’s chest. He leaned back more comfortably into the pillows and watched the pink distress fade from the tiny serene face. If only it were so simple.

Candide’s voice held a grin as she said, “And you’re undisputedly the best big brother in all of wizardom.”

As Harry ducked to hide his embarrassment, Snape swept back into the room carrying what appeared to be a sardine tin with the lid curled back. “This is a safe enough analgesia inducer in a neutral waterproof unguent.”

Snape sat down to lean over Harry, noticed Arcadius was sleeping, and set the tin on the side table. “Figures,” he murmured.

Moving more sedately, Snape put his slippered feet up on the bed and said, “And you?”

Harry shrugged and turned away from him.

“If he’s asleep, we can put him in the bassinet,” Candide said.

Harry gave Arcadius over and the baby was lowered into a woven bassinet suspended on a wrought iron stand. Candide pulled down and released it so that it rocked faintly. When he turned back, Harry found a parchment on a hard-cover book being slid onto his lap, and Snape held a Neverout quill out for him to take. Harry accepted it.

“I need to know what is troubling you so severely. I can understand your resistance to sharing your thoughts. In an emotional state it is difficult to control what a Legilimens sees. Which means you are going to have to write something instead.” Snape waited, then added, “What is going on with you, Harry?”

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Harry stared at the marble-like texture of the parchment and tried to find words. His feelings were clear and solid as crystal, but as soon as he tried to pin words to them, everything grew muddy, including the emotion itself. He put the pen to the surface, then pulled it up again. What was going on? What was he feeling? He could not write out “remorse”; the letters would not come together in his mind. Harry wrote shame, and stared at it, feeling the word hollowing him out as if it were a curse.

Snape’s arm was around him. He had blacked out again.

“Severus, maybe you should let him rest. You said he needed sleep.”

“If he were not napping half the day, I would be concerned on that point. These debilitating attacks need to stop. I thought they would continue to improve on their own . . . but it seems he is capable of a significant relapse.”

“You make it sound like he can just out-think them.”

Harry lifted his head and the grip around him loosened so he could sit back. Snape held the quill up for him again.

“Severus, you are tormenting him,” Candide accused, pausing in hovering her extra pillows to the top of the wardrobe in the corner.

“I am not. He must find a path through this. The sooner he does so, the sooner his pain eases.”

Harry took the quill. This was like a maze, Harry decided. He kept turning blind corners and falling into snares. But he was learning where the paths led, albeit the painful way.

Snape took the quill back. “Let me write one. We’ll take turns.” In simple block letters he wrote out pride and handed both back to Harry. “If you are not proud of the strength you showed, then there is something very much wrong.” He waited before going on. “You were willing to lose your life to make things right. I would argue that balances out all of it. Do you not agree it balances out some?”

Harry nodded and stared at the two words. He wanted to write “deserving” but that was out of reach. He considered “owe” but that was not quite it. In a burst of frustration he tried to push the book and parchment back at Snape.

“There is zero chance I will let you quit this task. Keep trying.”

Candide gave Harry a pained smile and turned the lamp on her side down before curling up to sleep.

Snape turned up the lamp on his side and sat back with a relaxed sigh. “I am in no hurry, Harry.” After a few minutes of companionable silence, Snape quietly asked, “What are you experiencing right before you fall into difficulty?”

Harry wrote So empty. Snape raised his chin and canted his head away. His voice was less than steady as he said, “Harry, you are still young. You will recover from

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this violence, for lack of a better word, to your soul. I really do believe that. It will simply take time.” Snape loosely held Harry’s arm. “You need to find patience with yourself. I know you do not find that easy.”

Harry shot him a look.

“Yes, I admit, neither do I. Not with myself and usually not with you. But this is different.”

Harry closed his eyes as he remembered threatening the man beside him, the one who was trying so very hard to help him. Harry touched his heart and his lips, then tried to write sorry, because it was suddenly clearly formed in his mind.

Snape pulled his writing hand off the parchment. “I’ve already forgiven you, Harry.” He released Harry’s hand. “All wars have battles you win and battles you lose. It’s simply the way things are. You lost a handful there near the end, but you won when it truly mattered. You seem to be having difficulty seeing that.”

Harry rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, tossed by new emotions.

Snape went on, “You don’t need my forgiveness, nor your friends’, nor even Winky’s. You have all of that, in fact, and yet you still struggle. Do you know why?”

Eyes closed, Harry nodded.

“What is it going to take, Harry?”

Harry opened his eyes and let them roam over the far wall, over the side-by-side wardrobes, the trunk with toys stacked precariously upon it. He had no answer to that.

Silence fell. Snape patted Harry’s arm before gripping it. “It seems to me that when you have these attacks you have struck upon something extraordinarily painful that you are too wounded, both in mind and spirit, to cope with properly. Is that a fair assessment?” At Harry’s nod, he went on, “Given how what may set you off is so unpredictable, I am afraid avoidance of potential triggers is not going to be feasible. Do you feel more injured after an attack?”

Harry thought that over and shrugged, then shook his head.

“I do wish I understood why bringing you here tonight set you off so.”

Harry put the quill to the parchment and wrote evil.

“This room is evil?”

Harry pointed at himself.

Snape’s left hand clenched and unclenched empty air. “Perhaps I do not really wish to understand. I was not keeping as good a watch over you as I actually needed to.”

Harry touched his heart and his lips, then challenged Snape with a quick glare to not complain.

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“Fair enough. But you need not apologize as far as I’m concerned.” He took the parchment and book away. “You have far less to make up for than I think you believe. And you have your entire life to do so.” He capped the quill and set it aside in the drawer. “But in the short term, you must find some new strengths to make up for your weaknesses while you heal. Even if they are not injuring you additionally, I cannot imagine these attacks are beneficial. Do try to keep fixed in your mind that everyone that matters has forgiven you, that you have earned the right to be proud of coming out of this at all, let alone as well and whole as you have . . . and that you deserve this family.”

Snape raised a sharp brow, when Harry expressed surprise. “I thought I caught a glimpse of that, even though you were trying your best to hide it. Unfortunately, a point of weakness with you even before this happened.” His voice dropped to barely audible, “I do not speak of any of these things lightly, or without personal experience, as you are well aware.”

Snape leaned over to check on Candide, then gestured with his head and swung his feet off the bed to stand up. Harry followed, careful not to jostle the bed too much.

In Harry’s room, Snape laid a fire and came over to stand beside where Harry sat on the edge of the bed, holding his dressing gown tight around himself with his hands.

“A very long time ago I felt the need to point out to you that you could not lose this family. I was a bit out of sorts myself at the time,” he added, clearly chagrined. “But I should have stated as much at some point earlier than that. These sorts of topics are not easy. They are not easy for most people, and those for whom it is easy, I have great difficulty trusting. But I digress.” He rubbed his eyes. “My point is, you are very much wanted here. Even at the worst times, we were more frightened for you than of you.”

Harry closed his eyes as pain stabbed through him. A hand closed around his shoulder. “I am sorry, Harry. I do not mean to cause you more difficulty again already. Look at me.” When Harry obliged him, he looked eyes and after a beat said, “Of course you felt helpless. But. You. Aren’t. Now. You won. Enjoy your victory. At least long enough to heal, please.”

Harry drew in a deep breath, trying to take those words into his empty heart. He let the breath go, and relaxed his arms which had been wrapped rigidly around his midsection.

“Better?” Snape held his hand out. “Let me take your dressing gown so you can rest.”

Harry snuggled down under the duvet. The fire in the hearth crackled heartily.

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The lamplight deflated and went out.

Snape's voice came out of the orange dimness, "Sleep the sleep of the victorious, Harry. You deserve it."



Harry scrubbed his eyes and yawned as he stepped into the dining room, then stopped upon seeing Ginny sitting with her notebooks beside her teacup and saucer. He glanced at the clock on the mantle and then at Snape.

"I refused to disturb you, even though I heartily agreed you should submit to an interview," Snape said from behind the morning newspaper. "Have a seat, Harry."

Harry shook Ginny's hand as a way of greeting her more personally and sat on the end. Under the table, Harry rubbed his arm; shaking hands had tweaked his muscles.

Ginny asked, "How are you doing, Harry?"

Harry nodded that he was well enough and gave her a smile, which made her relax. He wished a fire blazed in the hearth behind him to warm the chill from waking up, but it was sunny this morning even if the heat had not yet leached inside. Candide brought a plate laden with breakfast and set it before him. Harry patted his hand on his chest in an attempt to say thank you.

Ginny said, "Did you hear that the Midwitches induced Gretel yesterday?"

"Did they?" Candide said, taking the seat beside Snape. "Your parents must be thrilled."

"Oh, beside themselves. They've named her Molly Ruth. She's long, but sort of skinny and mostly makes ugly faces. Charlie thinks she's the cutest baby born in all of history."

"We'll have to send a basket of things over there."

"Back over there, you mean," Snape said.

"I hate to rush things, but I have to cover a Wizengamot hearing at 10:00 . . ."

Ginny said, shifting her notebooks around.

Harry motioned that she should go on. She flipped open a notebook and beside that set down a scroll and a quill that looked far too familiar. Harry pointed at the Quick Quotes Quill that had begun cavorting just above the scroll like an athlete doing warmups.

Ginny gripped her notebook in both hands. "It's like this, Harry. We're considering putting Skeeter's byline on the interview." At his expression, she quickly explained, "She has far more credibility on this topic than anyone else on staff. Don't worry, I'm editing everything she writes, and once final copy goes to print it can't be changed. Previous owners have seen to that, believe me. But she insisted on the

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observations from her quill or she refused to put her name on it. I didn't think you'd want her coming along so it was the best I could do."

Ginny turned to Snape and waited for him to respond. Snape lowered the paper and said, "I cannot bear the woman, but it's for the best if she essentially concedes in print that you are yourself again."

Harry huffed through his nose, then felt pleased to have made that loud of a vocal noise. The Quick Quotes Quill scratched something out, then turned slowly in the air, waiting.

Ginny put her quill to her notebook and asked, "When did you first notice Voldemort was . . . coming awake inside you?" While Harry thought about that, she said, "You've always sensed things from him, but when did you notice it was more than that?"

"If I may," Snape said, folding the paper away, "I think it was about the time that Voldemort returned in the empty shell of Gilderoy Lockhart."

Harry swallowed and nodded.

"Not before then?" Ginny asked. "When Harry started hearing the creatures in the underworld?"

"That familiarity with old magic is not unrelated to Voldemort, specifically the attack on Harry as child, but he did not acquire that skill from Voldemort, directly."

"What, actually, did you first notice?"

Harry looked at Snape and Snape's lips twitched as he replied, "Voldemort was better at plotting."

Ginny said, "Imprisonment made it worse, correct? Do you mind if I point out that it was being so close to the Death Eaters that did that? You were imprisoned without just cause." At Harry's gesture of acceptance of this, she efficiently went on, "And you spent the last few months acting outside the Ministry, but you were mostly demolishing the criminal gang Durumulna. Why?"

"They made Harry angry," Snape supplied on his own. "And he believed they deserved it."

"You were much better at getting to them acting alone, it seems to me," Ginny said. "I want to cover that some. The Ministry hasn't been very effective. We'd like to do an entire article just on that, later."

Harry shrugged. He felt antsy remembering seeking out servants among their ranks and wanted to move on.

"You're certain Voldemort is gone this time. Why?"

"He attacked Harry repeatedly, decreasing in strength each time, until there were no further attacks. If he could have attacked again, he would have."

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Harry wrapped his arms around himself and resisted closing his eyes tightly. Snape leaned forward to put his hand around his arm where it rested on the tabletop. The Quick Quotes Quill scratched frantically while the scroll slid by below it. Ginny frowned and leaned over to look at it.

Said Snape, "Dare I ask what it says?"

"Um . . ." Ginny's face twisted up. "It says A ruffled and fatigued Harry flinched at the question and was faithfully supported by a family member."

"Could be worse."

"It tones it down when I'm using it." Ginny flipped through her notepad. "You plan to return to the Aurors' program. I can fill in that part myself from what dad said."

Harry tapped her arm until she looked up.

"Yeah, I didn't even get around to applying. Maybe next year." She frowned at the clock. "I have to run. I need to get a good seat. Ma Dame's hearing is today. I think I have enough for this round, otherwise I'll stop by again."

Harry stood up, intending to accompany her.

"You want to come along?" She turned to Snape. "Is that all right?"

"Harry is going to have difficulty getting to London with you. It is too far for him to take the Floo Network; he is not allowed to Apparate; and it will take several hours by broomstick . . ."

Harry stared at him in shock and slowly sat back down again.

"Oh," Ginny said. "Well, I'll send you my personal observations if you like . . ."

Harry nodded bleakly. The remains of his breakfast, still steaming, were pushed back under his nose. As he ate, an owl came to the window bearing a letter. Harry sat with it propped on the table edge until he could piece together most of the two short sentences. It was from Rodgers, who thankfully preferred short notes. His old trainer was requesting he come in for a debriefing, soon, prior to returning to training. Harry handed it over.

"Tell him to come here if he wants to talk to you," Snape said, setting the letter back before Harry.

Harry clasped his hands together and sat hunched, staring at it, trying to accept that he was stuck. It felt so . . . Muggle.

"Why don't we all go into London?" Candide suggested. "We can take the train. Harry can visit the Ministry and we can all look in on the Weasleys. We could spend the weekend."

"And Harry can nap on the way," Snape added. "As is his wont."

Harry narrowed his eyes at him, but could not hold his annoyance long when faced with Snape's sedate amusement.

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“Feeling up to it?” Snape asked. When Harry nodded, he added, “I think it will be good to get you out of the house.” He stood and folded his napkin before dropping it beside his coffee cup. “In the meantime, I will fetch our much-missed house elf.”

Harry straightened, then slumped again. Snape stopped behind Harry’s chair to rest a hand on his shoulder, then departed in the Floo.

“Everything’s fine, Harry,” Candide said. After they stared at each other, she asked, “Empty platitude?”

Harry nodded.

“Sorry. How about: everything will be fine if you let it be?”

Arcadius fussed from the main hall, and she rose to fetch him. She sat down with him hitched on her arm and put her fingertip in his mouth. “I can’t imagine he’s teething at two months.” Half the candelabra on the table sparked into life. “It’s a little early in the day for candles, Arcadius.”

Arcadius pulled his hand out of his mouth to wave it at the candle flames. Harry tightened his dressing gown and wished the baby had lit the hearth instead.

“I can’t believe I’ve got used to that,” Candide said, watching the flames burn.

Harry pulled his chalkboard over and wrote out what else?

“What else is he going to start doing? Yep, I do worry about that. He doesn’t have any of the other characteristics of a firestarter, according to Severus. Too young, for example. Too young to teethe too.” She leaned her face close to the baby’s and he let out a squeal of delight.

They sat in a companionable silence until the sound of the Floo made Harry close his eyes. Ill prepared, but seeing nothing else for it, Harry moved his chair aside and stood up. Snape stood beside the hearth with his hand out as if ready to hold him up. Harry stepped clear of his reach as the Floo Network flared green again. Hunched, Winky crept out and peered around with large, popping eyes.

Harry tried to speak, but could not. Winky bowed to Candide, then bowed to Harry, who broadly shook his head.

“Masters too good to Winky,” she squeaked. “Masters is being very good wizards.” She tilted her head at the baby and said, “Winky is going to make Master Harry’s favorite.” And with that she sparkled away.

Harry had not thought he could feel worse.

“It’s in her nature,” Snape stated.

Harry strode by him on the way to the kitchen. As he crossed the main hall, he could hear Snape following at a slower pace.

The scent of cocoa boiling filled the long narrow kitchen. The hearth on the end roared with a grand pile of fresh wood and, despite only seconds passing since Winky’s return, freshly chopped carrots and onions lay on the wooden table and a

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heavy cauldron of water hung in the hearth, boiling heartily. Winky looked up from stirring heavy cream into the cocoa and considered Harry before returning to her task.

“Master Harry is good wizard,” Winky chirruped faintly as if talking to herself.

Harry shook his head again, but she was not looking at him anymore. Behind him, Snape said, “She senses your nature has changed. She requires no further convincing.” When Harry stared at him in anguish, Snape said, “I have repeatedly told her you are sorry.” He tossed his hands. “Winky, Harry is quite sorry for what happened. He wants me to tell you that yet again.”

Winky looked up. The milk pitcher sparkled away out of one hand while she stirred with the other. “Cocoa is being almost ready.”

“You are being clever again, Winky,” Snape criticized.

Winky blinked her giant eyes at him as if not understanding.

Harry could not bear this. He stepped up beside Winky and lowered himself to one knee. The heat radiating from the hearth burned his face.

“That is most definitely not necessary,” Snape said, then grumbled, “Neither of you are listening.”

Harry put his hand over his heart and ducked his head. When he looked up, Winky was holding out a steaming mug.

“Master Harry’s favorite,” she squeaked.

While Harry stared at the mug, Snape said, “She is quite happy with her situation, which means you can do no wrong.” He stepped closer and added, “The only thing you can do wrong is refuse to take the cocoa.”

Harry accepted the mug. The heavy ceramic pleasantly warmed his hand. He stared dumbly into the swirls of white foam in muddy sweet liquid. The scent of it invaded his head, making it hard to think.

“Harry thanks you for the cocoa, Winky,” Snape said.

This jarred Harry from staring into the offering. He pushed to his feet and stepped back from the hot fire. Winky was already busy sweeping vegetables into a cauldron. Harry stopped at the door to bow again.

As they crossed the hall, Snape said, “Given how much food she is preparing, I expect you to have quite a few visitors at lunchtime.”

Harry sank into the couch and sipped the cocoa, suspecting it contained elf magic that would work upon him, but accepting whatever it might do. With unexpected ease, he leaned back and relaxed. He held up his injured hand and examined it while thinking of all he needed to fix. He did this in an idle manner, hoping some grand idea would simply occur to him. Scattered silvery lines were still showing through his

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skin and when he moved in certain ways, his muscles twinged painfully. Whatever was to come, he needed to be healed more thoroughly than this.

When Snape crossed back through the hall, Harry set his mug on an end table and caught up with him to tug on his robes. Snape turned with a questioning expression and Harry pulled up his sleeve to move his hand while making a face.

“You are in need of some reworking, I suspect. Have a seat and I’ll get the poultices.”

Harry sat down, moving his hands and arms in all directions to find all the spots that pulled the wrong way. Snape hovered a tray of things within easy reach and sat beside him. “Your friend Hermione and I were working rather fast when we healed you. Pull up your sleeve.” When Harry gestured at both arms, Snape said, “You have more than one spot, I see. Pick a place to start.”

Harry pulled up his left sleeve and pointed at a bulging spot. Holding his wand like a quill, Snape braced his hand and sliced Harry’s arm open in a neat arc, then with a painting motion, began resealing the layers of muscle back together. A grey poultice resembling and possibly containing ground up worm guts went over the top of it and Harry turned his arm over to have another spot fixed.

“Move your fingers so I can see what is wrong with this one.”

Snape ran his thumb over the surface of Harry’s arm as he clasped and straightened his fingers, until Harry tried to jerk free the pain so surprised him.

“That would be the spot, I believe.” Without looking up from his task, Snape asked, “Would you like Misinguish, or do you prefer the suffering?”

Harry shook his head.

“You are healing quite well,” Snape said. “The penchant for suffering could use some work, however.”

Harry rested his head on the cushion and clamped his teeth together. It was not so much the pain that bothered him as feeling his flesh creeping around.

The door knocker sounded and Winky sparkled in to open it. Aaron sauntered into the main hall, cloak neatly hooked over two fingers as he held it out to Winky. He asked, “What’s Harry being punished for?”

“Good day, Mr. Wickem,” Snape said.

Aaron sat on the other couch and put his arms up on the back. “Come now, I had you as a Head of House for seven years, I know punishment when I see it.”

Harry gave Aaron a grin.

Snape said, “It would not be punishment if Harry could be convinced to swallow something to render his nervous system moot. Fortunately, we are almost finished here.”

Harry pushed the newest blob of poultice back in place when it tried to slide off.

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“Hermione worked extensively on your ankles for some reason, so I suspect they are not bothering you.”

Harry shook his head.

Aaron accepted a tall milky coffee in a beer mug from Winky and said, “I see your house elf is as subservient as ever.”

Harry sighed through his nose.

“What Harry means by that,” Snape drawled, “is she will not allow him to wallow in guilt as he would prefer.”

“There is a great wizard tradition of elf abuse, you know,” Aaron said to Harry, taking a second and third sip. “Oh, darn good coffee. Can I buy your elf when I finally get married and need one?”

“She is not for sale,” Snape said, standing and going to the dining room where the Floo had sounded.

“Come now, she must be bored already with no dark wizards to oversee. I think I could present enough of a challenge.” He winked at Harry. When Harry looked away, he leaned forward, “Come on, Harry. Lighten up.” He glanced to the dining room. “Guess we should join the others.” At Harry’s questioning look, he explained, “Mr. Weasley sent us all for lunch. To encourage you to return.”

Harry settled at the table with the Auror apprentices. Snape and Candide insisted on eating in the drawing room to leave them to themselves, which left Harry with no interpreter. An extra place-setting appeared just as the plates of food sparkled in. Ginny arrived in the Floo, gave Aaron a quick hug and sat down.

Harry tapped her plate with his knife.

“The hearing was dreadfully boring. Organized crime should be covered by our business correspondent, really.”

By the end of lunch, Harry went from feeling out of place at his own table to feeling once more part of his cohort. His dismay at not following the conversation at the beginning completely vanished by the end.

“Harry’s been doing a bang-up job,” Tridant said as he helped himself to a third square of cake. “Rodgers insists you’re waiting to catch The Boss before returning.”

Kerry Ann said in response to Harry’s funny expression, “He did say that. I think he’s jealous that you get to work outside the system. You’re coming back next week, right?”

Harry gestured at his chest, making a circle for no good reason, except that seemed meaningful. Ginny said, “Dad says when a Mediwizard clears him he can return. I think that’s what Harry is saying too.”

“You are being missed,” Vineet stated gravely.

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Harry forced himself to meet Vineet's level brown eyes. But it made Harry feel unsteady, like he might be inviting another attack, so he looked away again. He had to find some way to get stronger, and soon.



After lunch, Harry walked into the drawing room and faced Snape down. He dearly wanted to take care of Belinda, or at least see Belinda. Snape and Candide were relaxing over tea with Arcadius in the self-rocking bassinet.

“Not yet, Harry,” Snape stated.

Harry bit his lips and considered stamping a foot to express his frustration, but changed his mind in time. He paced instead, thinking of Vineet's easy going attitude and how Belinda would not be so sanguine and therefore would more likely be suffering undue stress.

“I will go visit her again this afternoon, if you wish. Mr. Abhaynanda has seen her twice, he tells me. I am quite certain she will be all right until you are well enough to rectify things, safely. On that note, your cousin and Remus are coming for dinner and I expect you to behave. Consider it a test, perhaps, if that helps. If you truly think merely seeing Ms. Beluna will make a difference—even if you are not allowed to remove any curses from her—and you keep yourself disciplined this evening, we can pay her a visit in London.”

Harry huffed and paced again, finding the room claustrophobic. On his next pass, Snape was in his path. He halted Harry with a hand on his chest and pulled his wand. With a quick snap of it he ran a Health Indicator. It fluttered yellow and what little was green was a sickly maroon green.

“Your estimation of your strength is biased, do remember, both by the healing potions and your isolation from strenuous tasks.” Snape tilted his head to better study him. “Any attacks today that I am unaware of?” When Harry shook his head, he said, “I am pleased to hear that. I did not expect you to endure Winky's return without suffering one.” He returned to his seat and said, “Patience, Harry.”

Harry closed his eyes and huffed through his nose.



Harry's cousin greeted him with a fierce hug. She did not release him completely, but held his sleeves in her fists and exclaimed, “The things that happen to you!”

Snape passed close behind Harry and muttered, “Look at this . . . a Muggle who does not believe any of it was your fault.”

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Pamela went on, "Mum wants you to visit as soon as you're able. I told her you weren't allowed to travel far by magic. She said that was fine, and 'it's a wonder any of them get anywhere safely anyway'." She stared at him from arms length. "You look okay. Mostly the same. Sheepish maybe."

They settled onto the couches, with Snape arranging for Lupin to sit as far from Harry as possible. Pamela asked Harry, "Are they going to figure out what happened to your voice?"

"When he is well enough for treatments that I fear may be harsh," Snape said, sitting back with a sherry. "He is well enough to begin regrowing his fingers without slowing his general recovery, but he has not indicated that he is impatient for their return."

Harry held up his injured hand and Pamela flinched from the sight.

"What happened exactly? Remus said you got in another fight with this evil wizard Voldemort, but this time you won for good. It certainly would be nice if you won for good."

No one replied right away. Snape said, "That is essentially what transpired. Sometime, perhaps, Harry will relate the detailed story. He has tired, I am afraid, of hearing it retold and I feel obliged to spare him."

Winky crept in just then carrying a tray of snacks. Snape asked Pamela, "And what of you? Things in the Muggle world going well?"

Harry assumed Snape must be distracting her, since he would never normally make such conversation. Even Candide turned her head his way sharply.

"The Muggle world is quiet enough. The usual politics and griping."

"No personal plans of any significance?"

Harry and Candide shared a questioning glance. Pamela laughed lightly and replied in the negative.

"Hm," Snape said. He sat back and stared into his drink.

Arcadius woke with a cry in his self-rocking bassinet and Snape stood first to pluck him out of it. He circled around the room, patting the fussing baby on the back. Fortunately, most of the candles in the room were already lit. Arcadius calmed and began peering at them over Snape's shoulder. Snape stopped before the couch full of guests and offered him to Pamela. "Would you like to hold him?"

Pamela shuffled forward and eagerly accepted him. "Oh, he's such a doll."

Arcadius fussed a bit, but sounded like he might hold off on a full volume complaint for about a minute.

"I should probably feed him," Candide said.

Harry keenly eyed Snape as he casually circled around to where he had left his drink on the end table. He faced away from them all as he swallowed the rest of it.

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Harry wished he would look his way. He had a bad feeling he was up to something.

Arcadius fussed a bit louder and Pamela raised him up onto her shoulder to pat him rapidly on the back. "You probably want mum, don't you, you little dear."

Snape took his time returning and accepted him back. Arcadius smacked his mouth as he was ferried over to Candide. Candide stood with him and strode off toward the library.

"Don't want one of your own, Remus?" Snape asked as he resumed his seat.

Lupin did not move, but something about his entire body changed, as if his animality had risen up and bristled, making his skin taut and his hair flattened.

From the doorway to the library, Candide turned and said, "Severus?"

Snape pointedly ignored her and she shook her head as she closed the door. Harry was considering throwing one of the small pillows at Snape when he noticed Pamela looking earnestly to Lupin for an answer.

"Really, Remus, what is the problem?" Snape asked, voice stony.

Harry breathed shallowly while waiting for Lupin to figure out a reply. Snape spoke first, saying, "Don't you dare accuse me of not understanding." Another pause, during which Winky sparkled in with the sherry bottle clutched in both hands to refill Snape's glass. Snape watched the liquid swirl as he said, "You know what I think? I think you are using your condition as an excuse. I think you are hiding behind it."

Harry slowly sat back, hoping but doubting that Winky would bring the bottle his way.

Lupin ran his thumb over his pointed fingernails. "I don't think it is any of your concern, really, Severus."

Snape pondered that before coming back with, "I am just looking out for family, Remus." Snape sat back, propping his sherry glass on the arm rest with a spell waved out of his hand. "So, if you were no longer a werewolf. What then?" But again, Snape did not give him a chance to reply. "You would rush out for a ring, I assume?"

Lupin deflated rather than rising to more anger. "It doesn't matter, Severus."

"Oh, but hypothetically, it does, Remus. If you are . . . merely using it as an excuse then it is no excuse. Just assure us that you would marry Harry's lovely cousin if you were not a werewolf and I will drop it. That is all you need do."

Lupin laughed harshly. "That's all you want to hear? All right then. Certainly." He spread his hands as if giving a proclamation. "If I were not a werewolf, I would do right by Pamela. Have bunches of little witches and wizards of our own. Happy?"

Lupin did not sound happy. Harry's heart sped up. The room fell quiet and Snape said, "Yes, quite happy. Aren't I always?"

Lupin laughed again, less harshly. "I don't understand you. Why don't you let the past go?"

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Snape's voice rumbled as it grew deeper. "Oh, I have. More so than you imagine. But no matter." He pushed to his feet. "I expect dinner will be on in a few minutes."

Pamela hooked her arm through Lupin's and they walked to the dining room together. Snape lagged behind to give Harry a raised brow and a challenging expression. Harry gave him a confident shrug in return.

"When you are healed . . ." Snape hissed. His eyes glittered as turned away, like one greatly enjoying himself.



"You should have invited Ms. Peterson to come early. She most certainly would have read your Auror books to you, for hours at a go, I expect."

Harry was sitting on the couch, head propped up crookedly on a hand which clutched the hair on top of his head in a long-term pose of frustration. He shook his head, making clear his horror at the notion that Elizabeth might learn of his difficulties with reading. He looked up at the clock, then deflated at the hours remaining until dinner when he would see her again. Just thinking about it made his chest lack for air.

"As you wish," Snape muttered. "You are due for a dose of Tissue Knitter. Perhaps Winky will bring you some cocoa to make it go down better."

Winky sparkled in at the same time Snape handed Harry a small bottle of liquid. "An extra dose today after the repairs I did on you yesterday."

Harry alternated between sips of horrific potion and warm, delicious cocoa. Finished with both, he settled back with *Blocking, Bludgeoning & Barricades*, a book from his first month of the Auror's program. He had hoped it would be easier to read than it was turning out to be. He still could not capture an entire sentence at once; part of it always scattered away. Perhaps he needed to find a book he had nearly memorized in order to practice finding the word shapes in his head at the same time as putting many words together at once into a thought.

"How is that going?" Snape asked.

Harry relaxed his shoulders, which had hunched up again already from the effort, and waved him away. He did not struggle for long, the cocoa and the potion pulled him into sleep before he could decide whether to try a book from Hogwarts.

Some time later, Candide crossed behind the couch and put her head in the drawing room to ask, "Did you do that to him intentionally?"

"No. The house elf might have, however. Harry's state of mind notwithstanding, she can be rather manipulative."

"I like that she takes care of things I don't even realize are a problem."

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“I suppose one could view it that way,” Snape said. He strode out into the hall to look at Harry curled awkwardly on the couch, his book resting on the floor, face down, heavy cover crushing some of its pages. “Do you think he looks comfortable, or shall I move him to his room?”

“He looks comfortable enough to me.”

Snape turned away. “In case his friends come calling, I’ll move him where he will not be disturbed as easily.”

Snape slowly released the hover spell so Harry settled onto his bed too gently to awaken. He settled a light cover over him and pulled the monitor out of the bedside drawer where Harry had, as usual, put it away the night before.



Candide welcomed their guest from the Floo.

Elizabeth said, “I don’t get much chance to travel by wizard transport, so I was running some errands on Diagon Alley and decided to come early. I hope I’m no trouble.”

“No trouble at all. Put your shopping down here. Harry is napping at the moment.” When Elizabeth seemed surprised, Candide added, “He’s still getting some potions that tend to exhaust him.”

“Oh. Is it too soon to have guests?”

Candide laughed. “Not at all. Harry’s friends have been in and out, day and night it seems, sometimes.”

“Oh,” Elizabeth said, sounding less enthusiastic.

“Come in and sit down. Winky will bring you something, if you desire it. She tends to do that.”

Elizabeth took the long way around the hall, looking over the wall hangings. When she passed the drawing room, Snape stepped out and said, “May I have a word, Ms. Peterson? Since you are here early and I am reluctant to waking Harry from much needed rest . . .”

“Sure . . .”

He closed the door after pausing to watch Candide rocking Arcadius in the bassinet.

“Have a seat, if you would.” He gestured at a chair before the cold hearth. Snape sat in his desk chair with his fingers knitted in his lap. After a brief silence, he said, “I could not help but notice that Harry is a bit smitten with you.”

“What?”

“It is no matter to this conversation if you have not noticed-”

“No, I hadn’t noticed.”

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Snape studied her before speaking again. "Harry is not quite the same as he was."

"Yes, you said. I haven't noticed that either."

"That isn't the purpose of this conversation either, so we can put that aside as well." He rocked back, eyes fixed on her. "I am disinclined to getting into this at all, so perhaps I shall restrict myself to making one critical observation about Harry and letting you do with it what you will. You seem well-meaning on top of well-mannered, so I will trust you to understand my concerns."

She stared at him with her brows raised, waiting.

"Harry is exceedingly vulnerable right now." He held up a hand to keep her from speaking. "I worry that he is incapable of making circumspect decisions. I worry that his raw emotions may . . . how to say this . . . allow him to form an attachment more desperate than might be best . . . for all involved, frankly."

She was sitting bolt upright now. "I understand. You know Harry far better than I, obviously. I grew up hearing about Harry, we all did, you know, and thought I knew him, a bit, but he isn't easy to get to know, really, in person. I didn't realize, for example, that . . . well, how you just said it. Smitten . . ." She laughed faintly. "Well, if you believe it to be so."

Snape stared at his fingers and said, "Harry is far stronger than anyone else in wizarddom in the ways that truly matter. But he is quite wounded, even if he is impatient with himself and ignores it most of the time."

Elizabeth ducked her head to stare at her hands. "I understand that he's going through a tough time right now, and I don't in any way want to take advantage of that."

When he came down to dinner, Harry shook Elizabeth's hand to greet her, while biting his lip.

She said, "Thank you for the invitation. My meals at school are not much to brag about and I very much appreciate it."

Candide led most of the conversation through the evening, asking Elizabeth about her studies and sharing stories about working as a professional witch.

"I'm still very grateful to Harry for arranging help for my studies."

Harry waved off her gratitude and stood from the couch where they had retired. He wanted to spend time with her alone and made a motion with his fingers that he wanted to go for a walk.

"Sure," she stood with a broad smile before glancing questioningly at Snape.

"Go right ahead. Not a restriction Harry has at the moment, although he has quite a few about travel, in general."

Cloaks draped over their shoulders, they walked in the direction opposite to that of her parents' house. Harry tossed his head that way and gave her a questioning

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look.

“My mum and dad?” she asked, adjusting her gloves as they walked along the edge of the road. “I’ve had a few letters from my mum, but that’s about it. It’s fine. I’m too busy to worry about it, which is just as well.”

Harry took her gloved hand in his own and they walked hand in hand as they turned down one of the quieter side roads.

“I want to ask you all kinds of questions,” she said, “but I can’t. It’s strange.” She looked at him as they walked. Harry glanced her way sometimes, trying not to read behind her eyes. He did not seem to be as good at Legilimency as he had been, but he did not want to take the chance. It did not seem fair.

“You were really partly He-Who, er, Voldemort, eh?”

Harry nodded.

“That’s more than a bit creepy, I have to admit.”

Harry squeezed her hand tighter, then held it loosely.

“It wasn’t your fault, and it seems like you took care of it the only way you could. Before it got too bad.”

Harry made a noncommittal gesture. They passed a stone house where the front gardens were beginning to bloom in long sweeps of color. Harry stopped to look at it.

“You don’t think so. You think you could have done more?”

Harry nodded, glanced at her earnest expression, then glanced away again.

“You’re feeling guilty, aren’t you?”

Harry nodded then gave her an expression of exaggerated surprise.

“I think I’d feel guilty too, that’s why I guessed that.” They stood looking over the flower beds. The wind waved the long branches of budding trees. “I love the color of new leaves,” she said. “It’s like your eyes a bit.”

She squeezed his hand this time. “I used to think it was my fault when my dad got mad at me. I was sure it was my fault. If someone had told me otherwise, I would not have believed them. But that belief itself, that was my fault.” She put her other hand over Harry’s. “I know this probably sounds weak compared to Voldemort, but I think I understand a bit. I think back now and wonder what in the world was wrong with me. It’s like I was a different person, someone willing to do this evil thing, almost, to myself. I would have fought tooth and nail to stay there years before. I can’t imagine what I was thinking then. It’s like the strength that lets you change, you can’t just call it up any time. It has to come on its own time.”

She dipped her head. “Sorry if I’m sounding silly, talking about something so minor.” She raised her head to stare in the direction of her parents’ house.

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Harry pulled her around to face him and shook his head. He longed to take her away somewhere. He motioned with his hands like riding a motorcycle.

“You want to go for a ride?” she asked, laughing. When Harry nodded eagerly, she flushed. “Maybe next visit.” She hesitated, then quickly added, “Is that all right? I need to get back for a lecture in the morning and you have to catch the early train.”

Harry huffed and stared at the broken tarmac at their feet, trying to control his frustration. It was like he had lost the ability to be patient, to sit back and wait for a chance he was positive would come later. He nodded, mostly because he knew he should simply accept things.

“I really appreciate you having me over. Candide said your friends have been in and out and I feel a bit honored that it was just me this evening.”

Harry gave her a smile. That was definitely how he had preferred it too. He could not figure out what it was about her that made him feel so strange. It was like the air in the world had been replaced by a lighter version and it made his head swim.

The sun had sunk far enough behind the clouds that the flowers before them began to glow with twilight.

“Would you walk me to the train station? I can take the Floo from there.”

Harry slid his hand down her arm to take her gloved hand again. The walk went far too fast, and the inside of the station with its grey block walls and harsh flickering lighting considerably reduced the mood. But in front of the train station hearth, Harry pulled her forward for a kiss, thinking about not much more than tasting her lips.

The kiss was merely a peck, because she pulled back. Harry gazed at her questioningly. Flustered, face reddened as if winter had stung her cheeks, she patted his arms and let go of him. Her emotions were tossing her thoughts about, but one or two came through plain as the bare walls around them lit by the Muggle fluorescent lighting.

“Sorry, Harry,” she said, then drew in her lips as if to taste them. “I should go.”

Harry stepped back and watched her duck into the green flames, mind fixed in a sort of shock from the vision he had caught from her.

Harry walked back from the train station, stride lengthening as he went, feeling his wounded body less and less. When he reached the door he did not feel empty for once; he felt overflowing, with white hot anger that made his shoulder muscles thicken and his arms warm.

In the main hall, Candide was bundling up a sleeping Arcadius and standing with the sort of care she used to avoid waking him. Snape stood beside one of the lamps, peering down at a letter he held. He looked up as Harry entered and came alert upon reading his face.

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Harry stepped right up to him and glared at him.

Candide said, "I think I'll . . . what's the matter?"

"I think Harry is upset with me," Snape said, folding the letter he held and setting it down.

Harry bit his lips, willing Snape to admit what Harry suspected based on the glimpsed memory from Elizabeth.

Candide asked, "Harry, what are you . . . what is Harry angry about?"

"Harry is upset that I spoke to Elizabeth about his emotional condition." Snape started to turn away, and Harry grabbed his arm, mostly because he could not express himself any other way. For several long seconds, Harry held on, even as Snape had raised his arm in an abbreviated move to shake him off. Finally, Harry let go.

"Severus, you did what?" Candide blurted.

Harry tipped his head, projecting, exactly. Snape failed to react, and Harry turned away to pace, waving his arms, and rubbing his hair back in frustration over being unable to rant. Betrayal was coring him out and more anger was pouring in behind to fill the space. He stopped dead when Winky appeared before him.

"Master Harry is being unhappy," she squeaked, sounding surprised.

Harry's muscles released. He stood there, feeling additionally miserable before turning away and walking to the back door, needing to get away.

Fog had gathered in the low spots of the back garden. Inside he could hear conversation, but it came out as a low mumble, incomprehensible. Harry crouched and cleared the ivy tangling the tarp over his bike, then methodically rolled the tarp to uncover the machine.

From the square of light outlining the doorway, Snape said, "Call one of your friends; you cannot go alone."

Harry let go of the bike cover and spun with the thought my friends are not here because they thought I would prefer an evening alone with Elizabeth! Snape's expression did not change, so Harry could not know if he understood. Harry folded the cover and set it aside.

"Harry," Snape said, voice taking on a threatening tone. "I will not allow you to take the bike out alone."

Emotions rolled through Harry, pummeling him in a way he was not accustomed to. He could not feel all of it at once there was so much of it, and all of it so conflicting with all the rest of it. Harry stepped back and Transformed into his Animagus form, as much to escape his emotion as to communicate his desperation for escape from the house. But two flaps of his wings left his great chest heaving with exhaustion. Harry released the Animagus form and laid his arms across the broad bike seat to balance while he recovered.

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Harry's strength returned with his anger. He stood straight and moved the Roar! knob to low and turned on the ignition.

Snape's voice came: "Why don't you go with him."

Harry turned and found Candide standing in the doorway.

"You just put Arcadius down; he won't be needing anything for a while. Go on. Harry cannot go alone." Snape waved his heaviest cloak from the entry way and hooked it around her.

Harry stared at the two of them, emotions chewing away at him like hordes of hungry creatures. Candide came over and took up one of the helmets.

"Go, on," Snape said. "If you are so determined. Keep it slow and on the ground, if you would, so you can stop if you have difficulty."

Harry slipped on the larger helmet and straddled the bike. Candide pulled hard on his shoulders getting on behind him. Harry stared at the glowing dials at the base of the handlebars, thinking that everything he was doing was wrong, but his anger, which had released him from the painful emptiness so thoroughly, urged him on.

Harry jumped on the starter, bit his bottom lip, and twisted the handle backwards to send them into the air.

Candide's cry of surprise reached his ears as they leveled off.

"Holy Merlin," she said. He could feel her leaning over to look down. "I thought broomsticks were too fast."

More sedately, Harry steered them toward the road and, between distantly spaced cars, landed them with a gentle squeak of the suspension. With a slow twist this time, he motored up to a normal speed for the road.

The bike's headlamp flashed over trees and posts, leaving them blind around sharp corners and over hills. Oncoming lights flashed in Harry's eyes as cars careened by the other way. The bike hungrily growled out of each turn. It was all a bit like navigating his new emotions.

Harry slowed down, firmly aware of the arms locked around him. He should not have left. He should have waited for a friend, or not gone at all. Snape had, yet again, placed his precious possession in Harry's care when he did not deserve such faith. Harry recognized that Snape had done that several times when Harry was losing himself, and that faith had been a life line. Thinking of that now, as stone fences flickered past on the right and tree branches reached into the headlamp light on the left, made Harry's chest hurt.

They came over a rise and the road flattened out leading to a traffic signal. A Muggle fast food restaurant stood like a beacon in the foggy night. Harry pulled into the car park.

Candide slid her helmet off and asked, "Need a break?"

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Harry nodded as he helped her off before following suit. His thighs complained about the bike seat.

“I was worried you were going to get on the motorway.”

Harry shook his head, ready to go home already. He took a few awkward steps, shaking out his legs.

Harry stopped to listen to the whine of the cars and realized how far they had come. She hooked her arm through his and said, “I assumed your mind was elsewhere. Let me get you dessert. Severus slipped me my handbag.” She pulled a miniature handbag from her pocket, gave it a toss in the air and caught the full sized handle as it fell. “First thing the Weasley twins have ever sold that I actually thought useful.”

Harry’s eyes watered in the bright light as they took a corner spot, far away from a family with three children carrying uplifted, half-eaten chips while playing tag around the table. The chairs and the table were bolted to the floor. Harry turned back and forth in his seat while Candide went to the counter. She returned with a chocolate sundae for Harry and a strawberry one for herself. The treats arrived under clear plastic domes. Candide removed hers and studied it as she dipped into the machine-precise spiraling ice cream.

“Are you very angry with Severus, or just temporarily miffed?”

Harry did not know, so he did not respond.

“You look so sad, I can barely stand it. Here, I have an idea.” She reached into her handbag and began setting things out on the table, one by one. “There are few situations that can’t be improved by a well-written letter.” She pulled out a blotter to go with a folded blank parchment, a bottle of ink, and a quill. Smoothing out the parchment she began, “Dear Elizabeth. . .”

Harry tapped his finger beside the greeting.

“Not what you want? Dearest? That’s coming on a bit strong . . . Well, all right. Dearest Elizabeth, I learned that Severus spoke with you this evening.” When Harry nodded eagerly, she wrote that out. “I admit that I disagree with his doing this.” Harry tapped his finger, but she wrote it out anyway, saying, “You have to keep it toned down, Harry. Never send a letter you couldn’t bear to read a year later. That’s my rule. Where were we? Oh yes. I disagree with his doing this and hope you . . . what . . . ignore him?”

She glanced down at the letter and back up at him and said, “I sincerely doubt there is any risk that she won’t visit again. She seems to like you too. Severus said he only told her he worried you were vulnerable and hoped that she would keep that in mind. He insisted to me that he did not tell her what to do.” A pair of pensioners sat down at the next table over, smiling in greeting while setting down their trays. “And not to be crass, but you are responsible for her schooling monies, so she cannot

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disappear from your life. Not that that's likely anyway."

Candide flipped the quill feather over her nose as she bent over the parchment in thought. "I'm not sure what else to say."

Harry shook his head. The cacophony of his emotions made it hard to think.

"How about: I had a lovely evening and hope you did as well. And despite Severus' concerns, I wish to get together again soon?" She studied Harry before saying, "It matters a bit whether you think Severus' concerns have any merit. Clearly Elizabeth thinks they do or we would not have reached this impasse."

Harry stared at her, trying to communicate with his gaze. Realizing that would not work, despite how well she had been speaking for him, he gestured for the quill. She fished a parchment scrap out of her handbag and Harry closed his eyes to make the letters come together. IM OK, he wrote.

"I think you are too. And you're still plenty young enough to bounce back if you aren't. Severus is feeling protective, I think." She added, "I hope you forgive him for handling that badly. He has insufficient practice at it, I'm certain."

Harry tapped the letter while nodding. Candide wrote out the rest, signed it for Harry with a surprisingly accurate copy of his own previous hand, and slipped it into an envelope. "The owls are at home," she said, half teasing.

Harry pushed his empty plastic container aside and stood up as he pocketed the letter.

"Rested?"

Harry nodded. He felt better focused now with the letter to hold on to.

"You don't look any happier," she said, voice wistful.

She sounded so pained, he pulled her into a half hug.

She squeezed his arms as he released her and said, "Everything is good now, you just need to learn to see it."

Harry nodded, mostly because he understood her point of view on the matter, not because he agreed.

The road grew impenetrably dark as the glow of the restaurant faded behind them. The low dips had gathered a rolling fog. Harry slowed as the headlamps increasingly lit the air rather than the roadway. They passed an abandoned petrol station Harry was certain he had not seen on the way out. This made him acutely aware of the hands wrapped around his middle. He had behaved childishly, he realized, by leaving like he had. Also, he seemed to be lost. A wave of guilt about forcing Snape's hand, yet again, made his chest cave in.

Harry slowed the bike to a crawl, swerving through the low white air to balance and looking for a spot to pull off the road. At the top of a rise there was wider gravel area off to the side opposite a driveway. The bike wheels crunched and popped as

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he pulled off and braked. Darkness came on from inside him and he bent over the handlebars.

One of the hands around his midsection shifted to pat him on the shoulder. Two deep breaths later, Harry's mind cleared. Purpose made everything else fade. He pushed upright and pulled out his wand to use a Four Point Spell. But knowing north was slightly behind him and to the right did not help much. Snape always insisted Harry's true skills lied with ignoring the approved spells. Point me HOME, Harry incanted silently, forcing the words to arrange in his mind clear enough to write them down if he had need to.

His wand buzzed and turned, pointing off to the left. Feeling much better, Harry pocketed his wand, pulled the hands around his middle tighter and held them there with one hand while twisting the bike into the air with the other.

Airborne, home was closer than expected. Harry let the bike settle into the back garden, toed the kickstand down, and let the great bike rock to rest on it. Before Harry could twist to reach a hand back to help Candide off, Snape was there.

"A shorter journey than I feared you would try," he said.

Harry tugged off his helmet, put both away, and waved the tarp back over the bike. He turned to Snape waiting in the doorway, touched his lips and his heart, then ducked by him, still angry enough to not meet his gaze.

In his room, Harry picked up the gently swirling monitor and weighed it in his hand, imagining throwing it through the window. He tossed it in the bottom of the wardrobe instead and dropped his cloak and robe and jeans and shoes on top of it. Satisfied with that, his eyes fell on Rita Skeeter's camera, which hung on a hook against the back wall of the wardrobe. Harry grabbed that out and tossed it in the small trunk he had packed for tomorrow.

When a knock sounded on the bedroom door and it opened, Harry took the opportunity to reorganize his packing, ignoring the figure in the doorway.

"Interesting to see you inherited your temper from your father, not from any other source."

Harry paused with his hand on his socks. That comment almost got to him. But he let it slide by, finished neatly repacking, and closed the lid and latched it. He stood straight, feeling strong enough to let anything slide by.

"Despite your ignoring me, I sense you are feeling better. Which is also interesting. I am glad to see you still plan to travel tomorrow. That was all I wished to verify. Good night, Harry."

The door shut with a click. Harry stared at the swirled grain of the door and wondered at how stubbornly he was behaving. He was indeed reluctant to part company with his anger, given how much better it made him feel. He let it carry him

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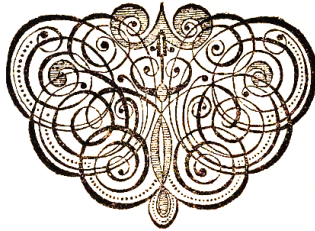
into sleep, even, despite a niggling sense that it was a childish thing to do.

Harry awoke with a gasp and rolled awkwardly to fumble for the lamp before remembering his wand was under his pillow and would be an easier way to bring up the flame. The nightmare's emotion trailed off, and he let go of the bedcovers. Kali fluttered in her cage before folding her wings and bedding down again.

Harry bit his lips and thought over the dream. In it, his mother had been crying for him, yelling at his father when he tried to comfort her. The memory of the dream trickled down to nothing, leaving Harry staring at the wall, feeling dizzy. No one came to see what was in his dream; he had buried the monitor well enough to prevent that, apparently. Funny, he realized now he had not actually expected that tossing it in the wardrobe would keep it from working and he felt disappointed.

Harry rubbed his eyes. He was still behaving childishly, which badly needed to stop. He was even having dreams about his parents missing him, which was also not a good sign. As horrific as it seemed, he worried that Snape was dead right. Patience, Harry said to himself. Soon enough he would be healed and he would have this maze in his head mapped out. Then he would take care of all the things he damaged. But first, patience.

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Harry rubbed his tired eyes and wedged his shoulder into the corner between the train seat and the window. Beyond the scratched glass, the trees and rooftops of Shrewsthorpe stood black against the steel grey morning sky. Candide wedged the bassinet between the seat and the stacked trunks. Arcadius had not stirred even an inch throughout their hurried departure.

The train lurched with a clang and began rolling. They picked up speed and Hogsmeade slid out of sight. Snape leaned back and watched Harry from the seat opposite.

“How are you feeling this morning?” he asked. Despite Harry ignoring him through their quick breakfast, he spoke with a gentle tone. “You don’t appear to have slept well.”

“It is quite early,” Candide pointed out.

Harry stared out at the forest rushing past, reviewing his strange dream. Snape leaned forward and tilted his head. It was then that Harry noticed his reflection in the window looked straight at his guardian.

“You had a nightmare?” Snape asked, diligently sticking with an amiable tone. “It’s the first since you eradicated Voldemort, is it not?”

Harry nodded faintly, switching back and forth between peering at the looming forest and peering at Snape.

“Do you wish to discuss it?”

Harry glared at him disbelievingly.

Snape sat back and calmly said, “If you change your mind, let me know.”

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Candide took a deep breath and glanced between them. She bent down for a magazine that had been stuffed down beside the sleeping baby and sat back with it, sighing, "It's going to be a long train ride."



In the Ministry Atrium a stage was being assembled. Rodgers came out to meet them at the reception desk and said, "The London Regionals are tomorrow," in answer to their curious glances at the bunting.

"Entering again, are you?" Snape asked with a touch of a sneer.

"No, are you?"

"Certainly not."

"Had enough, eh?"

"And you haven't?"

They looked away from each other and Rodgers gestured for Harry to follow him. "Are you all coming along? I did expect to speak with Harry, only."

"We'll go up to do some shopping on Diagon Alley," Candide said.

"Will we?" Snape asked.

"Or Knockturn, for Severus, of course," Candide said.

"I see you didn't marry a fool," Rodgers said to Snape. "I'll be finished with Harry in an hour or so."

Despite the other apprentices lunching with Harry just two days before, they greeted him as if they had not seen him in a year, which bolstered him nicely for facing their trainer.

"Down here, Potter, whenever your fan club is finished with you. They have one more round of drills before they can go home." He closed the training room door and led the way to the break room. Tonks slid in behind them and with a businesslike manner, set out a blank parchment and quill atop a stack of files.

"First off," Rodgers said, "Before we get into the official things, I need to know what is going on between you."

"Nothing," Tonks replied easily. "We're good."

Harry was greatly relieved to hear her amiable tone. He nodded in agreement.

"Really?" Rodgers asked, glancing back and forth between them, hands on hips as if this were an interrogation. "It is so not typical of either of you to make my life easier." He waited, as if to verify that they would not change their minds. "Well, that's something. Probably won't stop Harry the Hero from charging off after you, I'm betting, but I'll take it. Let's get down to business."

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Rodgers bent to page through a stack of random notes. Harry reached under the table to squeeze Tonks' hand then let it go again. She glanced up in surprise and gave him a scrunched smile, one with a bit of Metamorph behind it because her eyebrows got shaggy for a second.

On the second time through his pile, Rodgers pulled out one exceptionally messy note, and turned it sideways, then upside down. Behind him, the coin tin on the snack cart hovered and rattled. Without looking, he reached behind him to smack it back down and held it there until it quieted. Taking up a quill, he began to crowd the parchment before him with even more notes.

Rodgers said, "I'm informed by a reliable source that we previously had not just you, Harry James Potter, but Lord Voldemort as well, resident in our Apprenticeship program."

Harry looked down at his interlocked hands and nodded. He forced himself to look up again.

Tonks said, "Harry's had something of Voldemort since the attack when he was a child."

"So, I was told as well. That's reassuring." He paged forward again and pulled out a torn sheet of newspaper and held it up for examination. "I learned more about you from one newspaper article than I ever did having you here in training. I find that alarming."

Harry gestured for a quill and parchment and because he dearly wanted to get in a poke at his trainer, sweated out writing IM no longer plotting UR death.

Rodgers tapped his fist to his lips and said, "Holy Merlin. How long it took you to write that is actually worse than the contents of the note." He continued to rap himself on the mustache with his knuckles while he stared at Harry. "Arthur tells me we're getting you back. Well."

"His magic is fine," Tonks said.

"That's something."

"He's injured," Tonks pointed out.

"I know that. That's not in question. We have a new class starting in a few months, probably taking in another new apprentice, two if we can find that many. If we make Harry repeat second year, we might make it without too much disruption."

Harry nodded, accepting that.

"That's all right with you? Well, that's the worst I can threaten you with given that I can't kick you out."

Harry was relieved, actually. He could catch up for certain in that case.

"I was hoping to find out in detail what you've been up to, but I see that's not going to happen. Any time before my retirement." He slid Harry's note back to him,

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dropped his quill and sat with his arms crossed high, which made his chest appear far broader. “Maybe I’ll just cut to the chase in that case. Should I be arresting you right now for anything you were doing?”

Harry thought about that, eyes glancing around the room as he unwound his memories.

“He was mostly harassing Durumulna, remember?” Tonks said.

Harry wished she would stay silent, he could hear the guilt in her voice and expected that Rodgers would hear it eventually too. Mostly to distract his trainer, Harry pulled the note close and scratched out his previous message. He wrote *negel* then stopped, stymied by the word. He was thinking of the time he almost allowed Tridant to die, rather than getting him help. Another near miss he was grateful did not go as badly as he had intended. The room started to feel closed in.

“Negligence?” Rodgers guessed. At Harry’s nod, he said, “We could all be in for that. Anything else?”

Harry wondered if Rodgers would feel as sanguine if Harry could manage to add homicide after *negel*. He thought some more. Placing curses on people, even lightning bolt shaped ones, was not technically illegal. Not that he was aware of. Not if the person knew about it. He had failed to inform the Ministry that he knew where McCurdy, the kidnap victim was, but McCurdy had not wanted anyone to know.

Harry had tried to coerce Ursie, had used dark magic to torment him. What would the charges be for that? Harry could think of about seven without much effort. Taking a deep breath, determined not to have an attack, Harry concentrated hard and wrote *mishand prizner*.

Rodgers turned the note to better read the crooked writing. “Someone from Durumulna?” At Harry’s nod, he asked, “You’re looking for a medal?”

“Reggie,” Tonks said.

Rodgers pushed the note back to Harry and hooked his arm on a nearby empty chair. “It wasn’t him anyway. Perfect Potter here would never do that. I’d be more worried that he’d decide the bloke he was bringing in wasn’t exactly a Grindelwald-level threat and would stop to get him a pint on the way to the dungeon. That’s what I’d be worried about.”

He used his hand to tip the empty chair beside him up on two legs. “So, Potter, would you arrest you?”

Harry touched his lips then his heart. The room did not feel very steady; he was just barely breathing and what little breath he pulled in felt sandy in his throat.

“What’s that mean?”

“He’s saying he’s sorry,” Tonks supplied.

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“Well, that’s fine. We’re debriefing the wrong wizard. I hear the right wizard is dead. I was told that, but now I really do believe it.” Rodgers stood up. “He says he’s sorry. Potter, you’re going to be more sorry you can’t read and write, I think.”

The door closed behind Rodgers and Harry fingered the scrap with his crude messages on it.

“It’s going to be fine, Harry,” Tonks said.

Harry looked up at her, trying to figure her out.

“I know that look,” she muttered. “I do miss being with you, already, but I always botch this part of things, and I’m not going to this time. I’d much rather keep you on as a good friend than let this get messy. Especially since we’ll be working together. I hope we will, anyway.”

Harry took her hand again, glad he did not have to find any words.

“Hey, come with me. I have a boatload of work, but this will be quick.”

Tonks led him down to the Ministry Dungeon. As they arrived at the guard desk, Horace stood up so quickly, he nearly knocked his desk over.

“Ya need tah get in somewheres?” Horace began to blush, Harry was sure of it.

“Can I just take the key?”

Harry now noticed that Tonks appeared broader in the shoulders than normal, and her cloak fabric grew coarser. He glanced at Horace and back at Tonks.

Horace tapped his feet as he located the right key on his ring and with a spell, pulled it free and held it out.

“Thanks, Horace. Be back with it in a flick of a newt’s tail.”

After they turned the corner in the corridor, Harry tapped her shoulder and pointed back at the entrance while wagging his eyebrows.

“What?”

Harry repeated the gesture.

“Cor, Harry, don’t be silly.” She had the key in the lock of Percy’s cell door, so Harry let it drop.

Percy froze, mid-crossing of his arms, when Harry stepped into the cell. He instead pressed his bony body flat against the wall and braced his hands on the bench, eyes red and ringed with fatigue.

“Greetings,” Tonks said. “I brought you a visitor.”

“What are you doing here?” Percy snapped, eyes roving fitfully between and over the two of them. “I want my solicitor.”

“This is a friendly visit, Percy,” Tonks cooed. “Just a chat.” She turned to Harry and gave him a wink. She dropped her voice and added, “We know more about your situation than your solicitor, anyhow, Percy Weasley . . .”

“Don’t call me that. That’s not my name anymore.”

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Harry gave Tonks a raised brow in question.

“He insisted on being officially listed by an ancestral name. But he doesn’t even deserve the name ”Black“ really. It would imply you stood for something, Percy.”

Percy turned his chin up and away, but his eyes flicked back to Harry.

Tonks put her foot up on the bench and rested her arm on her knee. “You know what your trouble is? You can’t turn evidence to get a lower sentence. Harry already caught anyone you could help us get.”

“I can take him down,” Percy sneered, glancing to indicate Harry behind her. “Your little hero toy there.” His lips trembled as he spoke.

“No, you can’t, actually,” Tonks said soothingly. “Your solicitor hasn’t been in this week, has he?” She glanced back at Harry with a grin. “Didn’t think so. Maybe I should just leave you alone with Harry like he wants me to . . . unless you give us something useful.”

Percy’s sneered through vibrating lips, “Your friends have already been down here with the potions. You think I have anything left to tell them?”

“But, with the potion you only have to tell them what they ask. For example, I noticed some omissions in your transcripts, myself. I assume there are others.” She leaned close to tug on a strand of Percy’s hair as she talked.

She let her foot slip to the floor and backed up. “It’s going to be a long stay in prison, Percy.”

Percy swallowed hard as she backed up to the door. “He’s all yours, Harry. I’ll catch you upstairs-”

Percy shook his head. “I really don’t know anything about the Boss. I never really met him. Just my dad pretending . . .” His voice grew more frantic.

Harry turned to look at Tonks waiting by the door. He had little heart for this game.

“You think he’s being honest?” Tonks asked.

Percy sat hunched with his shoulders aimed forward and his neck retracted, eyes brimming with wariness. Harry could remember enjoying this, but now his stomach turned sourly. He could not even pretend. Percy would have a miserable time in prison; Harry knew that well enough.

Despite his thoughts, Harry’s grim stare further agitated Percy, who rocked his feet and gripped the bench harder.

“Look, I . . . Ma Dame might have mentioned a few things. Really, Tonks, don’t go . . . just yet.”

“Want me to stay, Harry?” Tonks asked.

Harry paused for effect, then nodded.

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Percy said, “Look, I can tell you where the Boss got that bus of his. It was made by the brother of the founder of the company that did the magical mods on the Knight Bus. He moved to Morocco from Spain about five years ago to get away from the heat. It sounded like that was where the Boss would retreat to as well, if need be.” He pushed his shoulders back. “That’s all I can think of right now.”

Tonks stared at Percy. “Hm.”

Harry tapped her on the arm and tilted his head at the door.

“Done with him already? Don’t want to knock him around a bit after what he did? He’s tried to maim, if not kill you, a few times . . .”

Harry shook his head and went to the door. From the corridor outside, Harry stared at Percy’s confused expression until Tonks closed the door on it.

Tonks stood with her back to the door and looked him over. Her mouth relaxed into a smile and she tugged on his arm playfully. “Good to have you back, Harry. Not as much fun . . . mind you. But good.”

With a dull thud, Tonks dropped the key on Horace’s desk. Horace grunted as he tried with his oversized hands to slip it back on his massive key ring. He kept sneaking glances at Tonks as he worked at it.

“Thanks, Horace.”

The key fell back to the desk. Horace put his hand over it and glanced up at Tonks with a stressed expression. Harry remained there beside the desk to force Tonks to turn around and come back.

“What is it?”

Harry waited.

“Er, ya wanna go fer a drink sometime?”

“You’re asking me?” Tonks blurted.

“Well . . . er.” Horace glanced at Harry with an uncomfortable expression. “Er . . . yeah.”

“Oh. I guess we could.” She turned to Harry and tilting her head humorously, said, “I seem to be available.”

Tonks set a rapid pace on the way to the Atrium. “Really, Harry, he’s hardly my type.” And a moment later: “I can’t believe you managed to set me up. You can’t even talk.” She took his arm as they came out through the gate. “Sorry. But really . . . Horace?”

Tonks steered him over to Snape, who waited beside the temporary duelling platform. “Here he is. I’ll see you tomorrow, I expect. Goodbye, Harry.”



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The Burrow was a sea of redheads and loud chatter. Their arrival went unnoticed for nearly a minute, until Ron forced his way over and handed them each a cigar, even stuffing one in beside Arcadius' blanket.

Mrs. Weasley sat at the long dining room table, baby in arms. "I'll give Molly up when I'm good and ready. I've waited long enough for her as it is."

Charlie hunched at her elbow making little faces at the bundle.

Candide asked in Harry's ear, "Where's the new mother?" When Harry glanced around and shrugged, she added, "Sleeping if she's smart. No one would hear a baby crying in here in a million years. Might as well take advantage."

Harry split off to wave hello to the people he knew. Two figures in purple velvet smoking jackets that cycled between hoary then plush in a tiger pattern, leapt into Harry's path.

"Say Harry . . ." one of the twins began.

"We were just wondering . . ."

"My brother and I . . ."

"Since you aren't technically with the Ministry at the moment."

"We were wondering . . . no, you go ahead . . ." The one on the left gestured for the one on the right.

"We were wondering if you'll be our spokeswizard."

"Well, our anti-spokeswizard, actually . . ."

"For this new line of sweets we have."

"The sweets shut people up. You know, like the gabbing bloke on the train beside you."

"Or the mother in law." He glanced over his shoulder to check where Mrs. Weasley was.

Ginny swept through, taking Harry away by the arm. "I sense, somehow, you haven't tested them on yourselves . . ."

In a relatively quiet corner, she asked, "Was the article okay?" When he hesitated, she asked, "Did you read it? Or . . ." Her face grew pained. "Have someone read it to you?"

Harry shook his head.

"I don't know why I was so worried," she said, propping a hand on her hip.

Aaron slipped up behind her and put his hands on her arms. "I thought it best to see what your secret conversation was about."

Ginny poked him in the ribs. "It's a one way conversation, Mr. Jealous."

"True. That just makes Harry more dangerous. He never comes across as self-involved." Aaron grinned, but his eyes flicked up and down Harry's new, Candide purchased, outfit—a pleated shirt and well-fitted swallowtail coat.

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The Burrow grew increasingly crowded and too loud to talk at all. The Floo flared green and Hermione stepped out of it. Bill jumped up, stumbled twice over people sitting on the floor, and greeted her with a cigar which he insisted on lighting for her before she stepped away.

Hermione held the smoldering cigar aside as she came upon Snape. "I guess it's not an exploding one as expected," she said loudly.

Snape made a gesture with his head that they should go outside.

Middle-aged redheads, some wearing foreign robes and smoking pipes or cigars, had gathered outside the door in the misting rain. They turned to peer curiously at Harry.

Snape said to Hermione, "I am wondering if you would do me a favor. Are you are going to be in town for the evening?" She nodded and he went on. "I would appreciate it if you would take Harry to a film."

Harry pulled his head back in surprise at the same time Hermione said, "A what?"

"A film. One of those Muggle large moving picture things. I expect you are familiar with them."

"Yes, of course."

Snape went on, "I understand they come in a range of topics and genres. Please choose the sappiest one you can."

Hermione hesitated. "All . . . right."

"I have a theory about Harry. He is on much better footing today than previously—"

"I noticed that, just looking at him now," Hermione said, reaching out to squeeze Harry's wrist.

Snape said, "I believe it would speed his recovery to experience a full array of strong emotion. Since I cannot sit him down with a book very easily, nor is it especially convenient to bring in a troupe of actors, this seems the best fall back option."

Hermione brightened. "Certainly. That sounds like rather a lot of fun. Okay, Harry?"

Harry nodded, seeing nothing for it.

The door to the house opened and the rumble of conversation and clattering dinnerware grew louder. Snape bent toward her to say, "Thank you. I think we will be retreating now back to the Cauldron. Harry can remain with you. Please return him when you are done with him, if you would."



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Harry watched the Muggles streaming by on the pavement outside the window of the coffee shop as Hermione fetched their orders. When she returned she gave him that same over-done gaze he had been getting from Snape too often, although with Hermione, it looked like her eyes were getting moist as well.

“Mocha for you, and skim with cinnamon for me. We have half an hour.”

Harry pulled the plastic top off his paper cup and looked into it. It sent a wave of steam into his face so he pushed it aside to let it cool. Hermione held her cup in both hands and peered at him, expression unwavering. He wanted to tell her to stop it, but he would have to write it down and that seemed tedious.

The bell on the door chimed as a group of black clad teens came in.

“You don’t know how happy I am, Harry,” Hermione said. She exhaled audibly through her nose as if relieved all over again.

At Harry’s faint sigh, she shook her head. “You don’t know how desperate we were getting,” she argued as if he had disagreed.

Harry glanced side to side but no one was in earshot. If his friend needed to talk this out, then the least he could do was listen. He put his hand on her wrist to encourage her to go on.

“The things you said to Dumbledore though. That maybe was deserved. Do you really think that was how he defeated Grindelwald?” Fortunately, she did not wait for an answer. “Love’s not a weakness, though, Harry.”

No, of course not, Harry thought, but he wasn’t sure if nodding or shaking his head would best convey that. He was remembering Snape on his knees telling him something similar and it made him feel unwell, so he sipped his milky coffee drink to cover.

Hermione was staring at the brass machinery on the counter as she said, “We were in a real bind, Harry. I know it wasn’t your fault. I don’t mean to imply that. But I hated the planning I was having to do.” She appeared exceedingly saddened, making Harry swallow hard. “We had no options.” Her head shook slowly, gaze increasingly far away. “Dumbledore said if one of the Horcruxes had been left intact, we had a decent chance, but they were all gone. I don’t know if he meant we could transfer Voldemort into it, or exactly what. But it didn’t matter, since it wasn’t actually an option.”

Her gaze finally fixed on him. “Is talking about this bothering you?”

Harry shook his head, wanting to help her. If he focused on her needs, the tendrils of distress trying to grip his chest slipped away instead of taking hold.

“This could bring on an attack, though. We shouldn’t be talking about this.”

We? Harry thought as she tipped a dose of sugar into her drink and stirred it.

“Want some?”

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Harry's drink was already sweet enough. He shook his head. Hermione slipped her arm free and gripped Harry's hand, sipping thoughtfully from the cup in her other hand.

"But everything's good now. Sorry if I'm slow getting that through my thick skull."

A Muggle couple sat down beside them, identically crossing their legs and sipping immediately from their simmering hot drinks while discussing the film they had just seen, one involving a boy who is haunted by ghosts. Hermione did not release Harry's hand and their silent vigil eventually attracted the attention of the other couple, who slowed their chatter long enough to glance over and shrug at each other.

Everyone went about their lives, unaware, Harry considered. The world went on. This world went on, that is to say.



"How was it?" Snape asked when Hermione and Harry arrived in their room at the Leaky Cauldron. It was late, and the Inn's corridors were quiet enough to hear the scuffle of mice.

Harry flinched slightly at memories of giant images and blaring voices of people having a bad time emotionally connecting with one another, mostly through pig-headedness. He felt frustrated, despite the happy ending.

"It was good." Hermione hooked an arm through Harry's and walked him fully into the room. "Here he is. Delivered as promised."

Snape stopped before Harry to consider him. His mouth relaxed as he said, "You do not appear to have enjoyed yourself, I'll admit."

"He wanted to see the film where things blew up and Muggles shot each other with guns. But I didn't think that the best idea."

Harry sighed then gave Snape a sheepish shrug.

Snape used a reassuring tone as he said, "Maybe next time."

Hermione asked, "Speaking of blowing things up, are you going to the tournament tomorrow? Minerva seemed to think I should take the weekend off. Even though I really should prepare end of term examinations, which are only five weeks away."

Harry turned curiously to Snape and glared challengingly at him until he said, "My duties are covered, albeit by someone depressingly less strict than myself. I was, actually, considering returning a few days a week, to try and salvage some of the term."

"Remus does all right," Hermione insisted, smiling. "I think it's actually a good sign that most of the Slytherins think it is nifty rather than offensive that he's a

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werewolf. I think they like that proper people don't like him." She looked to Harry. "Want to go together to the tournament tomorrow? I can stop by and get you. Both the twins are in it, as well as Neville. Ginny was still deciding whether to sign up late."

Harry nodded eagerly. The Minister would probably be happy to have him there for what would be the opening ceremonies.

"We'll all join you, I think," Candide said, coming in from the hallway carrying a sleeping Arcadius. "He was a bit riled up from traveling, but a walk put him right out." She closed the door so it barely made a click. "It's late." She put Arcadius in his basket and whispered, "What a long day."

Hermione said, "I'll let you get to sleep. See you tomorrow, Harry."

When she was gone, Candide said, "I really didn't intend to chase her out. But it is late."

Harry picked up his trunk and ducked to get to the second bed in an odd-shaped alcove. He had not realized from staying here as a child how very low the ceilings and especially the arches were.

"Did you bring everything you needed?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded, glad the side table did not hold the monitor.

"Do you want me to put it out? I found it in your wardrobe."

Harry rapidly shook his head.

"Yes, well, I expect you'll wake us if you have difficulty." Snape ducked to walk back to the main part of the suite, but turned. "No silencing spells," he said, accenting his command with a pointed finger.



"How was the film?" Vineet asked, when Hermione tried to sneak in without disturbing him.

Hermione waved the lamp up. "It was good, but Harry didn't enjoy it much. I don't think I chose well. Professor Snape insisted it be a sappy one." She laughed. "Can you imagine?"

Vineet tucked his dressing gown around himself as he stood from the couch. "He must have had his reasons."

Hermione put her handbag down and stepped over to him where they leaned together. Vineet put one hand on her head and the other on her back and they remained fixed that way, hearing each other breathing.

Into the stillness of the apartment, Hermione said, "I can't believe things are all straight now. I keep thinking I need to do something impossible. But I don't. I just

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have to write end of year examinations for the first time.” She laughed lightly, but it caught in her throat like a half cry. Vineet tightened his arms around her.

“I still can’t believe what you did.” Hermione pushed back to stare at him. The one lit lamp on the table by the door, despite the mirror behind it, did not cast much light in the center of the room.

“I had my reasons.”

“You never do anything without a good reason,” she said tiredly. “That’s one of the things I like about you.”

“I owe much to Harry. I expected that you understood that.”

She let go of him and walked toward the bedroom, waving lamps up ahead of her and dousing those behind. “We all owe much to Harry. But there is a limit, somehow.”

Vineet stepped ahead of her when she slowed down. Facing her, he said, “You were inquiring into techniques to destroy him.”

Hermione closed her eyes and slowly lowered her wand rather than use it on the bedside lamp. She bit her upper lip and her face crumpled. “I know. Never mind. I’m sorry I brought it up. You win.”

Vineet did not let her step around him. He gently took her shoulders and walked her back to where she had stopped when she came in the room. “It is not never-mindable. You are disappointed in me. Or is that it? I wish to know.”

“I’m not disappointed in you. I am surprised by you.”

“That is a bad thing?”

“I needed predictability from you. And I think I suddenly didn’t have that.” She shook her head. “I haven’t actually worked it out yet.”

“I wish to do so now, then.”

She dipped her head and started to walk by him again, but stopped. “We have lots of things to work out, Vishnu. Lots of things.”

He gently walked her back to the same spot again. They looked at each other. Vineet finally said, “Do you wish me to divorce Nandi?”

Hermione did not react. She considered him at length before replying, “If you are willing to take a Dark Mark, then yes, I do.” After another long gap, she added, “I know you feel it is beneath you. I understand that. Or I did understand that. But this was such an extreme thing to do and so I don’t really understand anymore. I suppose. I promised myself I wouldn’t do this. But everything seems different now. I’m sorry for pushing you. But actually, I’m not, really.”

She pressed her lips tight between her teeth while he considered this.

Vineet said, “The Mark. Harry. It all worked out in the end.”

“And why won’t this?” Hermione took a deep breath.

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“I don’t know?”

“Is that a question?” Hermione asked, then chuckled painfully. “Maybe we should discuss this when we aren’t so tired.”

“I am not at all tired.”

“Well, I am. Spending the evening with Harry left me knackered.”

“This is so? Harry is no trouble, now.”

She opened the wardrobe and stopped mid-reach for her dressing gown, hanging her fingertips on the edge of the shelf. “I don’t know why it was so wearing. It’s me, really. He’s fine, a little different, but fine. I’m the one who’s still having difficulty. I can’t move on, I guess.”

He came up behind her and wrapped her up in his arms. “You are wishing to move on?”

“If that’s not a proposal of some kind, I’m going to kick you on the shin.”

He leaned closer and said into her ear. “Threats of Muggle violence while you are holding a wand. This is quite serious.”

“You’ve been spending too much time around Aaron, I see.” Hermione laughed breathily and turned around in his arms. “I just can’t believe what you did. I’m still having a hard time coming to grips with it.”

“I fail to know why. I have been Harry’s servant since coming here seeking my fate. This one action made little difference for that reason. You, on the other hand, have been by his side for many years.”

She shook her head. “I couldn’t have done that if he had asked it of me.” She shuddered and closed her eyes. “It terrifies me to imagine he might have. I kept expecting him to test me. He was suspicious of me; I could tell. Thank Merlin he didn’t come after me with that. I don’t know what would have happened. I don’t know where you got the guts to accept a Mark. There wasn’t much of Harry left in there, as far as I could tell.”

Vineet put his hands on her shoulders. “Whereas you were contemplating ways of killing him, if necessary. I could never have done that.”

“I couldn’t have actually done the deed. But there didn’t seem to be any other way. I didn’t want to be left with no options if it came to that.” Her eyes stared off into the distance, beyond his shoulder at the brightly colored flowing curtains framing the windows. Her voice fell away as she said, “The Harry I remembered would not have wanted to become that . . . thing.”

Vineet’s voice grew quiet as well. “Even so, I could not even have researched it. It required great strength for you to even do this.”

“Well, it’s all better now,” she said, eyes pooling.

“You are needing to admit this often.”

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She sniffled. "I keep forgetting. I care a lot for Harry, and have spent nine years straight worrying about him."

She took down her nightdress and dressing gown and slipped out of his arms to walk to the bed.

"That is a long time," Vineet said, standing nearby while she changed.

"You aren't jealous of Harry, are you?" she asked, voice muffled from pulling her head through her nightdress. "Harry and I have never had anything between us."

Vineet waited until she had put her dressing gown on as well and tied it. "I am jealous of the time he had with you that I can never share in."

She sniffled again. "We were just kids."

"It was many years. I will never get to know those years."

She put her wand on the side table and let her arms drop to her sides. "We made the best of it, but it was mostly fear and danger. Everything was so much bigger than us. We were very lucky most of the time and that never made me feel any better about the future. Maybe that's why it's so hard to let go of the worry. I've held it so long."

Vineet stepped close again. "Perhaps I should teach you meditation. It can be good for solving this."

"Hm. Can you do that? I'd like that."

"It can help you forget everything that concerns you."

"Not everything . . ."

He pushed her hair back from her neck and cupped the back of her neck. "I will think about this other thing. Your point about Marks is well taken."

"It just seems to matter more now. I guess I am moving on. Now that Harry is better, I have to pay some attention to my life now."

"Meditation is definitely in order," he said gravely. "I can start by teaching you a simple method now if you want." When she nodded, he went on. "It is simple. You lie on your back with your palms turned upward and your eyes closed, and you do nothing while I make you forget everything that concerns you . . ."



Harry woke from a confused dream to stare at his low alcove ceiling, which for a panicked series of gasps, resembled a dungeon cell. He had been terrified in the dream, certain someone was coming to hurt him and his panicked helplessness was making his limbs jerk. Harry rubbed his arms and straightened the ragged quilts over himself. This mundane task made his throbbing heart slow enough so he could no longer feel it in his neck.

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A dark figure slipped into the even darker arched opening and waited there.

Harry waved him away, but it was probably too dark to see it because the figure slipped closer and the worn springs of the bed tilted precariously. The bedside lamp lit. Glittering cracks covered the shade, the end result of many unskilled repairs.

Harry waited, but Snape did not speak, merely sat in the lamplight, thinking, every so often studying Harry's face.

Harry gave him a light push on the arm, telling him to go. Snape's brow twitched with a teasing doubtfulness. He reached for the lamp, but pulled his hand back before touching the knob. He stroked Harry's arm instead, then gripped it. His dark gaze grew earnest and Harry had a fleeting impression of himself, led into the main hall by the Irish Garda. Snape's knuckles just touched Harry's chin before he turned the lamp down and the bed sprung level again.

Harry heard him whisper, "There is nothing you cannot make right . . ." before he departed with a soft shuffle of heavy fabric.



The Atrium buzzed with bright conversation as Harry, satchel over his shoulder, led the way through the clumps of eager early arrivals. Snape trailed behind, Hermione chatting with him about a problem student. When Harry turned back to wait for them, he found Snape scanning the crowd with a narrow gaze. Candide had gone to a luncheon at the Burrow, a luncheon Harry expected Molly had planned in a kind of defiance to the dueling competition.

Behind the stage, Harry found Belinda conferring with the rest of Bones' staff. Her eyes tracked his approach, and the others turned to see what had distracted her.

Snape and Hermione caught up to Harry just as he stepped up to the group. The one staffer who did not pull his or her notes up like a shield, said, "The Minister was hoping you'd make an appearance. She's in her office. Shall I show you up?"

"We can find our way, if that's all right?"

"I should probably show you." The rail-thin man handed his things to the befuddled staffer beside him and gave Hermione a challenging glance.

"I'll go find our friends, Harry," she said, "and meet up with you later."

Bones sat at her desk and a wizard in flashy yellow robes stood behind her, arms raised. He finished a complicated spell with his wand and held up a mirror for her to take hold of.

"No, no, more like the first," Bones complained.

More wand waving shoved her hair around into a new configuration.

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“Hm. That’s a bit too great aunt and not enough friendly neighbor. Oh, Mr. Potter.” He chair creaked as she rocked forward.

The hairdresser dropped his wand on the desk in surprise, then gathered it and his combs up in a frantic sweep.

“Really, Marcus, it’s not worth the theatrics.” Bones pushed to her feet and came around the desk. “I can’t keep track of who you are from week to week, Mr. Potter, I’ll confess. Just you this week, I’m told.”

Harry stared at her.

“In politics, no one is who they seem. While you were an outsider, you were delivering us our enemies, but in reality you were probably our biggest threat.” She waved her arm tiredly. “It happens. We dodged a serious situation without even knowing it had developed and now all is well. The key thing is where are we going from here?” She walked back to her chair and gestured for Marcus to try again. “Have a seat and spot of tea until game time, won’t you?” she said to the two of them.

Harry tapped Snape on the arm while projecting Belinda at him. Snape shook his head. Harry huffed through his nose and slouched a little in his chair.

Minutes into their snacks, a rap came on the door and Fudge shuffled into the room. He stopped upon seeing Harry and turned an unnatural color while his face appeared to inflate.

“Cornelius is judging the London Regional for us. Unless he has taken ill . . . ?”

Fudge cleared his throat. “No. No, I’m perfectly fine,” he snipped. “Any last minute instructions, or I’ll be on my way. I’m a busy man, you know. Very busy.”

“Keep it clean, that’s all I ask. I don’t want the competition sullied any more than dueling itself makes it.”

Fudge stalked out. Snape sat pinching his lips to hold back a grin. Harry hit him lightly on the arm again, wondering if he were okay.

“Oh, that’s perfect, Marcus.” Bones handed over the mirror and sat forward with her hair as it usually was. “Shall we go down and talk to the press a bit?”

Harry jumped and checked for his satchel, which was beside the leg of his chair.

Back in the Atrium, a handful of reporters stood off the back corner of the platform, leaning inward as if silently conferring while holding their smoldering cigarettes and pipes out to the side. As they approached, Skeeter flicked her cigarette away and it vanished before hitting the floor.

Harry stopped a few feet short of them and took the camera out of his satchel and held it up to capture the group of them standing there.

“Nice camera, Harry,” Ginny said, joining them. She had her notepad out and ready. “Comments on the last Wizengamot statement, Madame Bones?” she asked.

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“Don’t get annoying so early in your young career, my dear,” Bones said with a smile. “We’re having a festival here today.”

Harry took a picture of the two of them, catching Ginny pursing her lips. Harry advanced the film again and the brass dial read 19. He put it back in his satchel, taking his time setting it carefully within and latching the flap, because Skeeter was eyeing his movements.

After the press got half answers from the Minister on various questions, Harry was released to wander. The Atrium had filled up. Harry took a picture of the crowd. The way all the witches and wizards nearby were staring at him, it resembled a group picture.

“Hallo, Harry,” a familiar voice said. Neville approached with Hermione beside him. “Nice camera.”

Harry nodded in agreement and took a picture of Neville, Hermione and Ginny.

Ginny said, “I recognize that camera. It’s one of the nicest ones ever owned by the paper. Going to give it back?”

Harry shrugged and then understood Snape’s half smile. He felt strangely invulnerable. He had no will for tormenting Percy, but Skeeter was an entirely different matter. Skeeter was, in fact, following him around the Atrium as he and his friends made their way through the crowd, snapping photographs with others they knew.

Near the hearths Harry stopped to watch a trim figure in black who was briskly brushing off his clothes before offering a hand to Pansy as she pushed a pram out of the Floo. Harry wondered if they had not read the instruction booklet from the Midwives.

Draco’s eyes flicked up and down Harry, finally resting on the camera he held. Harry raised it and gestured for them to pose. Surprisingly, they did, although Draco’s lips curled into a sneer.

“Competing today, Mr. Malfoy?” Ginny asked, her tone entirely devoid of the personal history they all shared.

“Of course. And I intend to win too.” He stared at Harry and added, “I won’t get any complaint from you, I assume.” He snorted in amusement and his eyes flicked to Harry’s right. Skeeter was approaching.

“May I have my camera back?”

Harry held it up questioningly but then tucked it back under his arm.

“Stealing things, Potter?” Malfoy asked.

Skeeter replied, “Yes. Several things.” She held her hand out.

Harry gestured for her to stand beside Draco and he took another picture of them both appearing disgruntled, each in their own way. He advanced the film dial down to 11.

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“I thought you were supposed to be good now?” Skeeter mocked.

Harry looked up from the camera’s knobs to shoot her an innocent expression. Hermione put her hands on her hips and leaned forward a bit.

“He still doesn’t like you,” Ginny supplied. She turned to Harry, “You adjust the exposure here. And the aperture here.” At Harry’s surprised look, she said, “Hey, you know how many photographs I have to deal with every day?”

Harry pointed at the platform, and she said, “I decided to cover the competition from down here rather than defend my ill-gotten crown, as Skeeter keeps putting it.”

Harry saw Fudge making his way through the crowd and wondered if he could get a picture of him, thinking of seeing his reaction when he saw the camera. Someone grabbed his robes. “Don’t rub it in, Potter,” Skeeter hissed. “My, you still are trouble, aren’t you?” She released her blood red nails from his sleeve. “Well, go on, I expect like the child you are that when you run out of film you’ll return it.” Her voice fell lower, “I do want that film.”

“Leave him alone,” Hermione said. Harry took her arm and led his friends away.

Fudge was mounting the stage and Harry saw the Minister looking around the Atrium, hand shading her eyes. Harry unhooked the camera from his neck and pushed it into Ginny’s hands as he started away. He could hear Ginny asking Skeeter, “So, what’s on the film that you want so bad . . . ?”

Harry came aside the Minister and stayed there while she gave a rambling speech about the importance of maintaining proper wizard secrecy from the Muggles. Harry wondered what had happened that he did not know about.

“And Mr. Potter, of course, is our Master of Ceremonies for the DV Day festivities, so he is here to help us kick off the Tournament. Uh . . .” She peered at Harry as if rethinking handing the stage over to him. “Yes, well. We shouldn’t delay any longer. May the best wand win!”

Walking with his usual scuffing gait, Fudge made his way to the center of the stage and began to recite the rules from a long scroll while the participants stood in a row behind him. Harry found Snape in the audience, with Candide beside him. “Molly offered to watch Arcadius and I did want to join the fun. She’s less having a luncheon than running a nursery. Gosh, she’s tickled about Molly junior.”

Harry accepted a Bertie Bott’s Bean from the sack Candide held. It was caviar flavored, so he took another and got the same again. He gestured to see into the sack and found that all the beans were the same glistening black.

“I always get the One Flavor Bean,” Candide explained. “I figure why not?”

On the platform, Fred Weasley was facing off with Mortimor Pike, the man who ran the Cauldron and Sun-dried Sundries Shop on Knockturn Alley. The round was only close because Fred appeared to be holding back his best spells for later opponents.

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The hearths flared as the crowd continued to pile in. A wizard with a shaved head pushed ahead of them to get a better view and stood with his arms crossed and his feet apart. The back of his robes, which looked to have had the sleeves torn off, had embroidered on it *My Other Wand is a Wand*. Candide stood on tip-toe while the next pair found their places on the platform.

Harry sighed and tapped the man sharply on the shoulder. As expected, the man spun around, bulky arms unwinding as he rotated. But then he stared at Harry, mouth hanging open. Harry gestured that he needed to move aside and the man slinked off to stand with his back to the wall between the hearths, pointing down at his feet with a hopeful expression as if checking with Harry that that spot was all right.

Harry nodded. Then shook his head.

“Thanks, Harry,” Candide said, suppressing a smile.

Daphne Greengrass was battling an older witch and had trouble because she seemed to be trying hard to be nice. When she almost fell off the back of the platform due to a *Felting Charm*, Snape muttered, “You try to teach them right and sometimes it just doesn’t take.”

Fudge was a stickler for the rules and almost disqualified George for turning before the end of the count twice in a row. He and Draco made it to a draw in a set of exchanges that actually sent spell effect sizzling around the Atrium, to the great verbal appreciation from the crowd.

Once the long list of participants was whittled down, Draco, rather gently, Harry thought, eliminated Daphne and Fred just squeaked out a win over Neville.

“George always won at home,” Ginny said to no one in particular, then returned to jotting notes.

Draco faced a middle aged man with a paunch, who snapped out his spells like a music conductor. Draco had to duck under one of them. He stood straight, petting back his frazzled hair. Still stroking his hair, he missed with his *Dark Web Curse* and then lost his wand to a *Toad Tongue Charm* that did have an unexpected snap to it. Draco lightly stomped his shiny black shoe and jumped off the side of the stage rather than shake hands.

Between sweets, Candide asked Snape, “So, what was it like having him in your House all those years?”

“Don’t ask.”

Harry would have accused him of coddling Malfoy, if he could. He tapped Ginny on the shoulder and she looked up in surprise. After a beat, she said, “Oh, Professor Snape cosseted Draco.”

Harry nodded in agreement.

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Snape said, "I had to stay in exceptionally good stead with his father, you know."

Harry crossed his arms and watched as a twenty-something witch lost to George, who did not seem to worry about his opponent, tossing a Snake Charmer, followed by a Blinding Hex.

"Ouch," Ginny muttered as the woman had to be led to the middle for the handshake and then stand for a de-hexing. "Glad I'm down here. If my brothers knew they were dueling me, I wouldn't have a chance. Oh, by the way, Harry, Lord Frelander asked me if he should invite you to dinner."

Harry shrugged, then nodded.

"I tried to explain what had happened, but it's hard to explain these things to an old person."

In the end it was Fred and George remaining in the final round and the spells grew loud and bright. The paintings and bunting fell, chips of gold painted plaster rained on the crowd, the water in the fountain behind the platform sloshed out when one spell heaved the floor up.

"Now now!" Fudge shouted, holding his hands up and stepping between the opponents. Harry winced, expecting him to get blasted, but the twins raised their wands like a mirror image and peered at him full of innocent questioning.

"Keep the spell overflow down. No damaging spells! I read the rules so you must know them." He stepped back.

The twins tied that round and stepped back and faced each other while awaiting instructions. Their outfits matched, their red hair matched. They were less two people than one man facing his reflection.

Fudge scuffed his way to the center of the platform and silently moved his lips and made twitchy faces while checking the rule book. The crowd began murmuring in conversation, placing wagers with each other and critiquing the first round.

Harry thought about Percy in the dungeon beneath their feet. He thought about how much deeper underground he was going to end up after his sentencing. Harry rubbed his arms which prickled at the memory of his dream. He had felt such terror, like nothing he had ever experienced before. He remembered actual prison; it had never been that terrifying. In the dream he had feared someone approaching his cell with such force that his heart had been trying to claw free of his ribcage.

Fudge closed the rule book and gestured for the twins to begin another round. This round was more subdued, with longer incantations and spells that changed the shape of the air.

They tied again. And as they returned to their spots, they were both smiling.

Harry's heart began to race. He forcibly swallowed the saliva that had flooded his mouth.

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Another round began. And again the Weasley twins ended in a draw. The crowd grew restless as Fudge and the Minister conferred behind the platform.

Harry breathed deeply, forcing calm through his agitated limbs. This was not an attack like before, but the same technique worked to still his emotions.

“Mr. Potter, please come over here,” the Minister said, managing to speak above the crowd without shouting.

Harry made his way to the front and considered hopping over the stage, but his arms protested at the thought, so he walked around it.

“I’m going to leave it to you to decide who goes on in the competition, Harry,” Bones said.

Harry pointed at his own chest.

“You are the Master of Ceremonies. Go on, make a choice.”

Harry took his time stepping up onto the platform. The crowd fell hushed and suddenly his footsteps on the hollow floor echoed a lot more. He looked from one end of the platform to the other. He had lost track of who was who. The twins were dressed identically in puffy shouldered dark green smoking jackets with a paisley texture. Harry gestured for them to come to the center of the stage.

“What’s up?” the one on the right asked.

Harry looked at each of them again. They were not identical, one had hair that stuck up more neatly on the top and the other had more beads of sweat at his hairline. Harry gestured that they should put a fist up for stone, parchment, sword, and they did so, each lowering his head in an exaggerated pose of challenge. The twin on the right won with stone.

“Best two out of three,” the other announced.

But Harry pushed that twin’s fist down and shook his head.

“Awww . . .” the twin tossed his head aside and stepped back and gestured as if stabbed through the heart.

The other watched his brother with a frown, rather than give any victorious sign.

“Well, there we are,” Bones said, holding the miniature wand on a chain that served as a trophy. “Who shall we engrave this to?”

“Forge Weasley, Madame,” the one on the right said with an elegant bow.



Back in the Leaky Cauldron, Harry sat in bed with the quilt pulled over his bent knees. He stared at the waning sunlight on the flaking plaster which revealed a mixture of river stone and brick underneath. He did not notice right away that

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Snape was leaning in through the archway to his alcove and wondered how long he had been there.

“You did well today,” Snape observed, taking a step inside to stand straight.

Harry vaguely shook his head.

Snape’s head twitched in surprise and he waved over a rickety chair with barely any cane left on the seat. He used two spells on it before sitting and resting an arm on the bed. “Do you have your chalkboard?”

Harry pulled that out from under his Auror book on the side table. He hooked an arm behind it and took up a piece of chalk in the other hand.

Fix, Harry wrote. At Snape’s blank expression, Harry added Have to in front of that.

“If this is in reference to Ms. Beluna, you are not yet healthy enough.”

Harry frowned. If it only were Belinda . . . He had a sick feeling his dream was not a dream, and even if it was, he still had things to repair. Harry closed his eyes and stared at the splotchy darkness behind his lids to remain in control. He needed help and an attack would not inspire Snape’s assistance.

Harry opened his eyes and circled have to, around and around with the chalk. He stopped and looked at it before wiping it off with his sleeve. He could not possibly spell “Grindelwald.”

Snape leaned against the edge of the bed from his low seat and turned Harry’s chin toward him. The light was vanishing fast now, but Harry assumed his guardian could still read his gaze. In his mind he pictured Grindelwald in all his full anger. Snape let go and with a jerking movement sat back, leaving just his elbow on the bed. The fingers of that hand stretched and bent.

“You are not healthy,” Snape repeated coldly.

Too late, Harry scratched out and held it out at arm’s length, since Snape was sitting back now, posture one of half ignoring him.

Snape’s robes rustled as he adjusted his limbs and leaned on the bed again.

His voice became a harsh whisper. “That place only exists if you make it exist.”

Harry stared at him. When Snape refused to look his way, Harry wrote, U were in a place.

Snape frowned. “You cannot simply pretend that place does not exist?”

Not like me, Harry wrote.

Snape puzzled that one before saying. “You are telling me it would not be like you to leave things as they are. If so, I completely agree.” He was close to sneering.

Have to, Harry wrote again.

Snape’s hair fell back from his shoulders as he tilted his head to stare at the ceiling. His fingers drummed on the quilt. He lowered his head to glare at Harry

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again, glancing at the chalkboard Harry still held up. He reached his hand out to grasp Harry's ankle through the covers, eyes more like Hermione's now.

"I worry Harry, that one of these times you will go and never return."

Harry shook his head like a promise.

"You are sacrificing yourself for a dream."

Harry scratched out wand on the board and held it up.

Snape tilted his head as he considered this latest message. His voice was barely audible as he said, "The Wand of Destiny you mean? Dumbledore died without losing it to a rival. It has been negated, I am quite certain."

Harry waited, unmoving, with his message displayed.

Snape's lips pursed stubbornly and Harry half expected him to swear. He let go of Harry's ankle and flattened his hand on the quilt. "There are almost certainly other Wands of Destiny in one of those other places. But you must earn such a wand. It will be average, or worse, powerless or even disloyal, if you do not." He stared at the spread fingers of his hand while he said with great reluctance, "Your choices would seem to be: one, go to a place you know nothing about in the hopes of winning this wand to take against Grindelwald . . . and I assume that is your intent, as your options there are even more limited. Or two, obtain the wand from the place you have some familiarity with."

Harry's heart sped up as he considered that.

Snape said, "I expect, about now, that your associates in that place may be quite happy for you to remove it, quite honestly. And you would be given all assistance possible."

Snape's visage had grown grim and lined as the light had faded. Outside on Diagon Alley, weekend revelers were whooping and shouting to each other.

Harry's mind followed the lines Snape had set out. His heart felt lighter just thinking it possible.

Without another word, Snape stood up and set the chair aside. He turned as he ducked out of the alcove to look back. Harry could only make out his eyes reflecting the smoky blue panes of the small window beside Harry's bed. With the barest rustle of fabric, Snape slipped into the darkness of the next room, leaving Harry alone with the silence of his plans.